

Lynde Francis

# Stranded in Arcady



Francis Lynde

**Stranded in Arcady**

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### I

### THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

At the half-conscious moment of awakening Prime had a confused impression that he must have gone to bed leaving the electric lights turned on full-blast. Succeeding impressions were even more disconcerting. It seemed that he had also gone to bed with his clothes on; that the bed was unaccountably hard; that the pillow had borrowed the characteristics of a pillory.

Sitting up to give these chaotic conclusions a chance to clarify themselves, he was still more bewildered. That which had figured as the blaze of the neglected electrics resolved itself into the morning sun reflecting dazzlement from the dimpled surface of a woodland lake. The hard bed proved to be a sandy beach; the pillory pillow a gnarled and twisted tree root which had given him a crick in his neck.

When he put his hand to the cramped neck muscle and moved to escape the bedazzling sun reflection, the changed point of view gave him a shock. Sitting with her back to a tree at a little distance was a strange young woman – strange in the sense that he was sure he had never seen her before. Like himself, she had evidently just awakened, and she was staring at him out of wide-open, slate-gray eyes. In the eyes he saw a vast bewilderment comparable to his own, something of alarm, and a trace of subconscious embarrassment as she put her hands to her hair, which was sadly tumbled.

Prime scrambled to his feet and said, "Good morning" – merely because the conventions, in whatever surroundings, die hard. At this the young woman got up, too, patting and pinning the rebellious hair into subjection.

"Good morning," she returned, quite calmly; and then: "If you – if you live here, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where I am."

Prime checked a smile. "You beat me to it," he countered affably. "I was about to ask you if you could tell me where *I* am."

"Don't you know where you are?" she demanded.

"Only relatively; this charming sylvan environment is doubtless somewhere in America, but, as to the precise spot, I assure you I have no more idea than the man in the moon."

"It's a dream – it must be!" the young woman protested gropingly. "Last night I was in a city – in Quebec."

"So was I," was the prompt rejoinder. Then he felt for his watch, saying: "Wait a moment, let's see if it really was last night."

She waited; and then – "Was it?" she inquired eagerly.

"Yes, it must have been; my watch is still running."

She put her hand to her head. "I can't seem to think very clearly. If we were in Quebec last night, we can't be so very far from Quebec this morning. Can't you – don't you recognize this place at all?"

Prime took his first comprehensive survey of the surroundings. So far as could be seen there was nothing but the lake, with its farther shore dimly visible, and the primeval forest of pine, spruce, fir, and ghostly birch – a forest all-enveloping, shadowy, and rather forbidding, even with the summer morning sunlight playing upon it.

"It looks as if we might be a long way from Quebec," he ventured. "I am not very familiar with the Provinces, but these woods –"

She interrupted him anxiously. "A long way? How could it be – in a single night?" Then: "You are giving me to understand that you are not – that you don't know how we come to be here?"

"You must believe that, if you can't believe anything else," he hastened to say. "I don't know where we are, or how we got here, or why we should be here. In other words, I am not the kidnapper; I'm the kidnapped – or at least half of them."

"It seems as if it *must* be a bad dream," she returned, with the frown of perplexity growing between the pretty eyes. "Things like this don't really happen, you know."

"I know they don't, as a rule. I've tried to make them happen, now and then, on paper, but they always seem to lack a good bit in the way of verisimilitude."

The young woman turned away to walk down to the lake edge, where she knelt and washed her face and hands, drying them afterward on her handkerchief.

"Well," she asked, coming back to him, "have you thought of anything yet?"

He shook his head. "Honestly, I haven't anything left to think with. That part of my mind has basely escaped. But I have found something," and he pointed to a little heap of provisions and utensils piled at the upper edge of the sand belt: a flitch of bacon, sewn in canvas, a tiny sack of flour, a few cans of tinned things, matches, a camper's frying-pan, and a small coffee-pot. "Whoever brought us here didn't mean that we should starve for a day or two, at least. Shall we breakfast first and investigate afterward?"

"We?" she said. "Can you cook?"

"Not so that any one would notice it," he laughed. "Can you?"

She matched the laugh, and it relieved him mightily. It was her undoubted right as a woman to cry out, or faint, or be foolishly hysterical if she chose; the circumstances certainly warranted anything. But she was apparently waiving her privilege.

"Yes, I ought to be able to cook. When I am at home I teach domestic science in a girls' school. Will you make a fire?"

Prime bestirred himself like a seasoned camper – which was as far as possible from being the fact. There was plenty of dry wood at hand, and a bit of stripped birch bark answered for kindling. The young woman removed her coat and pulled up her sleeves. Prime cut the bacon with his pocket-knife, and, much to the detriment of the same implement, opened a can of peaches. For the bread, Domestic Science wrestled heroically with a lack of appliances; the batter had to be stirred in the tiny skillet with water taken from the lake.

The cooking was also difficult. Being strictly city-bred, neither of them knew enough to let the fire burn down to coals, and they tried to bake the pan-bread over the flames. The result was rather smoky and saddening, and the young woman felt called upon to apologize. But the peaches, fished out of the tin with a sharpened birch twig for a fork, were good, and so was the bacon; and for sauce there was a fair degree of outdoor hunger. Over the breakfast they plunged once more into the mystery.

"Let us try it by the process of elimination," Prime suggested. "First, let me see if I can cancel myself. When I am at home in New York my name is Donald Prime, and I am a perfectly harmless writer of stories. The editors are the only people who really hate me, and you could hardly charge this" – with an arm-wave to include the surrounding wilderness – "to the vindictiveness of an editor, could you?"

He wished to make her laugh again, and he succeeded – in spite of the sad pan-bread.

"Perhaps you have been muck-raking somebody in your stories," she remarked. "But that wouldn't include me. I am even more harmless than you are. My worst enemies are frivolous girls from well-to-do families who think it beneath them to learn to cook scientifically."

"It's a joke," Prime offered soberly; "it can't be anything else." Then: "If we only knew what is expected of us, so that we could play up to our part. What is the last thing you remember – in Quebec?"

"The most commonplace thing in the world. I am, or I was, a member of a vacation excursion party of school-teachers. Last evening at the hotel somebody proposed that we go to the Heights of Abraham and see the old battle-field by moonlight."

