

Eric Lehman – Winter at Gannet Bay

Wilton Loch had never been so cold. He had lived in the upper latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere all his life, but this was a new low. Frosty eyelids stuck to blurred eyeballs with each blink. The short beard that hung from his pursed lips creaked with every grimace. The ancient, coal-burning boat that chugged him across the St. Lawrence Seaway to the north shore of Quebec had covered his borrowed parka with soot, but served to keep the inspector and the small crew warm on the voyage. Now, as the Innu driver mushed the team of dogs ahead, the inspector held tightly to the sled and wind burned into his pores unheeded.

“How far is Gannet Bay?” he croaked out to his driver, who had picked him up from the landing without a word, turning his team across the sea ice.

The driver glanced at him, but only shook his head. Wilton tried in French. Nothing. Perhaps his ears were frozen. Wilton had long since lost feeling in his own. He silently cursed the necessity of the journey. There had been a murder in the tiny fishing village of Gannet Bay, and there were no other detectives anywhere close. The police chief from Matane had included “Hah!” in the telegram, indicating either his unwillingness to help or his disdain for any local investigators.

So, Wilton had received a message at his home on the south side of the Gaspé Peninsula, and had accepted the challenge. The winters were long up here, and living off his military pension gave him no other reason to leave the house. He thought back to his wife, and shivered, then laughed bitterly, unable to pull his parka closer.

Lights glimmered ahead. The driver turned along a long spit of land at the head of a bay. Small wooden houses with snowbanked sides appeared at long intervals. Some were dark, but a few had light inside and a thin stream of black smoke bisecting the purpling sky.

Nevertheless, Wilton had enough success and visible triumphs throughout the war to have earned something of a reputation. So, with

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dubious authority the Canadian government sent him around the Gaspé and across the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the dead of winter, to investigate the murder of a priest, Father Francis.

That was the only reason that it hadn't been left until spring, Wilton thought. A dead priest in a wasteland like the north shore was a gigantic beacon for the bored war correspondents, out of a job for a year now. He watched a jagged coast slowly taking shape in the pale light. If any journalists had reached this place before him, he would be surprised.

The center of the village was perhaps thirty structures, huddled on the rocky hillside closest to the sea. At the edge of this makeshift town, the guide stopped and screamed at the dogs, tying them to posts. Then, he turned to Wilton, pulling back a black mask that revealed a hard, but not unpleasant Innu face.

"My name is Emish, Mister Loch."

"It's nice to meet you at last," Wilton said with as much brightness as he could muster.

"I am sorry for on the sled," the Innu told him. "Conserve heat."

"Ah."

"No one moves. You must stay indoors."

"I can feel why." Wilton jumped a little to get his sluggish blood moving.

"Would you like to rest?"

"No, I would like to get started."

The Innu shrugged. "Then I will take you to the chapel after we put your things at my house." He led the way to a wooden building and after clearing a bit of snow, Emish pushed the heavy door in, and Wilton followed. A terrible smell assailed his icy nostrils. Fearing it would be impolite to ask, Wilton searched out the source. It was coming from the lamps on the tables.

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“Ah,” he began, “Whale oil?”

Emish shrugged. “Yes...very poor, though. A shortage, they say.”

“Probably temporary,” Wilton said absently. “Are there any ‘round here?”

“Whales? Not these days. We get this from somewhere east, I think.”

Wilton nodded, pointing to the fire. “Coal, as well?”

“Yes, from Pennsylvania. Why?”

“I’m curious, that’s all. It is my job, after all.”

“Of course.” Emish squinted at Wilton, and the inspector could have sworn he saw a glint in the man’s eye.

