

Lure of the Wilderness



Well before the time of the country dance, Jim, Ben and Laurie, aided by Careless, had collected the pelts needed
Laurie Harper (Jean Peters), Jim Harper (Walter Brennan), Ben Tyler (Jeffrey Hunter)



Noreen had followed them stealthily, saying as she surprised the lovers, "Evening, Miss Harper."
Laurie, Ben, Noreen (Constance Smith)



"Come on, let's get him down the creek," shouted Harry, dragging Ben down to the water's edge



"Welcome back, Harper," someone shouted as the boat approached the bank
Ben, Jim, Harry Longden (Pat Hogan), Laurie, Sheriff Jepson (Walter Taylor)

In the year 1910 the great Okefenokee swamp in Georgia was considered a death-trap by those living on the outskirts of its vast area of six hundred square miles.

It was the breeding ground of the deadly swamp bears, alligators and cottonmouth snakes and other creatures, each one of whom alone would have been sufficient reason why trappers from the nearby villages ventured only a short distance into the fringe of it.

In Fargo, one of the villages on the edge of this great swampland, lived Zack Tyler and his son Ben. Ben was good-looking with a sense of adventure, a will of his own and a deep affection for his dog, whom he had named Careless.

One spring two trappers failed to return from a visit into the interior of this vast unexplored area, and Zack and Ben with his dog Careless made up one of the search parties which set out to look for them.

"If them two trappers went past the marker, it's just too bad. This is as far as I look for anybody," Zack told his son, as they moved steadily through the dangerous waters to the point beyond which it was considered too great a risk to go.

Ben ignored the implication in his father's tone that they should turn back. There wasn't any law, he felt, that compelled a man to get lost because he ventured farther into the swampland than most white men, also Careless was sniffing the air appreciatively and his ears were cocked at an angle that indicated something out of the ordinary was not far away.

"Look there," Ben said suddenly, and pointed to a hat floating on the water, beside an overturned boat.

Zack looked. What he saw told him as clearly as words that the two trappers had themselves been trapped, and there were alligators near.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," he ordered Ben, whose face was expressing something between unbelief and horror. But Careless, for one, had other ideas: he had sighted a deer and, ignoring Ben's sharp commands to come back, swam ashore and made off in pursuit of it.

"He'll come back, son," Zack said consolingly, for he knew how much his son thought of the dog.

"I got to get him," Ben insisted.

But Zack's will proved the stronger for the moment. He was not going to let Ben venture any deeper into the swampland if he could prevent it, and certainly not on account of a dog, who, in Zack's opinion, had more chance than a man of finding his way home.

But that evening, in the face of his father's opposition and despite the pleas of his sweetheart, Noreen McGowan, and the half-teasing advice of the two shiftless brothers, Dave and Harry Longden, Ben announced he was going out to search for Careless.

"You ain't going past that marker?" Harry asked Ben, with an expression on his face which indicated a mixture of admiration at Ben's courage and incredulity at his foolhardiness.

"If I got to," Ben returned obstinately.

Dave made a gesture which showed he, too, thought Ben a crazy fool.

"If we see him again my name ain't Longden," he said, as they saw Ben make off, undaunted by their warnings and the threat of dangers which they all knew to be real.

Deeper and deeper Ben penetrated into the great unknown, cutting his way through the vegetation and calling to his dog by means of a small horn, the sound of which carried a long distance, and was finally answered by joyous barking.

An expression of sheer joy spread over Ben's face, and he altered his course to the direction from which the dog's reply to his call had come, fighting his way through the overhanging growth from which the dangerous cottonmouth snake frequently hang, and cutting a path for his feet from amongst the untrodden undergrowth.

But all further attempts to get Careless to answer him again failed, and, utterly dejected and tired after a long trek, he sat down in a small clearing to rest. It was not long before sleep overtook him, and on waking in the morning he found he had been clubbed into unconsciousness and his hands tied to a tree.

Ruefully, and with painful movements of his head, he looked about him. An oldish man and a young girl, dressed in a shabby and torn outfit, were watching him closely, and nearby, fastened on a leash, was Careless, who, on realising his master was awake, greeted him with cheerful barks.

The old man was the first to speak, and after inquiring Ben's name, asked him if he had come to look for himself and the girl.

"No. I came in here looking for my dog," Ben answered him sincerely. Then, seeing the old man was disbelieving, he added: "Can't you see he's mine? Let me take him and I'll go."

"What makes you think you can find your way out of here?" the old man questioned.

