

Then she went to another part of the art department. Fifteen minutes later Dawson called her:

"I say, you made a bad mistake here."

"I know it."

"You—" cried the girl.

"I mixed them on purpose," interrupted No. 28.

"It's lucky for me you did," grinned Dawson.

No. 28 looked at the girl.

"It isn't a pleasant feeling when one thinks somebody's going far away without saying 'good-by'—and something else, is

it?" said the girl behind the counter, her eyes suspiciously moist. "I was afraid, too, but—" and No. 28 interrupted herself, smiling and holding up her left hand to show the little diamond that sparkled on her third finger.

The girl at Dawson's side flushed and looked down.

To the art department, a month later, there came a small registered parcel. It contained a heavy gold locket with "No. 28" engraved on the front and two pictures in it—photographs of Mr. and Mrs. John W. Dawson.

The Other Man's Wife

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

THORNTON wasn't the sort of man in whom you'd expect to find the devil lurking. He was big, blond, and broad-shouldered. When we first saw him we thought he was an Englishman. That was at the post at Lac la Biche, six hundred miles north of civilization. Scotty and I had been mapping out timber-lines for the government, and for more than six months we hadn't seen a real white man who looked like home.

We came in late at night, and the factor gave us a room in his house. When we looked out of our window in the morning, we saw a little shack about a hundred feet away, and in front of that shack was Thornton, only half dressed, stretching himself in the sun, and *laughing*. There wasn't anything to laugh at, but we could see his teeth shining white, and he grinned every minute while he went through a sort of setting-up exercise.

When you begin to analyze a man, there is always some one human trait that rises above all others, and that laugh was Thornton's. Even the wolfish sledge-dogs at the post would wag their tails when they heard it.

We soon established friendly relations, but I could not get very far beyond the laugh. Indeed, Thornton was a mystery. DeBar, the factor, said that he had dropped into the post six months before, with a pack on his back and a rifle over his shoulder. He had no business, apparently. He was not a prospector, and it was only now and then

that he used his fine Marlin, and then only to shoot at marks.

One thing puzzled DeBar more than all else. Thornton worked like three men about the post, cutting the winter fire-wood, helping to catch and clean the tons of whitefish which were stored away for the dogs in the company's ice-houses, and doing other things without end. For this he refused all payment except his rations.

Scotty continued eastward to Churchill, and for seven weeks I bunked with Thornton in the shack. At the end of those seven weeks I knew little more about Thornton than at the beginning. I never had a closer or more congenial chum, and yet in his conversation he never got beyond the big woods, the mountains, and the tangled swamps. He was educated and a gentleman, and I knew that in spite of his brown face and arms, his hard muscles and splendid health, he was three-quarters tenderfoot. But he loved the wilderness.

"I never knew what life could hold for a man until I came up here, Forsythe," he said to me one day, his gray eyes dancing in the light of a glorious sunset. "I'm ten years younger than I was two years ago."

"You've been two years in the north?"

"A year and ten months," he replied.

Something brought to my lips the words that I had forced back a score of times.

"What brought you up here, Thornton?"

"Two things," he said quietly; "a woman—and a scoundrel."

He said no more, and I did not press the

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matter. There was a strange tremble in his voice, something that I took to be a note of sadness; but when he turned from the sunset to me his eyes were filled with a yet stranger joy, and his big, boyish laugh rang out with such wholesome infectiousness that I laughed with him, in spite of myself.

That night, in our shack, he produced a tightly bound bundle of letters about six inches thick, scattered them out before him on the table, and began reading them at random, while I sat bolstered back in my bunk, smoking and watching him. He was a curious study. Every little while I'd hear him chuckling and rumbling, his teeth a gleam, and between these times he'd grow serious. Once I saw tears rolling down his cheeks.

He puzzled me; and the more he puzzled me, the better I liked him. Every night for a week he spent an hour or two reading those letters over and over again. I had a dozen opportunities to see that they were a woman's letters; but he never offered a word of explanation.

With the approach of September, I made preparations to leave for the south, by way of Moose Factory and the Albany.

"Why not go the shorter way—by the Reindeer Lake water route to Prince Albert?" asked Thornton. "If you'll do that, I'll go with you."

His proposition delighted me, and we began planning for our trip. From that hour there came a curious change in Thornton. It was as if he had come into contact with some mysterious dynamo that had charged him with a strange nervous energy. We were two days in getting our stuff ready, and the night between he did not go to bed at all, but sat up reading the letters, smoking, and then reading over again what he had read half a hundred times before.

I was pretty well hardened, but during the first week of our canoe trip he nearly had me bushed a dozen times. He insisted on getting away before dawn, laughing, singing, and talking, and urged on the pace until sunset. I don't believe that he slept two hours a night. Often, when I woke up, I'd see him walking back and forth in the moonlight, humming softly to himself. There was almost a touch of madness in it all; but I knew that Thornton was sane.

One night—our fourteenth down—I awoke a little after midnight, and as usual looked about for Thornton. It was a glorious night. There was a full moon over

us, and with the lake at our feet, and the spruce and balsam forest on each side of us, the whole scene struck me as one of the most beautiful I had ever looked upon.

When I came out of our tent, Thornton was not in sight. Away across the lake I heard a moose calling. Back of me an owl hooted softly, and from miles away I could hear faintly the howling of a wolf. The night sounds were broken by my own startled cry as I felt a hand fall, without warning, upon my shoulder. It was Thornton. I had never seen his face as it looked just then.

