

***STEWART
EDWARD WHITE***



***THE SILENT
PLACES***

Stewart Edward White

The Silent Places

EAN 8596547347491

DigiCat, 2022

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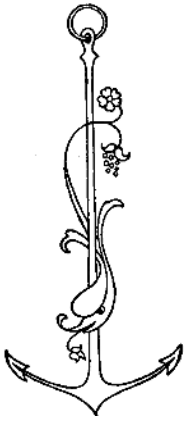
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Illustrated by Philip R. Goodwin

NEW YORK
McCLURE, PHILLIPS & CO.

MCMIV

Published, April, 1904

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CHAPTER ONE

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At about eight o'clock one evening of the early summer a group of men were seated on a grass-plot overlooking a broad river. The sun was just setting through the forest fringe directly behind them.

Of this group some reclined in the short grass, others lay flat on the bank's slope, while still others leaned against the carriages of two highly ornamented field-guns, whose embossed muzzles gaped silently at an eastern shore nearly two miles distant.

The men were busy with soft-voiced talk, punctuating their remarks with low laughter of a singularly infectious character. It was strange speech, richly embroidered with the musical names of places, with unfamiliar names of beasts, and with unintelligible names of things. Kenógami, Mamátawan, Wenebógan, Kapúskasíng, the silver-fox, the sea-otter, the sable, the wolverine, the musk-ox, parka, babiche, tump-line, giddés,—these and others sang like arrows cleaving the atmosphere of commoner words. In the distant woods the white-throats and olive thrushes called in a language hardly less intelligible.

There scarcely needed the row of glistening birch-barks below the men, the warehouse with its picketed lane, the tall flag-staff, the block-house stockade, the half-bred women chatting over the low fences of the log-houses, the squaws wandering to and fro in picturesque silence, the Indian children playing noisily or standing in awe before the veranda of the white house, to inform the initiated that this

little forest- and river-girt settlement was a post of the Honourable the Hudson's Bay Company. The time of sunset and the direction of the river's flow would have indicated a high latitude. The mile-long meadow, with its Indian camp, the oval of forest, the immense breadth of the river identified the place as Conjuror's House. Thus the blue water in the distance was James Bay, the river was the Moose; enjoying his Manila cheroot on the Factory veranda with the other officers of the Company was Galen Albret, and these men lounging on the river bank were the Company's post-keepers and runners, the travellers of the Silent Places.

They were of every age and dressed in a variety of styles. All wore ornamented moccasins, bead garters, and red sashes of worsted. As to the rest, each followed his taste. So in the group could be seen bare heads, fillet-bound heads, covered heads; shirt sleeves, woollen jerseys, and long, beautiful blanket coats. Two things, however, proved them akin. They all possessed a lean, wiry hardness of muscle and frame, a hawk-like glance of the eye, an almost emaciated spareness of flesh on the cheeks. They all smoked pipes of strong plug tobacco.

Whether the bronze of their faces, thrown into relief by the evening glow, the frowning steadiness of their eyes, or more fancifully the background of the guns, the flag-staff and the stockade was most responsible, the militant impression persisted strongly. These were the veterans of an hundred battles. They were of the stuff forlorn hopes are fashioned from. A great enemy, a powerful enemy, an enemy to be respected and feared had hardened them to

the unyielding. The adversary could almost be measured, the bitterness of the struggle almost be gauged from the scars of their spirits; the harshness of it, the cruelty of it, the wonderful immensity of it that should so fashion the souls and flesh of men. For to the bearing of these loungers clung that hint of greater things which is never lacking to those who have called the deeps of man's nature to the conquering.

The sun dipped to the horizon, and over the landscape slipped the beautiful north-country haze of crimson. From the distant forest sounded a single mournful wolf-howl. At once the sledge-dogs answered in chorus. The twilight descended. The men gradually fell silent, smoking their pipes, savouring the sharp snow-tang, grateful to their toughened senses, that still lingered in the air.

Suddenly out of the dimness loomed the tall form of an Indian, advancing with long, straight strides. In a moment he was among them responding composedly to their greetings.

