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TOM'S WIFE.

I.

TOM and Jake lived together most amicably in a rough log hut in one of the wildest wooded parts of that great frozen tract which we know as the Hudson Bay Company's territory. If they'd ever had surnames they'd almost forgotten those needless appendages themselves long since, and certainly nobody else on earth had ever heard of them. They were Tom and Jake to one another and all the world beside, that world in their case consisting of a few distant neighbours some fifty miles off on either side, and the Company's agent at Fort Nitchegouna, with whom they exchanged their skins and furs at long intervals for tobacco, salt, clothing, and other simple necessities of life in a far northern clearing.

For Tom and Jake were trappers by trade—trappers born and bred in the Hudson Bay district, who had shouldered rifles almost as soon as they could walk a mile, and knew no other mode of life but that lonely existence in the wild woods, snaring beaver, and musquash, and silver fox, and wolverene. Forest and snow were all their scenery. They were men of action, not men of words. Their speech was infrequent, direct, and natural. When they had nothing to say to each other they held their tongues. And as their life afforded few occasions for philosophic reflections they seldom exchanged a sentence between themselves through the long, cold winter and the short, hot summer, except in so far as it was necessary to give or receive instructions about joint action against some particular four-footed enemy—generally a “bar” or a stray northward-wandering summer “painter.” Save at these rare moments they were mostly mute, going about the two rooms of their bare log hut with their pipes between their lips, and very little else in their mouths or fancies.

Still, in their own way, those two were deeply attached to one another. They loved like brothers—undemonstratively, but none the less truly. When Tom came back from a long hunting expedition alone he held up his skins for a show in his hand, and said, “Hello, Jake!” and Jake held up his in return, and said, “Hello, Tom!” and both of them felt glad to see the other's face, with a profound consciousness that in that simple greeting they had fulfilled all the duties of backwoods' politeness, and satisfied the claims of eternal friendship.

Perhaps one reason why they liked one another so much was because each formed the other's entire environment. Though, to be sure, if you had told them so they would have smiled blankly and answered, “Sure!” in profound surprise that they should possess anything on earth that had so fine a name without even suspecting it. They had grown up together from the time they were boys, and no womankind had ever come in between to divide their allegiance one to the other. The only female society they ever saw, indeed, was when a party of wandering Indians passed that way to exchange their furs with the whites for spirits and gunpowder. On such occasions Tom and Jake had a rare old frolic with the youngest and prettiest squaws. They organized a moonlight entertainment on the cleared space in front of the hut, and danced to their heart's content for hours at a stretch with their dusky partners, while the Indian men sat by, smoking their pipes, and looked on impassive, wrapped in their blankets and in the true impenetrable Indian silence. At the end of it all, when Tom and Jake could dance no more, they stood glasses of grog to the tribe all round, and the Indians sang “He's a jolly good fellow!” to the familiar tune and in the Ojibway language. But with the trilling exceptions of these primitive orgies once in a twelvemonth Tom and Jake never saw a woman's face from year's end to year's end. They lived their own monotonous life alone among the trees and snows, contented to do so because they know and could conceive no other.

II.

At last, one day an unheard-of event took place by common consent in the little household. Tom went on a shopping expedition to Toronto.

For years the pair had been slowly accumulating a goodly stock of Canadian bank-notes, the surplus of their sales over their purchases from the Company's agent, and having nothing to do with them in the wild north they found these bank-notes had gathered head at last, till Tom and Jake began to feel it was a sin to lock up so much capital idle; and not being economists enough to have heard of investment, they decided between them that Tom, who was the best speaker, must set off to spend it, or part of it, at Toronto. There were things there, no doubt, in the stores they had heard tell of which would come in handy for the hut in snow-time. So off Tom set, in bright mid-winter, on his trusty snow-shoes, taking advantage of the easy travelling down, and meaning to bring back his purchases over the even road afforded by the snow on a hired sleigh from Barrie or Portage.

He might have gone to Ottawa, to be sure, which was a good deal nearer, but they had been told Toronto was the larger town, and if once Tom quitted his native wilds to see the world it was agreed between them he ought to see it with its modern civilization at its highest and best in the streets of a great commercial city.

