

The Man at Lone Lake

By VIRNA SHEARD

Author of "By the Queen's Grace," etc.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE people of the Post and Mission House of St. Elizabeth were astir early upon the morning following the wedding, to watch the departure of the bride and groom.

A disgruntled but enterprising young Indian with a small dog-train and load of musquash skins taken in the early fall, had quarrelled with the Factor over the price of them, and was now going to start out for a little settlement to the South-east, known as Blue Rock, where he hoped to drive a better bargain with an agent of another and more modern company, than the Honourable and ancient one of the Hudson Bay.

Wynn had persuaded this irate red man to give a seat to one passenger on his sledge, and therefore Nance was to ride in state whilst he kept pace with the Indian.

If the going proved good, the settlement would be reached in twelve hours, and there, the Mission priest had assured them, they would be able to borrow from a travelling priest who made Blue Rock his headquarters, a small Canadian sledge and strong pony, that would take them on and over broken roads to the nearest stopping place of the railroad, and though the journey might be long and tiresome it would be comparatively safe if the weather held good. There was no alluring alternative to this course, so they took it.

Weariness slips easily from young shoulders, and the world might have been strewn with white rose leaves instead of snow, as far as Nance and Dick Wynn were concerned. It was a good world to them, and a trifle of discomfort in it here and there weighed just as nothing at all.

The sky was clear blue and the sunrise dazzling, when they started, and the frost-edged wind was swept with the scent of balsam trees.

The entire population of the place waved them adieu, and Nance waved back, and smiled tremulously, for they had all been so kind, so dear. The Indian cracked his long whip, the quarrelsome huskies forgot their bones of contention, strained against their harness, and the light, long sledge, with its one passenger enthroned on the bales of fur, slipped away over the outward trail, the Indian driver and Dick Wynn keeping a good swinging pace beside it.

They all melted away into the golden light of the early morning, and the Mission people watched them go as though they were fairy folk who drifted off and into another and an unknown world, where perchance it might be always summer, and where men and women knew little or nothing of snow-storm and rough winds, long, dark nights, frost-bound stillness, and the pain of cold and loneliness.

When the figures and the dog-train had become but a dusky blur against the white, the Sisters returned to the Mission School, and the old priest to his house by the church. The Factor and his wife took up their daily work, and the few Indians and the passing trapper made ready to journey on.

Only the two men of the Mounted Police, who were delayed by the lame horse, sat by the Factor's fire in silence, and something tugged at their hearts that was not all homesickness, but was enough like it to make them impatient of the inactivity that gave them time to think.

One, more restless than the other, rose and paced up and down the room with a jingling of spurs and metal buckles, that entranced the smaller of the Factor's children, and awed those of a size larger. They all drew away into the dim corners of the room, and watched him in round-eyed silence. Up and down he walked—up and down—his shoulders square set, his weather-beaten face with its hard jaw and deep eyes, tense with some freshly stirred feeling. The wedding of the night before, the joyous passing of the bride and groom that morning, had roused within him a thousand half-dulled longings and desires. He grew suddenly sick of the wild unsettled North, and mad for the places of men—the places he knew.

From the chair by the fire his companion glanced at him uneasily, then took a little book from his pocket and tried to read.

A long half-hour dragged by, and still the clanking steps passed and re-passed the hearth.

"Settle down, old chap," said the man by the fire. "Come and have a pipe—or I'll go out with you again and have another look at the horses."

The soldier paused in his restless walking. "Settle down!" he echoed, "I don't feel as though I ever would to this life again"; I want to leave it all—all this," he said vaguely, waving his hand towards the window through which showed the bleak wintry landscape. "I want to get away from it, boy, and go home—home, do you understand, where they have gone—those two." He looked out and down the trail the Indian's dog-train had taken. Then he took up his pacing again.

The soldier by the fire knocked the ashes out of his pipe, filled it slowly and smoked alone. Furtively he watched the moving figure, but said no word, for when these attacks of restlessness came to any of the men, their comrades granted them the grace of silence. "By George!" the man said to himself, as he drew at his pipe, "I wouldn't like to cross him when he's in that mood. It's a madness he has on him; a madness for something, or someone, or some place he wants, and till it passes, the Lord help him!"

Then he turned to the children. "Hi there, you little kiddies!" he said softly, taking some coins from his pocket and holding them out. "Take these pennies and then run out to your mother beyond there. Sure he's a big man, and he needs lots of room to walk! Besides ye all have such eyes, and fix them on a fellow so, maybe he feels them. Scatter—with you! Maybe there's bread with treacle on it waiting for you where your mother is!" And so persuaded, the brown babies stolidly departed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE sun was noon-high when Francois came up to the Factor's house. He had broken a snow-shoe on the river-road, and been delayed. The last few miles he had tramped in his moccasins. Fatigue and anger had worked their will with him, and he moved now as one who was dazed and uncertain, yet this was but an outward seeming, for his purpose had not wavered.

At the Factor's door he stopped to knock the snow from his feet and leggings. Then he entered the trading-room.

For a moment the Factor did not know him, for his tangled hair had blown about his face, his face was lined and looked old, and his eyes blazed out of it with deep, hot anger.

"Francois," he said, after a moment, "what has come to you, boy?"

