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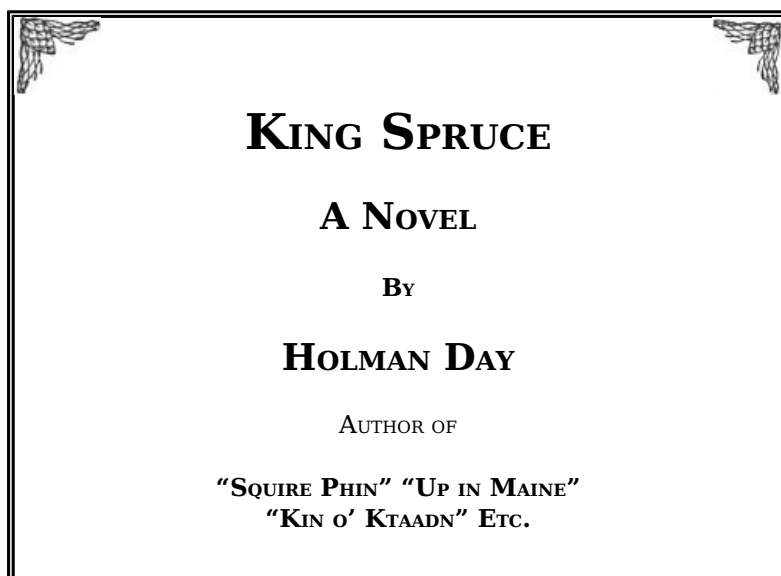
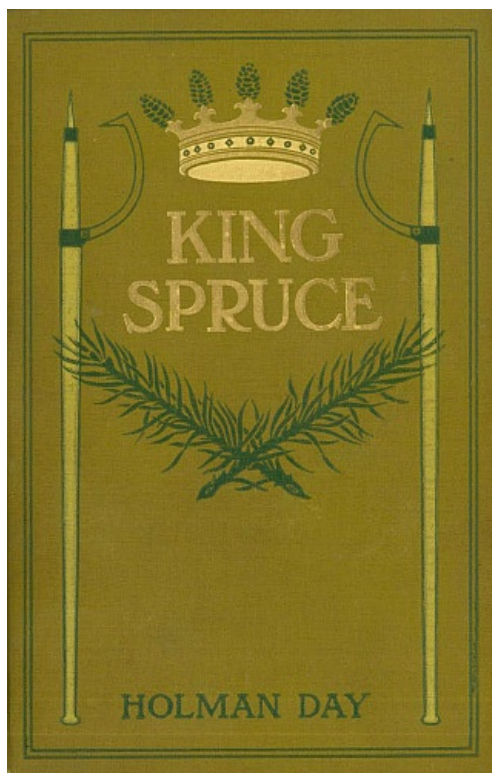
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KING SPRUCE, A NOVEL ***



ILLUSTRATED BY
E. ROSCOE SHRADER



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"I KNOW YOUR HEART" [See p. [289](#)]

TO

A. B. D.

MY COMRADE OF
TRAIL AND CAMP

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	UP IN "CASTLE CUT 'EM"	1
II.	THE HEIRESS OF "OAKLANDS"	17
III.	THE MAKING OF A "CHANEY MAN"	27
IV.	THE BOSS OF THE "BUSTERS"	35
V.	DURING THE PUGWASH HANG-UP	55
VI.	AS FOUGHT BEFORE THE "IT-'LL-GIT-YE CLUB"	62
VII.	ON MISERY GORE	78
VIII.	THE TORCH, AND THE LIGHTING OF IT	92
IX.	BY ORDER OF PULASKI D. BRITT	104
X.	"LADDER" LANE'S SOIRÉE	114
XI.	IN THE BARONY OF "STUMPAGE JOHN"	127
XII.	THE CODE OF LARRIGAN-LAND	142
XIII.	THE RED THROAT OF POGGY	153
XIV.	THE MESSAGE OF "PROPHET ELI"	164
XV.	BETWEEN TWO ON JERUSALEM	174
XVI.	IN THE PATH OF THE BIG WIND	181
XVII.	THE AFFAIR AT DURFY'S CAMP	198
XVIII.	THE OLD SOUBUNGO TRAIL	217
XIX.	THE HOME-MAKERS OF ENCHANTED	230
XX.	THE HA'NT OF THE UMCOLCUS	241
XXI.	THE MAN WHO CAME FROM NOWHERE	256
XXII.	THE HOSTAGE OF THE GREAT WHITE SILENCE	270
XXIII.	IN THE MATTER OF JOHN BARRETT'S DAUGHTER	278
XXIV.	THE CHEESE RIND THAT NEEDED SHARP TEETH	293
XXV.	SHARPENING TEETH ON PULASKI BRITT'S WHETSTONE	303
XXVI.	THE DEVIL OF THE HEMPEN STRANDS	312
XXVII.	THE "CANNED THUNDER" OF CASTONIA	324
XXVIII.	"'T WAS DONE BY TOMMY THUNDER"	341
XXIX.	THE PARADE PAST RODBURD IDE'S PLATFORM	352
XXX.	THE PACT WITH KING SPRUCE	361

ILLUSTRATIONS

"I KNOW YOUR HEART"	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"WADE STOOD ABOVE THE FALLEN FOE"	<i>Facing p.</i> 70
"WRITHING AT HIS BONDS, HIS CONTORTED FACE TOWARDS THE RED FLAMES GALLOPING UP THE VALLEY"	172
"WHAT I SAY ON THIS RIVER GOES!"	334

NOTE

When the trees have been cut and trimmed in the winter's work in the woods the logs are hauled in great loads to be piled at "landing-places" on the frozen streams, so that the spring floods will move them. Most of the streams have a succession of dams. On the spring drive the logs are floated to the dams, and then the gates are raised and the logs are "sluiced" through with a head of water behind them to carry them down-stream. Thus the drive is lifted along in sections from one dam to another. It will be seen that Pulaski D. Britt's series of dams on Jerusalem constituted a valuable holding, and enabled him to control the water and leave the logs of rivals stranded if he wished. The collection of water and quick work in "sluicing" are most important, for the streams give down only about so much water in the spring.

When a load of logs is suddenly set free from the cable holding it back on a steep descent, as in Chapter XXVI., it is said to be "sluiced."

When there is a jam of entangled logs as they are swept down-stream, if it is impossible to find and pry loose the "key-log," it is sometimes necessary to blow up the restraining logs with dynamite.

When the floating logs are caught upon rocks, and the men are prying them loose, they are said

to be “carding” the ledges.

A “jill-poke,” a pet aversion of drivers, is a log with one end lodged on the bank and the other thrust out into the stream.

The “cant-dog” is illustrated on the cover of the book.

The “peavy” is the Maine name for a slightly different variety of “cant-dog,” which takes its title from its maker in Old Town.

The “pick-pole” is an ashen pole ten to twelve feet long, shod with an iron point with a screw-tip, which enables a driver to pull a log towards him or to push it away.

KING SPRUCE

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I

UP IN “CASTLE CUT ‘EM”

“Oh, the road to ‘Castle Cut ‘Em’ is mostly all uphill.
You can dance along all cheerful to the sing-song of a mill;
King Cole he wanted fiddles, and so does old King Spruce,
But it’s only gashin’-fiddles that he finds of any use.

“Oh, come along, good lumbermen, oh, come along I say!
Come up to ‘Castle Cut ‘Em,’ and pull your wads and pay.
King Cole he liked his bitters, and so does old King Spruce,
But the only kind he hankers for is old spondulix-juice.”

—From song by Larry Gorman, “Woods Poet.”



The young man on his way to “Castle Cut ‘Em” was a clean-cut picture of self-reliant youth. But he was not walking as one who goes to a welcome task. He saw two men ahead of him who walked with as little display of eagerness; men whose shoulders were stooped and whose hands swung listlessly as do hands that are astonished at finding themselves idle.

A row of mills that squatted along the bank of the canal sent after them a medley of howls from band-saws and circulars. The young man, with the memory of his college classics sufficiently fresh to make him fanciful, found suggestion of chained monsters in the aspect of those shrieking mills, with slip-openings like huge mouths.

[Pg 2]

That same imagery invested the big building on the hill with attributes that were not reassuring. But he went on up the street in the sunshine, his eyes on the broad backs of the plodders ahead.

King Spruce was in official session.

Men who were big, men who were brawny, yet meek and apologetic, were daily climbing the hill or waiting in the big building to have word with the Honorable John Davis Barrett, who was King Spruce’s high chamberlain. Dwight Wade found half a dozen ahead of him when he came into the general office. They sat, balancing their hats on their knees, and each face wore the anxious expectancy that characterized those who waited to see John Barrett.

Wade had lived long enough in Stillwater to know the type of men who came to the throne-room of King Spruce in midsummer. These were stumpage buyers from the north woods, down to make another season’s contract with the lord of a million acres of timber land. Their faces were brown, their hands were knotted, and when one, in his turn, went into the inner office he moved awkwardly across the level tiles, as though he missed the familiar inequalities of the forest’s floor.

The others droned on with their subdued mumble about saw-logs, sleeper contracts, and “popple” peeling. The young man who had just entered was so plainly not of themselves or their interests that they paid no attention to him.

This was the first time Wade had been inside the doors of “Castle Cut ‘Em,” the name the humorists of Stillwater had given the dominating block on the main street of the little city. The

up-country men, with the bitterness of experience, and moved by somewhat fantastic imaginings, said it was "King Spruce's castle." [Pg 3]

In the north woods one heard men talk of King Spruce as though this potentate were a real and vital personality. To be sure, his power was real, and power is the principal manifestation of the tyrant who is incarnate. Invisibility usually makes the tyranny more potent. King Spruce, vast association of timber interests, was visible only through the affairs of his court administered by his officers to whom power had been delegated. And, viewed by what he exacted and performed, King Spruce lived and reigned—still lives and reigns.

Wade, not wholly at ease in the presence, for he had come with a petition like the others, gazed about the reception-room of the Umcolcus Lumbering and Log-driving Association, the incorporators' more decorous title for King Spruce. It occurred to him that the wall-adornments were not reassuring. A brightly polished circular-saw hung between two windows. It was crossed by two axes, and a double-handled saw was the base for this suggestive coat of arms. The framed photographs displayed loaded log-sleds and piles of logs heaped at landings and similar portraiture of destruction in the woods. Everything seemed to accentuate the dominion of the edge of steel. The other wall-decorations were the heads of moose and deer, further suggestion of slaughter in the forest. A stuffed porcupine on the mantel above the great fireplace mutely suggested that the timber-owners would brook no rivalry in their campaign against the forest; they had asked the State to offer a bounty for the slaughter of this tree-girdler, and a card propped against the "quill-pig" instructed the reader that the State had already spent more than fifty thousand dollars in bounties.

The deification of the cutting-edge appealed to Wade's abundant fancy. He had noticed, when he came past the windows of the lumber company's outfitting store on the first floor of the building, that the window displays consisted mostly of cutting tools. [Pg 4]

When the door of the inner office opened and one of those big and awkward giants came out, Wade discovered that King Spruce had evidently placed in the hands of the Honorable John Davis Barrett something sharp with which to slash human feelings, also. The man's face was flushed and his teeth were set down over his lower lip with manifest effort to dam back language.

"Didn't he renew?" inquired one of the waiting group, solicitously.

"He turned me down!" muttered the other, scarcely releasing the clutch on his lip. "I've wondered sometimes why 'Stumpage John' hasn't been over his own timber lands in all these years. If he has backed many out of that office feelin' like I do, I reckon there's a good reason why he doesn't trust himself up in the woods." He struck his soft hat across his palm. He did not raise his voice. But the venom in his tone was convincing. "By God, I'd relish bein' the man that mistook him for a bear!"

