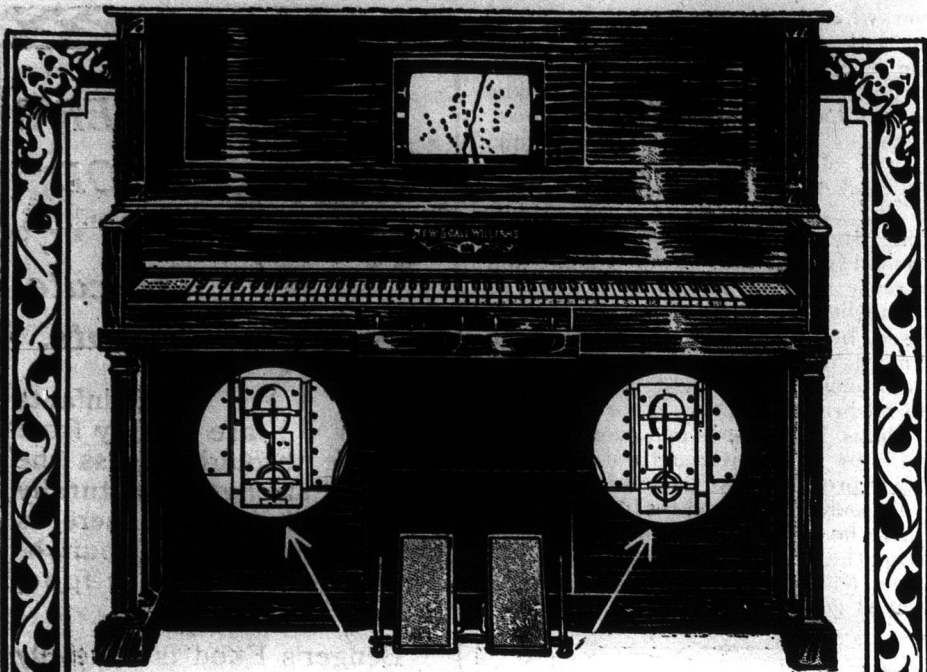




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The Duke

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten.

ALEC NORTON was certainly the laughing stock of everyone at Mattagami Landing. They called him the Duke. Why he went there, into the very heart of the North Ontario muskeg forests, straight from an English public school, goodness alone knew. Yet there he was—his face chewed out of all recognition by the mosquitos, his hands and feet blistered, tolerating his pains for two and one-half dollars a day, most of which went to the Chink laundryman for washing khakis.

Whenever the Duke passed through the settlement the old mining camp toughs grinned and nodded to one another. "Why does old Tom keep him on?" they would enquire. "He's too soft to earn his pay, and anyway it's cruelty to animals."

"Tom knows when he's got a man cheap," was the possible reply. "But he won't keep him for long, you see. That sort don't come into a country like this to stay."

The Duke did stay, however, working with pick and shovel in the trenches from sunrise to sunset. His boss, Tom Lawrence, was a tough old stick, and lived on his own claims in a dense patch of bush about half a mile from the Landing. He was a widower with one child—a boy of twelve, they called Billy.

Billy was as white a little white man as ever you saw, with the face of an angel and the heart of a warrior. He was of a very different breed from his father, and those who gave such matters any thought must have seen in Billy a type of character far removed from the sombre hue of his surroundings.

Billy and the Duke got on A1. The Duke—goodness knows when he found time—cleared a patch of bush near to the shanty, levelled it down, and here taught Billy to play cricket. Billy was a kindly little soul, and I fancy he looked upon the Duke as a sort of a god. Whenever Alec Norton appeared at the settlement Billy was in the canoe with him, till the boys took to enquiring whether the Duke enjoyed any extra pay in return for his duties as governess.

Then the row came. It was the beginning of July when some philanthropist returned from Montreal city with a consignment of hootch, which he distributed liberally up and down the settlement. Tom Lawrence got his share, then did what he always did on such occasions. He took more than was good for him, and started to knock the boy about. The result was that Tom Lawrence got a black eye and the Duke got fired.

Alec Norton had only one pal—a young English mining engineer called Ford, who lived at the settlement. The two had travelled north in the same coach. He went to Ford with his troubles.

