AT BIG LOON POST

By George Van Schaick

Copyrighted

Author of "Hearth of the North," "Ishmael of Grand Lae," Etc., Etc.

Synopsis.

Boyer Curran, agent of the Hudson Bay Company's Big Loon Post, is about to start back there with supplies. He learns that Lorimer, an Englishman, and his assistant has just married Ameon, an Indian. He sees the death notice of Lorimer's wealthy uncle, and reads a letter just arrived for Lorimer that he has an interest in the will. Curran reasons that if Lorimer should die, the money would be his wife's, then he could marry her himself and get it.

CHAPTER II.

Curran's right-hand man is Mashkaugan, an escaped convict rescued by Curran. This is a hunchback of great strength and very superstitious. They both hate Lorimer.

"Let me see," he said, after he had added the date. "I have no doubt that this will is all right, though I don't know much about such things. But it must be witnessed, and if the witnesses should ever be needed they'll be hard to get at. I think I'd better ask every man here who can scratch his name, then they'll always be able to find some of them."

Among the Canadian voyageurs Clairay and half a dozen others were able to affix their signatures after a fashion. Mashkaugan bluntly said he could not write, which was untrue; but Curran affixed his name at the bottom of the page with a fine flourish.

"Looks like quite a document," he commented. "I don't expect any one will ever be able to go back on that. It looks copper-bottomed and riveted and clinched on the inside."

"I'm sure I hope so," declared Lorimer earnestly. "I think it will be better for you to keep it for her. She might not realize its importance."

"Just as you say. It's only a kind of a fool thing, anyway, and won't ever be needed," said Curran lightly.

"You keep it with the books," said Lorimer hurriedly. "I've wasted a good deal of time and ought to be on my way."

They hastened to the landing once more, where Lorimer had to shake hands and receive good wishes. Then the young man entered the canoe, taking the bow, and dipped his new spruce paddle in the stream.

Mashkaugan jumped in the stern, lithe as a great cat, lustily shaking one foot that had been in the water, for every drop and every grain of sand that lodges between the ribs increases weight on the portages. After a hard month's usage a canoe may increase ten pounds in weight or more.

Lorimer and Mashkaugan turned when they had reached the middle of the current and waved their caps.

Ameon remained on the bank even after the boat had disappeared around the point. Other Indian women came to her and spoke gentle words of sympathy—for they understood. She smiled at them without trusting herself to speak, and they noticed that her eyes were bright with tears that did not fall, so bravely did she hold them back.

The young wife returned to the post and began to gather up all of her clothing and blankets and other belongings and carried them to her father's tent. The old man's eyes glinted in approval.

Curran had been busy in the storeroom, which was separate from the dwelling, but returned in time to see Ameon carrying out the last armful.

"Wonder what she's up to?" he commented. "Looks as if she was robbing the house and taking everything out to that old rascal, her father."

He walked over to the tent and waited until Ameon came out again.

"Why didn't you get Cyprien to help you?" he asked.

"It was not much," she answered, looking straight into his eyes. "Only my blankets and my clothes for now I live in my father's tent until Yellow Hair, my husband, comes back to me."

"What do you want to do that for?" he asked sharply.

"Eshi lakala tutagants,' she replied softly in the words that signified it was the custom of her people.

"You know you can always have all the grub you want from the store," he said, trying to speak pleasantly. "I'll look after you all right. Come to me for anything you want."

"I know what I may take," she answered quietly. "Upaishiu has given me the full tale of what I may take."

Curran turned on his heels to conceal his vexation. Of course the girl would help herself without asking him. It really looked as if she had made up her mind from the very first to have nothing to do with him.

He knew where there was an old padlock that he might use. By locking up the storeroom she would be compelled to come to him for everything she needed. He searched for it, but had no sooner found the thing than he threw it aside. It would not do.

He was now in a wilderness where the greatest crime known to man is robbing a cache. Never, since Tshemuak Post had been established had anything ever been under lock and key; nothing, even to the value of a penny, had ever been stolen.

These Indians were yet quite ignorant of many of the ways of civilization, but Curran knew that in some matters they were just like children, and prone to anger which they would show by departing to other posts—even into Jame's Bay, for to such rovers one or two hundred miles, more or less, matters little.