The small chapel stood at the top of the hill, marked by a huge stone cairn and a black cross barely topping the snowbank. The path was replete with dirty snow, and Wilton noted the remnants of several other trails. It had stormed since the murder, and Wilton’s mood darkened. They passed a pile of rime-covered wood, and the inspector took note of this oddity. Inside, an Innu woman sat by the chapel hearth, poking it with a board. A small altar was cobbled together with flat rocks, and the walls were padded with sealskins. Wilton’s guide introduced him as “Monsieur Loch.” The woman spoke no English, and only elementary French. Wilton despaired. The Innu both pointed at the floor by the shelf that served as a pulpit. Wilton groaned. It was spotlessly clean.

“Ask her if the priest had enemies,” he asked, bored.

This set off a flurry of Innu words and Emish listened patiently. Wilton explored the wooden boards around the site of the murder.

“This woman has often seen the schoolmaster and the priest arguing,” the guide said. “As she was leaving on the day the *pere* was killed, the schoolmaster was coming up the hill.”

Wilton brightened a bit, studying a bit of gray snow at the doorway.

“What time was that?”

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The woman shrugged. “Sunset, she says,” Emish told him.

“Are there any written records?”

“The *pere* kept a journal of his doings here at the mission,” Emish told Wilton. “But it is gone.”

“Stolen?”

“Burned, they say.”

“Who is *they*?”

Emish frowned. “The villagers. All came up there on that evening for the Mass, and all found the *pere* dead.”

“All at once?”

“No one leaves houses until the bell.”

Wilton sighed. “I suppose we should question all of them.”

Emish looked surprised. “But we must question the schoolmaster, Monsieur Briggs.”

“He will be first. But perhaps we had best see the *pere* first.”

“The *pere*?”

“The body hasn’t been buried? Not at this time of year.”

Emish shrugged and asked the woman a question. She crossed herself and pointed out the door. Wilton sighed again and pushed outside, walking to the pile of wood he had noticed, understanding. He glanced at the door, which had been closed again. No one would help him. He got to work, pulling off log after log, slowly but steadily, trying not to sweat. His thick gloves made the work difficult, and it was many long minutes before he reached the large, muscular body of the priest.

It was frozen solid, of course. Luckily the cause of death was obvious: a blow to the head that had crushed the side of the skull. The damage was extensive, but with a clear puncture point, about the width of three fingers. Wilton fumbled with his notebook for a bit, then gave up. He would have to record the relevant facts later, and rely on his usually stellar memory. He

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examined the rest of the body, finding curious dirt under the fingernails, soot and grease on the black cassock, and no trace of other injury. He began to form hypotheses based on the evidence so far, which would alter with each new piece of information, like a branching root system deep in his brain.

At last he was done. He considered briefly not restacking the wood, but he banished the thought. Exhaling frost into his beard, he began slowly placing the logs back onto the corpse, hoping that he wouldn't have to go through the process again before the investigation was over. He poked his head inside, finding the two natives deep in conversation.

“Could we talk to the schoolteacher now?”

The Innu grunted and led Wilton to the schoolhouse, indistinguishable from the other dwellings except for a sign that read “Ecole/School.” Waiting outside for the day's lesson to be over, the inspector walked around the building several times, scanning the ground.

The schoolteacher Briggs was a small, thin man with a wild shock of red hair. He was trying to erase a chalkboard, but the eraser seemed to be frozen. It clunked onto the teacher's desk like a rock, and Wilton heard him curse.

“Hello, sir,” Wilton announced, when the Innu guide said nothing.

The teacher turned, and appraised his guest. “And you are?”

“My name is Loch, and I am here on behalf of the Canadian government.”

“What a coincidence! So am I,” the man said, chuckling. “But I assume you are here about the recent unpleasantness.”

“Indeed.”

“Have you seen the body?”

“Yes...though I...”

“They wouldn't tell me how he died.”

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“A blow to the chest,” Wilton lied, searching for a reaction. When the man only shook his head and closed his eyes, he continued on the same track, lying again. “Everyone else ‘round here seems to know. Why not you?”

“I am not...a churchgoer.”

Wilton thought that was an interesting way of putting it. “A communist?”

