

AT BIG LOON POST

By George Van Schaick

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

Synopsis.

Joy Curran, agent of the Hudson's Bay Company's Big Loon Post, is sent back there with some men to learn that Lorimer, an Englishman, and his assistant have just married Amoué, 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 the printer who has the name of his wife's, then he could marry her himself and get it.

Curran sends Lorimer and Mashkaugan on an exploring trip and the Indian pushes Lorimer into the rapids and leaves him for dead. During his absence Lorimer's son is born.

Mashkaugan comes back with news of Lorimer's death.

But the white man is not dead. With much difficulty he makes his way back, and just before reaching the camp of Atuk, an Indian, he finds a white baby left alone in the woods.

Curran meanwhile has schemed to have Scarface, an Indian, play a trick on Amoué by taking her baby into the woods and leaving him for Curran to bring back.

Immediately after the discovery of her loss, Amoué starts in her canoe to look for the child. The frightened and repentant Mashkaugan accompanies her. They find the place where the baby was left, but he is gone now. The superstitious guide is frightened away by the sight of Lorimer.

Mashkaugan goes back alone to find the baby and is rescued from drowning by Lorimer. The Indian takes care of them both, and the baby:

They deem that there was no very good reason for that. There was no reason for that. There was no reason for that. There was no reason for that.

After this meal Lorimer felt much better. He was coughing a good deal, and there was some pain in his chest; but he was young and strong, and with an ability to recuperate rapidly.

He told of his decision not to return that afternoon. He was sure that it was wise for the weather was spoiling and a good night's rest would help him.

The baby began to cry. Lorimer went into the tent and with infinite precaution took the little thing in his arms. A strange thrill of pleasure ran through him as he rocked the child clumsily, yet in a manner that brought it peace.

Atuk's wife, when she raised the child, smiled broadly when she beheld this sight. Never would she have believed that she would have an Indian man have dandled a baby; but white men were not so common here, and the sight of the father with his little one pleased her.

"It is time the wash should be fed to his eyes," she said. "See how he moves his arms and feet. A hungry, lusty feeder he is, and must surely grow strong." She held the baby in her arms, and he moved and tumbled. She would lean upon his shoulder when the year, become manly.

Now the black clouds came fast and the storm is very near, and it will be best for thee to move about, shaking the stiffness from thy limbs before the gale arrives.

Lorimer left the tent, entrusting his son to Atuk's wife. It was wonderful how fond and rest were to the baby. He thought his head was aching, but he had not it. He had not it. He had not it.

He needed not follow the river now, but could cross at any time. His journey nearly as fast as a man in a canoe.

This was a country in which he had often hunted and fished. What delight there would have been in his remaining strength if only he could have been rushing toward the post, glorying in the prospect of meeting the open arms of Amoué, who would have thought he would never again shrink to his breast.

Lorimer did his utmost to shake off these thoughts, while only partially successful, the effort did him good.

He went down to the shore where Atuk had raised scaffolds for the drying of the fish. He stood on the shingly beach that was between water and beach, and watched the coming storm. The wind was blowing in great gusts, bending the tops of trees toward the south and driving the water of the lake before it.

Atuk crouched near him, busily mending a muskrat pelt that had fallen from the whitefish and caught in the net. He was mending a muskrat pelt that had fallen from the whitefish and caught in the net.

It is a great storm," he said loudly. "It is one such as tells of the snow coming soon. After this not a leaf will remain on the aspens and birches. The snows have been strong houses this year, and the bears have not much young pup for food. The fur is thick already. I want a marten and two muskrats. I will work that have good points. It will be a long, cold winter."

Lorimer stood beside a large tree whose trunk somewhat shielded him from the gale. Atuk left him, carrying the marten up to the tent.

would be with her. She thought that the storm might have obtained some information of the child. She hurried her old father, so eager was she to hear the news.

Curran bade her enter, assuming that she had really expressed that he had the occasion. He offered Amoué a chair and placed tobacco within reach of the man. "I am glad to find that all this seeking has been for nothing," he said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "You are all going away against my wishes. I am writing you to want to say that Amoué should take anything she wants that belongs to Lorimer."

