

*The* **WONDER**  
**WOMAN**

*BY* **MAE VAN NORMAN LONG**

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*The* **WONDER  
WOMAN**



**THE HEART OF THE WOODS**

TO  
LAWSON

# **THE WONDER WOMAN**

## CHAPTER I TWO WOMEN

“DO you see her now, Mr. David?”

I nodded, pointing into the coals. “I see a lion, and an old witch, and a monkey. I don’t see any woman.”

“There! There!” I cried. “She’s just going through the postern gate. Oh, she’s gone, lad! Never mind! Next time you may see her.”

“And is she prettier’n Wanza, Mr. David?”

“Perhaps not prettier,” I responded. “Wanza looking out from beneath the pink-lined umbrella on her peddler’s cart is very charming, indeed. But the woman I see in the fire is—oh, she’s altogether different!”

This was the customary tenor of my conversation with Joey as we sat before our fire of pine knots of an evening. The lad would point out to me queer kaleidoscopic creatures he saw deep in the heart of the pine fire; but his young eyes never saw the face I beheld there, and so I was obliged to describe my wonder woman to him.

It was not strange that Joey should share my confidence in this fashion. He had been my sole companion since the night four years before when I had found him—poor tiny lad—sobbing on the doorstep of a shack some three miles down the river. I had lifted him to my shoulder and entered the shack to find there a dying woman. The woman died that night, but before she passed away

she gave the child to me, saying: "He is only a waif! I took him from my poor brother when he died over on the Sound, about six months ago. My brother was a fisherman. He picked the child up on the beach one morning after a fierce storm a year ago. I was meaning to keep the boy always, poor as I be. But now—you take Joey, mister,—he'll be a blessing to you!"

A blessing! I said the words over to myself as I carried the boy home that night. I said them to myself when I awakened in the morning and looked down at him cradled in the hollow of my arm. I had been out of conceit with life. For me the world was "jagged and broken" in very truth. But looking down at the young stranger I thrilled with the sudden desire to smooth and shape my days again. To stand sure! And here was a companion for me! I was through with living alone!

I went to the window, threw it wide, and saw the dawn rosy in the east. A mountain bluebird that had a nest in a hole in a cottonwood tree hard by was perched on a serviceberry bush beside the window. I heard its song with rapture. I was smiling when I turned back to the bunk where I had left the child. The child was smiling too. He sat straight up among the blankets, his eyes were fixed on the bird, and he was holding out his little arms. I lifted him and carried him to the window, and he lisped: "I love birdie! I love you!"

And so Joey became my boy.

It was not only in the heart of the pine fire that I saw the radiant creature I described to Joey. When I looked from my workshop door at twilight across the shadowy river to the cool purple peaks of the mountains, the nebular mist arising seemed the cloud-folds



of her garments. And when I lay on my back at noon time, in the cedar grove, gazing upward through the shivering green dome at the sky, I always dreamed of the splendor of her eyes.

I grew to wonder how I should meet her. Someway, I always pictured myself astride my good cayuse, Buttons, on the river road returning from Roselake village, gay in my holiday clothes, with a freshly shaven face, and a bag of peppermints in my pocket for Joey.

As it fell out I was in my shop by the river at work on a cedar chest. I was garbed in a dark-blue flannel shirt and blue overalls, and needed a hair-cut sadly. I heard a sound and looked up. “She has come!” I said to myself. “Out of the land of dreams she has come to me!”

A young woman stood before me. The face I saw was oval and flawless. The cheeks were a delicate pink. Her lips were vivid, her eyes luminous as stars. Her silky, lustrous hair was bound with a broad band of blue ribbon. Although her riding skirt was torn, her blouse soiled, although she was dusty and disheveled, with shadows of weariness about her splendid eyes, her manner was that of a young princess as she addressed me.

“This place is for sale, I understand?”

I had not thought of selling the few acres that remained of the hundred-and-sixty-acre homestead I had taken up eight years before; but I was so overcome with awe and confusion, that I stammered forth:

“Why, no—that is, I think not! I shall sell some time, I dare say.”

Her face showed a flash of amusement and then grew thoughtful.

“It is a desirable place,” she murmured, half to herself.

