

Keenan, The Cache-Keeper

A Story of the Shut-Mouthed Men

By POLLOUGH POGUE



My friend, Jimmy Laramie, the cache-keeper, told me this, sitting in front of the living-shack at the cache, with the smudge-pail between us, one long evening of deep quiet, clean smells and soft lights, on spruce-coasted Nipigon. And when the sun sunk in crimson blaze and amber reek behind the rusty spruce

woods we sat picturing the drama of the story in the wild northern sun-set's smoke and coal. It was half-past nine o'clock that night before the last coals blackened in the northwest, and that dark brood of night-shadows spawned in the spruce came out to play in the cache clearing.

Jimmy Laramie was a big, clean-made Canadian with a large, honest face rusted brown by the sun. He had been for three months alone at the cache, eating his own villianies out of his frying-pan. He was an unbitted young stallion of the hardy breed that will not stay at home but must be heading northward and westward on its great adventure. I was a fire-ranger, drawn that way by a big smoke which a day's rain had cleaned from the sky.

We had been talking about the keepers of the lonely food caches which the Transcontinental engineers have set at least a hundred miles apart in a long east and west string across the continent-wide waste of spruce and muskeg which has fewer people to the square mile than any other part of the earth. These caches feed the field parties who are drawing a line of enormous mileage through the unmothered fastnesses of the finest wilderness left in the world.

The cache-keepers, living alone often for many months at a time on un-mapped rivers and lakes not mentioned in the school-books, are mother-forgotten men. Some of them go back utterly to the pagan embrace of Pan. Upon the minds of others the loneliness and interminable silence of the spruce forest weighs heavily, till a fungous brood of shadows clouds their brains, or the wilderness takes them like children by the hand and reassures them. Most cache-keepers live the uncombed, unbuttoned life and never lace their shoe-packs.

Keenan was cache-keeper on Rabiskaw Lake and he thought himself lucky. There was a small fur post on Rabiskaw Lake, a French company post, only ten miles from the cache. Once a week Keenan would paddle down the lake to the post and spend the night there.

Keenan was a type of the hardest men shaped in God's image to-day, the Canadians whom you will find on the uncombed North's ragged frontier, which they are hourly shoving farther northward, unrolling the map of vastness, with the balsam of the forest in their nostrils to give them strength. He had been transit-man on a location party that drew supplies from Rabiskaw Lake cache, and, his eyes going bad from much sighting across the naked snows, had come down from "the line" to keep the cache and rest his eyes.

He was a big, hairy man, sun-smoked dark as your shoe-packs, muscled like a horse, built as strong as the great Laurentian cliffs of Rabiskaw Lake, upon which the ages of the earth have written their mighty history. His mouth was a rusty knife-cut, his chin a block of beaten bronze.

Joe Brosseau, an enormous man, as black as a black bear, was in charge of the Rabiskaw Lake post. He was a French-Canadian with a dark lick of Indian blood in one end of his personal equation. When the crucible of his nature was heated by big, simple, primitive emotions, this wild Bedouin strain came to the surface in effervescence. Then there was likely to be trouble. His wife was a Scotch-Cree half-breed woman. Little Franchette, their daughter, was very pretty in a wild, brown way.

When Keenan first saw little Franchette she was wearing a spray of the red flowers of the fire-weed in her black hair, and when he kissed her her lips flowered as scarlet as the fire-weed's blood-hued blossoms. Before Keenan came into her life she was only a child as fresh and pure as the pyrola flowers that grew in white lakes on the muskeg. When he made love to her she ripened as the wild raspberries ripen under the hot grin of the July sun,

and only the beads on her rosary knew how much she loved him.

It meant everything in the world to her, but nothing at all to him. To him it was like hearing once more a stave of an old familiar song; he had made love to many women.

It was very pleasant to talk to this little wild girl with her dusk-rose face. It was very pleasant to be kissed by that soft mouth, and the something that laughed in her black eyes was very alluring.

To him she seemed no woman of earth at all but a daughter of Pan, a wild thing of the spruce and muskeg, who stole away from the post o' nights when the moon hung red over the forest, to dance with dryads in some moon-lit brule.

One week of blue October haze through which the soft maples on the hardwood ridges were red as torches and the birches yellow as camp fires Keenan did not come to the post as usual. Instead came an Ojibway of a "family" camped near the cache with the news that the big cache-keeper was going back to "the line."

Then very limited Joe Brosseau, who had never seen a town or a railway train, or a fenced road, who had lived his life beyond the ravelled edge of civilisation, with which he had never touched hands across the spruce forest, who was aware of basic things only, who was no more civilised than the black spruce, took canoe with two of his Ojibways for the cache, smouldering inside. The love of his daughter had been slimed with treading where love should never go, and if the cache-keeper meant to go away and leave her, there would be a heavy accounting.

"I will bring him back, Dear-my-soul," he said to Franchette when she told him how matters stood, "and we will send for Father Dugas, and he shall marry you. If not," he added with a rough muspuash oath when she had gone, "I will kill the lousy dog." So the canoe slopped through the shouldering waves that flowered white around it and in the brown dusk came to the river bay where crouched the great, gray log cache.

Keenan lay in his bunk in his living-shack reading a magazine two years old. Window and door stood open, and the flickering light from his candle ran in and out of the corners of the shack. The shadows dance-stepped on the floor.

