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A MICHIGAN MAN

By Elia W. Peattie

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A pine forest is nature's expression of solemnity and solitude. Sunlight, rivers, cascades, people, music, laughter, or dancing could not make it gay. With its unceasing reverberations and its eternal shadows, it is as awful and as holy as a cathedral.

Thirty good fellows working together by day and drinking together by night can keep up but a moody imitation of jollity. Spend twenty-five of your forty years, as Luther Dallas did, in this perennial gloom, and your soul—that which enjoys, aspires, competes—will be drugged as deep as if you had quaffed the cup of oblivion. Luther Dallas was counted one of the most experienced axe-men in the northern camps. He could fell a tree with the swift surety of an executioner, and in revenge for his many arborai murders the woodland had taken captive his mind, captured and chained it as Prospero did Ariel. The resounding footsteps of Progress driven on so mercilessly in this mad age could not reach his fastness. It did not concern him that men were thinking, investigating, inventing. His senses responded only to the sonorous music of the woods; a steadfast wind ringing metallic melody from the pine-tops contented him as the sound of the sea does the sailor; and dear as the odors of the ocean to the mariner were the resinous scents of the forest to him. Like a sailor, too, he had his superstitions. He had a presentiment that he was to die by one of these trees—that some day, in chopping, the tree would fall upon and crush him as it did his father the day they brought him back to the camp on a litter of pine boughs.

One day the gang boss noticed a tree that Dallas had left standing in a most unwoodman-like manner in the section which was allotted to him.

"What in thunder is that standing there for?" he asked.

Dallas raised his eyes to the pine, towering in stern dignity a hundred feet above them.

"Well," he said, feebly, "I noticed it, but kind-a left it t' the last."

"Cut it down to-morrow," was the response.

The wind was rising, and the tree muttered savagely. Luther thought it sounded like a menace, and turned pale. No trouble has yet been found that will keep a man awake in the keen air of the pineries after he has been swinging his axe all day, but the sleep of the chopper was so broken with disturbing dreams that night that the beads gathered on his brow, and twice he cried aloud. He ate his coarse flap-jacks in the morning and escaped from the smoky shanty as soon as he could.

"It'll bring bad luck, I'm afraid," he muttered as he went to get his axe from the rack. He was as fond of his axe as a soldier of his musket, but to-day he shouldered it with reluctance. He felt like a man with his destiny before him. The tree stood like a sentinel. He raised his axe, once, twice, a dozen times, but could not bring

himself to make a cut in the bark. He walked backward a few steps and looked up. The funereal green seemed to grow darker and darker till it became black. It was the embodiment of sorrow. Was it not shaking giant arms at him? Did it not cry out in angry challenge? Luther did not try to laugh at his fears; he had never seen any humor in life. A gust of wind had somehow crept through the dense barricade of foliage that flanked the clearing, and struck him with an icy chill. He looked at the sky: the day was advancing rapidly. He went at his work with an energy as determined as despair. The axe in his practiced hand made clean straight cuts in the trunk, now on this side, now on that. His task was not an easy one, but he finished it with wonderful expedition. After the chopping was finished, the tree stood firm a moment; then, as the tensely strained fibres began a weird moaning, he sprang aside, and stood waiting. In the distance he saw two men hewing a log. The axe-man sent them a shout and threw up his arms for them to look.

The tree stood out clear and beautiful against the gray sky; the men ceased their work and watched it. The vibrations became more violent, and the sounds they produced grew louder and louder till they reached a shrill wild cry. There came a pause; then a deep shuddering groan. The topmost branches began to move slowly, the whole stately bulk swayed, and then shot toward the ground. The gigantic trunk bounded from the stump, recoiled like a cannon, crashed down, and lay conquered, with a roar as of an earthquake, in a cloud of flying twigs and chips.

When the dust had cleared away, the men at the log on the outside of the clearing could not see Luther. They ran to the spot, and found him lying on the ground with his chest crushed in. His fearful eyes had not rightly calculated the distance from the stump to the top of the pine, nor rightly weighed the power of the massed branches, and so, standing spell-bound, watching the descending trunk as one might watch his Nemesis, the rebound came and left him lying worse than dead.

