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THE INDIAN ON THE TRAIL

From "Mackinac And Lake Stories", 1899

By Mary Hartwell Catherwood

Maurice Barrett sat waiting in the old lime-kiln built by the British in the war of 1812—a white ruin like much-scattered marble, which stands bowered in trees on a high part of the island. He had, to the amusement of the commissioner, hired this place for a summer study, and paid a carpenter to put a temporary roof over it, with skylight, and to make a door which could be fastened. Here on the uneven floor of stone were set his desk, his chair, and a bench on which he could stretch himself to think when undertaking to make up arrears in literary work. But the days were becoming nothing but trysts with her for whom he waited.

First came the heavenly morning walk and the opening of his study, then the short half-hour of labor, which unravelled off to delicious suspense. He caught through trees the hint of a shirt-waist which might be any girl's, then the long exquisite outline which could be nobody's in the world but hers, her face under its sailor hat, the blown blond hair, the blue eyes. Then her little hands met his outstretched hands at the door, and her whole violet-breathing self yielded to his arms.

They sat down on the bench, still in awe of each other and of the swift miracle of their love and engagement. Maurice had passed his fiftieth year, so clean from dissipation, so full of vitality and the beauty of a long race of strong men, that he did not look forty, and in all out-door activities rivalled the boys in their early twenties. He was an expert mountain-climber and explorer of regions from which he brought his own literary material; inured to fatigue, patient in hardship, and resourceful in danger. Money and reputation and the power which attends them he had wrung from fate as his right, and felt himself fit to match with the best blood in the world—except hers.

Yet she was only his social equal, and had grown up next door, while his unsatisfied nature searched the universe for its mate—a wild sweetbrier-rose of a child, pink and golden, breathing a daring, fragrant personality. He hearkened back to some recognition of her charm from the day she ran out bareheaded and slim-legged on her father's lawn and turned on the hose for her play. Yet he barely missed her when she went to an Eastern school, and only thrilled vaguely when she came back like one of Gibson's pictures, carrying herself with state-likeness. There was something in her blue eyes not to be found in any other blue eyes. He was housed with her family in the same hotel at the island before he completely understood the magnitude of what had befallen him.

"I am awfully set up because you have chosen me," she admitted at first. He liked to have her proud as of a conquest, and he was conscious of that general favor which stamped him a good match, even for a girl half his age.

"How much have you done this morning?" she inquired, looking at his desk.

"Enough to tide over the time until you came. Determination and execution are not one with me now." Her hands were cold, and he warmed them against his face.

"It was during your married life that determination and execution were one?"

"Decidedly. For that was my plodding age. Sometimes when I am tingling with impatience here I look back in wonder on the dogged drive of those days. Work is an unhappy man's best friend. I have no concealments from you, Lily. You know I never loved my wife—not this way—though I made her happy; I did my duty. She told me when she died that I had made her happy. People cannot help their limitations."

"Do you love me?" she asked, her lips close to his ear.

"I am you! Your blood flows through my veins. I feel you rush through me. You don't know what it is to love like that, do you?"

She shook her head.

"When you are out of my sight I do not live; I simply wait. What is the weird power in you that creates such gigantic passion?"

"The power is all in your imagination. You simply don't know me. You think I am a prize. Why, I—flirt—and I've—kissed men!"

He laughed. "You would be a queer girl, at your age, if you hadn't—kissed men—a little. Whatever your terrible past has been, it has made you the infinite darling that you are!"

She moved her eyes to watch the leaves twinkling in front of the lime-kiln.

"I must go," she said.

"I must go!" he mocked. "You are no sooner here than—' I must go '!"

"I can't be with you all the time. You don't care for appearances, so I have to."

"Appearances are nothing. This is the only real thing in the universe."

"But I really must go." She lifted her wilful chin and sat still. They stared at each other in the silence of lovers. Though the girl's face was without a line, she was more skilled in the play of love than he.

"Indeed I must go. Your eyes are half shut, like a gentian."

"When you are living intensely you don't look at the world through wide-open eyes," said Maurice. "I never let myself go before. Repression has been the law of my life. Think of it! In a long life-time I have loved but two persons—the woman I told you of, and you. Twenty years ago I found out what life meant. For the first time, I knew! But I was already married. I took that beautiful love by the throat and choked it down. Afterwards, when I was free, the woman I first loved was married. How long I have had to wait for you to bloom, lotos flower! This is living! All the other years were preparation."

"Do you never see her?" inquired the girl.

"Who? That first one? I have avoided her."

"She loved you?"