I knew then she had come to the shop by the yew path—the path that runs beneath the trailing yews and winds in and out like a purple-brown ribbon near the spring, where the moss is downy and green, and the bracken is high, and the breeze makes a sibilant sound in the rushes. I straightened my shoulders, laid aside my plane, and rolled down my sleeves. Thus far I had not fully appraised my visitor, having fallen a prey to the creeping paralysis of shyness at my first glance, but now, grown bolder, I stole a hardier look at her face. I saw the scarlet lips, the brilliant eyes, and the ivory forehead beneath the midnight hair. I saw the rose tint on her cheek, the tan on her tender throat where the rolled-back collar left it bare. I saw—and I breathed: “God help me!” deep in my heart; and there must have crept a warmth that was disquieting into my gaze, for she lowered her eyes swiftly, and slid her hand, in its riding glove, caressingly along the smooth surface of the cedar chest between us.

“What beautiful wood,” she said softly. “You are a carpenter—a craftsman,” she amended. “How wonderful to work with wood like this.”

“Christ was a carpenter,” a voice—a wee voice announced from behind us. Joey had stolen into the shop through the rear window as was his custom, and curled up on my work bench among the shavings.

“Who told you, lad?” I queried, being used to Joey’s terse and unexpected utterances.

My wonder woman looked at him sharply. Her black brows came together as she surveyed him, and she did not smile. Joey stared

and stared at her, until I thought he never would have done, and she continued to scrutinize him. I saw her eyes wander over his attire. Poor lad—his collection of wearing apparel was motley enough—an old hunting coat of mine that almost covered him, a pair of trousers unmistakably cut over, a straw hat that was set down so far on his brown head that his ears had perforce to bear the weight; a faded shirt, and scuffed out shoes. But Joey's scrutiny was more persistent than the one accorded him, and presently, my wonder woman was tricked into speech.

“Well?” she murmured, her lips relaxing.

Joey gave a great sigh, kicked up his heels like a fractious colt, and rolled over among the shavings. “Gracious Lord!” was his comment, delivered in awed tones.

“Joey!” I gasped, turning. But Joey was slipping, feet first, through the window. I caught him by the trousers and gave him a surreptitious shake, as I lowered him wriggling to the ground. He rolled over, rose to his knees; his brown eyes, big and soft, looked up at me affectionately; his lips parted in a grin of understanding.

“I'll put the potatoes on, Mr. David,” he vouchsafed, and vanished.

The beautiful face was questioning when I turned back. “Mr. David,” she repeated. “He is not your boy then?”

I hesitated. “No,” I said slowly. Somehow, I was in no mood to tell her Joey's story at that moment.

“Joey has the manners of a young Indian,” I apologized. “I hope he did not annoy you.”

“Children never annoy me,” she replied.

A tiny dimple played at one corner of her mouth and died suddenly as the half smile left her face. She bent her riding-whip between her hands and a look of distress came into her eyes.

“I am wrong, then, about this place being for sale? I saw a sign-board back there on the road. It said ‘For Sale’ in bold black letters. There was a big hand that pointed this way.”

A light broke in on me.

“It must be Russell’s old ranch on Hidden Lake,” I said. “To be sure, that is for sale. It has been for sale ever since I can remember.”

I saw her eyes brighten.

“There is a place I can buy, then? What is it like—this Hidden Lake?”

“It is a mere pond, hidden in the thickets. It can be reached from the river. If you can find the lead you can pole in with a canoe. It’s a famous place for ducks. The tules almost fill it in summer. There’s a good spring on the place, and I guess the soil is fair. One could raise vegetables and berries.”

“I don’t want to raise anything.”

I fancied her lip curled.

“No—no—why, I dare say not! How stupid of me,” I murmured.

She flirted her whip impatiently.

“Is there a road I can take?”

“I will show you,” I replied, and she walked out of the shop as if anxious to be off.

She paused in the cedar thicket beyond, and I joined her. We could see the river shining like silver gauze through the green latticed walls of the grove, and the sky above the steeples of the trees was amethyst and gray. The sun was low in the west, and the shadows lay purple along the wood aisles.

It was a magical May day. Hawthorn and serviceberry bushes waved snowy arms along the river bank and dropped white petals in the stream, the birch trees dangled long festoons of moss above the water, balm o’ Gileads shed their pungent perfume abroad, and the honeysuckle and wild clematis hung from the limbs of the slender young maples.

I held aside the underbrush for my wonder woman that she might pass, and we went through the cedar thicket, threaded our way through aspens and buck brush, and reached the trailing yews that were bending to dip their shining prisms in the spring.

“This is the yew path,” I explained, breaking the silence that we had maintained since leaving the shop. “It winds through the meadow and joins a trail that skirts Nigger Head mountain. Follow the trail, and it will take you to Hidden Lake.”

The soft neighing of a horse interrupted me. I peered through the buck brush, and glimpsed a bay mare tethered to the meadow bars. My companion gave a soft chirrup and pushed on before me. She had the mare’s bridle in her hand, and was stroking the animal’s nose when I reached her side.

