

# A BACKWOODS DIPLOMAT

By LLOYD ROBERTS

NICTAUX CAMP was aglow with excitement. The reason was this: Boss MacKenzie's brother in Boston had lately died and he had sent for his niece to live with him at Back Ridge. A fortnight after she arrived her uncle took his gang into the lumber woods. Then his cook was clumsy enough to cut his foot with an axe, and his niece insisted on filling his place.

She arrived on a load of fodder, bundled up to the ears in blankets and great-coats. It happened to be the noon hour, when the men were at the camp. Her uncle helped her off the team and escorted her in. She nodded unconcernedly at the lumbermen, and gazed about the huge one-room building with frank curiosity.

One or two of those present had seen her before, and had spread tales of her beauty in glowing terms to their fellows. Her luxuriant dark hair, her full red lips, her little up-tilted nose had been matters of much discussion during the past few days, and she lived up to the picture most satisfactorily.

As she warmed her slim hands over the stove the whole camp filed up and were presented and her sweet manner won their immediate friendship.

Coming alone into a crowd of strangers, they had expected her to be shy and embarrassed. She was evidently the most self-possessed person there. To their awkward words of welcome she returned smart little pleasantries that made them blush self-consciously and feel like school-children before their teacher.

All but Jim MacTavish. He had a name of being afraid of nothing—not even woman. He stepped up, shook her hand firmly but gently, and welcomed her with a smile in his steady blue eyes. Then he moved away, but something about him had struck a little deeper than his comrades, and left a pleasant impression in the back of her little head.

The gang returned to the woods and left Miss Winnie to the shy mercies of "Shorty" Jones, the "cook-kee." With few words and many gestures he made her familiar with everything that concerned her art, from the pots and pans hanging on the nails behind the stove to the slabs of bacon and barrels of flour in the storehouse.

She put a red calico apron over her black dress, and realised many an expensive gown had become her less. When the men came in at sundown they found her with her plump arms bare to the elbow and white with the labour of bread making. Never before was so much soap and water used in the scrubbing of hands and faces, so much time taken in the combing and parting of dampened hair. Those who were lucky in the possession of clean handkerchiefs, tied them about their necks, in lieu of collars and ties. Swearing and boisterousness were sternly suppressed, and if anyone forgot for a moment that now there was a woman in the camp, he was reminded of his oversight in no gentle terms.

With the help of the industrious Shorty, she had a dinner ready that proved her value beyond dispute. The fare was the same as usual, but they swore that they had never tasted rolls quite so light, or coffee so fragrant, and the salt pork was as good as fresh meat.

Though she treated them all with courtesousness, it soon became evident that MacTavish was marked for her special attention. Most of her conversation was addressed to him, while the others ate on in a self-conscious silence that they could not shake off.

After the tins were cleared up she said good-night and retired to her little cabin. MacTavish picked up a lantern and escorted her to her door.

At the end of a week the men had altogether outgrown their shyness and everything moved on as quietly as before, if not exactly in the same lines.

Already, however, most of them realised they were hopelessly behind in the competition of trying to win a stronger position in her affections. MacTavish, in his quiet, confident way, was receiving all the favours and was giving his heart in exchange. That much was plain to the whole camp. They shrugged their shoulders good-naturedly and fell back.

Joe Garrett felt differently about it. He had much confidence in the effectiveness of his smooth tongue and black, Latin type of beauty. He could not believe that the unassuming MacTavish could stand up for long against his scheming. If any man in the camp could get this city girl he was the one to do it. So at every opportunity he was at her side with his offerings of help and his pretty compliments, and a scowl at his rival when he loomed between.

This went on a few days longer, and then Joe's conceit seemed justified. Jim had left the field

entirely to him. It happened in this way: MacTavish returned to the camp at the noon hour a few minutes ahead of the rest. MacKenzie was talking with his niece at the door as he came around the corner of the building. He had evidently been admonishing her about something and her last words of defence that he overheard showed only too plainly what it was.

"Of course I don't! I'm only playing with him," she was saying. Then MacTavish wheeled and retreated without discovery.

So that was her game, was it? He felt more anger than pain that she should have been using him for her amusement only, something to while away the time with. His love for her, which she couldn't have helped seeing, was nothing but food for her vanity. He remembered how she had flirted with her eyes and her lips and how easily it had caught him. He was as much of a child where women were concerned as the most inexperienced stripling there, though he hadn't thought so before.

He fell in with the men as they emerged from the woods and greeted the girl as light-heartedly as ever, when he entered the camp.

He ate his lunch abstractedly and before he was through decided on his course. He loved her too well to resign her without a struggle just because of his pride. He would force her to care for him as much in reality as she pretended to. He would win her by playing her own game better than she did it herself, if it took the whole winter to succeed. He knew that below the surface he was her equal in every way and that he had certain qualities that the men about him did not possess.

So, when the others went back to their chopping, he made an excuse to linger behind. In a few minutes Shorty went out to chop fire-wood, and they were left alone. He didn't beat about the bush.

"Miss Winnie, there's somethin' I want ter say to yer, please." She gave a start of surprise and went on with her dish-washing. His serious expression made her think that he was going to voice his feelings about her, and she was quite certain what they were. It was sooner than she expected, that was all. She nodded her head, and he continued:

"I detest flirts. I guess I hates them more'n anythin' else. Because I knows you're not one is the reason I'm speakin' so plain now." She looked puzzled. "Now, I couldn't help seein' that you sort of liked my society more'n the others—by the way yer'd look at me and all the rest of it—and I felt it wouldn't be treatin' yer square if I didn't speak out 'fore it went too far."

