

**THE ANGEL AT
THE POOL**

Arthur Stringer

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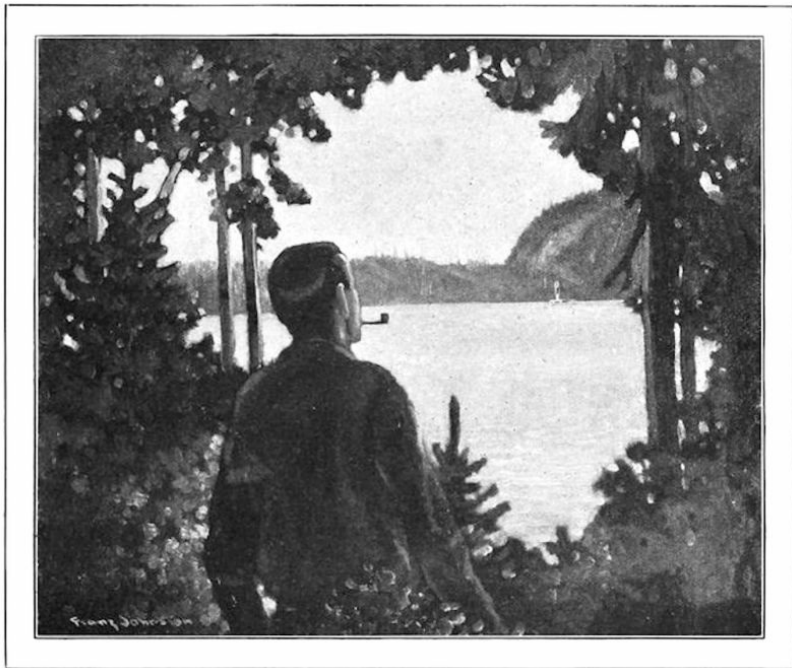
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THE ANGEL AT THE POOL

By ARTHUR STRINGER
ILLUSTRATED BY FRANZ JOHNSTON

*Being the story of a
married man who
discovered that it takes two
to make a successful
marriage and that the
woman is generally the
cleverer of the two.*



He thought at first it was a mirage, a delusion of his own disturbed mind but, as he continued to peer across the wind-ruffled water, he could see it was a slender-bodied girl, with bare legs and arms and shoulders.

LOREN DOWNING watched the two Indians as they paddled away. Their pendulum-like strokes left eddies of lingering opal in the liquid gold of the lagoon. And the canoe, as it headed south, to round the point, became a sudden black silhouette against the tawnier gold of the open lake.

“Thank God!” said Downing, as the impassive black figures drifted beyond reach of his eye. In half an hour, he knew, they would be over the portage and swinging away from him along the pine-blue banks of the Calumette, leaving him alone, utterly alone in his No-Man’s Land of peace and silence.

Downing breathed deep. He drank in lungfuls of the balsam-scented air and watched the shadows lengthen along the limpid mirror of the curving lake shore. It was very quiet. In the lower valley bowl, half a mile across the lake, the horizon-blue haze was turning to purple and amethyst. Silence descended on the lake and hung over the pine-dark hills like a benediction. And Downing wondered why solitude should bring peace to his soul.

He counted up the days since he had left the city—six of them, each seeming to carry him a step closer to the quietude he had craved. And now that he was back beside his old hunting cabin on Lac Rallumer, the divorce from that older world seemed complete.

He tried, as he sat down in the midst of his dunnage, to define his unrest, to grasp it and drag it out of its burrow. But it was not an easy thing to explain. All he knew was that Glenna lay at the root of it—Glenna, the quiet-eyed wife he had so abruptly left in that city home which had seemed to be smothering him. They had not quarreled. They had never quarreled, in fact, during all those two *diminuendo* years of their married life. That, perhaps, was the tragic part of it. An honest outburst might have relieved the tension, as a thunderstorm relieves summer heat. But Glenna wasn’t the quarreling kind. She wanted intensely to be a good wife to him.

And there again, Downing felt, lay another part of the trouble. She had been a good wife to him—altogether too good. There had been no threats and no hazards in the thing. Just the dead level of daily certainty. The slipping away of something primal and passionate, and the disquieting discovery, on his part, that the orange of emotion had been squeezed dry.

That was the situation in a nutshell. He was no longer enchanted. The woman from whom he had caught a touch of wildness in his courtship, the

woman from whom he still expected so much, was no longer an enchantress. She was merely “a good wife,” a sober-eyed companion slightly bewildered by his demand for the perpetuation of ecstasy, slightly disturbed by the more pallid tones in the tapestry of her contentment.

