

Devil's Drum, the strongest man in the Northland, counted him a fair antagonist in the wrestle. When, of evening, the young men would race canoes along the lake, he would take Lourdes and bring her in, flushed and laughing, ahead of the others in their empty birchbark shells; and as ours is a country where bodily vigour makes for more profit than mental parts, it would be no wonder if he had not won on her.

As a sudden influenza laid me by the heels for a month, I was able to pass on his chances myself; and when, one day, I watched the flame come and go in Lourdes' face as, one after the other, Gabriel forced every strong shoulder to the ground in a wrestling bout before the store, I saw that they were good. Despite the mad teasing with which she met his every attempt at actual love, I believe that summer would have seen them married if the governor had not picked him out for the factorship of the new fort of Painted Post.

As the order fell in with my recovery and our ways lay together, I was witness of their parting, for Lourdes rode out with us a half day's journey; nor could one imagine aught so beautiful as she at the moment she drew up her pony to say good-by. Bathed in sunshine, which crowned her with a flaming aureole, wrapped her ripe youth in a golden mantle, she made a figure rich, gracious, glorious as though limned in the soft stain of a window. I did not wonder at the yearning of Gabriel's dark face, the note of strain that changed his voice.

"Six months to build the fort, little one: three to set it in order, then I shall return to—"

"Find me hard and fast married," she laughingly interrupted.

But the tenderness of her smile belied the mischief in her eyes. It was to them he made his finish: "To end this fooling with our marriage. Till then, *à Dieu*."

"*A Dieu*," she answered, so soberly that I looked back and thus saw the laughter die in her eyes, leaving them darkly serious under the red flame of her hair. If that had been the return!

My usual routine would have carried me nor'west by Manitoba House to the Ellice Mission—where Gabriel left me—thence due north by Fort Pelly to Norway House, the La Passe Mission, and so round the Arctic stations to celebrate mass in the Barren Lands that lie under the midnight sun, returning at the end of a year from Fort McCloud in the west by a southern trail. But owing to a severer recurrence of influenza, I turned back two months later at Bedford House in Athabasca, arriving at the Portage on my homeward way a sick man, yet not so sick but that I had eyes for the second chapter of Lourdes' romance.