Seven weeks Tom was gone, and when he came back again he sat and talked for seven hours with Jake, as Jake could never have conceived his old friend and chum capable of talking. Contact with the world had given Tom fresh eloquence; he described all the wonders of the crowded town with strange ease of diction—the railway, the street-cars, the electric light, the telephone, the gigantic hotel, where his room had been number 580, till Jake began to think in his simple soul the travelled man was trying to cram him. Finally, Tom paused in a shamefaced way, and then said with a burst, "And Jake, I'm thinkin' of gettin' married."

Then Jake knew he was really cramming him, and answered nothing, but merely sat with his head on one side, puffing away doubtfully at one of the big cigars which Tom had brought back among his purchases from Toronto as a new and fashionable form of tobacco.

However, when Tom saw he was silent he went on with such evident sincerity to speak of the girl he had chosen for his future wife that bit by bit Jake's incredulity relaxed, and he began to discover to his profound surprise Tom was really in earnest. At last, when he could doubt the startling news no longer, he turned round to Tom and exclaimed in astonishment, "Why, Tom, man, how could ye ever make bold enough to ask her?"

For though Jake had hardly so much as seen a white woman's face in all his life, an innate chivalry and masculine modesty within him made him realize at once the full terror and difficulty of that awful ordeal.

Tom looked at the fire and at the new couch—it had run to a couch with horsehair covering—and answered slowly, "It *was* a pull, Jake, but I managed it, somever; I spoke up and managed it."

Jake felt in his soul a deeper admiration for Tom's abilities than he had ever felt in his life before. To think that that silent, untutored man could have spoken up to a woman's heart, and induced her in only five weeks' clear time to promise to marry him!

III

All through the rest of that winter Tom and Jake were busy with plans for this great revolution in their domestic arrangements—Jake, no less than Tom, and almost even more so—and as soon as spring set in they put them into execution, working together in concert with a rare good will at them. They had cut down logs to build a new room for their expected guest, while the snow was on the ground; and after the first thaw they piled them all up and plastered them well into a neat and commodious bridal chamber. Jake felt the necessity for “a little more style about the house now we’re goin’ to have a lady of our own to take care of us;” and he went so far as to send a trusty Indian, unbeknown to Tom, down to the store at Portage, on the Canadian frontier, to buy a wall-paper for the living-room, which he insisted henceforth upon describing as “the parlour.” He would have called it a drawing room, probably, if it were not for Tom, so deep was his respect for a white woman’s dignity. He even talked about building a kitchen, distinct from the parlour, as being more appropriate for the lady’s use, had not Tom dissuaded him by saying that Lucy—he actually dared to describe her by her Christian name alone as Lucy—would only find it an extra fire to light and tend, for of course they must have a fire in the living-room, anyway. Wood, to be sure, wasn’t dear; they could have that for the cutting, but he didn’t want to give Lucy any extra trouble. Jake smiled grimly to himself at that. Extra trouble, indeed! Before the white lady should dream of lighting the fires herself he’d be up and about—but there, no matter. It would be easier for her, perhaps, to keep things tidy in three rooms than in four; and ladies do love to keep things tidy.

At last the preparations were all complete; the little log hut was swept and garnished; the paper on the wall was further adorned by a couple of old *London News* chromo-lithographs; and Tom set out once more, and once more alone, to make his wedding trip to and from Toronto.

On the day he was due to return Jake was all in a flutter of bashful fear and blissful expectation. Had he made everything right as it ought to be for a lady? Was the bouquet of wild flowers in the mug on the mantelpiece strictly appropriate? Were the pots and pans all brightly scoured enough to meet the exacting eye of a female critic? Would Tom’s wife be very contemptuous and very hard on a rough trapper fellow? Was she really as young and pretty as Tom had pretended? Or was Tom only trying to magnify his own prowess—as he sometimes did with the game he just missed—by making out he had attacked and captured a real young white woman of surpassing beauty? All these questions Jake asked himself time and again, in delightful doubt, as he sat there waiting in his clean flannel shirt and store coat by the smudge fire for the advent of the happy pair on their honeymoon.

