

Land of Tribute



Andy Burtis

Surviving a year-long odyssey to reach the shores of America, a Venetian mariner realizes his dream of settling on that western frontier island called by the native Algonquian's 'Pamanack,' or 'Land of Tribute.' There, a passionate love grows between Pieter Alberti and Machequa, who epitomizes all that is noble...

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by Andy Burtis

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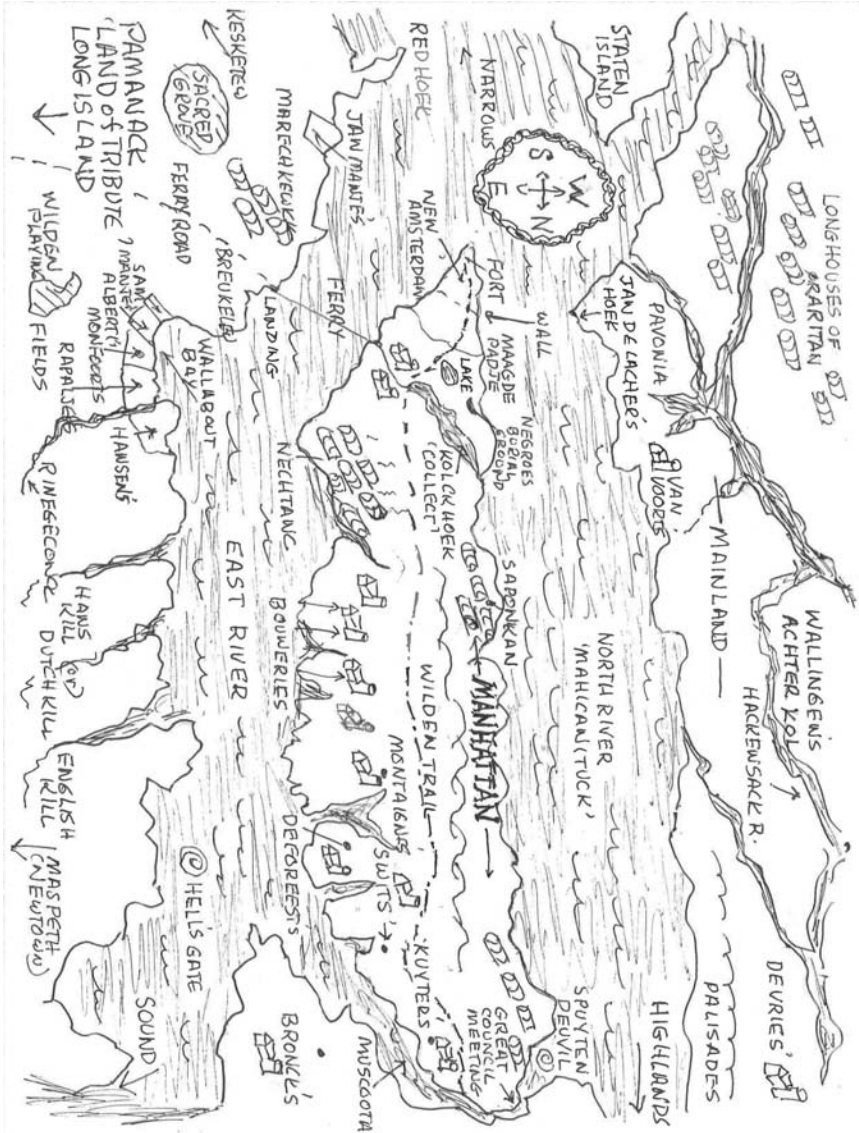
Aside from much of the journey, dates of events, court records, and signed contracts, the author's animation of these characters and others in this story is wholly fictitious. That said, most actually did live and did play similar roles at this time. Whether friends, partners, or enemies, all were caught up in events which actually happened.

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CHAPTER 23 – MACHEQUA

Running on the rapids of the spring melt-off was exhilarating. Pieter had never experienced it in a low-lying canoe before and it took his mind off the trouble back in the Highlands. The current being as strong as it was, Nyantich did most of the work in back where he sat, using his paddle mostly as a rudder. The roar of the river around them drowned his remorse for shouting down Hendrick, who had, nevertheless assured him his offer still stood concerning the voyage home.

Fleeting images crossed his mind at random on their frantic run downriver: Machequa waiting for him – crazy Hackawort with his pipes and crosses – the sachem's stories about orenda and masks – Venetian masks – the fight and the drunkenness being something he wouldn't miss – the futility of *Giudi-Gianni* ever coming – his naivety in respect to Hendrick's father. But the further south they travelled, the one recurring image he had was that of Machequa – her grace, her pleasant features, her love for Sawshoota, her easy manner of speaking, and a fully mature love always waiting for him. He had resisted her magnetism far too long, something he might never experience again after leaving....

Many times on their way downstream, Pieter glanced back at the stoic Nyantich, and saw in him what he saw in his sister – the personification of the best and most noble life of this still-wild America which had taken root in him.

