

The Man at Lone Lake

SYNOPSIS OF OPENING CHAPTERS.

DIOK WYNN, an Englishman, is living at Lone Lake, in the Woodcree country of Northern Alberta. Francois, the half-breed, comes up the Lake to Wynn's lonely hut to tell him that Old Man McCullough, Wynn's trapper friend, is seriously ill. Wynn and Francois leave at once for McCullough's imposing shack.

CHAPTER III.

THERE was candle-light in one window as the two men drew near. Wynn crossed the verandah and knocked at the door. Freedom had never degenerated into familiarity between him and the old trapper. The half-breed disappeared.

A tiny, middle-aged squaw opened the door, holding the candle high. Its wind-blown flame threw weird shadows over her small peaked face framed by the scarlet shawl she wore over her head.

The yellow light was reflected in her eyes which were big and golden-brown as a doe's, and filled with that strange melancholy often seen in the eyes of dumb wild things.

The man lifted his hat, bowed and smiled. It was a very nice smile, and his teeth flashed for the moment, white as corn-kernels.

The little squaw looked up at him and then shaded her face with one brown hand as though dazzled.

The father of Francois had long ago smiled in that sudden and radiant fashion. He had bowed and lifted his hat to her upon a far-off day, as this man did now. It was a habit of the white men, she had concluded. As far as she had been able, she had instructed Francois to follow it, but the result had been indifferent; no Indian could acquire it in its perfection, it seemed. She had not seen the father of Francois since Francois was a toddling baby. He had gone away to his own French-Canadian people, perhaps. Sometimes these English or French-Canadian squaw-men did go back to their people—but Wanota had remembered the smile and the way he had bowed to her.

"Come," she said, "Ol' man sick; ver' bad."

"I am so sorry," said Wynn, following her. "I hope I can be of some help."

Wanota led on through the wide living-room into a smaller room beyond. She set the candle on a rustic table and left him. A little grey and yellow Eskimo dog rose at their entrance, then settled down again. On a bed of balsam boughs, covered with the Company's heavy red blankets, lay a great gaunt figure. The right hand wandered over the blankets, the left was still—horribly still, Wynn thought. The features might have been carven, and the mouth wore an expression that was like a smile, yet was not one.

The erstwhile fine colour and tan of the old face seemed to have been burnt out, and it was ashen white. The eyes shone like blue fire—the thick hair glistered frostily.

McCullough stretched out his right hand and Wynn took it hard between his two that were so firm and steady.

"I am so sorry," he said again, rather helplessly—"awfully sorry, sir. You should have sent for me at once. But of course we'll get you round all right! Why, you were looking in the pink of condition when we had a smoke together a few days ago."

The twisted smile was turned towards him. "Here to-day," McCullough said thickly, "gone to-morrow. Gone to-morrow, boy. Which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven. It's in the church service so."

"Oh, yes!" said Wynn, nodding. "That's where it is. The church service simply boils over with cheerful sentiment. But what can I do for you, sir? You sent for me. Isn't there anything we can get from the agency for you—Francois or I?"

The hand he was holding tightened. "No! No!" came the answer, half-fiercely. "I need no drugs. You could get none but Radways' Painkiller, and whiskey. I'll pull through—perhaps. I feel life getting back into that side. But," lowering his voice, "I'm done for, Wynn, just the same. It doesn't matter, save for one thing. If I pull through it will be with a foot that drags—and an arm that won't do team work—and an eye that will never sight down a rifle-barrel again. I'll be one with

the maimed—the halt—and the blind. I'll shoot no more, and I'll set no more traps. The Company has paid me for my last pelt."

"I congratulate the beasts," said Wynn.

"Ah!" he returned. "It's a good day for them. I've taken in more fur these last eight years than any two Indians—pick 'em where you please. Did I ever tell you there was an old legend attached to Lone Lake, eh boy? No? I reckon just at first I thought it might scare you away, and I wanted to keep you. The Indians think the place haunted, the Swamp-crees and Wood-crees, the Chipewyans and all the rest of them. The place is damned for them. The story is, that a brave of the Chipewyans drowned himself there for love, after murdering his rival, by throwing him over the great Black Rock at the north of the lake. They say the Indian canoed out, tied a stone about his neck and dived. The trouble is they fancy the dip of his paddle can be heard yet on moon-light nights, and the dive from the canoe. Moreover the wind up around Black Rock makes a queer echo that they think is the voice of the murdered man. It's an old squaw's tale that has lost nothing by time. For seventy years no Indian has hunted within miles of the lake, either summer or winter, save Francois—and he is no true Indian."

"The place was rich with fur when I came to it. I've good trap lines twenty miles out from the lake in any direction—up the foot-hills or down the valleys. I've taken in mink and marten, fox and ermine, and the finest black-bear skins an agent ever bargained for. Haunted—ay, you know the place is bird-haunted at least, Wynn? I've had good hunting—good hunting; but this is the end."

