

AT BIG LOOP POST

By George Van Schaick

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Author of "Heart of the North," "Ishmael of the Grand Lac," Etc., Etc.

Synopsis.

Boyer Curran, agent of the Hudson Bay Company's Big Loop Post, is about to start back with supplies. He learns that Lorimer, an Englishman, and his assistant, a just married Amos, an Indian, have seen 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.

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 off Amos by taking her baby into the woods and leaving him for Curran to bring back.

Immediately after the discovery of her loss, Amos starts in her canoe to look for the child. The child, the 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 get the baby and is rescued from drowning by Lorimer. The Indians take care of them both, and the baby.

"No! Do not cry! In silence must thou come! There is one who do not want to see thee, and we depart. We will start at once, for I can travel but slowly, having my mother's arm." "I will have a moment's rest, for I am nearly done," said "My two lads are here," said "Father Gregoire. I will call them at once and we will start in the canoe. I can paddle, also," they were afloat on the now placid river, paddling down the scintillating path of moon-rays.

For a time Mashkaugan rested quietly, like one who knows he has done all that can be asked of the flesh of a man, but after a while he felt strong again and once more took up his broad paddle.

Amos was kneeling in the bow, with the precious little bundle of human life before her, comfortably ensconced in the narrowing point. She also, was paddling with magnificent sweep of her arms, and behind her the missionary, the hunchback, and the two men followed her stroke.

The canoe dashed ahead so fast that the thwarts groaned against the long bindings of spruce root, and the cedar ribs cracked and the birch-bark complained. The breaths of the strong men began to come out in sobbing grunts, as when men smites with all his force with a nine-pound ax.

Thus they heard nothing of the splashing of muskrat or of the whisperings of the gentle breeze through the reeds of the dead waters. The rapids were easy, and the craft flew upon them as if the affluents river was reached, and the paddles struck the calmer water as with one blow.

At the outlet they were compelled to slow down for a moment. At that point the river curved sharply and the canoe grated for a second on the sand until it passed on to deeper water.

"A journey to be remembered," whispered one of the priest's men. "We have traveled through the water as Uapishki, the wild goose, wings her way through the sky." They had reached the place of Atuk's fishing-camp, and ran into the beach between the long jutting rocks.

Leaping out, the men dragged the canoe ashore, and Amos jumped out with her baby and followed Mashkaugan to the tent that was concealed among the trees.

"We will wait here," said Father Gregoire. "Too many mourners have been in sorrow, too many witnesses also in happiness. We will pray here that the sick man may become well again, and then ye will go up and see whether I can do anything for this man who is so ill. Get me the little box of medicines from my pack."

In the meanwhile Amos had entered the tent where a man was tossing upon blankets resting on balsam-boughs.

To the young wife neither the long hair nor the straggling beard, nor the face that was so worn and suffering, mattered a whit. She bent over and kissed them tenderly and reverently.

"Amos! Amos! My wife!" cried Lorimer without looking at her.

"I am here," she said softly. Then his eyes opened and he looked at her blissfully.

"I had—such evil dreams—thou wert being taken away—away from me," he whispered hoarsely.

"I am with thee now—never to leave thee," she answered.

Lorimer smiled at her, and his

head fell back contentedly in peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XV.

Reaping the Whirlwind.

Quite late that evening Curran was turning over the pages of an old magazine. He was very restless. Finally he buried the book under a pile of papers across the room. This was unusual, for the slightest printed word is of the greatest value in the far west, being commonly treated with the greatest respect.

"I wonder what that old sky-pilot is doing with himself? He has been long ago. Likely he's found some Indian kid with a stomachache and is sitting up with him."

He consulted his watch—the only one within a radius of some hundreds of miles.

"El-sen! El-sen! Hanged if I'm going to wait up any longer for him!"

He had gone to his room and was beginning to undress, when he heard that he had better take a turn outside and see for himself whether he could find any explanation for the priest's absence.

He lit his pipe and opened the door. Absolute silence reigned. For some minutes he listened for human sounds, but he heard nothing.

Then he went toward the tent of the missionaries. He heard no sound; but somewhere a dog began to growl. The simple noise of the old man assured him that he was not alone.

"Seems pretty queer," he muttered, and moved on toward the landing-place, where many canoes were pulled upon the shore and could be clearly seen in the moonlight.

For a moment he searched among them, but could find no sign of the missionary's long, traveling canoe. Curran then uttered a curse.

"He's gone! That's all. I suppose that devil of a girl told him she didn't care to marry me, or else he told her that he didn't care to marry her."

Some day I'll get square with him for putting in his own gear—the old fool. Yet he's gone away in a very short time, they were afloat on the now placid river, paddling down the scintillating path of moon-rays.

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"I had—such evil dreams—thou wert being taken away—away from me," he whispered hoarsely.

"I am with thee now—never to leave thee," she answered.

She held up one hand with four fingers spread.

"Four days," she replied. "Time when Mashkaugan came in the night."

"Did you see him?"

"No see him," she replied. "Canoe gone and then canoe came back, so Mashkaugan here."

She shrugged her shoulders and went up the sloping bank, bearing her heavy black kettle.

Curran dashed off to the chief's tent. It suddenly struck him that he had not seen Amos for some time. As a rule, she was always busy being for the tent, over the cooking fire, or doing some of the endless jobs Indian women always find waiting for them. He must know if she was ill.

