

THE PALIMPSEST

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A Romance of the Forties

It was Sunday, and most of the inhabitants of the little Iowa village of Quasqueton were assembled at the town boarding house for their regular exchange of gossip and stories. On this particular occasion the ordinary town talk was probably superseded by a more absorbing topic, namely, the unsuccessful elk hunt of the day before. Again and again in the past weeks a lone elk had been chased in vain by the hunters of Buchanan County. Many and varied were the theories devised by these pioneer Nimrods to explain the failure, one being that the elusive elk was only a phantom of its departed race and kind.

Breaking abruptly into the midst of their discussion, rode a man and a girl, both on spirited black horses; and the attention of the group shifted immediately to these newcomers. The man was a commanding figure, tall and well built. He had about him an air which strongly impressed one with the fact that he was a person not to be trifled with —

yet the sprinkling of gray in his black hair lent dignity and charm to his appearance. The girl, on the other hand, was as striking in point of loveliness as her companion was in general appearance and bearing. She was fair in feature, graceful and bewitching in manners, attractive in form and speech. With the advent of this unusual couple it is safe to say that everyone speedily lost interest in the elk hunt.

Upon being asked the customary pioneer question — whence he came and where he proposed to go — he made the startling declaration that he was Bill Johnson, the far-famed Canadian patriot of the Thousand Isles of the St. Lawrence River. A gasp of wonder followed this remarkable revelation, for in the early forties the daring exploits of the renowned Canadian were fresh in the minds of all frontiersmen. But a few years had elapsed since the so-called "Patriot War of 1838", which was a revolt of certain Canadians against the administration of Sir Francis Bond Head, then Governor-General of Canada. And by far the most conspicuous figure in the revolt was Bill Johnson, whose adventures, deeds, and escapades in the region of the Thousand Isles of the St. Lawrence, where he had been compelled to flee from justice, would fill a volume. So it is little to be wondered at that this abrupt, unexpected appearance of the notorious rebel should have affected the villagers as it did.

Before they had time to recover from their surprise, he plunged into his tale. He told how he had

long been a terror to the British Dominion, how he and his family had lived on and indeed owned many of the islands in the St. Lawrence, and how he had been forced to flee from place to place to escape the British. He concluded by saying that since his daughter and he were now the only living members of his family, and having tired of the dangerous fugitive life on the islands, they had decided to leave Canada and settle down in Iowa. Interest changed to wonder, and wonder to awe, as he fluently recited his tale of daring adventures and hair-breadth escapes; and by the time he had finished, admiration was written on the faces of all.

Johnson purchased a farm within two miles of Quasqueton; and for some time the social life of the community centered about him and his daughter. While he probably came and went in every day life like the other pioneers, one can easily imagine the effect he had on his neighbors: how the story of his arrival spread from cabin to cabin; how the loud talk in the village grocery store toned down to a subdued whispering behind his back when he stepped up to the counter to buy, only to break out again stronger than ever the moment he left; and how he was followed by admiring glances and busy tongues wherever he went. It is even possible that the children in their daily games played at the daring exploits of the heroic figure.

It came as a rude shock to many in the surrounding community, therefore, when they learned that

their prominent neighbors had been made the victims of an unspeakably cruel outrage. According to Johnson's version, a party made up of about eight white men and a band of Indians, entered his house on a wintry night, dragged him from his bed out into the bitter cold, tied him to a tree and gave him some fifty lashes on the bare back. Then they ordered him and his daughter to pack up their belongings and leave the county within two hours. Since there was nothing to do but obey, into the bleak night they went, with twenty-five miles of windswept prairie between them and refuge. It was cold, so cruelly cold that one of the rioters is said to have frozen to death, another froze his feet, while many others of the party were frost bitten before they reached their homes. To Johnson, when he learned this, it must have seemed that poetic justice had overtaken his persecutors who had driven him from his home into the cold with an unmerciful beating.

In Dubuque, Johnson commenced proceedings against the rioters. The trial proved to be a lodestone, for hundreds of spectators crowded into the court room, no doubt as much to view the famous Canadians as to see justice done. Nor is it to be overlooked that the charms of Kate proved irresistible — she captivated the court from the judge to the janitor. So enamoured with her beauty and charm was the judge that he is said to have forgotten the dignity of his position in that he left his elevated station and escorted her to the door. And

we are told that "The cohort of loungers mounted the tables and benches, the bald headed jurors and the phalanx of attorneys stood with amazed countenance and open mouths at the unprecedented proceedings."

The trial went hard against the offenders. Four of them — Spencer, Evans, Parrish, and Rawley — were convicted, one sentenced to the penitentiary for two years, and the others fined two hundred dollars each. Stern justice must be meted out to those who dared encroach upon the rights of law-abiding people taking up residence in Iowa.

One of the absurd sequels of this trial was the effect on the young men. Although everyone at the trial, including the judge, was completely bewitched by the lovely Kate, it was the young bloods, and especially the editorial gallants who were most sorely smitten. After the trial they vied with one another in showering compliments and sweet flattery upon her through the editorial columns. Andrew Keesecker of the Dubuque *Miner's Express*, carried away in his ecstasy, wrote a rhapsody in which she was pictured as having "heavenly charms, deep blue eyes, matchless grace, piercing glances, queen-like dignity, soul-subduing countenance". As a result, he was made the laughing stock of the whole press of the West, a fact he deeply resented. The ridicule of John B. Russell, editor of the *Bloomington Herald*, he must have regarded as a personal affront, for he came very near fighting a duel with

him over it. Apparently what prevented these pioneer knights from entering the lists for a deadly tilt over the fair lady was disagreement as to place of meeting.

