

In the Realm of Women---Some Interesting Features



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THE COURAGE OF MARGE O'DOONE

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

David's eyes followed the direction of the two trails. A hundred yards upstream he could see where gravel and rock were replaced entirely by sand, quite a wide, unbroken sweep of it, across which those clawed and moccasined feet must have travelled if they had followed the creek. He was not interested in the bear, and Baree was not interested in the Indian boy; so when they came to the sand one followed the moccasin tracks and the other the claw tracks. They were not at any time more than ten feet apart. And then, all at once, they came together, and David saw that the bear had crossed the sand last and that his huge paws had obliterated a part of the moccasin trail. This did not strike him as unusually significant until he came to a point where the moccasins turned sharply and circled to the right. The bear followed. A little farther—and David's heart gave a sudden thump! At first it might have been coincidence, a bit of chance. It was chance no longer. It was deliberate. The claws were on the trail of the moccasins. David halted and poked his pipe, on which he had not drawn a breath in several minutes. He looked at his rifle, making sure that it was ready for action. Baree was growling. His white fangs gleamed and lurid lights were in his eyes as he gazed ahead and sniffed. David shuddered. Without doubt the claws had overtaken the moccasins by this time.

It was a grizzly. He guessed so much by the size of the paws. He followed it across a bar of gravel. Then they turned a twist in the creek and came to other sand. A cry of amazement burst from David's lips when he looked closely at the two trails again.

The moccasins were now following the grizzly! He stared, for a few moments disbelieving his eyes. Here, too, there was no room for doubt. The feet of the Indian boy had trodden in the tracks of the bear. The evidence was conclusive; the fact astonishing. Of course, it was barely possible. . . . Whatever the grizzly might have been in David's mind, it never reached a conclusion. He did not cry out at what he saw after that. He made no sound. Perhaps he did not even breathe. But it was there—under his eyes; inexplicable, amazing, not to be easily believed. A third time the order of the mysterious footprints in the sand was changed—and the grizzly was now following the boy, obliterating almost entirely the indentures in the sand of his small, moccasined feet. He wondered whether it was possible that his eyes had gone bad on him, or that his mind had slipped out of its normal groove and was tricking him with wildly hallucinations. So what happened in almost the same breath did not startle him as it might otherwise have done. It was for a brief moment simply another apparition from his sanity; and if the mountains had suddenly turned over and balanced themselves on their peaks their gymnastics would not have frozen him into a more speechless stupidity than did the girl who rose before him just then, not twenty paces away. She had emerged like an apparition from behind a great boulder—a little older a little taller, a bit wilder than she had seemed to him in the picture, but with that same glorious hair sweeping about her, and that same questioning look in her eyes as she stared at him. Her hands were in that same way at her side, too, as if she were on the point of running away from him. He tried to speak. He believed afterward, that he even made an effort to hold out his arms. But he was powerless. And so they stood there, twenty paces apart, staring at each other from the ends of the earth.

Something happened then to whip David's reason back into its place. He heard a crunching—heavy, slow. From around the other end of the boulder came a huge bear. A monster. Ten feet from the girl. The first cry rushed out of his throat. It was a warning, and in the same instant he raised his rifle to his shoulder. The girl was quicker than he—like an arrow, a flash, a whirlwind of burnished tresses, as she flew to the side of the great beast. She stood with her back against it, her two hands clutching its tawny hair, her slim body quivering, her eyes flashing at David. He felt weak. He lowered his rifle and advanced a few steps.

"Who . . . what . . ." he managed to say; and stopped. He was powerless to go on. But she seemed to understand. Her body stiffened. "I am Marge O'Doone," she said defiantly, "and this is my bear!"

Chapter XVII. She was splendid as she stood there, an exquisite human touch in the savagery of the world about her—and yet strangely wild as she faced David, protecting with her own quivering body the great beast behind her. To David, in the first immediacy of his astonishment, she had seemed to be a woman; but now she looked to him like a child, a very young girl. Perhaps it was the way her hair fell in tangled rings of curling about her shoulders and breast; the slimmness of her; the shortness of her skirt; the unflinching clearness of the great, blue eyes that were staring at him; and, above all else, the manner in which she had spoken her name. The bear might have been nothing more than a rock to him now, against which she was leaning. He did not hear Baree's low growling. He had travelled a long way to find her, and now that she stood before him in flesh and blood he was not interested in much else. It was a rather difficult situation. He had known her so long, she had been with him so constantly, filling even his dreams, that it was difficult for him to find words in which to begin speech. When did they come they

were most commonplace; his voice was quiet, with an assured and protecting note in it. "My name is David Raine," he said. "I have come a great distance to find you."

It was a simple and unemotional statement of fact, with nothing that was alarming in it, and yet the girl shrank closer against her bear. The huge brute was standing without the movement of a muscle, his small reddish eyes fixed on David. "I won't go back!" she said. "I'll fight!"

Her voice was clear, direct, defiant. Her hands appeared from behind her, and her little fists were clenched. With a swift movement she tossed her hair back from about her face. Her eyes were blue, but dark as thunder clouds in their gathering fierceness. She was like a child, and yet a woman. A ferocious little person. Ready to fight. Ready to spring at him if he approached. Her eyes never left his face.

"I won't go back!" she repeated. "I won't!"

He was noticing other things about her. Her moccasins were in tatters. Her short skirt was torn. Her shining hair was in tangles. As she swept it back from her face he saw under her eyes the darkness of exhaustion; in her cheeks a wanness, which he did not know just then was caused by hunger, and by her struggle to get away from something. On the back of one of her clenched hands was a deep, red scratch. The look in his face must have given the girl some inkling of the truth. She leaned a little forward, quickly and eagerly, and demanded:

"Didn't you come from the Nest? Didn't they send you—after me?" She pointed down the narrow valley, her lips parted as she waited for his answer, her hair rioting over her breast again as she bent toward him.

"I've come fifteen hundred miles—from that direction," said David, swinging an arm toward the backward mountains. "I've never been in this country before. I don't know where the Nest is, or what it is. And I'm not going to take you back to it unless you want to go. If some one is coming after you and you're bound to fight, I'll help you. Will that bear bite?"

He swung off his pack and put down his gun. For a moment the girl stared at him with widening eyes. The fear went out of them slowly. Her hand unclenched, and suddenly she turned to the big grizzly and clasped her bared arms about the shaggy monster's neck.

"Tara, Tara, it isn't one of them!" she cried. "It isn't one of them—and we thought it was!"

She whirled on David with a suddenness that took his breath away. It was like the swift turning of a bird. He had never seen a movement so quick.

"Who are you?" she flung at him, as if she had not already heard his name. "Why are you here? What business have you going up there—to the Nest?"

"I don't like that bear," said David dubiously, as the grizzly made a slow movement toward him.

"Tara won't hurt you," she said. "Not unless you put your hands on me and I scream. I've had him ever since he was a baby and he has never hurt any one yet. But—he will!" Her eyes glowed darkly again, and her voice had a strange, hard little note in it. "I've been training him," she added. "Tell me—why are you going to the Nest?"

It was a point-blank, determined question, with a hint of suspicion in it; and her eyes, as she asked it, were the clearest, steadiest, bluest eyes he had ever looked into.

(To Be Continued)

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