"And you did it?"

"Yes. After we had tramped all over the place, one of the young women asked me if I wouldn't like to go with her to the head of the cove where General Wolfe and his men climbed up from the river. We went together, and while we were there the young woman stumbled and fell and turned her ankle – or at least she said she did. I took her arm to help her back to the others, and in a little while I began to feel so tired and sleepy that I simply couldn't drag myself another step. That is the last that I remember."

"I can't tell quite such a straight story," said Prime, taking his turn, "but at any rate I shan't begin by telling you a lie. I'm afraid I was – er – drunk, you know."

"Tell me," she commanded, as one who would know the worst.

"I, too, was on my vacation," he went on. "I was to meet a friend of mine in Boston, and we were to motor together through New England. At the last moment I had a telegram from this friend changing the plan and asking me to meet him in Quebec. I arrived a day or so ahead of him, I suppose; at least, he wasn't at the hotel where he said he'd be."

"Go on," she encouraged.

"I had been there a day and a night, waiting, and, since I didn't know any one in Quebec, it was becoming rather tiresome. Last evening at dinner I happened to sit in with a big, two-fisted young fellow who confessed that he was in the same boat – waiting for somebody to turn up. After dinner we went out together and made a round of the movies, with three or four cafés sandwiched in between. I drank a little, just to be friendly with the chap, and the next thing I knew I was trying to go to sleep over one of the café tables. I seem to remember that my chance acquaintance got me up and headed me for the hotel; but after that it's all a blank."

"Didn't you know any better than to drink with a total stranger?" the young woman asked crisply.

"Apparently I didn't. But the three or four thimblefuls of cheap wine oughtn't to have knocked me out. It was awful stuff; worse than the *vin ordinaire* they feed you in the Paris wine-shops."

"It seems rather suspicious, doesn't it?" she mused; "your sudden sleepiness? Are you – are you used to drinking?"

"Tea," he laughed; "I'm a perfect inebriate with a teapot."

"There must be an explanation of some sort," she insisted. Then: "Can you climb a tree?"

He got up and dusted the sand from his clothes.

"I haven't done it since I used to pick apples in my grandfather's orchard at Batavia, but I'll try," and he left her to go in search of a tree tall enough to serve for an outlook.

The young woman had the two kitchen utensils washed and sand-scoured by the time he came back.

"Well?" she inquired.

"A wild and woolly wilderness," he reported; "just a trifle more of it than you can see from here. The lake is five or six miles wide and perhaps twice as long. There are low hills to the north and woods everywhere."

"And no houses or anything?"

"Nothing; for all I could see, we might be the only two human beings on the face of the earth."

"You seem to be quite cheerful about it," she retorted.

He grinned good-naturedly. "That is a matter of temperament. I'd be grouchy enough if it would do any good. I shall lose my motor trip through New England."

"Think – think hard!" the young woman pleaded. "Since there is no sign of a road, we must have come in a boat; in that case we can't be very far from Quebec. Surely there must be some one living on the shore of a lake as big as this. We must walk until we find a house."

"We'll do anything you say," Prime agreed; and they set out together, following the lake shore to the left, chiefly because the beach broadened in that direction and so afforded easy walking.

A tramp of a mile northward scarcely served to change the point of view. There was no break in the encircling forest, and at the end of the mile they came to a deeply indented bay, where the continuing shore was in plain view for a doubling of another mile. The search for inhabitants seeming to promise nothing in this direction, they turned and retraced their steps to the breakfast camp, still puzzling over the tangle of mysteries.

"Can't you think of *any* way of accounting for it?" the young woman urged for the twentieth time in the puzzlings.

"I can think of a million ways – all of them blankly impossible," said Prime. "It's simply a chaotic joke!"

The young woman shook her head. "I have lost my sense of humor," she confessed, adding: "I shall go stark, staring mad if we can't find out something!"

More to keep things from going from bad to worse than for any other reason, Prime suggested a walk in the opposite direction – southward from the breakfast camp. While they were still within sight of the ashes of the breakfast fire they made a discovery. The loose beach sand was tracked back and forth, and in one place there were scorings as if some heavy body had been dragged. Just beyond the footprints there were wheel tracks, beginning abruptly and ending in the same manner a hundred yards farther along. The wheel tracks were parallel but widely separated, ill-defined in the loose sand but easily traceable.

"A wagon?" questioned the young woman.

"No," said Prime soberly; "it was – er – it looks as if it might have been an aeroplane."



## II

### AMATEUR CASTAWAYS

Lucetta Millington – she had told Prime her name on the tramp to the northward – sat down in the sand, elbows on knees and her chin propped in her hands.

"You say 'aeroplane' as if it suggested something familiar to you, Mr. Prime," she prompted.

Truly it did suggest something to Prime, and for a moment his mouth went dry. Grider, the man he was to have met in Quebec, was a college classmate, a harebrained young barbarian, rich, an outdoor fanatic, an owner of fast yachts, a driver of fast cars, and latterly a dabbler in aviatics. Idle enough to be full of extravagant fads and fancies, and wealthy enough to indulge them, this young barbarian made friends of his enemies and enemies of his friends with equal facility – the latter chiefly through the medium of conscienceless practical jokes evolved from a Homeric sense of humor too ruthless to be appreciated by mere twentieth-century weaklings.

Prime had more than once been the good-natured victim of these jokes, and his heart sank within him. It was plain now that they had both been conveyed to this outlandish wilderness in an aircraft of some sort, and there was little doubt in his mind that Grider had been at the controls.

"It's a – it's a joke, just as I have been trying to tell you," he faltered at length. "We have been kidnapped, and I'm awfully afraid I know the man who did it," and thereupon he gave her a rapid-fire sketch of Grider and Grider's wholly barbarous and irresponsible proclivities.

Miss Millington heard him through without comment, still with her chin in her hands.

"You are standing there and telling me calmly that he did this – this unspeakable thing?" she exclaimed when the tale was told. Then, after a momentary pause: "I am trying to imagine the kind of man who could be so ferociously inhuman. Frankly, I can't, Mr. Prime."