"Any of his things she shall have," he said. "I will take away with her, she can place in empty boxes from the storeroom. They shall be kept safely for her. There is nothing here which the people who really own this property could object to her taking. They would object to them to be taken away from a great water."

He spoke in Montagnais slowly, watching the two Indians as if they might watch the fledgling brood of a partridge.

"The men of the brigade who have gone away," said Chief Nimsissuta, "told us that everything that belonged to Yellow Hair is now my daughter's."

The old man was looking at Curran as if he had been quick to discern some strange meaning in the man's words. But the young woman had sunk dully in her own thoughts, and was not so much as to import to her what had met with her loss.

"Ah, the paper!" exclaimed Curran. "True, there is such a paper. I will sell to you, but I fear such a paper is not of any good. It must be worthless, because it is the custom of our white people to take a man. When there are two the second can have nothing when the man dies, for the second is not really his."

Amoué sprang up, with eyes flashed and limbs trembling with excitement. She walked close to Curran.

"I am Amoué," she said. "I am the one who was the wife of Yellow Hair—and the only one. He never told me any tale of another woman of his, and many times told me I was the only one he ever loved."

Curran looked at her, shaking his head in pitying fashion.

"Alas! men will say such things," he said. "The love of a man is a tale that has been told times in greater number than the stars in the sky. I have seen such things to an innocent maiden. But you, too, look as if you did not believe me."

The young woman wept, and he hugged her. "If the last great treasure had been taken away from her—her husband's goods, truth, and honesty—and she had made him the only man in the world to her."

The very teaching he had imparted to her on that happy evening, she would never have been directed to showing her, simply and in few words, the higher ideals that move the conduct of a noble man.

"I won't believe it," she suddenly said. "I will believe it, but only if you can show me these things, and they sound false!"

She was standing before him like some girl created at bay, with flashing eyes his own could scarcely meet.

"Did Lorimer ever show thee the map in that little box?" asked Curran cautiously.

"No," answered Amoué. "He said they were things that did not matter."

"Didst thou never seek to read them after he went away?"

"I am the daughter of a chief," she answered proudly. "I am the woman who belonged to what she thought was a man. Would I have prided into things of his that he did not bid me look at?"

The young woman, erect and with head thrown back, was a model of womanly dignity. Curran looked at her with respect, and marveled at her spirit.

He would surely marry her and be happy. Her picture came that proud beauty would be his at no distant date, he swore to himself.

"Here is a letter," he answered after a moment. "If you seek to read after a moment, you shall see a true woman, and it was an evil day that took thee to wife. But look now at these written words that have come from another land where a woman knew. Thou hast learned to read, and thyself. Sit down here again—in the light. The words, telling all, begin here."

"Reading hands she took the paper he had placed before her and spelled out the words slowly:

Please come back soon from those dreadful places. You are my dear wife. The baby sends you a thousand kisses.

to the woman to the white people. What would I have cared for their ways in this country, where none could except those who are ever eager to go."

Had he told me the truth it would not have mattered, for I knew nothing and deemed that manly. I was of the country and would live in and the woman he would love. But why did he tell me these other things and show me the things he called goodness, only to let me find that he had none of it and deemed me a thing that ought to be put to rest."

"Other white men are not as he," said Curran loftily. "I could have loved thee truly. Nay, I love thee now. I have done so for me."

Amoué looked at him, but she was not so much as to import to her what had met with her loss.

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we have shared in the waste places. It can even find it in my heart to forgive thee for leaving so soon. Hadst thou waited a short time to whether it was truly dead, it would have been spared a terrible journey home."

"Yes, rise, you big fool!" echoed the Nascapue. "The dead one who came to life, and the pair of you, each in his time, have thought to take the last gulp of air. Hadst thou waited a short time to whether it was truly dead, it would have been spared a terrible journey home."

"I do not," replied the younger woman. "Who is there that can tell me this because I have sinned against the spirit of my husband who is dead."