I said, "Allow me," and offered my hand for her foot. She glanced at my hand, looked into my face, and smiled slowly as if amused. I felt the hot blood mount to my brow, and then her foot pressed my palm, and she was in the saddle, and her mare was wheeling.

"Good Sonia," I heard her murmur, and saw her gauntleted hand steal along the arching neck. She bent to me. The grace of her supple figure, the vital alluring face, her baffling beautiful eyes, her ripe lips with their dimpled corners, were sweet as life to me. For a moment our eyes met. She said gratefully: "Thank you. My ride will be splendid beneath those whispering yews."

Of a sudden my hands grew cold, my tongue stiffened in my throat, and my eyes smarted. She was going. I had no power to detain her, no sophisticated words to cajole her. I stared after her, and saw her ride away through the swaying meadow-grass to the yew path, the sun dappling her blue riding skirt, and the breeze lifting and swaying her bonny tresses.

When I went indoors after a retrospective half hour beside the spring, I found Joey in the grip of intense excitement. The table in the front room was laid for three, there was a roaring fire in the kitchen stove, and Joey's face was crimson as he stood on a stool at the sink turning the boiling water off a kettle of potatoes.

"I've made squatty biscuits like you showed me once," he volunteered in a loud whisper, "and stewed apples. And, Mr. David—I've hung a clean towel over the wash-bench, and scoured the basin with rushes."

I looked at Joey. Out in the woods I had undergone a savage battle with my old self that had walked out of the shadows and confronted me. I had remembered things—submerged, well-

forgotten things; I had exhumed skeletons from their charnel house—skeletons long buried; I had seen faces I had no wish to see, heard voices, the music of whose tones I could not sustain with equanimity; I had suffered. But as I looked at Joey, the futile little friend who loved me, and saw his pitiful efforts to please, the ice went out of my heart, and the fever out of my brain. I turned aside to the window and stood looking out with tightening throat.

Joey came and hovered near my elbow.

“There are only two pieces of gingerbread, Mr. David. I’ve put them on, and you can just say you don’t believe in giving children sweets.”

I laid my arm across the lad’s shoulders. I looked down into the honest brown eyes seeking mine for approval. The pressure of the two small rough hands on my arm was comforting.

“You’re a splendid provider, Joey,” I cried. “But you may eat your gingerbread, my boy. There will be no guest. She has gone on to Hidden Lake.”

Joey looked aghast. His jaw dropped, and his eyes grew black with disappointment.

“And I’ve sweetened the apple sauce with white sugar, and gone and wasted all that butter in those biscuits!”

I strolled into the front room and viewed the preparations. There was a large bunch of lupine in the big blue bowl in the center of the table, and all our best china was set forth in brave array. The bread-board I had carved graced one end of the table; at the other, Joey had arranged the two thick slabs of gingerbread on a pressed glass comport, a paper napkin beneath. I was smiling as I stood

there, but I had an uncomfortable feeling that all was not well with Joey. A sound from the kitchen attracted me. I went toward it. Joey leaned across the sink, his face buried in the roller towel. His young shoulders were heaving.

“I wanted her—oh, I wanted her to stay!” he blubbered.

I knew not what to say to comfort my lad, and so I said nothing. I caught up the pail and went outside to the spring for water.

I had filled my pail and was stooping to gather a handful of cress when I heard the sharp click of wheels in the underbrush behind me. Some one was driving over the uneven ground that lay between the cabin and the workshop. I looked around. A girl sitting beneath a pink-lined, green umbrella, in a two-wheeled cart, waved her whip at me. I straightened up, dropped the cress, and ran through the buck brush after her.

“Wait, wait, Wanza,” I cried.

I heard her say: “Whoa, Rosebud!” And the buckskin pony she was driving curveted and pawed the ground and set the green paper rosettes on its harness bobbing coquettishly as she pulled it up.

“Were you coming to the cabin, Wanza?” I asked, as I reached the cart.

“Whoa, Rosebud! No, I wasn’t to-night, Mr. Dale—I was only taking a short cut through your field.”





### **“I WAS ONLY TAKING A SHORT CUT”**

She leaned out from beneath the shadow of her pink-lined umbrella and smiled at me. Seldom it was that Wanza smiled at me like that. Friends we were—friends of years’ standing—but Wanza was chary of her smiles where I was concerned, and I must confess I found her frowns piquant enough.

The day that passed without Wanza whistling from her peddler’s cart at my door seemed more cheerless than usual. Wanza peddled

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