Ben assured him that he had left trail marks to redirect his footsteps, and was more than a little disconcerted at being told they had been removed.

"Couldn't you show me the way out of here?" he

began, and then, with a flash of recognition, he added: "Why, I know you. You're Jim Harper, and she"—he indicated the girl—"she must be your daughter, little Laurie."

Ben had barely finished speaking before Laurie sprang at him with her knife, with all the fury of an untamed and frightened creature, and would have struck him had not Jim intervened quickly and held her from him.

"No sense to take a human life if you can help it," he reasoned with Laurie.

"First chance he gets he'll bring them back in after you," Laurie screamed hysterically, and Ben noted that although she had sheathed her knife, her eyes were full of mistrust and fear.

Ben looked at Jim, and his mind went back to a time eight years earlier, when a lynch mob with flaming pine knots had chased Jim, his wife and child into the swampland after Jim had shot Bill Longden, the brother of Harry and Dave, and a man named Sam Black. Ben supposed he could not blame the girl for being afraid of what might follow if she and her father allowed him to return.

"I won't tell nobody. I give you my word," Ben promised them both. "Please don't try to keep me here, because I'll find my way out by myself if I have to. Guess I know what happened to them two 'lost trappers," he went on thoughtfully.

"They was cottonmouth bitten," Jim told him. "All we done was give them a decent burial."

Ben looked at him, unbelief written in every line of his face.

"I suppose you didn't kill Bin Longden eight years ago," he said.

"I killed Bill Longden in self-defence," Jim told him.

But Ben was not impressed with Jim's version of the killing of Dave and Harry's brother. Everyone knew that Jim Harper had shot Bill and another man named Sam Black. He had even been caught changing cattle brands.

"And Sam Black was self-defence, too?" sneered Ben.

"The Longdens killed Sam Black." Jim told him gravely.

The Longdens! Ben had no patience with such barefaced lying. Everyone knew Jim Harper had shot *both* of them, and there seemed little point in further discussion.

But Jim, pursuing the subject, tried to convince Ben that he had been unjustly accused of the murder of both men, and that the Longdens had killed Sam Black and cleverly fixed the blame on him, but this Ben found impossible to believe.

But as the day wore on, Jim, knowing that it had taken *him* six years to find his way out of the swampland, and that therefore Nature kept Ben as securely his prisoner as if he were bound in chains, freed Ben's hands, and presently a degree of trust began to grow between them.

The next day Jim gave Ben back his gun and together they hunted, Laurie using skillfully cut arrows and Careless doing his best to help.

"Living in here's just the same as being dead," Ben grumbled that evening.

"I know what you mean," Jim agreed, then he said meaningfully. "I never had no chance eight years ago. But I'd go back now if I could get a fair trial."

"You'd be willing to stand trial?" Ben couldn't bring himself to believe in Jim's sincerity.

"If I got a *fair* one and had a lawyer to help me," Jim told him, and in spite of Laurie's unrelenting suspicion of Ben, and after a lot of talk, it was agreed between the two men that Jim should show Ben the way out of the swamp and give him a bundle of skins to pay for the services of the finest lawyer that Ben could secure for him on his return.

"Don't talk no more about going back, 'cause you ain't going back," Laurie told Ben threateningly.

"Laurie, you got to learn to trust somebody some time," Jim urged her.

"Why?" she demanded angrily.

"Cause some time *you* got to go back," Jim told her.

But Laurie's memory of the mob laughing and swearing about how they'd "string" her father up when they got him, and her sick mother's terror that Jim would give himself up to save her, even though all three of them knew she was dying, kept fear alive in her, and not all Ben's persuasive powers could alleviate her misgivings about him.

"Remember, Ben," Jim warned him, "you can't talk to no one out there, not even your Pa. He's a good man, but people is people," and Ben gave his word that no one should drag the Harpers' secret from him.

Suspicious

MEANWHILE, search parties had set out to find Ben, his father being among the most tireless, and when, after his three days' and three nights' absence, Ben walked into his home unharmed, Zack's anxiety turned to anger.

"I'm sorry," Ben said. "I found Careless. Look at the skins I got, Pa. There's a whole treasure of them in the swamp. We could make us a fortune."

But Zack was not going to let Ben return to the swamplands for any money, and a fierce quarrel broke out between them, with the result that Zack told Ben that if he persisted in his fool notion of hunting beyond the safety marker he was not going to do it from under Zack's roof, and Ben, who had all his father's obstinacy, took himself off.

