

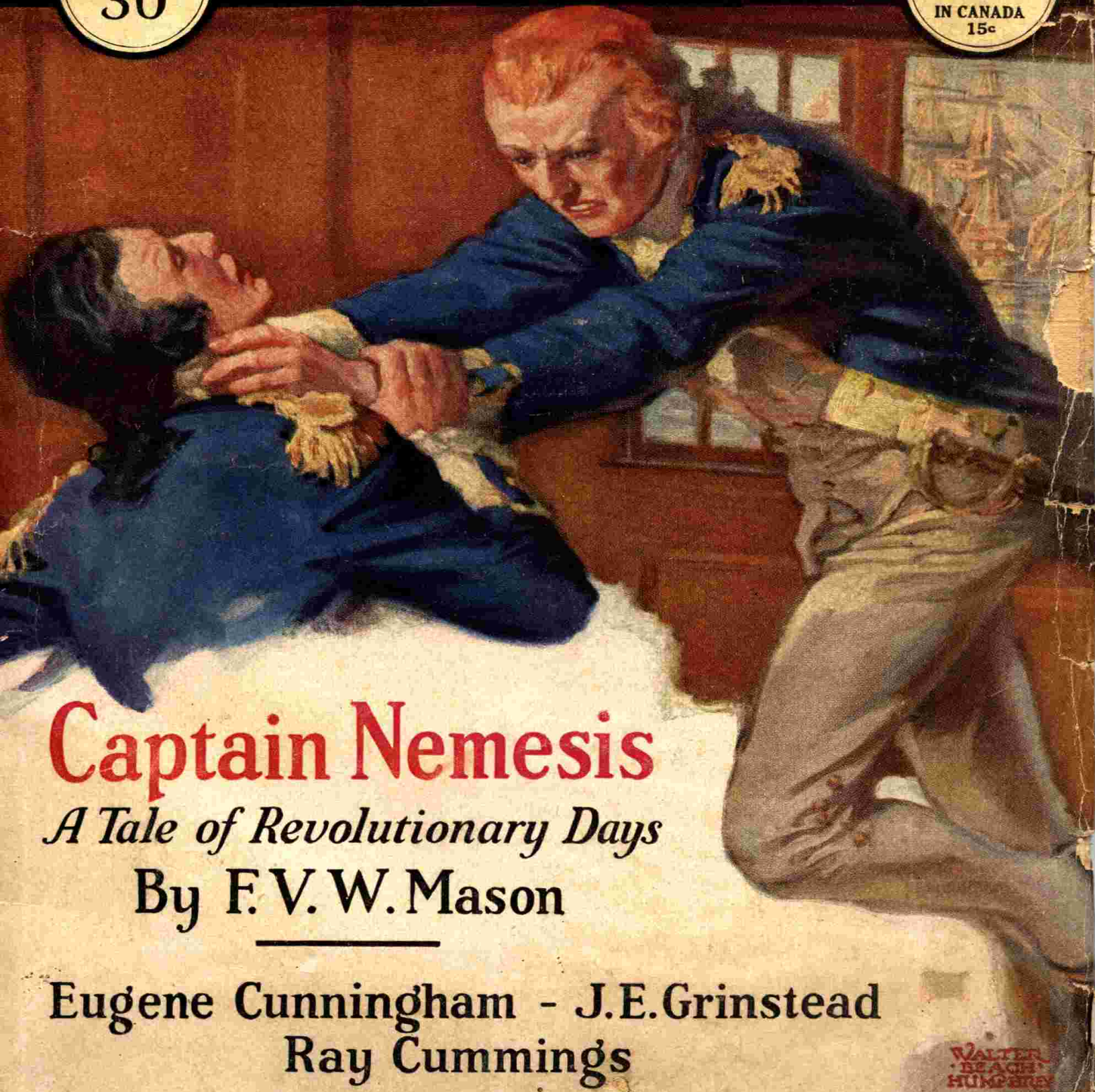
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TRIAL BY
WATER ***

Trial by Water

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

*A son of the voyageurs tests the hearts of
his young wife and of his debonair friend.*

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Jean Baptiste Chabrier listened, with an odd gleam in his dark, quiet eyes, to the roaring of the rapids. A dangerous place, those rapids! Who knew better than Jean Baptiste, who for three years had made his home within the sound of Assin-nebah's voice? Assin-nebah—that was as the Crees said it; "rocky water" it meant in the English.

Chabrier's mild and thoughtful gaze rested upon the figure of the girl seated in the middle of the canoe. He could not see her face, for she was looking ahead, just as he was. There had been a time when she would have faced Jean Baptiste, her husband; but now she looked toward the man in the bow—big, blond, gay Les Walters, the sawyer.

For just an instant the odd gleam in Jean Baptiste's eyes flamed up angrily. In the previous spring he had invited Les, who had never killed a moose, to come up to his camp in the hunting season. Les had accepted, and now he was here. He had been here for ten days, or perhaps more. Jean Baptiste did not keep accurate check of the time. It seemed many days—too many days.

Jean Baptiste had seen what had happened, for his eyes were sharp with love. It was a fool who said that love is blind. Love lends a jealous keenness to the vision, and Jean Baptiste was very much in love with his pretty wife. That was why he knew that she was falling in love with Les Walters.

The big sawyer was everything that Jean Baptiste was not. Les was tall and blond and smiling, full of broad, quick jests and subtle flatterings. Jean Baptiste was small, for all his strength, and dark and grave. He spoke softly and infrequently, and his adoration for Charlotte was in his heart and in his eyes, not upon his tongue.

