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# THE COBBLER IN THE DEVIL'S KITCHEN

From "Mackinac And Lake Stories", 1899

By **Mary Hartwell Catherwood**

Early in the Mackinac summer Owen Cunning took his shoemaker's bench and all his belongings to that open cavern on the beach called the Devil's Kitchen, which was said to derive its name from former practices of the Indians. They roasted prisoners there. The inner rock retained old smoke-stains.

Though appearing a mere hole in the cliff to passing canoe-men, the Devil's Kitchen was really as large as a small cabin, rising at least seven feet from a floor which sloped down towards the water. Overhead, through an opening which admitted his body, Owen could reach a natural attic, just large enough for his bed if he contented himself with blankets. And an Irishman prided himself on being tough as any French voyageur who slept blanketed on snow in the winter wilderness.

The rock was full of pockets, enclosing pebbles and fragments. By knocking out the contents of these, Owen made cupboards for his food. As for clothes, what Mackinac-Islander of the working-class, in those days of the Fur Company's prosperity, needed more than he had on? When his clothes wore out, Owen could go to the traders' and buy more. He washed his other shirt in the lake at his feet, and hung it on the cedars to dry by his door. Warm evenings, when the sun had soaked itself in limpid ripples until its crimson spread through them afar, Owen stripped himself and went bathing, with strong snorts of enjoyment as he rose from his plunge. The narrow lake rim was littered with fragments which had once filled the cavern. Two large pieces afforded him a table and a seat for his visitors.

Owen had a choice of water for his drinking. Not thirty feet away on his right a spring burst from the cliff and gushed through its little pool down the beach. It was cold and delicious.

In the east side of the Kitchen was a natural tiny fireplace a couple of feet high, screened by cedar foliage from the lake wind. Here Owen cooked his meals, and the smoke was generally carried out from his flueless hearth. The straits were then full of fish, and he had not far to throw his lines to reach deep water.

Dependent on the patronage of Mackinac village, the Irishman had chosen the very shop which would draw notice upon himself. His customers tramped out to him along a rough beach under the heights, which helped to wear away the foot-gear Owen mended. They stood grinning amiably at his snug quarters. It was told as far as Drummond Island and the Sault that a cobbler lived in the Devil's Kitchen on Mackinac.

He was a happy fellow, his clean Irish skin growing rosier in air pure as the air of mid-ocean. The lake spread in variegated copper lights almost at his feet. He did not like Mackinac village in summer, when the engagés were all back, and Indians camped tribes strong on the beach, to receive their money from the government. French and savages shouldered one another, the multitude of them making a great hubbub and a gay show of clothes like a fair. Every voyageur was sparring with every other voyageur. A challenge by the poke of a fist, and lo! a ring is formed and two are fighting. The whipped one gets up, shakes hands with his conqueror, and off they go to drink together. Owen despised such fighting. His way was to take a club and

break heads, and see some blood run on the ground. It was better for him to dwell alone than to be stirred up and left unsatisfied.

It was late in the afternoon, and the fresh smell of the water cheered him as he sat stitching on a pair of deer-hide shoes for one Léon Baudette, an engagé, who was homesick for Montreal. The lowering sun smote an hour-glass of light across the strait which separated him from St. Ignace on the north shore, the old Jesuit station. Mother-of-pearl clouds hung over the southern mainland, and the wash of the lake, which was as pleasant as silence itself, diverted his mind from a distant thump of Indian drums. He knew how lazy, naked warriors lay in their lodges, bumping a mallet on stretched deer-hide and droning barbarous monotones while they kicked their heels in air. If he despised anything more than the way the French diverted themselves, it was the way the Indians diverted themselves.

Without a sound there came into Owen's view on the right an Indian girl. He was at first taken by surprise at her coming over the moss of the spring. The shaggy cliff, clothed, like the top of his cave, with cedars, white birch, and pine, afforded no path to the beach in that direction. All his clients approached by the lake margin at the left.