But the money that Ben got for the skins seemed a lot to Dave Longden, who, having examined some few of them in McGowan's General Store, found them to be more than three days old. This fact, and Ben's question to McGowan about who was the best lawyer in the State, quickly set the gossips talking. They felt a man must be in trouble with the law to want such information, and the state of the skins showed Ben was hiding something. "Who'd you tell him?" Sheriff Brink asked McGowan, on hearing Ben had inquired about a lawyer.

"Why, old Judge Sloan, of course," McGowan replied. But perhaps the most suspicious of all was Noreen, and Ben's little slips of the tongue, such as "us" and "we" instead of "I," were not explained to her satisfaction by Ben's assurance that he only meant Careless and himself.

"I've been thinking," Noreen said, "maybe I ought to talk to Pa about figuring out the arrangements for the wedding."

It was not that Noreen was exactly afraid of losing Ben, but she found his behaviour a little peculiar, and she wanted to make sure of him.

"We'll talk about that when I get back from this next trip into the swamp," Ben told her.

But Noreen, like Zack, felt Ben was most unfair to give them all so much anxiety so unnecessarily, and said so, but her words had no effect. Ben was resolved to return; he had to—he owed Jim and Laurie that much. Also, having broken with his father on this very question, he had no intention of being bossed into submission by his girl.

He had found that the money he had obtained for the skins was a sum far below that which Judge Sloan would require for his services, and after buying Laurie a frock and Jim a box of cigars with the proceeds, he had decided to return to the swamp and collect a sufficient number of otter skins to cover the legal costs of Jim's trial, for one otter skin was worth ten of those Jim had given him.

"Just calm your fears," Ben told Noreen. "I'll be back in time to take you to the country dance."

"I'll be going to the dance with Jack Doran," Noreen said haughtily, with a toss of her dark head, for she intended to make Ben sorry for disregarding her wish that he should not return to the swamplands for his hunting, and she thought that making him jealous was the best way to punish him for thwarting her.

Nevertheless, Ben had decided to go, and he acted on his decision and made the journey back to Jim and Laurie without incident. For the first time Laurie felt a small feeling of confidence in him almost against her will. The frock Ben had chosen for her delighted her, and Jim was no less pleased with the first cigars he had smoked in years.

But if Laurie's trust and love for Ben were beginning to grow unbeknown to her, Ben's confidence in her father's innocence and a love for Laurie were growing in him, too.

"I know a place just teeming with otter. Couple of days from here," Laurie told Ben, after he had explained the necessity for the skins, and the three of them put all their skill into getting them, and well before the time of the country dance the pelts were collected.

Laurie found herself more interested in that dance than she cared to admit. Ben seemed mighty keen to get back for it, and she wondered if he had a girl to go with. Ben made no attempt to deceive her, but explained that he and Noreen had quarrelled about his return to the swamp and that he was uncertain as to whether she would be going to the dance with him or

not. Then an idea suddenly struck him:

"Why, if I ain't the blindest fool! The dance is at La Belle. Folks come from all over; nobody wouldn't know you. I'd be real proud to take you, Laurie," he said.

But Laurie was frightened that someone would find out who she was before Ben had got matters fixed up for her father, and although she longed with all her heart to go with Ben, her loyalty to her father made her refuse.

"You'd look real pretty all dressed up," Ben urged her.

"You mean I ain't so pretty now?" Laurie asked him.

"Well, no—I didn't mean that. Won't you come with me?" Ben pleaded.

But Laurie just shook her head.

One day there would be other dances, she told herself; one day, when her father had become a free man, how proudly she would step out with Ben on the dance floor. Until then she felt such pleasures must wait.

Seeing he was unable to persuade her, Ben stacked his boat with the skins and made his way back to the village, where Dave and Harry were among those waiting to discover how successful his second hunting trip into the swamp had been, and when it became known that he had over five hundred dollars' worth of otter skins, the brothers became jealous of his good fortune and suspicious of him, for they knew no one man alone could have trapped so many otters in two weeks, and on the night of the dance they seized the opportunity to question him closely.

"Just lucky, I guess," Ben answered them off-handedly, watching Noreen, who was dancing with Jack Doran and making sure that he knew it.

"What do you make of it?" Harry asked Dave.

"I don't know," Dave replied thoughtfully. "But I'm thinking just what you're thinking." And they began to plan between themselves how best to discover the secret of Ben's successful hunting.

"You ain't doing much dancing, Mr. Tyler," Noreen said to him provocatively during the evening. "I'm sorry I had to promise every dance to Jack." Ben looked at her. "You ain't fooling me, Ben Tyler. You're mad and I'm enjoying it," she continued.

