WOMEN'S HOUSEHOLD GIRLS'

FICTION – TWO PAGES OF RECIPES AND IDEAS – PAGE for MISSES

The Man Hunter

By James Oliver Curwood

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THE dog was a quarter strain wolf. Wherefore, he gazed with hungerful fierceness upon the meat crouching in the snow before him, though that meat was human. And the man was part wolf because of the slow, eating, cumulative pains of starvation. Wherefore, he, too, gazed with avid desire upon the meat just beyond his reach, though that meat bore the brands of his sledge traces. The man and the dog circled slowly—the man with his worn knees and mittened hands digging into the snow, the dog always on the outer edge of the circle.

"Good old Beaver-Tooth," cajoled the man, reaching out with a leering show of friendliness. "Good old boy. Won't you come—?"

He concealed the gleaming blade of the knife in his hand as he advanced, smiling and treacherous. He could not remember how many times he had made this effort since the pale sun had risen above the forests. Once—it seemed ages and ages ago to him—he had come within striking distance and had ripped open the dog's shoulder. Since then Beaver-Tooth had kept beyond reach. With a sinuous, twisting movement of his yellow body he kept out of reach now, licking his drooling lips as he watched the man, his ears erect, his redshot eyes never for an instant taking themselves from that pivotal life of the circle.

"Good old Beaver-Tooth," said the man again, softly, luringly. He raised his knifearm, then settled back, slowly, until he rested upon his knees.

Presently he rose unsteadily to his feet, swaying in his weakness, the understanding of what had happened filling him with new horror. All that day he had hunted fearlessly, hopefully, for the meat of this dog. Now he knew that the dog had changed into a wolf, and that there were two in the hunt. Also he knew that the dog was the stronger of the two.

The man grinned at Beaver-Tooth.

"Gee, but it's funny, Shacky!" he muttered. "But we're following orders, and the northwest mounted police is still hittin' the trail." He fell upon his knees again, facing the dog. "I'm glad there ain't two of you—you poor old hungry cuss!"

In the gloom of approaching night the wolffire in Beaver-Tooth's eyes grew brighter.

The man advanced, inch by inch, and the dog retreated inch by inch, until again they were fighting for life in the old circle, beating down the crackling snowcrust with aching hands and feet and paws—luring, evading, watching for opportunity in the strategy of that 10 foot battleground. Deepening gloom brought with it new strength and boldness to Beaver-Tooth. The man weakened. There was a growing paralysis in his limbs. His eyes were blurred as if by a veil so that at times he could not see the dog crouching two or three yards away. He knew, at last, that his knifearm could not deal a deathblow, and he settled down upon the snow with his back to a twisted spruce.

"Look here, Beaver-Tooth," he said, seriously, looking at the gleaming eyes just beyond his feet. "I'll cry quits if you're willing. What's the use, old boy? We're going to die. Let's do it peacefully. I ain't as hungry as I was. Come up here where we can keep warm—together—"

An hour passed—and he was still awake. Beaver-Tooth rose upon his forefeet with a nervous whine; the glow of the white night shone in his upturned eyes—he sniffed the upward air; and then—as low and as gentle as the purring of a cat at first—there rose from his swelling throat a cry that ended in the wailing call of the wolf. Holding his breath in a horror of understanding, the man listened. From far to the south there came an answering cry—and Beaver-Tooth, pointing his tawny muzzle to the stars, gave hungry voice in reply until the wilderness echoed with his invitation to the forest pack.

Shackleton rose to his knees, and from his knees he pulled himself to his feet.

"That's a mean trick, Beaver," he remonstrated, half aloud. "But I ain't in for a feed just yet, old boy. Yours truly, of the N. W. M. P., has still got life enough to climb a tree!"

He dragged himself up among the low branches of the twisted spruce until he was a dozen feet above the snow. Then he unbuckled his belt, passed it around a limb, and rebuckled it again.

"Funny I didn't think of this before," he grunted, testing the weight of his body on the stout service strap. "When the boys come along they'll find Shacky up high and dry, though he may be picked clean to the bones by these damned carrion ravens! Hy, Beaver, are you comfy?" he called down jeeringly. "You're making a mistake, old boy. The wolves won't leave a hair of you. S'long—n' I hope you have a good time!"

