

Red-Headed Windego

EDWARD WILLIAM THOMSON

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BIG Baptiste Seguin, on snow-shoes nearly six feet long, strode mightily out of the forest, and gazed across the treeless valley ahead.

"Hooraw! No choppin' for two mile!" he shouted.

"Hooraw! Bully! Hi-yi!" yelled the axemen, Pierre, "Jawunny" and "Frawce," two hundred yards behind. Their cries were taken up by the two chain-bearers still farther back.

"It is a lake, Baptiste?" cried Tom Dunscombe, the young surveyor, as he hurried forward through balsams that edged the woods and concealed the open space from those among the trees.

"No, seh; only a beaver meddy."

"Clean?"

"Clean! Yessh! Clean's your face. Hain't no tree for two mile if de line is go right."

"Good! We shall make seven miles to-day," said Tom as he came forward with immense strides, carrying a compass and Jacob's-staff. Behind him the axemen slashed along, striking white slivers from the pink and scaly columns of red pines that shot up a hundred and twenty feet without a branch. If any underbrush grew there, it was beneath the eight-feet-deep February snow, so that one could see far away down a multitude of vaulted, converging aisles.

Our young surveyor took no thought of the beauty and majesty of the forest he was leaving. His thoughts and those of his men were set solely on getting ahead; for all hands had been promised double pay for their whole winter, in case they succeeded in running a line round the disputed Moose Lake timber berth before the tenth of April.

Their success would secure the claim of their employer, Old Dan McEachran, whereas their failure would submit him perhaps to the loss of the limit, and certainly to a costly lawsuit with Old Rory Carmichael, another potentate of the Upper Ottawa.

At least six weeks more of fair snow-shoeing would be needed to "blaze" out the limit, even if the unknown country before them should turn out to be less broken by cedar swamps and high precipices than they feared. A few days' thaw with rain would make slush of the eight feet of snow, and compel the party either to keep in camp or risk mal de raquette,—strain of legs by heavy snow-shoeing. So they were in great haste to make the best of fine weather.

Tom thrust his Jacob's-staff into the snow, set the compass sights to the right bearing, looked through them, and stood by to let Big Baptiste get a course along the line ahead. Baptiste's duty was to walk straight for some selected object far away on the line. In woodland the axeman "blazed" trees on both sides of his snow-shoe track.

Baptiste was as expert at his job as any Indian, and indeed he looked as if he had a streak of Iroquois in his veins. So did "Frawce," "Jawunny," and all their comrades of the party.

"The three pines will do," said Tom, as Baptiste crouched.

"Good luck to-day for sure!" cried Baptiste, rising with his eyes fixed on three pines in the foreground of the distant timbered ridge. He saw that the line did indeed run clear of trees for two miles along one side of the long, narrow beaver meadow or swale.

Baptiste drew a deep breath, and grinned agreeably at Tom Dunscombe.

"De boys will look like dey's all got de double pay in deys' pocket when dey's see dis open," said Baptiste, and started for the three pines as straight as a bee.

Tom waited to get from the chainmen the distance to the edge of the wood. They came on the heels of the axemen, and all capered on their snow-shoes to see so long a space free from cutting.

It was now two o'clock; they had marched with forty pound or "light" packs since daylight, lurching on cold pork and hard-tack as they worked; they had slept cold for weeks on brush under an open tent pitched over a hole

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in the snow; they must live this life of hardship and huge work for six weeks longer, but they hoped to get twice their usual eighty-cents-a-day pay, and so their hearts were light and jolly.

But Big Baptiste, now two hundred yards in advance, swinging along in full view of the party, stopped with a scared cry. They saw him look to the left and to the right, and over his shoulder behind, like a man who expects mortal attack from a near but unknown quarter.

"What's the matter?" shouted Tom.

Baptiste went forward a few steps, hesitated, stopped, turned, and fairly ran back toward the party. As he came he continually turned his head from side to side as if expecting to see some dreadful thing following.

The men behind Tom stopped. Their faces were blanched. They looked, too, from side to side.

"Halt, Mr. Tom, halt! Oh, monjee, M'sieu, stop!" said Jawnny.

Tom looked around at his men, amazed at their faces of mysterious terror.

"What on earth has happened?" cried he.

Instead of answering, the men simply pointed to Big Baptiste, who was soon within twenty yards.

"What is the trouble, Baptiste?" asked Tom.

Baptiste's face was the hue of death. As he spoke he shuddered:—

"Monjee, Mr. Tom, we'll got for stop de job!"

"Stop the job! Are you crazy?"

"If you'll not b'lieve what I told, den you go'n' see for you'se'f."

"What is it?"

"De track, seh."

"What track? Wolves?"

"If it was only wolfs!"

"Confound you! can't you say what it is?"

"Ee's de—it ain't safe for told its name out loud, for dass de way it come—if it's call by its name!"

"Windego, eh?" said Tom, laughing.

"I'll know its track jus' as quick's I see it."

"Do you mean you have seen a Windego track?"

"Monjee, seh, don't say its name! Let us go back," said Jawnny. "Baptiste was at Madores' shanty with us when it took Hermidas Dubois."