Les was a novelty, and Charlotte was a woman. To Jean Baptiste, in whom stirred the romantic blood of the gay *voyageurs*, there was given a certain understanding of women. He knew their love of that which is new and different.

He had not blamed Charlotte. He had merely waited until he was sure she would be ready to decide between her husband and the other man; and now they were coming swiftly to the place where, ready or not, the woman must make her decision, instantly, once and for all.

The rapids were close ahead. The roar of the tortured waters filled the air. The high flung spray hung in swirling clouds of wind-whipped mist. Already the canoe was in the grip of the current. The water was black and waveless, and fretted with odd, ever changing cross currents and eddies. It writhed and twisted as if it knew and dreaded the granite-fanged monster that waited just ahead.

Les, in the bow, glanced back nervously. They had shot the rapids several times before, but the thunder of the angry waters still held a menace for the sawyer. Jean Baptiste smiled grimly and motioned briefly for Les to draw in his paddle. Then the little bushman stood up for an instant in the canoe and surveyed the stretch of raging water.

Kneeling, now, his paddle flashing in and out so rapidly that one could scarce have kept the tally of its stroking, Jean Baptiste shot the frail fabric into the foam-lashed torrent.

The fresh, cool tang of the spray stung his nostrils, and he filled his lungs with the exhilaration of it. A score of times he pitted his strength and the strength of his thin spruce blade against the angry might of the rapids, and a score of times he won.

Now he paddled as if the fiend was following him through this hell of waters. Now his paddle hung poised, every nerve and muscle of Jean Baptiste's body tense, his eyes sharp as hawk's eyes. Then the yellow blade flashed down again, and its cunning thrust won the canoe to safety past a dozen lurking dangers.

Spray splashed in over the bow. The canoe careened, twisted, poised, darted. It shot by hissing ledges, dipped as it went over miniature falls, swung around perilously with disaster threatening on every side, shot like an arrow down a straight stretch, and came at last to the rock-strewn, snag-guarded foot of the rapids.

Here the most dangerous places were passed. The banks of the stream were farther apart, the water ran deeper and more slowly. Jean Baptiste's eyes lit up suddenly, and he nodded to himself, as if in agreement with some inner thought. Yes, this was the place of the testing.

II.

Jean Baptiste dug his paddle cunningly into the foaming water and darted the bow of his light craft between two big black rocks, against which the water leaped in boiling fury. Instantly the stern of the canoe was caught by the current and swung around sharply, so that the boat lay directly across the course of the stream. It brought up sharply against a snag, there was a slivery crash, Les Walters uttered a yell of terror, and the canoe rolled over, hurling the three of them into the icy, swirling current.

For a moment Jean Baptiste shot downstream under the water, like a diving otter, the bursting bubbles crackling in his ears. Then, with a shout, he came to the surface and flung the water from his hair and eyes.

He turned quickly and looked back. Into his dark eyes came a sudden look of pain—the hurt look of a dog punished for he knows not what.

Charlotte—she had not turned to Jean Baptiste, to her husband, in her extremity. No, she had looked to the sawyer. A woman's dependence upon a man, Jean Baptiste had figured out in his simple soul, is the sum of her love for him. In the bush country, a woman selects the man who can best protect her, who can provide most safely for her and for the children she expects to bear; and Charlotte had turned for protection, not to her husband, but to Les.

While Jean Baptiste watched, Charlotte reached up out of the swirling waters and seized the frantically struggling sawyer by his shoulders, calling out in a voice inarticulate with fear. Like a flash Les turned, struck her full in the face, and threw her from him. Then, scrambling madly, he made for the safety of the shore.

Charlotte cried aloud with the pain of the blow, and her mane of black hair, loosened and streaming in the water, mingled again with the current. Struggling, her dress impeding her movements, she came, floundering helplessly, toward her husband.

She saw him standing there, waist deep in the surging flood, leaning against its might, and she screamed to him in a voice shrill with terror; but Jean Baptiste's face hardened, and he watched her with eyes as cold as the wet, slippery rocks over which poured the merciless black waters.

Swiftly the churning water bore her toward the sucking whirlpools at the foot of the rapids. Just as she swept by the motionless figure of Jean Baptiste, her face emerged from the flood, and on her white cheek her husband saw a blood-washed scar—a tiny, curving cut made by the heavy seal ring the sawyer wore.

Just in time Jean Baptiste reached out. His strong fingers sank firmly through wet cloth and gripped like steel the wet and slippery flesh beneath. With one powerful motion of his body he swept his wife from the water, and against his breast. She lay there, gasping and whimpering like the puppies Jean Baptiste raised to be sledge dogs, while her husband, cautiously feeling his way on the treacherous bottom, struggled toward the shore.

From time to time he glanced down at the white, dripping face so close to his own, and his eyes glinted with a fierce satisfaction.

He glanced down—and his eyes glittered with a sort of satisfaction.

From the little cut on her face fresh blood welled up to make a crimson stain on the wet, pale face. Always there would be a scar there. Always, when she looked in a mirror, that reminder would be before her eyes. Jean Baptiste, who had a certain understanding of women as a heritage from his gay *voyageur* forbears, was content that it should be so.

There had been a testing—a greater testing than he had planned. It had been a testing of two souls, instead of but one; but that also was well.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TRIAL BY WATER

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