"Isn't it beautiful—glorious!" he cried softly.

"It's wonderful!" I said. "You won't see this down there, Thornton!"

"Nor hear those sounds," he replied, his hand tightening on my arm. "Forsythe, we're pretty close to God up here, aren't we? She'll like it—I'll bring her back!"

"She!"

He looked at me, his teeth shining in that wonderful, silent laugh.

"I'm going to tell you about it, Forsythe," he said. "I can't keep it in any longer. Let's go down by the lake."

We walked down and seated ourselves on the edge of a big rock.

"I told you that I came up here because of a woman—and a man," continued Thornton. "Well, I did. The man and woman were husband and wife, and I—"

He interrupted himself with one of his chuckling laughs. There was something in it that made me shudder.

"No use to tell you that I loved her," he went on. "I worshiped her. She was my life. And I believe she loved me as much. I might have added that there was a third thing that drove me up here—what remained of the rag end of a man's honor."

"I begin to understand," I said, as he paused. "You came up here to get away from the woman. But this woman—her husband—"

For the first time since I had known him I saw a flash of anger leap into Thornton's face. He struck his hand against the rock.

"Her husband was a scoundrel, a brute who came home from his club drunk, a cheap money-spender, a man who wasn't fit to wipe the mud from her little feet, much less call her wife! He ought to have been shot. I can see it, now; and—well, I might as well tell you. I'm going back to her!"

"You are?" I cried. "Has she got a divorce? Is her husband still living?"

"No, she hasn't got a divorce, and her husband is still living; but for all that, we've arranged it. Those were her letters I've been reading, and she'll be at Prince Albert waiting for me on the 15th—three days from now. We shall be a little late, and that's why I'm hustling so. I've kept away from her for two years, but I can't do it any longer—and she says that if I do she'll kill herself. So there you have it. She's the sweetest, most beautiful girl in the whole world—eyes the color of these blue flowers you have up here, brown hair, and—but you've got to see her when we reach Prince Albert. You won't blame me for doing all this, then!"

I had nothing to say. At my silence he turned toward me suddenly, with that happy smile of his, and said again:

"I tell you that you won't blame me when you see her, Forsythe. You'll envy me, and you'll call me a confounded fool for staying away so long. It has been terribly hard for both of us. I'll wager that she's no sleeper than I am to-night, just from knowing that I'm hurrying to her."

"You're pretty confident," I could not help sneering. "I don't believe I'd wager much on such a woman. To be frank with you, Thornton, I don't care to meet her, so I'll decline your invitation. I've a little wife of my own, as true as steel, and I'd rather keep out of an affair like this. You understand?"

"Perfectly," said Thornton, and there was not the slightest ill-humor in his voice. "You—you think I am a cur?"

"If you have stolen another man's wife—yes."

"And the woman?"

"If she is betraying her husband, she is no better than you."

Thornton rose and stretched his long arms above his head.

"Isn't the moon glorious?" he cried exultantly. "She has never seen a moon like that, Forsythe. She has never seen a world like this. Do you know what we're going to do? We'll come up here and build a cabin, and—and she'll know what a real man is at last! She deserves it, Forsythe. And we'll have you up to visit us—you and your wife—two months out of each year. But then"—he turned and laughed squarely into my face—"you probably won't want your wife to know her."

"Probably not," I said, not without embarrassment.

"I don't blame you a bit, Forsythe," he exclaimed, and before I could draw back he had caught my hand and was shaking it hard in his own. "Let's be friends a little longer, old man," he went on. "I know you'll change your mind about the little girl and me when we reach Prince Albert."

I didn't go to sleep again that night; and the half-dozen days that followed were unpleasant enough—for me, at least. In spite of my own coolness toward him, there was absolutely no change in Thornton. Not once did he make any further allusion to what he had told me.

As we drew near to our journey's end, his enthusiasm and good spirits increased. He had the bow end of the canoe, and I had abundant opportunity of watching him. It was impossible not to like him, even after I knew his story.

We reached Prince Albert on a Sunday, after three days' travel in a buckboard. When we drove up in front of the hotel, there was just one person on the long veranda looking out over the Saskatchewan. It was a woman, reading a book.

As he saw her, I heard a great breath heave up inside Thornton's chest. The woman looked up, stared for a moment, and then dropped her book with a welcoming cry such as I had never heard before in my life. She sprang down the steps, and Thornton leaped from the wagon. They met there a dozen paces from me, Thornton catching her in his arms, and the woman clasping her arms about his neck.

I heard her sobbing, and I saw Thornton kissing her again and again, and then the woman pulled his big blond head down close to her face. It was sickening, knowing what I did, and I began helping the driver to throw off our dunnage.

In about two minutes I heard Thornton calling to me.

"Ho, Forsythe! Forsythe!"

I didn't turn my head. Then Thornton came to me, and as he straightened me around by the shoulders I caught a glimpse of the woman. He was right—she was very beautiful. Thornton laughed into my eyes for a full half minute.

"Forsythe," he said gently, "I told you that her husband was a scoundrel and a rake. Well, he was—and I was that scoundrel! I came up here for a chance of redeeming myself, and your big, glorious north has made a man of me. Forsythe, will you come and meet my wife?"

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