Posts that had been very prosperous were deserted with remarkable suddenness, having been abandoned by trading Indians for causes that might appear absolutely futile. The mere statement by some buck that the white man was locking up his goods because he feared that some one was a thief might have sufficed to send them all away.

On every possible occasion Curran did his best to be as courteous as possible to the young woman; but for days at a time she seldom appeared, remaining within the tent—which he could not enter without invitation from the old man—or disappearing into the woods to snare rabbits or patridges, or gather herbs for sickness.

Often he came and sat with old Nimisauts on a big log that had been rolled close to the camp-fire before the tent, and asked the ancient chief to share his plug of tobacco, which was used and gravely returned. The old man was sparing of words. He gave brief answers to all questions, while his seamed face remained like a graven image.

As the days wore on the agent began to get nervous. At times he watched the river intently for some minutes as if he expected an arrival. For a week or two the trading had kept him busy, as new families came in, but finally they were all accounted for.

The long hagglings were someway shortened by his temper, which was none too good. He had some well-filled days when the brigade began to drag heavily for him.

"What do you know of the country of the Utguk, where Yellow Hair has gone?" he asked Nimissuts one day.

"I know it well, as thou dost," replied the old man. "One river of Nukumeshu has good country where there is fur, but the other two go into waste places where there is little game—where it is more easy to die than to live. But the white men surely know their own schemes best."

"I wonder if the old devil suspects anything?" Curran asked himself on his return to the post.

Then he went into his own room and diluted a little pure alcohol with water and drank alone.

CHAPTER V.

Foul Play.

After a few days, when the distress of parting with Ameou had lost some of its keenness, Lorimer began to obtain some enjoyment from his trip. It was a change from the routine of the post. There was the constant delight of seeing new places, of camping each night in a different spot, of the long days of paddling up rivers whose every winding revealed fresh beauties.

As they went on they quickly investigated tracks of game on the sand banks along the shore, for their abundance or scarcity was of importance.

But soon the taciturnity of his companion became tiresome. Hardly a word ever came from him except as a brief answer to questions. Lorimer took a keen interest in the folklore of the Indians.

He often tried to get information from Mashkaugan; but the mere mention of beliefs and superstitions of the savages caused the hunchback to withdraw further into his shell. It made the voyageur uneasy.

One day they reached a place known as the White Rapids, where the river dashed turbulently for several hundred yards before engulfing itself in the chasm of a granitic hill. Just beyond the canon it leaped fiercely into a foam-flecked pool where great rocks overhung the water.

"A fine place, this, for the windegos and other devils to gather and plan torments for the spirits of departed men," said Lorimer, standing on a shelf of rock, somewhat awed by the majesty and grandeur of the spectacle.

Mashkaugan actually shivered.

"One must not speak of such things in a place like this," he answered uneasily.

The young man looked at him in some surprise. It had become evident that the strain of white blood in the man had not prevented him from remaining under the influence of the superstition that prevails among northern Indians.

They hastened over the portage and resumed their journey. Lorimer was wise enough to allow Mashkaugan to decide every course of action. He was an experienced voyageur, quick and strong of body, with splendid ability to meet every one of the problems constantly presented by travel in the wilderness.

Lorimer, also of sturdy body, and possessed of a keen intelligence, had been quick to grasp all the essentials, but he recognized that in the woods the hunchback was his master.

Yet Mashkaugan never took advantage of this. He might advise, but always with a respectful question.

When approaching some perilous rapid the voyager would stand up in the canoe with perfect balance and rapidly scan the rough water.

"Think best to right. Inside big black rock," he might say. "What think?"

"Go ahead!" Lorimer would answer.

Then, through the swirl of the waters shooting in and out among hidden boulders over which great spuming waves arose, they would dash on and on, seeming to be on the verge of destruction. Presently the canoe would leap into deep water again and they would float, while the alders, birches and dark fire appeared to rush by them like things endowed with life.

At all times the stroke of the paddle astern was timed to a second or the drive of the iron-shod pole quickly averted impending disaster.

"Traveling with you is a liberal education," he once told the voyager after they had passed a particularly dangerous place.

But Mashkaugan only grunted, having failed perhaps to grasp the sense of the words, and paddled on with great driving strokes which he could keep up long after Lorimer's arms were aching.

