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THE BLUE MAN

From "Mackinac And Lake Stories", 1899

By Mary Hartwell Catherwood

The lake was like a meadow full of running streams. Far off indeed it seemed frozen with countless wind-paths traversing the ice, so level and motionless was the surface under a gray sky. But summer rioted in verdure over the cliffs to the very beaches. From the high greenery of the island could be heard the tink-tank of a bell where some cow sighed amid the delicious gloom.

East of the Giant's Stairway in a cove are two round rocks with young cedars springing from them. It is easy to scramble to the flat top of the first one and sit in open ambush undetected by passers. The world's majority is unobservant. Children with their nurses, lovers, bicyclists who have left their wheels behind, excursionists—fortunately headed towards this spot in their one available hour—an endless procession, tramp by on the rough, wave-lapped margin, never wearing it smooth.

Amused by the unconsciousness of the reviewed, I found myself unexpectedly classed with the world's majority. For on the east round rock, a few yards from my seat on the west round rock, behold a man had arranged himself, his back against the cedars, without attracting notice. While the gray weather lightened and wine-red streaks on the lake began to alternate with translucent greens, and I was watching mauve plumes spring from a distant steamer before her whistles could be heard, this nimble stranger must have found his own amusement in the blindness of people with eyes.

He was not quite a stranger. I had seen him the day before; and he was a man to be remembered on account of a peculiar blueness of the skin, in which, perhaps, some drug or chemical had left an unearthly haze over the natural flush of blood. It might have appeared the effect of sky lights and cliff shadows, if I had not seen the same blue face distinctly in Madame Clementine's house. He was standing in the middle of a room at the foot of the stairway as we passed his open door.

So unusual a personality was not out of place in a transplanted Parisian tenement. Madame Clementine was a Parisian; and her house, set around three sides of a quadrangle in which flowers overflowed their beds, was a bit of artisan Paris. The ground-floor consisted of various levels joined by steps and wide-jambled doors. The chambers, to which a box staircase led, wanted nothing except canopies over the beds.

"Alors I give de convenable beds," said Madame Clementine, in mixed French and English, as she poked her mattresses. "Des bons lits! T'ree dollar one chambre, four dollar one chambre—" she suddenly spread her hands to include both—"seven dollar de tout ensemble!"

It was delightful to go with any friend who might be forced by crowded hotels to seek rooms in Madame Clementine's alley. The active, tiny, Frenchwoman, who wore a black mob-cap every-where except to mass, had reached present prosperity through past tribulation. Many years before she had followed a runaway

husband across the sea. As she stepped upon the dock almost destitute the first person her eyes rested on was her husband standing well forward in the crowd, with a ham under his arm which he was carrying home to his family. He saw Clementine and dropped the ham to run. The same hour he took his new wife and disappeared from the island. The doubly deserted French-speaking woman found employment and friends; and by her thrift was now in the way of piling up what she considered a fortune.

The man on the rock near me was no doubt one of Madame Clementine's permanent lodgers. Tourists ranting over the island in a single day had not his repose. He met my discovering start with a dim smile and a bend of his head, which was bare. His features were large, and his mouth corners had the sweet, strong expression of a noble patience. What first impressed me seemed to be his blueness, and the blurredness of his eyes struggling to sight as Bartimeus' eyes might have struggled the instant before the Lord touched them.

Only Asiatics realize the power of odors. The sense of smell is lightly appreciated in the Western world. A fragrance might be compounded which would have absolute power over a human being. We get wafts of scent to which something in us irresistibly answers. A satisfying sweetness, fleeting as last year's wild flowers, filled the whole cove. I thought of dead Indian pipes, standing erect in pathetic dignity, the delicate scales on their stems unfurled, refusing to crumble and pass away; the ghosts of Indians.

The blue man parted his large lips and moved them several instants; then his voice followed, like the tardy note of a distant steamer that addresses the eye with its plume of steam before the whistle is heard. I felt a creepy thrill down my shoulders—that sound should break so slowly across the few yards separating us! "Are you also waiting, madame?"

I felt compelled to answer him as I would have answered no other person. "Yes; but for one who never comes."

