

The Lake of Devils

Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

Table of Contents

<u>The Lake of Devils</u>	1
<u>Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews</u>	1

The Lake of Devils

Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

WHEN I was a youngster I used to be quite a superstitious sort of person — I suppose because I had a nurse till I was rather large, who was the sort of Scotchwoman which believes in fairies and red devils and those things. Even at my present age, when I am fourteen, I feel at times a tendency toward the ultra-natural, against my better judgment. I suppose that was the reason I got so keen about finding the hidden "Lake of Devils," the minute I heard about it.

My brother Walter and I were up in his club in Canada, and we had left our regular camp and gone off with tents and guides to find better hunting. We followed up the Riviere aux Vents — the River of Winds, you know — and discovered three little lakes on streams that discharged into it, and there were plenty of old caribou and moose trails, but no fresh signs, and we were getting discouraged. We had been away three days, all the time working through such wild country that I was knocked in the head when Walter said we had been going toward the railroad steadily and were not more than five miles from it now. But I looked it up on a map and found he was perfectly correct, as he sometimes is. The railroad doesn't mean much up here anyway, for it runs through a maiden wilderness as wild as you can catch 'em, and only one thing in the likelihood of a settlement in the two hundred miles between Quebec and Lake St. John.

One day we were camped by some rapids on the River of Winds, and after lunch — which identically resembled breakfast and dinner, being trout and bacon, flap-jacks and maple sugar — Walter, who is perpetual emotion, decided to walk up the small stream above our camp, and see if it looked as if there were a lake on beyond. But I'd had enough of tramping through alders and beaver meadow and windfalls, and as there was plenty of sunlight I thought I would bask. It's the reasonable thing for an animal to do after it's fed. So I left the dining room, which was the top of a big flat rock, to the guides, and deployed on to a slope a few feet from them in good hot sunshine, and lay on my back, and became as a boa-constrictor. The fire was blazing in a grove of balsams at the edge of the rock, and the guides bent over it, cooking, and it was nice to hear the lake splash up on one side and trout sizzle on the other.

My back was toward the men as they ate, and as I paid no attention to them they paid none to me. These French Canadians are indefatigable talkers and Walter says they probably talk all night in their sleep. The four men were chattering like madpies. I didn't hear what they said for some time, but after a while I happened to listen out of the deepness of my laziness, and I caught on to it that they were chaffing my guide, Henri Jeunesse, about something. Then I began to take notice. But what with the patois which they talk to each other so fast and so clipped that it makes you dizzy, and what with not believing my ears at the little I caught, I couldn't make any particular head or tail of it. They seemed to be guying Henri about riding a caribou, and Henri acted pleasantly, giggling and chuckling as men do, yet it did not seem to me plausible. Walter won't let me talk to the guides at their meals, so I had to stay corked up and not ask questions; but I made up my mind I would investigate it out of Henri what it was, the first chance. So when he and I went out fishing about five that afternoon I hadn't forgotten, not by no means, and all unknowing to him I took his conversation gently by the nose and guided it with unexampled skill to the point.

"Henri," I said, "what were the men making fun of you about at lunch?"

The Lake of Devils

Henri's paddle missed a dip, and he looked at me with polite surprisedness. "Comment, M'sieur Bob?" he asked, and I repeated.

"Something about — it sounded as if it was about riding a caribou," I went on, "but of course that's nonsense."

Henri began to laugh in a notice-how-modest-I-am way, but he seemed tickled all the same. "If M'sieur will cast to the left, by the dead tree fallen in the water — a large enough one broke there, a c't heure. But yes, M'sieur, it is true, what the others have said — that I rode the caribou. It was a droll of a ride and I was astonished." Henri stopped. You always have to punch him along a little to make him go.

"You rode a caribou — Caesar!" I said. "Go ahead, Henri, tell me about it — that's great." Of course I had to say it in French, but that's a kind of a free translation.

He grinned sheepishly and just at that junction I hooked a trout in the swift water at the top of the rapids, and story-telling had to stop while I played him and Henri yanked him in, slapping him on both sides of the boat. A monster — must have weighed a quarter of a pound. Henri tossed the flies free, and I cast over the first slide of the rapids into the pool below.

"Go on," I said; "I want to hear about that caribou ride. What was it?"