"Bo' jou', bo' jou', Me-en-gen," said they.

"Bo' jou', bo' jou'," said he.

He touched two of the men lightly on the shoulder. They arose, for they knew him as the bowsman of the Factor's canoe, and so understood that Galen Albret desired their presence.

Me-en-gen led the way in silence, across the grass-plot, past the flag-staff, to the foot of the steps leading to the Factory veranda. There the Indian left them. They mounted the steps. A voice halted them in the square of light cast

through an intervening room from a lighted inner apartment.

The veranda was wide and low; railed in; and, except for the square of light, cast in dimness. A dozen men sat in chairs, smoking. Across the shaft of light the smoke eddied strangely. A woman's voice accompanied softly the tinkle of a piano inside. The sounds, like the lamplight, were softened by the distance of the intervening room.

Of the men on the veranda Galen Albret's identity alone was evident. Grim, four-square, inert, his very way of sitting his chair, as though it were a seat of judgment and he the interpreter of some fierce blood-law, betrayed him. From under the bushy white tufts of his eyebrows the woodsmen felt the search of his inspection. Unconsciously they squared their shoulders.

The older had some fifty-five or sixty years, though his frame was still straight and athletic. A narrow-brimmed slouch hat shadowed quiet, gray eyes, a hawk nose, a long sweeping white mustache. His hands were tanned to a hard mahogany-brown carved into veins, cords, and gnarled joints. He had kindly humour in the wrinkles of his eyes, the slowly developed imagination of the forest-dweller in the deliberation of their gaze, and an evident hard and wiry endurance. His dress, from the rough pea-jacket to the unornamented moccasins, was severely plain.

His companion was hardly more than a boy in years, though more than a man in physical development. In every respect he seemed to be especially adapted to the rigours of northern life. The broad arch of his chest, the plump smoothness of his muscles, above all, the full roundness of

his throat indicated that warmth-giving blood, and plenty of it, would be pumped generously to every part of his body. His face from any point of view but one revealed a handsome, jaunty boy, whose beard was still a shade. But when he looked at one directly, the immaturity fell away. This might have been because of a certain confidence of experience beyond what most boys of twenty can know, or it might have been the result merely of a physical peculiarity. For his eyes were so extraordinarily close together that they seemed by their very proximity to pinch the bridge of his nose, and in addition, they possessed a queer slant or cast which twinkled perpetually now in one, now in the other. It invested him at once with an air singularly remote and singularly determined. But at once when he looked away the old boyishness returned, enhanced further by a certain youthful barbarity in the details of his dress—a slanted heron's feather in his hat, a beaded knife-sheath, an excess of ornamentation on his garters and moccasins, and the like.

In a moment one of the men on the veranda began to talk. It was not Galen Albret, though Galen Albret had summoned them, but MacDonald, his Chief Trader and his right-hand man. Galen Albret himself made no sign, but sat, his head sunk forward, watching the men's faces from his cavernous eyes.

"You have been called for especial duty," began MacDonald, shortly. "It is volunteer duty, and you need not go unless you want to. We have called you because you have the reputation of never having failed. That is not much for you, Herron, because you are young. Still we believe in

you. But you, Bolton, are an old hand on the Trail, and it means a good deal."

Galen Albret stirred. MacDonald shot a glance in his direction and hastened on.

"I am going to tell you what we want. If you don't care to tackle the job, you must know nothing about it. That is distinctly understood?"

He hitched forward nearer the light, scanning the men carefully. They nodded.

"Sure!" added Herron.

"That's all right. Do you men remember Jingoss, the Ojibway, who outfitted here a year ago last summer?"

"Him they calls th' Weasel?" inquired Sam Bolton.

"That's the one. Do you remember him well? how he looks?"

"Yes," nodded Sam and Dick Herron together.

"We've got to have that Indian."

"Where is he?" asked Herron. Sam Bolton remained silent.