If he had spoken in the pure French of the Touraine country, which is said to be the best in France, free from Parisianisms, it would not have surprised me. But he spoke English, with the halting though clear enunciation of a Nova Scotian.

"You—you must have patience. I have—have seen you only seven summers on the island."

"You have seen me these seven years past? But I never met you before!"

His mouth labored voicelessly before he declared, "I have been here thirty-five years."

How could that be possible!—and never a hint drifting through the hotels of any blue man! Yet the intimate life of old inhabitants is not paraded before the overrunning army of a season. I felt vaguely flattered that this exclusive resident had hitherto noticed me and condescended at last to reveal himself.

The blue man had been here thirty-five years! He knew the childish joy of bruising the flesh of orange-colored toadstools and wading amid long pine-cones which strew the ground like fairy corncobs. The white birches were dear to him, and he trembled with eagerness at the first pipe sign, or at the discovery of blue gentians where the eastern forest stoops to the strand. And he knew the echo, shaking like gigantic organ music from one side of the world to the other.

In solitary trysts with wilderness depths and caves which transient sight-seers know nothing about I had often pleased myself thinking the Mishi-ne-macki-naw-go were somewhere around me. If twigs crackled or a sudden awe fell causelessly, I laughed—"That family of Indian ghosts is near. I wish they would show themselves!" For if they ever show themselves, they bring you the gift of prophecy. The Chippewas left tobacco and gunpowder about for them. My offering was to cover with moss the picnic papers, tins, and broken bottles, with which man who is vile defiles every prospect. Discovering such a queer islander as the blue man was almost equal to seeing the Mishi-ne-macki-naw-go.

Voices approached; and I watched his eyes come into his face as he leaned forward! From a blurr' of lids they turned to beautiful clear balls shot through with yearning. Around the jut of rook appeared a bicycle girl, a golf girl, and a youth in knickers having his stockings laid in correct folds below the knee. They passed without noticing us. To see his looks dim and his eagerness relax was too painful. I watched the water ridging against the horizon like goldstone and changing swiftly to the blackest of greens. Distance folded into distance so that the remote drew near. He was certainly waiting for somebody, but it could not be that he had waited thirty-five years: thirty-five winters, whitening the ice-bound island; thirty-five summers, bringing all paradise except what he waited for.

Just as I glanced at the blue man again his lips began to move, and the peculiar tingle ran down my back, though I felt ashamed of it in his sweet presence.

"Madame, it will—it will comfort me if you permit me to talk to you."

"I shall be very glad, sir, to hear whatever you have to tell."

"I have—have waited here thirty-five years, and in all that time I have not spoken to any one!"

He said this quite candidly, closing his lips before his voice ceased to sound. The cedar sapling against which his head rested was not more real than the sincerity of that blue man's face. Some hermit soul, who had proved me by watching me seven years, was opening himself, and I felt the tears come in my eyes.

"Have you never heard of me, madame?"

"You forget, sir, that I do not even know your name."

"My name is probably forgotten on the island now. I stopped here between steamers during your American Civil War. A passing boat put in to leave a young girl who had cholera. I saw her hair floating out of the litter."

"Oh!" I exclaimed; "that is an island story." The blue man was actually presenting credentials when he spoke of the cholera story. "She was taken care of on the island until she recovered; and she was the beautiful daughter of a wealthy Southern family trying to get home from her convent in France, but unable to run the blockade. The nun who brought her died on shipboard before she landed at Montreal, and she hoped to get through the lines by venturing down the lakes. Yes, indeed! Madame Clementine has told me that story."

He listened, turning his head attentively and keeping his eyes half closed, and again worked his lips.

"Yes, yes. You know where she was taken care of?"

"It was at Madame Clementine's."

"I myself took her there." "And have you been there ever since?" He passed over the trivial question, and when his voice arrived it gushed without a stammer.