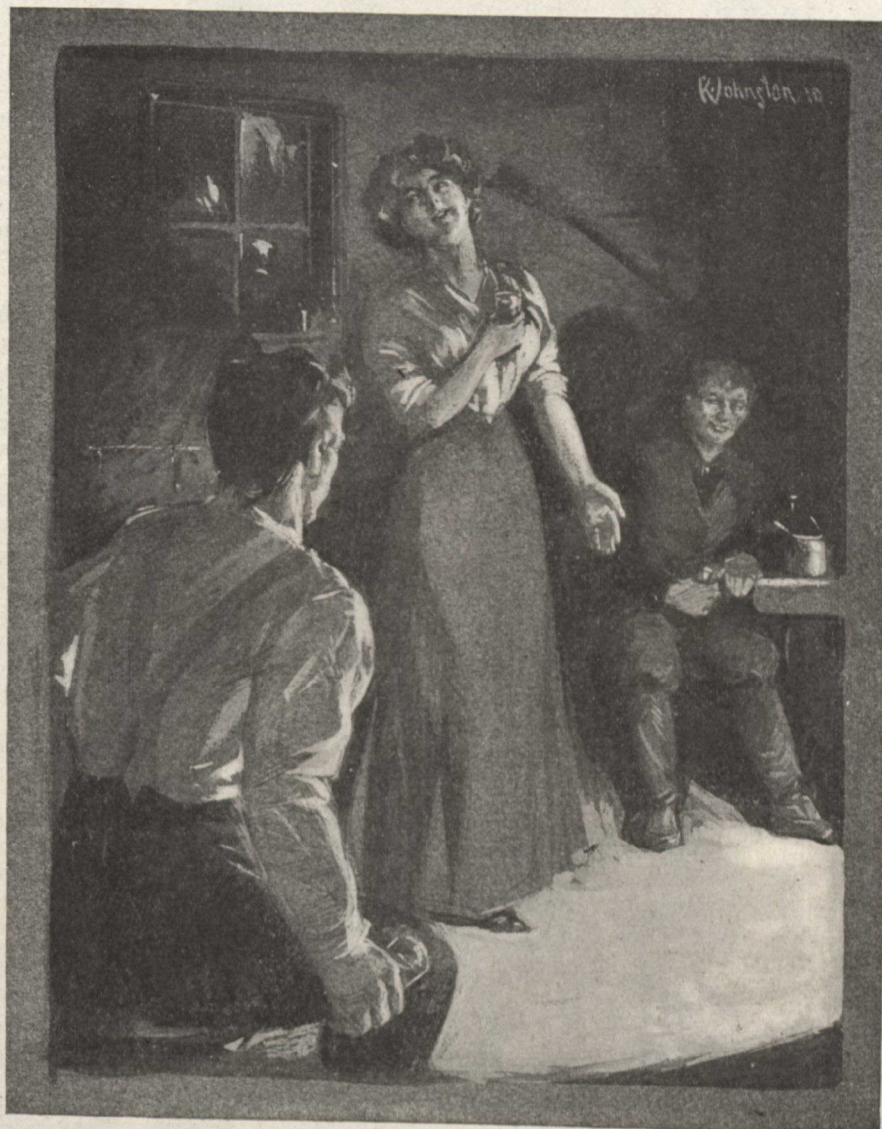
It opens on the afternoon that, making in to the Portage by a new trail which promised a short cut through a bit of woodland, I almost drove over Lourdes and Luke Stevens, the English clerk who was recently come out to serve out his indentures under Donald Blair. They were returning home from a lovers' ramble—yes, in that short time; indeed the speed of the wooing may be gauged from the fact that upon this third day of the fourth week of their acquaintance, his arm clasped her waist. Her bright head pressed in to his shoulder, they were pacing it in love's slow time, so wrapped in each other that they missed my wheels; and so afforded time for me to take a good look at Luke.

A tall lad—man, rather, he had turned twenty-six, and yet the word comes out of that first impression—he was very strongly built and carried himself with that certain distinction of manner much loved by women. Afterward, I heard that he came on one side of a noble family on the under side of the knot. For himself he claimed issue from that upper middle class which exiles its sons to the colonies through prejudice against trade; which, if true, makes for his credit in that he lacked even a taint of the ridiculously superior airs of that useless breed. Altogether I was favourably impressed until, turning at my cough, he reversed the usual habit and flew the woman's crimson. Then I saw that his eyes, while large and true blue, were much too soft for a man who had to make his way in our rough land; and it was to hide a sudden misgiving as much as in play that I shook my whip at Lourdes, whose white teeth had flashed like sudden pearls amidst the scarlet of her lips. I was troubled without knowing why until, that evening, Father

Beaupre put my feeling into words.

"A good lad, a fine lad," the priest said, as we talked it over. "Donald says that he never broke a better. But—too soft for Lourdes. For, look ye, this may be heresy, but it is also sense—a spice of the devil in a husband may sometimes cause a slip, yet in the long run it makes for the good of the church by causing others to 'ware his women. But would you have thought she'd have taken to him?"

It did seem strange that this gentleman should prevail with this madcap savage in whom Gabriel's iron had stirred only liking, and if there be answer to the puzzle it must inhere in the fact that were it otherwise and like mated only with like, we should be quickly bred into oaks and saplings; there could be no commingling of strength with the graces. Dame Nature may be trusted with her own business. But, curious or no, love him Lourdes did, with a love that bordered on ferocity and would brook no laggard wooing. I married them within a month, after a courtship short as it had been ideal.



"She looked at him over the top of her glass: 'And old loves.'"

Over a golden land that swooned under the languors of Indian summer, they had rambled, pausing often to observe, from grassy knolls, the badgers and other prairie children at their loves and wars. When, of evenings, I had strolled with the good priest along the quiet lake shore, we had often caught the slow dip of a paddle far out on the water; or, low, rich, bubbling with her joy of life, Lourdes' laugh would throb through the warm dusk, followed by silence so soft and suggestive that even we dry old churchmen would exchange glances of indulgent understanding.