"We can only bow down and let the storm pass by," said the other. "Be patient, Amoué, for there always comes an end to storms and tears. Bizzards may come and freeze the marrow in men's bones, yet are ever followed by sunlight so bright over the snows that it hurts eyes that are unaccustomed."

"In a few hours the clouds passed and the sale died down while a myriad of stars were shining in the heavens."

Amoué, who could not sleep, crawled out of the tent and sat by the embers of the fire on which the evening meal had been prepared. She remained there for some time, trying to penetrate mysteries which minds better trained than hers have never been able to solve.

The condition of the trembling hunchback was pitiful. His mirrored strange agony. The laughing Indians became sobered. They could not understand and felt that they stood before some gruesome mystery, which frightened them.

"What in the world is the matter with thee, Mashkaugan? Hasst thou lost, putting one hand on the shoulder of another? Indeed, I am glad to see thee. What I said just now meant for bitter reproaches. Thy silly fear overcame thee at that time—that is all. Now, I forgive thee most willingly. Thou must now relax thy mind and grow stronger, thanks to these good people."

Lorimer's looks belied what he said about becoming stronger. He looked very weak and exhausted, but he seized Mashkaugan's hand within his own, and in a few moments was smiling frankly and trying to be kinder than he ever had been before.

"Everything was known to thee," gasped the hunchback, "thy hand would never seek mine. I am less accused than I thought, for I am not a murderer. The penalty meted out to unforgivable sin."

Lorimer looked at him in utter surprise. These words were beyond his comprehension.

"The man is crazed yet," ventured Atuk's wife. "There is no stone of the beach, although it bears no mark. Yet some strange folly must have entered it to make him go on as he does. It has not left him yet, and still suffers from a disease that has changed the working of his brain."

The sturdy woman hastened to the beach. She found her husband vigorously rubbing the hunchback, who sat weeping at the sides of his lanky father.

The Nascapue's voice was contenting poorly with the accent of the red-eyed partridge, he was shouting to him. "I am glad to see thee, Mashkaugan. It is a great man in a canoe in all these parts. It must be that the widegood goes possession of thee to make thee put a stick in the water when ever muak, the foolish, hooting loon, would hardly trust himself to the waves. A fine canoe must be ready to get my youngest lad, who only begins to stand upon his feet, to teach thee better."

The Indian was properly indignant for the lake was not a large one and the storm had given plenty of warning. That which galled him most now was in bad plight again, after so much had been done to bring him back to his former strength.

"It must have been a vision of the spirit of the dead man that came to me. How did I get so far ashore?"

"It was no grasp of death," shouted Atuk, "but the saving hold of a good man. Truly, the water he is the path to the tent, where there is a fire. One moment! Take hold of my hand, and the strength of the storm of water!"

"Give thanks—there are few here to hail Mashkaugan, the great canoe man, who knows no when to stand and move on. Thy face is blue with the cold and hot tea may be the saving of thee."

Atuk's wife was wrestling with the canoe which had come ashore full of water. She dragged it up to safety. A few minutes more and the canoe would have wrecked it beyond repair.

She pulled it up after a cursing and then took her seat in the canoe and belonging to the day's work. Then she rushed up to the tent where her husband, staring widely at Mashkaugan,

The hunchback was kneeling in front of Lorimer, who was wrapped up in a great red canoe blanket, and whose face also expressed amazement.

Then Atuk and his wife burst out laughing. "The two present are an unusual spectacle, and one that might well have excited the mirth of any folk."

A couple of young children stood in a corner of the tent, greedily sucking their thumbs, while their beady eyes gleamed with the unworldly excitement of the scene.

"Rise, I tell you, Mashkaugan!" Lorimer said to the man before him. "I am glad to see thee. What I said last time meant for bitter reproaches. Thy silly fear overcame thee at that time—that is all. Now, I forgive thee most willingly. Thou must now relax thy mind and grow stronger, thanks to these good people."

Lorimer said to the man before him. "I am glad to see thee. What I said last time meant for bitter reproaches. Thy silly fear overcame thee at that time—that is all. Now, I forgive thee most willingly. Thou must now relax thy mind and grow stronger, thanks to these good people."

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