"Give any good reason for not renewin'?" asked a man whose face showed his anxiety for himself.

"Any one who has been over my operation on Lunksoos," declared the lumberman, answering the question in his own way—"any fair man knows I haven't devilled: I've left short stumps and I 'ain't topped off under eight inches, though you all know that their damnable scale-system puts a man to the bad when he's square on tops. But I 'ain't left tops to rot on the ground. I've been square!"

Wade did not understand clearly, but the sincerity of the man's distress appealed to him.

One of the little group darted an uneasy look towards the door of the inner office. It was closed tightly. But for all that he spoke in a husky whisper. [Pg 5]

"It must be that you didn't fix with What's-his-name last spring—I heard you and he had trouble."

The angry operator dared to speak now. He looked towards the door as though he hoped his voice would penetrate to King Spruce's throne-room.

"Trouble!" he cried. "Who wouldn't have trouble? I made up my mind I had divided my profits with John Barrett's blackmailin' thieves of agents for the last time. I lumbered square. And the agent was mad because I wasn't crooked and didn't have hush-money for him. And he spiked me with John Barrett; but you fellows, and all the rest that are willin' to whack up and steal in company, will get your contracts all right. And I'm froze out, with camps all built and five thousand dollars' worth of supplies in my depot-camp."

"Hold on!" protested several of the men, in chorus, crowding close to this dangerous tale-teller. "You ain't tryin' to sluice the rest of us, are you, just because you've gone to work and got your own load busted on the ramdown?"

"I'd like to see the whole infernal game of graft, gamble, and woods-gashin' showed up. Let John Barrett go up and look at his woods and he'll see what you are doin' to 'em—you and his agents! And the man that lumbers square, and remembers that there are folks comin' after us that will need trees, gets what I've just got!" He shook his crumpled hat in their faces. "And I'm just good and ripe for trouble, and a lot of it."

"Here, you let me talk with you," interposed a man who had said nothing before, and he took the recalcitrant by the arm, led him away to a corner, and they entered into earnest conference. At the end of it the destructionist drove his hat on with a smack of his big palm and strode out,

sullen but plainly convinced.

The other man returned to the group and spoke cautiously low, but in that big, bare room with its resonant emptiness even whispers travelled far. [Pg 6]

"I'll take a double contract and sublet to him," he explained. "Barrett won't know, and after this Dave will come back into line and handle the agent. I reckon he's got well converted from honesty in a lumberin' deal. It's what we're up against, gents, in this business; the patterns are handed to us and we've got to cut our conduct accordin' to other men's measurements. Barrett gets *his* first; the agent gets *his*; we get what we can squeeze out of a narrow margin—and the woods get hell."

A man came out of the inner office stroking the folds of a stumpage permit preparatory to stuffing it into his wallet, and the peacemaker departed promptly, for it was now his turn to pay his respects to King Spruce.

In what he had seen and what he had heard, Dwight Wade found food for thought. The men so manifestly had accepted the stranger as some one utterly removed from comprehension of their affairs or interest in their talk that they had not been discreet. It occurred to him that his own present business with John Barrett would be decidedly furthered were he to utilize that indiscretion.

This thought occurred to him not because he intended for one instant to use his information, but because he saw now that his business with John Barrett was more to John Barrett's personal advantage than that gentleman realized. This knowledge gave him more confidence. He was proposing something to the Honorable John Barrett that the latter, for his own good, ought to be pressed into accepting.

The earlier reflection which had made him uneasy, that a millionaire timber baron would not listen patiently to suggestions about his own business offered by the principal of the Stillwater high-school, had now been modified by circumstances. Even that lurking fear, that awe of John Barrett which he had his peculiar and private reason for feeling and hiding, was not quite so nerve-racking. [Pg 7]

Barrett left it to his clients to manage the order of precedence in the outer office. It was only necessary for the awaiting suppliant to note his place between those already there and those who came in after him; and Wade was prompt to accept his turn.

He knew the Honorable John Barrett. As mayor that gentleman had distributed the diplomas at the June graduation. And Mr. Barrett, after one first, sharp, scowling glance over his nose-glasses, hooking his chin to one side as he gazed, rose and greeted the young man cordially.

Then he wheeled his chair away from his desk to the window and sat down where he could feel the breeze.

Looking past him Wade saw the Stillwater saw-mills. There were five of them in a row along the canal. Each had a slip-opening in the end and it yawned wide like a mouth that stretched for prey.

The two windows pinched together in each gable gave to the end of the building likeness to a hideous face. From his seat Wade heard the screech of the band-saws. The sounds came out of those open mouths. The dripping logs went up the slips and into those mouths, like morsels sliding along a slaving tongue. Mingled with the fierce scream of the band-saws there were the wailings of the lath and clapboard saws. In that medley of sound the imagination heard monster and victims mingling howl of triumph and despairing cry.

The breeze that ruffled the awnings stirred the thin, gray hair of John Barrett, brought fresh scents of sawdust and sweeter fragrance of seasoning lumber. And fainter yet came the whiff of resinous balsam from the vast fields of logs that crowded the booms. [Pg 8]

With that picture backing him in the frame of the open window—mutilated trees, and mills yowling in chorus, and with the scent of the riven logs bathing him—the timber baron politely waited for the young man to speak. He had put off the brusqueness of his business demeanor, for it had not occurred to him that the principal of the Stillwater high school could have any financial errand. He played a little tattoo with his eye-glasses' rim upon the second button of his frock-coat. One touch of sunshine on Barrett's cheek showed up striated markings and the faint purpling that indulgence paints upon the skin. The way in which the shoulders were set back under the tightly buttoned frock-coat, the flashing of the keen eyes, and even the cock of the bristly gray mustache that crossed the face in a straight line showed that John Barrett had enjoyed the best that life had to offer him.

"I'll make my errand a short one, Mr. Barrett," began Wade, "for I see that others are waiting."

"They're only men who want to buy something," said the baron, reassuringly—"men who have come, the whole of them, with the same growl and whine. It's a relief to be rid of them for a few moments."

Frankly showing that he welcomed the respite, and serenely indifferent to those who waited, he brought a box of cigars from the desk, and the young man accepted one nervously.

"I think I have noticed you about the city since your school closed," Mr. Barrett proceeded. And

without special interest he asked, whirling his chair and gazing out of the window at the mills: "How do you happen to be staying here in Stillwater this summer? I supposed pedagogues in vacation-time ran away from their schools as fast as they could."

If John Barrett had not been staring at the mills he would have seen the flush that blazed on the young man's cheeks at this sudden, blunt demand for the reasons why he stayed in town. [Pg 9]

"If I had a home I should probably go there," answered Wade; "but my parents died while I was in college—and—and high-school principals do not usually find summer resorts and European trips agreeing with the size of their purses."

"Probably not," assented the millionaire, calmly. A sudden recollection seemed to strike him. "Say, speaking of college—you're the Burton centre, aren't you—or you were? I was there a year ago when Burton clinched the championship. I liked your game! I meant to have said as much to you, but I didn't get a chance, for you know what the push is on a ball-ground. I'm a Burton man, you know. I never miss a game. I'm glad to have such a chap as you at the head of our school. These pale fellows with specs aren't my style!"

He turned and ran an approving gaze over Wade's six feet of sturdy young manhood. With his keen eye for lines that revealed breeding and training, Barrett usually turned once to look after a handsome woman and twice to stare at a blooded horse. Men interested him, too—men who appealed to his sportsman sense. This young man, with the glamour of the football victories still upon him, was a particularly attractive object at that moment. He stared into Wade's flushed face, evidently accepting the color as the signal that gratified pride had set upon the cheeks.

"You'll weigh in at about one hundred and eighty-five," commented the millionaire. It seemed to Wade that his tone was that of a judge appraising the points of a race-horse, and for an instant he resented the fact that Barrett was sizing him less as a man than as a gladiator. "Old Dame Nature put you up solid, Mr. Wade, and gave you the face to go with the rest. I wish I were as young—and as free!" He gave another look at the mills and scowled when he heard the mumble of men's voices in the outer room. "When a man is past sixty, money doesn't buy the things for him that he really wants." It was the familiar cant of the man rich enough to affect disdain for money, and Wade was not impressed. [Pg 10]

"I'd like to take my daughter across the big pond this summer," the land baron grumbled, discontentedly, "but I never was tied down so in my life. I am directing-manager of the Umcolcus Association, and I've got all my own lands to handle besides, and with matters in the lumbering business as they are just now there are some things that you can't delegate to agents, Mr. Wade."

This man, confiding his troubles, did not seem the ogre he had been painted.

The young man had flushed still more deeply at mention of Barrett's daughter, but Barrett was again looking at his squalling mills.

The pause seemed a fair opportunity for the errand. The mention of agents revived the recollection that he was proposing something to John Barrett's advantage.

"Mr. Barrett, you know it is pretty hard for any one to live in Stillwater and not take an interest in the lumbering business. I'll confess that I've taken such interest myself. A few of my older boys have asked me to secure books on the science of forestry and help them study it."

"A man would have pretty hard work to convince me that it is a science," broke in Barrett, with some contempt. "As near as I can find out, it's mostly guesswork, and poor guesswork at that."

"Well, the fact remains," hastened Wade, a little nettled by the curtness that had succeeded the timber baron's rather sentimental courtesies, "my boys have been studying forestry, and I have been keeping a bit ahead of them and helping them as I could. Now they need a little practical experience. But they are boys who are working their way through school, and as I had to do the same thing I'm taking an especial interest in them. They have been in your mills two summers." [Pg 11]

"Why isn't it a good place for them to stay?" demanded Barrett. "They're learning a side of forestry there that amounts to something."

"The side that they want to learn is the side of the standing trees," persisted Wade, patiently. "I thought I could talk it over with you a little better than they. I hoped that such a large owner of timber land had begun to take interest in forestry and would, for experiment's sake, put these young men upon a section of timber land this summer and let them work up a map and a report that you could use as a basis for later comparison, if nothing else."

"What do you mean, that I'm going to hire them to do it—pay them money?" demanded the timber baron, fixing upon the young man that stare that always disconcerted petitioners. At that moment Wade realized why those men whom he had seen waiting in the outer office were gazing at the door of the inner room with such anxiety.

"The young men will be performing a real service, for they will plot a square mile and—"

"If there's any pay to it, I'd rather pay them to keep off my lands," broke in Barrett. "Forestry—"

He in turn was interrupted. The man who came in entered with manifest belief in his right to interrupt.

"Forestry!" he cried, taking the word off Barrett's lips—"forestry is getting your men into the

woods, getting grub to 'em, hiring bosses that can whale spryness into human jill-pokes, and can get the logs down to Pea Cove sortin'-boom before the drought strikes. That's forestry! That's my kind. It's the kind I've made my money on. It's the kind John Barrett made his on. What are you doin', John—hirin' a perfesser?" The new arrival asked this in a tone and with a glance up and down Wade that left no doubt as to his opinion of "perfessers." "Are you one of these newfangled fellers that's been studyin' in a book how to make trees grow?" he demanded.

[Pg 12]

Wade had only a limited acquaintance with the notables of the State, but he knew this man. He had seen him in Stillwater frequently, and his down-river office was in "Castle Cut 'Em." He was the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt. He had acquired that title—mostly for newspaper use—by serving many years in the State senate from Umcolcus County.