He settled himself back among the thick boughs. Weariness and starvation closed his eyes. In a subconscious sort of way he was cognizant of things happening after that.

When he opened his eyes there was sunlight all about.

"Hello, Beaver!" he called weakly.

When he unbuckled his belt he tumbled the dozen feet through thick spruce limbs to the place where Beaver-Tooth had been. There was no Beaver-Tooth now. At the foot of the tree there was a pile of scattered bones. All about there was the thousand marks of strange paws.

"Told you so, Beaver!" gasped the man. "God—"

He picked up one of the bones and gnawed at it voraciously. Vainly he strove to break it to get at the marrow. Still gnawing he staggered out from under the spruce with his face turned into the north.

In two hours he traveled two-thirds of a mile. It seemed to him that he had gone a great distance since he had started out from the spruce and all that was left of Beaver-Tooth. He was certain now that he could not drag himself on that much farther, so he spent his last rest in writing a few unsteady words on the back of an envelope. To whomever found his bones they stated that the bones were those of Sergeant Shackleton of the Northwest mounted police, and that he had died of starvation. Then he struggled on.

After a time there loomed up ahead of him an object. The object was on the opposite side of a small clearing which, in the narrowing comprehension of his vision, stretched away like a great plain before him. It was a cabin. The discovery, when it came, stirred no thrill in him. He wormed himself toward it, foot by foot, and when he had crossed a half of the clearing he stopped and gazed at it with languid interest, chin resting on his doubled knees.

Then there came the awakening. His lids drooped heavily, and when he opened them he was looking into a face—a woman's face white and startled, searching his with great staring eyes. He saw none of the fear in this face, none of its twitching terror. Only he knew that it had come before him like a vision, and that its eyes were of a wondrous beauty, and that it was very white—and very near. He gazed at it from out of his half-blind eyes in silence, reaching out his two hands—but as he reached, the face drew away until it shone like a white cameo shrouded in a mist. His arms dropped and the face returned from out of the mist.

Then he heard a voice—a faint sense of a voice which entered into the dying depths of his soul like a whisper that had floated through infinity. What it spoke had no meaning for him. All things were meaningless for a long time after that.

He felt no touch of hands, no biting grind of the snow as he was dragged to the cabin. Still there was life in him. He knew after a time that he was more comfortable and that something hot trickled down his throat and burned in his vitals. He knew, too, that an age or so ago he had set out to hunt down a man, and that he had lost his way—and starved. And he had met a face. The face absorbed what life there was in him.

He talked silly things to it after each trickling of that hot stuff down his throat—told it that he was Jack Shackleton, of the N. W. M. P., and that he was on the trail of a man named Croisset, who had killed a man at Fort Churchill.

For a long time he seemed to live in a world that was made just for himself and this face.

The face was very near to him, nearer than it had ever been before. The lustrous eyes were turned away, and he reached out. His hand fell upon something soft and warm; under his fingers he felt the quick, hot, pulsating beat of life, and then through the dissolving mists of his delirium he saw a movement, and heard a cry, and with a growing understanding in his wide-open eyes, he half raised himself to stare into the startled face from about which the mist-clouds had now completely gone.

"Take this, m'seur," he heard. "It will make you stronger."

Drinking, he gazed into the face, and his heart throbbed wildly at the strange, pallid beauty of it. It leaped still more tumultuously when the woman leaned over him so that a great braid slipped from her shoulder upon his neck. It was whipped back in an instant, but not before the thrill of its silken touch sent quivering darts of fire through his veins. Daringly he smiled.

"I've been dreaming about you," he whispered. "I've been dreaming about you—for a long time."

"Since last night, m'seur. It is now midday."

"Funny," continued Shackleton, still a little dazed. "Seems as if I've known

JACK SHACKLETON

you for ever so long. Lost—starved—you came to me. I understand, but—" He looked about him inquiringly. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. My husband is away, m'seur."

Shackleton came to himself with a jerk. He was still dressed, and pulled himself to a sitting posture on the edge of his cot.

"You are much stronger!" cried the woman eagerly. "You will be able to travel—soon!"

He could not fail to see the uneasiness in her manner as she leaned a little toward him, her bosom trembling under the nervous clutch of her hands.