That guide is awfully easily embarrassed, and he wriggled and looked miserable, and lighted his pipe and fussed about before he began, yet you could see somehow that he wanted to tell about it.

"It is nothing — a very simple thing — but if M'sieur wishes to hear — " and then he was off. "I was with my brother Tomas in the woods — it was two years ago, and on a lake in that direction." He turned and pointed back over his shoulder up the river, west. "In fact, that lake is not badly near this place — thirty minutes, not more. So it happened that Tomas and I guided for a M'sieur who shot a caribou, an old one, a large one, and the beast was by the shore on a sand beach, and he fell and lay, and did not budge. So it happened that I was in front when we came up from behind the rock where the M'sieur had watched, and I ran forward and jumped astride the caribou as he lay, and put my hand to my knife-case to take my knife to cut the throat, as M'sieur knows is right. But as I sat across him, before I could draw the knife, v'la! the caribou was on his legs, and with a great spring he jumped to the water, and v'la! I was riding him! for as he rose I had clutched at his long mane — he was, as I have said, old, and the collar of his neck was shaggy and white. I was stupid, I, for I was stunned with surprise, having never known a man to ride a caribou, so that before I knew my danger, the beast was swimming in deep water and I on him. And the M'sieur and Tomas, my brother, merely regarded me, astonished. They dared not fire, for fear of killing me. And the beast swam like a bateau a vapeur, and I continued to ride him by the mane; but I prayed aloud — I prayed to Saint Joseph my patron, that I might get to shore, for I cannot swim, not to this day. M'sieur Bob will probably laugh, but I prayed large prayers across that lake — it was half a mile wide — and it was probably the Saint who preserved me. The great beast debarked into a thicket of alders, yet I was afraid to jump from him, for he went fast — crais! it was fast. But it so happened that I became scraped because of the thick woods and because the caribou did not consider me, but, snorting horribly, plunged through them. So that I had misery. So that finally, about two acres from shore, I let go his beard and threw my arms in passing about a strong spruce tree, and I was cast with force against it, and v'la! I was again on earth. But much bruised — crais! I walked with difficulty after that ride."

I had left off casting, you had better believe, to listen, and when Henri stopped I just stared at him searchingly.

"Are you sure that is all true?" I asked, and I asked it solemnly — he wouldn't have dared to lie.

"Oui, M'sieur," he spoke right up, and I believed him, and I do now. Of course I'd heard of creasing animals before — that is, when a bullet grazes their backbones and stuns them for a moment so they drop like dead. But

The Lake of Devils

they're only scratched, and most generally they're up and off so fast that their bewildered murderers don't have time to shoot again. That isn't so awfully rare — I'd heard two or three accounts of it, so I knew it was possible. But the riding — that was a stunt! Innocent as I knew Henri to be, it was all I could do to believe it.

"Henri, I tell you that was fierce," I said to him cordially; but I had to say it in French, and it sounded rather prim. Then I thought I would cross-question him. "What kind of a tree did you claw on to?" I asked.

Henri looked up quickly with a scared expression, and I thought maybe I was about to corner him somehow, but all he said was:

"Une epinette, M'sieur Bob" — a spruce, you understand.

"How big?" I continued examiningly.

"It was not badly large" — "pas mal gros" — said Henri; "an old enough tree, of perhaps eight inches across. But why does M'sieur ask about that tree? I have never told but one or two persons about that tree."

"Never told? What was there to tell about it?" Henri looked very embarrassed again, and suddenly began paddling. "Don't turn the boat," I said, "I don't want to go up stream. It's all right here. But I want to know what there was about the tree."

As I said before, you have to give Henri a punch every few minutes to keep him going. He shook his head seriously, and his eyes looked big.

"Ah! that was a strange tree, that — but M'sieur will laugh if I tell the tale. In fact, he will not believe it."

"Oh, that's all right, Henri," I said agreeably. "I may not believe it, but I won't laugh and I would like to hear it."