"No, I fancy you can't; I couldn't imagine him myself, and I earn my living by imagining people – and things. Grider is in a class by himself. I have always told him that he was born about two thousand years too late. Back in the time of Julius Cæsar, now, they might have appreciated his classic sense of humor."

He stole a glance at the impassive face framed between the supporting palms. It was evident that Miss Millington was freezing silently in a heroic effort to restrain herself from bursting into flames of angry resentment.

"You may enjoy having such a man for your friend," she suggested with chilling emphasis, "but I think there are not very many people who would care to share him with you. Perhaps you have done something to earn the consequences of this wretched joke, but I am sure *I* haven't. Why should he include me?"

Prime suspected that he knew this, too, and he had to summon all his reserves of fortitude before he could bring himself to the point of telling her. Yet it was her due.

"I don't know what you will think of me, Miss Millington, but I guess the truth ought to be told. Grider has always ragged me about my women – er – that is, the women in my stories, I mean. He says they are all alike, and all sticks; merely wooden manikins – womanikins, he calls them – upon which to hang an evening gown. I shouldn't wonder if it were partly true; I don't know women very well."

"Go on," she commanded.

"The last time I was with Grider – it was about two weeks ago – he was particularly obnoxious about the girl in my last bit of stuff – the story that was printed in the *New Era* last month. He said – er – he said I ought to be marooned on some desert island with a woman; that after an experience of that kind I might be able to draw something that wouldn't be a mere caricature of the sex."

At this, as was most natural, Miss Millington's ice melted in a sudden and uncontrollable blaze of indignation.

"Are you trying to tell me that this atrocious friend of yours has taken *me*, a total stranger, to complete his cast of characters in this wretched burlesque?" she flashed out.

"I don't wish to believe it," he protested. "It doesn't seem possible for any human being to do such a thing. But I know Grider so well – "

"It is the smallest possible credit to you, Mr. Prime," she snapped. "You ought to be ashamed to have such a man for a friend!"

"I am," he acceded, humbly enough. "Grider weighs about fifty pounds more than I do, and he took three initials in athletics in the university. But I pledge you my word I shall beat him to a frazzle for this when I get the chance."

"A lot of good that does us now!" scoffed the poor victim. And then she got up and walked away, leaving him to stand gazing abstractedly at the wheel tracks of the kidnapping air-machine.

Having lived the unexciting life of a would-be man of letters, Prime had had none of the strenuous experiences which might have served to preface a situation such as this in which he found himself struggling like a fly in a web. It was absurdly, ridiculously impossible, and yet it existed as a situation to be met and dealt with. Watching the indignant young woman furtively, he saw that she went back to sit down beside the ashes of the breakfast fire, again with her chin in her hands. Meaning to be cautiously prudent, he rolled and smoked a cigarette before venturing to rejoin her, hoping that the lapse of time might clear the air a little.

She was staring aimlessly at the dimpled surface of the lake when he came up and took his place on the opposite side of the ashes. The little heap of provisions gave him an idea and an opening, but she struck in ahead of him.

"Let me know when you expect me to pose for you," she said without turning her head.

"I was an idiot to tell you that!" he exploded. "Can't you understand that that fool suggestion about the desert island and a – er – a woman was Grider's and not mine? How could I know that he would ever be criminal enough to turn it into a fact?"

"Oh, if you can call it criminal, and really mean it – " she threw out.

"I'll call it anything in the vocabulary if only you won't quarrel with me. Goodness knows, things are bad enough without that!"

She let him see a little more of her face. The frown had disappeared, and there were signs that the storm of indignation was passing.

"I suppose it isn't a particle of use to quarrel," she admitted. "What is done is done and can't be helped, however much we may agree to despise your barbarous friend, Mr. Grider. How is it all going to end?"

At this Prime aired his small idea. "Our provisions won't last more than a day or two; they were evidently not intended to. If that means anything, it means that Grider will come back for us before long. He certainly can't do less."

"To-day?"

"Let us hope so. Have you ever camped out in the woods before?"

"Never."

"Neither have I. What I don't know about woodcraft would make a much larger book than any I ever hope to write. You probably guessed that when you saw me make the fire."

The corners of the pretty mouth were twitching. "And you probably guessed my part of it when you saw me try to make that dreadful pan-bread. I *can* cook; really I can, Mr. Prime; but when one has been used to having everything imaginable to do it with – "

Prime thought he might venture to laugh once more. "Your revenge is in your own hands; all you have to do is to continue to make the bread. It'll get me in time. My digestion isn't particularly good, you know."

"Do you really think we shall be rescued soon?"

"For the sake of my own sanity, I'm obliged to think it."

"And in the meantime we must sit here and wait?"

"We needn't make the waiting any harder than we are obliged to. Suppose we call it a – er – a sort of surprise-party picnic. I imagine it is no use for us to try to escape. Grider probably picked the loneliest place he knew of."

She fell in with the idea rather more readily than he could have hoped, and it gave him a freshening interest in her. The women he knew best were not so entirely sensible. During what remained of the forenoon they rambled together in the forest, care-free for the moment and postponing the evil day. In such circumstances their acquaintance grew by leaps and bounds, and when they came back to make a renewed attack upon the provisions, the picnic spirit was still in the saddle.

The afternoon was spent in much the same manner; and in the absence of the conventional restraints, a good many harmless confidences were exchanged. Before the day was ended the young woman had heard the moving story of Prime's struggle for a foothold in the field of letters, a struggle which, he was modest enough to say, was still in the making; and in return she had given her own story, which was commonplace enough – so many years of school, so many in a Middle Western coeducational college, two more of them as a teacher in the girls' school.

"Humdrum, isn't it?" she said. They had made the evening fire, and she was trying to cook two vegetables and the inevitable pan-bread in the one small skillet. "This is my first real adventure. I wish I might know whether I dare enjoy it as much as I'd like to."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Oh, the conventions, I suppose. We can't run fast enough or far enough to get away from them. I am wondering what the senior faculty would say if it could see me just now."

Prime grinned appreciatively. "It would probably shriek and expire."

"Happily it can't see; and to-morrow – surely Mr. Grider will come back for us to-morrow, won't he?"

"We are going to sleep soundly in that comforting belief, anyway. Which reminds me: you will have to have some sort of a place to sleep in. Why didn't I think of that before dark?"

