



FROM HER CANOE THE GIRL WAS TEASING HIM.

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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when a man doesn't make a fool of himself. I didn't understand."

"Yes," said Scottie, but he went on, relentlessly. "She was your wife?"

"Yes."

Scottie's hand tightened on the other's shoulder. "Let's hear about it."

"It's brief," said Craig, "because there's nothing new. I was a doctor, with a fair practice, and my fortune to make. And she—she was just what you called the little girl over there—a beauty. We were happy, almost like a couple of kids, until we moved to a bigger city. And then—mehby you can understand it, Scottie—she was so beautiful that she began to attract attention, and she came to like it. Automobiles, fine clothes, dreams I couldn't materialize, a few parties, and then the other man and his bunch of money. When I found it out I wiped the slate clean, perhaps a little too quietly. That was two years ago. Six months after I left she had her divorce and they were married. They were in Europe the last I heard."

"Any children?" asked Scottie.

"No."

The little corporal drew Craig to his feet and pulled him out through the door into the day that was fading into night. The smells of spring were in the air. The fat popular buds were bursting. From the top of their ridge they could look down upon miles and miles of the quiet wilderness. For a moment Scottie pointed, without speaking. There came to them the distant moaning of a bull moose, calling for a mate; behind them, in a dense clump of black spruce, an owl chortled in sleepy awakening. There was something of majestic peace in the day's end. Craig felt his lungs filling with the pure air, and the glory of the solitudes filled his soul with a strange rest even before Scottie spoke.

"See what you've come to, Tom," he said, at last. "I was worse than you when I came up here, for I was dying of bad lungs. Look! Ain't it glorious? You've got that, and she—why, she's gone to hell," he said, simply.

For an instant Craig's hands clenched. But there was the touch of a brother in Scottie's hand as he said: "Let's go in and finish the bacon."

II

Later, Craig went out alone, and smoked. The confession that he had made to Scottie, the revelation of heartache that he had sworn to keep to himself, had already helped him, as the little corporal had predicted. But he knew that after a little he would regret having made that confession, for Scottie would see less and less of manhood in him now if he did not straighten up, like a tree that had been bent and twisted by storm, and face life anew. For Scottie could not understand, no man could understand, and he was already sorry that he had weaked.

What if he should tell Scottie that in his bitterest hours he could not bring himself to see the woman as she was, but always as she had been once upon a time in a fairland of long ago? Scottie would call him a fool, and he would reason and could not shatter this thing that was in him. More than once during those last six months he had seen her cheeks flushed with the flush of wine, her eyes sparkling with the triumph of conquest, her beautiful body throbbing with the new and maddening spirit that had taken possession of her. Scottie, and most other men, would have seen her like that, and would have cursed her. But it was different with him, perhaps because he was an idealist and had worshipped at the foot of a shrine which no shock could destroy.

He saw her again tonight, as he had seen her a thousand times in his wandering, back in the little village where paradise had opened its gates to him. He saw again the glorious flush in her cheeks, but it was the flush of his happy frolic in the orchard back of their little home, where the sunbeams and white petals of the apple blossoms danced in the lustrous gold of her hair. He saw the laughter and the triumph in her eyes, but they were of love and purity. He could not tell Scottie these things. They were of his own madness, and no man would understand.

A week later he was near the outlet of Silver Fox creek, and something turned him in the direction of Pierre Croisset's cabin. It was early in the afternoon, and the sun was warm, and the air was filled with the pleasant perfume of earth and shrub and tree bursting into life. He had come within a quarter of a mile of Pierre's home when a sound stopped him. It was the low growling of a dog, very near to him; and then as he listened, there came a girlish peal of laughter, so clear and sweet that he smiled in sheer sympathy with it.

He drew quietly nearer to the sound, and suddenly he found the sunlight glow of the Silver Fox almost at his feet. The girl's laugh rippled up to him again, and he peered down through a break in the balsam. Marie Croisset was so close that he could have tossed a pebble upon her bare head. In the center of the stream was a rock, upon which she had lured a huge, tawny-haired sledge dog. From her canoe the girl was teasing him.