Then he noticed it was Blackbird, a Sac girl, who had been pointed out to his critical eye the previous summer as a beauty. Owen admitted she was not bad-looking for a squaw. Her burnished hair, which had got her the name, was drawn down to cheeks where copper and vermilion infused the skin with a wonderful sunset tint. She was neatly and precisely dressed in the woman's skirt and jacket of her tribe, even her moccasins showing no trace of the scramble she must have had down some secret cliff descent in order to approach the cobbler unseen.

He greeted her with the contemptuous affability which an Irishman bestows upon a heathen. Blackbird was probably a good communicant of some wilderness mission, but this brought her no nearer to a son of Ireland.

"Good-day to the quane! And what may she be wanting the day?"

Blackbird's eyes, without the snake-restlessness of her race, dwelt unmoving upon him. Owen surmised she could not understand his or any other kind of English, being accustomed to no tongue but her own, except the French which the engagés talked in their winter camps. She stood upright as a pine without answering.

It flashed through him that there might be trouble in the village; and Blackbird, having regard for him, as we think it possible any human being may have for us, was there to bid him escape. With coldness around the roots of his hair, he remembered the massacre at Fort Michilimackinac—a spot almost in sight across the strait, where south shore approaches north shore at the mouth of Lake Michigan. He laid down his boot. His lips dropped apart, and with a hush of the sound—if such a sound can be hushed—he imitated the Indian war-whoop.

Blackbird did not smile at the uncanny screech, but she relaxed her face in stoic amusement, relieving Owen's tense breathing. There was no plot. The tribes merely intended to draw their money, get as drunk as possible, and depart in peace at the end of the month with various outfits to winter posts.

"Begorra, but that was a narrow escape!" sighed Owen, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. He was able to detect the deference that Blackbird paid him by this visit. He sat on his bench in the Kitchen, a sunny idol in a shrine, indifferent to the effect his background gave him.

His mouth puckered. He put up his leather stained hand coyly, and motioned her unmoving figure back.

"Ah, go 'way! Wasn't it to escape you and the likes of you that I made me retrace to the shore? Nayther white, full haythen, half, nor quarter nade apply. To come makin' the big eyes at me, and the post swarmin' wid thim that do be ready to marry on any woman at the droppin' of the hat!"

Mobile blue water with ripple and wash made a background for the Indian girl's dense repose. She could by lifting her eyes see the pock-marked front of Owen's Kitchen, and gnarled roots like exposed ribs in the shaggy heights above. But she kept her eyes lowered; and Owen stuck his feet under his bench, sensitive to defects in his foot-wear, which an artist skilled in making and mending moccasins could detect.

Blackbird moved forward and laid a shining dot on the stone he used as his table; then, without a word, she turned and disappeared the way she came, over the moss of the spring rivulet.

Owen left his bench and craned after her. He did not hear a pebble roll on the stony beach or a twig snap among foliage.

"Begorra, it's the wings of a say-gull!" said Owen, and he took up her offering. It was a tiny gold coin. Mackinac was full of gold the month the Indians were paid. It came in kegs from Washington, under the escort of soldiers, to the United States Agency, and was weighed out to each red heir despoiled of land by white conquest, in his due proportion, and immediately grasped from the improvident by merchants, for a little pork, a little whiskey, a little calico. But this was an old coin with a hole in it; a jewel worn suspended from neck or ear; the precious trinket of a girl. On one side was rudely scratched the outline of a bird.

"Begorra!" said Owen. He hid it in one of the rock pockets, a trust in a savings-bank, and sat down again to work, trying to discover Blackbird's object in offering tribute to him.

About sunset he lighted a fire in his low grate to cook his supper, and put the finished boots in a remote corner of the cave until he should get his pay. As he expected, Léon Baudette appeared, picking a barefooted way along the beach, with many complimentary greetings. The wary cobbler stood between the boots and his client, and responded with open cordiality. A voyageur who gave flesh and bone and sometimes life itself for a hundred dollars a year, and drank that hundred dollars up during his month of semi-civilization on Mackinac, seldom had much about him with which to pay for his necessary mending.