He had been reluctant to tell her, of course, that love was dead between them. He had even stood averse to acknowledging that he was leaving her. He had merely said that he’d been working too hard and wanted to get away for a rest and was going north to his hunting shack up on Lac Rallumer. He suspected, as he watched her studious eyes, that she was jealous of that lake of his, for she’d contrived to stop his visits there during the two years of his married life. She had never been there, of course, for she hated killing things and could never understand the call of the wild. She preferred taking her adventures under glass, like the rest of her Colonial Club set. She swam in a cement tank heated by steam pipes and surrounded by irreducible fat women presided over by Swedish “rubbers.”

She’d laugh at him if she could see him meekly making up his own wall bunk and building a fire in a sheet-iron stove and frying bacon in a skillet. She wouldn’t understand a man’s passion to get away from the machinery that made life so easy for the modern women and so encumbered for the modern man, his ache to escape all the piffling little conventions that could strangle a lover’s spirit as ivy slowly strangles an oak.

HE found something oddly satisfying in the homely tasks he performed about the cabin—in washing up his dishes and cleaning his rifle and his duck gun, and sorting out his fly-books and unpacking the blankets for his wall bunk. And when his fire sank low he knocked out his pipe and yawned contentedly, announcing to himself that it was time to turn in. He even wondered as he undressed what Glenna would be doing with herself at that particular hour. He had not intended to think of her. But one’s thoughts, he remembered as he stretched out on the solacingly hard bunk, aren’t always under one’s control.

He found it hard, in fact, to keep his memory from that last scene with her, when she had been so much less surprised than he had expected at the news of his intended excursion. But she’d been disturbed, for all her pretense of calmness.

“Does that mean that you’re leaving me?” she had said, as her barricaded amber eyes studied his face.

“A man naturally can’t be both here and in the North Woods at once,” he

had evaded.

“But are you leaving me?” she had insisted, with a white hand pressed against her breast.

“Don’t be theatrical!” he had cried back at her, almost angrily, wondering why he hadn’t the courage to say what he wanted to say. “Men still occasionally go up to their shooting cabins, you know.”

Her silence had been even harder to endure than her questions.

“I understand,” she had finally said. And there the whole cursed thing had been permitted to rest. But she didn’t understand. She couldn’t have understood, any more than he could have explained it all to her. He had half expected to hear her cry out: “This means, of course, that you no longer love me!” But she had saved him from that ignominy, to confront him with the still larger ignominy of their cowardice, their common cowardice. She had even smiled, self-protectively, before he turned and flung out of the room. It had been a condoning and slightly commiserative smile, not unlike that of a mother listening to a twelve-year-old son proclaiming his ridiculously romantic intention of going West and being a cowboy.

DOWNING’S first week at Lac Rallumer was not as happy as he had expected it to be. He had found freedom, he told himself, as he filled his indolently crowded days with the old round of hunting and fishing and paddling and swimming, but something seemed to be missing. He had sloughed off his soul’s unrest and gone back to the elemental, but in achieving the elemental, he began to feel he had arrived at something approaching emptiness.

Unwilling as he stood to admit it, he was lonely—obscurely but unmistakably lonely. There was a new unrest in his sun-saturated body, an unrest he had neither the power nor the wish to fathom.

He found himself, as the second week dragged away, possessed of a newer spirit of lassitude, of lassitude touched with defeat. He lounged morose and indolent about the camp wondering why a sudden choir of bird-calls should make him think of girls’ voices. He sat in the warm sand studying the lake he had always loved, wondering at the sense of desertion that now brooded over it.

He had asked for this solitude; he had planned and fought for it. And now that he was immersed in it, it was threatening to smother him in its immensity.

He let his morose eye sweep along the curving dark shore of the lake. The weather-bleached timbers of the distant boat-landing that he and Pierre Cat had built three years before stood bone-white in the slanting sunlight, half a mile across the lake. Then his body stiffened and a small chill pirouetted up and down his backbone. For on the bone-white landing above the ruffled blue water he caught sight of a woman.

He rose slowly to his feet, watching that woman's figure. He thought at first that it was a mirage, a delusion of his own disturbed mind. But she became more distinct as he continued to peer across the wind-ruffled water. It was a slender-bodied girl, with bare legs and arms and shoulders. And he could see, as he watched, that she was poising her body to dive from the landing into the blue water.

