



LOST TRAIL

A TALE OF THE NORTHERN WOODS.

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"It is all the same with the woods as with the sea," said Maxime sleepily. "A man starts off from one post to another; they await him, and he comes not. Still they wait, and still he comes not. Perhaps they search, but it is very seldom they find. He comes no more for all their searching and waiting. He is gone—lost—foundered—no eye shall any more behold him. Is it not so, Lucien?"

Lucien awoke with a jerk. "It is, Maxime," he answered earnestly; "It is, monsieur. But mostly they are best split and cooked upon the hot coals." He blinked amiably from Elliot to Maxime.

"Bah," said the latter, "he sleeps again. He always sleeps and dreams of food. He should have been a waiter in a restaurant. Once I dined in a fine restaurant in Montreal, and the waiters were continually demanding food from those below." He scowled at Lucien. "We were speaking, not of food, but of loss," he continued sternly. "Lost ships, lost men, lost trails—those things seen and known, and then lost forever."

"But sometimes they return," suggested Lucien, making a great effort to catch up with the conversation.

"Imbecile! If they return they are not lost!" cried Maxime.

"But sometimes," said Elliot lazily, "sometimes the woods give up their dead, as we are told the sea shall do. Sometimes men are lost in them by their own purpose. Eh, Maxime?"

"It is true, M'sieur," said Maxime, nodding his head. "M'sieur might have been born and bred in the woods by his knowledge of them. Eh! yes! Sometimes the lost wish to remain lost. That is well said."

Elliot smiled. He knew just what was his own knowledge of the wilds as compared with Maxime's, but the flattery amused and pleased him none the less.

"Ah!" put in Lucien; "I also know something of that. Do you remember Antoine Sarrasin of Notre Dame de Saules?"

"I remember," replied Maxime thoughtfully, "but we were not keeping count of the fools, only of the unfortunates."

Elliot blinked at the firelight. "What of Antoine Sarrasin?" he asked.

"Why," returned Lucien, "he was, as Maxime says, a fool. He was in love with my cousin Gabrielle, who also lives at Notre Dame de Saules."

"That was nothing," explained Maxime. "We were all in love with her from the time she was a child."

"But Antoine was the worst," continued Lucien; "he adored her. And it is known now she loved him. But then she was very rude to him, and refused to marry him. So what must Antoine do but take to the woods, he and his dog."

"His mother was an Indian," put in the hawk-faced Maxime, complacently, "so it was natural."

"That was two years ago," went on Lucien, "and he is still in the woods. Jacques le Soldat saw him somewhere about here last year, in March. No one has seen him since. And Gabrielle is as thin as a leaf. She would run to him now if he lifted a finger—if he returns."

"And if he does not return?" asked Elliot.

"She will die, perhaps," said Lucien, "or perhaps she will marry someone else. Who knows?"

"It must be late," said Maxime. "The moon rises. It is better to sleep, m'sieur."

Elliot glanced dreamily around. "It is too beautiful to shut one's eyes on yet," he answered.

They had come upon the little valley in that soft hour that follows sundown in the north. And here Elliot had insisted upon camping, regardless of all hostile hosts of midges and mosquitoes. For a lovelier spot he had never found in all his wanderings. It was rather a depression in the ground than a valley—a depression in a southward sloping hillside, so sunny and sheltered that all growing things within it attained a large perfection.

Birches ringed it about, and a spring filled its lowest part with a still blue pool. Around the pool were willows, their long leaves pendant and motionless; and giant ferns, waist-high, delicate, snapping at a touch. In the pool, the frogs made their primeval music; and great moths hawked to and fro above its glimmering surface, shadows seen for an instant against the white reflections of the stars. It seemed a place apart from all the rest of the woods; exquisite, unsorrowing, untouched; as if but newly awake in the youth of the world, and still wondering at its own beauty.

On this beauty and this peace Elliot at length closed his eyes, and the guides slept near him. Once he roused a little; Lucien was upon his knees, his black eyes rolling wildly, declaring that something had come and sniffed his face. Then sleep again shut down upon Elliot, and he drifted through gentle dreams to a perfect dawn. He awoke with the song of a thrush in his ears, and upon him a happy sense of his surroundings. His first thought was to look and see if the valley was as exquisite by day as by evening. And first thing he saw was the black square of the log cabin, lifting a desolate roof-ridge beneath the silver leaves of the willows.

Maxime, busied about the coffee, jerked his head toward it when he saw Elliot was awake. "Some other found this place before us," he said, "and lived here for a time. No, we have not been near it, m'sieur." Elliot glanced up quickly at Maxime's tone. "I would not go near it in a hurry, I," continued the guide, with an indescribable gesture and inflection. "It is in my mind, m'sieur, that there is some shadow upon it."

"It looks dismal enough," confessed Elliot. "I didn't notice it last night. Did you?"

"No," put in Lucien quickly, "we did not. There were strange things abroad last night."

"Lucien thinks he felt something blow in his face," said Maxime in indulgent explanation.

"That is what I did feel," said Lucien stubbornly.

"Am I a child to be afraid of a wind or a leaf? I felt. Also, I saw. A great shape, gray, that ran through the bushes without noise. And my face was damp from its nose. A-a-ah!"

Elliot rolled from his blanket, laughing gently. But his eyes fell again upon the log cabin, and his laughter died. The black square of the building, the blacker dark of door and window, struck somehow a chill upon him. It seemed as if the cabin were some sad, watchful presence; a blot upon the delicate beauty of the day.

"I'm going exploring," he said curtly over his shoulder. The guides rose also and followed him; Lucien was muttering something under his breath—French prayers, perhaps, or Indian charms. "That cabane has the evil eye," said Maxime, and made the sign against it.

As they drew nearer to the cabin, its desolate appearance was increased. Under the wild growth before the door could be traced the outline of a garden plot. Some hand had bent a young willow growing before the door into a living arch that framed the black entrance in a wonder of green. Elliot's foot was on the sill; his astonished eyes caught the outline of a rough table, a stool, a barrel in a corner. Then Maxime's hand swung him back.

"Pardon, M'sieur," said the guide gravely. "I will go in first, if m'sieur permits."

M'sieur was obliged to permit, for Maxime's touch was firm, and Lucien hung to his other arm and dragged him back a yard or two. He spoke to Lucien, but that Frenchman answered only in a guttural tongue unknown to him. Maxime stepped toward the bunk in the darkest corner of the cabin, from which a few rags of blanket fluttered. Presently he came out again, dusting dry willow leaves from his hands.

"What did you push me back for?" asked Elliot rather indignantly.

"To see if he who owned the cabin was still at home," answered Maxime simply. "Men die of many things,