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CROWFOOT: THE GREAT CHIEF OF THE BLACKFEET

By F. W. Howay

The Blackfoot confederacy was composed of the Blackfeet proper, the Bloods, and the Piegans, tribes that from time immemorial were roving buffalo hunters. The ground gave them, it is true, their camas and their native tobacco; the buffalo supplied them with everything else. The horse, which they had as early as 1754, enabled them to reach out over the prairies and the gun, which came to them with the first traders, gave them promise both of food and of protection. Amongst all the plains Indians none had a deeper feeling of ownership of their lands nor a greater jealousy of any interference with their possession of their country.

Amongst these people one name stands out pre-eminent,—that of Crowfoot. No one can read the story of the western prairies during the years 1871-1890 without meeting that name over and over again. Further acquaintance with his life and work engenders a deep admiration of this statesman in paint and blanket.

According to Blackfoot chronology Crowfoot was born in 1830. His father MANY NAMES belonged to the gens or clan SESE KSIS TSI MOX that is: the clan with the marked arrows, a name derived from their custom of heating some object and impressing it upon their arrows. The superiority of the clan in athletic sports won for it the popular name of TSI KI NAKO, the Mocassin clan.

CROWFOOT'S first name was KA YE STAR OH or Bear Ghost. He early felt himself chosen to lead his people into the paths of peace; for " Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war ". In justification of this belief it is said that in a vision a supernatural being, the Buffalo man, appeared to him and told him that he was to be the Father of his people; and he always claimed that a pair of calf-skin leggings usually worn by him were a present from the Buffalo man in token of that promise. He interpreted the vision as meaning that he would become not a war-chief but one who by maintaining peace and order would unify his people and bring to them happiness and prosperity.

As he grew to years of discretion, being a man of fine physique, fearless, and of keenest observation he was selected for important scout duty and similar work on which the success and the very lives of a war-party depend. So competent did he prove himself that the older men learned to repose confidence in his ability, even to the extent of relying implicitly upon his plans of warfare.

Then came the time when Crowfoot occasionally though not a war-chief led his own war parties. His fair and open conduct on such occasions marked him as an unusual Indian leader. His braves found it difficult to understand his humanity in those bitter inter-tribal encounters. Once in the almost interminable struggle that went on between Blackfoot and Cree he and his band surprised their opponents, sound asleep. Crowfoot detecting the odor of their dying camp fires called out: " Come on you plain smokers, let's have a smoke! " The startled Crees awoke; the fight commenced; and the Crees were overpowered. After reprimanding his prisonners for commencing a fight after his invitation to smoke, he released them, much to the disgust of his warriors who would gladly have brought Cree scalps home in triumph.

The following incident shows another quality; fearlessness. In a fight, the main body of the Crees were lying in ambush in a wood. Though Crowfoot knew this he hesitated not to follow his antagonist who retreated into the wood; he caught his man, struck him down, and returned to his own men unscathed.

Amongst the Blackfeet the horse occupied a position but little inferior, economically, to that of the buffalo. Having horses in plenty those Indians were yet anxious to add more to their numbers, and they cared not a whit as to the means. Horse stealing was a regular activity and the young bloods almost vied with each other in the occupation. One day these young thieves returned with horses stolen from the Stoneys. As soon as Crowfoot heard of the crime he proceeded to collect all the stolen animals, and by his orders Running Rabbit and other chiefs returned them to their rightful owners. A little later a party of Blackfeet under Eagle Ribs brought in a band of horses stolen from half-breeds. Again Crowfoot caused the animals to be gathered in and returned to their real owners, except one, a roan. That horse Eagle Ribs had appropriated to himself, and he expressed his determination to fight for its retention. Feeling that the attempt to reclaim it would create a serious disturbance, Crowfoot compensated the owner for its loss, and thus secured peace. Those are only two instances out of many that could be cited in which he strove to break up the habits of theft that had been in his people from the beginning. Such conduct, so contrary to Indian ethics—one might almost say Indian tradition—did not, of course, go unchallenged; for though some of his tribe began to learn respect for their neighbours' rights and property, others were highly incensed at such Quixotism. His life was threatened more than once but, fearlessly, he continued his course. Some even attempted to kill him. He evaded their attacks, reasoned them into a calmer mood, used diplomacy, placated with gifts—an almost infallible remedy amongst them,—or in desperate cases met force with force.

The advent of the first white settlers, the early faltering steps of agriculture, the decreasing herds of buffalo, made it plain to him that the old order was passing away. He saw that the Indian must conform his life to the new conditions; and he strove to impress upon his people the necessity of looking to the land for their support. The land fed the white man, under similar treatment it would feed the red man. He set himself to the task of changing his tribe from men who lived upon the gun to men who lived upon the spade.

