

# LOURDES

*A Fur-Post Love Story packed with Strong Character, Passion and Adventure*

By HERMAN WHITAKER

ILLUSTRATED BY R. E. JOHNSTONE

REINING his shaganappy ponies, Father Francis pointed his whip at twin spruces which formed the apex of a wooded cape that swept from the far forest out into a golden sea of prairie.

"There's the cause."

I had just commented on the fact that though we were travelling through a country rich and fat-soiled beyond imagination, and which abounded in teal, mallard, widgeon, prairie chicken, every sort of wild fowl; though deer fed in droves like cattle, knee-deep in the richest of pastures, and beaver, mink, otter, rarer fir animal splashed in the woodland lakes, all in the very heart of the Hudson Bay Company's vast domain, we had met neither trapper nor Indian nor seen a habitation since we left the Moose Post yesterday.

"Nor shall we," the priest said, as the ponies settled again to the tireless trot that eats up the miles. "Though it cuts twenty miles off the distance between La Passe and Churchill, the company's people give this trail a wide berth." Nodding at the spruces, he added: "It is twenty years since I was close to them. If you would like it—we have time?"

The deference was eminently characteristic, took out of the same courtesy which had led him to offer me, a Protestant and a stranger, passage in his buckboard from Fort Churchill—where I was resting after a long hunt for musk ox and caribou of the Barren Lands—to his own mission of La Passe.

And here I am tempted to wander into the story of Father Francis, the great priest who wages war against the devil in man throughout the length and breadth of a parish larger than an old-world kingdom. Returning, however, to the spruces, which we reached after five minutes of rough driving; originally some twelve feet apart, a century's growth had brought the stout trunks almost together. Below, the branches interlaced, but high above, where the tops swung again apart, I easily made out concentric rings of bark, at which the priest was pointing. Aware of the Cree custom of winter burial, I knew that long ago, in their green youth, they had been pulled down to cradle a dead man in his hammock of skins.

"Twenty years ago," Father Francis commented, "a fray of shaganappy fluttered up there in the wind, but I see that the bark has even covered the knot. Then, too, one could make out the outline of a double grave. The rain and gophers have wiped it out. Soon the trees themselves will go. Yet—what a wonderful thing is memory—when they and we shall have passed away, unborn generations, Indian and white, will still avoid this place. Let us drive on to the old fort."

A half mile's southing, parallel with the trail, brought us to it—all that was left, for what wind and weather had spared the prairie fires had taken. Fur houses, cabins, stockade, and stores, all were gone. Where the factor and clerk, trappers and traders once lived and loved, fought or chattered with the wild tribes that brought down the furry spoil of the far north, a dozen or so of old mud chimneys now uprose from rank grass growths, accentuating the loneliness of that lovely land by suggesting the hospitable fires that once blazed within their crumbled arches.

"A story here?" the priest repeated my question, driving on. "Surely, but if you will have patience until to-morrow, you shall have it from one who will tell it better than I."

Now, if ever face evidenced sensibility, sympathy, and humour in proportions that would insure a well-told story, it was surely his. It would have been hard to find better occasion—either then or when, that night, our fire twinkled, a wee red star under the enormous black vault above. It would have beguiled the long hours of travel next day. But even if our acquaintance had not been too recent for me to urge him, a certain finality, a touch of decision lurked in his smile. Moreover, what of his gossip of men and things as he had seen them during forty years in the Northland, time slid by unnoticed both then and the following day.

To tell the truth, I had forgotten the promised story when, next evening, he brought a sheepskin tome to me where I sat smoking before a great fire in the mission kitchen.

"The Abbe du Fre!" I exclaimed, after one glance at the close knit of delicate writing.

"You have heard of him?" And when I confessed to having made his acquaintance in the

records of St. Boniface, the good priest nodded. "Yes, they contain most of his writings—though he was no niggard. In the company's log books, our mission records, wherever in fact white paper and black ink occurred together, he was seized with the *furor scribendi*. He was a writer born, and though he would have scouted the very idea, some sneaking consciousness of the fact inheres in his elaborately apologetic prefaces. Had his lot been cast in Europe, where letters are not considered so scandalously idle, he would surely have made his mark. And now, as I have some matters to attend, you will please excuse me. I leave you in good company with the abbe and your pipe."

To that good fellowship he might have added the fire which leaped and crackled on the wide mud hearth warmly illumining the dark ceiling barks, the time-stained log walls. He did pause at the door to add: "It will increase your pleasure to know that not only was the story written here, but these old walls chambered its principal event."

And with this thought in the forefront of my mind I opened the book.

It was not my original intention to record the events here set down, the familiar preface ran, events which I had thought buried in the past until Israel, one of our hunters, burst in upon us as I sat at meat with Mr. Temple, the governor, who arrived at La Passe this evening. Pale from fright and utterly exhausted by a night and a day of hard running, he was just able to tell how, while stalking a moose that was feeding on the lush grass beneath the "Twin Spruces" north of the old Park Post, he had seen a man come out from the ruins; a tall man who staggered beneath the weight of the woman whom he bore on his shoulders. At that first glance Israel sensed something unusual, and when they passed him—so close that he could have touched them with his gun—some intuition of the truth held him still and silent; the intuition which developed into certainty when the moose continued to feed quietly, though the man passed it equally close on his way to the trees; the truth that, upon the instant, set his feet upon the fastest trail of his life. And I say "truth" in the face of Mr. Temple's skeptical suggestion that Israel had come upon some Cree carrying his dead squaw to the place of burial.

