SEEGWIN
A Legend of the Fur Trade

Said by EDWARD W. DAVIS

MR. DAVIS, who was for many years director of the Mines Experiment Station of the University of Minnesota, is usually identified by Minnesotans with the development of the state's taconite industry. He appears here in a totally different role. Long interested in the lore of the border lakes canoe country, he has collected many of its tales and legends, and among them is the following story. No claim can be made for its accuracy or strict authenticity. It has been told before many campfires, and no doubt numerous details have been added as well as forgotten. Yet the persistence through generations of such a legend is in itself interesting, and as retold by Mr. Davis, Joe Blackjack's tale is a good yarn and a fascinating example of north country folklore. Ed.

ONE EVENING some years ago in an old trapping shack on Northern Light Lake, Jock Richardson and I were sitting around the stove after supper, waiting for bedtime, and Jock told me this story.¹ He had heard it from an old Indian called Joe Blackjack,
whose Ojibway name was Kiwedin Binis, meaning "the clean, cold north wind." The two of them had met when Jock first came to live in the border country, and over the years they became good friends. According to Jock, the old Chippewa knew more about the rivers, lakes, and portages at the eastern end of the Rainy Lake watershed than anyone else. He always said Blackjack was a good man — honest, straightforward, and the cleanest Indian he had ever seen. I met the old fellow just once, but I can clearly recall his smiling face full of wrinkles and his small squinty eyes. He died in 1942 on the reservation at Shebandowan Lake in Ontario.

When they were trapping together during the fall beaver hunt of 1932, Blackjack told Jock the long tale which had been passed from generation to generation in his family. This took several evenings around the campfire, for Blackjack spoke in Ojibway and talked slowly, so that Jock could follow and understand.

When Jock repeated the tale to me that night in the shack on Northern Light it sounded like pure fiction, but later we went to work on it, checking names and dates. As we went along our interest increased, because the story did seem to line up — in a rough sort of way — with the diaries and journals of some of the early travelers and voyageurs who passed along the border lakes canoe route.

Here it is as Blackjack told it, but with the addition of a few dates and places, and sometimes names, when Jock and I could figure them out. Blackjack had learned the tale from his grandmother, who had learned it from her grandmother, so it is no wonder that some of the details are blurred and lost.

**EARLY IN JULY** of the year 1748 a brigade of five canoes with thirty French-Canadian voyageurs approached Grand Portage, after a journey of many days across Lake Superior. In command was Louis-Joseph Gaultier, youngest son of the great trader Pierre Gaultier, Sieur de la Vérendrye, who, after a four-year period of disfavor, again held a permit from the King of France for a monopoly of the fur trade west of the great lake.

Landing on the beach, the voyageurs unloaded the trade goods and supplies. In four days of hard labor the canoes and all the packs were carried over the nine-mile trail that bypassed the many falls and rapids in the lower Pigeon River. The long path was open and well packed down, since the Vérendrye family had cleared all the portages on the road to Rainy Lake seventeen years before, and the route had been in constant use during the succeeding seasons. In spots the mud was deep and there was much grumbling, but at last everything was assembled at the upper river, the canoes were gummed, and the party embarked. After the grueling work on the long portage, the men were glad to be on the water again, and the knowledge that at the end of the day a keg of high wine would be given to them added speed to their naturally rapid paddle strokes.

That evening they unloaded their canoes and turned them over on the shore. All preparations for the night were made at once, for no more work would be done after the spirits were distributed. The leader gave a nine-gallon keg to the men and took a mug to his tent for himself. His was the only tent; the men slept in their blankets under the canoes.

Louis-Joseph, the bourgeois of the red beard, as his voyageurs called him, was a big man, but quick in his movements and quick with his temper, too. Few ever crossed him. He started a small fire and made some porridge of meal and pemmican, and while it heated he drank sparingly of his liquor. He could hear the shouts and songs of his voyageurs getting louder and louder, but until they were all drunk and asleep, he must keep watch. There would, he knew, be fighting before the night was over, and it would be necessary for him to take away the knives of those who became
overwrought. He wanted no injured men who could not work.

As he drank his spirits and ate his porridge, his thoughts wandered. He had traveled this route many times—had, indeed, been with his brother François as far west as the great mountains beyond the Mandan villages. He was glad to return to this land of lakes after his absence in the East, and he looked forward to renewing acquaintances along the way and to the grand celebration when they reached Fort St. Pierre. His old friend, Wagosh, the Fox, on Saganaga Lake would be surprised to see him. Perhaps he could get a new canoe there if Wagosh’s people had one made. It had been a good trip thus far, he felt. The liquor warmed him, and he was happy and relaxed.

The noise from the camp was rising, and he could hear Pierre, the leader of the men, louder and more quarrelsome than the rest. At a sudden burst of shouting, he rose and left his tent. He saw that many of the men were already asleep, but a few were still on their feet, and Pierre stood before them waving a knife around his head and cursing wildly. Louis immediately moved in and demanded the knife. Pierre lurched at him with a wild swing, which the bourgeois easily avoided. Catching the voyageur’s wrist, he shook the knife from his grasp, and slapped him with his open hand. Pierre sat down heavily and began to cry, but Louis rolled the keg over to him and the trouble was ended. The other men staggered slowly away, and Louis, surveying them, knew that peace and quiet would rule the camp in a short time.

Back at his tent, he set a kettle to heating, and rummaging around in his pack, came up with some tea and a bottle of brandy, both of which he had been treasuring. He made boiling hot tea and drank it with brandy, and then he drank the brandy alone, and then he drank the tea alone, and then he mixed them again. All was quiet and suddenly Louis was melancholy. He needed a woman to console him tonight. It was sad, he thought, that a man had no woman to comfort him when he was depressed. Ah, well, thank God he still had brandy, and he took one more drink, pattering the half-empty bottle. Then he kicked out the fire, rolled up in his blanket, and went to sleep.

