Men Marooned

by George Marsh

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The sweet faces of the Cree women defied the sharp scrutiny of the half-breed. Surprise, doubt, appeared to rush a desire to laugh at the question of the stranger. They met each other's black eyes in a quizzical look; then the elder of the two said: "Good, the shaman, we have not seen. His sons own not a camp north of here on the Rabbit river."

The acute mind of Etienne strove to solve the riddle of the squaw's secret amusement. At last he decided that Jean Mokoman had won over their sons to the free-trader; but why Snort had not appeared at the Farrington's was a mystery.

"Do you know the strait has closed? You can cross to Ekwan for the New Year's feast," he hazarded.

The women smiled. "We go to the trader at Seal cove with our fur pelts!" said the old squaw. "There we get honest prices for—from the trader who always laughs."

It was evident that here Joe Mokoman had done his work well. Then Etienne cautiously began his counter-shifting. His grim face set in a look of surprise and horror. "Did you not hear?" he cried.

"No!"

"Why this trader brought that face from the land of demons across the Big Water? He angered them. He is a sorcerer and bewitches those who bring him their pelts." Etienne hastily interpreted the conversation to Guthrie as he watched the effect of his bombshell on the startled faces of the squaws.

"He makes bad medicine?" gasped the women.

Etienne gravely nodded his hooded head, then added: "He has bewitched Joe Mokoman to betray the Cree brothers and bring them to his bait. Those who go will never leave their wives and families again," he remarked with finality.

At the last the faces of the squaws grew gravely set. They chattered together excitedly. Etienne's explanation of the cause of the mutilation of McDonald had struck deep into the marrow of their superstitions. He hastily drove his advantage home.

"Snai Snort will not pay that debt to the trader Mokoman! Ha! Ha! is a friend of demons."

"Snai Snort!" cried a squaw in protest. "He is a shaman and friend of the trader-ka-lagha."

It was the turn of Savance to have the last word. "Snai Snort, the friend of McDonald? What could they mean? But he was equal to the emergency.

"Snort, the friend of McDonald Ha! Ha! Mokoman tells that talk to the hunters because he fears Snort the shaman."

Disturbed though she was, the Cree woman found in Etienne's words of "Mokoman was here this morning—there was the trader's boat. One sleep ago he says Snort was at the schooner of the outsiders' shack hauling. Snort is the friend of McDonald Ha! Ha!"

"Mokoman lies!" stormed the startled half-breed, but the germ of a suspicion of the old conjurer's loyalty quickened in his brain. "Are there camps at the head of the river in the barrens?" he asked, keen to catch the Ottawa and the Cree in the trader's theft work.

"Yes, you will see them before the light dies, and there are more on the north fork."

"Remember," cautioned the puzzled half-breed, as he turned to his dog, "the boat at Seal cove is full of demons—beware!" Those who do not never look again with joy on their wives and children." And with this parting shot, the shrewd Savance called "Ho!" and dipped his chief.

As the dogs took the river trail, from here on fre-hard from comfort ups by the scores of the hunters, Etienne gave Guthrie the gist of his talk.

"Old Snai—at the schooner? It's only a lie of this Offjaw," objected Garth, unable to reconcile the old man's simplicity and directness with the deep for bay tan at in bonne annee, New Year?

"Ah-hah!"

"We go to Kapiskau, Achille!"

The Indian slowly shook his head. "I go to the bay boat. He pay beag price for pelt."

Garth leaned eagerly forward to hear the conversation, which Etienne was waiting to launch.

"Ah-hah!" For a space, the cracking of a spruce knot was the only sound in the tipi. Then Savarine began: "You not ver' smart man, Achille. You lesson to dat 'Jiboy Wahene, Mokoman. Ah-hah, you not so smart wan. He say he's been back to dis island wid old Snort. You know why?" Etienne paused dramatically to relight his pipe. "He McDonal' put de devil into beer."

Nervously twisting her hands, the squaw of Achille stared at the speak-er from wide-filled eyes. The stolid features of the half-breed reflected the struggle within him.

"I put dat Mokoman undair de low up de Etiwan—he mak' trouble for us, but we weesh to have devil 'put een hees' by McDonal' Ha! Ha!"

"Mokoman was here," dryly coun-tered Achille.

"Ah-hah! wid beer!" snapped Etienne on a spare, and Garth's eyes shot approval as he waited for the reply.

"He, I did see evair-ee bit, e-ch'e-ap, Mokoman he say he's been back to