"That is for you to find out." MacDonald then went on to explain himself, hitching his chair still nearer, and lowering his voice. "A year ago last summer," said he, "he got his 'debt' at the store of two hundred castors^[1] which he was to pay off in pelts the following spring. He never came back. I don't think he intends to. The example is bad. It has never happened to us before. Too many Indians get credit at this Post. If this man is allowed to go unpunished, we'll be due for all sorts of trouble with our other creditors. Not only he, but all the rest of them, must be made to feel that an embezzler is going to be caught, every time. They all know

he's stolen that debt, and they're waiting to see what we're going to do about it. I tell you this so you'll know that it's important."

[1] One hundred dollars.

"You want us to catch him?" said Bolton, more as a comment than an inquiry.

"Catch him, and catch him alive!" corrected MacDonald. "There must be no shooting. We've got to punish him in a way that will make him an example. We've got to allow our Indians 'debt' in order to keep them. If we run too great a risk of loss, we cannot do it. That is a grave problem. In case of success you shall have double pay for the time you are gone, and be raised two ranks in the service. Will you do it?"

Sam Bolton passed his emaciated, gnarled hand gropingly across his mouth, his usual precursor of speech. But Galen Albret abruptly interposed, speaking directly, with authority, as was his habit.

"Hold on," said he, "I want no doubt. If you accept this, you must not fail. Either you must come back with that Indian, or you need not come back at all. I won't accept any excuses for failure. I won't accept any failure. It does not matter if it takes ten years. *I want that man.*"

Abruptly he fell silent. After a moment MacDonald resumed his speech.

"Think well. Let me know in the morning."

Bolton again passed his hand gropingly before his mouth.

"No need to wait for me," said he; "I'll do it."

Dick Herron suddenly laughed aloud, startling to flight the gravities of the moment.

"If Sam here's got her figured out, I've no need to worry," he asserted. "I'm with you."

"Very well," agreed MacDonald. "Remember, this must be kept quiet. Come to me for what you need."

"I will say good-by to you now," said Galen Albret. "I do not wish to be seen talking to you to-morrow."

The woodsmen stepped forward, and solemnly shook Galen Albret's hand. He did not arise to greet these men he was sending out into the Silent Places, for he was the Factor, and not to many is it given to rule a country so rich and extended. They nodded in turn to the taciturn smokers, then glided away into the darkness on silent, moccasined feet.

The night had fallen. Here and there through the gloom shone a lamp. Across the north was a dim glow of phosphorescence, precursor of the aurora, from which occasionally trembled for an instant a single shaft of light. The group by the bronze field-cannon were humming softly the sweet and tender cadences of *La Violette dandine*.

Instinctively the two woodsmen paused on the hither side of rejoining their companions. Bolton's eyes were already clouded with the trouble of his speculation. Dick Herron glanced at his comrade quizzically, the strange cast flickering in the wind of his thought.

"Oh, Sam!" said he.

"What?" asked the older man, rousing.

"Strikes me that by the time we get through drawin' that double pay on this job, we'll be rich men—and old!"

CHAPTER TWO

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The men stood looking vaguely upward at the stars.

Dick Herron whipped the grasses with a switch he had broken in passing a willow-bush. His mind was little active. Chiefly he regretted the good time he had promised himself here at the Post after the labour of an early spring march from distant Winnipeg. He appreciated the difficulties of the undertaking, but idly, as something that hardly concerned him. The details, the planning, he dismissed from his mind, confident that his comrade would rise to that. In time Sam Bolton would show him the point at which he was to bend his strength. Then he would stoop his shoulders, shut his eyes, and apply the magnificent brute force and pluck that was in him. So now he puckered his lips to the sibilance of a canoe-song, and waited.

But the other, Sam Bolton, the veteran woodsman, stood in rapt contemplation, his wide-seeing, gentle eyes of the old man staring with the magnitude of his reverie.

