

# The Man at Lone Lake,

## SYNOPSIS OF OPENING CHAPTERS.

DICK 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.

Then McCullough tells Wynn the story of his life, and how Nance, the granddaughter, tiring of seeing dead animals, had gone to the Sisters' School to live. The old man asks Wynn to go and bring her back. By paddling all night, he reaches the School next day. Nance at once prepares to return.

## CHAPTER V.

THE small craft was low in the water now, for the man was taking back tobacco, flour and bacon, and Nance had all her wealth in a compact but decidedly heavy bundle. Well she knew that women in the North were expected to travel light, and so she apologized for its weight, amusing Wynn with an inventory of such contents as were not altogether necessary, but which she assured him she could not leave behind, for they were the keepsakes the Indian children had given her at the last moment; queer treasures, old and outlandish, but dear to the hearts of the little givers, and therefore dear to her.

Nance insisted upon taking a paddle, and, in spite of the weight they made good headway.

There was a self-possession about Nance McCullough, a pleasant adaptability, a frank acceptance of the situation, that should have left nothing to be desired.

Unfortunately it did, to the man's mind.

They had gone smoothly enough up past the Post, where the old Factor waved at them from the door, with his brood of fat half-Cree children bobbing around him; had paddled along in sight of a little muskeg that shone with metallic lustre where silvery moss covered it like a coat of mail; they had slipped into the black velvety shadows of the giant spruce that lined the river bank at one point for several miles, and were the outposts of a dense forest beyond, and had come out into the sunlight, before Wynn voiced a certain dissatisfaction.

Long before this the girl had extracted all the information she could from him regarding her grandfather's illness, and he had given her unwarranted comfort. So her spirits rose and she chatted gaily of the heavens above and the earth beneath; discussed the past summer and coming winter, the Honourable Company and the kindly Sisters, the Factor, his Cree wife and progeny, whom apparently she loved. Also, she touched lightly on her own life, past, present, and to come. There seemed to be no hidden holes or corners in her mind; it was as sun-washed, and wind-swept as the river itself.

This girl was the worthy grand-daughter of the old man, Wynn concluded. It was at this point he put the dissatisfaction that had been simmering within him into words.

"I wish," he commenced, "I really wish, Miss McCullough—"

"Oh, you may call me Nance," interrupted the girl. "Nearly everybody does. Yes? You wish something? If you keep it till to-night there will be a new moon, and you may wish on that and it will come true. That is, it nearly always does come true with me."

"I never bank on the moon," objected Wynn, "and it simply couldn't help this time. I just wish that you wouldn't take me quite so much for granted, you know; so—so entirely as a matter of course."

Nance gave a short rippling laugh. "Do I?" she asked. "I didn't intend to. But what would you like me to do? All the Sisters seem to take every one and everything for granted. They are very seldom surprised or disturbed. They are self-possessed and kind and cool. That is—all but Sister Mary Philomena, and she is so very young, and is for ever doing penance for getting excited."

"Oh! The Sisters!" said the man shortly, paddling hard.

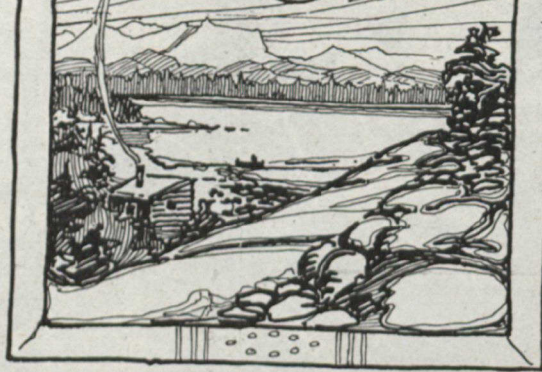
"The Sisters are dear," she returned. "I have tried and tried to be like them. But—I fail always. I have no reserve, no patience, no stillness."

"Are you like them in that you have no curiosity?" he inquired.

"Alas, no!" she admitted, shaking her golden head. "It is my besetting sin. I am always wanting to know things."

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"And yet you have not even asked me my name, nor by what chance I came to be Mr. McCullough's messenger. In fact, you have taken no personal interest in me whatever. I find it most humiliating," the aggrieved voice ended.

A wave of pink swept over the girl's face, and then ebbed till Wynn could see where it crept into the white throat and drifted into the hunter's green of her gown.

"I beg your pardon," she replied, "but I knew if Grand-dad sent you, that it was all right. And you are mistaken about my taking no interest. The Sisters always said it was wrong to ask questions, that is, personal ones—while you think me rude because I don't."

"No! No!" broke in the man hastily. "You altogether misunderstand me. I only desire a little kindly attention, just about what you would give one of those phlegmatic, unresponsive-looking young red-skins at the Mission, for instance; though, indeed, perhaps I should not look for it."

"Won't you please tell me your name?" she said demurely, glancing round.

"My name is Richard Wynn," he returned.

"And—and do you come from far, up here to the Boundaries?"

"From very far," he said.

A silence followed, and they paddled on through the blue of the morning. The white poplars along the river had changed colour, and now and then a leaf floated down stream like a fairy's golden shallop.