"Nonsense, father!" he laughed. "The rankest kind of nonsense. Why should one ghost pack round another when it could earn good money transporting my furs?" Withal which raillery, he was greatly impressed by the story, exclaiming at the end that I should deserve hanging or worse if I let it go unrecorded. Indeed, he took me by the shoulders and set me down to the writing, with orders to have it ready for his eye before he left next morning.

FOR the beginnings of it all I have to go back eight years in time, a few hundred miles in distance, to the occasion when I drove in to the Prairie Portage with Father Beaupre, then priest of that mission; and as I recall it, the day stands out for its preëminent beauty as much as for the fact that it marked my first glimpse of Lourdes. Late summer, a gentle breeze tempered the heat and sent brighter waves across the yellow prairies, so that we journeyed as through a golden sea all chased and fretted with shadows of the soft fleeces which sailed high in the blue above. To increase my enjoyment, while we rattled along in a big-wheeled Red River cart, the good priest poured into my ear a report so lengthy and encouraging, that we passed from the dead flat of the Garry prairies into the woodland country around the south end of Lake Manitoba without noticing the change.

"Sixteen Cree converts, half a score Sioux, ten girl communicants—" I remember his tale was at flood when, with dull clatter of unshod hoofs, a white girl child on an unbridled pony dashed out upon us from behind a poplar bluff.

"Lourdes! What does this mean?" the priest cried out angrily as the pony stopped of its own volition.

For the child was naked.

At the time I confess to a feeling of shocked confusion. But looking backward, the picture she made is the prettiest in a long life. Brown-eyed and delicately featured, her flesh, of a pure ivory white, shone whiter by contrast with masses of red-bronze hair that already fell to her waist. Though only twelve, her healthy development already promised

the luxury which, later, made such a stir in the forts; and as she sat her ragged pony staring us with wide dark eyes, the slim whiteness of her in outline against the dark green of a bluff, I could very well understand the old Greek passion for flesh.

"It is this son of a devil!" she answered, in voluble French. "You see, it is that he is so very dirty and requires the wash. But when I try to ride him into the lake, he shies like Jean, my brother, at the sight of soap, and being unbridled, turns and bolts." Digging small heels into the rough ribs, she added an emphatic: "Oh, wicked one!"

"He seems quiet enough now?" Father Beaupre doubted.

"Because he is well breathed. Now I shall go back for my clothes—extra labour for thee, sinful!" And turning the beast with a kick, delivered sideways upon one eye, she drove in her heels and flew off down the wind.

"And is she of the ten girl communicants?"

I was sorry for the dig when he replied with a groan: "I am rightly served for my boasting. She? Lourdes, daughter of the new factor, sent here, as it seems, to be a thorn in the side of my vanity."

After he had related a few of her pranks I could well believe it; an opinion which gained strength with the following years. Indeed, it became my habit to inquire first of Lourdes upon my annual visit; or did I omit it, the tale was at the tip of Father Beaupre's tongue—to be told with a smile or grimace according to his distance from its point. Once she had been captured in the ditch behind the stockade, where—having first stolen an altar cloth to drape the victim and lend verisimilitude to the ceremony—she was about to subject a cat to the *auto-da-fé* in imitation of the Virgin Martyrs.

Again, it was she who cut the rawhide thongs which bound the sled of that Presbyterian divine who came to this country in the train of Lord Selkirk, did it so cleverly that the poor gentleman was miles upon his road before he found himself sitting like a fallen prophet among the pieces.

Later, her tricks grew more intimate, usually bit deep on some one—as when she stole the watch of Donald, the Scotch clerk, from its nail in the store and gave it to a young Cree squaw, telling her that Donald's wife, who was notoriously jealous, would buy it for thrice its value in flour and bacon. Donald's beard grew grey over that prank, and while he was still explaining Lourdes shot up to her years. Leaving her one fall a lithe bare-legged lass who raced my ponies from the cross trails in to the mission without harm to her breathing, I returned next season to find her a woman.

And such a woman! The skirts, that had dropped so suddenly from her knees, fluttered above tiny moccasins which would have been a tight fit for my hand. Her carriage was something to see, head gracefully poised, with an uptilt of the round, firm chin, full torso curved in to the small waist, which swayed above fine hips with the easy flexures, perfect rhythms of youth. Already I have spoken of her whiteness that had the firm pure quality of ivory; in the midst of which imagine eyes that shone like young moons, all within the frame of her wonderful hair. I could well understand Father Beaupre's answer to my comment on her looks.

"Behold your thorn has developed a rose!"

"Ay, but it is still there—to prick the sharper for being hidden. Already she has sent one man to his grave, and when I am not busy shriving such of her lovers as are beyond my rough surgery, then I am listening to confessions of the sin of the eye from men whose penance might very well be left to their wives. There will be no peace till she is safely married to a strong man; for should she go to a weakling, the shrivings will increase, the confessions grow worse. However," he finished his grumble, "things point well. Gabriel, the Little, is after her, and as he always gets what he wants, he'll have her—sooner or later."

Concerning this Gabriel—whose nickname was one half jest—now needs a word. Really above medium height, he was very broad, deep-chested, and possessed that natural strength which is as wonderful as unexplainable; force pulsed through his tough muscles. On a long portage, I have seen him pack his four hundred pounds upstream knee-deep among slippery boulders. With one hand he could tie Gabriel, the Tall, his long, lean name-fellow, in a double knot, and even Mr. Fraser, of