But with the advent of the white man came, as always, the white man's vices—against which Crowfoot was powerless. American traders brought intoxicating liquor to the Blackfeet, and soon reduced the proud and powerful people to poverty. Their horses decreased, their wealth shrank, and their moral fibre was completely undermined by the traders' whiskey. One man could do nothing against that vile flood. Then, in 1874, the North West Mounted Police established themselves at Fort MacLeod and waged incessant war upon the whiskey traders in Forts Whoop-up, Stand-off, Slide-out, and other lawless strongholds.

In " Forty Years in Canada ", p. 79, Sir Samuel Steele tells of the visit of Crowfoot to Fort Macleod soon after the arrival of the force. The commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Macleod, explained that the police had come to maintain order and enforce the law, regardless of whether the offender were red or white. At the conclusion of his remarks, he says, p. 80: " Crowfoot, the personification of grace, rose and shook hands with the white chief and all the white men present. Then he bared his right arm and with eloquent gesture and eyes flashing fire made a long speech, thanking the One Above, who is our Chief, and the Great Mother for sending the Mounted Police to save them from the effect of the cursed fire-water, which was destroying their young men, and for the peace that was to come."

This thumb nail sketch by an eye witness gives a vivid picture of Crowfoot in his prime. Soon the deadly and demoralizing traffic was stamped out. The benefit to the Blackfeet showed in their returning prosperity. But with the return of their manhood their pride of territoriality returned, and they began to fear that though the police had benefited them they might aid the slowly-increasing number of white settlers in taking away their lands gradually and without any equivalent.

The Government of Canada began in 1871 to make treaties with the Indians whereby they, for certain specified payments and other considerations, ceded their rights in the land which had been theirs from time immemorial. By 1876 six treaties had been negotiated which covered practically all of the prairie provinces with the exception of the Blackfoot territory, comprising about 50,000 squares miles in the southwestern part of Alberta. These warlike and intelligent, but intractable, people were anxiously awaiting such a treaty, and becoming dangerously restless and uneasy at the steadily increasing number of settlers on their lands.

Finally in 1877 the commissioners arrived to negotiate the treaty with the Blackfeet, afterwards known as Treaty Number 7. It had been intended to hold the parley at Fort Macleod, the head-quarters of the North West Mounted Police; but Crowfoot, " the leading chief of the Blackfeet ", requested that the scene be the Ridge-under-Water, the Blackfoot Crossing of the Bow River. Shortly after the commissioners reached the agreed meeting place Crowfoot, " the principal chief of the Blackfeet " came to them to enquire when the negotiations would commence. During the interval he and some other chiefs under his influence refused to accept any rations from the Government until they learned what terms were to be offered. Lieutenant-Governor Laird, one of the commissioners, in his report, dealing with this point said:

> " He (Crowfoot) appeared to be under the impression that if the Indians were fed by the bounty of the Government they would be committed to the proposals of the Commissioners, whatever might be their nature. Though I feared this refusal did not augur well for the final success of the negotiations, yet I could not help wishing that other Indians whom I have seen, had a little of the spirit in regard to dependence upon the Government exhibited on this occasion by the great Chief of the Blackfeet."

The next day, however, when assured that the acceptance of provisions would not be regarded as committing them to the terms, Crowfoot accepted his share of rations. The commissioners then outlined the terms. After hearing them without interruption or comment Crowfoot stated that he would not speak that day; he would think over the proposals. The following day he came to the Lieutenant-Governor's tent with an interpreter to ask for explanations upon certain points.

A day later when the gathering re-assembled Crowfoot was ready. He had made up his mind. The Commissioners, having intimated that they would hear the views of the chiefs, Crowfoot was the first to speak. That speech was worthy of the occasion; it was the speech of a big man, a man of strength and vision.

> " While I speak, be kind and patient. I have to speak for my people, who are numerous, and who rely upon me to follow that

> course which in the future will tend to their good. The plains are large and wide. We are the children of the plains; it is our home, and the buffalo has been our food always. I hope you look upon the Blackfeet, Bloods, and Sarcees as your children now, and that you will be indulgent and charitable to them. They all expect me to speak now for them, and I trust the Great Spirit will put into their breasts to be a good people—into the minds of the men, women and children, and their future generations. The advice given me and my people has proved to be very good. If the Police had not come to the country, where would we be all now? Bad men and whiskey were killing us so fast that very few, indeed, of us would have been left to-day. The Police have protected us as the feathers of the bird protect it from the frosts of winter. I wish them all good, and trust that all our hearts will increase in goodness from this time forward. I am satisfied. I will sign the treaty."