Immediately after supper, and before he would permit himself to roll a cigarette from the diminishing supply of precious tobacco, Prime fell upon his problem, immensely willing but prodigiously inexperienced. At first he thought he would build a shack, but the lack of an axe put that out of the question. Round by round, ambition descended the ladder of necessity, and the result was nothing better than a camper's bed of broken pine twigs sheltered and housed in by a sort of bower built from such tree branches as he could break off by main strength.

The young woman did not withhold her meed of praise, especially after she had seen his blistered hands, which were also well daubed with pitch from the pines.

"It's a shame!" she said. "I ought not to have let you work so hard. If it should happen to rain, you'd need the shelter much more than I should."

"Why do you say that?"

"You don't look so very fit," was the calm reply; "and I *am* fit. Do you know, my one ambition, as a little girl, was to grow up and be an acrobat in a circus?"

"And yet you landed in the laboratory of a girls' school," he laughed.

"Not exclusively," she countered quickly. "Last year I was also an assistant in the gymnasium. Swimming was my specialty, but I taught other things as well."

Prime laughed again. "And I can't swim a single stroke," he confessed. "Isn't that a humiliating admission on the part of a man who has lived the greater part of his life in sight of the ocean?"

Miss Millington said she thought it was, and in such gladsome fashion the evening wore away. When it came time to sleep, the lately risen moon lighted the young woman to her bower; and Prime, replenishing the fire, made his bed in the sand, the unwonted exertions of the day and evening putting him to sleep before he had fairly fitted himself to the inequalities of his burrow below the tree roots.

### III

## SENSIBLE SHOES

The dawn of the second morning was much like that of the first, cool and crystal clear, and with the sun beating out a pathway of molten gold across the mirror-like surface of the solitary lake.

Prime bestirred himself early, meaning to get the breakfast under way single-handed while Miss Millington slept. But the young woman who had described herself as being "fit" had stolen a march upon him. He was frying the bacon when she came skimming up the beach with her hair flying.

"I got up early and didn't want to disturb you," she told him. "There is a splendid swimming place just around that point; I don't know when I've enjoyed a dip more. Wouldn't you like to try it while I dry my hair and make some more of the homicidal bread?"

Prime went obediently and took the required bath, finding the water bracingly cold and scarcely shallow enough to be reassuring to a non-swimmer. Over the breakfast which followed, the picnic spirit still presided, though by now it was beginning to lose a little of the lilt. For one thing, the bacon and the pan-bread, though they were ameliorated somewhat by the tinned things, were growing a trifle monotonous; for another, the limitless expanse of lake and sky and forest gave forth no sign of the hoped-for rescue.

After breakfast they made a careful calculation to determine how long their provisions would last. This, too, was unhelpful. With reasonable economy they might eat through another day. Beyond that lay a chance of famine.

"Surely Grider will come back for us to-day," Prime asserted when Domestic Science had done its best in apportioning the supplies. But at this the young woman shook her head doubtfully.

"I have had time to think," she announced. "It is all a guess, you know – this about Mr. Grider – and the more I think of it the more incredible it seems. Consider a moment. To make the kidnapping possible we must both have been drugged. That is a serious matter – too serious to have a part in the programme of the most reckless practical joker."

Prime looked up quickly. "I might have been drugged very easily. But you?"

The young woman bared a rounded arm to show a minute red dot half-way between wrist and elbow. "I told you about the young woman who stumbled and turned her ankle: when I took hold of her to help her, something pricked my arm. She said it was a pin in the sleeve of her coat and apologized for having been so careless as to leave it there."

Prime looked closely at the red dot.

"A hypodermic needle?" he suggested.

She nodded. "That is why I became so sleepy. And your potion was put in the wine, which you say tasted so bad."

Prime admitted the deduction without prejudice to his belief that Grider was the arch-plotter, saying: "Grider is quite capable of anything, if the notion appealed to him. And, of course, he must have had hired confederates; he couldn't manage it all alone."

"Still," she urged, "it seems to me that we ought to be trying to help ourselves in some way. It doesn't seem defensible just to sit here and wait, on the chance that your guess is going to prove true."

Prime laughed. "You are always and most eminently logical. Where shall we begin?"

"At the geography end of it," she replied calmly. "How far could an aeroplane fly in a single night?"

Prime took time to think about it. He had never had occasion to use a long aeroplane flight in any of his stories; hence the special information was lacking. But common sense and a few figures helped out – so many hours, so many miles an hour, total distance so much.

"Two hundred miles, let us say, as an extreme limit," he estimated, and at this the young woman gave a faint little shriek.

"Two hundred miles! Why, that is as far as from Cincinnati to Lake Erie! Surely we can't be that far from Quebec!"

"I merely mentioned that distance as the limit. We are evidently somewhere deep in the northern woods. I don't know much about the geography of this region – never having had to stage a story in it – but a lake of this size, with miles of marketable timber on its shores, argues one of two things: it is too far from civilization to have yet tempted the lumbermen, or else it has no outlet large enough to admit of logging operations. You may take your choice."

"But two hundred miles!" she gasped. "If some one doesn't come after us, we shall *never* get out alive!"

"That is why I think we ought to wait," said Prime quietly.

So they did wait throughout the entire forenoon, sitting for the most part under the shade of the shore trees, killing time and talking light-heartedly against the grim conclusion that each passing hour was forcing upon them. They contrived to keep it up to and through the noonday *séance* with the cooking fire; but after that the barriers, on the young woman's part, went out with a rush.

"I simply can't stand it any longer," she protested. "We must do something, Mr. Prime. We can at least walk somewhere and carry the bits of provisions along with us. Why should we stay right in this one spot until we starve?"

"I am still clinging to the Grider supposition," Prime admitted. "If we move away from here he might not be able to find us."

"It is only a supposition," she countered quickly. "You accept it, but, while I haven't anything better to offer, I cannot make it seem real."

"If you throw Grider out of it, it becomes an absolutely impossible riddle."

"I know; but everything is impossible. We are awake and alive and lost, and these are the only facts we can be sure of." Then she added: "It will be so much easier to bear if we are only doing something!"