Wade gazed at the puffy red face, the bristle of gray beard, the hard little eyes—pupils of dull gray set in yellow eyeballs—and remembered the stories he had heard about this man who yelped his words with canine abruptness of utterance, who waved his big, hairy hands about his head as he talked, and with every gesture, every glance, every word revealed himself as a driver of men, grown arrogant and cruel by possession of power.

"Mr. Britt is executive officer for the lumber company in the north country," explained Barrett, dryly. "We are all associated more or less closely, though many of our holdings are separate. We think it is quite essential to confer together when undertaking any important step." His satiric dwelling on the word "important" was exasperating. "This young gentleman is the principal of our high-school, Pulaski, and he wants me to put a bunch of high-school boys in my woods as foresters—and pay 'em for it. You came in just as I was going to give him my opinion. But it may be more proper for you to do it, for you are the woods executive, and are better posted on conditions up there than I am." His drawled irony was biting.

[Pg 13]

The Honorable John Barrett enjoyed sport of all kinds, including badger-baiting. Now he leaned back in his swivel-chair with the air of a man about to enjoy the spectacle of a lively affair. But Wade, glancing from Barrett to Britt, was in no humor to be the butt of the millionaire.

"I don't think I care to listen to Mr. Britt's opinions," he said, rising hastily.

"Why? Don't you think I know what I'm talking about?" demanded the lumberman. He had missed the point of Barrett's satire, being himself a man of the bludgeon instead of the rapier.

"I'm quite sure you know, Mr. Britt," said the young man, bowing to Barrett and starting away.

"I've hired more men than any ten operators on the Umcolcus, put 'em all together," declared Britt, following him, "and I'd ought to know something about whether a man is worth anything on a job or not. And rather than have any one of those squirt-gun foresters cuttin' and caliperin' over my lands, I'd—"

Wade shut the door behind him, strode through the outer office, and hurried down-stairs, his face very red and his teeth shut very tight. He realized that he had left the presence of King Spruce in most discourteous haste, but the look in John Barrett's eyes when he had leaned back and "sicked on" that old railer of the rasping voice had been too much for Wade's nerves. To be made an object of ridicule by *her* father was bitter, with the bitterness of banished hope that had sprung into blossom for just one encouraging moment.

When he came out into the sunlight he threw down the fat cigar—plump with a suggestion of the rich man's opulence—and ground it under his heel. In the anxiety of his intimate hopes, in the first cordiality of their interview, it had seemed as though the millionaire had chosen to meet him upon that common level of gentle society where consideration of money is banished. Now, in the passion of his disappointment, Wade realized that he had served merely as a diversion, as a prize pup or a game-cock would have served, had either been brought to "Castle Cut 'Em" for inspection.

[Pg 14]

Walking—seeking the open country and the comforting breath of the flowers—away from that sickly scent of the sawdust, his cheeks burned when he remembered that at first he had fearfully, yet hopefully, believed that John Barrett knew the secret that he and Elva Barrett were keeping.

Hastening away from his humiliation, he confessed to himself that in his optimism of love he had been dreaming a beautiful but particularly foolish dream; but having realized the blessed hope that had once seemed so visionary—having won Elva Barrett's love—the winning of even John Barrett had not seemed an impossible task. The millionaire's frank greeting had held a warmth that Wade had grasped at as vague encouragement. But now the clairvoyancy of his sensitiveness enabled him to understand John Barrett's nature and his own pitiful position in that great affair of the heart; he had not dared to look at that affair too closely till now.

So he hurried on, seeking the open country, obsessed by the strange fancy that there was something in his soul that he wanted to take out and scrutinize, alone, away from curious eyes.

The Honorable Pulaski D. Britt had watched that hasty exit with sudden ire that promptly changed to amusement. He turned slowly and gazed at the timber baron with that amusement plainly showing—amusement spiced with a bit of malice. The reverse of Britt's hard character as bully and tyrant was an insatiate curiosity as to the little affairs of the people he knew and a desire to retail those matters in gossip when he could wound feelings or stir mischief. If one with a gift of prophecy had told him that his next words would mark the beginning of the crisis of his life, Pulaski Britt would have professed his profane incredulity in his own vigorous fashion. All

[Pg 15]

that he said was, "Well, John, your girl has picked out quite a rugged-lookin' feller, even if he ain't much inclined to listen to good advice on forestry."

Confirmed gossips are like connoisseurs of cheese: the stuff they relish must be stout. It gratified Britt to see that he had "jumped" his friend.

"I didn't know but you had him in here to sign partnership papers," Britt continued, helping himself to a cigar. "I wouldn't blame you much for annexin' him. You need a chap of his size to go in on your lands and straighten out your bushwhackin' thieves with a club, seein' that you don't go yourself. As for me, I don't need to delegate clubbers; I can attend to it myself. It's the way I take exercise."

"Look here, Pulaski," Barrett replied, angrily, "a joke is all right between friends, but hitching up my daughter Elva's name with a beggar of a school-master isn't humorous."

Britt gnawed off the end of the cigar, and spat the fragment of tobacco into a far corner.

"Then if you don't see any humor in it, why don't you stop the courtin'?"

"There isn't any courting."

"I say there is, and if the girl's mother was alive, or you 'tending out at home as sharp as you ought to, your family would have had a stir-up long ago. If you ain't quite ready for a son-in-law, and don't want that young man, you'd better grab in and issue a family bulletin to that effect."

"Damn such foolishness! I don't believe it," stormed Barrett, pulling his chair back to the desk; [Pg 16]
"but if you knew it, why didn't you say something before?"

"Oh, I'm no gossip," returned Britt, serenely. "I've got something to do besides watch courtin' scrapes. But I don't have to watch this one in *your* family. I know it's on."

Barrett hooked his glasses on his nose with an angry gesture, and began to fuss with the papers on his desk. But in spite of his professed scepticism and his suspicion of Pulaski Britt's ingenuousness, it was plain that his mind was not on the papers.

He whirled away suddenly and faced Britt. That gentleman was pulling packets of other papers from his pocket.

"Look here, Britt, about this lying scandal that seems to be snaking around, seeing that it has come to your ears, I—"

"What I'm here for is to go over these drivin' tolls so that they can be passed on to the book-keepers," announced Mr. Britt, with a fine and brisk business air. He had shot his shaft of gossip, had "jumped" his man, and the affair of John Barrett's daughter had no further interest for him. "You go ahead and run your family affairs to suit yourself. As to these things you are runnin' with me, let's get at 'em."

In this manner, unwittingly, did Pulaski D. Britt light the fuse that connected with his own magazine; in this fashion, too, did he turn his back upon it.

CHAPTER II

[Pg 17]

THE HEIRESS OF "OAKLANDS"

"Pete Lebree had money and land, Paul of
Olamon had none,
Only his peavy and driving pole, his birch
canoe and his gun.
But to Paul Nicola, lithe and tall, son of a
Tarratine,
Had gone the heart of the governor's child,
Molly the island's
queen."

—*Old Town Ballads.*



he coachman usually drove into town from the "Oaklands" to bring John Barrett home from his office, for Barrett liked the spirited rush of his blooded horses.

But when his daughter occasionally anticipated the coachman, he resigned himself to a ride in her phaeton with only a sleepy pony to draw them.

Once more absorbed in his affairs, after the departure of Pulaski Britt, Barrett had forgotten the unpleasant morsel of gossip that Britt had brought to spice his interview.

But a familiar trilling call that came up to him stirred that unpleasant thing in his mind. When Barrett walked to the window and signalled to her that he had heard and would come, his expression was not exactly that of the fond father who welcomes his only child. It was not the

expression that the bright face peering from under the phaeton's parasol invited. And as he wore his look of uneasiness and discontent when he took his seat beside her, her face became grave also.

"Is it the business or the politics, father?" she asked, solicitously. "I'm jealous of both if they take away the smiles and bring the tired lines. If it's business, let's make believe we've got money enough. Haven't we—for only us two? If it's politics—well, when I'm a governor's daughter I'll be only an unhappy slave to the women, and you a servant of the men."

[Pg 18]

But he did not respond to her rallying.

"I can't get away from work this summer, Elva," he said, with something of the curtness of his business tone. "I mean I can't get away to go with you."

"But I don't want you to go anywhere, father," protested the girl.

She was so earnest that he glanced sidewise at her. His air was that of one who is trying a subtle test.

"I feel that I must go north for a visit to my timber lands," he went on; "I have not been over them for years. I've had pretty good proof that I am being robbed by men I trusted. I propose to go up there and make a few wholesome examples."

He was accustomed to talk his business affairs with her. She always received them with a grave understanding that pleased him. Her dark eyes now met him frankly and interestedly. Looking at her as he did, with his strange thrill of suspicion that another man wanted her and that she loved the man, he saw that his daughter was beautiful, with the brilliancy of type that transcends prettiness. He realized that she had the wit and spirit which make beauty potent, and her eyes and bearing showed poise and self-reliance. Such was John Barrett's appraisal, and John Barrett's business was to appraise humankind. But perhaps he did not fully realize that she was a woman with a woman's heart.

The pony was ambling along lazily under the elms, and the reflective lord of lands was silent awhile, glancing at his daughter occasionally from the corner of his eye. He noted, with fresh interest, that she had greeting for all she met—as gracious a word for the tattered man from the mill as for the youth who slowed his automobile to speak to her.

[Pg 19]

"These gossips have misunderstood her graciousness," he mused, the thought giving him comfort.

But he was still grimly intent upon his trial of her.

"Because I cannot go with you, and because I shall be away in the woods, Elva," he said, after a time, "I am going to send you to the shore with the Dustins."

There was sudden fire in her dark eyes.

"I do not care to go anywhere with the Dustins," she said, with decision. "I do not care to go anywhere at all this summer. Father!" There was a volume of protest in the intonation of the word. She had the bluntness of his business air when she was aroused. "I would be blind and a fool not to understand why you are so determined to throw me in with the Dustins. You want me to marry that bland and blessed son and heir. But I'll not do any such thing."

"You are jumping at conclusions, Elva," he returned, feeling that he himself had suddenly become the hunted.

"I've got enough of your wit, father, to know what's in a barrel when there's a knot-hole for me to peep through."

"Now that you have brought up the subject, what reason is there for your not wanting to marry Weston Dustin? He's—"

"I know all about him," she interrupted. "There is no earthly need for you and me to get into a snarl of words about him, dadah! He isn't the man I want for a husband; and when John Barrett's only daughter tells him that with all her heart and soul, I don't believe John Barrett is going to argue the question or ask for further reasons or give any orders."

He bridled in turn.

"But I'm going to tell you, for my part, that I want you to marry Weston Dustin! It has been my wish for a long time, though I have not wanted to hurry you."

[Pg 20]

She urged on the pony, as though anxious to end a *tête-à-tête* that was becoming embarrassing.

"It might be well to save our discussion of Mr. Dustin until that impetuous suitor has shown that he wants to marry me," she remarked, with a little acid in her tone.

"He has come to me like a gentleman, told me what he wants, and asked my permission," stated Mr. Barrett.

"Following a strictly business rule characteristic of Mr. Dustin—'Will you marry your timber lands to my saw-mill, Mr. John Barrett, one daughter thrown in?'"

"At least he didn't come sneaking around by the back door!" cried her father, jarred out of his earlier determination to probe the matter craftily.

"Intimating thereby that I have an affair of the heart with the iceman or the grocery boy?" she inquired, tartly.

She was looking full at him now with all the Barrett resoluteness shining in her eyes. And he, with only the vague and malicious promptings of Pulaski Britt for his credentials, had not the courage to make the charge that was on his tongue, for his heart rejected it now that he was looking into her face.