He could see the upward swing of the rounded white arms, the flash of the sun on the ivory-white shoulder as she rose and curved and descended. He could see the splash of the water where she had arrowed into it and the flashing white arm, as with an easy over-stroke she circled about and swam past the landing and quartered back until she came to the shore sand that fringed the cove. There she drew herself slowly and lazily up on the sloping sand, the sand so warm in the sunlight that it pulsed before his vision, playing weird tricks with the languidly stirring figure, leaving it flowingly distorted and insubstantial, so that Downing once more stopped to question whether the thing he saw were actual flesh and blood, or merely a fabrication of his own mind.

But he was no longer in doubt when he saw the girl rise to her feet, stretch with an air of luxuriousness and walk slowly up through the screening jack-pines to the hollow between the hills. Beside the spring in that hollow, Downing knew, stood the out-trail shack with the fur loft, the shack that he and old Pierre Cat, the Chippewa, had built to keep their "heads" and "green" hides in.

But this slender-bodied dryad, Downing knew, had nothing to do with Chippewas. She was white, white as the bole of a silver birch, and touched with the vague grace that only a silver birch can possess. She had worn a bathing cap, he felt sure, and a bathing cap in some way implied sophistication. She was not a creature of the wilds, for dryads, after all, don't bother about keeping their hair dry. She wouldn't and couldn't be a daughter of the wilderness, for he had seen too much of the frontier type to nurse many illusions as to its graces. Yet there was a touch of the wilderness about any young woman who could take a header like that into a northern lake, who could swim alone in lonely waters. And her swimming had been offhand and

easy.

“A white woman!” he repeated aloud as he stood staring at the remote and misty jack-pines, trying to pierce that dark green screen which so completely hid the hill-sheltered shack from his eyes. He half hoped to see a whiff of smoke between the pine tops, for that shack, he knew, was the only habitation between him and the Hudson Bay post a good hundred miles to the north. And campers, he remembered, had never been known to come within fifty miles of his lake.

Yet who was she? And where had she come from? And what was she doing there?

Downing couldn't answer those questions. He couldn't answer them any more than he could have explained a sinuous and mother-of-pearl-bodied mermaid slowly emerging from his lake water. He even found an unworded satisfaction in leaving them unanswered, in accepting them as unanswerable. And he fought down his original impulse to step into his canoe and paddle across the lake and unravel the mystery. He would wait until to-morrow. Already, he acknowledged as he turned back to his cabin, his cup of wonder had been sufficiently filled for one day. He had enough to think over as he set about his frugal evening tasks, set about them with a singularly light heart and a sense of impending good fortune which he could not define.

WHEN DOWNING awoke the next morning he cooked his breakfast with the persistent sense of a friendly spirit somewhere at his elbow. When he strolled down to the lake, still silver and opal under an early sun, he nursed the undefined yet sharpened joy of sharing those liberal beauties of nature with another, however remote. Some dark sweet thing was loose in the land, bringing warmth in its wake. It was like spring incarnate, long after spring had passed.

Yet Downing stopped short, with an odd skip of the pulse, as he caught sight of her, an hour later, sitting bare-legged on the edge of the bone-white landing. He could see her more distinctly this time, in that pellucid morning light, but not distinctly enough to define her features or satisfy that widening ache of curiosity which left him lamenting the fact that he had overlooked bringing his binoculars into the woods.

When he saw by her movements that she was making ready to swim in his lake again, he came to a sudden reckless decision. Slipping back to his cabin he found a faded blue and white bathing-suit creased with wrinkles and stippled with numerous moth-holes. It was not a raiment to be proud of but,

oddly impatient and oddly stirred, he threw off his clothes and struggled into the musty-odored garment. Then he crept quietly down to the water's edge. He could see, as he waded out, the bobbing rubber-capped head well toward the middle of the lake. And he started toward it with strong and resolute strokes.

He was half-way out to her before she caught sight of him. He could even hear her short scream, more of surprise than of terror, as she first beheld his advancing figure. She turned at once, like a frightened seal, and made for the boat-landing. He called out to her, he scarcely knew what, but his intention was to arrest her flight and explain the absence of any menace in his presence. She gave no heed, however, to that reassuring cry of his. And when he saw that she was intent on escaping him he started after her.

