

## THE LAW OF THE LAKES

By J. Olivier Curwood

McEWEN had fought like ten men. The crew stood back, cowed and bleeding, and McEwen rested on his capstan-bar. He had done murder, and he knew that he was at the climax of his misfortunes. But he had meted out vengeance in full measure, and though the stings of regret were coming with a cooler realization of what men would call his crime, his whole being still throbbled with the primal instinct that had called upon him to become the messenger of a good but unreasoning justice. The dead man at his feet had been a sinning thing, a coveter of that which every man holds precious unto himself. McEwen was glad that he had killed him. For an instant the little woman behind him had been glad, too. This was McEwen's wife.

Now there was quiet where had been the strife of battle. Seven men had struggled with McEwen, and six of them, their hearts filled with sympathy, rested for the command of the seventh, who lay only partly conscious upon the deck. This seventh was the captain. McEwen had struck him hard, and the face of the woman was filled with hatred as she looked upon the great bulk of the master in his defeat. She came up to the man who was her husband and took one of his naked arms between her hands, the light of a great love shining in her eyes. McEwen's wife was almost beautiful. Now, when the world had come to look its blackest to the man whose life had been indissolubly mixed with misfortune, it was she who had innocently edged him on to final ruin. The knowledge was slowly coming to him as he waited for the next attack. His eyes gleamed with the fire of an animal longing, and he took one step toward the prostrate captain to measure over again the justice which was due to two, but which

had emptied itself unsparingly upon the head of one. But the woman was before him. She turned her back upon the crew and twined one of her arms around the man's neck. With her other hand she drew his head down until it rested upon her shoulder. When men came up behind him the desire for vengeance had gone out of McEwen. Not a sound fell from his lips as the ship's irons were snapped over his wrists. Soothed into submission by the touch of the one for whom he had given his life, he walked quietly with his captors to the little cabin that had been his wife's, and there, with the door barred behind them, the two were left alone.

It was a long time before either the woman or the man spoke. McEwen seated himself and his companion kneeled silently and held his manacled hands close to her. As darkness slowly hid her husband's face she crept up to him until her cold, wet cheek rested against his own.

"Don't cry," he whispered. "You weren't to blame—you couldn't be!" There was supreme faith in his voice.

"I struck him!" cried the woman. "O, I struck him hard, Jim!" She laid her head upon the man's knees and sobbed. "Oh, Jim—Jim—I'd give my life if I hadn't told you!"

"No—no—it was right," replied McEwen. "I am to blame, little girl—only me. I knew Hendricks—I knew the captain—I was a fool for bringing you on a trip with them. I could stand their eying you, an' smiling, but when Hendricks came upon you forr'd, like a sneak, and insulted—"

"I hit him—I hit him!" sobbingly interrupted the woman.

"Yes, you hit him. I know you hit him hard," said the man.

His wife slipped up between his arms

and McEwen pressed her to him until the irons on his wrist hurt her back. "But I hit 'im harder," he added, grimly. "I hit 'im considerable harder. And I'm glad!"

"Jim—Jim"—pleaded the woman.

"Yes; I'm glad," repeated the man, doggedly. "But I'm sorry for you, Anne. There was a time when I thought the