"It would be hard going for a brigade," remarked Lorimer, at the boiling of a noontime kettle of tea.

"Indians come this way with pelts. Not so very bady," replied Maskaugan, shrugging his shoulders.

Finally they reached Numukesku Lake. It was like a small inland sea.

They were held at the outlet by the wind, as the waves were dangerous and the storm-blasts alternating with pelting squalls of rain could not be affronted.

It was their first day in idleness, for they had not rested on Sundays. They spent it in making needed repairs to their clothes. Toward nightfall, when the rain had ceased, they carefully attended to a few small leaks in the canoe, drying the bark with a cloth and birch rind, for the melted gum will not stick to a wet surface.

It proved to be a long day. The half-breed could hardly be made to talk, and Lorimer's thoughts reverted to Tshemuak Post and the woman who was waiting for him.

The desolation of the immense sheet of water, whose further shores were invisible, the sodden moisture of everything, the growing chilliness of damp bodies conspired to dull Lorimer's mind until he became conscious of a sense of distress.

From time to time, as he looked at his companion, he found Mashkaugan's eyes fixed upon him strangely; but whenever this happened Mashkaugan would look away, apparently unconcerned, and scan the raging waters of the lake through the opening of the tent.

But on the next day the sun was shining brightly again, and great fluffy clouds journeyed peacefully while the waters rippled pleasantly on the gravel of the shore.

They left the outlet and paddled up the northern shore of the lake. Toward evening they arrived at an encampment of Indians and remained with them for the night.

As they sat about the cheerful fires before the tents, Lorimer questioned the men carefully.

A tall youth showed surprise when Lorimer announced his intention of exploring the rivers, but the older ones merely nodded, saying nothing, for they believed that white men were apt to be foolish or else were ever searching for rocks and other things that were of no concern to sensible people.

Lorimer sought his tent and blankets early, but Mashkaugan remained up late with the Indians, who were only too glad to talk long to one who had just arrived.

"What is in the mind of the white man I know not," he said negligently in answer to some questions. "Neither do I care, for my time is paid and we have plenty of food with us."

"We do not like those other rivers," said a very old man, shaking his head. "Our Manitou Ilnos have told of evil things upon their waters."

Mashkaugan appeared to be startled at this information.

"There can be nothing that is worse than the White Rapids, he said.

"That also is a place that is accursed," answered the old man, who rose and went off to his tent.

"Huh! this only son, a fine lad, met his death in them," Mashkaugan was told by a youth. "After the waters swallowed him he was never seen again."

"This man Uapishiu, of the Yellow Hair, knows little of this country," said another Indian. "Curran, the man with the thin face, knows all about it. He has talked with us when we have been to Tshemuak. We told him that the river to the north is trapped out, being a good country, and he knows he gets all the fur. We also told him that the river to the east and the other beyond come from barren lands where there is little fur and the caribou pass in small numbers. No men live there—nothing but windegos and spirits of evil things."

"It is an order from the company," said Mashkaugan uneasily.

This was enough, for all men knew how powerful the company was. Did it not seem to be master of all lands and en—even of the beasts and fowls and fishes the whole world over?

But when the old man who had sought his tent discussed the matter with his wife he had many things to say.

"The company sends men to travel and look over the lands; but it never sends men unless some one has told them that a country is worth looking over. Curran must have told them. For some purpose of his own he lied. May the chief of all evil beings torment his spirit!"

"Uapishiu of the Yellow Hair is a good man," said the wife. "Perhaps Curran did not want him at the post, being afraid of him because there was ishkuteuapui (whisky, burning water) to be sold. It was this that caused the death of our only son last year, who, shouting loudly and upstanding, drove his canoe in the middle of the White Rapids.

The old people shook their heads many times, for the soreness of their great loss was still upon them. Presently the whole camp was asleep, save for a few lean dogs that prowled about the embers of the camp-fires searching for neglected morsels of food.

On the next morning the travelers started again. In the course of the next few days they met two more families. After speaking with them, Lorimer became more and more dissatisfied with the information he was getting.

"Of course, now I must go and look for myself," he cogitated. "One can never be altogether certain that these fellows are giving one straight talk. Yet I don't see how there can be any Indians living up the rivers to the east or these people would know about them. Of course they're always scared at the mention of tribes they're not acquainted with; but they don't even give me some cock-and-bull story about bad people living somewhere in that direction."