He pursued her, oddly thrilled at the thought of that strange race across a silent and lonely lake. He was proud of his swimming, but he saw to his dismay that he was not gaining on her as he had hoped. He forged closer, it is true, but he was still a good two hundred yards behind her when she reached the shore and, stooping as she went, ran up the broken slope, a flurry of flashing white and clinging blue in the mottled shadow and sunlight of the pine woods.

If he had been as sober-minded as usual he would never have continued the chase. He would have realised, under other circumstances, that the woman he was pursuing had already betrayed every evidence of not relishing that pursuit. But that strange chase had fired something in his blood, and he kept up the pursuit, racing wet-skinned through the shadowing pines until he came to the shack door, which he found slammed shut and locked in his face.

He would not have pounded on that door, he later remembered, if he had not retained some faint knowledge of his proprietary rights there. Yet it startled him a little to see the muzzle of a shotgun thrust close to his shoulder through the oiled buckskin covering the window. He was even more startled when the gun was discharged, within a step or two of where he stood.

It had not, of course, been pointed directly at him. But the flash went disconcertingly close to his bare skin. And it began to dawn on him what it meant. A barred door and a discharged firearm could not be construed as an invitation to enter.

His face was grim as he turned and strode back to his lake, where he noticed for the first time the canoe drawn up at the water's edge. It was, after all, his lake. And the matter couldn't rest there, he maintained, as he swam meditatively back to his home shore. You couldn't mystify a man that way and count on his forgetting it overnight.

Downing, in fact, thought a great deal about the unknown woman who had so pointedly evaded him and so precipitately withdrawn from his advances. He thought about her all the next day as he fished for black bass. And when he saw her once more bathing at the boat-landing he turned his canoe about and paddled slowly toward her shore. But she vanished again at his approach.

That both piqued and disappointed him. Yet as an assurance of his impersonal good-will he picked out the two biggest bass from amongst his catch and carried them meekly up to her door-step, where he deposited them as a peace-offering.

The next morning when he awakened he found a small oblong of birch-bark weighted down by a stone on the split pine wash-stool outside his door. Neatly printed on it in berry juice were the words:

You Have Been Kind, and
I'm Counting on Your Kindness

An odd needling of nerve-ends went through his body as he read that slightly enigmatic message. It seemed to contain a promise, even though he could not decipher how or why. It brought the unknown strangely nearer to him. And the thought of that white-armed figure groping about his cabin while he slept filled the emptiness of life with premonitions of drama.

When he shot a deer the next day, far back in the hills, he carried home the carcass, troubled by the thought that he was breaking the game laws. In that No Man's Land, he remembered, there were no game laws to break. He stood where the arm of the law no longer reached, where every man was a law unto himself, where the pioneer, when hungry, found food as best he could. But he carefully dressed the saddle of venison and wrapped it neatly in the whitest of birch-bark. Then he stepped into his canoe and paddled across Lac Rallumer, luminous with the refracted coloring of the northern afterglow.

His pulse quickened when he caught sight of the unknown woman, gray-clad between the dusky pines, ghost-like in the ghostly gloaming. But when he reached the shack beside the spring he found it empty. He could see a fire, a homely and companionable fire, burning in the Russian-iron stove with a kettle steaming on its rusty top. He could see camp equipment and a camp cot piled high with four-point blankets, serviceable-looking aluminum dishes, a folding mirror and a jar of face cream on a split log window-sill, unmistakably feminine clothing hanging from the pegs in the wall logs. And he felt, for reasons he could not define, like the violator of a sanctuary.

He stopped only long enough to lift a piece of charcoal from the hearth.

Backing away to the door-sill, where he had placed the saddle of venison, he wrote on the birch-bark that covered his offering:

I find that I am very lonely.

And then, with the embarrassment of a naturally reticent man detected in the midst of an emotionalism, he walked hurriedly down to his canoe and paddled homeward.

HE thrilled again, as he emerged to face another day, to find a cluster of wild flowers lying on his door-step. Yet instead of making his day a happy one they filled him with a morose unrest, prompting him to idle moodily about the lake front and stare at the opposite shore. But he caught no glimpse of the woman of mystery.

His loneliness, as evening deepened into night, became abysmal. He could not sleep when he finally went to bed. The cabin seemed cramped and confining.

He finally got up, found a bath-towel and groped his way slowly down to the lake where he just as slowly threw aside his sleeping garments and waded out into the cooling waters. Refreshed finally he clambered ashore and rubbed dry his water-cooled body, wondering at the ache that still lurked under his sense of well-being. It left him too restless to turn back to his cabin. Instead he wandered along the water's edge until the cove sand ended in a shoulder of rock. He sat down on this rock, staring across the lake where the silence hung like black velvet spangled with gold-dust.

