

The Man at Lone Lake,

CHAPTER I.

THE winters are long at Lone Lake. This thought struck Dick Wynn suddenly as he stood at the door of his shack, whistling and ramming the tobacco into his pipe. He wondered what had so inconsequently made him think of the winter, on a day of such balmy warmth, then remembered that a yellow leaf from the silver birch overhead had just fluttered down, butterfly-fashion, and brushed his hand.

Lately he had not kept track of time further than to notch a stick each morning after the admirable method of Robinson Crusoe. The stick hung invitingly by his so-called desk; the knife was close at hand, and he had ever been prone to form habits. But he had not counted the notches for many days, for he had been working, and to work with him was to be oblivious to the passing of hours. When he worked, he worked, and when he loafed he did it quite as thoroughly.

It might be, he considered reflectively, about the twentieth of September. A flock of shelldrakes had gone by at dusk the night before, heading due south, and about a week earlier he had run across Francois, the half-breed partner of his nearest neighbour, sitting at the edge of the lake making a stretching-ring.

Stepping aside Wynn picked up his time stick, and counted the notches up from a date he had marked.

It was October, October 1st. The soft whistling stopped abruptly. The warm season had fooled him. Well enough he knew that with a quick sharp frost winter sometimes came almost in a night here in the uncertain North, at the beginning of the foot hills. There might be later that season of the gods, "Indian Summer." The red men of the reservation counted on it to a certainty, their ancient prophecy being "First a little winter—then a little summer"; but no white trapper he had ever met pinned his whole faith to those glorious promised weeks.

"October," Wynn said half aloud. "Afterwards—no birds—no flowers—no honey-bees. November." He started at the notched stick, and drummed lightly on it with his fingers.

A chipmunk that had been asleep in the roomy pocket of his corduroy shooting coat, pushed out its small head inquiringly, and then by a movement too quick to follow, reached his shoulder, where it sat up and chattered cheerfully.

The man gave it no attention, but took up the pipe he had laid down, and went on with the ramming process.

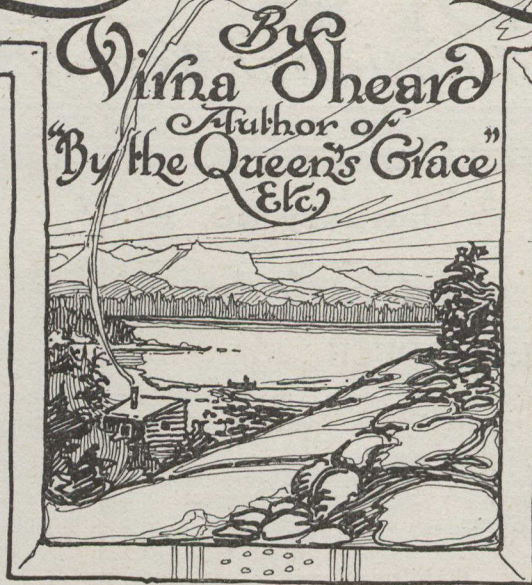
"November," he said again—"with the waterfowl gone, and the white frost and the bare trees, and Francois setting his villainous little dead-falls hereabout; the howling of the coyotes, and the long nights—the eternally long nights."

He went to the door of his shack again, and the chipmunk still on his shoulder, started to open a nut it had stealthily extracted from some hidden place, vigorously throwing the bits of shell far and wide. One piece struck Wynn on the cheek.

"Go slow, old chap!" he said, "go slow. Don't waste your vitality. You might need it before the white months are over."

The chipmunk chattered back saucily, a knowing look on its furry face, its head tilted sideways.

"You won't, eh? What makes you think so? Many a little beggar like you has got his lively hind leg caught in a weasel trap or been taken captive by one of those fat comfortable-looking gentlemen of the owl family, and it needs quite a bit of energy to get even a clever chipmunk out of such a scrape; even then he doesn't come out all in one piece, my friend. Sure thing. See? You don't see? You still think it wise to put all that vim into shelling a nut? You won't let me lead you gently up to the old, old Eastern practise of repose, the ancient habit of relaxation, the cultivation of the lotos-lily quiet? Here, where the balsam grows and the spruce trees have taken up their abode, you should be able to 'get into the silence,' as those pleasant people, the Christian Scientists, say. 'The scented silence of dreams.' Why even I can get there sometimes now, and without help—without help, mind you—when I try hard enough. It simply means shutting off the past, slipping out of the present, and projecting



one's soul (projecting one's soul is easier than it sounds, old chap) into the unsubstantial future, or the equally unsubstantial extreme past in which one has had no part."

The chipmunk suspended operations on the nut and chattered again. Wynn smiled up at him.

"What's on your mind?" he said whimsically. "I know you won't rest till I find out. Wait a second and I'll get your Marconi. Ah! I have it! You want to tell me it does not matter a whiff if you do expend some extra energy, for you sleep most of the winter. You think I'm a mind reader? Well, go on thinking so, small one. It's a rattling good idea to hibernate. Would that my pre-historic ancestor, the one who 'sat on the ancestral tree from which we sprang (I'm glad we sprang)' as Oliver Herford has it—would that he had imitated the bears and field-mice and slept o' winters. Sleep is good, Silver-tail. I wouldn't mind coming out when the spring wind blows, scraggy and shaky on my legs as a March bear, if I could only get rid of a few desolate months by sleep."