"You want me to go—"

"Yes, yes, m'seur, as quickly as you can!" she urged.

She turned toward the low door which opened into the larger apartment of the cabin, her pale face still shining at him through the day-gleam of the windowless room. "You will be able to go—this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Shackleton.

He fell back wearily upon the cot, a sweeping, crushing disappointment in his heart.

"Better get out—mighty quick, Shacky," he communed with himself.

He stared straight up at the logs overhead and his cheeks burned with a heat that was not that of fever.

It was not often that a face came into his life—unless it was the face of one he hunted. Once, many years ago, another woman's face had lived for a time in his conception of things good and beautiful. Since then destiny had woven itself for him beyond the fiftieth degree, where he had made of himself a successful hunter of men. But he forgot these things in the presence of this other face that had

LISTEN, M'SEUR,—BEFORE I KILL YOU I WILL TELL YOU THIS —

come into his life. Its effect had been so sudden and so complete that he lay quivering and stunned, his hands clenched as he gazed at the log ceiling, the flush deepening in his face as he heard in that outer room the swishing, luring sound of the woman's movement.

"Better get out—mighty quick," he warned himself again, steadying himself slowly to his feet. "It'll be better for you—a damned sight better, Shacky," he gabbled under his breath, wavering like a sick man as he went to the door. "I ain't afraid—but you never can tell what a man'll do—"

The outer room was empty. It was a wonderful little room with snowy muslin curtains at two sunlit windows and bright pictures on the smoothly hewn log walls. Shackleton's thin, handsome face lightened up as he saw a shelf in one corner filled with books. On the stove a pot was boiling, and he noticed that the table was set for dinner. Beyond these things which first struck his eyes he did not search. He moved across to the outer door, which was partly open.

Outside in the sun the woman was brushing her hair, a glory of copper-tinted tresses that drew from Shackleton's lips a low cry of joy and admiration. Startled, she looked up into the flaming betrayal of his face and eyes, and never had he seen a face half so beautiful as the crimson gathered swiftly in her cheeks.

Without speaking he watched her as she twined the rich strands into a braid.

"I haven't thanked you for saving my life," he half apologized. "Lucky I hit your cabin just when I did, for I was pretty near gone. Shackleton's my name—Jack Shackleton, sergeant in the police service. I guess I will be strong enough to move—pretty soon."

"You must go today—this afternoon!"

He shrugged his shoulders, smiling down upon her in his open, wholesome way.

"I'll try," he said. "He wouldn't like to find me here. Is that it?"

The flush had gone from her face. Whitening, she gazed at him, her fingers clutching nervously in her thick braid.

"Yes, yes, m'seur——"

He jerked himself erect so suddenly that the movement startled her. His white teeth gleamed in a smile which was as chill as steel, as he stared over her into the pale warmth of the sunlit sky.

"Do I look as bad as that?" he asked. He drew his arms back, slowly, until the muscles cracked. "I would like to meet this man, but—if it will cause you trouble I will go."

He turned toward the edge of the forest across the clearing. For an instant the touch of the woman's hand on his arm detained him.

"I will have dinner soon," she said. "You will come back?"

"Yes."

He crossed the clearing, followed the path which she had made in fighting for his life the preceding night. He saw where she had dragged him through the snow, a few feet at a time, saw the imprints of her feet in the broken crust; the evidences of her struggle to bear his weight into the cabin, and inwardly he groaned with the new agony and the new joy which had come together to warp the peace of his soul.

In the thick spruce and balsam he sat down, hidden from view, but so that he could see the little cabin. For a moment the woman appeared in the doorway. Even from his distance he caught the sheen of the sun in her bright hair. He watched until she was gone, and then with a long breath buried his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry we hit this place, Shacky," he muttered, falling into the old habit of talking to his other self. "But she's an angel—and what a skunk this man of hers must be! She's afraid of him—as afraid as hell, and I'll bet he's abusing the life out of her. She shivers when she speaks of him, Shacky, shivers like a dog that's tied up to be lashed—an' I've seen eyes like hers when I've run down hunted game."

He lifted his head, his eyes flashing with an insane light.