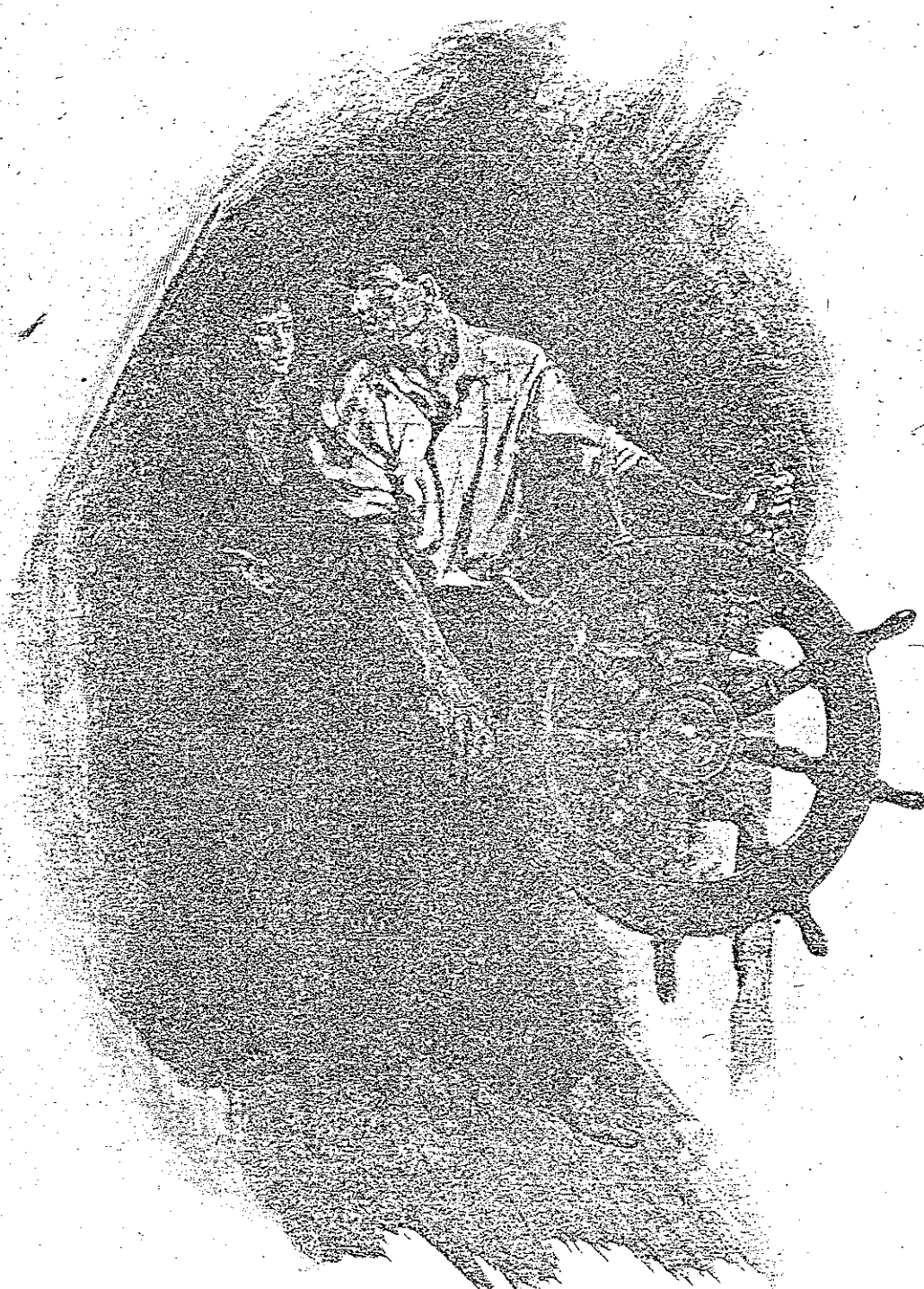
THE CREW STOOD BACK AND McEWEN RESTED ON HIS CAPSTAN-BAR

worst had happened. That was when little Jim died. Then I lost my ship, my berth, and had to turn common seaman to keep you from starving. I've always been unlucky, and now—"

