

HEADS AND HEARTS

An Adventure in the New Brunswick Woods.

By LLOYD ROBERTS, AUTHOR OF "THE SLEEPING DOG," ETC.



THE man's moccasined feet fell noiselessly on the soft forest floor. Above his head the shaggy cloud of green-black spruces walled off the blazing sun so that only a mysterious twilight filtered down among the boles. The grey of his homespun breeches and flannel shirt fitted well with his surroundings. The scarlet kerchief knotted loosely about his throat glowed like a strange fungus or bright crest of a woodpecker. His easy, tireless swing, roving eyes and subtle air of mastery proved him no novice in the deep ranks of the wilderness.

Bob Neville had two great loves. His art was one—the solitudes the other. Winter, the former claimed all his attention, but summer admitted a combination of both. Human companionship was a blessing he did not covet. His reserve was usually mistaken for borishness by men and stupidity by women. In truth it was caused by a shyness that he despised but could not overcome. The wilderness called for no affectations of mind or body and encouraged the silence that dwelt in his soul.

For the present he was camping on the head of the Mamozekel River, his tent a small fleecy cloud in the gold and scarlet sunset of the year. The huge round tracks of a bull moose had led him six twisted miles northward towards Nictor Lake (for calling game to the ambushed rifle was a trick he despised) and had faded out on a rocky ridge just when he felt the trail was growing warm. Still hoping to find it he was skirting from west to east, ears and eyes alert, when he heard a twig snap behind a windfall on his right. He dropped to a crouching position and slipped like a grey shadow beneath a fallen trunk. Then moving noiselessly along towards the butt a dead prong caught stubbornly at his sleeve, bent and snapped like a pistol shot in the expectant silence. Instantly the man sprang upon the prone tree, rifle poised for action. Not ten paces away, facing him, her eyes wide with fear, stood the slim young figure of a girl.

"Oh!" she gasped painfully, "I thought you were a bear."

The man squelched a cowardly impulse to sudden flight.

"I reckon I am, Miss—sometimes," he answered, dropping into the backwoods vernacular as the first way offering to hide his confusion.

She gave a little high-pitched laugh, then plumped down on the moss and hid a sweet face behind slim white fingers. By the sharp jerks of her shoulders Neville knew she was sobbing. Pity gripped his heart, and he stepped off his perch and moved close to her.

"What's the matter, miss? Ye ain't lost, are you?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" she moaned, uncovering very damp cheeks and seizing his free hand in both her own. "Please don't leave me, or I shall die of fear!" she pleaded, her dark eyes full of the truth of her words.

"Of course not," he reassured gruffly. "Where'd yer come from?"

"We're tenting on Nipisiquit Lake." Her arms were down in her lap and her voice had grown calmer. "I lost the trail while crossing the divide early this morning. I am so tired," she said helplessly. Again a strong tide of pity beat at the man's heart.

"Come, get up your strength and I'll take you back."

"Oh, will you? will you? Father will make it up to you if you do," she returned joyously.

Neville saw that his words and his dress had deceived her completely and felt considerably more at his ease. She rose weakly to her feet and he led off north by west, glancing at his compass to make sure of his direction. Striking straight for Nictor Lake and following it up to the portage trail between it and Nipisiquit Lake appeared to him the simplest method. He calculated they were a good two miles from the former and moved slowly to spare the girl's remaining energy.

Her relief of mind made her forget temporarily her fatigue. She kept close in the shadow of his broad back, thanking Providence for sending this brawny woodsman to be her guide and protector

in her need. She marked his noiseless tread and how his feet fell one ahead of the other, his rumpled mass of hair bare to the sun and wind, his thick brown arms and marvelous ease of motion. "If," mused the girl straight from the Great City, "the wilderness breeds such physiques as this our men have much to envy."

"Mister—mister—" she hesitated.

"Bob. Jest Bob, miss, 'll do all right," he introduced without turning his head.

"Well, Mister Bob, it is awfully good of you to take all this trouble because of me. And it was all my fault too—being lost this way." He offered no comment to this, and presently she continued her explanations, somehow feeling a strange confidence in this rugged stranger that she dimly accounted to his unaffectedness and different breeding.

"Yes, father—that's Doctor Murry—brought Luke Gould up here on his hunting trip. I don't like Luke a bit. I guess it's because he's so conceited and all that. Anyway we two got behind father and the guides on the portage and he began saying things that made me frantic. So when he stopped to tie his shoe-lace—they're silk, you know, and always getting untied—I just slipped off among the trees, intending to skirt around and join the others before Luke caught me. That was about ten this morning, and I've been walking ever since."

"Jove!" Neville ejaculated. Then, remembering his part, hastened to add, "You must be nigh tuckered out. I ain't got a bite of grub with me, either."

"I am hungry, but it's sort of nice to be really ravenous for once in my life—now I know I'm not going to starve."

THEY trudged on for some time in silence.