The bourgeois allowed his men to sleep late the next morning, and the sun was nearing the treetops before the brigade got under way. It was only a short distance up the river to the next portage which was long and muddy. Louis knew the cruel, sobering effect of a carrying strap across the forehead after a night of drink, and he knew that when the men had carried over the pieces and the canoes their steps would be far less faltering. Nevertheless, camp was made early that night, and though a few of the men heated food, many rolled up in their blankets and slept immediately.

The next day was better, and after making five portages, they camped on the beautiful Mountain Lake. Here the men built five separate fires, and set great brass kettles to boiling pemmican and Indian corn. Each man carried at his belt a wooden bowl and a knife. What more did he need besides a blanket to sit on in the canoe and to sleep in at night? A pipe and tobacco, of course—every bit as important as food—and a few beads and spangles. What could these be for? Aha, what else? They would soon reach Indian country, would they not, and beautiful women?

The brigade moved on across lakes and over portages. The men often sang, now, as they swung their narrow paddles in short, quick strokes. This pleased Louis. He was always glad when the men started a song, because it made him feel that all was well with them. They were good men, he thought—some better, but all good. Their spirits would remain high, he knew, if he could get some fresh meat, and he took up his gun as they embarked on Rose Lake. Its shallow bays had water lilies, and where there were water lilies, there might be moose. Silently they pad-
dled along the north shore with a gentle breeze in their faces and with the low sun nearing the treetops. As they rounded a point, every paddler froze in position. The steersman at the rear swung the canoe silently in toward a little bay where a great moose was standing in the water near the shore.

His ugly snout was toward them, but after a moment he seemed satisfied and went on eating water lily roots. No sooner had his great head gone down than the paddlers, pulling together in one powerful stroke, sent the canoe farther into the bay. Again they froze as the head came up, and again they made a single, powerful stroke as the head went down. Louis looked at his priming and set himself firmly—a few more strokes and he could shoot. Down went the huge head. The quick paddle stroke followed, then the freeze, and the intense gaze of the great, black eyes, now plainly visible. Once more, now—just once more. Yes, there it was. Down went the ugly snout and the men made another stroke, but this time, as the canoe steadied, Louis’ gun spoke with a tremendous roar in the narrow bay. The smoke came back in the voyageurs’ faces, but all could see that the great beast was down, and a shout went up—“Frais viande”—fresh meat.

By the time the animal had stopped his thrashings, the canoes had landed, and the men were wading into the water to drag him out and begin the skinning and butchering. There was much excitement, Pierre pointing out proudly how the ball from Louis’ gun had gone straight to the animal’s heart. No one, he boasted, but Louis-Joseph Gaultier, their own bourgeois, could have made such a shot at that distance.

That night the men received their portions of meat, the first they had eaten in many days. Most of them were satisfied to roast great hunks of it, gorging themselves on the half-raw flesh, but some made stews from such delicacies as the liver, tongue, nose, heart, and kidney, and one old voyageur skinned out the two great testicles for his pot. Louis carefully saved the hide and even the four hoofs to give Wagosh when the brigade reached his village in two more days.

Many sly remarks were passed about the night to be spent near this village on the lake called Saganaga. Louis told them that each man must pay for what he got, the full price agreed upon with the husband or father, and there were to be no spirits. If any man gave drink to the Indians, he would be left behind to winter with them. They all knew the rules, but it was best to remind them.

The sun was low in the sky as they approached the Chippewa village on the west side of Saganaga. The men sang lustily, and many of the Indians came down to the shore. A few paddled out in canoes to escort the brigade to its campground at the old post across the bay. Hardly had a landing been made and the packs assembled and covered before a messenger arrived, inviting Louis to visit the chief. After instructing Pierre to post a watch over the goods, the bourgeois set out in a small Indian canoe.

Louis was greeted with great affection by Wagosh and by some of his headmen. The long-stemmed ceremonial pipe was brought out, lighted, and passed around, each man facing east and taking three quick puffs. When the ceremony was finished, the old chief asked polite questions about the health and prosperity of the Red Beard and his relatives. During his years in the Indian country, Louis had learned something of the Ojibway language and had no trouble understanding the smoothly flowing words of Wagosh.

After answering in a somewhat faltering manner, the Frenchman brought out presents for the chief, the other headmen, and their wives. The women sat in the background around the edge of the lodge and took no part in the meeting until the gifts were distributed, when there was much chatter among them. All became quiet again as the old chief spoke. He asked his
guest whether there was anything he needed. Louis explained that he would like to have a new canoe since one of his was in bad condition. The Fox smoked his pipe in silence for a moment and then said, yes, he had a new canoe which his people had just finished, but they had need for it. The trader suggested that they could easily make another for themselves, but the chief replied that good birchbark had been hard to find that spring, and he was afraid that they could make no more canoes that season. Louis thought that with the great wisdom and knowledge of the woods possessed by the chief and his people, they could find enough good bark for another canoe. But Wagosh was not yet ready to trade, and he asked his guest to tell of his trip. This Louis did in some detail, and when he came to the shooting of the moose, there was much excitement. He said that he wished the Fox to have the hide and the hoofs, which were at his camp. Immediately the chief sent messengers to get them, and the others withdrew, leaving Louis and Wagosh alone.

The trader opened his pack and took out a small flask of much reduced high wine, which he presented to his host. The Vérendrye family had made it a rule that liquor was not to be traded with the Indians, but that a small amount might be given to the chiefs as a present. After this, the negotiations proceeded easily, and it was soon

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agreed that the new canoe would be handed over for goods valued at sixty beaver skins.

At the conclusion of the trade, Wagosh expressed great pleasure that Louis had come to see him again. He suggested that since his friend had been long on the journey, he would send one of his wives to the Red Beard’s tent that night to look after his wants. Louis thanked him politely, saying that he was very kind, but that this was too much to offer. The old chief, knowing what was in the Frenchman’s mind, told him that within the year he had been sent a young, new wife from the north. At his age, he feared that she would be childless; his friend, he said, would do him a great favor if he would accept her. Perhaps Louis would make for him a fine, young son who would grow up to be big and strong and have red hair.

