

Bookman

February 1921

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JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD AND HIS FAR NORTH

BY RAY LONG

AS a general rule writers and editors want to discuss anything but their work when they are on a holiday. Emerson Hough is fond of telling an incident of one of his trips into Alaska. He and his guide had made camp for the night. Emerson had relaxed beside the fire and was saying to himself, "Thank God I have finally found one place where no one is going to ask me for advice about writing." The guide, sitting on the opposite side of the fire, was not relaxed. He was studying Emerson and waiting for a psychological moment. He decided it had come, and reached into the breast pocket of his shirt. "Mr. Hough," he said, "I wonder if you would mind giving me your opinion of some poetry I have been writing?"

I had a somewhat similar experience on a fishing trip, in the Rainy Lake Country. My guide was a remarkable, full-blooded Indian, with the extraordinary name of Thomas Linklader, and with a still more extraordinary Scotch accent. One sunset we were paddling back to camp trolling for muskallonge. The last thing in the world I was thinking of was magazines. I didn't even know that Thomas had any idea that I was in the magazine business. Thomas stopped paddling for a moment and said: "I am very much interested in a magazine published in your country, Mr. Long—a magazine called 'The Red Book'."

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At that time I was editor of "The Red Book". Even my bitter dislike of a talking shop when I was trying to get a strike could not overcome my curiosity. "And why are you interested in that particular magazine, Thomas?" I asked. "Because of some animal stories it is publishing," he answered. "They are by a man named Curwood. He knows animals as I know them. He must have spent much of his life in the forest. I have been reading his stories for quite a while and I have never found anything in any of them which did not agree with what I myself have observed, with the exception of one statement of his: he says that wolves will not swim; that they dislike the water too much. I know that wolves do swim, and you know that they do, because we have them on the island where we have our camp. They are always changing from one island to another. I couldn't understand why he made such a statement until I asked some questions of men who have been in the part of the north about which Mr. Curwood writes, and from them I found that the wolves up there are different from our wolves. Did you ever read any of this man's stories, Mr. Long?"

I tried to be modest in saying that I not only had read them, but that I was the editor who was publishing them; and that I really believed I had discovered James Oliver Curwood. As a

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matter of fact that statement wasn't quite true. Curwood had been publishing for quite a while before I made his acquaintance, but I think I was the first editor to see the tremendous possibilities in his keen insight into nature—both animal and human—and his quite extraordinary faculty for presenting an understanding and sympathetic picture of the far north, which is now our last line of romance on this continent.

My belief in Curwood's accuracy was based on my knowledge of the man and on my scant knowledge of wild animal life gained in short vacations. To have a man like Thomas Linklader confirm him meant more to me than confirmation from a dozen Stefáns-sons, for Thomas really knew his woods. He took me one day to the scene of a caribou battle, and from the footprints in the gravel by the shore of a stream reconstructed the entire fight. He could tell me with greater accuracy than any man I ever met in the north, just where we would find any particular kind of animal and any particular kind of fish. He absolutely knew what he was talking about.

I returned to my desk with still greater faith in Curwood, and from then on published practically everything he wrote. And I think I enjoy as much as he possibly can, the announcement that 105,000 copies of his latest novel, "The Valley of Silent Men", were sold before publication. For Curwood has come into his own. He has won a vast audience among novel readers as he long ago won a great number of magazine readers.

I was curious to see what effect this popular acclaim would have on Curwood. I think I have come to know him as well as one individual can know another. We have been on fishing trips in the hottest of hot

weather, and we have gone picnicking with the thermometer thirty degrees below zero. I have visited him in his home, he has been a visitor in mine. I have roughed it with him in the wildest sort of country, and have seen him react to the "civilization" of the big cities. And in each of these varying circumstances he has been true to his individual philosophy of life. In other words, there is a fine strain of sincerity in the makeup of James Oliver Curwood that does not vary with varying conditions.

How then would he, and in consequence, his work, be affected by this clamorous public approval of his novels? The answer, I believe, may be found in this: Curwood used to turn out as many as two novels a year in addition to a couple of dozen short stories. They averaged up very well, too, as far as writing goes; his work indicated painstaking care. With the exception of "The Grizzly King", which many critics consider his best work, "The River's End" was the most effectively written of his novels. But today Curwood is writing one novel a year and very few short stories. And "The Valley of Silent Men" shows a distinct improvement—not only as to narrative and dramatic value, but in construction, development, characterization, and cumulative force.

As a matter of fact, Curwood was a little worried about the responsibilities of being a *best* best seller. Then he decided that a writer could be a true artist and reach a vast public. He cited the enormous following of Dickens, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Kipling, Dumas, Mark Twain, whose stature is greater, and not less, because they reach the understanding of the masses.

