

# THE LAUGH OF THE LOON

By Arthur James Hayes

Illustrated by R. Tandler

IT IS weird—the quavering cry of the loon—and it is mocking to frail humanity. Its thin, high note is a fitting ending for this little human tragedy.



Over his shoulder she espied Bobby and the flowers.

**A** MAN sat on the farthest log of the rotting pier and stared stonily over the placid surface of silent Sakawan.

The anointing stillness of the evening air had hushed even the susurrations of the pine. The northern day was fading out of the western sky, but over the farthest hill, where the green was growing dusker and the purple shadows lingered in the long ravines, glowed the rich tints of a cloudless sunset.

In the east and north the forest and lake were blending, the steel blue and the soft green merging in a graphitic gray that would soon be a toneless black. Sakawan itself, sparkling among its rock-girt islands, mimicked like a giant chameleon the varied tints of the darkening heavens. Far out on its still surface two teal broke the mirror perfection of the water in silver streaks.

Suddenly, from out of the deepening

dusk of the east, came a long, melancholy, dirgeful sound, half whistle, half wail, as if all the heartaches and tragedy of the wilderness' countless ages had been compressed for utterance in a single cry. The man on the farthest log of the rotting pier shuddered, and then cursed aloud.

With one hand—it was slender and delicate, despite callouses and bruised, crooked fingers—he brushed back his graying hair. His face was thin and dark and lined. Silver tints were insinuating themselves into the blackness of his unkempt beard. His attire—spiked river boots, torn mackinaw, dirty blue shirt and corduroys—was strictly unconventional, as convention is reckoned by given time and place. But somehow one sensed that the man himself was not. And the man gave some evidence of the fact by shuddering at the dirgeful wail of the distant loon.

Off to the south, out of the denser shadows, his mate answered. There was a brief interval of silence. Then again

out of the night came the weird high, quavering accents of unearthly mirth, as if some fiend rejoiced in evil consummated. The ghoulish sounds echoed sardonically back and forth in the hills before surrendering to the solitude's insistent silence. The man on the rotting pier did not wonder that the stolid Crees averred that the lonely loon was the reincarnation of a damned soul. The stillness and the shadows and the lilt of that demoniac laughter made the idea strangely plausible.

◆ ◆ ◆  
The loon had laughed. But this time the man didn't bury his lean face in leaner hands and shudder. Instead he threw back his head and laughed himself, in emulation. And there was a note in his voice that made his laughter like that of the loons.

His unseeing eyes still stared stolidly lakeward, but they were filmed with retrospection.

He saw another lake, a pleasure resort integral with the scheme of things

that were. He saw a young man lazily propelling a canoe shoreward. From the shore, softened mystically by the distance, came the music of a pavilion band. Throughout the ensuing years he seemed to remember that music, even as he had remembered the girl.

Tonight, too, there was music—after a fashion. At his back lay the single straggling thoroughfare of Namewaukon. From the gaudily decorated interior of the Lumberman's Haven came the tortured wheezes of the latest song hits—"latest" by virtue of the fact that they had enjoyed transient popularity in the cities, eight or ten months before. The Bucktooth Kid, who "tickled the ivories" for the Lumberman's Haven, had been re-enforced by an itinerant trap drummer and a stranded negro who had once played a cornet in the Tenth Cavalry Regimental Band.

The darkness was punctuated at intervals with the frenzied whoops of some lumberjack hilariously engrossed in the task of ridding himself of five months'