Her fingers dripped on the floor as she watched him, too amazed to interrupt.

"The truth is, Miss Winnie, though I think yer a mighty fine girl, none better perhaps, I ain't exactly in love with yer an' I don't rightly feel I ever will be. It's better yer knew it now than later, when yer might be pretty sore erbout it. Hopin' yer won't bear me no ill-will for speakin' out so blunt, and we'll always be the best of friends, I bid yer good-day." MacTavish slid out of the door before her wrath could shape itself into words and escaped to the friendly cover of the woods.

Though he had played his first move exceedingly well, he couldn't help feeling himself a hypocrite and a brute. Perhaps she would detest him for his words, only he hoped she would take it more as a joke after her anger had cooled down. Now it remained for him to live up to the part he had set for himself and let the future take care of itself.

Thus Joe Garrett became her devout cavalier, and was not even surprised that he had gained such an easy victory over his rival. Jim was completely ignored and strange to say did not seem to mind it.

Miss Winnie waited for some time for an opportunity to punish him for his audacity, but as he took care that she did not find it, she finally decided to be content with absolutely withdrawing the friendship that had been so misunderstood.

Though she gave most of her favours to Garrett, she hardly liked him. He was too forward in his attentions to please her. However, he made a good cloak under which to hide her wounded vanity, and womanlike ignored the injustice she was doing him.

As time went on the big lumberman's continued indifference piqued her interest more than she cared to admit. She noticed how the others looked up to him as a leader in all things. He was considered the best axeman in the camp, and could throw a peavie farther than MacKenzie himself, who was somewhat famed along the river for his strength. These things, and many others, impressed her deeply; but though he was as courteous as ever,

there were no signs on his part of a stronger feeling, such as he appeared to have had in the beginning. She could not know that night after night he would lie awake on the broad bunk among his fellows and wonder if she was absolutely indifferent to him and if she really cared for Garrett; and she saw no signs of the desperate struggle he underwent to keep from his eyes, when he looked at her, the great ache within his heart.

Two months of this went by, and both were still waiting for some sign from the other to show his or her hand. Then Joe Garrett made a mistake that opened both their eyes.

One morning as he drove his team from the stables past the camp, something prompted him to drop the lines and enter. He had noticed Shorty busy on the woodpile and knew the girl would be alone.

He made some gallant excuse at her look of surprise and commenced a string of ardent compliments that she parried mockingly. Suddenly he became exasperated at her manner and clutching her by both shoulders attempted to kiss her.

At that moment MacTavish entered. He did not wait for explanations. In two bounds he was across the floor. Seizing Garrett by his collar and the seat of his breeches, he jerked him violently backwards, whirled him round and ran him out of the door before he could offer resistance. As he released him his heavy foot shot out and Garrett sprawled forward into the snow.

He instantly went back to the girl, trembling with rage. She did not give him time to speak, but swamped his anger with the bitterness of her tongue.

"What business is it of yours, Mr. MacTavish, that you should interfere?" she flared, her face white and her eyes shining. "I can take care of myself without your help. You're a brute and a coward!" She clenched her little fists as if she meant to strike him. He was too dazed to remonstrate, or to try to explain, and she went on more calmly:

"I'll thank you to let my friends alone after this; and Mr. Garrett is my friend—which is more than I care to say about you."

A low chuckle made her turn her head quickly. Garrett was standing near them with an evil sneer on his lips, and an axe in his hands.

"I was thinkin' of splittin' his head fer 'im, Winnie," he explained, "but I reckon you're doin' up the skunk better than I could, eh?"

She realised how perilously near a tragedy they were, and instantly became calm. She went slowly over to Garrett and held out her hand.

"Give me the axe, please. There is no need of that." He gave it to her grudgingly, his hot temper being somewhat cooled over the downfall of his rival.

"Now, Mr. Garrett," she said coldly, "when you speak to me remember that I'm Miss; and if anyone is a skunk about here it is very apt to be yourself!" It was his turn to look amazed. Then he became furiously angry.

"Eh! So you *do* love that fellow, then?" he sneered.

"That's my business," she retorted. "I want nothing more to do with you! Kindly leave us alone." She was fighting to keep her self-control.

MacTavish had been listening stolidly. Now he seemed to wake up. "Can you take the hint, or will I have to fire you out again?" he growled, and stepped towards the other.

Garrett laughed insultingly, but did not wait for a demonstration of MacTavish's strength. He retreated through the door and left the two alone.

MacTavish turned to the girl. "Now, Miss Winnie, you asked me what right I had to protect you from insult. I'll tell you. It's because I love you!"

She flushed red. "Why, I thought you said you didn't love me and never could."

"I did; but that was because I overheard you tellin' your uncle you were only playin' with me and it made me mad. I've been pretendin' I didn't ever since, but now I'm clean sick of the game and don't care if you knows it or not. Do you hate me for them words?"

"No, Jim, I'm afraid I don't. I *was* only playing with you, but I guess I liked you better than I thought underneath. You treated me the way I deserved, and I'm pretty much ashamed of myself."

She went very close to him, her pretty face bent down. "Why," she murmured, "if you think you can overcome your aversion to flirts, why—why—" He put his arms strongly about her, and saved her the embarrassment of completing her sentence.