Three months later, when the logs, lopped of their branches, drifted down the streams, the woodman, a human log lopped of his strength, drifted to a great city. A change, the doctor said, might prolong his life. The lumbermen made up a purse, and he started out, not very definitely knowing his destination. He had a sister, much younger than himself, who at the age of sixteen had married and gone, he believed, to Chicago. That was years ago, but he had an idea that he might find her. He was not troubled by his lack of resources: he did not believe that any man would want for a meal unless he were "shiftless." He had always been able to turn his hand to something.

He felt too ill from the jostling of the cars to notice much of anything on the journey. The dizzy scenes whirling past made him faint, and he was glad to lie with closed eyes. He imagined that his little sister in her pink calico frock and bare feet (as he remembered her) would be at the station to meet him. "Oh, Lu!" she would call from some hiding-place, and he would go and find her.

The conductor stopped by Luther's seat and said that they were in the city at last; but it seemed to the sick man as if they went miles after that, with a multitude of twinkling lights on one side and a blank darkness that they told him was the lake on the other. The conductor again stopped by his seat.

"Well, my man," said he, "how are you feeling?"

Luther, the possessor of the toughest muscles in the gang, felt a sick man's irritation at the tone of pity.

"Oh, I'm all right!" he said, gruffly, and shook off the assistance the conductor tried to offer with his overcoat. "I'm going to my sister's," he explained, in answer to the inquiry as to where he was going. The man, somewhat piqued at the spirit in which his overtures were met, left him, and Luther stepped on to the platform. There was a long vista of semi-light, down which crowds of people walked and baggagemen rushed. The building, if it deserved the name, seemed a ruin, and through the arched doors Luther could see men—hackmen—dancing and howling like dervishes. Trains were coming and going, and the whistles and bells kept up a ceaseless clangor. Luther, with his small satchel and uncouth dress, slouched by the crowd unnoticed, and reached the street. He walked amid such an illumination as he had never dreamed of, and paused half blinded in the glare of a broad sheet of electric light that filled a pillared entrance into which many people passed. He looked about him. Above on every side rose great, many-windowed buildings; on the street the cars and carriages thronged, and jostling crowds dashed headlong among the vehicles. After a time he turned down a street that seemed to him a pandemonium filled with madmen. It went to his head like wine, and hardly left him the presence of mind to sustain a quiet exterior. The wind was laden with a penetrating moisture that chilled him as the dry icy breezes from Huron never had done, and the pain in his lungs made him faint and dizzy. He wondered if his red-cheeked little sister could live in one of those vast, impregnable buildings. He thought of stopping some of those serious-looking men and asking them if they knew her, but he could not muster up the courage. The distressing experience that comes to almost every one some time in life, of losing all identity in the universal humanity, was becoming his. The tears began to roll down his wasted face from loneliness and exhaustion. He grew hungry with longing for the dirty but familiar cabins of the camp, and staggered along with eyes half closed, conjuring visions of the warm interiors, the leaping fires, the groups of laughing men seen dimly through clouds of tobacco smoke.

A delicious scent of coffee met his hungry sense and made him really think he was taking the savory black draught from his familiar tin cup; but the muddy streets, the blinding lights, the cruel, rushing people, were still there. The buildings, however, now became different. They were lower and meaner, with dirty windows. Women laughing loudly crowded about the doors, and the establishments seemed to be equally divided between saloon-keepers, pawnbrokers, and dealers in second-hand clothes. Luther wondered where they all drew their support from. Upon one signboard he read, "Lodgings 10 cents to 50 cents. A Square Meal for 15 cents," and, thankful for some haven, entered. Here he spent his first night and other nights, while his purse dwindled and his strength waned. At last he got a man in a drug store to search the directory for his sister's residence. They found a name he took to be his brother-in-law's. It was two days later when he found the address—a great many-storied mansion on one of the southern boulevards—and found also that his search had been in vain. Sore and faint, he staggered back to his miserable shelter, only to arise feverish and ill in the morning. He frequented the great shop doors, thronged with brilliantly dressed ladies, and watched to see if his little sister might not dash up in one of those satin-lined coaches and take him where he would be warm and safe and would sleep undisturbed by drunken, ribald songs and loathsome surroundings. There were days when he almost forgot his name, and, striving to remember, would lose his senses for a moment

and drift back to the harmonious solitudes of the North and breathe the resin-scented frosty atmosphere. He grew terrified at the blood he coughed from his lacerated lungs, and wondered bitterly why the boys did not come to take him home.