Well, then, if that guide didn't make me open my eyes. I couldn't believe my two ears, though mostly they are very confidential. I had to draw a few more of his teeth to get it, but the story he told in the end is this which I shall now relate. It seems that the Montagnais Indians, who still live in the country around the Club in considerable numbers, have a tradition of a lake which they call the Lake of Devils, which no white man may see and live, their theory being that it is thick with devils around there and they kill the whites. But the hunting is supposed to be gorgeous, and every year the Indians celebrate a grand hullabaloo very secretly, and go off in small parties to hunt with their blessed devils. None of the French guides know exactly where it is, but it is supposed to be in a general way somewhere about the headwaters of the River of Winds, and the portages to it are blazed with a mysterious blaze, which the Indians never describe, only it is different from any other blaze. Henri said that when he debarked off the caribou he was sitting down backward half way up the tree-trunk, and as he slid he felt his hands catch in a hole. So when he got right side up with care he looked to see what it was, as a hunter would do, and there, on the tree, was the oddest blaze he had ever seen — he couldn't describe it very well, but it was in two parts and cut deep. It was "pas mal vieux" — "not badly old" — and Henri said he was as sure as he was of his life that it was the beginning of the portage to the Lake of Devils.

"Didn't you go ahead and follow the trail?" I asked, and he pretty nearly fell out of the boat. He actually trembled at the idea.

"No one in the world could make me follow that road, M'sieur Bob. From that road no white man may return. The trees are all 'plaques' — blazed — on the side as one goes, and for the returning one may not find the plaque. They fade from the bark as one passes. It is the road of death for us others, white men. Ah! but I know — it is certain. It was the first cousin of my father, Josef Moison, a man of great boldness and very strong — he tried it. It was a bad winter for the hunting — there was not of game in the forest around our village, and his family had

The Lake of Devils

need of meat. So it happened that he said he had no fear of devils, he, — he feared more the hunger. And he went to find that lake. One believes well that he reached it, for when they found him in the forest, at the foot of a great rock, with his neck broken, there was the meat of two large caribou in his pack. Also, more lately, perhaps five years ago, Auguste Ouillette of our village, a man very curious, who took pride, as well, to know all of the country, went off alone to see that lake, but of him there was no news afterward. Without doubt the devils killed him. There are other tales as well, of men lost on that road. It is said that the devils are of a scarlet color, and that they jump and play about the edge of the lake."

Well, I broke my word then — I howled. The picture of bright red devils bounding cheerfully over a sand beach waiting for white men for supper took me all of a sudden. But I was sorry I had done it, for Henri shut up, and I couldn't get much more out of him. However, I did extract that he could go straight to the lake where the caribou was killed, and it was not far from camp, and that there was an old portage; he had marked the place where he had found the blazed tree.

I could hardly sleep that night for planning the fun I would have next day. Naturally, in this enlightened age, I scorn devils, but the idea of them, and of Henri and the Indians really having faith in them, gave me rather nice cold shivers, and I think now that I must have had just the least scrap of belief in the story too; just a faint reminiscence of the superstitions of my childhood. Anyhow I thought it would be no end of fun to find that place and follow it up to the hidden lake.

When I told Walter that I was going off alone with my guide and didn't want to tell where till I got home that night, he said:

"You're a mysterious young cuss, aren't you? Going to strike Hudson's Bay across country? I should regret it deeply if you should break those priceless legs of yours when I have not the pleasure of being present. But it will be affecting to see Henri bear you back in his arms — I call that a pretty picture — Mussoo and his faithful guide."

That's the way Walter pronounces "Monsieur." His French is fierce.

I had a hearty lunch packed — thank Providence for that! and Walter addressed us briefly before we left.

"Henri," he said, "ne laissez pas M'sieur Bob devenir perdrix," and poor Henri looked respectfully serious, but dazed as to why he should not let me become a partridge. Of course Walter meant "perdu" — lost — but his French is awfully risqué. Then he adjured me to take good care of my legs, because they were models of the Apollo Belvidere, and all the guides laughed, though they hadn't an idea what Apollo Belvidere meant, and I don't remember myself at this moment. But any student of anatomy can see I'm leggy.

"They're longer than yours, anyway," I shouted back, as we went off; then we lost the tents and the rapids and the camp fire down the windings of the forest, and went on, picking our way over rocks and fallen trees, through marshes and thickets — the regular going in Canadian woods.

