

The Windigo at Beaver Rock

By E. G. Bayne

It was the twenty-third of December and a bright morning. The newly-risen sun was pricking out a myriad diamond points along the illimitable sheets of crust and making of each snow-laden pine and balsam a thing of glittering beauty. Withal, the air was sharp. It "stabbed like a driven nail."

"Fifty-six below," remarked John Williamson to himself as he glanced up at the thermometer which hung on the outer door-jamb at the entrance to the little trading post. "That's fairly keen even for northern Alberta!"

The long, low-set log building, snugged up in the lee of a small mountain, and further protected by a thin grove of pine and poplar to the east, was the only human habitation in miles. There was a tiny dock down at the lake and one or two outbuildings behind the trading post and this was all. Dog-sled trails led east, west and south, and here and there, sunken in the crust, could be seen the imprint of snowshoes, but beyond these slight evidences of human life, there was little to recommend the spot to a stranger sociably inclined.

John Williamson was practically a stranger, for this was his first winter at the post. He was filling, to the best of his ability, the place of the former factor who had joined the army the preceding spring. As to being lonely, some men might have confessed to this very natural craving for the companionship of their fellows. Not so John Williamson. Didn't he have a wife and daughter to make life cheery for him? Besides, trade had been rather brisk all autumn, and then, every two months the mail from the south arrived. It was to look for the mail dogs that he had come outside this morning. But there was no sign of them. He stood shading his eyes with both hands and gazing still hopefully down the long valley that ran south between two ranges of foothills.

The light tread of an Indian roused him, and he turned to find one, Black Swallow, standing almost beside him. The red man carried a large bundle of pelts.

"You bucks are certainly good at the gumshoe business," observed the factor, as he recovered from his start of surprise. "Come inside."

The Indian, following the other into the post, flung his furs down on the nearest counter and demanded, in confidential tone, some liquid refreshment.

"Hooch," he said, simply.

"No hooch, son," returned the factor, decidedly. "Government says not, you know, what's this—mink, marten, skunk, rabbit? Big catch, eh?"

"You new man? Where old man go?"

"He's gone to war."

"I go war soon, too. You gottum tobac?"

"Sure."

"You gottum gunpowder?"

"Yes; big stock—lots of it."

"You gottum chow?"

"Oh, plenty chow."

And while Black Swallow, with great deliberation ordered his chow (food), the factor asked him the news of the north-land. There was very little, it would seem. Rabbits were plentiful. Beaver was scarce this year. Weather was bad. Black Swallow had seen The Windigo at Beaver Rock. The last remark set the factor to laughing. "You red rascals have cooked that yarn up amongst you to avoid carrying parcels for me. There are six bundles now, waiting to go to the Landing, and I can't bribe one of you, it seems."

"Get mail man," returned the Indian. "Regular mail man is sick. And the mail from Edmonton is now four days' overdue. Besides, the Edmonton fellow won't care to go thirty miles off his beat, and back."

As the factor spoke, two more Indians entered the post. They bought pemmican, codfish, sugar, tobacco, molasses, red print, dates, some packages of meal, and various articles of wearing apparel, and the factor called to his daughter to come and check up these purchases while he counted the pelts.

Madge Williamson came out of the little office at her father's bidding. She had not yet become accustomed to the Indians. She distrusted them one and all. But as the morning passed and more Indians, and some white men as well, ar-

rived to "trade," she was too busy to remember her fears. She was but a northerner in the making. "What's this about a ghost or something of the sort up at Beaver Rock?" demanded Williamson of one of the white men, a trapper by the name of O'Neil.

"Well, I don't know," answered the trapper slowly, his eyes taking on a furtive look. "There's them that only imagines things, John, an' then again, there's others, like myself now, that could tell you strange tales. Mind, I'm not sayin' I seen the ghost myself; but last night I met Jim Crow musing across from the Yellowhead district an' he said he seen it, quite plain."

"It?" repeated the factor, a shade sarcastically.

"It," replied O'Neil with emphasis. "It is a tall fellow, dressed like one of them gentlemen of the comp'ny of adventurers y' know. Jim said he only appears off an' on like, mostly on windy nights, an' he's always diggin' away with a big shovel as though he might be lookin' fer gold under the snow. He's appeared oftener this year than ever."

"So it seems! I can't get any stuff up that way, and as all the men from the Landing have gone to the war, there's small chance of anyone coming down, for either mail or parcels. Why doesn't someone catch this hoodoo?"

"How'n thunder kin they ketch a thing that melts into thin air as soon as you git nigh him?"

"Slippery sort, eh?" laughed the factor, skeptically.

"You kin laugh, John, but I tell you—oh well, let's git down to business. Got any more of that there canned syrup? Well, I'll take six tins."

Alphonse Chabot, a little beady-eyed trapper from east of Devine's Landing, came to the post about noon.

"Eh, mon Dieu! Not at your life I don't take no package to de Landing, m'sieu! Sorry, me, not to oblige. No, no!"

"But you came by Beaver Rock!" the factor put in, rather impatiently. "You always do."

"No, no! Me, I came by sout' trail, m'sieu."

"What! Went ten miles out of your way?"

The little Frenchman nodded, and shrugged.

"What would you? I got wife and eight kids, m'sieu. I tink of dem—not of m'self."

Saying which Alphonse gathered up his parcels and calling out a "Merry Christmas, m'sieu," scuttled away.

John Williamson sent an anxious glance into his office where the bundles for Devine's Landing lay.

"Guess I'll have to hitch the dogs to-night and go up myself," he said, finally, to his daughter.

"No indeed, Dad! If there's any question, I'll go. Why it was only yesterday you were complaining about that pain in your back again!"

"Somebody must go, child. Of course I know I haven't been on a sled since we left Athabasca, but there's a sick squaw at Devine's, waiting for those packages of medicine, and I can't get buck or

white man to go past Beaver Rock. Besides—well, it's Christmas, and think of that little colony of disappointed people up there who won't have any Christmas cheer."

Madge made no reply, but she bit her lip thoughtfully, her dark eyes full of dread. Up at the Landing there were children, and children are the same the world over, at Christmas time. Only to think of the disappointment in those little faces, and all on account of a silly old Indian superstition!

"That copper-colored cheat, Rain-on-the-Lake, who was in here a few minutes ago," the factor went on, "tells me that there's a black fox up near Beaver Rock, and possibly more than one. Now if that's the case and the price of black fox pelts what it is, perhaps after all, there may be something in this ghost affair. It will take a pretty big spirit (manitou, or whatever they call it) to scare a chap like Rain-on-the-Lake."

"I'm not a bit frightened," returned the girl, pale nevertheless, in spite of her words. "So I'll go to the Landing, Dad, myself. No, don't say a word now! I'm going, just as soon as the mail comes, and if the mail isn't here by sunset, I'll start anyway!"

The factor looked anxiously at the girl. Well he knew her fear of the Indians, her slight knowledge of the trails, the distance to be travelled, the piercing cold. But all remonstrance was in vain. Madge was determined to go.

"I'll stay at the Landing to-night and be home before sunset to-morrow," she explained, patting her father's arm. "Don't you worry, Dad, and don't let mother worry."



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