"HOW do you manage it, you and the bears, and those little people, the field-mice? Who taught you how? What fairy charm do you hold, or what kind of a blessed lullaby do you sing to yourselves?"

"It's the wind through the pines, you say. No good—I've tried it."

The chipmunk's chattering had ceased and it had curled itself up on the man's shoulder, a good shoulder, broad and square. It wound its silvery tail around its body and closed its eyes.

Wynn stood quite still at the shack door, and, save for the blue smoke curling up from his pipe, might have seemed asleep himself. His face was turned towards the lake. Through the trees he could see a glimmer of the "deep, divine, dark dayshine" of the water.

When the pipe was finished he lifted the chipmunk gently down and into his pocket. He would smoke another pipe, he thought, and then get to work. Going across to a box resting on a rough-hewn shelf, he raised the lid and looked in. It was empty. He glanced at three unopened tins standing by the box.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, "I have smoked a lot lately! But there must be a bag of fine-cut there somewhere." Lifting the box he peered behind it, then moved the tins. In doing so he touched a small, compact black leather case—a physician's case. He drew back his hand as though it had been stung. Slowly he stepped back from the shelf, his eyes fixed on the little case. A slight trembling ran through his limbs, his face suddenly showed blanched and sharply drawn against the dim light of the room. Groping with one hand he caught a chair back and seemed to steady himself by it. The chair was a substantial, home-made thing, and bore the weight well. In a moment more he walked towards the shelf again, took the little black case and laid it by itself, plainly in sight, and away from the tobacco tins. This done, he picked up his pipe. The hand in which he held it shook a little, but the colour had come back to his face, and he went on talking in the same monotone.

"Yes, I must have smoked a lot lately. At this rate I'll run out of tobacco long before Christmas. 'Christmas,' he repeated with a short laugh. "It's

a lip-blistering wort of word up here. What was it we used to sing around the fire—the old carol—oh yes, 'God rest you, merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay.' Well, we let nothing us dismay those days."

"I'll have to canoe down to the agency, or have my merry day without even a pipe for company. True, I can go over to the old man's shack and have him tell me the history of his life yet once again; or the old man may take a notion to tramp down to the Mission to see that grand-daughter, whose name so embellishes his conversations, or he may be going over his line, or he may be dead—although he looks good for thirty years."

"I'd best depend on the pipe. Yes, I'll canoe down. The ubiquitous and honourable the Hudson's Bay Company, have my profound admiration and gratitude. A man can't get an impossible distance away from their posts, if he knows the map." Then he frowned. "I didn't mean to go near a reservation or agency till spring. So much for hide-bound resolution. Wynn, you smoke too much, too infernally much. It's ruination to nerves. Frays them at the edges. You are probably carrying round a beastly nicotine heart at this moment, and it will spring some sort of surprise on you in the night along about February, when the candles have given out. It will probably run down, and then make up time on the long jump."

Silence followed this monologue, and the man drew himself up and shook back his head as though confused.

"I am getting into a confirmed habit of talking to myself," he exclaimed sharply. "When I talk to the chipmunk it's only a threadbare excuse to hear a voice. This bone-penetrating silence is beginning to tell. Once I heard of an old woman who lived alone and talked to the clock—but according to the legend she had wheels; and they went round. Now, I haven't got wheels—yet. Still, out here where the John Burroughes' and other back-to-nature folk assure us it requires genius to contract any bad habits, I have contracted two with pleasurable ease; I smoke criminally and babble idiotically."

He went to the door again and leaned against the frame, his figure blocking out the light from the shadowy room. Suddenly he stiffened to a listening attitude. The far-off dip of a paddle had come to him. Perhaps the old man desired a red-trout for his supper. The ice-cold water of the little lake, into which emptied a glacier-fed stream, sheltered many trout and pike, and monster touladi as well.

No. There was no fishing being done. He heard the canoe scrape bottom; then knew it was being beached just beyond a patch of thorn and bramble. The grasses there were rough and dry, and crackled as they broke.

Presently came the "pad," "pad" of moccasined feet through the crisp under-brush and past a place where wild raspberries grew. They climbed a slope, touched a carpet of spruce needles, and the sound was gone.

Wynn leaned forward.

"Francois!" he said. "Now he's following the old Indian trick of keeping behind the trees as he comes. Though why this secretiveness heaven knows. Hides by instinct I suppose. I ought to be able to see him about now—ah!"

CHAPTER II.

A HALF-BREED swung into view a short stone's throw from the shack. His head had for covering only his thick, shoulder-long hair; his lithe figure was clothed in a red sleeveless jersey and buck-skin trousers, squaw-made. He wore a belt beautifully beaded in a pattern and colours that might have come from ancient Egypt, and as a concession to social custom, there dangled from it a nickle-plated Waterbury watch, and a bunch of assorted keys fastened to a copper chain. Whence or why the keys, none might say.

The expression of his handsome Indian face, lighter in colour than many a Spaniard's, was sullen to the verge of unfriendliness.

"Ah, Francois!" said Wynn, nodding to him carelessly. "I heard you coming. You paddled across, did you not? It's surprising how far one can hear a paddle in this quiet."

(Continued on page 25.)