"With the blameless passion that we both at first thought was the most perfect friendship."

"Wouldn't you marry her now if she were free?"

"No. It is ended. We have grown apart in renunciation for twenty years. I am not one that changes easily, you see. You have taken what I could not withhold from you, and it is yours. I am in your power."

They heard a great steamer blowing upon the strait. Its voice reverberated through the woods. The girl's beautiful face was full of a tender wistfulness, half maternal. Neither jealousy nor pique marred its exquisite sympathy. It was such an expression as an untamed wood-nymph might have worn, contemplating the life of man.

"Don't be sad," she breathed.

Vague terror shot through Maurice's gaze.

"That is a strange thing for you to say to me, Lily. Is it all you can say—when I love you so?"

"I was thinking of the other woman. Did she suffer?"

"At any rate, she has the whole world now—beauty, talent, wealth, social prestige. She is one of the most successful women in this country."

"Do I know her name?"

"Quite well. She has been a person of consequence since you were a child."

"I couldn't capture the whole world," mused Lily. Maurice kissed her small fingers.

"Some one else will put it in your lap, to keep or throw away as you choose."

The hurried tink-tank of an approaching cow-bell suggested passers. Then a whirl of wheels could be heard through tangled wilderness. The girl met his lips with a lingering which trembled through all his body, and withdrew herself.

"Now I am going. Are you coming down the trail with me?"

Maurice shut the lime-kiln door, and crossed with her a grassy avenue to find among birches the ravelled ends of a path called the White Islander's Trail. You may know it first by a triangle of roots at the foot of an oak. Thence a thread, barely visible to expert eyes, winds to some mossy dead pines and crosses a rotten log. There it becomes a trail cleaving the heights, and plunging boldly up and down evergreen glooms to a road parallel with the cliff. Once, when the island was freshly drenched in rain, Lily breathed deeply, gazing down the tunnel floored with rock and pine-needles, a flask of incense. "It is like the violins!"

In that seclusion of heaven Maurice could draw her slim shape to him, for the way is so narrow that two are obliged to walk close. They parted near the wider entrance, where a stump reared itself against the open sky, bearing a stick like a bow, and having the appearance of a crouching figure.

"There is the Indian on the trail," said Lily. "You must go back now."

"He looks so formidable," said Maurice; "especially in twilight, and, except at noon, it is always twilight here. But when you reach him he is nothing but a stump."

"He is more than a stump," she insisted. "He is a real Indian, and some day will get up and take a scalp! It gives me a shiver every time I come in sight of him crouched on the trail!"

"Do you know," complained her lover, "that you haven't told me once to-day?"

"Well—I do."

"How much?"

"Oh—a little!"

"A little will not do!"

"Then—a great deal."

"I want all—all!"

Her eyes wandered towards the Indian on the trail, and the bow of her mouth was bent in a tantalizing curve.

"I have told you I love you. Why doesn't that satisfy you?"

"It isn't enough!"

"Perhaps I can't satisfy you. I love you all I can."

"All you can?"

"Yes. Maybe I can't love you as much as you want me to. I am shallow!"

"For God's sake, don't say you are shallow! There is deep under deep in you! I couldn't have staked my life on you, I couldn't have loved you, if there hadn't been! Say I have only touched the surface yet, but don't say you are shallow!"

The girl shook her head.

"There isn't enough of me. Do you know," she exclaimed, whimsically, "that's the Indian on the trail! You'll never feel quite sure of me, will you?"

Maurice's lips moved. "You are my own!"

She kept him at bay with her eyes, though they filled slowly with tears.

"I am a child of the devil!" exclaimed Lily, with vehemence. "I give people trouble and make them suffer!"

"She classes me with 'people'!" Maurice thought. He said, "Have I ever blamed you for anything?"

"No."

"Then don't blame yourself. I will simply take what you can give me. That is all I could take. Forgive me for loving you too much. I will try to love you less."

"No," the girl demurred. "I don't want you to do that."

"I am very unreasonable," he said, humbly. "But the rest of the world is a shadow. You are my one reality. There is nothing in the universe but you."

She brushed her eyes fiercely. "I mustn't cry. I'll have to explain it if I do, and the lids will be red all day."

The man felt internally seared, as by burning lava, with the conviction that he had staked his all late in life on what could never be really his. She would diffuse herself through many. He was concentrated in her. His passion had its lips burned shut.

"I am Providence's favorite bag-holder," was his bitter thought. "The game is never for me."

"Good-bye," said Lily.

"Good-bye," said Maurice.

"Are you coming into the casino to-night?"