I could see Henri was not very keen about taking me over to the caribou lake — he looked pretty grouchy. But I didn't ask his opinion, for I know how to manage men. So he swung ahead down the old Indian portage with the canoe, and I jumped along after him with my .30-.30 smokeless Winchester rifle in my hands, and in about twenty-six minutes we looked down from the top of a hill and saw the strange lake shining below through the trees. Of course Henri stopped then, and I went on softly with the gun, in case there should be a caribou or moose in the water. But there wasn't anything, and I signalled back that he might come along. I think it's a pretty sight to see a guide coming through the woods with a canoe on his head. They walk wonderfully quietly, and it looks as if a big mushroom that had grown in the moss had suddenly pulled up its stalk and was gliding through the forest.

The Lake of Devils

Henri slid the canoe into the water and held it for me to embark, and when he was in too, and had pushed off, I told him I wanted to go where he had found the blazed tree. I had my back to him, so I didn't see his expression, but his paddle knocked the gunwale and stopped for about two beats. Then he put it in again and the boat fairly sprang forward with the force he gave his stroke. I spoke to him, and he answered politely, though in polly-syllables, but he evidently did not want to talk. When we debarked and I told him to go ahead to the blazed tree, he didn't object or say a word, but he looked mighty glum. However, he prowled about till he found his own blazes, and they were pretty small, and started into the woods ahead of me all right. They were "bois forts" — thick — those woods, and I laughed to think of the caribou going at a hand-gallop with Henri on him, scraped with every jump, but afraid to let go.

Pretty soon he brought up short and pointed without a word to an old spruce, and there, sure enough, was the queerest blaze I'd ever seen. It was cut in deeper than any other blaze, to begin with, and it was two signs, one over the other, and close together. The lower one looked like a half circle, and the upper like a jagged roundish hole — it was impossible to tell exactly what it was. I sat down on a log and tried to remember what I had read in Parkman and other literatures about Indian signs, and the nearest I could get was that the round thing above might mean the sun, and the jags out of it light-rays, and it might stand for Manitou, the Indian god, and the half circle was probably a canoe, and the two together were the things that were to lead them to good hunting — their boats and the help of their gods. Gods and devils are all the same to Indians.

Anyhow, I was keen now about finding that lake, and I had a scheme for getting back all right. I stepped over a log and wriggled to the other side of the tree and pulled out my big hunting knife and cut a good fat blaze. Henri gave a horrified exclamation, but the bark fell off, and there was a nice fresh blaze, and no devils so far.

"Come along, Henri," I said. "We'll do that to the other side of every tree, and I'd like to see if we can't get back then." But Henri wouldn't budge. He was gentle and respectful enough, but you couldn't stir him. He just planted his fore-feet and stood. "Well, all right," I said finally. "It's pitiful to see a big, strong chap like you afraid of nothing, but I'm going anyway."

Then he just begged like a dog. He said he wasn't afraid of anything on earth, but no man could fight ghosts and spirits. He said M'sieur would shoot him if he went back without me. I left him begging and went on to the next blaze. It was easy to find, and so was the next and the next, and I was having a lovely old time. I marked the other side of the tree carefully every time, and hadn't any idea of not getting back. It was fine woods and good going, up the side of a mountain, and though I'd forgotten a compass, the sun shone and I took the direction as I went. After a quarter of a mile or so, the line ran through a marsh, and of course the going got bad and I couldn't cover ground as fast, and every now and then I had to hunt two or three minutes for the next blaze.

It had got to be one o'clock by the time I was through the marsh, and I was hungry, having had breakfast early, so I unslung the knapsack that held the lunch and sat down by a fine, cold spring, gathered birch bark and dry sticks, and built a little fire and had lunch all to myself as cosy as a bear in a berry patch. I was sorry for Henri, because I had brought all the lunch, but it served him right. I ate a stick of sweet chocolate for dessert, and felt like a new man, and just anxious to run that devil lake to earth. So I stuck the chocolate that was left in my pack and started on to the next witch tree.

That time I had to look five minutes before I found it, and when I did, I got sight of the one beyond it at the same moment, and raced on without remembering my system of blazing. I must have missed two or three trees before it occurred to me, and then I put my hand to my belt instantly for my knife — and it wasn't there. Of course I knew as soon as I missed it that I must have left it where I lunched, for I had it out to cut the butter. I worked very cautiously two or three blazed trees back, till I came to the blaze where I had looked so long for the next plaque. Then I was deadlocked. I couldn't find that back blaze to save my life. I hung my handkerchief high on the last tree I was sure of, and searched from it in every direction, again and again, but I couldn't find the queer cutting that I wanted.