Neville had never experienced such peace of mind when in the presence of one of the opposite sex before. Somewhat like an ostrich with its head in the sand he considered his true self effectually hidden behind his guise of woodsman. So it happened that he came to certain amazing conclusions with himself in regard to the standard of the girl—no doubt because she was the first he had been in a position to bravely face and analyse. As vividly as if he turned around his vision beheld the slight, bare-headed figure dressed in pale blue duck, sadly rent and soiled, toiling in his wake, and his trust sat so lightly on his shoulders that he would not have forfeited it if he might.

By pausing twice for a few scanty moments of rest and a long cool draught at a deep-mouthed spring, they came in time to where the sunlight blazed beyond the trunks, and so out on an immense clearing mottled with chips and jagged stumps. At the far edge gleamed the great turquoise shield of Nictor Lake and between it and themselves stood a cabin, squat and broad of beam. A group of lumbermen lolled about the door, their short black pipes spurting defiance at the few remaining midgits.

Neville saw the opportunity for food and led his charge straight for the scrutinising and curious eyes. As he drew near a doubt as to the wisdom of his action assailed him. He felt sudden fear of their curiosity. However, he knew it was too late to retreat and so advanced with every appearance of ease.

Such men as were seated on neighbouring logs rose promptly and doffed their black felts.

"Howde do, boys," said Neville, "do you think you could give my wife and myself a bite of something. We're pretty nigh famished."

"You bet we kin," answered a muscular, strong-jawed man, stepping up and introducing himself as Bert MacKenzie, boss of the camp. "Now step right in and Jim'll fix yer up." He led the way through the open doorway and the two followed close.

Jim, a thin, nervous individual, hustled about and like a miracle had steaming rolls, scalding tea, pork and beans and apple-sauce spread upon one end of the table before them. Neville thanked him and explained between mouthfuls, while the boss and half a dozen fellows within the building listened attentively.

"My wife and I," the effort it cost him to form those words made no showing in his voice, "are camping over on the Mamozekel. We were followin' the tracks of a moose and sort of lost all ac-

count of time. Findin' we were nigh here we calculated to drop in on yer and beg a bite. Them rolls are as good as I've ever tasted."

Strength was fast returning to the girl's tired body.

"Oh, they are simply perfect, Jim," she corroborated, turning her shining eyes on the flustered cook.

There was a mirthless chuckle from a tall, dark lumberman leaning against the upper line of bunks. "Don't Ben make 'em as good as those, miss?"

The girl flushed painfully and concealed her face behind a mug of tea.

Neville stared straight into the eyes of the speaker, the laugh more than the words working on his strained nerves. "What do yer mean?" he asked, quietly.

"Why, jest what I says," sneered MacPherson. "When yer wife, as yer calls her, went by here in a canoe yesterday Ben Simmons was doin' the cookin' fer her, for he told me so." There was an air of suspense and suspicion in the camp that brought a pallor of rage to Neville's face.

He slowly got to his feet and slid over to the now scowling lumberman. His words were almost whispered.

"I said 'my wife.' Do you mean I lie?"

"Now I wouldn't exactly say that. More'n likely she is yer wife now—only yesterday she were jest plain Miss—"

The sentence was never finished, for Neville's right fist met the point of his chin and dropped him where he stood. He waited until the man, no longer malicious, staggered to his feet, and then returned to his place at the table. The girl, who was first half-dazed, thrilled with pride in her protector.

"I reckon I lost my temper a mite, Mr. MacKenzie," he apologised to his host.

"Don't worry, he got jest what he deserved fer insultin' Mrs. Neville that away," reassured the boss, as the object of their comment beat a retreat from the camp. The others present took the hint and hastened to compose their features to sympathy and friendliness; but standing somewhat in dread of incurring the anger of MacPherson they discreetly held their peace.

MACKENZIE was sincere as he was rugged and believed he knew the courtesy due one's guests. "It's gettin' 'long towards sundown an' yers have a big journey ahead of yers. What yer say ter stoppin' the night? We kin fix yer up a bunk in the outhouse."

"No, there'll be a moon later on an' I guess we'd better be trottin'. Thankee all the same. Are yer ready, Madge?"

"Yes—dear," she returned bravely, feeling ashamed to let the weight of the responsibility rest on him alone. She rose and held out her hand to the boss, when there was a clatter of tongues and feet outside and a young man, very neatly dressed in grey flannels and russet shoes, sprang triumphantly through the doorway.

"Hello, Miss Murry! How in Jove's name did you get here? The guides are trying to follow your tracks away back in the woods. The Doctor and I thought we'd leave word here for the men to keep their eyes open for you and join in the search if you didn't turn up. This is luck."

Neville saw himself becoming involved beyond his strength just when he imagined he had cleared the atmosphere of all suspicion. Now if he told the truth his former lies would show up in an ugly light. There was nothing for it but to fight it out as he had begun, beating down all opposition and trusting to the girl to continue backing him up. The lumbermen had crowded about the entrance and he could see the mocking eyes of MacPherson over the others' shoulders.

Gould turned and shouted the good news beyond them to the ears of the Doctor, who was waiting in the canoe a hundred yards away. When he turned he was confronted by Neville.

"Look ahere, young man, yer evidently unaware of the fact that 'Miss Murry,' as yer calls her, is my wife."

Luke glared in amazement. "The devil she is!" "She sure is. And what's more she wasn't lost this morning and had no intention of bein'."

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