The trader replied that under those conditions he would, of course, be honored to accept and would do his best to accommodate his old friend. He explained, however, that he had a custom on occasions of this kind—a cleansing ceremony at the edge of the lake—and asked that the new wife be told of it. Then if she chose not to come, he said, under no circumstances was she to be beaten and bound and carried to his tent. The old chief answered that this was, indeed, a strange custom, but that he would tell his wives and let them decide.

By this time, the messengers had returned with the moose hide and hoofs, and the women were already at work on them. Louis went to look over his new canoe and to renew his acquaintance with the men and women who had made it. After sundown a quiet Indian girl came to tell him that Chief Wagosh awaited the Red Beard at his lodge. She led him back and held open the skin door for him to enter. At once he smelled the fish, and there before him on a piece of birchbark was a great trout that had been baked in clay all day among hot rocks, just the way he liked it best.

Louis and the chief ate first, and when they had their fill the women ate, and lastly the younger members of the household. There was plenty for all in that great fish. When the leisurely meal was finished, they sat and talked and smoked for a time, and then Louis excused himself to return to his own camp. It was late twilight, and the stars were appearing in bold patterns as he paddled the small canoe across the bay.

His tent was pitched a short distance from the voyageurs’ camp. As he lifted the canoe from the water, a figure disengaged itself from the deeper shadows of the forest and approached him. The girl spoke to him quietly, saying that Chief Wagosh, her husband, had sent her to his tent for the night. Louis at once recognized her as the same one who had brought him the invitation to the feast and led him to the lodge. He asked her if she understood about the cleansing ceremony and she said she did not, but would do as he directed.

Louis went to his tent and got from his pack some of the soap his men made from bear grease and wood ashes. Removing his clothing, he walked down to the shore. The girl quickly did likewise and stood before him in the fading light, straight and slim. Louis took her hand, and they walked out into the warm water. He showed her how to rub the soap on her body, and then how to wash it off. Gravely she imitated his actions. Then Louis dived under the water alone and swam with great, splashing strokes far out into the bay.

When he returned, exhilarated from his hard swim, they sat side by side on the sand, letting the warm breeze dry them. He asked whether she liked the cleansing ceremony, and she said she did. However, she was glad to do anything he wished, since she was the dutiful wife of the chief and he had told her to be obedient. In that case, Louis said, she must smile and laugh and be happy. Then he asked her whether she had helped prepare the great fish for the feast. She told him that she had been allowed to help, but the work had been in
charge of the older wives. She said her people had known that he was coming two days before, and Wagosh had sent his most expert men out into the big lake to catch the trout. Her reserve seemed to melt away as she talked, and at last, hand in hand, they went into Louis' tent.

SOME EIGHTEEN years later, in the summer of 1766, another band of French-Canadian voyageurs hoisted packs and canoes at Grand Portage and began the long trip to the Rainy River. In command of the party was a trader named Finlay, who, like other shrewd Englishmen experienced in the fur business, had turned sharp eyes on the great area beyond Lake Superior after the Treaty of Paris in 1763 gave the British possession of Canada. With financial backing from a Montreal merchant, Finlay had been among the earliest to set out for the Rainy River district.

During the first season he had encountered many difficulties. He did not know the country well, and the savages, still attached to their French friends, had been suspicious and antagonistic. Establishing a post on the Rainy River, Finlay had left a few men there and brought the rest of his brigade out with the furs acquired during the winter. He had disposed of these at Sault Ste. Marie, where he also secured new canoes and the trade goods dispatched to him by his associate in the East. The latter had also sent his nephew, Robert, to act as Finlay's clerk and learn the Indian trade.

Finlay had eyed this addition to the party with misgivings. Robert was young — about twenty years old, Finlay guessed — with a serious, intent manner which the trader found disconcerting at times. The youth
could often be seen talking with the voyageurs, trying to learn their strange mixture of old French, Ojibway, and English, and listening to their songs and stories. Though this did not please Finlay, who preferred to keep his voyageurs in their places, he knew it would prove useful in handling the large group of men needed for the return journey.

Beyond Grand Portage, the brigade made its tedious way up streams and across lakes to Height of Land Portage, the great divide between the Lake Superior and Hudson Bay watersheds. Viewing it for the first time, the young clerk found this rugged country appealing. He preferred the quiet intimacy of inland waters to the boisterous waves of Lake Superior and fell quickly under the spell of the voyageurs' songs as they paddled down lake after lake, set like a string of jewels against the green velvet of the trees.

It was plain that many people had passed this way each year when the French trade was flourishing. Nearly every point of prominence along the proper route was marked by a lob pine. Earlier travelers had prepared these markers by chopping off all the branches for a distance of ten or twenty feet down from the tops of selected tall trees, leaving only a few branches at the very crown as a sort of plume. The portage trails were wide and beaten hard by the tramp of heavily burdened feet, and at the ends of many portages large clearings had been made where old campgrounds could be found. But of most interest to Robert were the names and dates carved on the trees and the occasional mound with a marker of birchbark bearing a name, a date, and often a crude cross.

The party's first contact with Indians was at a large lake called Saganaga, where it was necessary to pass a village whose inhabitants were sometimes troublesome. The voyageurs told of a chief friendly to the French who had lived there in the old days. But the young chief now in control stopped small brigades of canoes and exacted a toll. Having more men than he had brought the year before, Finlay was confident he could force his way through if necessary. Nevertheless, he directed that camp be made early and delayed entering the big lake until morning.

As the brigade approached the Indian village, the travelers were intercepted by a host of small canoes. It was evident that the trader and his men would not be able to pass without a fight unless terms were made with the chief.

Finlay went ashore, leaving Robert in charge of the brigade with instructions not to land unless he heard a pistol shot. The trader met the chief in his lodge and presented the usual gifts of tobacco, blankets, knives, and cloth, all of which the young chief accepted. He was not satisfied, however, and demanded rum. Finlay asked what his people had to trade, and they brought out a few worthless summer furs. Despite much talk and gesturing, Finlay refused to give rum except in trade, and at last, after a conference, an Indian girl was brought and offered to him as a wife. The trader refused. The girl was then offered as a companion, to be returned when the spring brigade came back that way next year. Finlay hesitated; he knew that some concession was necessary to get his canoes through without further trouble.