Something was stirring within the girl's mind, a persistent thing that she would have scorned to call personal curiosity. It set her heart to beating rather quickly, but she determined not to let it find vent in questions.

She resolved to ask him nothing more, whatever the temptation, and bent to her paddle refusing to rest. Presently she looked across her shoulder and the resolve melted.

"Have you come for the fur?" she asked.

"No," responded Wynn, "I am not a trapper."

Again she resolved, and by way of clenching that resolution switched the conversation rapidly to other things.

She spoke again of her grandfather, of his strength, his adventures, his moving accidents by flood and field. Wynn could see the old man was her idol—albeit with feet of clay.

She talked of Wanota, of whom she was fond; of Francois, whom she but tolerated, and told of how he had once at the spring gatherings of trappers gambled all his pelts away and come home from the Post with a bundle of the gambler's little red willow counting-sticks in his pocket, instead of the Company's good money or supplies.

Laughingly she recounted a story of having, herself, paddled across Lone Lake one moonlight September night when Wanota was asleep, her grandfather away, and Francois gone to the place where his canoe was cached to hunt for the big nickle-plated watch which he had dropped that afternoon from his beaded belt, and hoped to find on the trail between the shack and the water.

"I knew he would hear the dip of my paddle on the lake, and think it was the spirit of the long dead Indian taking his boat into deep water, so that he might dive midway out; I dropped a piece of birch-bark suddenly, and the sound echoed as far as Black Rock. You know the echo there is, like a voice calling! Francois had often boasted he didn't be-

lieve the legend and laughed at all Indians who did. It seemed right enough then to test his faith. But I was only a little girl; now it strikes me I was unkind; anyway I was terribly naughty, for grand-dad would never let me go out beyond his larch trees after dark at any time, without him.

"What did Francois do?" asked the man.

"I cannot be sure," she laughed, "but I heard the underbrush breaking and the dry grasses rustling as though some one ran very fast."

"But you?" said Wynn. "Were you not afraid?"

"No," she returned, "I don't think I was afraid. I remember it was very still and strange out on the lake, and bright like silver in some places, and black in others. I wondered where the Indian had gone down, and thought of how desperate and heart-sick he must have been so long ago. I thought, too, of the white man he had thrown over Black Rock, and of the Indian girl they both had loved. But I did not fear their spirits—or the dark. Of course if a lynx or bear had been near shore—but no thought of them came to me until afterwards. I just wanted to see if Francois was really truthful about not believing the legend. Even yet I cannot be quite sure that it was Francois who ran. Oh, it was a little unkind—very unkind, rather, but Francois needs punishing anyway. He is lazy, and does not visit his traps often enough, and his dead-falls do not always kill outright. He does not mind how the beasts suffer if the fur is not injured. And he catches fish just for the pleasure of catching them—far more than he can salt down for use, or dry—and he will not follow a moose he has only wounded, unless he is hard pressed for meat. He is cruel." She stopped paddling and turned to Wynn.

"If you are not a trapper," she asked breathlessly, "what are you?"

"At home in one of the English universities I was a teacher of mathematics," the man answered. "As a student I did rather well in some of the branches of that science, and they gave me a chair. Then, well, because I needed more money, and was offered more in an American college, I came across. After that—"

"Yes?" echoed the girl. "Yes? After that?"

Wynn laughed a little, a not altogether happy laugh. "It could hardly be called an interesting story," he went on. "In fact it is an exceedingly dull one in spots. It drags—and that's unforgivable. It hasn't even a moral. I mean a moral applicable to the average person."

"To me, do you mean?" Nance suggested.

"It certainly has no moral applicable to you, and you are not the average person," he laughed. "Ergo—if it has not a moral for the average person and none for the other sort—it has no moral. The climax of the story is conspicuous by its absence and it doesn't end well. I mean the end bids fair to be flat, stale and unornamental. Of course it will have an end—every story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end—with a flourish, a blare of trumpets or fireworks, that is if it makes for success. Should the gods intervene and give this one a chance, it might end 'and so he lived happily ever after!' But the gods seldom intervene. With the ending I see coming I don't believe any editor would take the stuff were it turned into typewritten pages, tied with a ribbon, and signed with a big name."

"If I were an editor," she assented naively, "I should read the manuscript anyway."

"Does that mean that you really care to hear the dismal yarn?" he queried.

Oh thistle-down resolutions! "Yes," Nance returned unhesitatingly, "I would like you to tell me all of it."

"We will turn the canoe shoreward and have our lunch," temporized Wynn. "There are trout over yonder—where the water is brown and still like a pool. There under the larch. I caught a rainbow beauty just there, once. In the pack along with the bacon and flour, repose biscuits. We'll go up the bank, and you will rest while I look around. There may also be berries."

"You must never take chances with berries!" she warned. "Never! There are willow-berries and wolf-berries and a small pink berry—all of which are good to let alone. The dog-berries pucker one's lips. The big saskatoons—we're too late for them; they will be sun-dried unless the bears have had them all. Even the late, late black-berries are gone

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