“Do you think the government would have sent me out here with that on my record? With Stalin knocking on our Arctic doors?”

“You are an atheist, then.”

Briggs sat back. “Yes, you could say that.”

“That must make you...unpopular, in a place like this.”

“I suppose so.” The red-haired man frowned. “But I do my job well, and I keep my beliefs away from the children.” His frown changed to a laugh. “I am sure the parents question their offspring thoroughly about that.”

“So, this is why you argued with *Pere Francis*.”

“Not at all!” The excitable man exclaimed. “Despite my beliefs, in my life I have had no problem with the clergy. I had a problem with this clergyman.”

Wilton glanced at the Innu man, who was furiously pretending not to listen, and had a black look on his face. “Why is that, if you don’t mind telling me?”

Briggs paused, glancing at the Innu. “Do you mind leaving us for a minute?”

Emish stamped out into the snow without a look back.

“That was very rude of me...” The schoolteacher shrugged. “Almost unforgivable. But I did not need a churchgoer like Emish to have further ammunition.” He stood up and tossed another piece of coal in the stove. “This priest, he was always scheming, finding ways to increase the church’s share. He put up a huge fight when the government sent me here, and not

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because I am a nonbeliever. No, he was worried that another man of intelligence would be more aware of his schemes and plans for bilking the natives out of what little wealth they have.”

Wilton nodded, smiling encouragingly. He found the schoolteacher off-putting, but not malevolent. Still, he had certainly reasons to dislike the *pere*. “Did you see him on the day of the murder?”

“Yes...I went up there early in the afternoon to speak to him about his new project to raise money for a sled and dog team, for the congregation, as he so prudently put it. But he kicked me out, cursing me severely I might add, and I came back to town long before the bells rang for Mass.”

Wilton noted the time frame. “Ah. Well, I may have to ask you more questions later, Monsieur Briggs. I assume you will not be leaving town?” He smiled.

The schoolteacher laughed, and ran a hand through his red hair. “Not bloody likely.”

Wilton stepped outside and shook his head at his guide, as if in sympathy for the rudeness of the other man.

“I believe he did it,” Emish muttered as they tramped to the first house. “You need not question anyone else.”

Wilton said nothing, but looked curiously at the guide, then at the sun, which appeared to have moved little in the last several hours.

After a number of interviews, which told Wilton nothing new, Emish led them to the town public house. Wilton was allowed to pay for a round of drinks to make himself welcome, and he did so reluctantly, knowing that without official papers he would have a hard time recovering money from either the Canadian government or the British military. After a few minutes a snap of cold entered the room, and two prospectors wiped black muck off their boots, stepping to the rickety bar for a drink.

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Wilton spoke to the Innu host in French, and he served the two men glasses. “What are you boys finding ‘round here?” Wilton asked brightly.

The two men looked at each other. “Gold,” one said.

“Good hunting?”

“Not this time of year,” the shorter man said in good English. The taller one spoke to him quickly in French. “We found some, though,” the shorter one continued, draining his glass in one gulp. The taller one had already finished, and they escaped into the weird twilight.

“Ah,” Wilton said, and turned to the Innu guide. “Who’s next?”

Emish took him to three more dwellings, then led him to his own, where the inspector was glad to find a feast of seal meat awaiting. The mixture of caribou blood and liquor was actually quite palatable, and as Wilton settled into the thick fur-lined bag, he dropped quickly asleep.

In the morning Wilton told Emish that he wanted to be alone for the day, and the Innu shrugged and left. The inspector had considered rifling through the house, but considered it bad manners. So, he had gone to the public house, which was empty except for the proprietor, who sat in the corner by the fire.

“I didn’t get to talk to you yesterday, and I thought I would stop by.”

The man grunted, poking the coals with a stick.