When they reached the turn to the Spuyten Duyvil and shortest way to Nechtanc, Nyantich yelled they must not try to go that way, as Pieter knew it would be too hard for Nyantich to control the fast-moving canoe and not get them sucked into the whirlpool. So they went on past the many wilden villages which littered the shore until they reached the only other place where they could cross over to the East River. When they reached the village of Saponikan, Nyantich motioned for him to paddle hard on his right as Nyantich dug his paddle into the water on the left. It sent them into the creek which led through the cradle of hills to the lake. Paddling across this lake to where it fed another creek, they followed the creek's course to the East River below the promontory of Nechtanc.

The bracing north-wind now sent snow flying into their faces as they turned north upriver. After paddling hard against the wind for a short ways they turned into a small creek before disembarking on a snow-bank by the wilden village. Once ashore, Nyantich grasped the unsteady Pieter with both hands at arm's length as if to size him up after such a wild ride. His eyes smiling, head held high, he gave Pieter's shoulders a shake to signify his great pleasure at such a passage. He gestured to the north, from whence they had come, and then dropped the arc of his arm to his waist, pressing his palm down as he told him things up there would settle before the following year. His eyes told him where Machequa would be waiting for him – in the small house he said he had made for her. Pieter could see the smoke curling up from her place right by the creek, just off the river, a place they had just passed. It was set off just a ways from the village. He smiled sheepishly and looked sideways at his friend who was smiling broadly now, clearly pleased with himself.

Watching Nyantich walk to his father's longhouse, Pieter knew that their friendship was given to him as a blessing, perhaps a greater blessing now than he had realized before. It was then he saw Machequa waving at him from the waters of the creek by her house, where she now stood with some others. *What on earth was she doing in those icy waters? He hadn't seen her on the way up the creek! Had they been diving?* She pointed to her house where he should go, and gestured for him to wait for her there.

On his way to her house he saw Machequa come out of the creek with the others – all naked and shivering, violently shaking off their hair, and laughing as they threw blankets over their shoulders while running for what he knew was their village's sweat lodge to warm up.

Machequa laughed when her friends kidded her about being the first out of the water. She begged them to forgive her, for she was not used to the coldness anymore; she wondered how they did it. Once inside they clamored again about the fired stones, and teased her about cleaning her Mallemoc up before she had her fun and make a sister or brother for Sawshoota. They warned her not to make him too comfortable or he would sleep and not play. They had already found a place for Sawshoota to sleep, they assured her, and would keep her there as long as necessary. In the morning, if her man

wanted, he could watch them fish from the stilted platforms the men had just finished building over the creek. The hot stones made the water sear their necks as it curled around them. What a joyous feeling overtook her now at the thought of what might soon come true!

Her friends said they would beckon her Mallemoc from her house to come to her, and so they left. The heat made her feel like passing out, or was it the thought of him? She would overcome his doubts this day! Suddenly he was standing before her, but what a mess of a man her Mallemoc looked like – bloodied and beaten. Her heart sank for his condition as she helped him off with his clothes and sat him down to pour some cool water over his sores.

“Wait here, Mallemoc. Turn your face to the steam until I return,” she both spoke and signed, pointing to the water and stones. Quickly, she fetched the straight razor and soap which Flips had left, and returned to lather his beard and gently shave him, taking great care to avoid his cuts, scar, and bruises. When finished, she told him to come meet her at her place when he was ready– but not before he jumped into the cold water of the creek, and leave his mud-caked clothes outside. After he left, she wondered how that must have sounded to him – his eyes so sad to think of that water, but he had agreed to do it, and even smiled – although she knew it was half-hearted....

Back inside her little roundhouse, her heart felt warm and full within her as she sat wearing the soft brown deerskin skirt he had given her before the trial. And then he came in to her. He shivered where he stood as she administered a lotion to his sores as gently as she could for all his shivering. His face still felt cold as she dried it and motioned for him to sit near the small fire across from her on the bearskin rug she had washed and combed so many times that spring, each time thinking of him....

Done with her nursing, Machequa fully regarded his nakedness for the first time. Her eyes followed the line from his hairy chest down to his rippling stomach as they sat facing each other, legs extended towards each other. Her toes tingled at the touch of his. He smiled bashfully at her, his face flush with expectation, yet still full of the same strange concern. Still though, did she not see in his eyes a reflection of the flames from her fire? Her eyes stayed transfixed on his until the suspense of his being there became unbearable. Slowly,

she drew her skirt over her head and placed it beside her. Drawing her knees up, she slid between his legs so that her toes found what she had long been waiting to find, his passion. She breathed deeply and arched her back, her nipples firm and hard....

Her desire to please him found its fullest expression that night. She soared with her Big Bird down to earth in great spirals, their cries echoing off canyon walls down the long Mahicanituck to the sea, the endless sea. The timeless sound of the surf lapping up on the shore brought peace to her heart, a feeling of reverence for its mystery. She reached for the conch and held it to his ear and knew it spoke to him of love, fully satiated love.

