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There was Something in the Lake. And the Something Killed

# GHOST LAKE

by August Derleth

*Illustrated by Denis Tiani*

At the fork in the trail the Indian refused to go on. This was when it was evident that Taylor meant to take the north trail and not the west. The Indian had calmly gone past the fork, in the first place, expecting us to follow him into the west. Taylor had no intention of doing so.

"This way, this way," he said impatiently.

The guide simply turned and shook his head.

"What do you mean?" demanded Taylor belligerently.

The Indian pointed north. "Not go," he said, shaking his head again. He made a sign of evil. "Bad water," he went on, struggling with his English.

"Look here," Taylor said then, "we hired you to take us to the lake. We expect you to keep your bargain."

"Not bad water, not go," the Indian was emphatic. He waved to the north and lapsed into his own language. The lake we sought, he said—for I understood him, if Taylor did not—lay less than a day's journey almost due north. The trail led first to a small lake of "good water" but the "bad water" lay beyond that. There was not much of a trail; Indians avoided the lake; no one was taken there. The lake belonged to invisible beings none could see; they did not like men to come there. It was a place of evil.

I translated this for Taylor.

He flashed a scornful glance at the guide. "Wendigo?" he asked.

The Indian shook his head. What he said sounded like "Mujje-nepe."

Taylor turned to me. I shrugged. "What do we do now?" he asked. "Are you game to go on without him?"

"If you'll permit me my superstitions," I answered, "we'll go on. Just the same, it might be better to listen to him. He says not to go on the water, if we go there. Just to stay off the water."

Taylor snorted. "Hah!" he said. "Tom went there and didn't come back. Nelia, too. They weren't to be found in the woods or anywhere near their gear. So they must have gone out on the lake and drowned. How do we stay off the water if we mean to look for them—or their bodies?"

* * * * *

The lake was beautiful and not too large, a body of placid water surrounded by pines that pressed down to the shore. We reached it just before sundown, and the water glowed and shone with the colors of the heavens in the west—copper and lemon and saffron, magenta and old rose and lavender, with the trees absolutely black on it, the kind of sunset only to be found in the Quetico or north. "Ghost Lake," the Indians called it; it had other names—"Lost Lake," "Dead Man's Lake," and others, all grown from native fears, real or fancied.

We had no time then to admire the beauty or solitude of the place. Evening came fast among the pines; it would soon be dark; we would have all we could do to make camp, have supper, and settle down for the night. So we got at it and it was dark before we had finished. The lake now lay black, with stars in its water. Loons called—not apparently from the lake but from some other water some distance away—and owls, and something made a steady, watery sound, a kind of washing sound, as if somewhere waves washed up along the shore.

Taylor was not communicative, any more than he had been ever since he introduced himself to me a week before in Kingman. A taciturn man, much given to his pipe, but disturbed with an agitation he concealed quite successfully for the most part.

"As I understand it, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner didn't come to this place together?" I asked at last.

He shook his head. "She came first. They had been separated. My fault," he said in a strained voice, so that I guessed that there had been something between the woman and himself. "It was a

reconciliation—or was intended to be. But you know something about this lake, and I've heard things. Why is it shunned?"

I shrugged. "I know little more than you do. It has a bad reputation. Like some of the river rapids. If too many lives are claimed by the rapids, they begin to have a bad reputation. That's understandable."

"But a lake!" protested Taylor, twisting his rugged face into a grimace of scorn.

"Very well," I said. "Not counting your friends—if that's what happened to them—this lake has claimed no less than seventeen lives in the memory of the natives."

"How do they know?"

"Oh, eventually the bodies have been cast up on shore."

"Well, people do drown. And primitive people live by superstitions. Civilized man has his share, too."

"There isn't a dwelling anywhere on the lake's shore. No invasion here, the way there is at other lakes. The Indians won't come near it. You saw how our guide reacted—nothing sensational, just stolid refusal to go close to it."

"It surely can't be compared to river rapids. It's quiet water."

"Is it?"

He cocked his head and listened to the washing sound of many waters.

"I didn't mean that, of course," he said. "Wind-driven waves washing on the shore. I meant disturbed . . ."

I broke in. "There isn't any wind."

I had noticed it almost immediately after I had first become aware of the water's sound. Though waves were most certainly washing up the bank, there was no wind to drive them. The night was still.

Taylor got up and went outside. I followed.