“I thought you would like to share a hot drink with me.” Wilton put a pound on the table nearby. At this, the man stood up, took a pot off the fire, and poured hot tea into two ceramic mugs. They sat for a while in silence, and Wilton held his curiosity in check, hoping that the other’s would break first. Winters were long, and the inspector knew the power of a stranger.

“So, you’re here to investigate the *pere*,” the man finally spoke.

Wilton nodded, waiting.

“You’ll find the schoolteacher a slippery one.”

“He doesn’t seem popular ‘round here.”

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“Well, amongst the church goers he has his critics.”

“Are you one of them?”

“No...” the man paused. “No, but it doesn’t sit right with me, all the same.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, they didn’t get along, see? The *pere* and the teacher. And no one else in the village had a particular grudge.”

“Ah. Well, before I leave you to your fire, was Emish in the village when the priest was killed? He didn’t say.”

“No, he was in the Mingans, trading.” The man stood up. “Stay a while.”

“I’ll be back later for something stronger.” Wilton cracked the door.

“When did he get back?”

“Just two days before your arrival.”

Wilton calculated. Almost a week after the murder. It made him an unlikely suspect. Why was he trying to pin the murder on the schoolteacher? Was it just the mood of the villagers? He would have to find that out. Today, however, there was another lead to follow. He followed the ambiguous shoreline until he was a half mile outside of the main cluster of houses. Then, he traced a long semi-circle to the next shore, taking a few hours, moving briskly but avoiding a sweat. The hills around town were not high, but in places the snow was deep, and he struggled in silence, understanding the luxury he had at home, even on the fairly remote Gaspé Peninsula.

The freezing inspector noted the paths out of town, most recently unused. There were a number of very old trails radiating from the chapel into the hills, but only one that had been used since snow had fallen. He scanned the windswept landscape and could see the faint traces of this path leading further north into the hills. He dug down into the snow, finding the hard ice of

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frozen footprints, and several layers of dirt and grime before hitting the hard soil.

Wilton continued to the west, hitting a trail made by a dog team, which must have been Emish's. There were no other teams in town currently, and he believed his host had the only one. This trail headed directly east and west, but Wilton climbed a rise to make sure. He could only see for a few miles, but he doubted that anyone would go so far out of the way and double back in this climate at this time of year. The inspector continued on his track, trying to be thorough, but cut back towards the village and reached Emish's house, where he lit a fire and waited until the Innu man returned a few hours later.

After a few drinks of caribou liquor and a meal of an unidentifiable meat, Wilton spoke carefully. "I may have found the murderer of *Pere Francis*."

"Yes, it is that Monsieur Briggs."

"I do not think so."

"The schoolmaster, he is a bad man." Emish said, expressionless.

Wilton nodded. He was not so sure of that, but it didn't hurt to lie here.

"Yes, but he is not a murderer."

"Who, then?"

"I have a theory on that, but I need your help to prove it. We must take the sled and a gun, if you have one."

"Of course. It is the only gun in the village, I think."

"Excellent." He neglected to tell Emish about his own military pistol, hidden in his coat. He needed to know one more thing before he did that.

"Tomorrow morning, we must leave early."

"I was going to hunt for seal tomorrow."

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“The seal will wait. And the government might repay you,” Wilton lied uncomfortably. “After all, you do not want killers roaming your hunting grounds.”

“No.” Emish said flatly. “I will wake you in the morning.”

Wilton slipped into his bag and stared at the ceiling until he heard the other man move again five hours later. In the murky half-dark Emish grappled the dogs into action, and Wilton directed him north into the hills. As they wound through the backcountry, following the broken trail, Wilton understood why the pere was trying to get a sled and dog team. This would be a grueling walk in the winter.

An hour passed, and then another. At last, Wilton began to see other tracks again, and signaled Emish to stake the dogs down. They continued on foot, the Innu holding a long rifle. After a half hour, the tracks grew numerous, and on a long river plain, a cabin appeared next to a large bump of rock. Below it on one side the snow had turned entirely black. Wilton saw Emish cross himself, staring at what the inspector was sure was a large seep.