"If you will be there."

"I have promised a lot of dances. Good-bye. Go back and work."

"Yes, I must work," said Maurice.

She gave him a defiant, radiant smile, and ran towards the Indian on the trail. He turned in the opposite direction, and tramped the woods until nightfall.

At first he mocked himself. "Oh yes, she loves me! I'm glad, at any rate, that she loves me! There will be enough to moisten my lips with; and if I thirst for an ocean that is not her fault."

Why had a woman been made who could inspire such passion without returning it? He reminded himself that she was of a later, a gayer, lighter, less strenuous generation than his own. Thousands of men had waded blood for a principle and a lost cause in his day. In hers the gigantic republic stood up a menace to nations. The struggle for existence was over before she was born. Yet women seemed more in earnest now than ever before. He said to himself, "I have always picked out natures as fatal to me as a death-warrant, and fastened my life to them."

The thought stabbed him that perhaps his wife, whom he had believed satisfied, had carried such hopeless anguish as he now carried. Tardy remorse for what he could not help gave him the feeling of a murderer. And since he knew himself how little may be given under the bond of marriage, he could not look forward and say, "My love will yet be mine!"

He would, indeed, have society on his side; and children—he drew his breath hard at that. Her ways with children were divine. He had often watched her instinctive mothering of, and drawing them around her. And it should be much to him that he might look at and, touch her. There was life in her mere presence.

He felt the curse of the artistic temperament, which creates in man the exquisite sensitiveness of woman.

Taking the longest and hardest path home around the eastern beach, Maurice turned once on impulse, parted a screen of birches, and stepped into an amphitheatre of the cliff, moss-clothed and cedar-walled. It sloped downward in three terraces. A balcony or high parapet of stone hung on one side, a rock low and

broad stood in the centre, and an unmistakable chair of rock, cushioned with vividly green-branched moss, waited an occupant. Maurice sat down, wondering if any other human being, perplexed and tortured, had ever domiciled there for a brief time. Slim alder-trees and maples were clasped in moss to their waists. The spacious open was darkened by dense shade overhead. Bois Blanc was plainly in view from the beach. But the eastern islands stretched a line of foliage in growing dusk. Maurice felt the cooling benediction of the place. This world is such a good world to be happy in, if you have the happiness.

When the light faded he went on, climbing low headlands which jutted into the water, and sliding down on the other side; so that he reached the hotel physically exhausted, and had his dinner sent to his room. But a vitality constantly renewing itself swept away every trace of his hard day when he entered the gayly lighted casino.

He no longer danced, not because dancing ceased to delight him, but because the serious business of life had left no room for it. He walked along the waxed floor, avoiding the circling procession of waltzers, and bowing to a bank of pretty faces, but thinking his own thought, in growing bitterness: "They who live blameless lives are the fools of fate. If I had it to do over again, I would take what I wanted in spite of everything, and let the consequences fall where they would!" Looking up, he met in the eyes the woman of his early love.

She was holding court, for a person of such consequence became the centre of the caravansary from the instant of her arrival; and she gave him her hand with the conventional frankness and self-command that set her apart from the weak. Once more he knew she was a woman to be worshipped, whose presence rebuked the baseness he had just thought.

"Perhaps it was she who kept me from being worse," Maurice recognized in a flash; "not I myself!"

"Why, Mrs. Carstang, I didn't know you were here!" he spoke, with warmth around the heart.

"We came at noon."

"And I was in the woods all day." Maurice greeted the red-cheeked, elderly Mr. Carstang, whom, according to half the world, his wife doted upon, and according to the other half, she simply endured. At any rate, he looked pleased with his lot.

While Maurice stood talking with Mrs. Carstang, the new grief and the old strangely neutralized each other. It was as if they met and grappled, and he had numb peace. The woman of his first love made him proud of that early bond. She was more than she had been then. But Lily moved past him with a smile. Her dancing was visible music. It had a penetrating grace—hers, and no other person's in the world. The floating of a slim nymph down a forest avenue, now separating from her partner, and now joining him at caprice, it rushed through Maurice like some recollection of the Golden Age, when he had stood imprisoned in a tree. There was little opportunity to do anything but watch her, for she was more in demand than any other girl in the casino. Hop nights were her unconscious ovations. He took a kind of aching delight in her dancing. For while it gratified an artist to the core, it separated her from her lover and gave her to other men.

Next morning he waited for her in the study with a restlessness which would not let him sit still. More than once he went as far as the oak-tree to watch for a glimmer. But when Lily finally appeared at the door he pretended to be very busy with papers on his desk, and looked up, saying, "Oh!"