"Yesseh. That's de way I'll come for know de track soon's I see it," said Baptiste. "Before den I mos' don' b'lieve dere was any of it. But ain't it take Hermidas Dubois only last New Year's?"

"That was all nonsense about Dubois. I'll bet it was a joke to scare you all."

"Who's kill a man for a joke?" said Baptiste.

"Did you see Hermidas Dubois killed? Did you see him dead? No! I heard all about it. All you know is that he went away on New Year's morning, when the rest of the men were too scared to leave the shanty, because some one said there was a Windego track outside."

"Hermidas never come back!"

"I'll bet he went away home. You'll find him at Saint Agathe in the spring. You can't be such fools as to believe in Windegos."

"Don't you say dat name some more!" yelled Big Baptiste, now fierce with fright. "Hain't I just seen de track? I'm go'n' back, me, if I don't get a copper of pay for de whole winter!"

"Wait a little now, Baptiste," said Tom, alarmed lest his party should desert him and the job. "I'll soon find out what's at the bottom of the track."

"Dere is blood at de bottom—I seen it!" said Baptiste.

"Well, you wait till I go and see it."

"No! I go back, me," said Baptiste, and started up the slope with the others at his heels.

"Halt! Stop there! Halt, you fools! Don't you understand that if there was any such monster it would as easily catch you in one place as another?"

The men went on. Tom took another tone.

"Boys, look here! I say, you are going to desert me like cowards?"

"Hain't goin' for desert you, Mr. Tom, no seh!" said Baptiste, halting. "Honly I'll hain' go for cross de track."

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They all faced round.

Tom was acquainted with a considerable number of Windego superstitions.

"There's no danger unless it's a fresh track," he said. "Perhaps it's an old one."

"Fresh made dis mornin'," said Baptiste.

"Well, wait till I go and see it. You're all right, you know, if you don't cross it. Isn't that the idea?"

"No, seh. Mr. Humphreys told Madore 'bout dat. Eef somebody cross de track and don't never come back, den de magic ain't in de track no more. But it's watchin', watchin' all round to catch somebody what cross its track; and if nobody don't cross its track and get caught, den de—de Ting mebbly get crazy mad, and nobody don' know what it's goin' for do. Kill every person mebbly."

Tom mused over this information. These men had all been in Madore's shanty; Madore was under Red Dick Humphreys; Red Dick was Rory Carmichael's head foreman; he had sworn to stop the survey by hook or by crook, and this vow had been made after Tom had hired his gang from among those scared away from Madore's shanty. Tom thought he began to understand the situation.

"Just wait a bit, boys," he said, and started.

"You ain't surely go'n' for cross de track?" cried Baptiste.

"Not now, anyway," said Tom. "But wait till I see it."

When he reached the mysterious track it surprised him so greatly that he easily forgave Baptiste's fears.

If a giant having ill-shaped feet as long as Tom's snow-shoes had passed by in moccasins, the main features of the indentations might have been produced. But the marks were no deeper in the snow than if the huge moccasins had been worn by an ordinary man. They were about five and a half feet apart from centres, a stride that no human legs could take at a walking pace.

Moreover, there were on the snow none of the dragging marks of striding; the gigantic feet had apparently been lifted straight up clear of the snow, and put straight down.

Strangest of all, at the front of each print were five narrow holes which suggested that the mysterious creature had travelled with bare, claw-like toes. An irregular drip or squirt of blood went along the middle of the indentations! Nevertheless, the whole thing seemed of human devising.

This track, Tom reflected, was consistent with the Indian

superstition that Windegos are monsters who take on or relinquish the human form, and vary their size at pleasure. He perceived that he must bring the maker of those tracks promptly to book, or suffer his men to desert the survey, and cost him his whole winter's work, besides making him a laughing stock in the settlements.

The young fellow made his decision instantly. After feeling for his match-box and sheath-knife, he took his hatchet from his sash, and called to the men.

"Go into camp and wait for me!"

Then he set off alongside of the mysterious track at his best pace. It came out of a tangle of alders to the west, and went into such another tangle about a quarter of a mile to the east. Tom went east. The men watched him with horror.

"He's got crazy, looking at de track," said Big Baptiste, "for that's the way,—one is enchanted,—he must follow."

"He was a good boss," said Jawunny, sadly.

As the young fellow disappeared in the alders the men looked at one another with a certain shame. Not a sound except the sough of pines from the neighboring forest was heard. Though the sun was sinking in clear blue, the aspect of the wilderness, gray and white and severe, touched the impressionable men with deeper melancholy. They felt lonely, masterless, mean.

"He was a good boss," said Jawunny again.

"Tort Dieu!" cried Baptiste, leaping to his feet. "It's a shame for desert the young boss. I don't care; the Windego can only kill me. I'm going for help Mr. Tom."

"Me also," said Jawunny.

Then all wished to go. But after some parley it was agreed that the others should wait for the portageurs, who were likely to be two miles behind, and make camp for the night.

Soon Baptiste and Jawunny, each with his axe, started diagonally across the swale, and entered the alders on Tom's track.