I came up behind him at the water's edge. The water rippled and stirred. Now a waning moon was rising, and the wan moonlight reflected from the lake's surface as far as the eye could see toward the dark line of trees opposite. The water from one shore to another was alive with movement, with ripples and little waves that came gently inshore. It was strange to see the ripples that drove the water in two feet over the land, washing in among the roots of the trees that reached waterward from the shore. There was no wind to make waves. The lake was agitated, rippling out from its center toward every shore, as if some great beast were stirring the water there. And the water seemed to come in farthest along the shore where we stood. Taylor stepped back a little.

"Damndest thing I ever saw," he said. "It's got to have some perfectly natural explanation."

"What is it?"

"There may be some settling of the lake bottom," he answered.

It was true, any considerable settling of the bottom would disturb the the water. I said nothing. I thought, though, that if there were that, we ought certainly to feel some tremor along the shore. There was nothing.

He seemed anxious to believe it. "Isn't that possible?"

"Yes," I said.

He turned and went back into the tent.

He hadn't said what he was looking for, coming here—not specifically. Some proof that his two friends were dead? Perhaps he needed to know particularly that she was gone, and meant to wait until her body, too, was cast up by the lake. He could indeed mean to skirt the lake in search of it.

I followed him and made ready, like him, to settle in for the night.

But I could not sleep. The lake fell silent, and gradually other sounds rose—the hooting of owls, the shuddersome cries of lynxes, the eerie laughter of loons, all rising from some distance—and the occasional voices of frogs, guttural, nearby.

Taylor, though, slept readily.

After two hours, I got up and went outside.

The lake loomed like something alive, an alert presence. It was placid now; not a ripple disturbed its surface, which, like a great mirror, reflected the stars. It gave the impression of opening to nether regions of space as the sky overhead—what could be seen of it above the lake—represented the vast star-spaces reaching far beyond sight into an eternity unplumbed by man—or any other living creature that might exist among the galaxies.

I stood in the starshine watching and listening. The sentient water, the dark, quiet trees towering along the shore all around, black against the moonlit sky, the reflection of the moon on the quiet water, like one watchful eye—all combined to stir a sense of uneasiness, a feeling of being observed, a conviction that the lake, like all else around it, *waited*. Uneasiness spread toward something akin to fear, an apprehension I could not define, a growing awareness of something incredibly old and evil, lying in wait to make itself manifest, for to the eye all was tranquil and serene.

I tried to shake myself free of a feeling that must have arisen from the residue of all the tales passed on about the lake, but I could not. The lake's brooding presence pressed in upon me more tangibly than the dark pine forest enclosing it; the voices of the distant birds—owl call, loon cry, lynx scream—the deep-throated songs of the frogs, like the strumming of some bass instrument—all rose toward it and fell away with an odd effect, as if that body of water were a wall that repelled all sound; and indeed, no sound came from it—the birds and animals, even the frogs, did not give voice from its edge, but from some distance from the lake.

Then, as I stood there, a faint ripple of movement took place in the lake, a furling of water shoreward toward where I stood, as if a fish moved into the shallows there—and yet not quite the same, for this was no arrowed wave, as were it headed by a fish, but the general movement of the water, gently, insidiously. I watched, fascinated. It was a swelling, a surging of the water toward the shore.

I looked to either side. The moonlit darkness limited vision. I could not be sure, but it seemed to me that there was no concomitant movement of water on either side. Could it have been that the water was reaching toward the place where I stood *because* I stood there? But this was surely no more than a fever of the imagination.

I backed away, up the bank—a slight incline away from the edge of the water. Almost imperceptibly the water retreated, pulling back, and in seconds was calm again.

Disturbed, I returned to the tent, and lay, restless still, for some time before I slept, after a fashion.

When I woke in the morning I saw that Taylor had gotten up before me. He, at least, had slept untroubled. He had breakfast ready; the pleasant smell of bacon pervaded the woods, mingling with the pungence of the pines and the aroma of coffee. He had done more. I saw with a faint stirring of alarm that he had inflated the boat.

"You're going out on the lake?" I asked.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" he said, grinning. "Why not?"

Why not, indeed? In the morning sunlight the lake lay still, its water calm and cobalt, framed by the deep green pines and the shadowed darkness beneath them, where no ray of sunlight reached. Overhead the sky showed cerulean, cloudless. In the west the waning moon shone, a pale ghost of what it had been last night. The woods were alive with sounds—the rustling and stirrings of animals, the matins of birds.

"I don't know," I said. By daylight I could not give voice to the vague uneasiness I had felt by dark.

"You're not afraid?"

I smiled at his challenge, but said nothing.

"Then we'll go out."