The Lake of Devils

I hunted the woods over for half an hour, till it got to be about three in the afternoon. A big wind had come up and the sky had clouded over, and without a compass I didn't know my direction any more. It shows what a deep, fundamental yearning toward superstition is in the heart of the strongest that I began to feel Henri's story take hold of my heart—strings, whatever heart—strings may be. Something made me feel funny any way. The more I tried not to think about it, the more it crept up and whispered things. This was just what Henri had said — you couldn't find the blazes to go back. I seemed to hear his voice saying: "No white man may return on that road." I tried to laugh out loud to myself, but it sounded something awful — I never heard such a laugh. I didn't try but once, for I wasn't sure but it was one of the devils. Then I tried to whistle the "Bamboo Tree," which is a cheering melody, but the tune went lame and I stopped in the middle when I remembered it was about a tree. I didn't care for any more treeology.

I looked at my watch and it was half—past three; the wind was rushing and howling through the branches; the sky was black, and a drop or so of rain fell. I had to get somewhere; I couldn't stop in those lonely woods; they choked me. Rather the Lake of Devils than this; I could breathe better if I got out from under the waving leaves that looked as if they were rushing to get at me. Of course I was awfully silly, you know: I realized that all right, but I did feel just that way at the time, though I'm ashamed of my human weakness. I got so I hated to stir for fear of the noise I'd make, though there was plenty of noise all around me.

But at last I gave a jump, gasping as I did it, picked up my rifle and started on a run for the next blaze forward, which I could see distinctly. They followed each other thickly for half a mile, and I walked fast, tearing along just to get somewhere. I must have been growing more and more nervous, for suddenly when I couldn't see a marked tree in front of me anywhere, I stood still and let out a scream like a hyena. I simply couldn't help it, but it seems now as if I were a born idiot to stand there in the woods all alone and yell like a big baby because I was scared. My! but wouldn't I have been glad to see Henri! I hadn't any pride left, and I only wished I'd been a coward too.

Then my eyes lit on a tree I hadn't noticed, and there was that fiendish sign which I hated now with all my soul, yet longed to see as I had never longed before. I found myself hugging the tree and laughing at it. I can't understand how I could have been such a kid, but the foolish things did themselves without waiting for me.

I worked along from tree to tree, and there seemed to be two of me, one the regular Bob that I was used to, and another duffer that broke out every few minutes with crazy tricks. Once I listened, and he was trying to recite "To be or not to be," in French. It was awfully funny, and I laughed at him till tears ran down my face and I tasted them in my mouth. But all the time the two of us were following the trail from plaque to plaque, and suddenly there was the glitter of water through the trees — there was a lake! I remember hearing the other boy whisper "Sh — Sh" to me and then giggle softly in a silly way, and as I stole along I loaded my rifle and put it at full cock, which of course is a way I never carry a gun. The other Bob whispered things in French.

"Voilà le lac aux Diables, M'sieur Bob," he said. "Nous serons mangés," and I answered him out loud:

"I know it's the Lake of Devils, you goose," I said crossly. "But we won't be eaten before I shoot the first one. There aren't any devils anyway — but don't talk or they'll hear us."

Suddenly there was a wide beaten road which I had come into before I saw it. I don't know why, except that I was a lunatic generally, but I dropped on all fours and crawled along it. It seemed safer. However, it was so inconvenient to carry a rifle that way that I soon got up and walked. Then in a minute more I had come out of the woods altogether and was on the shore of a great lake — eight or ten miles long and two or three wide. There were islands in it, and the wind dashed up noisy waves against them and against the shore where I stood. It was wild and beautiful, but I didn't care much for that. A damp mist filled the air and the hills looked steep and black in the storm and twilight, and nowhere was a sign of life. I stood still and waited two or three minutes for something to happen, but it seemed as if I were the only person on earth.

