

Mekaisto-Red Crow

By JOHN LAURIE, Calgary, Alta.

"If civilization can tame the buffalo so that they are like cattle, the lesson is one that I shall not forget easily." When Mekaisto-Red Crow-Head Chief of the Bloods was on tour to Eastern Canada, he was shown the tame buffalo at Stoney Mountain; as a man of high intelligence, he saw the point. Neither did he forget.

Possibly because he never ceased to insist upon that proper recognition of his people's place in the old and the new orders of things, Mekaisto has never been good historical material in the white man's history of the West; others of less prestige but greater pliability have been magnified at his expense. Those white men who knew him well were impressed by his intelligence, his greatness of spirit, and his qualities of leadership. Other tribes and their Chiefs recognized these qualities. To illustrate the lofty position he held, one should recall that, before proceeding with negotiations, Governor Laird's treaty party, in 1877, waited three days for Mekaisto to come. Here was a man who knew the rules of protocol and expected others to observe them as well. The lesson is one that the Canadian Government would have done well to remember.

Tall and slim, dignified in bearing, Mekaisto naturally commanded respect; his expression was quiet, mild and unusually intelligent. In gesture he was always restrained but effective; in speech he was sparing of words, but so well-chosen were they that hearers knew he had pondered the matter before speaking. This quietness is said to have come after a tragic incident early in life. Although Mekaisto never considered himself a handsome man, he was very sensitive about his face. Once, when, after warning a brother who was quarrelling with him, he received a blow in the face, Mekaisto had killed his brother. After that, he was always quiet in all his ways. White men record that they never heard him use undignified or scurrilous language, that he did not descend to gossip or idle banter, and that he was incorruptible.

But he was far from humorless. On one occasion when the Sun Dance camp had broken up, Mekaisto had occasion to return to that area in search of some horses. Seeing some tepees still about, he inquired the reason and learned that some new initiates into one of the societies were having a grand time trading wives with one another. He was greatly amused at the enthusiasm of

these initiates and at appropriate times recalled the incident with gusto. Again, it was not unusual for the teacher of the Red Crow Village school, to find, among his class of beginners, the dignified chief calmly seated with the little boys. When Rev. Josiah Hinchcliffe, the teacher and later Minister of Education for British Columbia, served the daily snack of bovril and biscuits, the chief took his place in line as if he were only a tiny beginner. Both of them enjoyed the situation and laughed over it later. Above all, Mekaisto enjoyed a good, practical joke.

In his youth, this sedate man with sharp eyes and fine aquiline nose, had been a distinguished warrior and buffalo hunter. Although many less successful men would loudly boast their meagre achievements, Red Crow preferred to stand upon the record of solid deeds. Naturally his reticence, his courage, his intelligence and his record brought him to pre-eminence in the band so that, once having become chief, he retained that office until his death in 1899 at slightly over eighty years of age.

The post-treaty years were difficult. Head of a numerous band, Mekaisto restrained them after the Treaty had been signed so that there are, among the Bloods, few instances of violent behaviour. That he could induce the hot-blooded youths of his band, brought up in the tradition of intertribal raids, incited by the stories of their elders, to adapt themselves to the restrictions of life under Treaty is a record of splendid leadership upon a high level of statesmanship. When one recalls the violence that marked white expansion westwards in the United States, and the proximity of the Blood Reserve to the border, surely Red Crow's record is outstanding.

After the Treaty, he was a man of peace and honor. Before the disorders of 1885, Mekaisto resolutely closed his ears to the emissaries of Reil and, on one occasion, ordered out of the Blood Camp, a Cree agitator, although the latter was a close relative of a prominent Blood family. Again, during the uprising, he is said to have offered the services of a large war party to help the government forces. Although the offer was not accepted, he followed events with keen interest and displayed considerable satisfaction when the trouble was over and the ringleaders punished.

Within the tribe his position was rarely challenged and never weakened. Once an ambitious minor chief is said to have tried to lead away from Mekaisto's influence a large number of Bloods. The great chief simply ignored this campaign against him until some who had turned their faces to his rival began to move their camps away from the

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main encampment. Then and then only did Mekaisto act. He walked quietly out of his tepee, moved from one rebel to another and spoke to each. What he may have said is not recorded; that each rebel hung his head in shame and had his tepee reset in its former place is a matter of record. The crisis was over. Mekaisto's influence was stronger than ever.

Another tale states that once two members of his band were wanted at Fort Macleod to answer charges of cattle theft. Two R.N.W.M.P. constables went to the camp, and, although they secured the culprits, the uproar and disorder was so great that the wanted men were taken from custody. The constables reported what had happened and a party of twenty men, accompanied by Jerry Potts, interpreter, set out for Standoff. Potts went ahead to inform Mekaisto that the men must be surrendered. The chief, knowing the inflamed tempers of his young men who had been sundancing, returned word that he would consider the matter. Potts, having delivered the message to the officer in charge of the police group, was sent back with a second message — Mekaisto must personally deliver the two alleged thieves within an hour or the police would come and take them. Time passed. Just as the police party received orders to mount and advance, Mekaisto came in sight with a party including the wanted men and the entire group proceeded to Fort Macleod. Although the Superintendent lectured Mekaisto sternly and punished not only the culprits but the rioters as well, one does not doubt that Mekaisto had averted a serious incident.

Mekaisto foresaw the changes of time and realized that adaption was the secret of survival with dignity. On the magnificent Blood Reserve today results of this foresight are evident. The Bloods have never, until recently, surrendered an acre of their reserve so that, with land for the future rather than money alone, the Bloods have made great progress. Better than this, they have preserved their dignity, their self-respect, and the best essentials of their former culture.

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