The half-breed ignored the question. A certain dignity about him kept the garrulous agent from following his question up. He stared at him in silence.

Francois swung his rifle down from his shoulder, and laid it along his arm loosely.

"Where is dat man from Lone Lak—an—and de ole trapper's grand-daughter?" he said slowly, sighting down the rifle barrel and adjusting it a little awkwardly.

Some tone in his voice set the Factor's slowly-moving mind to work. His ideas which were usually nebulous, drifted slowly together and took shape.

"Wat is that to you?" he answered Francois, with a little indifferent shrug. Then his manner changing—"but come by de fire; we get you breakfast. You are dead-beat—by your looks."

The half-breed swung his rifle loose, strode across and caught him hard at the throat by his rough flannel shirt. He twisted it tight and held it.

"Answer!" he commanded, his dangerous eyes on the face that grew slowly purple.

The agent, stout and short of breath at best, gasped and attempted to reply.

"Dey are married! Married and gone! The priest can tell you."

Francois threw him off, and swayed a little where he stood, then steadied.

"Wat time?" he asked hoarsely. "Wen did they go—an where?"

"Dis morning by sunrise," the Factor answered obediently enough. "Dey went with Oppapago de runner. He took a train load of Musquash skins on farther; to Blue Rock maybe."

Francois made no comment. A slight trembling ran through his limbs, and he unfastened the collar of his beaver coat.

"I rest now by your fire," he said, nodding towards the inner room. "Tell your squaw to bring meat. I pay."

He strode through the low door leading from the trading-room to the living-room.

A fire of pine knots burned on the hearth and the air was warm and heavy with the perfume and smoke of tobacco.

Before the fire, and with his back to the door, sat a man in the uniform of the Royal Mounted Police. He leaned forward his chin on his hands, and sat still, as though drowsy from the scented warmth.

Another man in the same uniform paced the floor, his cartridge belt swinging loose, his spurs clinking at each step. Two rifles and a Colt's revolver lay on the rough mantel shelf.

Francois walked to the centre of the room, unseeing, or as though confused. Then, on a sudden, and as one sharply awakened, he looked up and took in the situation in every detail.

It was a trap he had blindly strayed into! The trap of the law. The trap that had been set for him cunningly, and had waited long for some chance or arrant folly of his to lead him into it.

Instantly he raised his gun, though awkwardly enough, covered the man by the fire, and laid his left fore-finger on the trigger. Then he stood stock-still.

The man who walked stood still also. He scanned the half-breed from his rough fur cap to his moccasined feet, and recognized him.

With a lightning quick movement he reached the mantel, but before his hand touched the revolver, Francois fired—and the man, who seemingly dozed in the chair before the fire, and had not roused or noticed who entered the room, swayed a bit further forward and slipped to the floor.

Two more reports rang out together—a second from Francois' gun, and one from the revolver of the officer of the Mounted Police. From the trading-room the French-Canadian agent came running in with short, excited cries, and beyond, somewhere, a chorus of children's voices frightened and clamouring, was raised suddenly.

The room was blue with smoke, but the Factor saw one man standing stiffly by the fireplace, his revolver still in his hand. On the floor lay Francois and the other soldier of the Mounted Police.

He ran from one to the other frantically. He was a man of peaceful habit, slow to anger, and with sympathies easily wrought upon. He raised his voice now in loud lamentation and protested to heaven against such fierce and tragic happenings as these taking place beneath the roof of his house.

His squaw stood passively at the door, keeping the brood of children behind her, and she watched the scene in silence.

Still the officer waited with raised revolver, his finger on the trigger, his eyes fixed upon the half-breed on the floor.

A thin line of red ran from the breast of Francois' beaver coat, and widened, and widened, as it ran across to the warm hearth stones.

The fur cap had fallen off, and the man's tangled dark head moved from side to side, mechanically it seemed. His lips were drawn back a little from his teeth, that showed strong and white as a wolf's, but he made no sound.

The soldier who had slipped from his chair, lay where he fell, absolutely still.

Slowly the officer of the Police lowered his revolver. Kneeling down by his comrade he bent over him and listened. The room grew strangely quiet for a moment, and the Factor stayed his lamentations and listened also.

Presently the soldier arose. "Dead," he said shortly. "Stone-dead. He never even knew"—the words trailed into silence.

HE crossed to Francois. The half-breed looked up, the restless moving of his head stilled.

"It makes a good way to go," he said through his stiffening lips. "A queek ver short portage. Merci M'sieu. I thank you, with ma heart. Dieu! Yo clever fellows—yo grand Seigneur! With yo bon rifle, bon revolver. Yo damn fine horses. Yo cannot tak one French Indian alive, eh?" Along with the rattle in his throat sounded a short scornful laugh.

"So!" he went on after a pause. "Francois de trapper—de outlaw—he walk into de trap. An Francois—crippled of hees right arm, starved as coyote in Spring, an dead with weariness—he get one of yo. So!" The mocking voice ceased, the red line ran more quickly.

Then with a sharp movement the half-breed raised himself up on his left arm. The light of reason had gone from his eyes, and a wild delirium filled them. Something he saw before him, or someone, for he gazed hard and smiled. "She es made of the snow—an de pink of de wild-rose—an de gold of the frost-touched leaf—" he said softly.

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