"In the old times stern parents married off daughters as they would dispose of farm stock," she said, whipping her pony with a little unnecessary vigor. "But I had never learned that the custom had obtained in the Barrett family. Therefore, father, we will talk about something more profitable than Mr. Dustin."

Outside the city, in the valley where the road curved to enter the gates of "Oaklands," they met Dwight Wade returning, chastened by self-communion.

Barrett did not look at the young man. He kept his eyes on his daughter's face as she returned Wade's bow. He saw what he feared. The fires of indignation quickly left the dark eyes. There was the softness of a caress in her gaze. Love displayed his crimson flag on her cheeks. She spoke in answer to Wade's salutation, and even cast one shy look after him when he had passed. When she took her eyes from him she found her father's hard gaze fronting her.

[Pg 21]

"Do you know that fellow?" he demanded, brusquely.

"Yes," she said, her composure not yet regained; "when he was a student at Burton and I was at the academy I met him often at receptions."

"What is that academy, a sort of matrimonial bureau?" His tone was rough.

"It is not a nunnery," she retorted, with spirit. "The ordinary rules of society govern there as they do here in Stillwater."

"Elva," he said, emotion in his tones, "since your mother died you have been mistress of the house and of your own actions, mostly. Has that fellow there been calling on you?"

"He has called on me, certainly. Many of my school friends have called. Since he has been principal of the high-school I have invited him to 'Oaklands.'"

"You needn't invite him again. I do not want him to call on you."

"For what reason, father?" She was looking straight ahead now, and her voice was even with the evenness of contemplated rebellion.

"As your father, I am not obliged to give reasons for all my commands."

"You are obliged to give me a reason when you deny a young gentleman of good standing in this city our house. An unreasonable order like that reflects on my character or my judgment. I am the mistress of our home, as well as your daughter."

"It's making gossip," he floundered, dimly feeling the unwisdom of quoting Pulaski Britt.

[Pg 22]

"Who is gossiping, and what is the gossip?" she insisted.

"I don't care to go into the matter," he declared, desperately. "If the young man is nothing to you except an acquaintance, and I have reasons of my own for not wanting him to call at my house, I expect you to do as I say, seeing that his exclusion will not mean any sacrifice for you."

He was dealing craftily. She knew it, and resented it.

"I do not propose to sacrifice any of my friends for a whim, father. If your reasons have anything to do with my personal side of this matter, I must have them. If they are purely your own and do not concern me, I must consider them your whim, unless you convince me to the contrary, and I shall not be governed in my choice of friends. That may sound rebellious, but a father should not provoke a daughter to rebellion. You ought to know me too well for that."

They were at the house, and he threw himself out of the phaeton and tramped in without reply. During their supper he preserved a resentful silence, and at the end went up-stairs to his den to think over the whole matter. It had suddenly assumed a seriousness that puzzled and frightened him. He had been routed in the first encounter. He resolved to make sure of his ground and his facts—and win.

Usually he did not notice who came or who went at his house. The still waters of his confidence in his daughter had never been troubled until the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt had breathed upon them.

This evening, when he heard a caller announced, he tiptoed to the head of the stairs and listened.

It was Dwight Wade, and at sight of him his pride took alarm, his anger flared. After the afternoon's exasperating talk, this seemed like open and insulting contempt for his authority. It was as though the man were plotting with a disobedient daughter to flout him as a father. His

[Pg 23]

purpose of calm thought was swept away by an unreasoning wrath. Muttering venomous oaths, he stamped down the stairs, whose carpet made his approach stealthy, though he did not intend it, and he came upon the two as Wade, his great love spurred by the day's opposition, despondent in the present, fearing for the future, reached out his longing arms and took her to his heart.

They faced him as he stood and glowered upon them, a pathetic pair, clinging to each other.

"You sneaking thief!" roared Barrett.

The girl did not draw away. Wade felt her trembling hands seeking his, and he pressed them and kept her in the circle of his arm.

"I don't care to advertise this," Barrett went on, choking with his rage, "but there's just one way to treat you, you thief, and that's to have you kicked out of the house. Elva, up-stairs with you!"

She gently put away her lover's arm, but she remained beside him, strong in her woman's courage.

"I have always been proud of my father as a gentleman," she said. "It hurts my faith to have you say such things under your own roof."

"That pup has come under my roof to steal," raged the millionaire, "and he's got to take the consequences. Don't you read me my duty, girl!"

Even Barrett in his wrath had to acknowledge that simple manliness has potency against pride of wealth. Wade took two steps towards him, the instinctive movement of the male that protects his mate.

"Mr. Barrett," he said, gravely, "give me credit for honest intentions. If it is a fault to love your daughter with all my heart and soul, I have committed that fault. For me it's a privilege—an honor that you can't prevent."

[Pg 24]

"What! I can't regulate my own daughter's marriage, you young hound?"

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Barrett. You cannot prevent me from loving her, even though I may never see nor speak to her again."

And Elva, blushing, tremulous, yet determined, looked straight in her father's eyes, saying, "And I love him."

Barrett realized that his anger was making a sorry figure compared with this young man's resolute calmness. With an effort he held himself in check.

"We won't argue the love side of this thing," he said, grimly. "I haven't any notion of doing that with a nineteen-year-old girl and a pauper. But I want to inform you, young man, that the marriage of John Barrett's only child and heir is a matter for my judgment to control. I'm taking it for granted that you are not sneak enough to run away with her, even if you have stolen her affections."

The millionaire understood his man. He had calculated the effect of the sneer. He knew how New England pride may be spurred to conquer passion.

"These are wicked insults, sir," said the young man, his face rigid and pale, "but I don't deserve them."

"I tell you here before my daughter that I have plans for her future that you shall not interfere with. This is no country school-ma'am, down on your plane of life—this is Elva Barrett, of 'Oaklands,' a girl who has temporarily lost her good sense, but who is nevertheless my daughter and my heiress. She will remember that in a little while. Take yourself out of the way, young man!"

The girl's eyes blazed. Her face was transfigured with grief and love. She was about to speak, but Wade hastened to her and took her hand.

"Good-night, Elva."

[Pg 25]

She understood him. His eyes and the quiver in his voice spoke to her heart. She clung to his hands when he would have withdrawn them. The look she gave her father checked that gentleman's contemptuous mutterings.

"I am ashamed of my father, Mr. Wade," she said, passionately. "I offer you the apologies of our home."

"Say, look here!" snarled Barrett, this scornful rebelliousness putting his wits to flight, "if that's the way you feel about me, put on your hat and go with him. I'll be d—d if I don't mean it! Go and starve."

He realized the folly of his outburst as he returned their gaze. But he persisted in his puerile attack.

"Oh, you don't want her that way, do you?" he sneered. "You want her to bring the dollars that go along with her!"

Then Wade forgot himself.

He wrested one hand from the gentle clasp that entreated him, and would have struck the mouth that uttered the wretched insult. The girl prevented an act that would have been an enormity. She caught his wrist, and when his arm relaxed he did not dare, at first, to look at her. Then he gave her one quick stare of horror and looked at his hand, dazed and ashamed.

Barrett, strangely enough, was jarred back to equanimity by the threat of that blow. He folded his arms, drew himself up, and stood there, the outraged master of the mansion restored to command, silent, cold, rigid, his whole attitude of indignant reproach more effective than all the curses in Satan's lexicon.

Talk could not help that distressing situation. The young man's white lips tried to frame the words "I apologize," but even in his anguish the grim humor of this reciprocation of apology rose before his dizzy consciousness.

"Good-night!" he gasped.

[Pg 26]

Then he left her and went into the hall, John Barrett close on his heels. The millionaire watched him take his hat, followed him out upon the broad porch, and halted him at the edge of the steps.

"Mr. Wade," he said, "you'd rather resign your position than be kicked out, I presume?"

"You mean that it is your wish that I should go away from Stillwater?"

"That is exactly what I mean. You resign, or I will have your resignation demanded by the school board."

"I think my school relations are entirely my own business," retorted the young man, fighting back his mounting wrath.

"I'll make it mine, and have you kicked out of this town like a cur."

Wade remembered at that instant the face of the man whom he had seen leave John Barrett's office that morning. He recollected his words—"I'd relish bein' the man that mistook him for a bear!" He knew now how that man felt. And feeling the lust of killing rise in his own soul for the first time, he clinched his fists, set his teeth, and strode away into the night.

CHAPTER III

[Pg 27]

THE MAKING OF A "CHANEY MAN"

"We're bound for the choppin's at
Chamberlain Lake,
And we're lookin' for trouble and suthin'
to take.
We reckon we'll manage this end of the
train,
And we'll leave a red streak up the
centre of Maine."

—Murphy's "Come-all-ye."



company of reserves posted in a thicket, after valiantly withstanding the hammering of a battery, were suddenly routed by wasps. They broke and ran like the veriest knaves.

Dwight Wade had determined to face John Barrett's battery of persecution. But at the end of a week he realized that the little city of Stillwater was looking askance at him. He knew that gossip attended his steps and stood ever at his shoulders, as one from the tail of the eye sees shadowy visions and, turning suddenly, finds them gone.

That John Barrett would deliberately start stories in which his daughter's affairs were concerned seemed incredible to the lover who, for the sake of her fair fame and her peace of mind, had resolved to make fetish of duty, realizing even better than she herself that Elva Barrett's sense of justice would weigh well her duties as daughter before she could be won to the duties of wife.

Yet Wade could hardly tell why he determined to stay in Stillwater. He wanted to console himself with the belief that a sudden departure would give gossip the proof it wanted. For gossip, as he caught its vague whispers, said that John Barrett had kicked—actually and violently kicked—the principal of the Stillwater high-school out of his mansion. Wade did not like to think that Barrett, by himself or a servant, started that story. Yet the thought made Wade suspect that the bitterness of the night at "Oaklands" still rankled, and that he was remaining in Stillwater for the sake of defying John Barrett, and was not simply crucifying his spirit for the sake of the peace of John Barrett's daughter.

[Pg 28]

For he confessed that his stay there would be martyrdom. He had resolved that he would not try to see her; that would only mean grief for her and humiliation for him. He was proud of his love for Elva Barrett, in spite of her father's contempt and insults. He found no reproach for himself

because he had loved her and had told her so. But for the rôle of a Lochinvar his New England nature had no taste. He realized, without arguing the question with himself, that Elva Barrett was not to be won by the impetuous folly that demanded blind sacrifice of name and position and father and friends.

There was no cowardice in this realization. It was rather a pathetic sacrifice on the part of simple loyalty and a love that was absolute devotion. In deciding to remain in Stillwater he kept his love alight like a flame before a shrine. But beyond his daily work and the unflinching purpose of his great love he could not see his way.

It was because his way was so obscure that the wasps found him an easier victim.

He heard the buzzings at street corners as he passed. There were stings of glances and of half-heard words.

Like the pastor of a church in a small place, the principal of a high-school is one in whom the community feels a sense of proprietorship, with full right to canvass his goings and comings and liberty to circumscribe and control. For is he not the one that should "set example"?

[Pg 29]

The wasps would not accept his silent surrender. They suspected something hidden, and their imaginings saw the worst. They buzzed more busily every day. That they would not allow him the peace and the pathetic liberty of renunciation drove Wade frantic. With all the courage of his conscience, he still faced John Barrett's battery. But the wasps he could not face.