Léon Baudette swore at the price, being a discontented engagé. But the foot-wear he was obliged to have, being secretly determined to desert to Canada before the boats went out. You may see his name marked as a deserter in the Fur Company's books at Mackinac Island. So, reluctantly counting out the money, he put on his shoes and crossed his legs to smoke and chat, occupying the visitor's seat. Owen put his kettle to boil, and sat down also to enjoy society; for why should man be hurried?

He learned how many fights had been fought that day; how many bales of furs were packed in the Company's yard; that Étienne St. Martin was trying to ship with the Northern instead of the Illinois Brigade,

on account of a grudge against Charle' Charette. He learned that the Indians were having snake and medicine dances to cure a consumptive chief. And, to his surprise, he learned that he was considered a medicine-man among the tribes, on account of his living unmolested in the Devil's Kitchen.

"O oui," declared Léon. "You de wizard. You only play you mend de shoe; but, by gar, you make de poor voyageur pay de same like it was work! I hear dey call you Big Medicine of de Cuisine Diable."

Owen was compelled to smile with pleasure at his importance, his long upper lip lifting its unshaven bristles in a white curd.

"Do ye moind, Leen me boy, a haythen Injun lady by the name of Blackbird?"

"Me, I know Blackbird," responded Léon Bau-dette.

"Is the consoompted chafe that they're makin' the snake shindy for married on her?"

"No, no. Blackbird she wife of Jean Magliss in de winter camps."

"John McGillis? Is it for marry in' on a haythen wife he is?"

"O oui. Two wives. One good Cat'olique. Jean Magliss, he dance every night now with Amable Morin's girl. The more weddings, the more dancing. Me," Léon shrugged, "I no want a woman eating my wages in Mackinac. A squaw in the winter camps—'t assez."

"Two wives, the bog-trotter!" gulped Owen. "John McGillis is a blayguard!"

"Oui, what you call Irish," assented Léon; and he dodged, but the cobbler threw nothing at him. Owen marked with the awl on his own leather apron.

"First a haythen and then a quarther-brade," he tallied against his countryman. "He will be takin' his quarther-brade to the praste before the boats go gut?"

Léon raised fat eyebrows. "Amable Morin, he no fool. It is six daughters he has. O oui; the marriage is soon made."

"And the poor haythen, what does she do now?"

"Blackbird? She watch Jean Magliss dance. Then she leave her lodge and take to de pine wood. Blackbird ver fond of what you call de Irish."

Owen was little richer in the gift of expression than the Indian woman, but he could feel the tragedy of her unconfirmed marriage. A squaw was taken to her lord's wigwam, and remained as long as she pleased him. He could divorce her with a gift, proportioned to his means and her worth.

When Léon Baudette departed, Owen prepared and ate his supper, brewing himself some herb tea and seasoning it with a drop of whiskey.

The evening beauty of the lake, of coasts melting in general dimness, and that iridescent stony hook stretched out from Round Island to grapple passing craft, was lost on Owen. Humid air did not soften the glower which grew and hardened on his visage as he made his preparations for night. These were very simple. The coals of drift-wood soon died to white ashes in his grate. To close the shop was to stand upon the shoemaker's bench and reach for the ladder in his attic—a short ladder that just performed its office and could be hidden aloft.

Drawing his stairway after him when he had ascended, Owen spread and arranged his blankets. The ghosts that rose from tortured bodies in the Kitchen below never worked any terror in his imagination when he went to bed. Rather, he lay stretched in his hard cradle gloating over the stars, his wild security, the thousand night aspects of nature which he could make part of himself without expressing. For him the moon cast gorgeous bridges on the water; the breathing of the woods was the breathing of a colossal brother; and when that awful chill which precedes the resurrection of day rose from the earth and started from the rock, he turned comfortably in his thick bedding and taxed sleepy eyes to catch the wanness coming over the lake.