"Where's your daughter?" he demanded harshly.

The old man pointed to the north with his thumb.

"Gone away with White Beard, the Manitou lino," he answered quietly.

"I've been expecting all the time to see her. What are you hiding from me?"

"I hide nothing," replied the old chief. "You never ask me."

"Where have they gone? What do you know about all this? If you're trying to play tricks on me, you'll go hungry this winter."

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Leaping out, the men dragged the canoe ashore, and Amos jumped out with her baby and followed Mashkaugan to the tent that was concealed among the trees.

"This place is not in here," said the hunchback.

Curran grasped him and would have flung him aside, but he could hardly judge the half-breed. Father Gregoire who quickly followed, laid a powerful hand on the agent's shoulder.

"I will not have any bawling on this day," he said gravely. "Loosen your hold, men! I order peace among you. Mashkaugan, stop that back! Curran has surely the right to be with us and join in our rejoicing. Enter quietly now!"

The agent walked in, glancing furiously at Mashkaugan, and the old missionary.

But when he was inside the tent he remained like a man transfixed by an arrow, or as one lost in a bizzard, who has leaped against a tree and there been frozen stiff and stark. Lorimer had been lying down, but now he had raised himself on one elbow.

The thin, drawn features looked to Curran like those of a corpse that has been taken from a tomb, notwithstanding the smile that was upon his face.

Casting a bewildered glance about him, he saw Amos, with the child lying upon her breast. The gentle smile of happy greeting with which she met his look he translated in his excitement as a grin of triumph over him.

"You have all been plotting against me!" he raged. "All have sought to make a fool of me! I suppose you'll be telling lies to the company about me, too. You can't prove anything. You take me for one that may be gulled and spurned and laughed at."

Whereas that devil of a half-breed! The man dashed furiously out of the tent.

"Keep still, keep still. I command you," shouted Father Gregoire.

But Curran paid no heed and ran toward Mashkaugan, who stood at a short distance with folded arms.

"I'll have no fighting!" cried the priest again. "Run away, Mashkaugan, till we quiet this madman. He'll kill you and the children!"

The Indian canoe-men came running up as Mashkaugan turned away. Mashkaugan ran to a few steps, as if a deer, paying little heed to his direction. The infuriated man followed close.

In a few seconds he was on the ledge of rock which overhung the lake, and was compelled to turn at bay.

Curran flung himself upon him, and they grappled as wild beast, panting like a bull moose in deadly fight. For a moment the agent took the advantage of the grasp of the hunchback's long arms, and an explosion was heard.

For another brief instant, Mashkaugan loosened his hold, but one of his great fists came crashing against Curran's lower jaw.

The agent fell like an animal that has been poleaxed and slipped inertly from the shelving rock into the deep-blue water, which closed over him, plunging him first into something over as if to cast a veil over the gruesome evidence of his blind, wild fury.

The Indians leaped into their canoes and paddled swiftly to the spot. For a time they searched with long, setting poles, but they were vain, and they could find nothing. In a short time they ceased, fearing the spirits that gather about the places of sudden death were about them.

Mashkaugan was the first to get up. He came to the edge of the tent, where the old missionary knelt by him, weeping.

"I shudder to think of the things that defend itself," he said sadly.

But Mashkaugan smiled at him. "It is for the best," he said in a low, halting voice. "I would speak to thee, father, and be shivered by thee if my sins may ever be forgiven. Put thy hand near my mouth, for I can speak but low."

The old man listened. For some minutes slow words that hurt continued to come. Then Father Gregoire made a sign and Maku came to him.

"Bring Lorimer!" he ordered. The sick man was brought supported on both sides, and knelt by the reclining man.

"Mashkaugan begs thy forgiveness," said the priest.

"Indeed, I forgive thee all, Mashkaugan," said Lorimer. "I would give much to know that we two soon might travel again as friends together in the greatness of the woods!"

The hunchback smiled at him gratefully and spoke in a stronger voice.

"If I am forgiven of God and man," said he, "there will surely be happiness in lying over there between the two great birches that overlook the water and the glory of every rising sun."

For many days it seemed as if they would have to bury him beneath the very rocks, yet he recovered and was Lorimer's staunch, devoted friend.

One morning all the canoes were loaded, and on the return to Tahemak Post, where many pounds of valuable black "buck" were burned in long-barreled guns in honor of the day they had saved Lorimer, Father Gregoire and Amos with all their happiness, and Atuk with his family.

Indeed, no man was ever known to camp again or to stretch meshes for whitefish in the place at Many Beaver the beautiful name of "Pointe au Manchant," the Bad Man Point.

When Lorimer finally discovered that his much-mourned wife was he was rather bewildered in regard to his disposal. The greatness of the north had been more than all else in the world to him.

He simply supplied the needs of his sister across the river, and he had a large family to bring up and educate. The share he kept for himself would doubtless be put to good use when his own boys grew up.

He moved to a post near civilization, where books are easy to secure, and where children may be taught the rudiments of white men and the craft of red men. A clever young woman

teaches them the first in a neat clap-board house, while Mashkaugan and old Minisutis give them lessons in the lore that is only found in the wonderful book of the great wilderness.

(The end.)

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