The chief, sensing his hesitation, quickly pointed out the girl's good qualities. Looking at her carefully for the first time, Finlay noted with surprise that she had blue eyes and distinctly reddish hair. When he asked about her, he was told that she was a daughter of the old chief and that she would be traded to Finlay cheap because she was not big and strong, and the young bucks would not marry her.

It soon became obvious that the girl was quite as anxious to go with Finlay as the chief was to get rid of her. She had dressed in her finest clothes, and she showed the trader her sewing and the designs worked into her jacket with colored porcupine quills. Through his half-breed guide, who
served as interpreter, Finlay told her that he was going toward the setting sun to a far lake and would not be back for many moons. She said she would go. He asked what work she could do, and she said she could snare rabbits and deer and make clothes and moccasins for both summer and winter. She said she was strong and could carry water and chop wood and that the reason the young bucks would not marry her was because she would not please them and give them their way with her. Finlay reluctantly agreed to take her in exchange for two kegs of well-watered liquor. Whether the girl could earn her keep or not, Finlay thought it was worth the price to get under way again without further delay.

IT SOON became apparent that he had acquired no ordinary squaw. At the camp that evening the guide brought the girl to Finlay, saying that she wanted something called “savon.” Robert, listening, said that meant soap. What could she know about soap? Through the guide, she replied that her mother had told her how white men greased themselves with it and then went into the lake and she wished to do as the white people did. Finlay explained that they had no soap, but that the men would make some when they reached their post. He asked who her father was and she said the great chief Wagosh, but that she was really the daughter of La Verendrye of the red beard, the son of the white father who first brought her people knives of iron and pots of copper. By her voice and every movement she made it plain that she was proud of her blood and considered herself better than all Indians and most whites. Finlay was amused by her haughty attitude toward the voyageurs and was not much surprised when she refused to ride in any canoe but his. Since the leader’s canoe was heavily loaded, however, she agreed to ride with Robert, after learning that he was the nephew of a Montreal merchant.

The young clerk knew little of the Ojib-way tongue and could not talk with the girl, but he learned, with the help of one of the voyageurs, that her name was See-gwin-kee-zhig, which meant “spring sky.” He told her his name and taught her to say it. This pleased her, and she wanted to know other English words. She seemed happy to be with Robert, whom she accepted as her equal.

At the next large lake, called Basswood, Finlay’s party had to pass another Chippewa village. Here the trader had met with his greatest difficulty the previous year. His small brigade of three canoes had been intercepted and he had been permitted to proceed only after the Indians had confiscated one canoe and all the goods it contained.

This time he planned to reach the village early in the day to avoid camping in the area. He knew that scouts had been watching the brigade ever since it had entered the lake, and he was not surprised to find a large group of canoes waiting behind the point of an island. The Indians escorted the brigade toward the village, and their ready weapons gave ample warning of the reception he could expect. Finlay scattered his canoes and told his men to load and prime their guns. Seeing this, the Indians moved off to a more respectful distance; some fitted arrows to their bows, and others brought out guns and made threatening gestures.

Finlay explained to Robert that he, with three men and the interpreter, would go ashore to visit the chief, but that nothing serious would happen until he started to leave the chief’s lodge. At that point, if the negotiations had not reached a satisfactory settlement, trouble might start. Robert and the men were not to land unless Finlay fired his pistol, in which case they must be prepared for a fight. He expected no serious trouble and would do his best to prevent it, since he wanted these Indians to bring the results of their fall fur hunt to him at his post on Rainy River.

When Finlay reached shore he found the
chief awaiting him with several of his leading warriors. The trader smoked with them and then distributed presents, stating that he was in a hurry but could not pass without stopping to greet the great chief of the village. His host said they were to have a feast and Finlay must stay. Although the Englishman repeated that he must hurry on, the chief continued to insist that Finlay land his big canoes and spend the night. This was the way trouble had started the previous summer and the trader did not propose to let it happen again. It was obvious, however, that the chief was not to be bought off with a few presents; he wanted a share of the freight in the big canoes. The Indians crowded around the entrance to the lodge carrying their weapons, and Finlay knew he must talk fast to get his goods through without a battle.

He told the chief he was sorry he could not stay for the feast, but must hurry on to Horse Portage where a guide from Rainy River was awaiting him. He said the Great White Father at Michilimackinac was very angry at the taking of the canoe and goods the year before—that Finlay had only with great difficulty restrained him from sending soldiers with their big guns and war canoes to kill the people and burn the village. Finlay said he had explained that the chief and his people were not really bad Indians and had persuaded the Great White Father to give them another chance to prove their good faith.

This argument evidently impressed the chief, who had heard of the great guns that belched fire and smoke and could kill many men with a single shot. Nevertheless, he repeated that Finlay must stay the night and enjoy the feast.

The situation was tense, and the trader did some hard thinking. If he stayed, he knew he would be robbed; if he refused, it would mean a fight and bloodshed and perhaps an end to his trading activities in the area. He had to act quickly, decisively, and with great assurance. Pressing his threats of reprisal still further, he told the chief that unless the Great White Father received a dispatch from him by the time of the new moon saying that the Indians had made no trouble, he would send the soldiers. After hearing the report his new guide would bring him from the Rainy River post, Finlay would send back a messenger to the Great White Father to tell him how the Indians had treated the brigade. If the chief delayed him or interfered with the passage of the messenger, then the soldiers would be on their way, and no order from the Great White Father could reach them to turn them back.

Finlay could see that this story had a strong effect. Pushing his advantage, he arose to depart with his men, telling the chief to come to the trade canoe, where he would give him a keg of rum for the feast that evening. The chief thought he should have three kegs, and they agreed on two.

While the kegs were being transferred to the Indian canoe, the chief watched suspiciously, and at last told Finlay he was sending some of his braves along to Horse Portage to escort the messenger on his re-
turn. Finlay readily agreed, for it had occurred to him that the trick might be used again, and sending back one of his men seemed a small price for convincing the chief and keeping up the bluff.