But instead of lying down in his usual peace when the nest was made to suit him, Owen wheeled and hung undecided legs over the edge of his loft. Then he again put down the ladder and descended. He had trod the three-quarters of a mile of beach to the village but once since the boats came in. Now that his mind was fixed he took to it again with a loping step, bending his body forward and grasping his cap to butt through trailing foliage.

As he passed the point and neared the post, its blare and hubbub burst on him, and its torch-light and many twinkling candles. He proceeded beside the triple row of Indian lodges which occupied the entire water-front. At intervals, on the very verge, evening fires were built, throwing streamers of crimson flicker on the lake. Naked papposes gathered around these at play. But on an open flat betwixt encampment and village rose a lighted tabernacle of blankets stretched on poles and uprights; and within this the adult Indians were crowded, celebrating the orgy of the medicine-dance. Their noise kept a continuous roll of echoes moving across the islands.

Owen made haste to pass this carnival of invocation and plunge into the swarming main street of Mackinac, where a thousand voyageurs roved, ready to embrace any man and call him brother and press him to drink with them. Broad low houses with huge chimney-stacks and dormer-windows stood open and hospitable; for Mackinac was en fête while the fur season lasted. One huge storage-room, a wing of the Fur Company's building, was lighted with candles around the sides for the nightly ball. Squared dark joists of timber showed overhead. The fiddlers sat on a raised platform, playing in ecstasy. The dark, shining floor was thronged with dancers, who, before primrose-color entirely withdrew from evening twilight, had rushed to their usual amusement. Half-breeds, quarter-breeds, sixteenth-breeds, Canadian French, Americans, in finery that the Northwest was able to command from marts of the world, crossed, joined hands, and whirled, the rhythmic tread of feet sounding like the beating of a great pulse. The doors of double timber stood open. From where he paused outside, Owen could see mighty hinges stretching across the whole width of these doors.

And he could see John McGillis moving among the most agile dancers. When at last the music stopped, and John led Amable Morin's girl to one of the benches along the wall, Owen was conscious that an Indian woman crossed the lighted space behind him, and he turned and looked full at Blackbird, and she looked full at him. But she did not stay to be included in the greeting of John McGillis, though English might be better known to

her than Owen had supposed.

John came heartily to the door and endeavored to pull his countryman in. He was a much younger man than Owen, a handsome, light-haired voyageur, with thick eyelids and cajoling blue eyes. John was the only Irish engagé in the brigades. The sweet gift of blarney dwelt on his broad red lips.

He looked too amiable and easily entreated, too much in love with life, indeed, to quarrel with any one. Yet as Owen answered his invitation by a quick pass that struck his cheek, his color mounted with zest, and he stepped out, turning up his sleeves.

"Is it a foight ye want, ye old wizard from the Devil's Kitchen?" laughed John, still good-natured.

"It's a foight I want," responded Owen. "It's a foight I'm shpilin' for. Come out forninst the place, where the shlobberin' Frinch can lave a man be, and I'll shpake me moind."

John walked bareheaded with him, and they passed around the building to a fence enclosing the Fur Company's silent yard. Stockades of sharp-pointed cedar posts outlined gardens near them. A smell of fur mingled with odors of sweetbrier and loam. Again the violins excited that throb of dancing feet, and John McGillis moved his arms in time to the music.

"Out wid it, Owen. I'm losin' me shport."

"John McGillis, are ye not own cousin to me by raisin of marryin' on as fine a colleen as iver shteped in Ireland?"

"I am, Owen, I am."

"Did ye lave that same in sorrow, consatin' to fetch her out to Ameriky whin yer fortune was made?"

"I did, Owen, I did."