Craig chuckled softly. It was the low growling of a dog, very near to him; and then as he listened, there came a girlish peal of laughter, so clear and sweet that he smiled in sheer sympathy with it. He drew quietly nearer to the sound, and suddenly he found the sunlight glow of the Silver Fox almost at his feet. The girl's laugh rippled up to him again, and he peered down through a break in the balsam. Marie Croisset was so close that he could have tossed a pebble upon her bare head. In the center of the stream was a rock, upon which she had lured a huge, tawny-haired sledge dog. From her canoe the girl was teasing him.

canoe; her movements were like music as she balanced herself after each reckless feat toward the rock, or swift dip of her cedar paddle. Her round, rosy cheeks were bare to the elbow, and suddenly she plunged one of them deep into the water and sent a cascade of spray over her comrade on the rock.

Craig caught the cry on his lips. For a moment she lost her balance. The canoe tipped; she gave a shrill little cry, and then, after another moment of suspense in which Craig was ready to jump, the frail craft straightened. The girl's heavy braid had slipped over her shoulder into the water, and as she bent her head so that the drip of wet would not wet her, she pointed a playful finger at the dog.

"Now, see what you've done. Trigger!" she cried. "I must go ashore and dry my hair, and you—you must swim!" She swung the canoe quickly to the sandy shore, almost directly under Craig, and sprang out with the lightness of a fawn. Then her fingers slipped with feminine swiftness through the glistening strands of her hair, and before Craig could move, it fell in a dark and rippling glory to her hips, enriched by the pale glow of the sun that was already sinking behind the forests.

He caught the laughing beauty of her face as she turned, its deep, wildrose flush, the glow of her eyes, the taunting of her lips. She had once again laughed at Kazan on the rock; with that vision of her breaking like a ray of sunlight into his darkened soul, Craig slipped quietly away.

He was curious, excited, and he found himself thinking strange things. It was not exertion that had made his heart beat a little faster or that had brought the glow to his face. His thoughts moved swiftly as he went toward Croisset's. He had looked upon a miracle. He had found beauty, and purity, and happiness, in the heart of a wilderness, an in spite of him there rose another face before him—the face of one who was delving to the depths of life itself, in her search for the happiness which she found in this girl whose only companion outside of her cabin home was a dog!

For an hour he smoked his pipe with Croisset, while Croisset's wife prepared an early supper. Marie came, running breathlessly with Trigger at her heels, her unbound hair still leaping in riotous beauty about her. When she saw Craig, she stopped before her, straight and smiling, his hand reaching out to her, there came a swift change in her face. The red blood surged into her cheeks, the laughter left her eyes; and Craig, looking deep into them as he held her small, trembling hand, saw something in their shy loveliness that was not of the child—but of woman.

It was late when he left. The moon had risen, and the wonderful world about him was bathed in its soft radiance. Croisset and the girl went with him to the beginning of the trail at the edge of the clearing. He shook hands with Pierre. The halfbreed was relighting his pipe when he took Marie's hand again and looked once more down deep into her eyes. They met his own, a little frightened, a little questioning, lustreously beautiful and pure in the moon glow; and Craig saw in them that something indelible—more marvelous than life—which his soul had been crying to see in another woman's eyes since the dawn of desire in him. And he knew that he had never seen it, not even in those first days of the Fairland years and years ago.

"Good night, little Marie," he whispered. "At that night, for the first time, his voice rose in song as he went homeward through the forest."

III

Twice each week, and then three times, Craig went to Croisset's cabin now. And each time that wonderful thing that he had found in the girl's eyes grew larger and more beautiful for him, until at last it walked with him, and he carried it with him in a green sash, the old pain at his heart, filling up the gnawing emptiness, covering over with sweetness and purity and love the harsh things of the world. He was still, as the weeks of spring drifted into summer, he spoke no word of love, and told Marie nothing of what had happened in the days gone by. He dreaded the moment of telling the story of his broken and twisted life.

And at last the day of it came. They had climbed to the top of the Sun rock, high in the forest, and a hundred feet beneath them the vast solitude of green swamp and forest and sunlit lake reached out mile upon mile. Marie sat at his feet, gazing out upon the wonderful world, with her chin resting in the cup of her hands.

"Marie," he said, suddenly, "I like your other name best—the Indian name that your father sometimes calls you. It's going to be my name for you. Me-lee—what does it mean?"

He saw the color deepening in the girl's cheek. She looked up at him, and he saw that she was a mischievous glow in her eyes.

"It is Cree," she said. "An old Indian first called me that down at the mission where I went to school. 'I know,' he persisted, 'but what does it mean?'"

and heard the sobbing tremulousness of her breath as her face nestled in sweet surrender against his own. He knew that she loved him—loved him as no other woman had ever loved him in his life, and when he lifted her face and found her beautiful eyes humid with the tears of her happiness, he could only hold her closer, fighting to find a beginning for the thing which he wished to say.