The morning was chill, and she seemed a fair Russian in fur-edged cloth as she put her cold fingers teasingly against his neck.

"Are you working hard?"

"Trying to. I am behind."

"But if there is a good wind this afternoon you are not to forget the Carstangs' sail. They will be here only a day or two, and you mustn't neglect them. Mrs. Carstang told me if I saw you first to invite you."

Maurice met the girl's smiling eyes, and the ice of her hand went through him.

"Isn't Mrs. Carstang lovely! As soon as I saw you come in last night, I knew she was—the other woman."

"You didn't look at me."

"I can see with my eyelashes. Do you know, I have often thought I should love her if I were a man!"

There was not a trace of jealousy in Lily's gentle and perfect manner.

"You resemble her," said Maurice. "You have the blond head, and the same features—only a little more delicate."

"I have been in her parlor all morning," said Lily. "We talked about you. I am certain, Maurice, Mrs. Carstang is in her heart still faithful to you."

That she should thrust the old love on him as a kind of solace seemed the cruelest of all. There was no cognizance of anything except this one maddening girl. She absorbed him. She wrung the strength of his manhood from him as tribute, such tribute as everybody paid her, even Mrs. Carstang. He sat like a rock, tranced by the strong control which he kept over himself.

"I must go," said Lily. She had not sat down at all. Maurice shuffled his papers.

"Good-bye," she spoke.

"Good-bye," he answered.

She did not ask, "Are you coming down the trail with me?" but ebbed softly away, the swish of her silken petticoat subsiding on the grassy avenue.

Her lover stretched his arms across the desk and sobbed upon them with heart-broken gasps.

"It is killing me! It is killing me! And there is no escape. If I took my life my disembodied ghost would follow her, less able to make itself felt than now! I cannot live without her, and she is not for me—not for me!"

He cursed the necessity which drove him out with the sailing party, and the prodigal waste of life on neutral, trivial doings which cannot be called living. He could see Lily with every pore of his body, and grew faint keeping down a wild beast in him which desired to toss overboard the men who crowded around her. She was more deliciously droll than any comédienne, full of music and wit, the kind of spirit that rises flood-

tide with occasion. He was himself hilarious also during this experience of sailing with two queens surrounded by courtiers and playing the deep game of fascination, as if men were created for the amusement of their lighter moments. Lily's defiant, inscrutable eyes mocked him. But Mrs. Carstang gave him sweet friendship, and he sat by her with the unchanging loyalty of a devotee to an altar from which the sacrament has been removed.

Next morning Lily did not come to the lime-kiln. Maurice worked furiously all day, and corrected proof in his room at night, though tableaux were shown in the casino, both Mrs. Carstang and Lily being head and front of the undertaking.

The second day Lily did not come to the limekiln. But he saw her pass along the grassy avenue in front of his study with Mrs. Carstang, a man on each side of them. They waved their hands to him.

Maurice sat with his head on his desk all the afternoon, beaten and broken-hearted. He told himself he was a poltroon; that he was losing his manhood; that the one he loved despised him, and did well to despise him; that a man of his age who gave way to such weakness must be entering senility. The habit of rectitude would cover him like armor, and proclaim him still of a chivalry to which he felt recreant. But it came upon him like revelation that many a man had died of what doctors had called disease, when the report to the health-officer should have read: "This man loved a woman with a great passion, and she slew him."

The sigh of the woods around, and the sunlight searching for him through his door, were lonelier than illimitable space. It was what the natives call a "real Mackinac day," with infinite splendor of sky and water.

Maurice heard the rustle of woman's clothes, and stood up as Lily came through the white waste of stones. She stopped and gazed at him with large hunted eyes, and submitted to his taking and kissing her hands. It was so blessed to have her at all that half his trouble fled before her. They sat down together on the bench.

Much of his life Maurice had been in the attitude of judging whether other people pleased him or not. Lily reversed this habit of mind, and made him humbly solicitous to know whether he pleased her or not. He silently thanked God for the mere privilege of having her near him. Passionate selfishness was chastened out of him. One can say much behind the lips and make no sound at all.

"If I drench her with my love and she does not know it," thought Maurice, "it cannot annoy her. Let me take what she is willing to give, and ask no more."

"The Carstangs are gone," said Lily.

"Yes; I bade them good-bye this morning before I came to the lime-kiln."

"You don't say you regret their going."

"I never seek Mrs. Carstang."