Prime had an uncomfortable feeling that a move would be a definite abandonment of the only reasonable hope; but he had no further argument to adduce, and the preparations for the move were quickly made. Though the young woman was the disbeliever in the Grider hypothesis, it was at her suggestion that Prime wrote a note on the back of a pocket-worn letter and left it sticking in a cleft stake by the waterside; the note advertising the direction they were about to take. They had no plan other than to try to find the lake's outlet, and to this end they laid their course southward along the shore, dividing the small "tote-load" of dunnage at the young woman's insistence.

So long as they had the sandy lake margin for a path, the going was easy, but in a little time the beach disappeared in a rocky shore, with the forest crowding closely upon the water, and they were forced to make a long circuit inland. Still having the protective instinct, Prime "broke trail" handsomely for his companion, but, since he was something less than an athlete, the long afternoon of it told upon him severely; so severely, indeed, that he was glad to throw himself down upon the sands to rest when they finally came back to the lake on the shore of a narrow bay.

"I didn't know before how much I lacked of being a real man," he admitted, stretching himself luxuriously upon his back to stare up into the sunset sky. Then, as if it had just occurred to him: "Say – it must have been something fierce for you."

"I am all right," was the cheerful reply. "But I shall never get over being thankful that I put on a pair of sensible shoes, night before last, to walk to the Heights of Abraham."

After he had rested and was beginning to grow stiff, Prime sat up.

"We can't go much farther before dark; shall we camp here?" he asked.

The young woman shook her head. "We can't see anything from here; it is so shut in. Can't we go on a little farther?"

"Sure," Prime assented, scrambling up and stooping to rub the stiffness out of his calves, and at this the aimless march was renewed, to end definitely a few minutes later at the intake of a stream flowing silently out of the lake to the southeastward; a stream narrow and not too swift, but sufficiently deep to bar their way.

Twilight was stealing softly through the shadowy aisles of the forest when they prepared to camp at the lake-shore edge of the wood. Prime made the camp-fire, and, since the lake water was a little roiled at the outlet mouth, he took one of the empty fruit-tins and crossed the neck of land to the river. Working his way around a thicket of undergrowth, he came upon the stream at a point where the little river, as if gathering itself for its long journey to the sea, spread away in a quiet and almost currentless reach.

Climbing down the bank to fill the tin, he found a startling surprise lying in wait for him. Just below the overhanging bank a large birch-bark canoe, well filled with dunnage, was drawn out upon a tiny beach. His first impulse was to rush back to his companion with the good news that their rescue was at hand; the next was possibly a hand-down from some far-away Indian-dodging ancestor: perhaps it would be well first to find out into whose hands they were going to fall.

The canoe itself told him nothing, and neither did the lading, which included a good store of eatables. There was an air of isolation about the birch-bark which gave him the feeling that it had been beached for some time, and the dry paddles lying inside confirmed the impression. He listened, momentarily expecting to hear sounds betraying the presence of the owners, but the silence of the sombre forest was unbroken save by the lapping of the little wavelets on the near-by lake shore.

Realizing that Miss Millington would be waiting for her bread-mixing water, Prime filled the tin and recrossed the small peninsula.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were lost," said the bread-maker. "Did you have to go far?"

"No, not very far." Then, snatching at the first excuse that offered: "I saw some berries on the river-bank. Let me have the tin again and I'll see if I can't gather a few before it grows too dark."

Having thus given a plausible reason for a longer absence, he went back to the canoe to look in the fading light for tracks in the sand. Now that he made a business of searching for them, he found plenty of them; heelless tracks as if the feet that had made them had been shod with moccasins. A little farther down the stream-side there were broken bushes and a small earth-slide to show where somebody had scrambled up to the forest level. Following the trail he soon found himself in a natural clearing, grass-grown and running back from the river a hundred yards or more. In the centre of this clearing he came upon the ashes of five separate fires, disposed in the form of a rude cross.

Still there was no sign of the canoe-owners themselves, and the discovery of the curiously arranged ash-heaps merely added more mystery to mystery. The fires had been dead for some time. Of this Prime assured himself by thrusting his hand into the ashes. Clearly the camp, if it were a camp, had been abandoned for some hours at least. The gathering dusk warned him that it would be useless to try to track the fire-makers, and he turned to make his way back to the lake shore and supper.

It was in the edge of the glade, under the gloomy shadow of a giant spruce, that he stumbled blindly over some reluctantly yielding obstacle and fell headlong. Regaining his feet quickly with a nameless fear unnerving him, he stooped and groped under the shadowing tree, drawing back horror-stricken when his hand came in contact with the stiffened arm of a corpse.

He had matches in his pocket, and he found one and lighted it. His hand shook so that the match went out and he had to light another. By the brief flare of the second match he saw a double horror. Lying in a little depression between two spreading roots of the spruce were the bodies of two men locked in a death-grip. Another match visualized the tragedy in all its ghastly details. The men were apparently Indians, or half-breeds, and it had been a duel to the death, fought with knives.

## IV IN THE NIGHT

Prime made his way to the camp-fire at the lake edge, a prey to many disturbing emotions. Having lived a life practically void of adventure, the sudden collision with bloody tragedy shocked him prodigiously. Out of the welter of emotions he dug a single fixed and unalterable decision. Come what might, his companion must be kept from all knowledge of the duel and its ghastly outcome.

"Dear me! You look as if you had seen a ghost," was the way the battle of concealment was opened when he came within the circle of firelight. "Did you find any berries?"

Prime shook his head. "No, it was too dark," he said; "and, anyway, I'm not sure there were any."

"Never mind," was the cheerful rejoinder. "We have enough without them, and, really, I am beginning to get the knack of the pan-bread. If you don't say it is better this evening – " She broke off suddenly. He had sat down by the fire and was nursing his knees to keep them from knocking together. "Why, what *is* the matter with you? You are as pale as a sheet."

"I – I stumbled over something and fell down," he explained hesitantly. "It wasn't much of a fall, but it seemed to shake me up a good bit. I'll be all right in a minute or two."

"You are simply tired to death," she put in sympathetically. "The long tramp this afternoon was too much for you."

Prime resented the sympathy. He was not willing to admit that he could not endure as much as she could – as much as any mere woman could.

