



He had no disciples. He was the last Conjuror of his tribe. He was very old and he had little strength. His head, projecting from the blanket that enveloped him, was bald and looked like the head of a turtle with its prominent nose, beady, filmy eyes and skin like water-soaked and sun-dried leather. His hand shook as he filled and lit his pipe. After the exertion of putting a chunk in the stove he sat exhausted, trembling.

Old, very old, and very wise. The success of his magic came a great deal from his long knowledge of the ways of men and of Nature. It is possible that in his trances his subconscious mind worked out various problems and announced prophecies based upon observation long stored, released by the state of swoon, with the vital functions very low but the subnormal brain alert.

Many of his predictions had come true, more and more as his years advanced. Magic is the secret of the unknown and, without question, Nipegosis had ways and means of obtaining knowledge that others could not guess. Add such matters to his own innate wisdom and he produced wizardry.

There were few occasions now upon which to practice it, few to witness it, even when the remnants of the tribe made White Rock their headquarters in spring, summer and fall. But the room was stocked with the paraphernalia of his profession, gathered through scores of years, inherited, some of it.

Skulls of bear and bison painted with various devices, old baskets whose patterns were runes. Rattles, war clubs and tomahawks with which to fight the evil spirits. Medicine drums, carved spears and wands of ceremony, decorated with tufts of feathers. Wooden bowls carved in weird designs. Plummed bonnets, marks that represented totem birds and beasts, set with teeth carved from cachalot ivory, eyed with shell naere brought from the Big Salt Water to the west. Empty shells of terrapin, antlers, curiously twisted growth of trees, medicine bags, herbs, skins of marten and ermine. Mats and blankets. A totem pole, carved and painted, that reached to the roof—the family tree of Nipegosis.

An hour before, an Indian had driven his dog sled swiftly through the deserted street of White Rock and left with the Conjuror the hind quarters of a freshly killed moose. It was tribute as much as kindly service. He spoke briefly and vanished in the growing dusk, Marion MacLeod did not see him, busy in the cabin she and her brother occupied. Will MacLeod was out after game himself, to feed his dogs.

Marion set out food for him on the back of their stove against his return, ate her own supper, filled a pail with broth for Nipegosis, took a lantern and went to the wizard's house, close-wrapped

against the bitter cold. She had been calling on Nipegosis at least once a day since their arrival. A trader's niece, born to listen to it, she could speak his tongue well enough, as could her brother; though Nipegosis sometimes used words and strung phrases she could not understand, scraps of a dying tongue already discarded by the present generation.

She knew nothing of the moose quarters. The wind had filled in the light trail of runners and paws with drift. Light showed dimly through the ice-glazed windows of the Conjuror's house. His two lamps were of stone, with animal fat for fuel and elder pitch for wicks. Through a chink or two the fire glared from the stove. The place smelled like a museum.

A blanket had been thrown over the meat by the hunter at the request of Nipegosis. He did not care to have it known that he had had a visitor, that he had received news. Such knowledge might be turned to power and, while there might be none to practice it upon, old custom swung him to secrecy.

What he thought of the white girl, of her brother, he did not reveal. He did not show what he might know about their affairs nor even their identities. Undoubtedly he knew a great deal, one way and another.

Will MacLeod approved of his sister's visits. He had a reason for that. If Nipegosis opened up he might help him a great deal in the matter that had made him choose White Rock for a hiding place, provided he could win the wizard's gratitude or friendship. It was certain that Nipegosis would not be ungrateful, would not care to remain under an obligation so long as he was normal, but Will MacLeod wanted something Nipegosis might well consider far too great.

Marion had a certain womanly pity toward the wizard and, perhaps because of a Highland inheritance, of ancestors who firmly believed in second-sight, she had a strong belief, blended with reverence, in his wisdom. She sometimes saw his eyes regarding her with a kindly speculation. Nipegosis might know what Will wanted—what she also wanted, for Will's sake first and then for her own, so that they might both leave this exile—but she fancied, and hoped, that the wizard sensed that she would have performed these little offices for him without any selfish purpose.