“It is oil.” Wilton said quietly, relieved that his guide seemed to not recognize the substance. “The men in that house may have killed the *pere*.”

“How will we know?”

“The cabin will tell us.”

The two men walked slowly, circling away from the patch, which appeared to have been a well at one time. Equipment lay around the area, rusted and frozen. Wilton pulled out his pistol, surprising Emish, who shrugged, smiled, and peeked in the window. “Sleeping,” he whispered. “Door is barred.”

Wilton cursed silently. He slumped against the wooden wall, and indicated the other side of the door. His beard, already cracking with ice, froze solid. Emish seemed impervious to the cold, but stamped his feet once every few minutes. At last, they heard activity inside, and then the sound of

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the bar being drawn. The shorter prospector emerged in only his long underwear, clearly ready to urinate. Wilton shoved the pistol in his face.

“Hello. Mind if I ask a few questions?”

The man screamed, and fell backwards onto the cabin floor. The other man jumped for the chest in the corner, but Wilton barged inside, shouting “*mais no, monsieur.*” Emish held his gun on the other prospector, grinning. Wilton linked the men together with his only pair of handcuffs, and Emish nodded. “They will not get far if they try to escape,” he chuckled, clearly pleased with this adventure.

Wilton scanned the cabin, seeing two pickaxes. On the wall a wooden cross was nailed. “A strange artifact,” he said to the English-speaking man. The prospector’s face was blank, but he glanced at the chest. Wilton opened it, finding a rifle, clothing, and at the bottom a selection of torn pages from the priest’s journal, all focusing on the oil well. When he brought them out, the taller man began wailing. That was all that the inspector needed.

The guide retrieved the sled and they tied the men to the back of it on a long board, sometimes pulling them, sometimes letting them walk. It was impossible to tell time, but the low sun had long gone down when they reached the village and locked the men in the storeroom of the public house for the night.

Back at Emish’s cabin, they celebrated with the guide’s special brew and some delicacy of the sea that Wilton thought better not to question.

Finally, the Innu guide could no longer contain his curiosity. “How did you know?”

“I first thought that it might be a miner when I examined the body and found that it was the back of a hammer or a pickaxe which had killed him. Then we saw the two men in the public house. Their boots were covered in fresh oil, so they lied about gold prospecting.”

“All men lie about those kinds of plans.”

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“Yes, but they left the warmth of the pub when I began questioning. Later, I found the trail that the *pere* had used, the one we followed, and it had been walked after his death. I guessed it was the prospectors, since no one else would leave the village this time of year.”

“But why kill him?”

“We will have to see about that. But I think profit. He had known the person who killed him, and had not been surprised by the murder weapon in the man’s hand, or he would have put up a fight.”

“Yes, the *pere* was a strong man, a wonderful man.” Emish nodded.

“Strong enough to walk out into the hills quite often during the summers, and to search them.”

Emish frowned. “And he found the prospector’s secret mine?”

Wilton hesitated. How far would this man take his faith? “No, I believe it was the other way around. The chapel trail to the claim was well-traveled and dirty. I think these two men found the *pere*’s claim, and killed him for it.”

The Innu slumped by his fire. “Yes, *Pere Francis* was always trying to raise money for the Lord.”

Wilton held his tongue, and instead tried to give some sense to the faithful man: “Yes, he involved himself with the matters of this world, and he paid for it.”

Emish nodded. “I was wrong to blame the teacher. It is these others who one must watch.”

Wilton nodded, growing sleepy after the day’s exertions. He drank the caribou liquor, savoring the sweet, salty taste, hoping for a good night’s rest. Tomorrow Emish would take him and the two prisoners back to meet the boat. After an inquest and a day’s paperwork, he would be sent back. Back to his home on the Gaspé at the mouth of the Cascapedia River. Back to his wife and her moods. Back to a very long winter.