"I'm not especially tired," he denied; and to prove it he began to eat as if he were hungry, and to talk, and to make his companion talk, of things as far as possible removed from the sombre heart of a Canadian forest.

Immediately after supper he began to build another sleeping-shelter, though the young woman insisted that it was ridiculous for him to feel that he was obliged to do this at every fresh stopping-place. None the less, he persevered, partly because the work relieved him of the necessity of trying to keep up appearances. Fortunately, Miss Millington confessed herself weary enough to go to bed early, and after she left him Prime sat before the fire, smoking the dust out of his tobacco-pouch and formulating his plan for the keeping of the horrid secret.

The plan was simple enough, asking only for time and a sufficient quantity – and quality – of nerve. When he could be sure that his camp-mate was safely asleep he would go back to the glade and dispose of the two dead men in some way so that she would never know of their existence alive or dead.

The waiting proved to be a terrific strain; the more so since the conditions were strictly compelling. The chance to secure the ownerless and well-stocked canoe was by no means to be lost, but Prime saw difficulties ahead. His companion would wish to know a lot of things that she must not be told, and he was well assured that she would have to be convinced of their right to take the canoe before she would consent to be an accomplice in the taking. This meant delay, which in its turn rigidly imposed the complete effacement of all traces of the tragedy. He was waiting to begin the effacement.

By the time his tobacco was gone he was quivering with a nervous impatience to be up and at it and have it over with. After the crackling fire died down the forest silence was unbroken. The young woman was asleep; he could hear her regular breathing. But the time was not yet ripe. The moon had risen, but it was not yet high enough to pour its rays into the tree-sheltered glade, and without its light to aid him the horrible thing he had to do would be still more horrible.

It was nearly midnight when he got up from his place beside the whitening embers of the camp-fire and pulled himself together for the grewsome task. Half-way to the glade a fit of trembling seized him and he had to sit down until it passed. It was immensely humiliating, and he lamented the

carefully civilized pre-existence which had left him so helplessly unable to cope with the primitive and the unusual.

When he reached the glade and the big spruce the moon was shining full upon the two dead men. One of them had a crooking arm locked around the neck of the other. Prime's gorge rose when he found that he had to strain and tug to break the arm-grip, and he had a creeping shock of horror when he discovered that the gripped throat had a gaping wound through which the man's life had fled. In the body of the other man he found a retaliatory knife, buried to the haft, and it took all his strength to withdraw it.

With these unnerving preliminaries fairly over, he went on doggedly, dragging the bodies one at a time to the river-brink. Selecting the quietest of the eddies, and making sure of its sufficient depth by sounding with a broken tree limb, he began a search for weighting-stones. There were none on the river-bank, and he had to go back to the lake shore for them, carrying them an armful at a time.

The weighting process kept even pace with the other ghastly details. The men both wore the belted coats of the northern guides, and he first tried filling the pockets with stones. When this seemed entirely inadequate he trudged back to the abandoned canoe and secured a pair of blankets from its lading. Of these he made a winding-sheet for each of the dead men, wrapping the stones in with the bodies, and making all fast as well as he could with strings fashioned from strips of the blanketing.

All this took time, and before it was finished, with the two stiffened bodies settling to the bottom of the deep pool, Prime was sick and shaken. What remained to be done was less distressing. Going back to the glade he searched until he found the other hunting-knife. Also, in groping under the murder tree he found a small buckskin sack filled with coins. A lighted match showed him the contents – a handful of bright English sovereigns. The inference was plain; the two men had fought for the possession of the gold, and both had lost.

Prime went back to the river and, kneeling at the water's edge, scoured the two knives with sand to remove the blood-stains. That done, and the knives well hidden in the bow of the canoe, he made another journey to the glade and carefully scattered the ashes of the five fires.

Owing to the civilized pre-existence, he was fagged and weary to the point of collapse when he finally returned to the campfire on the lake beach and flung himself down beside it to sleep. But for long hours sleep would not come, and when it did come it was little better than a succession of hideous nightmares in which two dark-faced men were reproachfully throttling him and dragging him down into the bottomless depths of the outlet river.



## V

### A SECRET FOR ONE

Prime awoke unrefreshed at the moment when the morning sun was beginning to gild the tops of the highest trees, to find his campmate up and busying herself housewifely over the breakfast fire.

"You looked so utterly tired and worn out I thought I'd let you sleep as long as you could," she offered. "Are you feeling any better this morning?"

"I'm not sick," he protested, wincing a little in spite of himself in deference to the stiffened thews and sinews.

"You mustn't be," she argued cheerfully. "To-day is the day when we must go back a few thousand years and become Stone-Age people."

"Meaning that the provisions will be gone?"

"Yes."

"There are rabbits," he asserted. "I saw two of them yesterday. Does the domestic-science course include the cooking of rabbits *au voyageur*?"

"It is going to include the cooking of anything we can find to cook. Does the literary course include the catching of rabbits with one's bare hands?"

"It includes an imagination which is better than the possession of many traps and weapons," he jested. "I feel it in my bones that we are not going to starve."

"Let us be thankful to your bones," she returned gayly, and at this Prime felt the grisly night and its horrors withdrawing a little way.

There was more of the cheerful badinage to enliven the scanty breakfast, but there was pathos in the air when Prime felt for his cigarette-papers and mechanically opened his empty tobacco-pouch.

"You poor man!" she cooed, pitying him. "What will you do now?"

Prime had a thought which was only partly regretful. He might have searched in the pockets of the dead men for more tobacco, but it had not occurred to him at the time. He dismissed the thought and came back to the playing of his part in the secret for one.

"The lack of tobacco is a small consideration, when there is so much else at stake," he maintained. "If the Grider guess is the right one, it is evident that something has turned up to tangle it. Unscrupulous as he is in the matter of idiotic jokes, I know him well enough to be sure that he wouldn't leave us here to famish. He is only an amateur aviator, and it is quite within the possibilities that he has wrecked himself somewhere. It seems to me that we ought to take this river for a guide and push on for ourselves. Doesn't it appear that way to you?"

"If we only had a boat of some kind," she sighed. "But even then we couldn't push very far without something to eat."