Five days were enough to explore the northern river. It proved to be fine ground, but it was all carefully trapped over until it ended in tiny streams issuing from great marshlands.

The first eastern river only took four days to explore. It soon proved to be utterly [illegible] navigation and Lorimer had to turn back.

The remaining stream, flowing into the lake not more than a mile from the inlet of the previous one, at first promised fair travel; but nowhere on the banks could they discover any trace of Indians.

After some days they came to a long canon walled in by cliffs of the great height, where the waters narrowed into a seething torrent, which made navigation impossible. They made a long, hard portage, but it only brought them onto a barren land where trees were dwarfed and great tracts of gray moss, edged by rank, sour grasses, extended beyond their vision.

For several days they progressed noting a few old tracks of caribou, although they saw none of the animals. Wild fowl were plentiful, and they shot some geese and ducks.

But soon Lorimer was compelled to acknowledge that the outlook was hopeless and they started back.

"It has been a wild goose chase for fair," Lorimer told Mashkaugan. "I tell, I'm bad enough to have seen all this country."

As they retraced their way the going was easier. The provisions were gradually diminishing, and the canoe rode lightly on the water, while the portages could be passed over more rapidly. They again took what seemed to be desperate chances in boiling rapids, but always went through them in safety.

They crossed the big lake again. It was a long journey. The frail craft could not be trusted far from land. Big squalls came up very suddenly and compelled them to follow the shore and cut across from point to point when the water was calm enough.

Finally they reached the outlet of the big lake. They were obliged to halt for one day while a gale abated. Lorimer felt more contented now than at any time since the beginning of the trip. Was he not going back to the cherished woman he had learned to love so dearly? The flood bore them so swiftly that in three hours they covered a ditance that had taken a long day on the upward trip.

Lorimer for some time had been conscious that Mashkaugan was watching him in a strange way. Over rapids and in dangerous places the halfbreed would hesitate at times, seeming to have lost some of his nerve.

One day, in camp, the hunchback had taken up Lorimer's gun ostensibly to clean it with a greasy rag, but when the young man changed to look at him he had an uncomfortable feeling that the Indian was staring at him strangely and that some queer notion possessed his mind.

Mashkaugan put the gun aside quite suddenly and busied himself with the making of batter for flapjacks.

It was on the day after this that they reached the great White Rapids again. They shot a part of it at tremendous speed, but stopped in a bit of dead water above the place where the narrowing river seemed to rest for an instant before it entered the chasm and took a thirty-foot leap into the turmoil below.

Here they landed on a great, flat rock and unloaded. Mashkaugan found a small leak in the canoe and built a tiny fire to heat some gum.

When everything was ready Mashkaugan lit his pipe. His hands were somewhat unsteady. Lorimer made up his pack, which consisted of his own war-bag and a partly filled fifty-pound bag of flour.

"Leave that behind," grunted Mashkaugan. "I come back for it."

But Lorimer had already swung the load to his forehead.

"I can easily take that across," he said. "The going is good enough, and you have plenty to carry."

He looked about to see that nothing was left behind, and noted that a little flour had been spilled on the rocks. He put his load down to investigate. There was a small hole in the bag.

From his own pack he took a spare bag of waterproof canvas and transferred the flour to it, tying up the neck with strong cord.

"Better leave that flour," Mashkaugan said again.

The half-breed, while always willing to do far more than his share of the work without the slightest complaint, had never before objected to Lorimer's packing all he wanted to carry. This insistence seemed strange to the young man; but the half-breed was a queer chap, anyway.

Without paying further attention Lorimer started off, closely followed by Mashkaugan, who was carrying the canoe.

Their way was over some loose rocks and small boulders until they clambered up to a rather narrow ledge which gave secure footing to a steady man.

Below them, to the right, the water was swirling into the chasm, rising in angry waves that seemed to explode in the air as if some magic force blasted them to pieces. The thunderous roar drowned all other sounds.

At length they came to a place where the path was very narrow and where a long step had to be taken across a cleft that had split the huge rock.

The hunchback, with glaring eyes, watched his chance. He was very close to Lorimer, who was stepping cautiously, yet without the slightest idea of danger.

For a second before taking the long stride, Lorimer stopped to assure himself of his balance.