And their honeymoon had been equally ideal. I have always pitied those whose nuptials are cast amidst the toil and traffic, smoke and noise of cities; the poor souls who flee the regard of friends to expose their natural shyness to the vulgar, brazen stare of a crowded caravansary. But the deep woods cradled theirs, and did the autumn leaves crimson over the tale they whispered to the grasses, there was none but a startled fawn to spread the tale through the forest. For they went off on a long hunting which outlasted my stay, and when I returned the following year, they had settled down in the face of Father Beaupre's croaking to what seemed an unusually happy life.

"Which merely goes to show," he then said, amending his wisdom to suit the new case, "what I have observed before—it is your madcap girls who make the best of wives."

Concerning Gabriel? Were I aught but a plain chronicler of events, here would be fine soil in which to sow the seed of future occasion by

telling of his vow to be revenged. As a matter of fact he took the news very quietly, being helped, perhaps, by the fact that it had had three months to ripen while drifting in to his far fort. In either case, he plunged at his work with ardor which must have won him both peace and reputation in the ordinary course of events.

Wherewith I am brought face to face with a fortuitous providence, find myself in presence of one of those mysteries over which priest and layman may puzzle themselves into spiritual blindness without obtaining a glimpse of the solution which is reserved for the eye of faith. Here were two men, ordinarily good, whose lives would have run in usual channels but for the chance that made two widows, while it drowned at once the factor and clerk of the Park Lands Post in the same rapid. For with the order that sent Luke north and Gabriel east to fill the respective vacancies, things were set in train toward the inevitable conclusion. The future, however, cast no shadow upon that bright spring day when, very happy in the promotion, they rode out from the Portage with two Red River carts creaking behind under the weight of their housekeeping.

AND now the tale comes by many mouths—through Father John, whom I relieved for sickness the following winter, from trappers and traders passing between mission and fort, its end by Gabriel himself; but here the mosaic is fused in a whole which begins with the arrival at the Park Lands Post.

To Lourdes, the journey had been one long joy. After the dead flats of Southern Manitoba, the alternation of rolling prairie, frequent rivers, wide valley, black spruce forest, which gave the Park Lands their name, must have appeared to her as fairyland; and did she tire of the prospect, there were pleasant thoughts of the hospitable folk at the post where they had stayed the preceding night, or she could occupy herself with curious speculations upon those she would meet at the next. Being a woman, excessively pretty at that, it goes without saying that, analysed, her thought centred upon the impression she had made on one, was about to make on the other. Once at La Passe, within fifty miles of her future home, her curiosity naturally concentrated upon it, and she simply bombarded Father John with questions concerning the factor and folk of the post. As, however, the priest had not been there since the coming of the new men, he could tell her nothing. Wherefore, imagine her surprise when Gabriel came out to meet them as their carts creaked in through the gates two days later.

Be sure that she hid it better than he, for Jean le Gros, who saw, said afterward that Gabriel stood on gape till, having introduced himself, Luke

turned to do the like for his wife. Then he burst out laughing. "Why, we are old friends!" he cried, and while showing them to their quarters, he asked after her parents, Father Beaupre, myself, in friendly fashion; bore himself in all things like the strong, sane man he then was.

Better that he had been harsher. Viewing his conduct under the strong light that beats on the past, one wishes, while admiring him for it, that he had driven them forth with blows—for which he would not have lacked a precedent in the Northland. But, as I say, he not only gave them honest welcome, but even took to Luke like a brother. As they were both new men, with a record to make between them, they hunted together near and wide, using the same blankets on long trails into the heart of the Barren Lands in search of furs; and what of their long absences abroad, preoccupations of business at home, Lourdes found herself almost a widow that summer—that very much against her will.

For when did woman overlook the cooling of love? A belief in the fatal nature of the gentle malady is ineradicably planted in the breast of the sex which never forgives even a hint of convalescence in lover, husband, or, as in Lourdes' case, both. Had Luke's passion remained at the fever heat which women persist in regarding as normal, she might have passed Gabriel's defection. But when both old lover and new husband neglected a skin whiter than winter snows, to hang over evil-

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