"Brace up, sir!" said Wynn. "Who can say it is the end? I had an uncle—a Bishop as it happened—who had several attacks of about this sort; got into the way of having them, and he lived to eighty and died of a fever."

The white head moved on the blankets.

"But I'm no Bishop," he said shortly. Then, after a pause, "there's a thing you can do for me, Wynn. You're not the sort would fail a friend. It's a favour."

"Anything," responded the man.

"Thanks." I just want you to paddle down to the St. Elizabeth's Mission beyond the Agency, and go to the Sisters' School and find Nance; she has been there two years now. I want you to say to her, 'The old man's sent me down to tell you he'll never set another trap—and he wants you.' That'll bring her. I want her to come back with you, boy. Francois might go, but I'd rather it were you."

"I'll be delighted," said Wynn. His lips trembled a little over the conventional phrase.

"I never told you," McCullough went on, "but Nance hated the trapping. She liked the life with me—all but that. The joy of the out-of-doors was born in her. What we needed to take of fish or fowl she was content to take; but the trapping—heavens! She hated it. We had two good years together before she realized what my way of living meant, she being only a child; then Francois—the fool—showed her a trap with a red fox leg caught in the teeth, only the leg mind you. The little beast had gnawed it off. There's one here and there will do that sooner than be taken alive. The child was a perfect tornado of passion and grief at the sight. That winter she fretted off and on, and cried over

the broken animals we brought in. Once tramping on her snow-shoes over by Lone Lake she came on a young bear dragging a twelve-pound trap. He had been caught three days, maybe, and all the fire was gone out of him. He only whimpered. With her little hands she pulled the trap apart and freed him. Rage gave her strength likely. Rage at Francois—and at me. The next winter she fretted more. I'd leave her in the shack, comfortable as the place could be made, with Wanota to look after her, a warm fire, a book or two, the strip of bead work Wanota taught her to make—all she said she needed for her pleasure—and yet when I came in I could tell she'd been fretting. She was just heartsick to see the load I brought each time, sick of hearing of fur and the price of it, sick of stretching-rings and boards and the sight and smell of the pelts being cured. Sick to death of blood-rusted traps.

"She'd coax me to give it up, sweetly enough, but persistently I tried not to lose patience. She was only a small thing—a girl-child. She didn't realize that her very living, all she'd ever own after I was gone, would come from the fur—for I'd saved. The Company's money was blood-money to her, the price of innocent lives. That's what she called it once, not thinking it would some day be all she'd have. I tried to keep patient, but I loved the life. It suited me. I never knew I was old. Then came a night. There was a cub-fox she'd had for a pet. A rusty little lame chap she had picked up in the grass. She'd taught him a dozen tricks and cured his hurt. By and by he got the 'wanderlust.' You can't really tame any wild thing. He sprang one of my traps and it was my cursed luck to bring him in with a bunch of rabbits, not recognizing him; but she knew him and that ended it. She lifted the little red beast up and held him close. His head dangled and he was the dearest looking fox you ever saw. Nance stared at me over him."

"Grand-dad," she said, and her eyes went the colour of the blue in the candle flame, Wynn. "I'll not stop here and see such things brought home. You've been trapping a long time. Though it's evil work, you've been lucky. You do not need to trap any more. I know about the two silver foxes, and the many, many black bear skins and all the marten and mink. Promise me to set no more traps, or I will go and live with the Sisters at the Mission."

"I only laughed a little down in my throat."

"Cool down, Nancy," I said. "Quiet, honey—quiet. I'll bring home another cub-fox for you to pet. Trapping's my work, child. It's my good work. There's no reason for my giving it up."

"I can see her little white face now. She didn't answer, but that night she was gone. It was moon-light and she had fastened on her snow-shoes and tramped down the river way the whole twenty miles to the settlement. There were the small latticed tracks. It was not so bitter cold—but I knew what fear was when I found her gone."

"There's a Providence takes care of children and fools, Wynn. She was both a child and a fool. A beloved little fool." The halting voice dropped into silence.

"She wouldn't come back?" asked Wynn.

"Not she. Not unless I'd give her my solemn word I'd trap no more. That was a rare winter. I've never seen finer pelts. I got much money from the Company in the Spring. Besides, a man can't be bullied and badgered by a slip of a girl."

"No," said Wynn thoughtfully. "Oh! certainly not."

"You see, boy," the old man broke in rapidly. "I always had intended to give up the work; intended taking the child away from this place back to the other things that I don't seem to need, but that she would want when the time came. I always said to myself, 'one year more, and that ends it.' Now fate has done the bullying. Wynn, I want her home. Back here with me. Paddle down to the Mission, tell her what I said, and bring her back. Will you?"

"I'll do my best," he replied, rising. "You've talked far too much, old man. I'll send Wanota. Indian ladies are good antidotes for the conversational tendency."

"When will you start?" asked McCullough, following him with his eyes.

"To-night," he answered.

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