They were outside near a cluster of trees, and as the light fell on her face Ben felt a sudden longing to see Laurie. In his mind's eye he saw Laurie, the wild, lovable, untamed girl, standing before him, and waiting for him to put his arms about her and lead her on to the floor. Then, as if in answer to his secret wish, Laurie came stealing through the trees towards him, dressed in the blue frock he had bought her, and looking, in Ben's opinion, the belle of the ball.

Seeing she was unable to provoke Ben into declaring his jealousy of Jack, Noreen had moved away as Laurie shyly approached.

"You came," Ben gasped unbelievably, taking her by the hand.

"Pa brought me to the edge of the swamp. He'll be waiting to take me back," Laurie explained.

Ben then told her the good news. The money the otter skins had fetched was sufficient to pay Jim's legal costs, and Ben was going to see a big lawyer on the morrow.

Overjoyed, Laurie followed Ben into the dance hall, a fact not unnoticed by Noreen, who became torn with jealousy. She did not recognise the girl, but she did the frock, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself she got Ben outside and questioned him.

"You bought that dress before you went back into the swamp. I saw it through the window. And it wouldn't be hard to prove, neither," Noreen went on nastily. "But I'm willing to forget. Fact, I'm willing to forget lots," she added, seeing that Ben was unimpressed by her first mood.

But Ben was no longer affected by Noreen's behaviour towards him. He knew that it was Laurie he wanted, and Noreen, realising her failure to stimulate his interest in her, picked a quarrel with him, and a fight between him and Jack ensued.

The dancers swarmed out of the hall, some to watch, some to try to stop the two men, neither of whom pulled their punches, until finally Sheriff Brink stepped in and restored order.

"He fought for you," Ben shouted to Noreen, referring to Jack, "and he can have you."

With a gasp at this insult, Noreen determined to get her own back, and as Laurie ran back towards the swamp edge, horrified at the trouble her presence at the dance had caused, Noreen sensed that she must be Jim Harper's daughter—Jim Harper, the man wanted for murder, the man who was hiding in the swamp.

The Questioning

BEN caught up with Laurie, and taking her in his arms tried to soothe away the unpleasantness of the evening, and telling her that he was through for ever with Noreen and that she, Laurie, was the girl he loved. But Noreen had followed them stealthily, saying as she surprised the lovers:

"Lure of the Wilderness"

"Evening, Miss Harper."

Laurie gave a gasp of horror. "She knows," she said, turning to Ben with a return of her old mistrust of him rising up in her heart. "About your father—of course I know," Noreen agreed. "He told me. Didn't you expect he'd tell the girl he's going to marry?"

"I didn't, Noreen—you know I didn't," protested Ben. But it was too late. With a little broken cry Laurie had fled and, though Ben searched for hours, was nowhere to be found.

IT was not long before Noreen's discovery that Jim Harper and his daughter were hiding in the swamp led to the sheriff and the Longdens challenging Ben to lead them to the Harpers' hide-out.

"Who told you I know anything about Jim Harper?" Ben shouted at them.

"Ain't no use playing around, Ben," the sheriff advised him. "You know we know."

"And now it makes sense how you got those skins," Dave broke in.

"Now speak up, boy," Sheriff Brink told him. "Harper's wanted for two murders. It's your duty to show us where he is."

But Ben was loyal, and not a word could any of them get from him for all their threats.

From a window Noreen watched delightedly. She was tasting the sweet fruits of revenge.

"Come on, let's get him down the creek," shouted Harry, and dragging Ben into the water, they held his head under until his lungs nearly burst, not once, but twice; but still Ben's courage and loyalty never faltered.

Noreen, however, frightened at the outcome of the mischief she had made, had Zack fetched down to the water's edge.

"I didn't know they'd do this. You know Ben. He won't say. They'll kill him!" she cried frantically to his father.

Zack looked at the men who were holding his son under the water with contemptuous disgust.

"Let go of him," he ordered them. "I ain't going to ask you again. Take your hands off."

Unwillingly Ben was released, and putting his strong arms around his son, Zack led him home.

"Pa, I was just coming to tell you." Ben began when he had recovered.

"You don't have to tell me nothing, son," Zack told him.

"Pa, I know he's innocent," and Ben pleaded Jim's cause. "All he's asking is a fair trial."

"All right, son, we'll go into the County Seat tomorrow and get things arranged," Zack comforted the boy, "and you can go in and bring him out."