McEwen caught himself, and his wife did not question. Hours afterward the woman knocked on the barred door, and the man on watch let her out. It was nearly midnight, but a light was burning brightly in the captain's cabin. McEwen's wife took a few steps toward it, then hesitated and turned into the shadow of the galley. Only a few faint gleams of the stern-lights streaked the gloom of the afterdeck, and into this she walked silently and leaned over the rail of the ship. For a long time she gazed out into the blackness of the sea. Now and then over this highway of the lakes there glimmered faintly the lights of other ships, and far astern she saw a glowing, ever-changing eye that guarded a point of the Michigan wilderness, winking at her, it seemed, like a ball of fire behind lids constantly opening and closing. Behind that light the woman knew there lay the stillness and the peace of a land unclaimed by human strife, and into her heart there came a longing to reach over into it and to take with her the ironed man she had left back in the little cabin. As she thought of the restfulness there, amid the forests that breathed of good will to all living things, the great red eye winked and winked at her, and each time, as the hurrying ship left it farther behind, it seemed to call to her more eagerly, yet with growing hopelessness. At last it sank behind a forest headland, but even then a last reflection flashed up into the sky, and when that was gone the woman buried her head in her arms and sobbed and listened to the gurgling music of the running water in the ship's wake. After a little she slipped out among the shadows of the deck and approached a broad-backed figure that was leaning over the wheel of the schooner.

"Mr. Williams, can I talk with you—just a minute, please?" she asked.

The man turned and lifted his lantern as McEwen's wife came up into the light.



"MR. WILLIAMS, CAN I TALK WITH YOU JUST A MINUTE, PLEASE?" SHE ASKED

In the struggle that day the woman had seen him protect her husband from a vicious blow of the captain's, as if by accident, and she had confidence in him.

"I want to thank you," she said. "I want to thank you for—for not hurting him."

The wheelman lowered his lantern from the white, beautiful face of the woman and turned the wick down so that it left them almost in darkness.

"I saw what you did," she added. "You don't blame him, then?"

"No," growled the sailor. He looked suspiciously in the direction of the captain's lighted cabin. "By damn, I'd almost done it myself—for Betsy!"

"Betsy is your wife?"

The wheelman nodded and sucked his pipe audibly. For a few moments the two stood silent, looking out into the blackness that hung over the sea ahead.

"You think—there's no hope?" faltered McEwen's wife.

Williams had expected this. He answered equivocally.

"We're bound for Buff'lo. If it was Detroit, or Algonac—" he stopped, hoping that the other would understand.

"What difference does it make where we're bound for?" she persisted, laying a hand upon his arm.

The sailor sucked harder at the stem of his pipe. He drove the schooner a point out of her course to busy himself, then brought her slowly back, and thought hard as he worked. "Well, it means this," he finally said, cornered. "If a ship was just leavin' Duluth an' I was to kill a man, 'r c'mmit piracy, I'd be punished by the state for which we was bound, even if the port was a thousand miles away. It's the law o' the lakes."

"I understand—I understand!" moaned the woman. "In New York—they—kill—"

"And in Michigan they don't," said Williams.

Mrs. McEwen's hand dropped from

his arm. For a few moments she stood with bowed head, and Williams, with a thick feeling in his throat, thought that she was crying. But when she spoke to him again her voice was so firm that it startled him.

"You've been kind, Mr. Williams. I'll always think of it," she said, and walked in the direction of the captain's cabin, this time boldly.

"God help me," she whispered to herself. "Oh, I'll do it, Jim; I'll do it—I'll do it!" For a moment she paused beside the captain's door, as if still lacking a little of the courage she would need in the trial before her. Then she knocked, her little fist beating firmly against the oak panel, and Williams heard the thick, drunken voice of the master as he called for her to enter. For an hour after that the wheelman watched and listened closely, determined to rush to the woman's assistance should she call for it. But he heard no sounds, and only once did he see a figure through the lighted window, and that so indistinctly that he could not tell whether it was the captain or McEwen's wife. At the end of the hour the cabin door was opened and Mrs. McEwen reappeared. Her face was flushed with excitement, and in her eyes there was a dazzling fire which the captain did not understand as he looked down into them.