WITH THE CHIPPEWA braves leading the way, the brigade resumed its journey, to the relief of all except Seegwin. Having heard about the conversation between Finlay and the chief, she knew one of the men would be sent back from Horse Portage. It seemed certain to her that Robert would be the messenger. Who else could be trusted with such an important mission and who else would be permitted to speak to the Great White Father? The prospect of being separated from Robert distressed her, and as the afternoon passed, she became silent and thoughtful.

Near sunset the party reached Horse Portage, and Finlay was pleased to find Red Eye, his old and trusted guide, awaiting him. They greeted each other warmly; Finlay explained the situation and outlined to Red Eye his plan for maintaining the hoax. He would now make up some important-looking dispatches and send Crooked Nose, the first guide, back with them. But here an unexpected difficulty developed: Crooked Nose refused to go. He said, however, that Seegwin had told him she knew the route perfectly and wanted to return to her people. When Finlay asked Seegwin if this were true, she said yes. She told him gravely that she knew the route and would take the messenger back if the messenger were Robert, but she would take no one else. On this point she remained firm, and as there seemed to be no alternative, Finlay went to tell the clerk that he was to make the journey. Seegwin and Red Eye continued to talk earnestly together.

Robert was surprised and more than a little disappointed at the news, but he recognized at once the importance of carrying the plan through. If he were lucky, he might find a guide at Grand Portage to bring him back, but the chance was slim that he could rejoin Finlay or reach the Rainy River post that season.

By the time the sky was light the next morning, Seegwin was preparing the packs for the return trip. She seemed much interested in their contents, personally checking everything, rejecting this, including that, with swift and sure decision. When all was ready the two groups separated—Robert, Seegwin, and Crooked Nose, who would accompany them as far as Basswood, turning their small Indian canoe toward the east, and Finlay with the six trade canoes continuing west. With a casual wave of the hand, Robert began a journey that would take him he knew not where—perhaps to Grand Portage, perhaps all the way to Michilimackinac.

When the little group reached the Indian village on Basswood Lake, Robert showed the chief the papers with their large wax seals, saying he must deliver them as quickly as possible to the Great White Father. The chief replied that to make sure the message was not delayed he would send his braves along to see the Englishman safely
over the next portage. Robert was not deceived by this apparent concern for his speedy and successful journey, and as he embarked with Seegwin and the three Chippewa escorts he knew he was being watched rather than assisted.

The guide had remained at the village, and Robert was dubious at the prospect of paddling a canoe all the way to Saganaga with only a young girl to help. He was not an expert paddler, but when he found that Seegwin had arranged the packs so he would paddle in the bow, his relief was tinged with resentment. To his surprise, however, the little canoe kept pace easily with that of the Indians leading them, seeming to skim over the surface of the lake almost of its own accord.

Before the sun reached the treetops, they entered the little bay leading to the portage. Robert expected their escorts to turn back at this point, but they watched silently as he and Seegwin unloaded the canoe. Under their inspection, he felt clumsy as he lifted the bark craft to his shoulders and started along the rocky portage. Seegwin went ahead down the trail carrying both packs and stood waiting for him at the end without the slightest sign of fatigue, although her load had been twice as heavy as his. As he put the canoe in the water again, he saw the three savages watching from some high rocks, and he wondered how far they would accompany him.

Robert and Seegwin started up Birch Lake, though the sun was already below the horizon and the sky was gradually darkening. Robert was thinking about camp and food, but Seegwin headed through the twisting, turning channel of the lake with a sureness that convinced him she knew the route. The stars were shining brightly before they stopped on a little island.

Seegwin chose a secluded camp site
among the trees, but when Robert started to put up the little shelter tent, she stopped him. Neither would she let him make a fire, but simply sliced off pieces of pemmican for each of them to eat cold. He was puzzled, but when the girl disappeared among the bushes with her blanket, he thought he understood, and amusement mingled with anger filled him. She need not worry that he would bother her. He was no half-savage voyageur; the last thing he would do was go to bed with a squaw. Rolling up in his blanket, he soon slept.

He awakened the next morning with the sun in his face and Seegwin shaking him. She motioned for him to keep silent and led him across the island to some brush on the opposite shore. When she parted the bushes, he saw coming down the lake from the east the three Indians they had left the night before at the portage. Watching them, he realized that he and Seegwin had been followed to see that they were traveling in the right direction. The Indians had apparently passed the island some time earlier and were now returning toward their village. As the canoe approached, its occupants stopped paddling and began to argue, pointing this way and that, toward the portage, toward the island, and toward the village. Finally one who talked louder than the others pointed westward, and all then began to paddle down the lake again. Seegwin’s eyes were sparkling as she turned to Robert and whispered the word, “Good.” They sat quietly until the canoe rounded a distant point and disappeared.

Robert sensed that Seegwin had been watching from the hiding place for hours to learn whether they were being followed. But what was the purpose of this secrecy? He tried to make her understand his question, but she simply smiled at him and said, “No.” Her vocabulary seemed to consist of “yes,” “no,” and “good.” As they prepared to leave, Robert noticed that the canoe was not where he had left it the night before; marks on the shore indicated it had been put back into the water.

This morning Seegwin took the forward paddling position and left the stern to Robert. He was glad of the change, but wondered why it had been made. The workings of the girl’s mind were a closed book to him, though watching her, he felt sure that she had a reason for everything she did. As they moved away from the island, he was conscious of a quickened paddle stroke, and again he felt resentment swelling up in him. He had not set a fast enough stroke the day before—that was the key to the changed positions. But he could see no necessity for speed.

A light breeze helped them on their way, and soon they reached the next portage. At the landing place, Seegwin seemed much interested in the shore. Robert could see marks in the sand where two canoes had recently been drawn up. One could be that of the three Indians who had been following them, but what was the other? He questioned Seegwin, but she did not seem to understand and continued to examine the ground carefully as they carried over. They made the portage in one trip and Robert prepared to smoke a pipe. But Seegwin hurried him on, and soon they were paddling up Carp Lake.