"What are you looking for out there?" I asked then.

"Some evidence."

"A body," I put it bluntly.

He nodded curtly. "We can move along the shore—that'll be a lot easier than tramping through the woods."

I granted that, though the woods were more open than most and there was comparatively little underbrush; but what there was grew up along the lake's edge, making a search of the water line needlessly more difficult than it would be from out on the water.

So after breakfast we went out, paddling not far from the shore, and beginning the skirting of the lake. Whatever I expected, nothing happened, and presently I paddled with more energy, and joined in the melancholy search Taylor made so earnestly, craning to look up every inlet. I could only guess at the intensity of his relationship with Mrs. Gardner, for nothing of it escaped him beyond his initial admission of what he called a "close friendship," leaving me only to guess at the degree of intimacy implied. It hardly mattered. They had been close, all right, or else he would hardly have come all this way up into Canada to look for her body.

The sun's warmth, the still air, the far cries of birds combined to lull us. Heat shimmered from the open water. Apart from the grim search Taylor conducted, the morning was idyllic. Superstitions about the lake's reputation faded, receded, seemed ridiculous, as every night's fears always look by day. We moved steadily along the edge of the lake.

Taylor's search was futile. The shore inland invited in many places. Perhaps some day cabins would be put up here. And yet—I did not quite believe in such habitation; that it would come about seemed remote, not only because of the distance from any settlement. "Lost Lake" struck me as the most appropriate of the names given to this dark water.

We had got almost around the lake when the water began to stir. No other word could apply to it—for it was like a great animal that, resting, had awakened and begun to stretch, to flex its muscles. It was not ripples, not waves, but a sudden swelling. The surface of the water broke, became disturbed, agitated.

I looked up quickly. The pines stood motionless. There was no wind.

Of a sudden, alarm mushroomed up in me almost uncontrollably. I bent violently to the paddle.

"Head for shore!" I shouted.

Taylor looked at me agape. My shout echoed from the far shore.

Then an erupting swell almost upset the boat.

Taylor caught my alarm, and began to paddle furiously.

While we had been passing around the lake, we had floated along with ease; but now, suddenly, terribly, it was as if we were in a sea of syrup, fighting a violent current. The water held us tenaciously, as if reluctant to loose its grip upon the frail craft in which we sat.

It seemed an eternity before we touched the shore. I leapt from the boat, Taylor after me. We bent and pulled the boat up on the shore, and, standing upright, looked back at the lake.

The water was tranquil, glasslike in its smoothness.

Beads of perspiration gleamed from Taylor's face as well as mine. Both of us were breathing hard.

Taylor snorted. "You rattled me," he said accusingly.

"You felt it, too," I charged. "You know you did."

"You rattled me," he said again. "You panicked."

I could see then that he didn't want to believe.

We carried the boat back through the woods to our camp. Not a word passed between us.

* * * * * * *

That afternoon we had visitors. Henry Germain, a tall, sturdy archaeologist in his middle sixties, came in from the north with his party. He seemed surprised to find us camped at the lake. I observed that there was not an Indian in his party; but presumably he knew the region well enough that he needed no guide.

We sat around over coffee and Taylor deliberately brought the conversation around to the legends of the lake.

Germain nodded brusquely. "Oh, I've heard all those stories. The Indians have attached legends to just about every lake and hill in the area. It's integral to their culture. You'll run into the same thing among Indians wherever they are—Sioux, Mohican, Aroostook, Apache—you name them."

"Are they true?"

Germain fixed a hard eye on Taylor. "What's truth?"

Taylor was impatient. "I mean, is there anything to them?"

"If you mean have people drowned here, yes. Bodies have sometimes been recovered. But not, after each drowning, the Indians tell us, until the lake has a new victim." He smiled. "It's all according to some plan, presumably. But," and here he sobered, "I never take even the wildest legend too lightly. Somewhere there's a grain of indisputable truth. If you keep searching long enough you may find it."

Taylor shrugged. "All that abstract talk."

"Well, truth's an abstract, isn't it? What's true for you needn't be true for me or for anyone else. The sun rises and sets—that's an absolute truth unless we get into semantics. Absolute truths are the same to everyone."

"And a lake that kills people?" broke in Taylor. "What kind of truth is that?"

Germain gave him a long, calculating look. "My field is archaeology, Mr. Taylor," he said.

In half an hour Germain and his party were gone, back down the little-used Indian trail along which Taylor and I had come. Taylor was in a black mood, and the lake, as a subject of conversation, was tabu. He made poor company. I couldn't understand why he should be so sour and withdrawn; he had convinced himself I had panicked him, and I wasn't inclined to argue with him. He could believe what he liked.