The Lake of Devils

When suddenly I saw, rising in the air above the woods, beyond a point of land on my right, a thick blue cloud of smoke. I can't describe how that pleasing sight blood-curdled me. I was dead sure they were at it, cooking a white man. It was dinner-time — though I don't know if devils dine at night or at noon like other country people. I had to see what was going on, and I crawled up, scared to death, bound to find out the status of things. I didn't make a crack — I stalked those devils well, and when I got where I could peep through some bushes around the point, sure enough there was one of them, jumping about on the beach, just as Henri had told me.

I had got so worked up now that I was hardly surprised at all; but talk about blood freezing! My teeth sounded like a sewing machine. The fiend wasn't all red, only the upper half of him, but his legs were long and skinny, the way devils always are. I hadn't a doubt but it was up with me, for I think I had gone a little crazy, as they say lost people do. Yet I was angry too, and I wanted to do some damage before I was killed, so I put up my rifle and sighted on that jumping-jack on the beach. I was just going to pull the trigger when something in his antics caught my eye. It was unbelievable, but he was certainly doing the running broad jump in just the form that Mr. McKelway, our trainer, puts us through it at school. I lowered the gun and watched, and he made a cracking good jump — it must have been nineteen feet. I was glad I hadn't shot him.

Well, something in the naturalness of that devil's jumping seemed to make me breathe easier, and I worked through the bushes to where I could see farther around the point. And what was the sight that burst upon my astonished eyes, but a great big building, a hotel, about a quarter of a mile away! I felt like an elastic band that has been stretched to its longest and then suddenly let go. I never had such a whack of relief. Indians and devils don't build hotels. That knowledge came at me, and the sweetness of the white skin surged up over me. I gave another look at the red and black thing still jumping by itself, and behold! it was a human boy, a boy in a red shirt. I sprinted down that sand whooping, and he turned in surprise as I came up, and then I can just tell you I was surpriseder than he, for it was Billy Bond, a chap who goes to my school.

"How do you do?" he said first, for I was out of breath. "Where did you drop from?"

"Bill," I said solemnly, "I was going to shoot you. I thought you were a devil."

"Well, I'm not," answered Billy. "You would have been awfully fresh if you had."

Then we fell to explanations and recriminations. Instead of the mysterious Lake of Devils I had come out on Lake Edward, right on the railroad, the one settlement of the two hundred miles between Quebec and Lake St. John. Billy and his people were staying here at the hotel for a few days on their way to Roberval on Lake St. John, and he had come down to the beach to see if he had forgotten his track work. We sat down against a log and split my last piece of sweet chocolate, and as we munched I told him about Henri's story and the horrid time I'd had.

"You'll just have to spend the night with me," he said, "and we'll send you back to your brother with a guide in the morning." That was out of kindness, but of course I didn't need a guide. Then suddenly he gave a shout. "I know what that blaze was," he said. "I've never seen it, but an old hunter who's around the hotel told me about it just the other day. There was a chap here several years ago who was in some little college, and was an Alpha Delta Phi. He was clean silly about his society, and was forever cutting its sign, a star and crescent, on the trees and the piazza and all around. He thought he could fish, too, and was keen about finding new places. Well, one day he went off with a guide who took him to Black Pond — that must be where you started from — and the guide let him believe nobody'd ever discovered it before and that it was full of trout. So he started out to cut a trail to it, and to make it a bigger secret, he cut only on one side of the trees — to show the way back. The other side he marked with pieces of red tape, which is all gone now. And the blaze he cut was the Alpha Delta Phi sign, the star and crescent."

"Oh!" I said; "oh!"

The Lake of Devils

"It took him and a guide a week to cut that trail, old Jean-Baptiste told me," Billy went on. "And there wasn't any fishing in the lake anyway. It's shallow and only good for caribou. Nobody has ever used the trail since — there's an easier way to get to Black Pond."

When I got within a mile of the River of Winds the next day I thought there was a war. At intervals of five minutes the hills rebounded with two rifle shots close together, and when I realized that Walter was signalling for me it made me sick to think how he was wasting cartridges. After all that expense I thought he would welcome me with enthusiasm and brotherly affection. I thought he would kill the fatted canned chicken for me; but no, sir! He was morose at me and wouldn't listen decently to my adventures. I said to him very agreeably that it was all right now, and that it was a pity to lose your temper when things were satisfactory, but all he answered was:

"I hope never to live through another such night. You go off devil hunting just once more, you young cuss, and I'll kick you into the lake."