He recalled a series of rough portages here and was surprised when Seegwin indicated they should turn to the left into a narrow channel. They were going too much toward the north, he thought. At the end of the twisting inlet, they entered a still smaller channel, and there, quite plainly, was a portage, of which Robert had no recollection. It was short, being little more than a lift-over, and they were soon paddling across a small lake or pond that he was sure he had never seen before.

Now, for the first time, Seegwin showed indecision. They paddled along the far shore, entering every little bay and inlet until she found what she was looking for. When they disembarked, Robert could see only the faintest trace of a portage, and pointing to it, he shook his head. Seegwin, however, laughed at his quizzical expres-
sion and motioned for him to take up the canoe. When he shook his head, she fitted her tumpline, lifted the two packs, and started down the faint trail.

Having no choice, Robert hoisted the canoe to his shoulders and followed, forcing his way awkwardly through the brush along the overgrown path. It was hard, hot work swinging the canoe this way and that between the trees. While he reasoned that Seegwin was probably taking what she thought to be a short cut, he had nearly decided to put down the canoe and demand an explanation when he heard her call from a short distance ahead—"Robar!" She had never before spoken his name, and despite his annoyance he was forced to smile at her accent. He soon reached her, standing on the shore of a small, clear lake.

After putting down the canoe, he took her firmly by the shoulders, looked down into her smiling face, and spoke seriously. Though she could not follow his words, he hoped to make her understand something through his tone and gestures. He told her that he would go no further until she intended to lead him. He suspected, he said, that she had thrown the Indians off their trail by paddling to the portage at night and making signs to indicate the two of them had already crossed. He could not understand the reason for this nor the need for haste. She must somehow explain to him. "You-tell-me," he concluded, pointing to her mouth, and then to his ear.

Seegwin watched every movement of his eyes and lips, and when he had finished, she reached up, and with her finger tips, smoothed out the frown on his forehead. Robert backed away and shook his head in exasperation. She pointed across the lake to a little sandy beach, nodding her head up and down and saying, "Yes, yes." Then, seeing his frown gather again, she lifted the kettle out of the canoe and hung it on a stick, at the same time pointing once more to the other side of the lake.

Robert understood that she wanted to camp there, and grudgingly he prepared to reload the canoe. She seemed greatly pleased as they started paddling, and when they neared the landing she pointed out to him three flat rocks piled on one another. Robert knew this was the Chippewa portage sign, which meant they were on a route of some kind.

As soon as they had drawn up the canoe on a narrow beach, Seegwin knelt in the smooth sand and began making marks with a stick. As Robert squatted beside her, he recognized the lines as a map. She pointed out the Z shape of Basswood Lake and then drew two routes, one to the east toward Saganaga, and the other going north and then turning back toward the west. She talked constantly as she drew, explaining everything to Robert in rapid Ojibway, of which he understood scarcely a word. Pointing to him and then to herself, she pushed two little twigs into the sand at a spot on the second route, which evidently marked their present location. Then pointing to Basswood, she drew the route that Finlay was taking westward toward Lac la Croix. Finally she traced in the sand a line from the two twigs, leading around north of Basswood and eventually joining Finlay's route.

Gradually it dawned on Robert that they were going to try to rejoin Finlay. She had taken him toward Saganaga only far enough to convince the Indians that the messenger was on his way east toward Grand Portage and had then turned off on a route that circled back to the north and west. As she finished, a low whistle escaped him. She had never intended to return to her own village. She must have persuaded Crooked Nose not to go, then planned all this with Red Eye. And Finlay—did he know? Robert recalled the parting words of the trader, who said that if Robert should find a way to rejoin the brigade, he must at all costs avoid being seen. Finlay must have suspected. A feeling of elation bubbled up in Robert, and reaching out, he grasped Seegwin's hand.

She had been watching him closely with a look that was earnest, almost fearful.
When he took her hand, her whole face lighted up. Robert, looking down into her eyes, was suddenly filled with embarrassment. He stood up quickly and walked away, not seeing the look of pain his action caused.

They built a small fire that evening and cooked a meal of Indian corn with pemmican and flour. It tasted good to Robert, who had eaten no hot food for two days. He was relaxed and happy as he smoked his pipe and watched the twilight crowd in on the dying campfire. Whether or not they caught up with Finlay's brigade, he was confident they would find their way to the Rainy River post, and he would winter in the woods after all.

The evening was warm and quiet, and as he sauntered down to the little beach for a swim, he saw a dimly silhouetted figure standing in the shallow water. Quickly he turned off into the woods, making his way around the point to another bay. When he returned to camp Seegwin was already rolled up in her blanket, asleep, and he crawled into his own as quietly as possible. The little tent was crowded and intimate, and her nearness bothered him. He turned and twisted, trying to avoid touching her blanket. Why did she have to be so damned clean? If she had been dirty and smelly he could have slept. But Seegwin was not a common squaw. Her father was the son of La Vérendrye, a great Frenchman. She was almost white — half white, anyway. At last, unable to lie there and ignore her any longer, he took up his blanket and moved down to the beach, where he slept on the warm sand by the camp-fire.

IN THE MORNING he was awakened by a light touch and opened his eyes to see Seegwin smiling at him. She pointed to the pot that was already steaming over the fire. The sun was just rising as they finished eating, and by the time the tent was down and the packs loaded, it was light enough to see the old marks along the portage trail. Seegwin, as usual, took the packs, and Robert, shouldering the canoe, followed her into the woods.

Their journey that day covered a series of portages, interrupted only briefly by short trips through small lakes and streams barely deep enough to float the canoe. Robert often wondered how Seegwin found
the way. She seemed to locate the piled stones marking the portages with little or no searching. That night they camped on the shore of a larger lake. With Seegwin’s sand map in mind, Robert felt they must have made considerable progress and should now be nearly north of the Indian village on Basswood.