At this moment, just as he began to move, the point of the canoe that was born on the great shoulders of the half-breed touched his left side very lightly, yet hard enough to push him slightly to the right.

Lorimer staggered and clutched at the air helplessly. With a cry that was unheard he pitched down thirty feet into the caldron beneath.

Mashkaugan stepped back quickly and laid the canoe on the rocky shelf.

Then he hurried forward and glared into the foaming waters.

For a moment he saw a ghastly, distorted face struggling in the flood; then a body helplessly rolled between rocky spurs.

But now there remained no trace of any man; yet the half-breed searched the foot of the cliffs with eager, staring eyes, and peered through the sudding foam at the bottom of the fall, over the frothy black waters of the pool, and along the rugged sides that were deeply worn by uncounted ages of whirling flood and grinding ice.

He did not see the slightest sign of Lorimer!

Mashkaugan then sat down and with trembling hands tried to cut tobacco for his pipe. But he put it in his pocket again and passed his sleeve over his forehead, streaming with sweat.

He shivered like one with some malignant ague. He did not remain in that spot, for suddenly it seemed to him as if out of the roar of the crashing water there burst forth voices that were calling him a murderer and swore vengeance everlasting upon him!

In a frenzy of haste he carried the canoe to the end of the portage. Dreading the sight of the raging waters, he took a long detour over the cliffs for the remainder of his load, and traversed the same way, clambering with catlike ease over some awful going.

Yet when he came to a place where the walking was easy he began to stagger like a drunken man.

He put the canoe back in the water and loaded it in desperate haste. After he entered it the swift current bore him very fast, yet his long, sinewy arms plied the paddle as fiercely as if some gruesome thing were following him.

As he went on he scanned the surface of the water, fearing to see an awful, upturned white face that might reproach him and hover above his canoe while he journeyed.

Until after sundown he drove the canoe with utter recklessness into the middle of boiling waters, yet always emerging safely; but in the long dead waters there was no excitement. The wind had fallen, and the stillness of the dark forest seemed to penetrate his soul with terror.

It was so late and dark when he stopped that he was unable to pick out a fair camping-place.

He lighted a tiny fire on poor ground full of roots and stones and boiled his tea; but when he tried to eat, the morsels seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth. The scalding drink alone was grateful.

He did not try to put up his tent—merely rolling himself in his blankets; but sleep would not come.

His evil deeds had hitherto been limited to various pilferings and the breaking of laws which he considered unjust. The promises and the threats of Curran, and the diablerie he had for Lorimer, made him a ready tool in the hands of the chief agent.

But now that the deed was done, he suffered with agonizing fear. The consciousness he finally lost was replaced by visions in which he saw the foul fiends of the Indians and the evil spirits of the whites leagued together against him in an appalling array of grinning, monstrous faces.

CHAPTER VI.

Two Arrivals.

For a good many weeks nothing of any importance occurred at Tshemuak Post. The Indians who were summering there idled away a good part of their time; only winter could give them profitable work.

The women, of course, kept busy making and mending garments and footwear. They repaired nets that would be used later on, when the whitefish began to run toward their spawning beds. Some of them made beadwork, which the company would buy. But the men were idle.

July, which the Indians call "Month of moulting," and August, "Month when caribou horns shed their velvet," had gone by. Ameon began to look forward eagerly to the return of her man, Uapishiu of the Yellow Hair. She left her tent frequently in order to sit on the bank of the river and watch the lower reaches, whence he would come hastening toward her.

Always in her hands were tiny shirts of buckskin broidered with porcupine quills and beads, and little caps and moccasins so small that they seemed to be fashioned to fit the thumb of a man.

At dusk, when she could no longer see far, she would return to the dwelling of the old chief, her father, and lie down to sleep restlessly; for she often had uneasy dreams.

Then came a day when the old women of the camp gathered about her, crooning words intended to propitiate the spirits of evil, and the light of happiness came to the face of Ameou.

"Indeed, I am glad now that Yellow Hair has not yet returned," she told the wife of Nimissuts. "He will be spared any sorrow for me, and on the day of his coming back there will be nothing but happiness for him!"

The old women chanted again in low voices while Ameou waited, strong in body and yet stronger in faith and hope.

Curran left the post next morning after grumbling about the food served him by old Anne.