"I wouldn't mind," he explained, "if it wasn't for Billy. He's the whitest little cuss I ever knew. Now I've got to clear out and leave him to that dad of his—"

Then suddenly the Duke buried his face in his hands and said no more. It's surprising how the flies and mining camp grub pull a fellow down who isn't used to them.

The Duke knocked about the city for a few days, but no one seemed disposed to find him work. "You'd best get away south and find a softer place," Ford advised. "It takes a fellow a year or two to get used to life up here, and you're about done up already. If you get typhoid you'll kick it, and besides—we're likely to be burnt out by forest fire any day."

The forest fire came before it was expected. It always does. One never expects a forest fire till it appears, and then it is usually too late to do anything.

That day—the eleventh of July—dawned as clear as crystal, save for the slight taint of smoke that had been in the air for weeks past. At about eleven o'clock it began to blow in short, savage gusts. By twelve it was blowing a sixty-mile hurricane.

Never was Mattagami Landing more thoroughly awakened. Everyone was car-

rying buckets of water, and damping down the surrounding bush. But soon it began to get darker and darker. Men collided with one another in the main avenue; dogs barked, women screamed, and children ran hither and thither searching for their parents. It was just as you would imagine the streets of London to be if the city were bombarded by artillery in the midst of a fog.

The fire must have been still ten miles distant when a man came running down the tote road from the bush, hatless and ragged, his face scratched with branches. "She's right behind us—travelling at the rate of an express train," was the report he brought. Then he asked if anyone had seen Tom Lawrence and Billy.

No one had. Those who knew Tom said that he'd stay behind and try to save his property; those who knew Billy said that the boy would stand by his father.

Panting and coughing the man who had come in from the bush groped his way to the main landing stage. In the gloom no one recognized him as the Duke. Swinging clouds of smoke filled the air, and in the distance could be heard a dull, persistent roar, like the roar of thunder.

As the Duke reached the main landing stage some of the men were pushing off a raft, on which crouched a terrified group of women and children. For a moment the smoke cleared, and the English public school boy saw that Billy's canoe wasn't there. He climbed into the one nearest to him, and was about to push off when someone clutched the gunwale.

"Where are you going, you all-fired idiot?" enquired that someone excitedly. It was Saphray, of the police.

"I'm going to lend old Tom Lawrence a hand," the Duke answered. "He's stopping behind to save his property."

"Save his—ant! Don't you be a blame goat. You stay right here. You won't stand a lame duck's chance away from the clearing."

The policeman clung tenaciously to the canoe. The Duke whipped round, and exposed a revolver hitherto concealed. "Let go, or by Jupiter I'll brain you!" he shouted. He had to shout to make himself heard. Then he plied his paddle, and the canoe vanished into the clouds of swinging blackness.

II

As soon as Tom Lawrence and Billy saw the fire coming they got to work at once with buckets of water, damping down the surrounding bush. They should have cleared out right away, but like many another close-fisted man Tom was prepared to risk his own life and that of his son in order to save his property.

When at length the Duke arrived at the clearing on which the hut stood, he knew that it was too late to escape by the river. Down it fanned a scorching draught like the blast from a furnace—a draught which had burnt his face, and raised ugly blisters on his naked arms. Through the air flew wisps of burning birchbark and lighted sparks, which stung like a swarm of hornets.

The Duke rolled out of the canoe into the water to saturate his smouldering clothes. Then he ascended the bank, and groped his way hot-footed towards the shanty. As he neared it he stumbled against a huddled heap crouching for shelter behind a rampike. He stooped and touched it—it was Billy!

"Gosh, I'm glad you've come," said the boy hoarsely. "Where's dad?"

"Don't know sonny. Come on quick."

He gripped the boy by the hand, and dragged him towards the river. "Get in. That's right. Take off your jacket and shield your face with it. Come on."

"Where? We'd best stay here in the water."

"No. Those cedars will burn like matchwood. Cedar stifles you. Come on—to the cricket pitch."

On they went—stumbling, groping from place to place. Their eyes burnt like fire. Black blisters showed around