And he fled. In the end it was nothing but that—he was put to flight! The people of Stillwater accepted it as flight, for he placed his resignation in the hands of the school board barely a week before the date for the opening of the autumn term. And on the train on which he fled was the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt, still unconscious that the word of gossip he had dropped was the match that lighted a fuse, and that the fuse was briskly burning.

Above the rumble of the starting car-wheels Wade heard the mills of Stillwater screaming their farewell taunt at him.

Then the Honorable Pulaski Britt came and sat down in his seat, penning him next to the window.

"Yes, sir," said Britt, with keen memory as to where he had left off in his previous conversation and with dogged determination to have his say out, "a man that reads a book written by a pefesser that don't know the difference between a ramdown and a dose of catnip tea, and then thinks he understands forestry of the kind that there's a dollar in, needs to have his head examined for hollows. Do you find anything in them books about how to get the best figgers on dressed beef?—and when you are buyin' it in fifty-ton lots for a dozen camps a half a cent on a pound means something! Is there anything about hirin' men and makin' 'em stay and work, gettin' cooks and saw-filers that know their business, chasin' thieves away from depot-camps, keepin' crews from losin' half the tools? Forestry! Making trees grow! Gawd-amighty, young man, Nature will attend to the tree-growin'. That's all Nature has got to do. She was doin' it before we got here, and doin' it well, and do you reckon we have any right to set up and tell Nature her business? I've got something else to think of besides tellin' Nature how to run her end. I'd like to know how to grow men instead of trees. My Jerusalem boss, MacLeod, writes me he has been two weeks getting together his hundred men for that operation. He'll meet me at the Umcolcus junction, up the line here a hundred miles. And I've been tryin' most of that time to get hold of the right sort of a 'chaney man.'"

[Pg 30]

Wade, in his resentment at Britt's intrusion on his thoughts, was in no mood for philological research, but sudden and rather idle curiosity impelled him to ask what a "chaney man" was.

"Why, a clerk—a camp clerk, time-keeper, wangan store overseer, supply accountant, and all that," snapped Britt, with small patience for the young man's ignorance.

At that instant it came more plainly to Wade that he was a fugitive. When he had left Elva Barrett behind he had let go the strongest cable of hope. A day before—the day after—his manly spirit probably would not have allowed him to become a clerk for Pulaski Britt. This day the impetuous desire to hide in the woods, to escape the wasps of humanity, to be in some place where sneers and false pity and taunt could not reach him—that desire was coined into performance.

"Wouldn't I fit into a job of that sort, Mr. Britt?" he asked, blurting the question. And when the lumberman stared at him with as much astonishment as Pulaski Britt ever allowed himself to display, Wade added, "I have given up school-teaching because—well, I want to get into the woods for my health!"

"It will be healthy, all right, but it won't be dude work," said Britt. "You'll have to hump 'round on snow-shoes or a jumper to five camps. Board and thirty-five a month! What's the particular ailment with you?" he demanded, rather suspiciously. "You look rugged enough."

[Pg 31]

The young man did not reply, and the Honorable Pulaski stared at him, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. Mr. Britt had no very delicate notions of repressing an idea when it occurred to him "Say, look here, young man," he cried, "I reckon I understand! The Barrett girl, hey? And John got after you! Well, he can make it hot for any one he takes a niff at."

"Can't I have that job, Mr. Britt, without a general discussion of my affairs?" asked Wade, with temper.

"You're hired!" There was the click of business in Britt's tone, but his gossip's nature showed itself in the somewhat humorous drawl in which he added: "I'm glad to know that it's only love that ails you. Outside of that, you strike me as bein' a pretty rugged chap, and it's rugged chaps we're lookin' for in 'Britt's Busters.' If it's only love that ails you, I reckon we won't have any trouble about sendin' you out cured in the spring."

But noting the glitter in Wade's eyes, Mr. Britt chuckled amiably and took himself off down the car to talk business with a man.

During the long ride to Umcolcus Junction, Wade sat revelling in the bitterness of his thoughts. He was not disturbed because he had given up his school. There was a relief in escaping from meddlesome backbiters. The school had been only a means to an end: it afforded revenue to attain certain cherished professional plans that loomed large in Wade's prospects. Money earned honorably in any other fashion would count for as much. But the fact remained that he was fleeing, was hiding. Britt's rough and somewhat contemptuous proprietorship, so instantly displayed, wounded his pride. When he had passed the station to which he had purchased his ticket before he met Britt, he offered more pay to the conductor. He had seen Britt talking with the conductor a moment before, brandishing a hairy hand in his direction.

[Pg 32]

"It's all settled by Mr. Britt," the train officer stated, passing on. "You're one of his men, he says."

He growled under his breath as he accepted that label—"One of Britt's men."

There were one hundred more waiting for them at Umcolcus Junction, where they changed to the spur line that ran north.

Most of the men were in a state of social inebriety. A few fighters were sitting apart on their dunnage-bags, nursing bruises and grudges. Mindful of the State law that forbade the wearing of calked boots on board a railroad train, the men who owned only that sort of footgear were in their stocking feet. They carried their boots strung about their necks by lacings. Many were bareheaded, having thrown away their hats in their enthusiasm. Wade was not in a frame of mind to see any picturesqueness in that frowsy crowd. He was one of them; he walked dutifully behind his master, the Honorable Pulaski Britt.

A little man, with neck wattled blue and red with queer suggestion of a turkey's characteristics, lurched out of a group and came at Pulaski Britt with a meek and watery smile of welcome. His knees doubled with a drunkard's limpness, and he had to run to keep from falling. Britt evidently did not propose to serve as dock for this human derelict. He stepped to one side with an oath, and the man made a dizzy whirl and dove headforemost under the train on the main track, and at that moment the train started. The man rolled over twice, and lay, serenely indifferent to death, on the outer rail.

[Pg 33]

After it was all over Wade sourly told himself that he acted as he did simply to avoid witnessing a hideous spectacle.

For, in spite of Britt's yells of protest, he went under the car, missed the grinding wheels by an inch, and rolled out on the other side with the drunken man in his arms.

And when the train had drawn out of the station he came back across the track, lugging the little man as he would carry a gripsack, tossed him into the open door of the baggage-car of the waiting train, spat the dust off his own clothes, and went into the coach, casting surly looks at the sputtering inebriates who attempted to shake hands with him.

When the train started Britt came again and penned the young man in his seat against the window-casing.

"You've started in makin' yourself worth while, even if you are only the chaney man," vouchsafed his employer. "You did an infernal fool trick, but you've saved me Tommy Eye, the best teamster on the Umcolcus waters. As he lies there now he ain't worth half a cent a pound to feed to cats; when he's on a load with the webbin's in his hands I wouldn't take ten thousand dollars for him."

"Is he a sort of personal property of yours?" asked Wade, sullenly. He was venting his own resentment at Pulaski Britt's airs of general proprietorship over men.

"Just the same as that," replied Britt, complacently. "I've had him more than twenty years, and I'd like to see him try to go to work for any one else, or any one else try to hire him away." He struck his hand on the young man's knee. "Up this way, if you don't make men know you own 'em, you're missin' one of the main points of forestry!" He sneered this word every time he used it in his talk with Wade. The new chaney man began to wonder how much longer he could endure the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt without rising and cuffing those puffy cheeks.

[Pg 34]

CHAPTER IV

THE BOSS OF THE "BUSTERS"

[Pg 35]

"If you don't like our looks nor ain't stuck on our kind,
Git back with the dames in the next car behind."



n and on went the yelping staccato of the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt. The Honorable Pulaski D. was discoursing on his favorite topic, and his voice was heard above the rattle and jangle of the shaky old passenger-coach that jolted behind some freight-cars.

"Forty years ago I rolled nigh onto a million feet into that brook there!" shouted the lumber baron of the Umcolcus. His knotted, hairy fist wagged under the young man's nose as he pointed at the car window, his unwholesome breath fanned warmly on Wade's cheek, and when he crowded over to look into the summer-dried stream his bristly chin-whiskers tickled his seat-mate's ear. The September day was muggy and human contact disquieting. Wade shrank nearer the open window. The Honorable Pulaski did not notice the shrinking. He was accustomed to crowd folks. His self-assertiveness expected them to get out of the way.

"Yes, sir, nigh onto a million in one spring, and half of it 'down pine' and sounder'n a hound's tooth. Nothing here now but sleeper stuff. It's a good many miles to the nearest saw-log, and that's where I'm cutting on Jerusalem. I tell you, I've peeled some territory in forty years, young man."

[Pg 36]

Wade looked at the red tongue licking lustfully between blue lips, and then gazed on the ragged, bush-grown wastes on either side. While he had been crowding men the Honorable Pulaski had been just as industriously crowding the forest off God's acres. The "chock" of the axe sounded in his abrupt sentences, the rasp of saws in his voice.

"We left big stumps those days." The hairy fist indicated the rotten monuments of moss-covered punk shouldering over the dwarfed bushes. "There was a lot of it ahead of us. Didn't have to be economical. Get it down and yanked to the landings—that was the game! We're cutting as small as eight-inch spruce at Jerusalem. Ain't a mouthful for a gang-saw, but they taste good to pulp-grinders."

The train began to groan and jerk to a stand-still, and the old man dove out of his seat and staggered down the aisle, holding to the backs of the seats. At the last station he had spent ten minutes of hand-brandishing colloquy on the platform with a shingle-mill boss whom he had summoned to the train by wire. He was to meet a birch-mill foreman here. Wade looked out at the struggling cedars and the white birches, "the ladies of the forest," pathetic aftermath which was now falling victim to axe and saw, and wondered with a flicker of grim humor in his thoughts why the Honorable Pulaski did not set crews at work cutting the bushes for hoop-poles and then clean up the last remnant into toothpicks.

"He's a driver, ain't he?" sounded a voice in his ear. An old man behind him hung his grizzled whiskers over the seat-back and pointed an admiring finger at the retreating back of the lumber baron.

Wade wished that people would let him alone. He had some thoughts—some very bitter thoughts—to think alone, and the world jarred on him. The yelp of the Honorable Pulaski's monologue, that everlasting, insistent bellow of voices in the smoking-car ahead, where the ingoing crew of Britt's hundred men were trying to sing with drunken lustiness, and now this amiable old fool of the grizzled whiskers, stung the dull pain of his resentment at deeper troubles into sudden and almost childish anger.

[Pg 37]

"Once when I was swamping for him on Telos stream, he says to me, 'Man,' he says, 'remember that the time that's lost when an axe is slicin' air ain't helping me to pay you day's wages!' And I says to him, 'Mister Britt,' says I—"

Dwight Wade, college graduate, former high-school principal, and at all times in the past a cultured and courteous young gentleman, did the first really rude and unpardonable act of his life. He twisted his chin over his shoulder, scowled into the mild, dim, and watery eyes of his interlocutor, and growled:

"Oh, cut it short! What in—" He checked the expletive, and snapped himself up and across the aisle, and slammed down into another seat. The red came over his face. He did not dare to look back at the old man. He hearkened to the rip-roaring chorus in the smoking-car, and reflected that as the new time-keeper he was now one of "Britt's Busters," and that the demoralizing license of the great north woods must have entered into his nature thus early. He grunted his disgust at himself under his breath, and hunched his head down between his shoulders.

In his nasty state of mind he glowered at a passenger who came into the car at the front. It was a girl, and a pretty girl at that. She nodded a cheery greeting to the old man of the grizzled whiskers, and with a smile still dimpling her cheeks flashed one glance at Wade. It was not a bold look, and yet there was the least bit of challenge in it. The sudden pout on her lips might have been at thought of confiding her fresh, crisp skirts to the dusty seat; and yet, when she turned and shot one more quick glance at the young man's sour countenance, the pout curled into something like disdain, and a little shrug of her shoulders hinted that she had not met the response that she was accustomed to find on the faces of young men who saw her for the first time.