One day, as he painfully dragged himself down a residence street, he tried to collect his thoughts and form some plan for the future. He had no trade, understood no handiwork: he could fell trees! He looked at the gaunt, scrawny, transplanted specimens that met his eye, and gave himself up to the homesickness that filled his soul. He slept that night in the shelter of a stable, and spent his last money in the morning for a biscuit.

He traveled many miles that afternoon looking for something to which he might turn his hand. Once he got permission to carry a hod for half an hour. At the end of that time he fainted. When he recovered, the foreman paid him twenty-five cents. "For God's sake, man, go home," he said. Luther stared at him with a white face and went on.

There came days when he so forgot his native dignity as to beg. He seldom received anything; he was referred to various charitable institutions whose existence he had never heard of.

One morning, when a pall of smoke enveloped the city and the odors of coal-gas refused to lift their nauseating poison through the heavy air, Luther, chilled with dew and famished, awoke to a happier life. The loneliness at his heart was gone. The feeling of hopeless imprisonment that the miles and miles of streets had terrified him with gave place to one of freedom and exaltation. Above him he heard the rasping of pine boughs; his feet trod on a rebounding mat of decay; the sky was as coldly blue as the bosom of Huron. He walked as if on ether, singing a senseless jargon the woodmen had aroused the echoes with:

*"Hi yi halloo!
The owl sees you!
Look what you do!
Hi yi halloo!"*

Swung over his shoulder was a stick he had used to assist his limping gait, but now transformed into the beloved axe. He would reach the clearing soon, he thought, and strode on like a giant, while people hurried from his path. Suddenly a smooth trunk, stripped of its bark and bleached by weather, arose before him.

"Hi yi halloo!" High went the wasted arm—crash!—a broken staff, a jingle of wires, a maddened, shouting man the centre of a group of amused spectators! 'A few moments later, four broad-shouldered men in blue had him in their grasp, pinioned and guarded, clattering over the noisy streets behind two spirited horses. They drew after them a troop of noisy, jeering boys, who danced about the wagon like a swirl of autumn leaves. Then came a halt, and Luther was dragged up the steps of a square brick building with a belfry on the top. They entered a large bare room with benches ranged about the walls, and brought him before a man at a desk.

"What is your name?" asked the man at the desk.

"Hi yi halloo!" said Luther.

"He's drunk, sergeant," said one of the men in blue, and the axe-man was led into the basement. He was conscious of an involuntary resistance, a short struggle, and a final shock of pain—then oblivion.

The chopper awoke to the realization of three stone walls and an iron grating in front. Through this he looked out upon a stone flooring across which was a row of similar apartments. He neither knew nor cared where he was. The feeling of imprisonment was no greater than he had felt on the endless, cheerless streets. He laid himself on the bench that ran along a side wall, and, closing his eyes, listened to the babble of the clear stream and the thunder of the "drive" on its journey. How the logs hurried and jostled! crushing, whirling, ducking, with the merry lads leaping about them with shouts and laughter. Suddenly he was recalled by a voice. Some one handed a narrow tin cup full of coffee and a thick slice of bread through the grating. Across the way he dimly saw a man eating a similar slice of bread. Men in other compartments were swearing and singing, He knew these now for the voices he had heard in his dreams. He tried to force some of the bread down his parched and swollen throat, but failed; the coffee strangled him, and he threw himself upon the bench.

The forest again, the night-wind, the whistle of the axe through the air! Once when he opened his eyes he found it dark! It would soon be time to go to work. He fancied there would be hoarfrost on the trees in the morning. How close the cabin seemed! Ha!—here came his little sister. Her voice sounded like the wind on a spring morning. How loud it swelled now! "Lu! Lu!" she cried.

The next morning the lock-up keeper opened the cell door. Luther lay with his head in a pool of blood. His soul had escaped from the thrall of the forest.

"Well, well!" said the little fat police justice, when he was told of it. "We ought to have a doctor around to look after such cases."

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