The primitive lamps cast weird and uncertain shadows about the big room. Nipegosis sat huddled in his blankets.

"Come in, Tagami," he said as she entered. That was his name for her. Tagami, the Birch, most graceful of trees in the North. It was a compliment. He had not moved. He would be expecting her at that hour, the first of twilight and darkness, the opening of the door had brought in cold

air, made the wicks flicker; but to Marion there was always something uncanny about the utterances of Nipegosis. His voice sounded like that of an ancient oracle, tired of Delphic utterances, speaking deeply but wearily out of a cavern.

She closed the door and sat down on a stump covered with bison hide, stripped of hair and softly tanned. She took the cover off the broth and offered it to him together with the spoon of carved horn he had given her, telling her it was a magic spoon—one that made good medicine.

The smell of the strong broth gratified him. It was good and proper for Red Deer to bring him the meat. Not proper for him to tell Red Deer that meat, raw or cooked, was too strong for his few teeth and his belly these days. A wizard must always be wrapped in mystery. They would find him some day, in this lodge he had taken over, dead, with dignity. He sipped the contents of the basin slowly.

"Your brother hunts," he stated. "He will soon return. He brings meat."

Marion accepted his assertions. Facts would prove them. And she began to have an eerie feeling that she always got in the Conjuror's presence. It was heightened tonight. She felt the soft, short silken hairs at the back of her neck stiffen and bristle. It seemed as if something marked a clammy track down her spine.

She held the sense of danger and yet she felt she was protected, that Nipegosis was in a kindly mood toward her. Perhaps this last gift of broth might make him speak, tell her what she most wanted to know. She believed in her brother's tale of his innocence in the killing of Jacques Regnier, though she would have followed him anyway. And she knew, as he did, that the evidence was practically overwhelming.

Nipegosis finished his broth; the girl put another chunk in the stove. The shadows blinked about the queer objects and invested them with greater significance.

The Conjuror sat motionless; he had seemed to collapse into a shapeless, boneless heap beneath his blanket. In the wavering light his turtle head seemed something carved, rather than animate. His eyes were closed between the horn lids.

Suddenly, in some nook where the light did not reach, somewhere in the dense shadow, an Indian drum began to beat, a ceremonial tom-tom. It was hard to locate the sound and Marion did not try. Her mouth got dry and again she felt the ghostly trail on her spine. Her skin goose-fleshed. She was sure they were alone in the place, but who was beating that drum, in a low monotonous rhythm that entered into her blood, controlled the throb of heart and pulse? It sounded as if skeleton fingers were tapping on the parchment.

Tom tom tom! Tom tom tom! Tom tom tom! Tom tom tom! A thin voice was whispering up near the roof. Nipegosis sat huddled, without movement, entranced. Marion listened to the thin voice with flesh creeping on her bones. The drum might be some trick, the voice ventriloquism, not the voice of the spirit medium of Nipegosis, but it was terrifyingly convincing.

"Love comes on the trail," whispered the tiny voice. "Death is there. Danger comes behind. Death is close to Love and Love travels with danger. Beyond Elk River by the barrens, on the edge of the forest Death threatens Love and Danger follows fast."

The whisper faded to a wordless chirp. Something seemed fluttering overhead, small but nimble, like a bat. That ceased. The drum tapped on.

Tom tom tom! Tom tom tom! Tom tom tom! Tom tom tom! Then silence while the fire shifted inside the drum stove and the lamplight juggled with the shadows. The weird faces on the totem pole seemed alive, peering at her, grinning. She felt the presences that were invisible.

"Love on the trail, Death—and Danger follows fast!"

What did the cryptic words mean? Nipegosis would profess he had not heard them, did not utter them. Perhaps he had not.

The Conjuror stirred, came back to life.

"The pan of iron, child," he said querulously, but in his own voice. "Bring it swiftly. Heat it on the stove. Then bring me the bowl of herbs, there by the bison skull."