It came hard, slowly at first, with Me-lee's pure eyes looking up into his own. And into those eyes, as he went on with the terrible story, there came the dark, startled pain of one who has learned that she is not first, the look that Craig had dreaded to see. But in an instant something else took its place, a look of wistful attentiveness, of pain for him—and her hand, stole up to his face, and stroked it with the gentleness of one who understood, and who grieved because of his grief. Craig could look no longer into her eyes, and as he went on he gazed unseeing over her head into the world beyond. He left nothing unsaid. And at the end he felt Me-lee press a kiss to him, and with the sweetness of a child she raised her lips to his and twined her arms about his neck.

IV

After that, in the days that followed, Me-lee seemed to Craig something more than child or woman. In her eyes, in her gentle touch, in her wistful quickness to respond to his moods, he saw the life and the woman he had not for herself. Stranger to the world from which he had come, she saw his wounds and lived to heal them. It was wonderful to Craig. It was as if he had been close to death and she was nursing him back to life. Never did he see in her eyes what he might have expected to find there—the troublesome visioning of the other woman. The time came when Craig knew that, if to sacrifice herself would give him greater happiness, Me-lee would send him back to the life and the woman he had once known. At last he would find love as he had dreamed that love should be.

It was midsummer when a messenger came up from Nelson House with word for Craig. He was wanted there at once. There was no explanation. He was wanted on a matter of importance. Scottie carried word to Me-lee, while Craig started south the next day. It was evening of the third day when Craig reached Nelson House. There were lights in the factor's quarters, and Craig went there at once. Blood, the Hudson Bay company's agent, greeted him mysteriously. He wrung Craig's hands until they ached, and almost immediately excused himself a little excitedly. He was gone five minutes, and Craig sat down, wondering what was in the wind.

He heard Blood returning. And then, the door to the big, lighted room which was the factor's "den" opened and closed softly, and he heard a quick, gasping breath. His back was turned, and he whirled about.

"Good God!" he cried, springing to his feet. Five steps away, her arms reaching out to him, her beautiful face filled with a longing and a joy which he had never seen there before, stood the woman who had once been his wife.

"Tom!" Some strange thing leaped into his head and dazed him. He staggered toward her with a wild, low cry, seeing her through half blindness, and her name fell from his lips in a green sob. For a few insane moments reason left him in their embrace. Her lips were kissing him. He heard her repeating his name over and over again, and he caught her to his breast madly.

"Isobel!" The sound of her name brought him back to a still stranger joy, and he thrust her away from him, and stood facing her with a face as white as death.

"Tom—Tom—" she moaned, quailing before the terrible look which she saw in his eyes now. "I've been searching for you—hunting for you—for months and months. Oh, my God! You—Tom—you'll take me back! I didn't know how I loved you—until after—that. You'll take me back—you'll take me back!"

Her arms reached to him pleadingly, but his fingers did not unclench. He noticed now that she was dressed in a white, shimmering gown that made her look like an angel. She was older; there were the faintest lines about her eyes, but she was more beautiful than ever.

"Forbes—" He spoke the name in a hard, cold voice. "He is dead," she said. "He died six months after—we were married, Tom—I've suffered—more than I can ever tell. I've been punished, Oh, Tom, I've been punished—"

"Her eyes lit up at the eagerness of his question. "Yes—yes—I am rich, Tom. And it is yours, all yours. Oh, you will give me—you will forgive me—you will take me back!"

Her arms were about him again; her white bosom throbbed against him, and she crushed her face against his breast. He did not speak. His arms hung at his side. For a time he stared hard and unseeing at the wall. Then, suddenly, that a red flush of triumph surged into her face, he kissed her and pushed her away from him. The harshness was gone from his face. She saw a wonderful peace in his eyes.

"We will pay her," whispered the woman who had been his wife. "Yes, we will pay her," he repeated, and his face was illumined with the joy of the thought. "And what do you think would be fair payment for the saving of a man's soul?" he asked. "Ten thousand—twenty thousand—more—more, if that is not enough." He was tightening his belt. "I am going to pay her—on Christmas day," he said, quietly. "We are going to be married then. Goodby, Isobel, and may God bless you—always!" Like a shadow he slipped away into the white gloom of the night, into the north.

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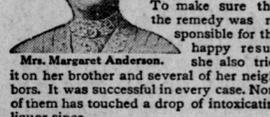
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