When they had finished eating, Robert gummed the leaks in the canoe. His patches were not skillful, but they seemed effective. Seegwin was busy gathering great armloads of balsam boughs for more comfortable sleeping, and he could smell their clean fragrance as he approached the tent. Entering, he saw she had carpeted the small space with feathery boughs, and this time there was to be no question. His blanket was below and hers was on the top.

Two days and many portages later the pair reached Lac la Croix. They landed at a small island on the southwest shore, and there, on a smooth rock, Seegwin found two stones piled together with a poplar twig wedged between. She looked the twig over carefully, examined the leaves, and then held up two fingers, one bent in the middle. When she pointed down the lake to the west, Robert understood that Finlay’s brigade was a day and a half ahead of them. He and the girl had completely circled Basswood Lake and were now back on the usual canoe route to Rainy River.

Now that they were so close to the brigade, there seemed no reason to hurry, and Robert and Seegwin slowed their paddle strokes. Both felt reluctant to give up the privacy of their newly-found companionship, and Robert shrank from meeting Finlay’s quizzical look and the voyageurs’ sly comments. Next morning they lingered in camp. That day they again paddled slowly, crossing portages at a leisurely pace, and it was not until the following afternoon, shortly before sundown, that they overtook the brigade.

In camp that evening there was much talk between Robert and Finlay and later between Robert and Seegwin, with Red Eye interpreting. A few things still puzzled Robert. Had Seegwin ever passed along the route north of Basswood before? No, she had not, was the answer, but she had been back and forth many times between Saganaga and Lac la Croix, where the people of her village often wintered. She had known there was a northern route, and Red Eye had traveled over most of it. He had told her where to turn off and how to find the first few portages. Robert thought they must have crossed at least thirty portages. How did she find them all? When he asked, she simply smiled and said “yes.”

He also wanted to know who had suggested they follow the old canoe route and rejoin the brigade. After some rapid words with Seegwin, the guide said—rather reluctantly, Robert thought—that it had been his idea. Why, then, Robert asked, had he been chosen as the messenger? Red Eye replied with a shrug that it was Finlay’s decision, but watching Seegwin, Robert saw her eyes sparkling.

Any question Robert had about the future of his relationship with the girl was settled that night when he found that she had moved into his tent. When, with some embarrassment, he spoke of it to Finlay, the trader chuckled and observed that in the wilderness marriage was usually a simple matter.

ALL TOO SOON, it seemed to Robert, the long days of paddling were over and the party reached Finlay’s fort on Rainy River. With the arrival of the brigade there were some forty whites at the post, and in the four or five weeks remaining before frost they were kept busy dispensing trade goods, completing work on the stockade, and securing a supply of food for the winter. As the days passed, Finlay turned his attention to the latter tasks, leaving much of the actual trading to Robert.

One of the larger buildings had been divided by a great double fireplace into two rooms, one for the trade goods and the
other serving as living quarters for the trader and his clerk. To Robert’s surprise Seegwin did not hesitate to enter this dwelling, which was strange and new to her. She took up the tasks of housekeeping and mastered them with surprising speed, quickly adapting to the white man’s ways. She delighted in the stone fireplace, the brass kettles, the iron knives, the steel needles—and the soap. This she used lavishly, washing everything about the place. She made a large birchbark tub in which she bathed frequently and would have bathed Robert and Finlay also had they allowed it. She was soon able to cook to the Englishmen’s liking, and they were grateful at the end of long and often exhausting days to find her before the open fire, slowly turning a leg of venison or a goose on the spit.

The girl was a strange creature—half wild, half tame, and entirely unpredictable. In the fort or at the nearby Chippewa village she was an Indian, dressing and talking like the others, but in their house with only Robert and Finlay present, she made every effort to act as she believed white women did. She was self-reliant and independent, yet sensitive to Robert’s every mood and whim.

The hours she loved best were those they spent in the evenings before the great fireplace. There Robert taught her English words and phrases, and with each new expression she mastered, the barrier that separated her thoughts from his became less. She had so many things to say and so few words to say them. During the day, when she was alone, she would practice what she had learned, talking to herself by the hour.

One winter evening Seegwin told Robert in her faltering English that she was going to give him a son. She was happy because he would be like his father, big and strong, wise and brave. Would he not have the blood of the first Frenchman and one of the earliest Englishmen to come among her people? He would be a great hunter and trader and a leader of men, both red and white.

Many plans and dreams were talked over in the weeks that followed, and Seegwin constantly questioned Robert about how white women took care of their babies. Young Robert would be white like his father and must be treated as white children were. Robert was at first appalled by the prospect of having a family, but it seemed so simple and easy to Seegwin that he came to accept it in much the same manner.

With spring the rains came and the open water below the falls in the river gradually lengthened. Robert and Finlay prepared for the collection and delivery of their furs and Robert reluctantly decided that he would not go to Sault Ste. Marie with Finlay, but would stay at the fort with Seegwin. The long trip might be too much for her, and he would not leave her alone. Finlay scoffed at this, but said that if Robert did not accompany the brigade, he could go west to investigate the possibilities for building a new post. It was decided that Robert would leave with five men in two light canoes as soon as the ice was gone. The expedition would return in time to report to Finlay before the trader left for Grand Portage.

When Seegwin heard of the plan, she said she would go with Robert but he refused to take her. They would be traveling fast, he said, and he would be gone scarcely a month. She accepted his decision in silence, but he could see the pain in her eyes. He tried to comfort her by saying that like a white lady, she must be very careful of the little one who was expected to come in July, “the moon when the birds cast their feathers.”

As the hour for Robert’s departure approached, Seegwin became more and more depressed, and at last he found her crouched in a corner, moaning in a weird manner. He could neither comfort nor quiet her. When his canoe had vanished from sight down the river, she refused to return to the fort, and went to the Indian village. Only occasionally did she search out Finlay.
in the vain hope that he had some word of Robert.

Preparations for the long trip to Sault Ste. Marie kept the trader occupied, and he had given little thought to the expedition, when one morning a shout went up from the river. Hastening to the landing, he saw one canoe approaching and was in time to catch the shouted news of disaster. The other canoe had been lost in the great rapids of the Winnipeg River. One man had been rescued, but Robert and the Indian guide were carried under the cold torrent and could not be found.