[Pg 38]

While Wade was gazing gloomily and abstractedly at the fair profile and the nose, tip-tilted a wee bit above the big white bow of her veil tied under her chin, one of the crew lurched from the door of the smoking-car, caught off his hat, and bowed extravagantly. It was Tommy Eye. He had to clutch the brake-wheel to keep himself from falling. But his voice was still his own. He broke out lustily:

“Oh, there ain’t no girl, no pretty
little girl,
That I have left behind me.
I’m all cut loose for to wrassle with
the spruce,
Way up where she can’t find me.
Oh, there ain’t no—”

An angry face appeared over his shoulder in the door of the smoker, two big hands clutched his throat, jammed the melody into a hoarse squawk, and then the songster went tumbling backward into the car and out of sight.

Almost immediately his muscular suppressor crossed the platform and came into the coach, snatching the little round hat off the back of his head as he entered. Wade knew him. His employer had introduced them at the junction as two who should know each other. It was Colin MacLeod, the “boss.”

“And Prince Edward’s Island never turned out a smarter,” the Honorable Pulaski had said, not deigning to make an aside of his remarks. “Landed four million of the Umcolcus logs on the ice this spring, busted her with dynamite, let hell and the drive loose, licked every pulp-wood boss that got in his way with their kindlings, and was the first into Pea Cove boom with every log on the scale-sheet. That’s this boy!” And he fondled the young giant’s arm like a butcher appraising beef.

[Pg 39]

Wade paid little attention to him then. With his ridged jaw muscles, his hard gray eyes, and the bullying cock of his head, he was only a part of the ruthlessness of the woods.

But now, as he came up the car aisle, his face flushed, his eyes eager, his embarrassment wrinkling on his forehead, Wade looked at him with the sudden thought that the boss of the “Busters” was merely a boy, after all.

“It was only Tommy Eye, Miss Nina,” explained MacLeod, his voice trembling, his abashed admiration shining in his face. “He’s just out of jail, you know.” He looked at Wade and then at the old man of the grizzled whiskers, and raised his voice as though to gain a self-possession he did not feel. “Tommy always gets into jail after the drive is down. He’s spent seventeen summers in jail, and is proud of it.”

“But there ain’t no better teamster ever pushed on the webbin’s,” said the old man, admiration for all the folks of the woods still unflagging.

The girl did not display the same enthusiasm, either for Tommy Eye’s mishaps or for the bashful giant who stood shifting from foot to foot beside her seat.

“Crews going into the woods ought to be nailed up in box-cars, that’s what father says. And when they go through Castonia settlement I wish they were in crates, the same as they ship bears.”

“How is your father since spring?” asked the young boss, stammeringly, trying to appear unconscious of her scorn.

[Pg 40]

“Oh, he’s all right,” she returned, carelessly, patting her hand on her lips to repress a yawn.

“And is every one in Castonia all right?”

“You can ask them when you get there,” she replied, a bit ungraciously.

“I tell you, I was pretty surprised to see you get aboard the train down here at Bomazeen. I—”

She canted her head suddenly, and looked sidewise at him with an expression half satiric, half indignant.

“Do you think that all the folks who ever go anywhere in this world are river drivers and”—she shot a quick and disparaging glance at the still glowering Wade—“drummers?”

MacLeod noticed the look and its scorn with delight, and grasped at this opportunity to get outside the platitudes of conversation. But in his eagerness to be news-monger he did not soften his “out-door voice,” deepened by many years of bellowing above the roar of white water.

“Oh, that ain’t a drummer! That’s Britt’s new chaney man—the time-keeper and the wangan store clerk.” MacLeod knew that a girl born and bred in Castonia settlement, on the edge of the great forest, needed no explanation of “chaney man,” the only man in a logging crew who could sleep till daylight, and didn’t come out in the spring with callous marks on his hands as big as dimes. But he seemed to be hungry for an excuse to stay beside her, where he could gaze down on the brown hair looped over her forehead and her radiantly fair face, and could catch a glimpse of the white teeth. “Britt was tellin’ me on the side that he’s been teachin’ school or something like that, and—say, you’ve heard of old Barrett, who controls all the stumpage on the Chamberlain waters—that rich old feller? Well, Britt, being hitched up with Barrett more or less, and knowin’ all

[Pg 41]

about it—”

Wade was now upright in his seat, but the absorbed foreman, catching at last a gleam of interest in the gray eyes upraised to his, did not notice.

“—Britt says that Mister School-teacher there went to work and fell in love with Barrett’s girl, and now she’s goin’ to marry a rich feller in the lumberin’ line that her dad picked out for her, and instead of goin’ to war or to sea, like—”

Wade, maddened, sick at heart, furious at the old tattler who had thus canvassed his poor secret with his boss, had tried twice to cry an interruption. But his voice stuck in his throat.

Now he leaped up, leaned far over the seat-back in front of him, and shouted, with face flushed and eyes like shining steel:

“That’s enough of that, you pup!”

In the sudden, astonished silence the old man dragged his fingers through his grizzled whiskers and whined plaintively:

“Ain’t he peppery, though, about anybody talking? He shet me up, too!”

“It’s my business you’re talking!” shouted Wade, beating time with clinched fist. “Drop it.”

MacLeod, primordial in his instincts, lost sight of the provocation, and felt only the rebuff in the presence of the girl he was seeking to attract. He had no apology on his tongue or in his heart.

“It will take a better man than you to trig talk that I’m makin’,” he retorted. “This isn’t a district school, where you are licked if you whisper!” He sneered as he said it, and took one step up the aisle.

With the bitter anger that had been burning in him for many days now fanned into the white-heat of Berserker rage, Wade leaped out of his seat. Between them sat the girl, looking from one to the other, her cheeks paling, her lips apart.

[Pg 42]

At the moment, with a drunken man’s instinctive knowledge of ripe occasions, Tommy Eye lurched out once more on the smoker platform and began to carol the lay that had consoled him on so many trips from town:

“Oh, there ain’t no girl, no pretty
little girl,
That I have left behind me.”

There sounded the clang of the engine bell far to the front. There was the premonitory and approaching jangle of shacklings, as car after car took up its slack.

“Look after your man there, MacLeod!” cried the girl. “The yank will throw him off.”

“Let him go, then!” gritted the foreman. The flame in Wade’s eyes was like the red torch of battle to him. Not for years had a man dared to give him that look.

Suddenly the car sprang forward under their feet as the last shackle snapped taut. The boss was driven towards Wade, and let himself be driven. The other braced himself, blind in his fury, realizing at last the nature of the blood lust.

A squall, fairly demoniac in intensity, stopped them. MacLeod recognized the voice, and even his passion for battle yielded. When the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt, baron of the Umcolcus, yelled in that fashion it meant obedience, and on this occasion the squall was reinforced by a shriek from the girl. And MacLeod whirled, dropping his fists.

There on the platform stood Britt, clutching the limp and soggy Tommy Eye by the slack of his jacket. The Honorable Pulaski, jealous of every second of time, had remained in conversation to the last with his birch foreman. He stepped aboard just as Tommy, jarred from his feet, was pitching off the other side of the platform. The Honorable Pulaski snatched for him and held on, at the imminent risk of his own life. Already both of them were leaning far out, for Tommy Eye, in the blissful calm of his spirit, was making no effort to help himself.

[Pg 43]

In an instant MacLeod was down the car aisle and had pulled both back to safety.

“Why in blastnation ain’t you staying in this hog-car here, where you belong, you long-legged P.I. steer?” roared the old man, his anger ready the moment his fright subsided. “What do I hire you for? You came near letting me lose the best teamster in my whole crew. Now get into that car and stay in that car till we get to the end of this railroad.”

He put his hands against MacLeod’s breast and shoved him backward into the door, where Tommy Eye, grinning in fatuous ignorance of the danger he had passed through, had just disappeared ahead of him. The angry shame of a man cruelly humiliated twisted MacLeod’s features, but he allowed his imperious despot to push him into the car, casting a last appealing look at the girl. Britt slammed the door and stood on the platform, bracing himself by a hand on either side the casing, and peered through the dingy glass to make sure that his crew was now under proper discipline.

“He’s a driver and a master,” piped up Grizzly Whiskers, with the appositeness of a Greek chorus.

"There's the song about him, ye know:

"Oh, the night that I was
married,
The night that I was wed,
Up there come Pulaski
Britt
And stood at my bed-
head.
Said he, 'Arise, young
married man,
And come along with me.
Where the waters of
Umcolcus
They do roar along so
free.'"

"I'll bet he went, at that," volunteered a man farther back in the car. "When Britt is after men he gits 'em, and when he gits 'em he uses 'em." [Pg 44]

"Mr. Britt," he shouted down the car aisle as the old man entered, "that was brave work you done in savin' Tommy's life!"

"Go to the devil with your compliments!" snapped Britt. "If it wasn't that I was losing my best teamster I wouldn't have put out my little finger to save him from mince-meat."

He saw the girl, turned over a seat to face her, and began to fire rapid questions at her regarding her father and mother and the latest news of Castonia settlement. When the conversation languished, as it did soon on account of the inattention of the young woman, the Honorable Pulaski caught the still flaming eye of Dwight Wade, and crooked his finger to summon him. Wade merely scowled the deeper. The Honorable Pulaski serenely disregarded this malevolence as a probable optical illusion, and when Wade did not start beckoned again.

"Come here, you!" he bellowed. "Can't you see that I want you?"

With new accession of fury at being thus baited, the young man started up, resolved to take his employer aside and free his mind on that matter of news-mongering. But the bluff and busy tyrant was first, as he always was in his dealings with men.

"Here, Wade," he shouted, "you shake hands with the prettiest girl in the north country! This is Miss Nina Ide, and this is my new time-keeper, Dwight Wade. He's going to find that there's more in lumbering than there is in being a college dude or teaching a school. Sit down, Wade."

He pulled the young man into the seat.

"Entertain this young lady," he commanded. "She don't want to talk with old chaps like me. Her father—well, I reckon you know her father! Oh, you don't? Well, he's first assessor of Castonia settlement, runs the roads, the schools, and the town, has the general store and post-office, and this pretty daughter that all the boys are in love with." [Pg 45]

And at the end of this delicate introduction he pushed brusquely between them, and went back to talk with his elderly admirer in the rear of the car.

Wade looked into the gray eyes of the girl sullenly. There was an angry sparkle in her gaze.

"Well, Mr. Wade, you may think from what that old fool said that I'm suffering to be entertained. If you think any such thing you can change your mind and go back."

She had not a city-bred woman's self-poise, he thought. Her manner was that of the country belle, spoiled the least bit by flattery and attention. And yet, as he looked at her, he thought that he had never seen fairer skin to set off the flush of angry beauty. For others there was something alluring in the absolute whiteness of her teeth, peeping under the curve of her lip, in the nose (the least bit *retroussé*), in the looped locks of brown hair crossing her temples. Yet there was no admiration in his eyes.

"I hope you won't hold me guilty of being the intruder," he said, coldly.

"Not if you move your brogans over to some seat where there is more room for them," she returned, with a click of her white teeth that showed mild savagery. This young man who was in love with some one else, and who had scowled at her, was decidedly not to her liking, she thought, in spite of his regular features, his firm chin, his clean-cut mouth unhidden by beard, and his brown eyes.