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It took them twenty yards through the alders, to the edge of a warm spring or marsh about fifty yards wide. This open, shallow water was completely encircled by alders that came down to its very edge. Tom's snow-shoe track joined the track of the mysterious monster for the first time on the edge—and there both vanished!

Baptiste and Jawunny looked at the place with the wildest terror, and without even thinking to search the deeply indented opposite edges of the little pool for a reappearance of the tracks, fled back to the party. It was just as Red Dick Humphreys had said; just as they had always heard. Tom, like Hermidas Dubois, appeared to have vanished from existence the moment he stepped on the Windego track!

The dimness of early evening was in the red-pine forest through which Tom's party had passed early in the afternoon, and the belated portageurs were tramping along the line. A man with a red head had been long crouching in some cedar bushes to the east of the "blazed" cutting. When he had watched the portageurs pass out of sight, he stepped over upon their track, and followed it a short distance.

A few minutes later a young fellow, over six feet high, who strongly resembled Tom Dunscombe, followed the red-headed man.

The stranger, suddenly catching sight of a flame far away ahead on the edge of the beaver meadow, stopped and fairly hugged himself.

"Camped, by jiminy! I knowed I'd fetch 'em," was the only remark he made.

"I wish Big Baptiste could see that Windego laugh," thought Tom Dunscombe, concealed behind a tree.

After reflecting a few moments, the red-headed man, a wiry little fellow, went forward till he came to where an old pine had recently fallen across the track. There he kicked off his snow-shoes, picked them up, ran along the trunk, jumped into the snow from among the branches, put on his snow-shoes, and started northwestward. His new track could not be seen from the survey line.

But Tom had beheld and understood the purpose of the manœuvre. He made straight for the head of the fallen tree, got on the stranger's tracks and cautiously followed them, keeping far enough behind to be out of hearing or sight.

The red-headed stranger went toward the wood out of which the mysterious track of the morning had come. When he had reached the little brush-camp in which he had slept the previous night, he made a small fire, put a small tin pot on it, boiled some tea, broiled a venison steak, ate his supper, had several good laughs, took a long smoke, rolled himself round and round in his blanket, and went to sleep.

Hours passed before Tom ventured to crawl forward and peer into the brush camp. The red-headed man was lying on his face, as is the custom of many woodsmen. His capuchin cap covered his red head.

Tom Dunscombe took off his own long sash. When the red-headed man woke up he found that some one was on his back, holding his head firmly down.

Unable to extricate his arms or legs from his blankets, the red-headed man began to utter fearful threats. Tom said not one word, but diligently wound his sash round his prisoner's head, shoulders, and arms.

He then rose, took the red-headed man's own "tump-line," a leather strap about twelve feet long, which tapered from the middle to both ends, tied this firmly round the angry live mummy, and left him lying on his face.

Then, collecting his prisoner's axe, snow-shoes, provisions, and tin pail, Tom started with them back along the Windego track for camp.

Big Baptiste and his comrades had supped too full of fears to go to sleep. They had built an enormous fire, because Windegos are reported, in Indian circles, to share with wild beasts the dread of flames and brands. Tom stole quietly to within fifty yards of the camp, and suddenly shouted in unearthly fashion. The men sprang up, quaking.

"It's the Windego!" screamed Jawunny.

"You silly fools!" said Tom, coming forward. "Don't you know my voice? Am I a Windego?"

"It's the Windego, for sure; it's took the shape of Mr. Tom, after eatin' him," cried Big Baptiste.

Tom laughed so uproariously at this that the other men scouted the idea, though it was quite in keeping with their information concerning Windegos' habits.

Then Tom came in and gave a full and particular account of the Windego's pursuit, capture, and present predicament.

"But how'd he make de track?" they asked.

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"He had two big old snow-shoes, stuffed with spruce tips underneath, and covered with dressed deerskin. He had cut off the back ends of them, You shall see them to-morrow. I found them down yonder where he had left them after crossing the warm spring. He had five bits of sharp round wood going down in front of them. He must have stood on them one after the other, and lifted the back one every time with the pole he carried. I've got that, too. The blood was from a deer he had run down and killed in the snow. He carried the blood in his tin pail, and sprinkled it behind him. He must have run out our line long ago with a compass, so he knew where it would go. But come, let us go and see if it's Red Dick Humphreys."

Red Dick proved to be the prisoner. He had become quite philosophic while waiting for his captor to come back. When unbound he grinned pleasantly, and remarked:

"You're Mr. Dunscombe, eh? Well, you're a smart young feller, Mr. Dunscombe. There ain't another man on the Ottaway that could 'a' done that trick on me. Old Dan McEachran will make your fortun' for this, and I don't begrudge it. You're a man—that's so. If ever I hear any feller saying to the contrary he's got to lick Red Dick Humphreys."

And he told them the particulars of his practical joke in making a Windego track round Madore's shanty.

"Hermidas Dubois?—oh, he's all right," said Red Dick. "He's at home at St. Agathe. Man, he helped me to fix up that Windego track at Madore's; but, by criminy! the look of it scared him so he wouldn't cross it himself. It was a holy terror!"