"Then you don't understand what I mean, Captain?" she whispered, pausing and looking up at the man in the lighted doorway. "I wish you could—Oh, I wish you could!" She clenched her hands, and a look of pathetic helplessness filled her face. Williams saw it and grinned. He could not hear what she was saying, but his faith in the honor of McEwen's wife was strong, and he knew that she was fighting, fighting hard. "Oh, I wish you could!" the woman whispered again, so tremulously that she seemed on the point of crying. "Don't you see? Jim has always made life miserable for me, and—I—I—want you to get rid of him, but you





Drawing by J. W. Norton

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THE SAILORS STARED AT HER BOLDLY

mustn't kill him! Can't you see what I mean now?" she cried, desperately. "I want you to give him a chance, that's all—a chance to kill himself!"

Before the captain could detain her she turned and ran quickly across the deck of the schooner toward the little cabin. When the watch admitted her into McEwen's prison he smiled in a way that was not pleasant, and the woman felt like striking him. She knew that this man, and Williams as well, had seen her come from the captain's cabin, and that the next day stories of her visit would be common among the crew. Her face burned with mingled excitement, triumph and shame as she pressed it for a moment against her husband's rough cheek. But now she could talk hopefully, and she described to the condemned man the things they would do when he was free. She told him of the light on the edge of the Michigan wilderness, how it had seemed to call to her, and how he and she might bury themselves in the great pine forests and live there peacefully, as others had done and were doing. She described the happy visions she had seen in her dreams when he was away at sea, visions of a hundred Arcadias waiting for them in the vast, unsettled northland, where summer was sweet with the fragrance of flowers and the song of birds, and the still, white winter was always filled with the peace of the wild. Until the first light of dawn came in at the little cabin window she added fuel to the spark of hope that was beginning to burn in the man's breast.

This morning McEwen's wife made her toilet with more than usual care. She was a little pale and there were shadows under her eyes, but when she came on deck her hair glowed red-gold in the early sun and her eyes shone with unnatural brightness. She guessed that her visit to the captain was already known among the men. The sailors stared at her boldly, and the seaman who had taken the place of the dead mate approached her and

smilingly asked if she was ready for breakfast.

"I am going to take breakfast in the captain's cabin," she replied. "Will you tell Captain Jenks that I am ready?"

Her authority confused the mate. If Captain Jenks was subject to the authority of this woman it behooved him to act with propriety, and he dropped a few words of warning to his mates as he carried Mrs. McEwen's message to the skipper. The developments of the day showed that his judgment was right. McEwen's wife not only breakfasted in the captain's cabin; she took complete possession of its occupant, and when the two came out upon the deck she clung to the man's arm with an astonishing air of ownership. During the whole of the morning the two were continually together, with the exception of brief intervals which the woman spent in the prisoner's cabin. At noon the two dined together. A little later Mrs. McEwen reappeared alone. Her face was flushed with excitement, her eyes sparkled with triumph. She tried vainly to hide her emotion as she hurried to her husband. Williams, who saw her, knew that she had achieved something which meant much to her and to the shackled man in the little cabin. She flashed the news to him with her eyes as she passed, but Williams was too dull to comprehend in detail, so he fell to-guessing. That afternoon Captain Jenks called him into his cabin.

"You're at the wheel from twelve until two to-night, ain't you, Williams?" he asked.

"Yessir," replied the sailor.

"Well, you needn't report until one o'clock. And see here, Williams—". The giant captain stood up and placed both hands upon the seaman's broad shoulders. "There ain't no use of gossiping about a little change like this, is there? Take a reef in your jaw, Williams—an' hold it! Understand?" The sailor returned to his duty, filled with mystery, and with a feeling in him that something stupendous de-

pended upon his silence—something that in some way had to do with the welfare of the little woman who he knew was plotting. Once he asked himself if it was possible that Mrs. McEwen had turned traitor to her husband, but he immediately growled out a curse at himself for having allowed such a thought to enter his head.