Wade flushed, rose, bowed with hat lifted to a rather ironical height, and took his seat alone, well to the front of the car. He saw MacLeod's baleful face framed in the little window of the smoking-car's door. For mile after mile, as the train jangled on, it remained there. [Pg 46]

The menace of the expression, the challenge in the attitude, and this insolent espionage, all following the insults of his gossiping tongue, wrought upon the young man's feelings like a file on metal. As his resentment gnawed, it was in his mind to go and smash his fist through the little window into the middle of that lowering countenance.

To him came the Honorable Pulaski, bristling and bustling.

"They're telling me back there, young man, that you and Colin came near to having some sort of rumpus a little while ago. Now, I can't have anything of that sort going on among my men. You mind *your* business. I'll make *him* mind *his*. But what's it all about, anyway? Why were you going to fight like roosters at sight?"

Wade looked at his pompous red face and into his eyes with their yellowish sclerotic, and choked back the recrimination he had intended. The thought of opening his heart's poor secret by bandying words with this man made him quiver.

"As well to talk to a Durham bull," he reflected.

"Why, you poor college dude," went on his employer, scornfully, "Colin MacLeod would break you in two and use you to taller his boots, a piece in each hand. You're hired to keep books and peddle wangan stuff according to the prices marked! Keep your place, where you belong. Don't go to stacking muscle against the boss of the Busters."

The former centre of Burton College's football eleven stiffened his muscles and set his nails into his palms to keep from hot retort. What was the use? What did college training avail if it didn't help a gentleman to hold his tongue at the right time? [Pg 47]

"Now, remember what I've told you," ordered Britt, "and I'll go and set MacLeod to the right-about, so that you won't have to be afraid of him if you mind your own business."

He went away into the smoking-car. Between the opening and the closing of the door there puffed out a louder jargon from the orgy. It then settled into its dull diapason of maudlin voices.

For the rest of the journey, to the end of the forest railroad spur, Wade sat and looked out into the hopeless and ragged ruin left by the axes. The sight fitted with his mood. Britt, back from his interview with MacLeod, and serene in the power of the conscious autocrat, sat by himself and figured endlessly with a stubby lead-pencil. Wade looked around only once at the girl. When he did he caught her looking at him, and she immediately snapped her eyes away indignantly.

At last the engine gave a long shriek that wailed away in echoes among the stumps. It was a different note from its careless yelps at the infrequent crossings.

"Here we are!" bellowed Britt, cheerfully, stuffing away his papers and coming up the car for his little bag. He stopped opposite Wade.

"Remember what I told you about minding your business," he commanded, brusquely. "You may be a college graduate, but MacLeod is your boss. He won't hurt you if you keep your place!"

In medicine there are cumulative poisons—the effect of small doses at intervals amounting in the end to a single large dose.

In matters of heart, temper, and moral restraint there are cumulative poisons, too. Dwight Wade, struggling up as the train jolted to a halt, felt that this last insult, coming as it did out of that brusque, rough-sneering, culture-despising spirit of the woods, exemplified in Pulaski D. Britt, had put an end to self-restraint. [Pg 48]

It was the same brusque, money-worshipping, intolerant spirit of the woods that sounded in John Barrett's voice when he had sneered at Wade's pretensions to his daughter's hand. There it was now in those roaring voices in the smoking-car. And yet he had come to it—hating it—fleeing from the sight of men of his kind when his little temple of love seemed closed to him, and the world had jeered at him behind his back! He looked through the dirty car windows at the little shacks of the railroad terminus, heard the bellow of voices, gritted his teeth in ungovernable rage at Britt's last words, and determined to—well, he hardly knew what he did propose to do.

But it should be something to show them all that he could no longer be bossed and insulted and jeered at—all in that bumptious, braggadocio, bucko spirit of the woods!

Both platforms of the cars were swarming with men—men rigged in queer garb: wool leggings, wool jackets striped off in bizarre colors or checked like crazy horse-blankets. Each man in sight carried his heavy brogan shoes hung about his neck.

They were singing in fairly good time, and Wade listened to the words despite himself:

"Oh, here I come from the Kay-ni-
beck,
With my old calk boots slung round
my neck
Here we come—yas, a-here we
come—
A hundred men and a jug of rum.
 WHOOP-fa-dingo!
 Old Prong
Jones!"

The girl passed Wade, going down the aisle before he left his seat. He came behind her. But they were obliged to wait at the door. The men crowded close upon both platforms. Each man had a meal-sack stuffed with his possessions. They were all elbowing each other, and the result was a [Pg 49]

congestion that the kicks of the Honorable Pulaski and the cuffs of Colin MacLeod did little to break.

The boss of the Busters kept stealing glances at the girl, as though to challenge her notice, and perhaps her admiration, as she saw him thus a master of men.

It was then that the spirit of anger and rebellion seething in Dwight Wade—the cumulative poison of his many insults—stirred him to bitter provocation in his own turn.

The girl carried a heavy leather suit-case, and now, waiting for the press of men to escape from the car, she rested it against a seat, and sighed in weariness and vexation.

With quiet masterfulness Wade took it from her hand and smiled into the astonished gray eyes that flashed back over her shoulder at him. It was a smile that not even a maiden, offended as she had been, could resist.

"I will assist you to—to—I believe it is a stage-coach that takes us on," he said. "Let me do this, so that you won't remember me simply as a man whose own troubles made him a boor."

MacLeod's look of fury as he saw the act fell full upon them both, and the girl resented it.

"I thank you," she returned, smiling at her squire with a little exaggeration of cordiality. And when at last the platforms were cleared they stepped out, still talking.

All about them men were kneeling, fastening the latches of their spike-sole shoes.

"Rod Ide's gal has got a new mash!" hiccoughed one burly chap, leering at them as they passed. At the instant MacLeod, at their heels, struck the man brutally across the mouth, shouldered Wade roughly, and spoke to the girl, his round hat crumpled in his big fist. [Pg 50]

"Miss Nina," he stammered, "I'm—I'm sorry for forgetting that you were in that car awhile back. But you know I ain't used to takin' talk of that sort. So, let me see you safe aboard the stage, like an old friend should."

"This gentleman will look after me," said the girl. She tried to be calm, but her voice trembled. A city woman, confident of the regard due to woman, would not have feared so acutely. But Nina Ide, bred on the edge of the forest, was accustomed to see the brute in man spurn restraint. The passions flaming in the eyes of these two were familiar to her. She expected little more from the gentleman in the way of consideration for her feelings than she did from the lumber-jack. "You go along about your business, Colin," she said, hastily. "I can attend to mine."

"Give me that!" snarled the boss, his eyes red under their meeting brows. In his rage he forgot the deference due the woman.

"See if you can take it!" growled back the other. With him the girl was only the means to the end that his whole nature now lusted for. He forgot her.

Wade looked for the young giant to strike. But the woods duello has its vagaries.

MacLeod lifted one heavy shoe and drove its spiked sole down upon Wade's foot, the brads puncturing the thin leather. With his foe thus anchored, he clutched for the valise. But ere his victim had time to strike, the furious, flaming, bristling face of the Honorable Pulaski was between them, and his elbows, hard as pine knots, drove them apart with wicked thrustings. As they staggered back the old lumber baron, used to playing the tyrant mediator, grabbed an axe from the nearest man of the crew.

"I'll brain the one that lifts a finger!" he howled. "What did I tell you about this? Who is running this crew? Whose money is paying you? Get back, you hounds!" [Pg 51]

Once more, though he gasped in the pure madness of his rage, MacLeod was cowed by his despot. He turned and began marshalling the crew aboard great wagons that were waiting at the station.

"You take your seat in that wagon, young man!" roared Britt, shaking that hateful, hairy fist under Wade's nose. "We'll see about all this later! Get onto that wagon!"

At the opposite side of the station was the mail-stage, a dusty, rusty conveyance with a lurching canopy of cracked leather above its four seats, and four doleful horses waiting the snap of the driver's whip.

Without a word to Britt, Wade led the way to the coach, and set the suit-case between the seats. He limped as he walked, and his teeth were set in pain.

He gave his hand to the girl, and she silently accepted the assistance and took her place in the coach.

Then he turned to meet the fiery gaze of the Honorable Pulaski, who had followed close on their heels, choking with expletives.

"I reckon I see through this now," he growled. "Tryin' to cut out the cleanest feller in the Umcolcus with your dude airs! But Rod Ide's girl ain't to be fooled by city notions. She knows a man when she sees him." He chucked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of MacLeod, busy with the laggard men. "Go aboard, and let this be an end of your meddling, young man."

"You just speak for yourself and attend to your business, Mr. Britt!" cried the girl, with a spirit that cowed even the tyrant's bluster. "'Rod Ide's girl,' as you call her, can choose all her own affairs, and you needn't scowl at me, for I'm not on your pay-roll and I'm not afraid of you!"

[Pg 52]

She turned to Wade with real gentleness in her tones.

"I'm afraid he hurt you. It's a rough country up here. If you hadn't been trying to help me it wouldn't have happened. He had no right to—" She checked herself suddenly, and her cheeks flamed.

"That wasn't a fair twit about my sticking my nose into your affairs, Miss Nina," protested Britt, and turning from her he visited his rage vicariously on his time-keeper, taking him by the arm and starting to drag him. "I told you to get aboard!" he rasped. "And when my men that I hire don't do as I tell 'em to do, I kick 'em aboard—and a time-keeper is no better than a swamper with me when he leaves this railroad. You want to understand those things and save lots of trouble."

"You take your hand off my arm, Mr. Britt," said the young man. He did not speak loudly, but there was something in his voice that impressed the Honorable Pulaski, who knew men.

"Now," resumed Wade, "for reasons of my own and that I don't propose to explain, I am going to ride to Castonia settlement on this mail-stage."

"It's safe to go on the wagon," persisted Britt, more mildly. "I tell you, if you mind your own business, I won't let him lick you."

With face gray and rigid at an insult that the old man couldn't understand, Wade opened his mouth, then shut it, turned his back, and climbed aboard the coach. The girl moved along to the farther end, and gropingly and blindly, without thought as to where he was sitting, he took the place beside her.

He remembered that as they drove away Britt shook that hairy fist at him, and that some rude roisterer on the wagons lilted some doggerel about "the chaney man." And through a sort of red mist he saw the face of Colin MacLeod.

[Pg 53]

They were miles along the rough road before he looked at the girl. At the movement of his head she turned her own, and in the piquant face above the big white bow of the veil he saw real sympathy.

He did not speak, but he looked into her clear eyes—eyes that had the country girl's spirit and a resourcefulness beyond her years—and from them he drew a certain comfort.

"Mr. Wade," she said, at last, "I'm only nineteen years old, but up in Castonia settlement we see what men are without the wrappings on them. I don't know much about real society, but I've read about it, and I guess society women get sort of dazzled by the outside polish and don't see things very clear. But up our way, with what they see of men, girls get to be women young. You are a college graduate and a school-teacher and all that, and I'm only nineteen, but—well, it just seems to me I can't help reaching over like this—"

She patted his arm.

"—And what I feel like saying is, 'Poor boy!'"

There was such vibrant sympathy in her voice that though he set his teeth, clinched his hands, and summoned all his resolution, his nervous strain slackened and the tears came into his eyes—tears that had been slowly welling ever since he had turned from John Barrett's door.

It was woman's attempt at consolation that broke through his restraint.

"I don't blame you much for squizzlin' a little," broke in the stage-driver, who saw this emotion without catching the conversation. "He did bring his huck down solid when he stamped. But I've been calked myself, and a tobacker poultice allus does the business for me—northin' better for p'isen in a wound."