She obeyed, placing the heavy skillet on top of the hot stove that was fairly humming with heat, showing a dull cherry on its sides. The heat in the room was, or seemed to be tremendous. Perspiration dripped from her forehead, but Nipegosis shivered.

At his bidding she sat down the hot skillet on the floor upon two

billets of wood. The Conjuror bent over, stiffly, until she fancied he must creak, picking out twigs and dried leaves from the bowl of highly polished wood, tossing them on the metal where they curled and gave out pungent odors, inter-twining coils of smoke. The room seemed to swim before her eyes. She seemed curiously light, without body. The walls of the log house faded and she fancied she floated through them, high in air, beneath bright stars, going fast. She heard the deep drone of the Conjuror's voice and could not understand what he said. He seemed to guide her.

There was a river, its current turned to ice, black under the stars, reflecting them. A black strip of forest over which she floated. Then a waste blue-white, stretching far south.

A star on the ground, on the edge of the forest, red fitful. It was not a star, but a dying fire.

She seemed impelled toward it, moving without volition, without any sense of corporeal being, hovering. Only her mind, like a bird, like a spirit descending.

There was a man by the fire, muffled up, crouching, shivering. He set a stick carefully on the fire. There were three other sticks on the snow beside him. She tried to see his face but could not. She felt that a message trembled between them, trying to adjust itself to the right vibrations, to conquer some ghostly static; to tune in.

She felt a tremendous sympathy for this shivering unknown. She felt, she knew him, that his presence there was important, vital to her happiness. She knew that he was hurt, helpless, that Death was close by. Her sight blurred, the scene wavered, distorted, slowly disappeared.

Then she was back in the Conjuror's house, on the hide-covered stump, her eyes streaming with tears, the room a mist of stinging vapor. Her memory of

what she had seen, or imagined, was indelibly etched into her brain. She did not try to reason out the phenomenon or whatever the experience might be termed. The conviction that it was true burned inside of her. It might be magic or some natural telepathy transmitted under stress.

Nipegosis sat there, a feeble old man, in front of the stove between the two lamps, his eyes blinking at the stove, shining like crimson spangles between their slitted lids. He seemed exhausted, as if power had gone out of him. She left him there.

Will was home, as Nipegosis had predicted; flinging meat to the dogs, when she broke in on him.

He listened to her seriously. He had her share of Scotch beliefs. He knew Indians. He knew Nipegosis.

"All right, Sis!" he told her. "Nipegosis told you something, or showed you something. He doesn't talk through his war bonnet. He knows. I don't know where he gets his stuff or how he puts it over, but I'll stake anything that somebody is out there, on the edge of timber beyond Elk River. That's ten miles. He'll freeze to death inside of two hours. We'll take a chance on it."

It's no chance, Will. He's sure. It's somebody I know, I'm sure. Trying to tell me something."

"Sure, kid," said her brother. He saw she was not far from being hysterical and she was not that sort of a girl. He brought her out of it with something to do.

"Help me harness the team," he commanded.

Seven dogs, three couples and a leader. A girl on the long narrow sled with the blankets. Seven dogs full of meat, digging in their paws, making ten miles an hour and better, tugging in their harness. A man behind the sled, running, clinging to the gee-pole, guiding it, urging on the team. The breath of all of them like puffs of steam, pursuing a fantasy perhaps.

They crossed the frozen river and raced through the trees. It was Marion who first glimpsed the dim glow of the fire, down to embers. The man was in a heap in a little hollow, one arm flung out. He was unconscious, stiffening.

The dogs lay down on command, panting after their run, but fresh, their tongues lolling, ears up as the brother and sister ran toward the fallen man.

"Easy, Sis, he's hurt," said Will. "Frozen blood all over his leg and the blanket. Hit in the head, too. We've got to lift him on the sled and get him back in double time. Heart's still going."

"Will," cried the girl with a sob. "It's Byrne. It's Dick Byrne!"

(To be continued)

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