Above all things, Curwood is sincere in whatever he writes; he is square in so many ways. I recall

one visit to his home in Owosso, Michigan. We sat up late one night hatching plots for his "Nomads of the North". I suggested a situation that appealed to his imagination and we developed it for all it was worth. We both went to bed highly satisfied, and you can well imagine my surprise when he turned up at breakfast and told me the suggestion wouldn't do. He had gone to bed to lie awake all night long, and had finally determined that these animals would not be likely to do the things we had planned for the story. Not, mind you, that they *would not* but that it was not *likely* that they would.

James Oliver Curwood is a writing man because he has something to say, and he writes only of those things which he knows best. His novels are set in the far north region of Canada because he not only knows, but actually loves, that country. I think it is pretty generally known that Curwood was employed for two years by the Canadian government as an explorer and that he has lived among the Eskimos. But I am not sure whether the public is aware that he makes expeditions on his own initiative and at his own expense into the unexplored regions. These are thoroughly organized expeditions, too, requiring a pack train of twelve horses or more, in charge of Bruce Otto, the noted guide. Curwood and Otto remain on the trail for months at a time, "living off the land".

These periodic trips serve the double purpose of satisfying Curwood's craving for the wild places and of furnishing him with authentic material for his stories. In his own words, "I traveled three thousand miles up and down the mighty Saskatchewan before I wrote 'The River's End', and if I had not gone down the Athabasca, the

Slave and the Mackenzie with the wild 'river brigades' of God's country, I would not have written 'The Valley of Silent Men'." Before writing "The Grizzly King" and "Nomads of the North" he lived three years with those noble animal characters—Thor, Muskwa, Neewa, and Brimstone, while "God's Country and the Woman" and "Kazan" were written in a cabin hundreds of miles from civilization.

Curwood's favorite place, however, for performing his literary labors, is in a spare room of the cottage he bought for his mother and father in Owosso. The furnishing of this room approximates the primitive equipment of his forest cabins. There is a stove, a kitchen table, an old sewing machine for his typewriter—and the typewriter itself.

He swears that he cannot write in his own home, one of the most interesting homes that I have ever seen. In it are twenty-seven guns, all of which have seen service—the stocks of most of them are scarred with notches recording his kills. And the place from cellar to garret is filled with mounted heads and furs. But each of these trophies of his days as a killer he regards as a martyr. No longer is Curwood the hunter, the trapper, the destroyer of wild life. A great light has come to him, and in what he terms his religion, he believes that the wild animals understand he is their friend. He has put this conversion of his into a book which is announced for publication in the spring. "God's Country, The Trail to Happiness", it will be called; and he says it has given him greater joy to write this confession and conversion of a killer than anything he has done.

"Nature is my religion," he says; "and my desire, my ambition, the great goal I wish to achieve, is to take

my readers with me into this nature. I love it, and they must love it—if I can get two acquainted."

"God's Country", in Curwood's philosophy, is not some specific modern Garden of Eden, indoors, all nature. That explains how easily Curwood dwells in his own imaginative aspects of the far north in near his home in Owosso. I think I've ever seen Jim more than on the day he found me in the little stream where he could throw in a bobber and pull out one time. And I am confident there must be some tie-up that has got Curwood in an ice-cream factory. Certainly there is some gous between the frozen frozen ice-cream.

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 ous between the frozen north and
 frozen ice-cream.

Many of Curwood's admirers have
 wondered why he has confined all his
 activities to the north and has never

explored and written about the trop-
 ics. Snakes, is the answer. Jim Cur-
 wood, who is not afraid of anything
 else on the face of the earth, stands in
 deadly fear of snakes and doesn't even
 like to hear about them, let alone come
 in contact with them. So there is little
 hope for stories of the tropics from
 his pen.

Curwood's output to date (and he is
 still a young man in his early forties)
 is seventeen volumes,—novels and col-
 lections of short stories, and a his-
 tory of the Great Lakes,—to say noth-
 ing of the stories that have appeared
 only in magazines. The very size of
 his output has been an asset, because
 his writing is easy and facile. In ad-
 dition, in my opinion, Curwood has the
 greatest sense of the dramatic—or I
 might say, melodramatic—of any
 writer in this country. He can tell a
 story supremely well. And what is a
 novel except "a good story, well told"
 or, as I believe Professor William
 Lyon Phelps condensed it, "a good
 story"?

NIGHT PICTURE

BY DANIEL HENDERSON

AN oak rose up in the fields of night
 And wove its branches into a snare.
 The stars escaped in a high, swift flight—
 But the moon hung prisoned there!