McEwen's wife remained with her husband all of the afternoon. Captain Jenks showed no anxiety to see her, and even evaded as much as possible that part of the ship where the prisoner's cabin was situated. Toward evening the woman came on deck again and went into the stern of the schooner. Until the ship's lights began to glow in the gathering darkness she amused herself by throwing crumbs of iron ore into the bottom of a skiff that was dragging behind the vessel. At first she missed frequently. Ten—twenty—thirty times, and her judgment became more accurate. Then she closed her eyes, and with tragic earnestness tossed the bits of ore blindly. She counted, missing once out of three, once out of five, and at last only once out of ten times. She was still practising when the captain came up and stood beside her at the rail.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He leaned over and looked down into the bottom of the boat. The woman laughed as she called his attention to the little pieces of ore.

"I've tossed seventy pieces out of a hundred in there," she cried. "I'll wager you couldn't do it, Captain!" She gave her companion a handful of ore and watched him with apparent earnestness as he measured the distance. When he missed twice out of ten throws she clapped her hands and laughed. In a moment she became sober as the cook approached to inquire where she would have her supper.

"With my husband, please," she said. "And send supper for half a dozen. I'm ravenously hungry. Captain, tell him to bring us double allowance, will you?"

She appealed to the skipper, who reiterated the order.

"I was hoping that you would take supper with me," he said, as the cook turned away.

"You know it is the last time," replied the woman, drawing back slightly as he came nearer her.

"Are you sure it is the last?" questioned the captain. "Are you sure that—"

"I'm absolutely certain," interrupted Mrs. McEwen, with a shudder. "Jim knows that he has got to die. But he fears the kind of death—and the disgrace—to me." Unconsciously the woman's voice became almost tender. But she hardened it in a moment. "Ugh-h-h! He talks of it in such a cold-blooded way—and I agree with him in everything. He thinks that it will save me trouble if he kills himself before we arrive at Buffalo. So when you give him his liberty for a few minutes to stretch his legs, as he calls it, he is going to take advantage of the opportunity and jump overboard. This afternoon he said that he was glad you weren't going to take his irons off, for he'd drown quicker with them on. Oh, yes—he'll do it!"

The man came nearer, and in the semi-gloom he stretched out an arm. The woman drew suddenly back, but naturally, as if she did not see it. "I'm going back to Ji—to the cabin, now," she said. "You won't see me again until to-morrow. I'll pretend that I am asleep when you unlock the door, and he won't awaken me. Good night." She slipped out of the captain's reach and was gone before he could move to detain her.

A few minutes after she had rejoined her husband the cook was admitted with their supper. Mrs. McEwen ate lightly, and several times during the course of the meal she cautioned her husband to be more sparing with the food. After they had finished she took what remained of bread and meat and wrapped it in a piece of cloth. The half dozen potatoes the cook

had brought she put in a paper bag. Every scrap of food, even to bread crumbs, she collected and hid away. When the cook returned for the dishes an hour later he made no attempt to conceal his astonishment. The prisoner grinned at him good-naturedly. Mrs. McEwen smiled at him. "I know you think we're—we're pigs," she laughed. "But we were so hungry, and your supper was awfully good."

After that the hours passed slowly. Once the woman drew a small file from inside her dress and showed it to McEwen, and the two laughed happily. Again and again the prisoner drew his fingers over its rough edge, and each time he smiled more confidently.

"I wish I might try it just a little on the under side, Jim," begged his wife, but the man shook his head and nodded suspiciously toward the door.

After ten o'clock the woman at times thought the hands of McEwen's watch had stopped. She laid the timepiece in the light of the cabin lamp and until eleven kept her eyes almost constantly upon it. Then she extinguished the light, and in the thick darkness crept up close to her husband. The man bent to whisper to her, but she stopped him by placing a hand over his mouth. One by one she counted off the seconds to herself. A hundred—two hundred—three hundred, and up to five times three hundred she measured the time. Then she quietly slipped out from between McEwen's arms and tiptoed to her bunk. Again she counted, until she knew that the hour was almost gone. She strained her ears now to catch the sounds of the ship. Once she thought she heard footsteps. For a few minutes after that there was absolute silence, and then there came the fumbling of a hand at the cabin door. Trembling with excitement the woman half raised herself until she was sure that the man had come and gone.