"I had a month of happiness. I have had thirty-five years of waiting. When this island binds you to any one you remain bound. Since that month with her I can do nothing but wait until she comes. I lost her, I don't know how. We were in this cove together. She sat on this rock and waited while I went up the cliff to gather ferns for her. When I returned she was gone. I searched the island for her. It kept on smiling as if there never had been such a person! Something happened which I do not understand, for she did not want to leave me. She disappeared as if the earth had swallowed her!" I felt a rill of cold down my back like the jetting of the spring that spouted from its ferny tunnel farther eastward. Had he been thirty-five years on the island without ever hearing the Old Mission story about bones found in the cliff above us? Those who reached them by venturing down a pit as deep as a well, uncovered by winter storms, declared they were the remains of a woman's skeleton. I never saw the people who found them. It was an oft-repeated Mission story which had come down to me. An Indian girl was missed from the Mission school and never traced. It was believed she met her fate in this rock crevasse. The bones were blue, tinged by a clay in which they had lain. I tried to remember what became of the Southern girl who was put ashore, her hair flying from a litter. Distinct as her tradition remained, it ended abruptly. Even Madame Clementine forgot when and how she left the island after she ceased to be an object of solicitude, for many comers and goers trample the memory as well as the island.

Had his love followed him up the green tangled height and sunk so swiftly to her death that it was accomplished without noise or outcry? To this hour only a few inhabitants locate the treacherous spot. He could not hide, even at Madame Clementine's, from all the talk of a community. This unreasonable tryst of thirty-five years raised for the first time doubts of his sanity. A woman might have kept such a tryst; but a man consoles himself.

Passers had been less frequent than usual, but again there was a crunch of approaching feet. Again he leaned forward, and the sparks in his eyes enlarged, and faded, as two fat women wobbled over the unsteady stones, exclaiming and balancing themselves, oblivious to the blue man and me.

"It is four o'clock," said one, pausing to look at her watch. "This air gives one such an appetite I shall never be able to wait for dinner."

"When the girls come in from golf at five we will have some tea," said the other.

Retarding beach gadders passed us. Some of them noticed me with a start, but the blue man, wrapped in rigid privacy, with his head sunk on his breast, still evaded curious eyes.

I began to see that his clothes were by no means new, though they suited the wearer with a kind of masculine elegance. The blue man's head had so entirely dominated my attention that the cut of his coat and his pointed collar and neckerchief seemed to appear for the first time.

He turned his face to me once more, but before our brief talk could be resumed another woman came around the jut of cliff, so light-footed that she did not make as much noise on the stones as the fat women could still be heard making while they floundered eastward, their backs towards us. The blue man had impressed me as being of middle age. But I felt mistaken; he changed so completely. Springing from the rock like a boy, his eyes glorified, his lips quivering, he met with open arms the woman who had come around the jut of the Giant's Stairway. At first glance I thought her a slim old woman with the kind of hair which looks either blond or gray. But the maturity glided into sinuous girlishness, yielding to her lover, and her hair shook loose, floating over his shoulder.

I dropped my eyes. I heard a pebble stir under their feet. The tinkle of water falling down its ferny tunnel could be guessed at; and the beauty of the world stabbed one with such keenness that the stab brought tears.

We have all had our dreams of flying; or floating high or low, lying extended on the air at will. By what process of association I do not know, the perfect naturalness and satisfaction of flying recurred to me. I was cleansed from all doubt of ultimate good. The meeting of the blue man and the woman with floating hair seemed to be what the island had awaited for thirty-five years.

The miracle of impossible happiness had been worked for him. It confused me like a dazzle of fireworks. I turned my back and bowed my head, waiting for him to speak again or to leave me out, as he saw fit.

Extreme joy may be very silent in those who have waited long, for I did not hear a cry or a spoken word. Presently I dared to look, and was not surprised to find myself alone. The evergreen-clothed amphitheatre behind had many paths which would instantly hide climbers from view. The blue man and the woman with floating hair knew these heights well. I thought of the pitfall, and sat watching with back-tilted head, anxious to warn them if they stirred foliage near where that fatal trap was said to lurk. But the steep forest gave no sign or sound from its mossy depths.

I sat still a long time in a trance of the senses, like that which follows a drama whose spell you would not break. Masts and cross-trees of ships, were banded by ribbons of smoke blowing back from the steamers which towed them in lines up or down the straits.

Towards sunset there was a faint blush above the steel-blue waters, which at their edge reflected the blush. Then mist closed in. The sky became ribbed with horizontal bars, so that the earth was pent like a heart within the hollow of some vast skeleton.