"I saw a scar—a red mark——" He breathed tensely, staring at the cabin. "I wonder—if he hits her——"

He dragged himself to his feet, hands clenched. A deluge of fire seemed to sweep suddenly into his head, blinding his vision, and he caught at a sapling to keep himself from falling. There was a ghastly pallor in his face when he staggered back into the cabin.

"I'm dizzy—sick—" he stammered, gazing strangely at the woman. "I don't believe—I can eat—"

He saw her face grow whiter, and out of the whiteness the faint, red scar just under the soft sweep of her hair grew redder. The sight of it filled his soul with rage and he cursed incoherently as he staggered through the other door and flung himself heavily upon the cot. The woman followed him and laid a cold cloth upon his feverish forehead.

In the lightless little room her eyes glowed down upon him like lustrous stars. He felt something fall upon him again as she leaned over, and this time he caught it, and with a low cry crushed the soft mass of her braid between his two big hands. The fire in his head blazed more fiercely, and words burst from him, words heated with passion and trembling with his love.

"See here, little girl," he said, looking up into the aspen whiteness of her face with shining eyes, "don't you be afraid!

"I understand—now. You're afraid something will happen—when he comes back. Well, it will. My name's Jack Shackleton—of the N. W. M. P.—and I know what that man is out there. I know—"

The sharpness of her cry pierced him to his soul. The woman fell upon her knees beside the cot, her face so near that he could feel her hot breath.

"You know?" she cried. "My God, do you know?"

Her voice broke, and with a terrible cry of anguish she buried her head in her arms and sobbed until the room was filled with her grief and the terrific pounding of Shackleton's heart.

"Yes, yes, I know," he breathed. The grip of his fingers tightened in the soft braid, and he leaned over until his burning face was close to the woman's, his lips buried in the glory of her hair, his free arm clutching her throbbing shoulders tighter and tighter to him. "I set out to find a murderer," he panted, "but he's worse than a murderer. And I—I love you—don't you see—you came to me—and I love you—"

He felt her struggling against him, but with the struggling his arm held her closer until the glorious warmth of her face, her mouth, her eyes were for an instant crushed against his own. With a sudden effort she pulled herself back, thrusting him away from her with her hands against his breast.

"You told me—everything—last night—when you were out of your head," she confessed. "You love me—"

Her face blazed upon him, her hands tightened convulsively.

"Yes, I love you," breathed Shackleton.

There was infinite tenderness in his voice now. He reached out until his long fingers buried themselves again in her warm hair. Gently she pulled down his hands.

"Then—will you go away—for me?"

"I will go away with you," said Shackleton.

The words were out, and he sat upon the edge of the cot.

"I will go with you," he repeated, and he could hear the woman panting like a cornered animal. His voice was terribly calm. "It means as much to me as it does to you," he went on slowly and steadily. "I will have to desert the service. But I love you more than anything else in the world. If I stay I shall kill this man who—who—has hurt you."

There was a silence in which only the pulsating life of their own bodies made sound. After a moment there came to shatter that stillness another sound, faint and distant—the sharp, metallic report of a rifle.

The woman sprang to her feet. In the outer room she turned upon Shackleton, who had followed her.

"Listen!" she commanded.

Her face went white as there came again the distant report of a gun. But there was a strange, cold calmness in her voice when she spoke.

"That is my husband," she said. "What are you going to do?"

Hanging at the end of a beltcord against the log wall was a revolver. Shackleton had noticed it, and now he took it down and saw that it was loaded.

"I am going to wait for him," he replied. "I am going to wait for him—or go away with you."

He opened the door and stretched out his arm. Over his shoulder the woman saw that it was snowing.

"Our trail will be hidden within half an hour," he urged.

The woman gave a low cry. He turned to see her face flushed again, her eyes shining.

"Then we will go!" she cried almost joyously. "Hurry—eat something—

while I go into the other room and write a note—for him."

"Why a note?" he asked.

"It will make it safer for us."

For the first time he saw the woman's white teeth in a smile. But there was a dangerous gleam in her eyes as he advanced with outstretched arms, tender words of love quivering on his lips.

"You must promise not to touch me—if I go," she replied softly. "You must promise not to touch me again until I say that you may. Will you promise that?"

"Yes—yes—I promise!"

He dropped into a chair as she disappeared into the little room. His brain was afire again and a stifled groan dropped from his tight set lips as he rested his throbbing head in the palms of his hands.