"Jim," she whispered.

McEwen came to her. For a few moments the woman lay with her head upon his breast and her arms around him. Then she pushed him gently away, and the shackled man walked to the door and opened it. McEwen could discern no sign of life on deck, with the exception of a shadow at the wheel, which he knew was the captain. So he walked out boldly and passed into the bow where he could conceal himself from the eyes of the man aft. Hardly had he disappeared when Mrs. McEwen followed him and crept cautiously out into the deep shadow of the cabin. There she crouched, eagerly watching the figure at the wheel. The knowledge that the captain had thus far lent himself to her plot almost overwhelmed her. She could see that he was alone and that part of the ship's lights were extinguished. Amidships the vessel was buried in deep gloom. The darkness hung like a wall between her and the dimly-lit stern, where stood the man; and the woman knew that through this the captain was watching the exposed part of the forward deck. Foot by foot she crawled aft, until from the protection of a hatch in the outer edge of the blackness of the midship deck she could look upon the wheelman and almost hear him breathe. Once or twice she dared to move that she might look back into the schooner's bow. The first time she saw her husband leaning over the rail of the ship; the second, he had disappeared. When she turned to the captain again he had left the wheel and was coming quietly up into the gloom. With her face pressed upon the deck and her throbbing heart almost bursting with mingled fear and hope, McEwen's wife heard him pass within a few feet of her. Face to face with the crucial moment she rose to her feet and darted across the illumined space that lay between her and the darkness of the stern, her bare feet falling noiselessly upon the deck. For the fraction of a minute she stood poised over the after rail. Once—



twice—three times she tossed objects into the blackness of the sea, and each time, as she heard them drop into the bottom of the boat dragging behind, she thanked providence for the impulse that had urged her to practise with the crumbs of ore. Then she sought the tow-line, and with a prayer upon her lips climbed over the edge of the ship. An inch at a time she lowered herself until she felt the wash of the sea about her feet. The rope cut into her tender hands, but as the water came higher she gripped the line still more determinedly. Gradually the water came to her knees, and she groped with one hand for the boat. She could just touch it, and sank to her waist before she could reach over into it. With a supreme effort she raised herself out of the sea, pulling on the taut line with one arm and lifting on the gunwale with the other, until, dripping and exhausted, she fell headlong into the skiff. For a brief interval she rested. Then, drawing a knife from her bosom, she crouched in the bottom of the skiff and waited, with her eyes on the rail of the ship towering above her.

From the bow of the schooner McEwen, peering into the after deck, had seen Captain Jenks leave the wheel and his wife run into the stern. Now he walked slowly back along the starboard rail, while from the ship's center of gloom the captain eyed him like a wolf. Several times McEwen half climbed over the vessel's side, and each time slipped back, as if lacking the nerve to launch himself into

the sea. Gradually he approached the stern. The master of the ship followed stealthily, cursing under his breath at the other's cowardice and with the desire growing in him to come up behind McEwen and end it all himself. For several minutes the shackled man stood leaning over the aft rail. The captain watched him closely and thought he saw him motioning with his ironed hands. He crept nearer, as McEwen raised himself, and like an animal prepared to rush upon him if he faltered this time. But there was something terribly deliberate about McEwen's actions now. He climbed upon the rail, and for a full half minute stood poised there. Suddenly he leaped out into the blackness that hung over the sea, and the man on deck could hear the plunge of his body in the wash behind. Without a shudder at the tragedy he had witnessed the master of the ship returned to the wheel, lit his pipe and waited for Williams.

Out in the darkness the schooner's skiff was drifting. In it was McEwen's wife, pulling frantically at a rope which was dragging something up out of the sea. Soon a man appeared at the edge of the craft, like a fish at the end of a line, and two helpless hands, with iron cuffs about their wrists, were held up to the woman. Shortly after this there were two people in the little skiff, and the joyful sobs of a woman mingled with the tender love-talk of a man in the peaceful quiet of the night.