He sat holding the girl's hands and never swerving a glance from her face, which was weirdly pallid—the face of her spirit. He felt himself enveloped and possessed by her, his will subject to her will. He said within himself, voicelessly: "I love you. I love the firm chin, the wilful lower lip, and the Cupid's bow of the upper lip. I love the oval of your cheeks, the curve of your ears, the etched eyebrows, and all the little curls on your temples. I love the proud nose and most beautiful forehead. Every blond hair on that dear head is mine! Its upward tilt on the long throat is adorable! Have you any gesture or personal trait which does not thrill me? But best of all, because through them you yourself look at me, revealing more than you think, I adore your blue eyes."

"What are you thinking?" demanded Lily.

"Of a man who lay face downward far out in the desert, and had not a drop of water to moisten his lips."

"Is he in your story?"

"Yes, he is in my story."

"I thought perhaps you didn't want me to come here any more," she said.

"You didn't think so!" flashed Maurice.

"But you turned your cheek to me the last time I was here. You were too busy to do more than speak."

Voicelessly he said: "I lay under your feet, my life, my love! You walked on me and never knew it." Aloud he answered: "Was I so detestable? Forgive me. I am trying to learn self-control."

"You are all self-control! If you have feeling, you manage very well to conceal it."

"God grant it!" he said, in silence, behind his lips. "For the touch of your hand is rapture. My God! how hard it is to love so much and be still!" Aloud he said, "Don't you know the great mass of human beings are obliged to conceal their feelings because they have not the gift of expression?"

"Yes, I know," answered Lily, defiantly.

"But that can never be said of you," Maurice went on. "For you are so richly endowed with expression that your problem is how to mask it."

"Are you coming down the trail with me? It is sunset, and time to shut the study for the day."

He prepared at once to leave his den, and they went out together on the trail, lingering step by step. Though it was the heart of the island summer, the maples still had tender pink leaves at the extremities of branches; and the trail looked wild and fresh as if that hour tunneled through the wilderness. Sunset tried to penetrate western stretches with level shafts, but none reached the darkening path where twilight already purpled the hollows.

The night coolness was like respite after burning pain. Maurice wondered how close he might draw this changeful girl to him without again losing her. He had compared her to a wild sweetbrier-rose. She was a hundred-leaved rose, hiding innumerable natures in her depths.

They passed the dead pines, crossed the rotten log, and came silently within sight of the Indian on the trail, but neither of them noted it. The Indian stood stencilled against a background of primrose light, his bow magnified.

It was here that Maurice felt the slight elastic body sag upon his arm.

"I am tired," said Lily. "I have been working so hard to amuse your friends!"

"Would that I were my friends!" responded Maurice. He said, silently: "I love you! I wonder if I shall ever learn to love you less?"

The unspoken appeal of her swaying figure put him off his guard, and he found himself holding her, the very depths of his passion rushing out with the force of lava.

"It is you I want!—the you that is not any other person on earth or in the universe! Whatever it is—the identity—the spirit—that is you—the you that was mated with me in other lives—that I have sought—will seek—must have, whatever the price in time and anguish!—understand!—there is nobody but you!"

Tears oozed from under her closed lids. She lay in his arms passive, as in a half-swoon.

"You do the talking," she breathed. "I do the loving!"

Without opening her eyes she met him with her perfect mouth, and gave herself to him in a kiss. He understood a spirit so passionately reticent that it denied to itself its own inward motions. The wilfulness of a solitary exalted nature melted in that kiss. All the soft curves of her face concealed and belied the woman who opened "her wild blue eyes and looked at him, passionately adoring, fierce for her own, yet doubtful of fate.

"If I let you know that I loved you all I do, you would tire of me!"

"How can you say I could ever tire of you?"

"I know it! When you are not quite sure of me, you love me best!"

Maurice laughed against her lips. "You said that was the Indian on the trail—my never being quite sure of you! Will you take an oath with me?"

"Yes."

"This is the oath: I swear before God that I love you more than any one else on earth; more than any one else in the universe."

She repeated: "I swear before God that I love you more than any one else on earth; more than any one else in the universe!"

Maurice held her blond head against his breast, quivering through flesh and spirit. That was the moment of life. What was conquering the dense resistance of material things, or coming off victor in bouts with men? The moment of life is when the infinite sea opens before the lover.

The heart of the island held them like the heart of Allah. The pines sang around them.

"We must go on," spoke Lily. "It is so dark we can't see the Indian on the trail."

"There isn't any Indian on the trail now," laughed Maurice. "You can never frighten me with him again."



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“ THAT WAS THE MOMENT OF LIFE ”

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