"When that girl is my wife I'll get some grub fit to eat!" he told himself.

Chief Nimissuts was walking among the tents clad in his finest raiment and strutting proudly, like one who has accomplished a praiseworthy deed.

"What feast day art thou celebrating?" asked the chief agent mockingly.

"This is the day of the feast of the birth of the son of Lorimer Yellow Hair," answered the old fellow. "Indeed, it is a son, strong and lusty, according to the old women. The down upon his head is of golden color. He sleeps not as does my daughter. Never have I seen a child more sturdy in limb. Doubtless he will grow to be as I was during the days of my youth, when I bore two bags of flour and a three fathom canoe over Long Portage without resting and returned for another load.

"Art thou not afraid to boast so much, old man," asked Curran wickedly, "lest the evil spirits overhear thee and play their pranks upon thee or upon the child?"

The chief looked scared. He believed in this sort of thing.

"Indeed, I was not boasting as to the little one," he said. "I repeated that which the old women told me, and spoke only of things I once could do and never will be able to do again. A man may surely be glad to have seen the son of his own daughter, who is a stronger bond between her and Yellow Hair.

Nevertheless, the old man returned to his tent and donned his old clothes. The rest of the day he moved in a manner that was quite subdued.

But Curran returned to the post and thought deeply, biting at the stem of his empty pipe as if his strong jaws were eager to destroy something.

"The will is in my own hands," he said; "but if—if anything has happened to Lorimer, this child is now the heir, will or no will! I suppose that a court would appoint guardians for him, so that I might not have the handling of much of the money, even if I married Ameon. Now to get rid of the brat!"

He had already thought much about this complication in his original plan. One crime that he had planned was by this time probably carried out. Another would have to follow.

Curran took his gun and went into the woods toward the Long Barrens, where, at this season, one might chance to come across a caribou. He only managed to miss an easy shot at a young stag, and returned in a dark mood as restless as ever.

Father Gregoire, the missionary, who intended to winter in the North that year, arrived next morning.

"I have a letter for you and a couple for Lorimer," he said. "They were glad at Big Rat to have a chance of sending them on by me."

Curran only obtained them after the old man had conducted a long search through his pack. The agent stood by him so anxious that he dug his finger nails into the palms of his hands. The venerable priest made his way to the tent of Nimissuts, rejoicing at the opportunity of adding to his fold.

But Curran rushed into the post and shut himself in his room. His own letter bore the name of a firm of lawyers in Quebec. He opened it with fingers that shook with excitement. As he read it his eyes glistened with an evil light:

Dear Sir:

Pursuant to your instructions we have caused a search to be made of the will of the late Sir John Conway Lorimer, of which a true copy is herewith inclosed. You will see that by its terms a number of charitable bequests are made, the balance of the estate being left to a relative—one Lawrence Alston Lorimer. This balance is estimated at a value of seventy thousand pounds sterling.

Awaiting your further commands,

Very faithfully yours,

O'MEAGHER, MACDONALD & QUINCEY.

"That makes three hundred and fifty thousand dollars!" Curran muttered between his teeth. "And this infernal little half-breed whelp is in my way! That's got to be attended to! Why doesn't that Mashkaugan get back?"

To Be Continued.

Western Travel Heavy.

According to reports to the various railroads with headquarters at Chicago, passenger traffic to Pacific coast points is very heavy, most of the passengers traveling first-class.

Eggs Are Being Exported.

On her last trip to London the American liner New York carried 36,000 dozen eggs, the first shipment of eggs since the war began. The eggs cost 25 cents a dozen in New York and were ordered by cable from London.

THE NEW BIRD STORE
at 218 Third Ave., corner Michigan Ave., Detroit, Mich., sells, buys and exchanges everything in Birds, Dogs and Pets. Circulars upon request. When in Detroit pay us a visit.

DAISY FLY KILLER

Placed anywhere, stays all kinds of flies. Neat, clean, ornamental, convenient, cheap. Lasts all season. Made of metal, can't spill or tip over; will not soil or injure anything. Guaranteed effective. Sold by dealers, or 5 sent by express prepaid for $1.
HAROLD SOMERS, 150 DeKalb Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

CASTORIA
For Infants and Children
In Use For Over 30 Years
Always bears the Signature of Chas. H. Fletcher