The last seventy miles or so were to be performed on horseback (borrowed, of course) along the Toronto trail or path through the woods; and at last the sound of horses’ hoofs on the forest soil made Jake start, and blush, and look at himself furtively, with a tremor of shame, in the looking-glass that now graced the “parlour” mantelpiece.

In two minutes more they were at the door, and Tom was wringing his friend’s hand hard, and Jake, looking up, all red-faced confusion, beheld before him, in a neat brown dress, a thing of beauty such as he had never before either seen or dreamed of.

He could only look, and cry out, “Oh, Tom!” and bow before the lady with awkward politeness. The pretty speech he had carefully composed and learnt by heart for the occasion, “It give me much pleasure, ma’am, to welcome my friend Tom’s wife to our humble cottage,” stuck in his throat and refused to deliver itself. All he knew as he stood there bowing, and painfully conscious of the conduct of his hands, was that Tom’s wife was a vision of glory—a beam of sunlight descended straight upon their house in some happy hour from the seventh heavens.

And, indeed, as a matter of fact, she was a pretty, graceful Canadian girl—a farmer’s daughter—one of those delicate girls, with small hands and feet and *mignonne* features, whom the Anglo-Saxon race in its Western decadence seems to produce by hundreds (before the stock dies out) out of the commonest lines, yet with a type of beauty which in England itself belongs only to the extreme aristocratic society. Jake was ready to fall down and worship at her feet, and when the lady held out her small, white hand and said to him graciously, with a pretty smile, “I’m glad to see you; Tom’s told me a great deal about you already,” he felt as though he could sink into the ground with shame for his own inability to answer her fitly.

IV.

The lady's advent made a wonderful difference to the little log hut; for Jake that lonely tenement was filled now with grace and poetry. Tom, for his part, secure in his possession of the priceless treasure, didn't seem after the first few months to make so much of her. But to Jake, who could but worship from afar, she was simply a goddess on earth, a fairy descended to lighten and sweeten the gloom of the forest. Her presence made everything purer and more beautiful. He couldn't imagine how Tom, with the easy carelessness of the quite married man, could allow that angel to cook and wash for them; for himself, he was always trying to save her trouble, to split her firewood and draw her water, to make up for the lack of society in that trackless forest, to find conversation even, as soon as his first awe of the lady wore slowly away and gave place to the sublime and delightful consciousness of secure friendship. For Mrs. Tom, as he always called her, was gracious enough to admit him to the honours of her confidence, and to talk with him on terms of perfect equality. The trapper's heart bounded within him whenever she gave him a kind word—the only white woman, save his own mother, he had ever known to be really friendly with.

Month after month those three lived on together in their strange household, seldom or never seeing any one from outside; and month after month Jake's admiration and devotion towards the dainty white lady grew more and more profound, chivalrous, and tender. As for Tom, he seemed to think less and less of her—or so Jake fancied—as time went on; to be unworthy of this treasure he had won so easily. He was rough but kind, Lucy said sometimes, whereas Jake, as he knew in his own heart, and confessed to himself sheepishly, was kind and not rough, never rough to Lucy. He worshipped the very ground on which she trod—he, whose adoration had never been spoilt by the too great familiarity of accomplished possession.

Winter came on, and with it that terrible time of privation for a lone woman in the cold, cold north. Lucy was snowed up all day in the hut, which Jake tried to make still bright and pleasant for her. He brought in boughs of green spruce-fir to decorate the mantelpiece, and red berries of bitter-sweet to put in the vases that now flanked the mirror. But do all he could, Lucy's spirits faltered terribly in that long, close time. The colour began to fade from her cheeks, and the drudgery and isolation of that awful life began to tell upon her health, both bodily and mental.

"Tom hadn't ought ever to have married her," Jake thought. "She's worlds too good for the likes of us poor hardy trappers."

But Tom considered her just good enough, and not one scrap more than that, and accounted her life about as happy apparently as most other women's.

Winter wore on, and strange things again happened in the hut. It was soon to have yet another inmate.

Against that foreseen contingency it was Jake who travelled on snow-shoes all the way to Portage, and on his own hired sleigh brought back in his train a country doctor. It was Jake who laid in a stock of condensed milk for the little one's use, and who held and washed and first dressed the baby. "Our baby," Jake called it always with proprietary pride—the finest infant, he was willing to wager a score of skins, in all the square miles of the Hudson Bay Company's territory.