Many times she answered his longing to be loved with her passion, and with many tears of joy. She loved him as she hoped she would love him forever. To the end of time their tide went out and washed in, out and in. The night was still starry when they emerged together for a brief time to see the dawn's early light taking shape. How the morning stars twinkled with happiness, so happy they cast their beams over the water as if each were little moons. Back inside the two of them laughed, caressed, kissed with lips and noses up and down their lean bodies, and drifted back to sleep again.

When she awoke, there he was by her side. When she asked if he could love her daughter as his own he said that he could, as Nyantich was already like a brother to him. Convinced they were meant for each other, she kissed his chest and his stomach, swept her lustrous black hair over his body. She heard him mutter something and slid off him to better hear what he said, asking him to say it again.

"Askuttaa-quompsin, Machequa?" He whispered to her.

How *well* she was? It made her smile. "Ashpaum-pauntam," she corrected him gently that yes, she felt very good. She tried to focus her thoughts but couldn't. She was in a daze! In time, in time....then he would speak her tongue better and she his...until then, she would wait.

Tenderly, she said that she loved him. "Cowamaunsh Mallemoc." She sighed, smiled, and asked if he felt the same as she rested her hand on his heart. "Wunne-tunta?"

"Wunne-tunta, *Nawautam*, Machequa," he replied, for he did love her, *completely*. He blinked to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

“Cowauta, cowauta, cowauta....” She told him she wanted to hear it over and over, and he did more than just say it.

It was so tempting for him to say he would take her and Sawshoota home that very day! He despaired for his ingrained practicality – as his house stood in another world, so close, but still so far away from her people’s language and culture. But such was the love they had shared that it overcame him. Tears came to his eyes to share such beauty and love. He blinked back his tears, but they rolled down anyway, stinging his sores, burning away his reservations.

She kissed his tears away, ran her fingers through his hair. “It will be better now,” she told him, as she struggled to express herself, slowly, one word at a time. “My daughter...your daughter, Mallemoc, and my house...your house, and my beadwork...for you. I am daughter of Niande, a sachem. Many things come from my mother’s clan too. I will love you here...in town...or Rechowacky, on Pamanack. It doesn’t matter....Now I wash your clothes. Make belt to record your fight.” It made him smile, for he had forgotten it.

It was night again, and then morning. He left her sleeping in peace and stepped out upon the snow-bank by the creek. But sensing her eyes upon him, he turned back. There she stood in her tight skirt.

She asked if he was going across the sea with Hendrick that day. He said he was not, and promised to be back soon. As he walked on, he thought of first meeting her, and laughed at his part in what happened. He continued down the snow-covered shoreline, passing Smits Vly before seeing the Wallabout Bay across the river. He was a part of something good here, he truly realized for the first time, on this island of Manhattan, and there was no reason good enough to leave.

For the rest of that spring and early summer he visited her many times, and they learned to speak more of those things which held meaning to each other in each other’s language: friends, nature, habitations, groups and clans and peoples, family and work – the meaning of the many belts she had woven and kept.

But when the two of them were walking through a field filled with strawberries off a creek called Montaigne’s Kill, she seemed tired, listless. Blocking out his fears, he passed it off to the hot day, for he was simply too enchanted by her love.

She stopped to pick some of the tiny berries for him. They were very sweet, and as they sat down on some grass overlooking the river, a song came to him. "*Cercai qualcosa de bello*," he sang softly, more like speaking it, like his father Fiamo often did, "*Toccai il cielo....con un ditto ma fondai...esso a tierra....*" As he stroked her glistening hair, he hummed it like his father had, without any presence of mind. To explain his song to her, he had only to point from his eyes to the sky –which his father had sometimes called *cielo*, sometimes *firmamente*. How else could he express her worth to him in anything but his Italian? – That his flights to heaven came only as she drew him down to her earth.

It was August and muggy when Nyantich came into his garden at home with news to tell him, he said.

"Antimony, you remember him, Mallemoc?" he spoke slowly in Dutch, the language they commonly shared.

"Yes, he is your best friend, full of pranks. I like him."

"Antimony, his brother, Takapousha, his father Mechowodt, my father Niande, and one-eyed Penhawitz, Grand Sachem of Eastern Metoac. All these men signed papers at the fort today, where I now come from. These papers which your Keift signs too, give your people right to live on much land at Pamanack. So, maybe you, Mallemoc, can now settle there."

"This is good news, Nyantich. Does Machequa know? And is she well enough to visit?"

"No, not yet my brother. But a *weir-a-wonce* from Marechkewick is with her now at Rechowacky. But only you are father, no one else, Mallemoc. You only!" Nyantich smiled.

"The same woman who doesn't like me?" It was the first thing Pieter thought of to say, not understanding exactly what Nyantich meant. "Nyantich, is Machequa in trouble? Is she with my child?" He asked, although still averse to her being attended to by that woman.

Nyantich smiled again, which bothered Pieter a little, for Pieter knew he did this sometimes when uncomfortable. "It is our way for her to see to Machequa," Nyantich replied. "She knows what to do. You wait."

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