"Whin ye got word of her death last year, was ye a broken-hearted widdy or was ye not?"

"I was, Owen, I was." 46

"John McGillis, do ye call yerself a widdy now, or do ye not call yerself a widdy?"

"I do, Owen, I do."

"Thin ye're the loire," and Owen slapped his face.

For a minute there was danger of manslaughter as they dealt each other blows with sledge fists. Instead of clinching, they stood apart and cudgelled fiercely with the knuckled hand. The first round ended in blood, which John wiped from his face with a new bandanna, and Owen flung contemptuously from his nose with finger and thumb. The lax-muscled cobbler was no match for the fresh and vigorous voyageur, and he knew it, but went stubbornly to work again, saying, grimly:

"I've shpiled yer face for the gu'urls the night, bedad."

They pounded each other without mercy, and again rested, Owen this time leaning against the fence to breathe.

"John McGillis, are ye a widdy or are ye not a widdy?" he challenged, as soon as he could speak.

"I am, Owen Cunnin', I am," maintained John.

"Thin I repate ye're the loire!" And once more they came to the proof, until Owen lay upon the ground kicking to keep his opponent off.

"Will I bring ye the dhrop of whiskey, Owen?" suggested John, tenderly.

His cousin by marriage crawled to the fence and sat up, without replying.

"I've the flask in me pouch, Owen."

"Kape it there."

"But sure if ye foight wid me ye'll dhrink wid me?"

"I'll not dhrink a dhrop wid ye."

The cobbler panted heavily. "The loikes of you that do be goin' to marry on a Frinch quarter-brade, desavin' her, and the father and the mother and the praste, that you do be a widdy."

"I am a widdy, Owen."

The cobbler made a feint to rise, but sank back, repeating, at the top of his breath, "Ye're the loire!"

"What do ye mane?" sternly demanded John. "Ye know I've had me throuble. Ye know I've lost me wife in the old country. It's a year gone. Was the praste that wrote the letther a loire?"

"I have a towken that ye're not the widdy ye think ye are."

John came to Owen and stooped over him, grasping him by the collar. Candle-light across the street and stars in a steel-blue sky did not reveal faces distinctly, but his shaking of the cobbler was an outcome of his own inward convulsion. He belonged to a class in whom memory and imagination were not strong, being continually taxed by a present of large action crowded with changing images. But when his past rose up it took entire possession of him.

"Why didn't ye tell me this before?"

"I've not knowed it the long time meself."

"What towken have ye got?"

"Towken enough for you and me."

"Show it to me."

"I will not."

"Ye're desavin' me. Ye have no towken."

"Thin marry on yer quarter-brade if ye dare!"

To be unsettled and uninterested in his surroundings was John McGillis's portion during the remaining weeks of his stay on the island. Half savage and half tender he sat in his barracks and smoked large pipes of tobacco.

He tramped out nearly every evening to the Devil's Kitchen, and had wordy battles, which a Frenchman would have called fights, with the cobbler, though the conferences always ended by his producing his ration and supping and smoking there. He coaxed his cousin to show him the token, vacillating between hope of impossible news from a wife he had every reason to believe dead, and indignation at being made the sport of Owen's stubbornness. Learning in the Fur Company's office that Owen had received news from the old country in the latest mail sent out of New York, he was beside himself, and Amable Morin's girl was forgotten. He began to believe he had never thought of her.

"Sure, the old man Morin and me had some words and a dhrink over it, was all. I did but dance wid her and pinch her cheek. A man niver knows what he does on Mackinac till he comes to himself in the winter camps wid a large family on his moind."

"The blarney of your lip doesn't desave me, John McGillis," responded his cousin the cobbler, with grimness.

"But whin will ye give me the word you've got, Owen?"

"I'll not give it to ye till the boats go out."

"Will ye tell me, is the colleen alive, thin?"

"I've tould ye ye're not a widdy."

"If the colleen is alive, the towken would be sint to me."