I turned in early to get some of the sleep I had missed the night before.

I woke at dawn. Taylor was gone.

I got into my trousers and went outside. Taylor was down at the lake. He had the boat into the water.

I went down to where he was bent over the boat. "You're not going out?" I said.

He looked up at me. "You coming along?"

I shook my head.

The lake lay like a mirror, giving back the treetops and the lightening sky. In the east Venus shone, a great burning eye, now of fading gold. In the west the spectral moon. I could feel the fascination of the lake, a tangible thing that seemed to draw me toward the water.

Taylor stood up. His face was grim, determined. He stood in an attitude of listening.

"Hear them?" he asked tensely.

"What? I hear a loon calling," I said.

"Voices. Human voices. They're calling. I hear her voice."

He did think he heard something. I heard nothing at all, nothing but the loon and the ringing silence—and the silence of the forest has a ringing for the ears. I've known it all my life. Perhaps the blood's sound echoing in the inner ear. But something is there to be heard. Not voices.

"You must have been in love with that woman, Taylor," I said.

"That's none of your business," he said. "Listen!"

I listened.

"There's nothing," I said.

He began to push the boat out a little, preparatory to jumping in.

"Don't go," I cried. "Don't go out there. You're crazy to go. What can you hope to find out there?"

He stood tense, looking out over the lake. "Look!" he said.

The increasing light made a strange pattern out in the middle of the lake, where mists were rising, shaping. The low mists along the shore stayed down, just over the water—thin vapors; but out there, in the middle of the lake, the mists were columns.

"There they are!" he shouted hoarsely.

He started to get into the boat.

"You're crazy!" I said again. I flung myself upon him, to hold him back. I was as conscious of the pull of the water as he was; I had less reason to yield to it.

He came around with the paddle and hit me on the left temple. I saw stars and fell back, stumbled against a root, and went sprawling.

When I came to, Taylor was gone. I saw him well out on the lake—and now the lake was no longer placid. It was alive with movement; every inch of its surface was agitated. There were great swells, foam-topped waves, and ripples that caught the first light and shone and sparkled like jewels. The still, windless air seemed to reflect the water's exultation, but not a needle moved on any pine. The water seemed not malevolent so much as *joyous*.

I called to Taylor, urging him to come back.

He never heard or cared to hear, for his eyes looked ahead, his head never turned. His boat was tossing out there like a leaf in a swift-running brook. He made no sign to show that he was conscious of danger, yet the water was breaking around his craft, and here and there geysers of water shot aloft and fell back.

Every moment the water was becoming more violently disturbed. For seconds now and then I lost sight of Taylor and the boat altogether. I had to step back from shore, for waves were now coming inland as much as five feet and more. The air rang with the sounds of the water, rang and echoed into tumultuous outpourings of liquid voices, that sounded sometimes indeed as if human tones were integral to them. I stood disturbingly aware of the lake's violence, of the water's frenetic *joy*, a tangible thing as real as the ground supporting me, as real as the motionless trees ringing the lake.

Then, abruptly, the mood changed. The water darkened, as if clouds shadowed the sun; the surging joy triumphed and gave way to great geysers of water that towered ominously high above Taylor and the boat, which were lost to sight behind the columns of water mounting skyward; the very air was filled with a beast-like musk and every sense recoiled from a flowing-out of stark evil and horror.

And, as suddenly, the tumult of the water ceased. The towering geysers fell, the swelling subsided, the waves and ripples died down and, almost as by magic, the lake resumed its placidity. Joy, evil, horror all were gone; what remained was only the unmistakable impression of watchful waiting.

Of Taylor and the boat there was no sign.

I went back down to the lake after I finished packing for the long trek back to Kingman. There was nothing I could do for Taylor. It was two hours since he had vanished, and I had no recourse but to report him missing. I looked out over that calm body of water for any sign of the boat. There was none.

The lake lay motionless, undisturbed under the morning sun. It did not seem possible that I had seen what I had seen. I knew there was little they would do about Taylor—nobody would make more than a token attempt to drag for his body, if that.

When I turned to go, something lighter in color caught my eye down along the shore from where I stood.

Thinking it might be Taylor's boat, I fought my way through some scrub growth and the tall pines to the spot.

It wasn't the boat.

Come up into the shallows there were the bodies of a man and a woman, clasped to each other. They had been in the water a long time before the lake gave them up.