Beyond the black velvet band lay the wilderness. There was the trackless country, large as the United States itself, with its great forests, its unmapped bodies of water, its plains, its barren grounds, its mountains, its water courses wider even than the Hudson River. Moose and bear, true lords of the forest, he might see any summer day. Herds of caribou, sometimes thousands strong, roamed its woodlands and barrens. Wolves, lurking or bold as their prey was strong or weak, clung to the caribou bands in hope of a victim. Wolverines,—unchanged in form from another

geological period—marten, mink, fisher, otter, ermine, muskrat, lynx, foxes, beaver carried on their varied affairs of murder or of peaceful industry. Woods Indians, scarcely less keen of sense or natural of life than the animals, dwelt in their wigwams of bark or skins, trapped and fished, made their long migrations as the geese turn following their instinct. Sun, shadow, rain, cold, snow, hunger, plenty, labour, or the peaceful gliding of rivers, these had watched by the Long Trail in the years Sam Bolton had followed it. He sensed them now dimly, instinctively, waiting by the Trail he was called upon to follow.

Sam Bolton had lived many years in the forest, and many years alone. Therefore he had imagination. It might be of a limited quality, but through it he saw things in their essences.

Now from the safe vantage ground of the camp, from the breathing space before the struggle, he looked out upon the wilderness, and in the wilderness he felt the old, inimical Presence as he had felt it for forty years. The scars of that long combat throbbed through his consciousness. The twisting of his strong hands, the loosening of the elasticity, the humbling of the spirit, the caution that had displaced the carelessness of youth, the keenness of eye, the patience,—all these were at once the marks of blows and the spoils of victory received from the Enemy. The wilderness, calm, ruthless, just, terrible, waited in the shadow of the forest, seeking no combat, avoiding none, conquering with a lofty air of predestination, yielding superbly as though the moment's victory for which a man had strained the fibres of his soul were, after all, a little,

unimportant thing; never weary, never exultant, dispassionate, inevitable, mighty, whose emotions were silence, whose speech was silence, whose most terrible weapon was the great white silence that smothered men's spirits. Sam Bolton clearly saw the North. He felt against him the steady pressure of her resistance. She might yield, but relentlessly regained her elasticity. Men's efforts against her would tire; the mechanics of her power remained constant. What she lost in the moments of her opponent's might, she recovered in the hours of his weakness, so that at the last she won, poised in her original equilibrium above the bodies of her antagonists. Dimly he felt these things, personifying the wilderness in his imagination of the old man, arranging half-consciously his weapons of craft in their due order.

Somewhere out beyond in those woods, at any one of the thirty-two points of the compass, a man was lurking. He might be five or five hundred miles away. He was an expert at taking care of himself in the woods. Abruptly Sam Bolton began to formulate his thoughts aloud.

"We got to keep him or anybody else from knowin' we's after him, Dick," said he. "Jest as soon as he knows that, it's just too easy for him to keep out of our way. Lucky Jingoss is an Ojibway, and his people are way off south. We can fool this crowd here easy enough; we'll tell 'em we're looking for new locations for winter posts. But she's an awful big country."

"Which way'll we go first?" asked Dick, without, however, much interest in the reply. Whatever Sam decided was sure to be all right.

"It's this way," replied the latter. "He's got to trade somewheres. He can't come into any of the Posts here at the Bay. What's the nearest? Why, Missináibie, down in Lake Superior country. Probably he's down in that country somewheres. We'll start south."

"That's Ojibway country," hazarded Dick at random.

"It's Ojibway country, but Jingoss is a Georgian Bay Ojibway. Down near Missináibie every Injun has his own hunting district, and they're different from our Crees,—they stick pretty close to their district. Any strangers trying to hunt and trap there are going to get shot, sure pop. That makes me think that if Jingoss has gone south, and if he's trading now at Missináibie, and if he ain't chummed up with some of them Ojibways to get permission to trap in their allotments, and if he ain't pushed right on home to his own people or out west to Winnipeg country, then most likely we'll find him somewheres about the region of th' Kabinakágam."

"So we'll go up th' Missináibie River first," surmised Dick.

"That's how we'll make a start," assented Bolton.

As though this decision had terminated an interview, they turned with one accord toward the dim group of their companions. As they approached, they were acclaimed.

"Here he is," "Dick, come here," "Dick, sing us the song. Chante donc 'Oncle Naid,' Deeck."