I was about to climb down from my rock when two young men passed by, the first strollers I had noticed since the blue man's exit. They rapped stones out of the way with their canes, and pushed the caps back from their youthful faces, talking rapidly in excitement.

"When did it happen?"

"About four o'clock. You were off at the golf links."

"Was she killed instantly?"

"I think so. I think she never knew what hurt her after seeing the horses plunge and the carriage go over. I was walking my wheel down-hill just behind and I didn't hear her scream. The driver said he lost the brake; and he's a pretty spectacle now, for he landed on his head. It was that beautiful old lady with the fly-away hair that we saw arrive from this morning's boat while we were sitting out smoking, you remember."

"Not that one!"

"That was the woman. Had a black maid with her. She's a Southerner. I looked on the register."

The other young fellow whistled.

"I'm glad I was at the links and didn't see it. She was a stunning woman."

Dusk stalked grimly down from eastern heights and blurred the water earlier than on rose-colored evenings, making the home-returning walker shiver through evergreen glooms along shore. The lights of the sleepy Old Mission had never seemed so pleasant, though the house was full of talk about that day's accident at the other side of the island.

I slipped out before the early boat left next morning, driven by undefined anxieties towards Madame Clementine's alley. There is a childish credulity which clings to imaginative people through life. I had accepted the blue man and the woman with floating hair in the way which they chose to present themselves. But I began to feel like one who sees a distinctly focused picture shimmering to a dissolving view. The intrusion of an accident to a stranger at another hotel continued this morning, for as I took the long way around the bay before turning back to Clementine's alley I met the open island hearse, looking like a relic of provincial France, and in it was a coffin, and behind it moved a carriage in which a black maid sat weeping.

Madame Clementine came out to her palings and picked some of her nasturtiums for me. In her mixed language she talked excitedly about the accident; nothing equals the islander's zest for sensation after his winter trance when the summer world comes to him.

"When I heard it," I confessed, "I thought of the friend of your blue gentleman. The description was so like her. But I saw her myself on the beach by the Giant's Stairway after four o'clock yesterday."

Madame Clementine contracted her short face in puzzled wrinkles.

"There is one gentleman of red head," she responded, "but none of blue—pas du tout."

"You must know whom I mean—the lodger who has been with you thirty-five years."

She looked at me as at one who has either been tricked or is attempting trickery.

"I don't know his name—but you certainly understand! The man I saw in that room at the foot of the stairs when you were showing my friend and me the chambers day before yesterday."

"There was nobody. De room at de foot of de stair is empty all season. Tout de suite I put in some young lady that arrive this night."

"Madame Clementine, I saw a man with a blue skin on the beach yesterday—" I stopped. He had not told me he lodged with her. That was my own deduction. "I saw him the day before in this house. Don't you know any such person? He has been on the island since that young lady was brought to your house with the cholera so long ago. He brought her to you."

A flicker of recollection appeared on Clementine's face.

"That man is gone, madame; it is many years. And he was not blue at all. He was English Jersey man, of Halifax."

"Did you never hear of any blue man on the island, Clementine?"

"I hear of blue bones found beyond Point de Mission."

"But that skeleton found in the hole near the Giant's Stairway was a woman's skeleton."

"Me loes!" exclaimed Madame Clementine, miscalling her English as she always did in excitement. "Me handle de big bones, moi-même! Me loes what de doctor who found him say!"

"I was told it was an Indian girl."

"You have hear lies, madame. Me loes there was a blue man found beyond Point de Mission."

"But who was it that I saw in your house?"

"He is not in my house!" declared Madame Clementine. "No blue man is ever in my house!" She crossed herself.

There is a sensation like having a slide pulled from one's head; the shock passes in the fraction of a second. Sunshine, and rioting nasturtiums, the whole natural world, including Clementine's puzzled brown face, were no more distinct to-day than the blue man and the woman with floating hair had been yesterday.

I had seen a man who shot down to instant death in the pit under the Giant's Stairway thirty-five years ago. I had seen a woman, who, perhaps, once thought herself intentionally and strangely deserted, seek and meet him after she had been killed at four o'clock!

This experience, set down in my note-book and repeated to no one, remains associated with the Old World scent of ginger. For I remember hearing Clementine say through a buzzing, "You come in, madame—you must have de hot wine and jahjah!"

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