Presently he bared his face. From the door the woman was looking at him again. Again he saw the red scar, the wretchedness in her eyes, the misery and fear in her trembling lips. She went back, and the stiff lines of his jaws relaxed.

No, this was not so much of a sin, after all. He was sacrificing himself—and this sacrifice of his future, of his name and honor in the service was winning him a paradise of happiness, and—saving a woman. Saving her—from what? He had leaped to his own conclusions. The woman was afraid of her husband. She trembled and her face went white when she spoke of him. Abuse, terror, unhappiness, betrayed themselves in the pathetic grief lines of her face. He was saving her—from a man. What sort of a man he could not guess, only he knew that he was a brute and unfit for the possession of this face which he would worship and strive for until the hour of his death. He felt no regret, no disturbing prick of conscience, when the woman came back to him.

"I am ready," she said, with a smile that set his heart leaping. "This will tell him what we are—not doing."

She folded a closely written sheet of paper and placed it on the table. Shackleton's blood burned like fire when he saw the change that had come over her. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes glowed with the lustrous flame that he had seen in Beaver-Tooth's eyes when they two had fought for life, and they held him back now—as Beaver-Tooth's had held him back in that blood stained arena under the black spruce. Still smiling at him, she put on her fur coat and her fur cap, and out of the silken gray lynx her lovely face glowed with the sweet beauty of a bakneesh flower—and yet with something in it that stirred him with strange and unaccountable warning. The woman noted the slow fading of the flush in his face and with a quick movement came to him, resting her hands upon his shoulders, smiling up into his eyes.

"It is snowing—hard," she whispered, her voice trembling with eagerness. "We must hurry—and it will cover our tracks. I will fill a pack with food while you are getting ready. Hurry—please hurry!"

She darted quickly to the table while Shackleton went into his room. The dizziness had gone from his head. There was new strength in his limbs. In his happiness he felt like raising his voice in shouting song. At last he had found life—life as he had dreamed of it from away back in the misty ages of his past, a woman's love—happiness. He put on his thick coat and cap, throbbing with excitement and haste. He forgot the man, forgot everything but the nearness of this woman, the beauty of her hair, her eyes—the glory of the thing he had won. It was the woman who brought him back into the sensing of other things. From the outer room there came a sudden thrilling, sobbing cry—two words that transfixed him to stone—the deep toned, panting voice of a man!

In the gloom of the little room he drew his revolver and cocked it. Like a cat he moved to the door. He saw the woman crushed close in a man's arms, saw her arms around his neck, her face turned up to him—kissing him, sobbing to him, speaking to him in a swift, broken voice as she lay upon his breast. Even then Shackleton did not understand. Again his mind leaped to quick, calculating conclusions.

The husband had returned sooner than the woman had expected, and her kisses, her embraces, were to hide a paroxysm of fear—her terror at the sudden entrance of this man upon their preparations for flight. He smiled grimly and his index finger curved itself around the trigger of his pistol. Something would happen very soon. The woman was talking in French, which he could not understand. As he waited—breathlessly—she darted to the table and gave to the man the paper upon which she had written. Not until then did he begin to comprehend and a slow chill ate its way through his veins. What did it mean? Was the woman betraying him? He leaned forward to catch a glimse of the man's face. The woman's husband was reading the paper. When he had finished he dropped it to the floor, and turned with a question on his lips to the woman.

In that moment Shackleton saw his face—a thin, dark face, and a cry near burst from his lips. It was the face of him whom he had hunted for months—the face of John Croisset, who had killed a man at Churchill! In another moment he had sprung into the outer room, his revolver leveled at the other's breast.

The woman was ahead of him. With a scream like that of a wild thing at bay she flew at his throat and the suddenness of the movement knocked the pistol from his hand. Before he could recover it, Croisset was in front of him, his white teeth gleaming from between pale lips, his black eyes shining at him over the barrel of his revolver.

"Ah, M'seur Shackleton, so it is you!"

He spoke softly and without excitement. But there was something in his eyes which made the sergeant of police cringe.

"I am going to kill you!" Croisset's voice was soft and low. "I am going to kill you, m'seur!"

He came a step nearer, as if to bring his revolver closer to Shackleton's heart.