Little wonder is it that the other chiefs: Red Crow, Father of Many Children, and Old Sun, announced their acceptance: "I will sign with Crowfoot." "I agree with Crowfoot and will sign," "We all agree with Crowfoot." And even less wonder is it that there has grown up a tradition amongst the Blackfeet that as soon as Crowfoot's adhesion to the treaty was announced the Governor's cannon was fired.

Crowfoot now became the Grand Sachem of the Blackfoot confederacy, a position which became more and more solidified as the passing years brought to his tribe a clearer understanding of the benefits of the treaty. About two years after this famous speech had been made he, in the interests of the harmony and goodwill, visited the neighbouring tribes. Everywhere he was received with the greatest respect and friendliness until he reached the Assiniboin, a Siouxan people who had joined the Crees. As he and his party approached the Assiniboin camp they were met by a welcoming delegation. One of these delegates refused to offer the hand of friendship, and suddenly began to lash Crowfoot with his quirt. Some of the Blackfeet braves immediately intervened and would have shot the Assiniboin on the spot but for the interference of Crowfoot who paying no attention to the wrangle exerted himself for peace and goodwill and actually placed his hand over the muzzle of the threatening gun to prevent bloodshed. Such conduct in one known to be fearless made a deep impression upon the Assiniboins. A blow had always brought a blow in return; this seemed a practical application of the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. But, though Crowfoot refused to chastise his assailant, Black Horse, an Assiniboin chief, took in hand the punishment of the offending members of his tribe. Before Crowfoot left the lodges of the Assiniboins ample and profuse apologies were offered him for the insult.

About 1884 Louis Riel, that Stormy Petrel, sent his emissaries amongst the Indians of the Plains spreading the rumor that the whites were in the country to take away the land from the Indians and that the promises made in the various treaties would never be kept. This propaganda made some headway amongst the Crees. Sir Samuel Steele in his "Forty Years in Canada" (p. 180) says that one of these runners was amongst the Blackfeet urging that the Indians could kill the settlers' cattle if they chose for the lands was theirs and the white settlers were mere interlopers. According to Steele these arguments made an impression upon Crowfoot, whose former friendly demeanor changed to one of hostility. However, the arrest and removal of Riel's representative and a heart-to-heart talk with the officers of the Mounted Police brought Crowfoot back to himself again.

About a year later broke out the North West Rebellion. Though the war-zone lay near the confluence of the North and South Saskatchewan rivers the whole of the western prairies was seething with unrest or at any rate in a condition that caused much uneasiness in the authorities. And yet there was no doubt about Crowfoot. Even Major-General Strange in his report p. 52 says: " Chief Crowfoot though, perhaps, personally sincere in his professions of loyalty, was unable to control all the young men of this tribe ", who, he thinks, would have risen had the Government troops sustained a reverse. On other hand the Lieutenant-Governor the Honourable Edgar Dewdney had no doubt: " The messages we have from Crowfoot are of a very friendly nature, and if we should require assistance from him in the shape of men for scouts we can get them." (Gunner Jingo's Jubilee, p. 410). The question in the end would have been; had Crowfoot sufficient control over his tribe to curb the warlike desires of his young braves? To that question it is believed that there could be but one answer: Yes. The Blackfeet claim that the warriors were about equally divided in opinion, and that Crowfoot went amongst the disaffected explaining that the origin of the rebellion lay in the refusal of the Great White Mother to recognize the claims of the half-breeds to lands that she knew rightfully belonged to the Indians. " Crowfoot," they say, " received a message from his friend General Strange AH PO PI. In this message AH PO PI wanted to know what attitude the Blackfeet had towards the fighting in the North, and also wished to know if his friend Crowfoot were able to maintain peace... Crowfoot replied to his friend AH PO PI not to be afraid and to rest assured that the Blackfeet would not take sides with any party but would remain neutral."

And so it was. Through the whole of that tense springtime the detachment of North West Mounted Police at Gleichen in the Blackfoot reserve was never called upon for any assistance to maintain peace and order amongst Crowfoot's people.

Crowfoot was now fifty-five years of age; admired, even adored by the Blackfeet, respected by the white people, a tower of strength in every effort towards peace and good understanding. The remaining five years of his life were quiet and uneventful. In 1890, at the age of sixty came the end; his work was done. And most fittingly he lies overlooking that spot so dear to the Blackfoot heart, the Ridge-under-Water, the spot where he had proven his right to be called, as the plain cross at his grave-head has it, " THE FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE."

F. W. HOWAY.