It was time to usher in the glad surprise, and Prime began to gather up the breakfast leavings. "We'll go over and have a look at the river, anyway," he suggested, and a few minutes later he had led the way across the point of land, and had heard the young woman's cry of delight and relief when she discovered the stranded canoe.

"You knew about this all the time," was her reproachful accusation. "You were over here last night. That is why you had the prophetic bones a little while ago. Why didn't you tell me before?"

He grinned. "At the moment you seemed cheerful enough without the addition of the good news. Do you know what is in that canoe?"

"No."

"Things to eat," he avouched solemnly; "lots of them! More than we could eat in a month."

"But they are not ours," she objected.

"No matter; we are going to eat them just the same."

"You mean that we can hire the owners to take us out of this wilderness? Have you any money?"

"Plenty of it," he boasted, chinking the buckskin bag in his pocket, the finding of which he had, up to this moment, entirely forgotten.

"But where are the owners? I don't see any camp."

"That is one reason why I didn't tell you last night. I found the canoe, but I didn't find anything that looked – er – like a camp."

"Then we shall have to sit down patiently and wait until they come back. They wouldn't go very far away and leave a loaded canoe alone like this, would they?"

Prime gave a furtive side glance at the shadowy pool in the eddy. Truly the canoe-owners had not gone very far, but it was quite far enough. If he could have framed any reasonable excuse for it, he would have urged the immediate borrowing of the canoe, and an equally immediate departure from the spot of grisly associations. Indeed, he did go so far as to suggest it, and was brought up standing, as he more than half expected to be, against Miss Millington's conscience.

"Why, certainly we couldn't do anything like that!" she protested. "It would be highway robbery! We must wait until they return. Surely they won't be gone very long."

There was no help for it except in telling her the shocking truth, and Prime was not equal to that. So he reconciled himself as best he could to the enforced delay, hoping that the tender conscience would not demand too much time.

Almost at once the owner of the conscience suggested that they make a round through the adjoining forest in an attempt to discover the camp of the missing men. Prime acceded cheerfully enough, though he was impatient to examine the canoe-load, in which he was hoping there might prove to be a supply of tobacco. For the better part of the forenoon they quartered the forest around and about between the river and the lake in widening circles, missing nothing but the glade of horrors, which Prime took good care to avoid. At noon they came back to the canoe-landing and made a frugal meal on the remains of their own store of food.

"We are too punctiliously foolish," Prime declared when the second meal without its tobacco aftermath had been endured. "You say we are obliged to wait, and in that case we shall have to borrow, sooner or later. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't begin it now. We can explain everything, you know; and, besides, I have money with which to pay for what we take."

"But your money isn't Canadian money," was the ready objection voiced by the tender conscience.

Prime's laugh did not ring quite true. "That is where you are mistaken," he retorted. "It is good English gold, in sovereigns."

If the young woman were surprised to learn that a man who had expected to motor out of Canada in a day or two at the most had supplied himself with a stock of English sovereigns, she did not question the fact. But for fear she might, Prime went on hastily:

"I always like to be prepared for all kinds of emergencies when I leave home, and this time I wasn't sure just where I was going to bring up, you know – after Grider had changed his mind as to our starting-point."

The evasion served its purpose, and the young woman assented to an immediate examination of the canoe-load. Prime helped her down the steep bank, and they began to rummage, spreading their findings out on the little beach. As Prime had intimated, there was a liberal stock of provisions – jerked deer-meat, smoke-cured bacon, flour, meal, salt, baking-powder, tea, and sugar, but no coffee, a few tins of vegetables, a small sack of potatoes, and, last but not least, a canvas-covered mass of something which they decided was pemmican.

Rummaging further, the precious tobacco came to light – two huge twists of it hidden in the centre of one of the two remaining blanket-rolls. Prime stopped right where he was, crumbled a bit of the dried leaf in his hands, and made a cigarette, his companion looking on with a little lip-curl which might have been of derision or merely of amusement.

"Is it good?" she asked, when he had inhaled the first deep breath.

"It's vile!" he returned. "At the same time, it is so much better than nothing that I could do a Highland fling for pure joy. Take my advice, Miss Millington, and never become a slave to the tobacco habit."

"Miss Millington," she repeated, half musingly. "Doesn't that strike you as being a trifle absurd at this distance from a drawing-room?"

"It surely does," he admitted frankly; "and so, for that matter, does 'Mr. Prime.'"

She looked up at him with a charming little grimace.

"I'll concede the 'Lucetta' if you will concede the 'Donald.'"

"It's a go," he laughed. "It is the last of the conventions, and we'll tell it good-by without a whimper." With the goodly array of foodstuff spread out upon the sand, and with his back carefully turned upon the pool of dread, he felt that he could afford to be light-hearted.

There was only a little more of the rummaging to be done. A canvas-covered roll unslashed from its place beneath a canoe-stay proved to be a square of duck large enough to make a small sleeping-tent. Inside of this roll there was an ample stock of cartridges for the two repeating rifles lying cased in their canvas covers in the bottom of the boat, and an Indian-tanned deerskin used as a wrapping for the ammunition. With the guns there was a serviceable woodsman's axe. In the bow, where Prime had dropped the two savage-looking hunting-knives, there were a few utensils: a teapot, a camper's skillet large enough to be worth while, tin cup and plates, an empty whiskey-bottle, and a basin – the latter presumably for the dough-mixing.

After they had their findings lying on the sand the tender conscience came in play again, and nothing would do but everything must be put back just as they had found it, Prime drawing the line, however, at a portion of the tobacco and enough of the food to serve for supper and breakfast. During the remainder of the afternoon they left the canoe-load undisturbed, but when evening came Prime borrowed the basin, the cups, plates, and the larger skillet. Farther along he borrowed the canvas roll and the axe and set up the tiny sleeping-tent, placing it so that Lucetta, if she were so minded, could see the fire.

Just before she retired the young woman made a generous protest.

"You mustn't do all the borrowing for me," she insisted. "Go right down there and get one of those blanket-rolls for yourself. I shan't sleep a wink if you don't."

The next morning there were more speculations, on the young woman's part, as to the whereabouts of the canoe-owners, with much wonderment at their protracted absence and the singular abandonment of their entire outfit, even to the weapons. Whereat Prime invented all sorts of theories to account for this curious state of affairs, all of them much more ingenious than plausible.