But the more the baby lived and thrived and the more Jake worshipped and admired its mother, the less and less did Tom seem to think of them. Jake was beginning to get angry with Tom in his heart of hearts for his want of kindness and respect to Lucy. If only she had been *his*—but there, Jake never permitted himself to think like that—or if he did he read a bit of a chapter in Lucy's book that she'd brought with her, for he knew how to read, and that soon made him come round again with a rush to better and saner views of the matter.

Summer came and went, and winter returned again, and with it Lucy's ill-health became more pronounced. She was fading, Jake sometimes thought, under stress of that hard life, like a summer flower before the frosts of October. But Tom didn't see it; he was often positively harsh and cruel to her now; it made Jake's heart bleed sometimes to hear how angrily and unkindly he spoke to her.

One morning in January, a cold sunlit morning, when the thermometer (if they'd had one) would have stood some fifty degrees below zero, Jake rose from his bed, all fiery in soul, and went out to his work to trap the ermines in their winter livery. He was ill at ease. Things grew worse and worse for Lucy. He had heard voices in the night from Mrs. Tom's room—Tom and his wife had been having words, he knew. That wretch to dare to talk so to that angel!

Slowly the change had been working in his heart. It had worked itself out fully now. He had loved Tom once, and then that morning, for Lucy's sake, he knew he hated him.

He went about his work with a sluggish soul. It was a bitter cold day, even for the far north, and the snow glittered icily in the clear frosty sunshine. He longed every minute to be back with Lucy. To think she was unhappy alone in the hut there, that pure fair girl, nursing her grief, with none to comfort her! Do what he would he couldn't help recurring to it. At last the impulse was too strong for him to resist. He left his traps half baited in the snow, and trudged wearily home across the frozen forest to comfort Lucy.

At the door the sound of angry voices met his ear once more. His heart throbbed hard, and then stood still within him. He knew a great crisis in his life had come. With trembling fingers he lifted the latch: then he strode, black as night, into the desolate little parlour.

By the table Lucy was sitting, her face in her hands, with the baby in her lap, sobbing violently. Opposite where he stood Tom had just risen, and was speaking in harsh tones to that poor quivering woman. As Jake raised the latch he caught just one word. It was a word that made the blood boil in his veins. Tom—the Tom he had once loved so well—had flung a hateful oath at the woman Jake would have died to save from one pang of trouble.

Jake was a choleric man, and he could stand it no more. The man had spoken his own condemnation. Advancing with a firm stride into the middle of the room, he looked full in Tom's face, one fierce wild look, and cried out aloud in a terrible voice, "Coward!" Then without pausing a second, in the white heat of his righteous indignation, he pulled out his revolver from the belt at his side, and taking aim steadily, with a tremulous hand, sent a bullet through the heart of Lucy's husband.

Tom turned just once towards his murderer as he clasped his hand to his bleeding breast. Then he staggered and fell at full length on the floor, with his lifeless head close by the legs of the plain wooden table.

VI.

At that terrible sound Lucy leapt from her place, and, laying down the baby, flung herself in an agony of terror and amazement on the lifeless body of her murdered husband. It was all so ghastly, so sudden, so incomprehensible! She flung herself upon it in one wild burst of despair; and the awful cry that went up from her lips to heaven above brought Jake at once with a rush to a blinding consciousness of his crime, and of the insoluble riddle which it so sternly imposed upon him.

Quick as lightning, as he paused there, revolver in hand, with the body of his friend bleeding fast before his eyes, the whole impassable deadlock to which he had brought things by that irrevocable act flashed across his fevered brain like wildfire. It was impossible, he said to himself in his agony, that Lucy should pass one night alone under that desecrated roof with her husband's murderer. It was impossible that she should accept that murderer's escort to see her safe through the frozen forest to the nearest place of refuge from his blood-stained presence. It was impossible that he should let her tramp alone with her baby in mid-winter through the pathless woods, surrounded by the manifold terrors of savage wild beasts and wilder Indians. It was impossible that he should leave her in the hut by herself with her dead husband, to suffer who knows what agonies of fear and sorrow, while he made his way alone through the snow-clad land to deliver himself up to offended justice. Whatever way he looked at it he saw no door of escape—no door but one, and from that one door, all murderer as he was, he shrank back like a woman. But there was no time to think. He must nerve himself to act. Tenderly and remorsefully he raised that deadly weapon again in his hand, pointed it straight, and fired unflinchingly. Another report, another loud cry, and another thick cloud of white smoke in the little parlour.