From Dubuque, Johnson and Kate went into Mahaska County, settling near the Skunk River. There a new turn of affairs took place in their ever eventful lives. Heretofore the famous Canadian had not been bothered much by the love-stricken admirers of his fair daughter, for they had been content to gaze and admire from a distance. But now a new problem confronted him when a man actually dared to make love openly to Kate.

Job Peck was the long reputed rowdy and terror of the Skunk River country. One day when he was hunting deer, he saw smoke curling up from the chimney of a recently vacant cabin. Curious to learn who its new occupants were, he proceeded to reconnoitre, and when his eyes fell upon Kate — the Cleopatra of the Iowa frontier — it is reported that he immediately shed his desperado characteristics. One can almost picture his desperate efforts to live down his doubtful reputation, break from his swaggering habits, and make a favorable impression on the "new girl". And hereafter, he made frequent wanderings to the little cabin in the timber; his deer in the chase seemed always to lead him to that locality. But even though Kate seemed disposed to return his affections, the old man would have none of their foolishness. And one day, rifle in hand, he

ordered young Peck off his premises, threatening him dire vengeance if he ever prowled about the place again.

These threats probably kept the love-smitten Peck well out of the range of Johnson's rifle in the day time, but evidently did not cause him to abandon the dictates of his heart. For one evening when Johnson was away, Peck eloped with Kate to Benjamin McClary's place in Jefferson County, where they were married. When the father came home and learned what had happened, he followed in hot pursuit and arrived at McClary's cabin just after the young couple had gone to bed.

With drawn pistol he entered the cabin and climbed up into the loft where they had retired for the night. At the point of his gun he forced his daughter to get up and dress and descend the ladder. Then he followed, put her on a horse and rode away with her. Peck, meanwhile, suffered the humiliation unresisting. It was hopeless to remonstrate or argue with an armed man. And was not this the fearless rebel who had struck terror into the hearts of many a Britisher in the Thousand Isles?

Several days passed. Then came a wild dismal night with the wolves howling a blood curdling chorus in the timber near Johnson's cabin. The Canadian himself sat on a rude stool before a log fire, puffing away at a corn cob pipe. There was a flash of light, a sharp report, and he fell to the floor shot through the heart. Suspicion pointed toward young

Peck, and he was arrested and held for the murder in a Washington County jail. But though it was generally conceded that he was guilty of the crime, in the trial he was acquitted.

Recently there had come unexpected developments. For some time Bill Johnson and his bewitching daughter had given new zest and color to the ordinarily hard life of the pioneers of Iowa. Unthought of events had followed each other in such rapid succession that the people hardly knew what to look for next. Then came the news out of the East that the man who had passed himself as Bill Johnson the Canadian patriot was not that noted character, but rather was the degenerate son of a worthy Welsh Canadian — that he was a criminal and an impostor, and a man of low repute. The real patriot Johnson, it was learned, was held in high esteem, even by his enemies. Then it was learned that in the Dubuque trial, Johnson and Kate had perjured themselves; and upon this discovery, the Governor remitted the penalties laid upon the assailants in the winter night attack. These men set out to arrest Kate for having committed perjury; but she was aided by those who were still subject to her charms, and made her escape.

That the person whom they had accepted and entertained so royally should turn out to be an impostor was a fact bitterly hard for the Iowans to accept. But the evidence was not to be doubted. The first clear intimation that the Bill Johnson dwelling

among them was not the Canadian patriot came in the form of a statement in a New York newspaper, denying that the Johnson of Canadian memory had been lynched in Buchanan County, for he was at that time residing in New York State, and was in good health. Shortly afterward a letter followed, from a number of inhabitants of Greenville, Maine, which revealed the facts that Iowa's hero had at one time resided in the vicinity of the Canadian patriot and learned all about him; that while in Maine he had variously passed as Killey, Willis, and Salone, and had been engaged for the most part in swindling schemes. And finally, an Iowan, A. C. Fulton, while in Canada, looked up the record of the individual who had claimed to be the hero of the Thousand Isles, and found that he was an impostor and would have been welcomed back by the Canadian authorities with open arms and a rope halter. So the people in Clayton, Buchanan, Dubuque, and Mahaska counties had to swallow their disappointment and admit that a rogue had hoodwinked them.

There are several versions of the later career of Kate and Peck, and it is difficult to say which is correct. But there is one of them — and it sounds as plausible as any — that brings the romance to a natural and happy ending. However, there were long and unhappy days for Peck during his imprisonment, and for several months following his release, when he knew nothing of his wife's whereabouts. No doubt his darkest hour came when he searched in

vain for a trace of Kate, trying bravely to fight off the fear that perhaps she was lost to him forever. Finally he learned that from Iowa she had fled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; whereupon he set out for the East. At his journey's end he found Kate living with refined, cultured people, in whose home she delighted him with a display of her accomplishments upon the piano. From Pittsburgh, the happy couple moved back to Iowa, settling at a point near Oskaloosa, where they lived several years; later they moved still further west. In California they lived happily together until Peck's death. And the last heard of the one time vampire of the Iowa frontier was that she was again married and to a devoted husband.

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