It was a sad blow to Finlay; he had become attached to his young assistant. And what now of Seegwin? He might send her and her baby to Robert’s uncle, but would she go? And how would the Montreal trader react to that arrangement? He sent immediately for the girl, dreading the moment of telling her. His messenger returned, however, with the news that she had left the village two days before without a word to anyone.

Despite the mishap, the work of the post went on. The packs were made up, the canoes repaired, and the men allotted their tasks, five to remain at the fort and the rest to go with Finlay. The time for departure approached and there was still no sign of Seegwin, so Finlay sent word to the village that if she returned and did not choose to stay with the Indians, she would be cared
for at the fort. When the canoes were loaded and ready to depart, the girl quietly appeared and took a place in one of them. In the long trip across Rainy Lake, through Lac la Croix, and into Basswood, she hardly spoke a word.

Finlay stopped the brigade at the Indian village on Saganaga and was not surprised to see Seegwin disappear among the lodges. Knowing the trader carried no rum or trade goods on his return trip to Lake Superior the chief made no trouble, and Finlay smoked a pipe with him, explaining about Seegwin and telling what had happened to Robert. He left payment on account of her marriage and also for her care until he returned, when he hoped she and her new baby would again go to the Rainy River fort with him. Her child would be almost white and he intended to see that it was brought up and educated as Robert would have desired.

But this was not to be. When, late in August, Finlay and his brigade again reached Saganaga, they found the village in ruins. It had been burned out, and the place was deserted, except for a few old women. From one of them Finlay learned of a raid by the Sioux a few weeks before. Early one morning, she said, many canoes and warriors had rounded the point. They had rushed on the village before the Chippewa were able to defend themselves, murdering or carrying away with them all who had not fled.

Finlay inquired about Seegwin and was told that she and her newborn boy-child had escaped. She had crossed the point by a hidden trail through the woods. On the far side she joined an old woman and her husband, who were about to flee in a canoe that lay hidden under the bank. They had nearly reached the big island when they were observed by two Sioux warriors who gave chase in a small canoe. When the fugitives reached the island, one of the Sioux, who carried a gun, shot the old man. Seegwin seized the old man's gun and slew the warrior, who went overboard, taking his gun with him. The other Sioux, being unarmed, fled, leaving the girl and the old woman safe on the island. The wife refused to leave her dying husband, but Seegwin with her baby took the canoe and disappeared around the island. Finlay could learn no more.

Seegwin, however, had safely worked her way through the inner channel to the northeast arm of Saganaga, where she left the canoe and traveled far through the deep woods to the village of her mother's family. There she stayed and raised her son, who became a great and honored chief among his people.

WHEN JOCK told me this story in 1946, there seemed no reason to doubt it or to believe it. We knew, of course, that the La Verendrye brigade came up the Pigeon River route into the north country in 1731 and that the father and his four sons were active in the fur trade beyond Rainy Lake until 1744, when their trading permit was cancelled and given to Nicolas-Joseph de Noyelles. In 1747, the younger Verendryes were back in the border region, trading with the Indians there and to the west until the death of their father in December, 1749. The youngest was named Louis-Joseph, and according to surviving records, he spent the winter of 1747-48 in the East, leaving Montreal in June, 1748, on a trip to the Far West.2

When Alexander Henry, the elder, passed up the Pigeon River route and through the border lakes in 1775, he mentioned in his diary a Chippewa village on Saganaga that, some time before, had been raided and burned by the Sioux.3 He noted further that the Chippewa on Saganaga had made much trouble for the early English traders who passed that way, demanding "gifts" of liquor and other articles from them to as-

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2. Alexander Henry, Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories, 238 (Boston, 1901).
sure safe-conduct. English traders, however, do not seem to have used that route until about 1765, a few years after the Treaty of Paris. Thus the Sioux raid must have occurred somewhere about the year 1770. According to Blackjack, Seegwin's child was his grandmother's great grandfather, and if Blackjack was sixty in 1940, the dates and generations would nearly check.

The identities of the trader here called Finlay and of his young clerk seem almost impossible to trace. According to Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, writing in 1784, "The first adventurer went from Michilimakinak in the year 1765." He was stopped and his canoes plundered by Indians in the Rainy Lake region. The following year he "met with the same bad Fortune" and again failed to get much farther than Rainy Lake. Another attempt in 1767 was more successful, and he penetrated beyond Lake Winnipeg. This man is unnamed, but according to Hudson's Bay Company records, the first English trader to reach the Saskatchewan by way of the Grand Portage route was James Finlay, or Finley, who wintered there in 1768-69 at a post later known as Finlay's House. There is evidence, however, that several independent "pedlars" from Canada—both French and English—had penetrated deep into the fur country beyond the border lakes at the same time or even earlier.

Blackjack said that as a young man he had followed Seegwin's secret canoe route from one end to the other; he wanted to take Jock over it to prove that it was there. Jock never went, but from the map it looks possible, and it is certain that the Indians had portages all through that country.

One summer afternoon in 1950 a swimmer wearing a diving mask retrieved an old gun from the bottom of Saganaga, some sixty feet off the point of Jock's Island. Lying in about twenty feet of water, it had rusted, of course, but it was all in one piece, including the wooden stock. It was a muzzle-loader, a percussion lock, with a brass scroll dragon of the type that appears on early guns used in the Indian trade by the Hudson's Bay Company. Of course it might have been dropped into the lake in any number of ways, but Jock and I like to think that it belonged to the Sioux shot by Seegwin when she was escaping with her young son, the great, great, great grandfather of Blackjack.

\footnote{W. Stewart Wallace, ed., \textit{Documents Relating to the North West Company}, 70 (Toronto, 1934).}
\footnote{W. Stewart Wallace, \textit{The Pedlars from Quebec and Other Papers on the Nor'Westers}, 4-9 (Toronto, 1954).}

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![Image of a gun found off Jock's Island]