Black Brosseau crumpled his huge body through the doorway. The spruce-leathered Ojibway canoe-men stayed by the canoe. Telepathically they knew there would be a fight; it was in the air. But they would not interfere. The big gods whose drama was the lives of men had planned it.

The cache-keeper surged up from his bunk and roughed a "Bou-jou, bou-jou, Joe!" in his moose bellow that made the words sound like camp oaths.

"Bou-jou, bou-jou, m'shoor," growled Brosseau in answer. "So you leave de cache? You go on 'de line,' eh? W'en you go? Nex' week?"

"Next week I hit the unblazed trail that leads to hell or sundown," answered Keenan, laughing down from his great height.

Black Brosseau's big, square face was made in ruled lines that ran up and down and across and now the lines hardened into a map of fury. He was a man of sparse speech and his way was always that of simplicity and directness.

"You — ——" he roared, "you com' to de pos' an' marry Franchette. If not, den I kill you."

The cache-keeper laughed again in shameless, insolent mirth. "So you want a fight, do you? By the smoke of hell, you'll get your bellyfuk. I won't marry your mongrel daughter, though she is a pretty little thing. Come outside."

There were no more words. The North breeds shut-mouthed men; few are their words and straight to the point. Brosseau turned and strode outside. Keenan followed. A great burnt-gold moon had topped a broken-backed hill; the little clearing was strewn with the bright coin of the moon-light. An owl questioned the bronze night with rough speech. Whip-poor-wills called from the spruce-shadows: "Bois pourri! bois pourri! bois pourri!" From the vast spread of the lake the gray waves came galloping and crumbled into snow on the beach. Far away a wild rapid, rippling through an ore-boned gorge, made her prayer to God. But these small sounds did not disturb the Big Elemental Silence,

filled with romance and melancholy, that hung over forest, lake and rough-backed hill.

Both men understood that it was not to be a mere fist-fight, and looked about for weapons. Two new brush-hooks of the kind used by axe-men on "the line" leaned against the cache wall. With a single impulse each man laid a big brown hand on one of these. Then began a battle to write poetry about.

It was like hearing old legends told anew to see them strike and parry, running swiftly forward and back, circling and side-stepping. Brosseau's soul vibrated with hatred, but Keenan felt nothing but the impersonal zest for fighting that was part of his healthy pagan nature. His great frank soul rejoiced in its freedom. He had come to the wilderness because he was too big to live under the restraints of civilisation. He had wanted more room. He had refused to walk in the gravel paths and keep off the grass.

The steel clanged with the right ring of battle and the sparks flew merrily as the blades met in parries. The elemental man, the half-brute of the Flint Age, leaped to life in both men. Ages of civilisation dropped from the cache-keeper. As he fought Brosseau quickly lapsed back to the primitive; he had not so far to go.

Presently Keenan's face was gashed open from brow to chin by a glancing blow. A moment afterward only a quick backward spring saved Brosseau from a slashing cut that would have split his shoulder.

"By God!" jeered Keenan with a red grin, "you smelt hell that time, old shoe-pack!"

That taunt set Black Brosseau on flame. With a deep bear-roar he rushed at Keenan again, swinging a desperate blade. The cache-keeper gave back, parrying the brush-hook's fury. The moon-bright blades rang with blithe resonance. Luck was Keenan's ally. In a parry his leaping blade cut clean through Brosseau's hook-stock just below the head and left the trader weaponless.

Brosseau, roaring an oath, ran head down beneath the cache-keeper's arms and gripped him around the middle. Keenan was forced to drop his hook, and the fight became an issue of sheer physical strength between them. With mighty muscles stretch and thrilling, they wrestled. Breathing hard, they whirled and spun in circles, arms locked in fierce grapple, and the earth reverberated with the swift stamping of their moccasined feet. Twice they loosed their holds and bludgeoned each other with their fists.

At length Keenan, with a mighty heave, swung the trader off his feet, and threw him upon his back, leapt upon his broad chest, and holding him down with his knees, sledged him in the face with maul-like fists. Long after Brosseau was senseless the club-like arms rose and fell, battering the trader's face to wreckage. It was not until his savage fury had worked itself clear as wine clears itself in fermentation that he left Brosseau to lie there in the dimmed daylight of the moon and went back to his shack.

Brosseau's Ojibways, carrying water in their hats, shocked the trader's dumbed brain back to consciousness again. Within a surprisingly short space of time he staggered to his feet, shaking his great mane of hair. He was half-blinded, his face was cut and bruised and blood-smearred, the nose was broken and flattened. But he was not badly hurt. Men of the spruce's stamp are hard to damage seriously. And he was not licked. There is no recipe for licking a bush-whelped Canadian. Stiff, sore in every joint, muscle-sprained, with red waves of pain shooting through his brain, seeing things through a sorrowful gray haze, he limped toward the shack to renew the fight.

Keenan sat on a bench in his shack bathing the cut in his face with cold water from a basin which he held on his knees. Through the open doorway he looked out upon the calmness of the undisturbed night, the mingled gray and gloom and silver of the clearing, and on the forest edge the spilt-ink shadows and the penetrating moon-light leaking and dripping through the spruce branches like white rain. The wind had gone to sleep; the air hung quiet over all the vastness of spruce which the moon had turned into goblin country.