When it cleared away Lucy lay lifeless on Tom's warm corpse, and Jake stood alone in the hut with the baby.

She was shot quite dead through the heart from the back. Jake's practised hand had never taken a surer aim. He had nerved himself to the task to save her needless pangs of mind or body. He had dared to solve the insoluble problem in the one awful way that still remained open to him.

VII.

As soon as he had sufficiently recovered from the first sickening horror of that terrible scene Jake took the two bodies up reverently from the ground in his arms, and laid them side by side on the bed in their own bedroom. Then he knelt down like a child beside the bed and prayed. Words came to him in his need. He prayed long, and fervently, and earnestly.

But he didn't pray for mercy or forgiveness for himself. It was not of himself or his own selfish fears for this world or the next that Jake was thinking. He prayed for the souls of Tom and Lucy. He wasn't theologian enough to know in his simple mind that in the particular Church of which he reckoned himself to be an outlying member prayers for the dead are discountenanced and discouraged. He followed the dictates of his own innermost instinct. He prayed that Tom and Lucy might henceforth have rest, and might forgive him this wicked wrong he had done them. He prayed that the baby—Lucy's baby—might be spared to live as its mother would have wished it, and grow up to a happier life than ever hers had been. He prayed with great beads of dew standing on his cold brow in the agony of his repentant remorse and contrition. Last of all he humbly prayed a merciful Heaven, in simple but heartfelt words, to be pleased to lay upon him such condign punishment as the magnitude of the great crime he had just committed most duly merited.

Then, conscious of a deep and abiding guilt that made him unworthy to kneel any longer beside the corpse of that pure and beautiful woman whom he had loved and murdered, he rose once more, with staggering steps went out into the snow alone with his crime, and dug a deep hole with a pick in the frozen drift to receive those two piteous bleeding bodies. He couldn't bury them, to be sure, for the ground was too hard; but he could lay them up there safe in the preserving snow, and pour water to freeze above their temporary grave, so that they might lie there in safety from the wolves and the foxes till the thaw set in, when men from the fort could come over and take them to Nitchegouna cemetery. There Lucy should lie in holy earth till the Day of Judgment.

When the grave was dug he carried out those two tenderly once more in his arms, and laid them side by side with their faces turned towards one another in the trench he had thus made to receive them. Over the top of the trench he poured buckets of water, and in half an hour so intense was the cold on that bitter, glittering January day, the whole mass was frozen stiff and solid together as a granite column.

After that Jake took Lucy's little book from her leather desk, and slowly and solemnly, in spite of many stumbling efforts, read over the grave, with blinding tears and choking voice, the Church of England burial service. At times his tongue failed him and his lips quivered, but still he went on alone in the clearing. Come what might, Lucy should not be buried without Christian burial. As he finished he flung himself passionately on the grave, and cried out aloud from his very heart in a broken voice, "Tom, Tom, I was your friend, and I killed you! I killed you!" But he didn't dare to say a last farewell to Lucy. Murderer that he was, he was unworthy to speak to her.

From the grave Jake turned once more, awful in his loneliness, into the bare hut, where the baby lay crying and stretching out its nine months' arms for its dead mother. Jake took it up in his fatherly hands and kissed it, as he had kissed it many times before, and mixed it some food with broken biscuit and condensed milk, and fed it with a spoon till it smiled and was happy.

Then he wrapped the baby in a thick warm skin, rolled in her dress all their remaining bank-notes, strapped his knapsack on his back, full of condensed milk, fastened the snow-shoes on his weary feet, and set out through the snow with the baby in his arms, pressed close to his breast, in a paroxysm of remorse, to give himself up for the double murder to the authorities at Ottawa.



Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *Tom's Wife* by Grant Allen]