

MAD LAVEEN

By ROBERT WATSON

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NOTE: "You have read 'The Mad Laveen' in verse in my 'Mad Minstrel.' Now here is the story as I would write it in prose, written, I may say, after I wrote the one in verse."—(From letter from Mr. Watson when sending this story to the B.C.M.).

Ghosts! Well,—I don't know. Sitting in an easy chair, by a cosy fire, in the bright lights, with everything soothing and comforting, one might be inclined to say there aren't any; but out in the bush, among the tall firs and pines, with the yellow light of a full moon shining through the scudding clouds and throwing moving gleams and shadows, or reflecting a dull, silver radiance from the river, with the added weird cries and the unaccountable crackling noises of the forest, one may change ground a little and say, Well,—maybe there are. Every man is entitled to his own opinion. But when dealing with the subject of ghosts—real ghosts—a man cannot explain. The ghost never takes the trouble to, he just comes and goes, and that is all.

Perhaps you have never heard of Mad Laveen who lived for years at the head of the gulch there and passed out last year. It is true that he didn't cut much of a figure when alive, but his final going out was quite a spectacular affair.

Laveen was apparently a Russian; big, bearded and taciturn. No one in Kalamalka Valley knew just where he came from. He simply arrived one day, took up his abode in the old shack that sat on the top of Ghost Ravine, and he remained there for years, speaking to none, interesting himself in nobody, doing little or nothing outside of squeezing enough from the hills and the river to feed and clothe him, and that was not difficult.

Once a month, he would drop down to the settlement of Zore with an order, neatly written and in good English, for flour, tea, sugar and other plain necessities. He never passed the time of day even with old Hans Jacques the storekeeper. He would place his order on the counter, stand aside, pick up his bill when Hans made it out, pay over his money, push his purchases into a sack, sling the sack on his back and trudge out along the back lanes into the bush and home.

The mothers of the kiddies playing in the roadway used to call their offspring indoors when they heard Mad Laveen was in the village. And the children needed no second warning, for the name had become a synonym of bad, evil, devil; although why this should be, no one seemed to know, for Laveen kept his own council and, so far as common knowledge went, had harmed no one directly. But the very dogs pulled in their tails and cowered away at the sight of him. Something sinister seemed to invade the atmosphere at his approach. The settlers in and about Zore always took the high trail when passing Laveen's at the gulch, for they were afraid of him. Once, Sam Lethe's boy Roddy, had ventured down the low trail to the door of the shack. Laveen was not at home; Roddy admitted that, for he had seen him in the distance canoeing down the river; but Roddy had to hop home on one good leg that day, for a bullet splintered the other, although Roddy neither heard a shot nor could he admit that he was hit from the direction in which Laveen had been coming.

One day, in the dead of winter, when it was twenty-five below, Widow Fernie, in a kindly act of charity, had ventured to within a hundred yards of Laveen's place on the trail, and had laid a pot of warm soup, with a chicken in it, right in his way and just shortly before the time she thought Laveen would be coming home. At midnight, that same night, she was awakened by a crash of splintering glass and,

on jumping up, round her pot, with the soup and fowl frozen and untouched, had been crashed through her bedroom window.

It was little wonder the folks called him Mad Laveen, and less wonder still that no one cared to have anything to do with him any more than he cared for them.

If Laveen insisted on being alone, and living alone,—that was Laveen's business, and so long as he harmed no one he was entitled to live his own life.

But the less that is known of a person, the more is likely to be conjectured of his past history.

A stranger came into the village one day and mentioned that he had watched Laveen bathing himself by the river's edge. That statement alone created astonishment, for Laveen and water appeared to be as opposite in friendliness as the poles. But the stranger stated Laveen was bathing an open sore on his great back, which was criss-crossed from neck to waist in a latticework pattern of great, raised, blood-red weals. Then it got about that Laveen was a Russian refugee, possibly escaped from the horrors of the Siberian Mines, and that the dreaded gnout and Laveen had been on familiar terms on many occasions, so much so that poison had eaten into him and still kept his wounds open.

That he was devoutly religious in his own way, was also common talk.

Daring lads had come back from bush excursions in the Ravine with the tale that Laveen had a crucifix set up in a lonely place in the forest. On the top of the crucifix was the head of a mitred priest or saint. One boy, more venturesome than the others, had examined this closely when Laveen was absent. He said the head was made of wood, beautifully carved and ingrained with a delicate, human-like coloring, showing the face of a suffering Christ, with sad eyes that seemed to bear the burden of the sins of the world in them.

The lad in his bravado had intended tearing the thing down and bringing it in to the village as a trophy, but the sad eyes of the image had sent him home with the sacrilege undone.

But enough of the living Laveen. Sufficient is it, that he lived out his miserable hermit existence and shunned his fellow men.

I was Deputy Sheriff of the district at this time and in the Forestry Service as well. My jurisdiction took me over a large territory, and I had been absent from the little settlement of Zore for possibly three months, when I returned to set up a camp of a dozen men on some clearing that required to be done for observation work. I had no sooner got to town than I was assailed on every side with the same query: "Did you come across Laveen on your travels?"

"No!" I answered. "What's the bother? You folks seem suddenly to have developed a great interest in him."

"Well!—he hasn't been seen for over two months," old Hans Jacques ventured. "We ain't worryin', nor we ain't carin' much, only it's darned kind of queer."

"Hasn't anyone gone to see?" I asked. "The man might be sick and not able to get around. He might be dead."

"We ain't been to see, an, nobody's got a mind to take chances on a charge o' buchshot for being over-friendly."

It was a cold-blooded way of handling the case, but, after all, I could not blame the settlers. Laveen had brought on this attitude by his own behavior.

That night at camp I woke up several times and, as I looked down over the Kalamalka Valley, with the moon shining silver-like on the river away over beyond Ghost

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