And Dick, leaning carelessly against the breech of the field-guns, in a rich, husky baritone crooned to the far north the soft syllables of the far south.

"Oh, there was an old darkey, and his name was Uncle Ned,

And he lived long ago, long ago!"



CHAPTER THREE

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In the selection of paddles early next morning Sam insisted that the Indian rule be observed, measuring carefully that the length of each implement should just equal the height of its wielder. He chose the narrow maple blade, that it might not split when thrust against the bottom to check speed in a rapid. Further the blades were stained a brilliant orange.

Dick Herron had already picked one of a dozen birch-bark canoes laid away under the bridge over the dry coulee. He knew a good canoe as you would know a good horse. Fourteen feet it measured, of the heavy winter-cut of bark, and with a bottom all of one piece, without cracks or large knots.

The canoe and the paddles they laid at the water's edge. Then they went together to the great warehouse, behind the grill of whose upper room MacDonald was writing. Ordinarily the trappers were not allowed inside the grill, but Dick and Sam were told to help themselves freely. The stocking Dick left to his older companion, assuring himself merely of an hundred rounds of ammunition for his new model Winchester rifle, the 44-40 repeater, then just entering the outskirts of its popularity.

In the obscurity of the wide, low room the old woodsman moved to and fro, ducking his head to avoid things hanging, peering into corners, asking an occasional question of MacDonald, who followed him silently about. Two small steel traps, a narrow, small-meshed fish-net, a fish-line and

hooks, powder, ball, and caps for the old man's muzzle-loader, a sack of salt were first laid aside. This represented subsistence. Then matches, a flint-and-steel machine, two four-point blankets. These meant warmth. Then ten pounds of plug tobacco and as many of tea. These were necessary luxuries. And finally a small sack of flour and a side of bacon. These were merely a temporary provision; when they should be exhausted, the men would rely wholly on the forest.

Sam Bolton hovered over the pile, after it was completed, his eyes half shut, naming over its items again and again, assuring himself that nothing lacked. At his side MacDonald made suggestions.

"Got a copper pail, Sam? a frying-pan? cups? How about the axe? Better have an extra knife between you. Need any clothes? Compass all right?"

To each of these questions Sam nodded an assent. So MacDonald, having named everything—with the exception of the canvas square to be used as a tarpaulin or a tent, and soap and towel—fell silent, convinced that he could do nothing more.

But Dick, who had been drumming his fingers idly against the window, turned with a suggestion of his own.

"How're we fixed for shoe pacs? I haven't got any."

At once MacDonald looked blank.

"By George, boys, I ain't got but four or five pairs of moccasins in the place! There's plenty of oil tan; I can fix you all right there. But smoke tans! That Abítibi gang mighty near cleaned me out. You'll have to try the Indians."

Accordingly Bolton and Herron took their way in the dusty little foot-trodden path—there were no horses in that frontier—between the Factor's residence and the Clerk's house, down the meandering trail through the high grasses of the meadow to where the Indian lodges lifted their pointed tops against the sky.

The wigwams were scattered apparently at random. Before each a fire burned. Women and girls busied themselves with a variety of camp-work. A tame crow hopped and fluttered here and there just out of reach of the pointed-nosed, shaggy wolf-dogs.

The latter rushed madly forward at the approaching strangers, yelping in a curious, long-drawn bay, more suggestive of their wolf ancestors than of the domestic animal. Dick and Sam laid about them vigorously with short staffs they had brought for the purpose. Immediately the dogs, recognising their dominance, slunk back. Three men sauntered forward, grinning broadly in amiable greeting. Two or three women, more bashful than the rest, scuttled into the depths of wigwams out of sight. A multitude of children concealed themselves craftily, like a covey of quail, and focussed their bright, bead-like eyes on the newcomers. The rest of the camp went its way unmoved.

"Bo' jou', bo' jou'," greeted Sam Bolton.

"Bo' jou', bo' jou'," replied the three.

These Indians were of the far upper country. They spoke no English nor French, and adhered still to their own tribal customs and religious observances. They had lingered several days beyond their time for the purpose of conjuring. In fact at this very moment the big medicine lodge raised