"Listen, m'seur," he commanded, quietly, the smile fading from his lips "Before I kill you I will tell you this—that you have met the whitest woman in all the world. I want you to know that before you die, and that it was to save me that she planned to go with you—for a time." The smile returned to his lips. "She would have lost you out there in the mountains, m'seur—tonight—and then she would have returned to me and we would have gone into the south. She might have killed you instead of saving your life, m'seur—but she is—a woman."

A groaning cry fell from Shackleton. He saw the woman's face again as if in a vision, and to that face he stretched out his arms.

"Have you anything to say before I kill you, m'seur?"

The question rang sharply in the sergeant's ears.

"I have only a moment," went on Croisset. "The men you left on the Gray Beaver have been on my trail all day, and I have been fighting them back. They are on my trail now and will be here soon. Quick! What have you to say?"

"Only this," said Shackleton, "that I have loved but two women in my life. One of them I loved many years ago. The other I found here." There was a strange, low thrill in his voice. "I have fought for women all my life, m'seur. I have knocked men down who have spoken ill of them. You know I am not a coward, Croisset. I am not afraid of death—and—and—I would like to do something—for her."

Dully his eyes sought the woman's.

"For you," he whispered, hoarsely.

His half reaching arms dropped to his side.

"She loves you—a great deal—Croisset," he almost sobbed.

"More than my life," replied the woman. "Until that happened at Churchill we lived in a paradise!"

"It was not—so bad—what happened at Churchill," mumbled Shackleton. "Only—it's murder according to law. You killed a man—because he spoke foully of her."

He straightened as if an electric shock had passed through him. His eyes flashed with their old fire. His nostrils quivered.

"They are after you—close behind?" he cried.

"Very near," said Croisset.

From an inside pocket Shackleton whipped out a package, using his fingers like the claws of an animal in tearing the paper from it. There fluttered to the floor a flag of bloodred cotton.

"The badge of the red terror—of the smallpox!" he exclaimed. "You know what it means, Croisset. Every man in our service carries such a flag. Quick! It is the service flag—the warning of death—and those who are following you will not dare to approach! Do you understand? Quick, man! My God, don't you understand?"

His face was as white as death as he held out the red signal of plague.

"But my trail, m'seur. It leads to the door. They will know—"

"Give me your coat, your hat, your gun," cried Shackleton. "They will think that you came to the door and turned away, and they will follow—follow me!"

He laughed, stripping off Croisset's caribouskin coat, helping himself to his fur cap.

"Now—your boots," he commanded. "And you're going to hike into the south, man—you're going to hike tonight, and you're not going to stop until you've hit the other country where they don't have the N. W. M. P. Do you understand? Sooner or later you'll be caught up here. I'll lead 'em into the west, and you hike eastward and south. Now—"

He sprang to his feet. The woman hung the pack of food over his shoulders. Together they went to the door. For a moment Shackleton hesitated.

"Croisset," he said, gently. "I didn't understand. That's all."

He turned to go out in the thickly falling snow. Two hands fell upon his broad shoulders and for an instant he faced the woman. The glory of her eyes dazzled him. He half closed his own, and in that moment he felt the sweet, warm touch of her lips upon his rough cheek.

"May the great God care for you," he heard in a whisper.

For a hundred yards he went through the snow. Then he turned and waited until he saw the red flag hanging from the end of a sapling branch over the cabin.

After a long time, from a distance, there came a sound, and the sound was followed by shadowy figures looming up through the snow gloom. He watched them as they approached the cabin—saw them halt suddenly when they saw the red flag of the plague—and then, lifting Croisset's rifle, he fired a shot close over their heads.

He laughed as there came the patter of bullets in the spruce about him, and with long, swinging strides led his pursuers into the west.

"If you were only with me now, old Beaver-Tooth," he whispered to himself. "Ain't this a joke? I wonder if they'll catch Jack Shackleton of the N. W. M. P. Guess not. The boys are tired. I can tell by the way they're running. I'll lose 'em tonight, swing around behind 'em tomorrow, and join 'em in this chase that ain't going to stop until we reach the Athabaska. I swear it. It ain't going to help the reputation of Jack Shackleton, N. W. M. P., but mebby it'll help to stake out a little corner in heaven for me when the time comes!"

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