For himself, the mystery was scarcely less unexplainable. Why two men, evidently outfitted for a long journey, should stop by the way, build five fires that were plainly not camp-fires, and then fall to and fight each other to death over a bag of English sovereigns, were puzzles that he did not attempt to solve in his own behalf. It was enough that the facts had befallen, and that the net result for a pair of helpless castaways was a well-stocked canoe which Lucetta's acid-proof honesty was still preventing them from appropriating.

After a breakfast served with the garnishings afforded by the Heaven-sent supplies, Prime uncased the two rifles and looked them over. They were United States products of an early edition, but were apparently serviceable and in good order. In the canvas case of one of the guns there was a packet of fish-lines and hooks. At Lucetta's suggestion a few shots were fired as a signal for the lost canoe-owners. Nothing coming of this, they tried a little target practice, selecting the largest tree in sight for a mark, and both missing it with monotonous regularity. Later in the day Prime brought the talk around by degrees to the expediences. How much of the present good weather must they waste in waiting for the hypothetical return of the absentees? Perhaps some accident had happened; perhaps the absentees would never turn up. Who could tell?

Domestic Science, with gymnasium-teaching on the side, fought the suggestion to which all this pointed. They had no manner of right to take the canoe and its belongings without the consent of the owners. What was the hurry? By waiting they would be sure to obtain the help they were needing, and another day or two must certainly end the suspense.

Prime went as far as he could without telling the shocking truth. With the dead men's pool so near at hand he was shudderingly anxious to be gone, but the young woman's logic was unanswerable and the delay was extended. A single small advance marked this second day. Along toward evening Prime unloaded the canoe, and together they made a few heroic attempts to acquire the art of paddling. It was apparently a lost art so far as they were concerned. The big birch-bark, lightened of its load, did everything but what it was expected to do, yawing and careening under the unskilful handling in a most disconcerting manner.

"If I could only rig up some way to row the thing!" Prime exclaimed, when they had contrived to drift and seesaw half a mile or more down the almost currentless first reach of the stream.

"You couldn't," asserted the more practical young woman. "The sides are as thin as paper, and they wouldn't hold rowlocks if you could make them. Besides, who ever heard of rowing a birch-bark canoe?"

"Somebody will hear of it, if I ever live to work this vacation trip of ours into a story – No, no; paddle the other way! We want to turn around and go back!"

They got the hang of it a little better after a while, the young woman catching the knack first; and after much labor they won back to their camping-place on the small peninsula. Over the evening fire Prime unwrapped the deerskin they had found in the canvas-roll.

"We shall have to have moccasins of some sort," he announced. "That flimsy boat isn't going to stand for shoes with heels on them. Does domestic science include a semester in shoemaking? I can assure you in advance that literature doesn't."

Lucetta took the leather and sat for a time regarding it thoughtfully. "No needle, no thread, no pattern," she mused. "And if we cut it and spoil it there won't be enough left for two pairs."

"If you have an idea, try it; I'll stand the expense of the leather," chuckled Prime, with large liberality.

But now the young woman was hesitating on another score.

"This leather belongs to the owners of the canoe; I don't know that we have any right to cut it," she objected.

Prime was tempted to say things objurgatory of these phantom owners who would not down, but he didn't. Every fresh reference to the two dead men gave him an impulse to glance over his shoulder at the silent pool in the eddy, and the longer the thing went on the less able he was to control the prompting.

"You forget that we are able to pay for all damages," was what he really did say, and at that the young woman removed a shoe, placed a neatly stockinged foot on the skin and marked around it with a bit of charcoal taken from the fire, leaving a generous margin. Borrowing Prime's pocket-knife she cut to the line, made tiny buttonholes all around the piece, and threaded them with a drawing-string made of the soft leather.

"You've got it!" exclaimed the unskilled one in open-eyed admiration, after the one-piece slipper was fashioned and tried on. "You are a wonder! I shouldn't have thought of that in a month of Sundays. It's capital!"

There was enough material in the single skin to make the two pairs, with something left over, and Prime put his on at once with a sigh of relief born of the grateful chance to get rid of the civilized shoes. Past that there was more talk about the ever-thickening mysteries, and again Lucetta refused to accept the Grider explanation, while Prime clung to it simply because he could not invent any other. Yet it was borne in upon him that the mystery was edging away from the Grider hypothesis in spite of all he could do. There was nothing to connect the two canoemen, fighting over the purse of

gold, with Grider, or with the abduction of a school-teacher and a writer of stories; yet there were pointings here, too, if one might read them. Why were the five fires lighted in the glade unless it were for a signal of some sort? Prime wished from the bottom of his heart that he could set the keen mentality of his companion at work on this latest phase of the mystery, but with the dead men lying stiff and still at the bottom of their pool less than a stone's throw away, his courage failed him and his lips were sealed.

## VI CANOEEDLINGS

On the fifth morning – their third at the peninsula camp – Prime registered a solemn vow to make this the last day of the entirely unnecessary delay. More and more he was tormented by the fear that the dead men might escape from their weightings and rise to become a menace to Lucetta's sanity or his own; and, though he had been given the best possible proof that his companion was above reproach in the matter of calm courage and freedom from hysteria, he meant to take no chances – for her or for himself.

At his suggestion they began the day by making another essay at the paddling, embarking in the emptied canoe shortly after breakfast. Gaining a little facility after an hour or so, they headed the birch-bark downstream past the point which they had reached the previous afternoon, and soon found themselves in a quickening current. Prime, kneeling in the bow, gave the word, and Lucetta obeyed it.

"We'll try the quick water," he flung back to her. "We'll have to have the experience, and we had better get it with the empty canoe, rather than with the load."

This seemed logical, but it led to results. In a short time the shores grew rocky and there was no safe place to land. Moreover, the little river was now running so swiftly that they were afraid to try to turn around. Rapid after rapid was passed in vain struggles to stop the triumphal progress, and if the canoe's lading had been aboard, Prime would have been entirely happy, since every rapid they shot was taking them farther away from the scene of the tragedy. But the lading was not aboard.

"We've got to do something to head off this runaway!" the bowman shouted back over his shoulder in one of the quieter raceways. "We're leaving our commissary behind."

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