The Return

MEANWHILE, all Laurie's suspicions and mistrust of Ben had returned, and when he arrived back at their hide-out with the necessary legal documents for Jim's trial, he found both her and her father no longer regarded him as their friend. At Jim's bidding he flung the papers to the ground, calling out to him to look at them for himself and see for himself that they were genuine, for both father and daughter suspected a trick. Jim picked up the papers and saw they were stamped with the county sheriff's seal, an indisputable proof of their genuineness.

"Sheriff Jepson's waiting at the edge of the swamp to make sure no harm'll come to you," Ben told them.

But only Jim felt Ben was telling the truth; Laurie could not bring herself to trust him again and, full of misgivings, she accompanied the two men on their journey.

But, unknown to Ben, Dave and Harry Longden had followed him and, hiding themselves in the thick bushes, had watched him making his way in his boat to the Harpers' hide-out. They knew they could not hope to escape justice a second time for the killing of Sam Black, and they planned to shoot both Jim and Ben, for evidence of their guilt might come out at Jim's trial. They were not going to take any risks.

With their guns in position they waited, screened by the trees and bushes, until they saw the two men and Laurie within range. Then, taking careful aim, they fired, missing them both, but warning both of trouble. Jim turned on Ben like a hunted animal, convinced Ben had led him into a trap, and when Ben told him that their attackers were the Longden brothers, all his old suspicions against him were revived.

"So you know who it is, huh?" Jim sneered at him. "That proves you put them on to us."

"But it couldn't be nobody else," Ben argued. "They must have followed me in here. They hate me the same as they do you." And it was true, for the Longdens had no intention of letting Jim put a noose round their necks for the killing of Sam Black.

"Show yourself to them," Laurie hissed at Ben as they took cover in the undergrowth.

"You want me to get killed?" Ben asked her. But Laurie was insistent, and drawing out her knife, threatened to stick it in Ben's back if he refused. Ben stood up and the Longden brothers deliberately fired on him, missing him, but wounding Jim in the leg.

Now realising that Ben was speaking the truth in claiming to be their true friend, Laurie ordered Ben to follow her, with the intention of drawing Harry and Dave away from Jim. Her strategy worked and Laurie's knowledge of the swamp proved the undoing of the brothers.

"Throw something down—drop your jacket," Laurie commanded Ben as they approached the quicksands.

Ben did as he was told, and when Dave and Harry, who were following some little way behind them, saw it lying on what seemed to be a grass and sand plot, they were lured in the direction which Laurie knew spelt death for them. But the quicksands took only Dave, sucking him slowly but surely down, and Harry became Ben and Laurie's prisoner.

Returning to where Jim lay hidden, they helped him into the boat, and all four of them completed the journey to where Sheriff Jepson and the local townspeople were waiting. Perhaps some among them thought Jim Harper guilty, but the general feeling was that a man who was willing to give himself up and stand his trial had probably been the victim of some injustice, and they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt until the verdict proved otherwise, and so Jim found an unexpected welcome awaiting him as the boat approached the water's edge.

"Welcome back, Harper," someone shouted as the boat approached the water's edge.

"Good to see you again, Jim," another voice called out, and still another: "Howdy, Miss Laurie."

Jim looked at them and tried to smile, but emotion overcame him. He was among friends and he knew it.

"All right, boys, take him along," Jepson commanded.

"Could you wait? I'd just like to look for a minute," Jim asked. "It's like coming back to life."

As they drove him away, Ben put his arm round Laurie. She looked at him and smiled happily. Suspicion and mistrust had gone for ever.

(Adapted by permission from the 20th Century-Fox film.)

LURE OF THE WILDERNESS

(20th Century-Fox)

Director: Jean Negulesco

American. Certificate "U"

Running time 90 minutes

Photographed in Technicolor

Laurie Harper.....Jean Peters
Ben Tyler.....Jeffrey Hunter
Noreen.....Constance Smith
Jim Harper.....Walter Brennan
Zack Tyler.....Tom Tully
Pat McGowan.....Harry Shannon
Sheriff Brink.....Will Wright
Dave Longden.....Jack Elam
Ned Tyler.....Harry Carter
Harry Longden.....Pat Hogan
Shep Rigby.....Al Thompson
Will Stone.....Robert Adler
Square Dance Caller.....Sherman Sanders
Widow Sutton.....Mary Parker
Jack Doran.....Robert Karnes
Sloane.....George Spaulding
Sheriff Jepson.....Walter Taylor
Young Man.....Ted Jordan