"Thin ye've got it," said Owen.

Poor John smoked, biting hard on his pipe-stem. Ignorance, and the helplessness of a limited man who is more a good animal than a discerning soul; time, the slow transmission of news, his fixed state as a voyageur—all these things were against him. He could not adjust himself to any facts, and his feelings sometimes approached the melting state. It was no use to war with Owen Cunning, whom he was ashamed of handling roughly. The cobbler sat with swollen and bandaged face, talking out of a slit, still bullying him.

But the time came for his brigade to go out, and then there was action, decision, positive life once more. It went far northward, and was first to depart, in order to reach winter-quarters before snow should fly.

At the log dock the boats waited, twelve of them in this outfit, each one a mighty Argo, rowed by a dozen pairs of oars, and with centre-piece for stepping a mast. Hundreds of pounds they could carry, and a crew of fifteen men. The tarpaulin used for a night covering and to shelter the trading-goods from storms was large as the roof of a house.

Quiescent on lapping water they rested, their loads and each man's baggage of twenty or fewer pounds packed tightly to place.

The cobbler from the Devil's Kitchen was in the crowd thronging dock and shore. The villagers were there, saying farewells, and all the voyageurs who were soon to go out in other brigades snuffed as war-horses ready for the charge. The life of the woods, which was their true life, again drew them. They could scarcely wait. Dancing and love-making suddenly cloyed; for a man was made to conquer the wilderness and take the spoils of the earth. "Woodsman's habits returned upon them. The frippery of the island was dropped like the withes which bound Samson. Their companions the Indians were also making ready the canoes. Blackbird stood erect behind the elbow of John McGillis as he took leave of his cousin the cobbler.

"Do ye moind, Owen," exclaimed John, turning from the interests of active life to that which had disturbed his spirit, convinced unalterably of his own widowed state, yet harrowed unspeakably, "ye promised to show me that word from the old country before the boats wint out."

"I niver promised to show ye any word from the old country," responded Owen, having his mouth free of bandages and both eyes for the boats.

"Te tould me ye had a towken from the old country."

"I niver tould ye I had a towken from the old country."

"Ye did tell me ye had a towken."

"I have."

"Ye said it proved I was not a widdy."

"I did."

"Show me that same, thin."

"I will."

Owen looked steadily past John's shoulder at Blackbird, and laid in John's hand a small gold coin with a hole in it, on one side of which was rudely scratched the outline of a bird.

John McGillis's face burned red, and many expressions besides laughter crossed it. Like a child detected in fault, he looked sheepishly at Owen and glanced behind his shoulder. The faithful sunset-tinted face of Blackbird, immovable as a fixed star, regarded the battered cobbler as it might have regarded a great manitou when the island was young.

"How did you come by this, Owen?"

"I come by it from one that had throuble. Has yerself iver seen it before, John McGillis?"

"I have."

"Is it a towken that ye're not a widdy?"

"It is."

The boats went out, and Blackbird sat in her Irish husband's boat, on his baggage. Oars flashed, and the commandant's boat led the way. Then the life of the Northwest rose like a great wave—the voyageurs' song chanted by a hundred and fifty throats, with a chorus of thousands on the shore:

# COBBLER IN THE DEVIL'S KITCHEN



Dans les chan-tiers nous hi - ver - ne - rons!



Dans les chan-tiers nous hi - ver - ne - rons!

*Dans les chan - tiers nous hi - ver - ne - rons!*

*Dans lea chan - tiers nous hi - ver - ne - rons!*

When Owen returned to his Kitchen he found a robe of the finest beaver folded and laid on his shoemaker's bench.

"Begorra!" observed the cobbler, shaking it out and rubbing it against his cheek, "she has paid me a beaver-shkin and the spalpeen wasn't worrth it. But she can kape him now till she has a moind to turn him out herself. Whin a man marries on a hay then, wid praste or widout praste, let him shtick to his haythen."

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