Yet a moment later the silence was broken by a faint rhythm of sound that made Downing lean forward in the gloom, every nerve on edge. It grew more defined as he listened, that sound out of the universal blackness. He knew, as it stopped, went on again, stopped, that it was made by a canoe paddle, a canoe paddle creeping closer and closer to his shore. And again that uncontrollable small chill and fever of stirred emotion eddied through him. He even stopped breathing for a moment as he heard the grate and rub of the canoe keel on the ribbed shore sand.

Out of the engulfing darkness he could catch other faint sounds, sounds implying that his mysterious visitor was stepping ashore and dragging her craft up on the sand after her. And he knew, as he peered through the opaque warm air, that she was quietly and cautiously approaching his cabin.

He stopped short, remembering of a sudden how fleeting and delicate-

footed had been her earlier visits. She might, after all, be merely leaving a clump of flowers on his door-step.

It was too late for gestures and hesitations, he grimly resolved, as he moved toward the beached canoe. It was too late, he repeated, as he stopped beside the shadowy thwart and laid hands on the pointed prow, pushing the craft quietly back into the water until it was once more afloat. Then, with a deeper breath, he thrust it out into the open lake, where a faint breeze caught it.

HE had no clear-cut knowledge of what the next step was going to be. He could afford to move slowly. The stage, he knew, was narrowed down to that little clearing of his between the water and the wilderness. They seemed wordlessly alone, he and that unknown woman, in a world of their own, as utterly alone as if they stood, the last two points of life, on a lost planet drifting down the frontiers of infinity.

It was the woman, he found as he stood there, who was still the more active factor in the situation. For he could see her ghostly figure once more groping its way to where she imagined her canoe to be waiting.

He shrank back in the gloom as she came closer. He could see her as she came to a stop, close to the water's edge, as she moved a little to the east and then to the west, as she stooped and felt with her hand for the print of her canoe keel in the shore sand. He could hear her involuntary small cry of dismay when she found the canoe was most unmistakably gone. He could see her turn about and stare up the slope toward the cabin. Then he saw her step slowly back from the water's edge and as slowly begin to take off her clothes.

She was going to swim back. And when he remembered that that meant he would lose her he moved forward through the darkness, his heart pounding.

She must have heard a twig snap under his foot, for she turned towards him in that velvety gloom before he could reach her side. He did not want to frighten her, yet he felt that she would surely try to escape him. But bewilderment must have taken all power of movement from her, for she neither turned away nor cried out. She merely waited in the darkness, mistily outlined, with one bare arm thrown up across her face.

Instead of seizing her in his arms, as every impulse of his body prompted, he sank down beside her on the sand, with a gesture infinitely humble.

"Don't go!" he implored.

The hand that had fallen to her side groped for his bowed head and rested

there. But she did not speak.

“This,” he said, “can only happen once in a lifetime.”

“This what?” she asked in the ghostliest of whispers.

“Love like this,” he asserted in a steadier voice as he rose to his feet.

“Is it love?” she asked, the whispered words so low that he scarcely caught them.

“It’s love as I’ve never known it before,” he huskily proclaimed. “And as we may never know it again.”

She had turned her face away from him.

“Never?” she whispered in the darkness. And the pathos in her cry served to steady him again.

“Oh, I’ve always loved you,” he heard his own lips averring. “I’ve loved you without knowing it. I’ve been waiting for this to bring us together.”

“Do you love me that way, Loren?”

He heard her spoken words, but they failed to reach any inner court of consciousness. For he knew now beyond all shadow of doubt that the woman he held in his arms was his own wife. It was Glenna, Glenna who had once lost the power to awaken him out of his apathy.

“Do you love me that way, Loren?” she repeated, her voice still dreamy with its capitulating weakness, her arms still clinging to him.

Downing laughed a little as he drew away from her in the darkness. That laugh was not so much one of bitterness as of enlightenment, not so much one of hardness as of humility. And the odor of her hair, so close to him, made him dizzy again.

“Yes, I love you that way,” he proclaimed as he caught her up in his arms.

“Don’t be rough, dearest,” she whispered as he swept her off her feet. “Oh, don’t be rough!” she repeated as he carried her towards the cabin wrapped in darkness. And there was something more than triumph in her smile as she realized that he had neither heard nor heeded the words she had spoken.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Angel at the Pool* by Arthur Stringer]