The chaney man reached his hand to the girl under the shelter of the seat-back.

[Pg 54]

"Shake!" he said, simply. "I've come up here to stay awhile, and it's good to feel that I've got one friend that's—that's a woman."

"And you—" She faltered and paused to listen, lips apart.

"I've come to stay," he repeated, grimly.

He listened too.

Far behind them they heard the dull rumble of the heavy wagons over the ledges. The raucous howling of the revellers had something wolf-like about it. It seemed to close the line of retreat. Ahead were the big woods, looming darkly on the mountain ridges—that vast region of man to man, and the devil take the weak.

And again he said, not boastingly, but with a quiet setting of his tense jaw muscles:

"I've come to stay."

DURING THE PUGWASH HANG-UP

"With eddies and rapids it's
middlin' tough,
To worry a log-drive through.
But to manage a woman is more
than enough
For a West Branch driving
crew."

—Leeboomook Song.



ust how Tommy Eye escaped so nimbly from the ruck of the fight at the foot of Pugwash Hill he never knew nor understood, his wits not being of the clearest that day—and the others being too busy to notice.

But he did escape. One open-handed buffet sent him reeling into and through some wayside bushes. He sat on his haunches on the other side a moment like a jack-rabbit and surveyed the stirring scene, and then made for higher ground. At the end of an enervating sixty-days' sentence in the county jail—his seventeenth summer "on the bricks" for the same old bibulous cause; second offence, and no money left to pay the fine—Tommy did not feel fit for the fray.

He sat on a boulder at the top of the rise for a little while and gazed down on them—the hundred men of "Britt's Busters," bound in for the winter cutting on Umcolcus waters. They were fighting aimlessly, "mixing it up" without any special vindictiveness, and Tommy, an expert in inebriety, sagely concluded that they were too drunk to furnish amusement. So he rolled over the boulder and nestled down to ease his headache, knowing, as a teamster should know, that Britt's tote wagons were to hold up at the Pugwash for a half-hour's rest and bait.

[Pg 56]

For that matter, a fight at the Pugwash was no novel incident—not for Tommy Eye, at least, veteran of many a woods campaign.

The hang-up at the hill is a teamster's rule as ancient as the tote road.

And the fight of the ingoing crew is as regular as the halt. All the way from the end of the railroad the men have been crowded on the wagons, with nothing to do but express personal differences of opinion. Every other man is a stranger to his neighbor, for employment offices do not make a specialty of introductions. As the principal matter of argument on the tote wagons is which is the best man, the Pugwash Hill wait, where there is soft ground and elbow-room, makes a most inviting opportunity to settle disputes and establish an *entente cordiale* that will last through all the winter.

Two other men—two men who had been on the outskirts of the fray from its beginning—came leisurely up the hill, and sat down on the boulder behind which was couched Tommy Eye.

One was the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt; the other was Colin MacLeod.

The Honorable Pulaski tucked the end of a big cigar into the opening in his bristly gray beard where his mouth was hidden, and lighted it. As an after-thought he offered one to MacLeod. The young man, his elbows on his knees, his flushed face turned aside, shook his head sullenly.

"Well, you're having a run of cuss-foolishness that even our champion fool, Tommy Eye himself, couldn't match," snorted the old man, rolling his tongue around his cigar.

Tommy, behind the rock, tipped one ear up out of the moss.

[Pg 57]

"Here you go pouncing into that car to-day, where my new time-keeper was, and go to picking a fuss with him, and—"

"He was the one that started it, Mr. Britt," said the boss, in the dull monotone of one who has said the same thing many times before.

"Don't bluff me!" snapped the Honorable Pulaski. "You were gossiping over a lot of his private business with that Ide girl—and bringing me into it, too. You can't fool me! Old Jeff back in the car heard it all. The young feller had a right to put in an oar to stop you, and he did it, and I'll back him in it."

"Yes, and you went and introduced him to Miss Ide—that's some more of your backin'," said MacLeod, bitterly.

"Just common politeness—just common politeness!" cried Britt, waving his cigar impatiently. "That girl hasn't said she'd marry you, has she? No! I knew she hadn't. Well, she's got a right to talk with nice young men that I introduce to her, and there's nothing to it to make a fuss over, MacLeod—only common politeness. You're making a fool of yourself, and setting the girl herself against you by acting jealous like that before the face and eyes of every one. That's enough time

and talk wasted on girls. Now, quit it, and get your mind on your work. You understand that I won't have any more of this scrapping in my crew."

With a blissful disregard of consistency, he gazed through smoke-clouds down at the men below, who were listlessly exchanging blows or rolling on the ground, locked in close embrace.

MacLeod stood up, and tugged the collar of his wool jacket away from his throat.

"I ain't much of a man to talk my business over with any one, Mr. Britt," he said. "But you are putting this thing on a business basis, and you don't have the right to do it. I ain't engaged to Nina Ide, and I 'ain't asked her to be engaged to me, for the time 'ain't come right yet. But there ain't nobody else in God's world goin' to have her but me. She ain't too good for me, even if her father is old Rod Ide. I'll have money some day myself. I've got some now. I can buy the clothes when I need 'em, if that's all that a girl likes. But it ain't all they like—not the kind of a girl like Nina Ide is. She knows a man when she sees him. She knows that I'm a man, square and straight, and one that loves her well enough to let her walk on him, and that's the kind of a man for a girl born and bred on the edge of the woods."

[Pg 58]

He drew up his lithe, tall body, and snapped his head to one side with almost a click of the rigid neck.

"Along comes that college dude," he snarled, "just thrown over by a city girl and lookin' for some one else to make love to, and he cuts in"—his voice broke—"you see what he done, Mr. Britt! He helped her off the train before I could get there. He put her on the stage, and rode away with her while you were makin' me handle the men. And he's ridin' with her now, damn him, and he's a-talkin' with her and laughin' at me behind my back!" He shook both fists at the road to Castonia settlement, winding over the hill, and there were tears on his cheeks.

"He probably isn't laughing very much," replied Britt, dryly. "Not since you plugged that spike boot of yours down on his foot there on the depot platform. A nasty trick, MacLeod, that was."

"I wish I'd 'a' ground it off," muttered the boss. He struck his spikes against the boulder with such force that a stream of fire followed the kick.

"He can't do it—he can't do it, Mr. Britt! He can't steal her! I've loved her too long, and I'll have her. You just gave off your orders to me about fighting. You don't say anything to those cattle down there fighting about nothin'. You let them settle their troubles. Here I am!" He struck his breast. "For five years, first up in the dark of the mornin', last to bed in the dark of the night. I've sweat and swore and frozen in the slush and snow and sleet, driving your crew to make money for you. And I've waded from April till September, I've broken jams and taken the first chance in the white water, so that I could get your drive down ahead of the rest. And now, when it comes to a matter of hell and heaven for me, you tell me I can't stand like a man for my own. You call it wastin' time!"

[Pg 59]

He bent over the Honorable Pulaski, his face purple, his eyes red. Britt took out his cigar and held it aside to blink up at this disconcerting young madman.

"I tell you, you are taking chances, Mr. Britt. You have bradded me on, and told me that a man of the woods always gets what he wants if he goes after it right. Twice to-day you have stood between me and what I want. You've let a college dude take the sluice ahead of me. I know you pay me my money, but don't you do that again. I'm going to have that girl, I say! The man that steps in ahead of me, he's goin' to die, Mr. Britt, and the man that steps between me and that man, when I'm after him, he dies, too. And if that sounds like a bluff, then you haven't got Colin MacLeod sized up right, that's all!"

The Honorable Pulaski winked rapidly under the other's savage regard. He knew when to bluster and he knew when to palter.

"MacLeod," he said, at last, getting up off the rack with a grunt, "what a man that works for me does in the girl line is none of my business. But after that kind of brash talk I might suggest to you that a cell in state-prison isn't going to be like God's out-doors that you're roaming around in now."

[Pg 60]

The boss sneered contemptuously.

"Furthermore, this college dude, that you are talking about as though he were a water-logged jill-poke, was something in the football line when he was in college—I don't know what, for I don't know anything about such foolishness—but, anyway, from what I hear, it was up to him to break the most arms and legs, and he did it, I understand. This is only in advice, MacLeod—only in advice," he cried, flapping a big hand to check impatient interruption. "You saw when Tommy Eye, the drunken fool, fell under the train at the junction to-day, as he is always doing, that feller Wade picked him up with one hand and lugged him like a pound of sausage-meat—saved the fool's life, and didn't turn a hair over it. So, talk a little softer about killing, my boy, and, best of all, wait till you find out that he wants the girl or the girl wants *you!*"

He walked down the hill.

"Go to blazes with your advice, you old fool!" growled MacLeod, under his breath. "He's lookin' for it; he's achin' for it! He gave me a look to-day that no man has given me in ten years and had eyes left open to look a second time. He'll get it!"

As he turned to follow his employer he saw the recumbent Tommy, and went out of his way far enough to give him a vicious kick.

"Get onto the wagons, you rum-keg, or you'll walk to Castonia!"

"Be jigged if I won't walk!" groaned Tommy, surveying the retreating back of the boss with sudden weak hatred. "So there was a man who saved my life to-day when I didn't know it! And there was another man who kicked me when I did know it! It's the chaney man he's after, and the chaney man was good to me! I'll make a fair fight of it if my legs hold out, and that's all any man could do."

[Pg 61]

The horses were still munching fodder, and the gladiators, thankful for an excuse to stop the fray, were stupidly listening to a harangue by the Honorable Pulaski, who was explaining what would be allowed and what would not be allowed in his camps.

Tommy Eye ducked around the bushes and took the road with a woodsman's lope, his wobbly knees getting stronger as the exercise cleared his brain.

A woodman's lope is not impressive, viewed with a sprinter's eye. Nor is a camel's stride. But either is a great devourer of distance. So it happened that Tommy Eye, sweat-streaked and breathing hard, caught up with the sluggish Castonia stage while it was negotiating the last rock-strewn hill a half-mile outside the settlement.

Dwight Wade, time-keeper of the Busters, heard the stertorous puffing, and looked around to see Tommy Eye clinging to the muddy axle and towing behind. Tommy divided an amiable and apologetic grin between Wade and the girl beside him.

"I'm only—workin' out—the—the budge!" Tommy explained, between the jerks of the wagon. "Don't mind me!"

Down the half-mile of dusty declivity into Castonia, the only smooth road between the railroad and the settlement, the stage made its usual gallant dash with chuckling axle-boxes and the spanking of splay hoofs.

And Tommy Eye came limply slamming on behind.

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 62]

AS FOUGHT BEFORE THE "IT-'LL-GIT-YE CLUB"

"We dug him out of his blankets, and hauled him out to the light—
His eyes were red with the tears he had shed, but now he wanted to fight.
And screaming a string of curses, he struck as he raved and swore—
Floored Joe Lacrosse and the swamping boss and announced he was ready for more."

—The Fight at Damphy's.



Civilization sets her last outpost at Castonia in the plate-glass windows of Rodburd Ide's store. Civilization had some aggravating experiences in doing this. Four times hairy iconoclasts from the deep woods came down, gazed disdainfully at these windows as an effort to put on airs, and smashed them with rocks dug out of the dusty road. Four times Rodburd Ide collected damages and renewed the windows—and in the end civilization won out.

Those experienced in such things can tell a Castonia man anywhere by the pitch of his voice. Everlastingly, Umcolcus pours its window-jarring white waters through the Hulling Machine's dripping ledges. Here enters Ragmuff stream, bellowing down the side of Tumbledick, a mountain that crowds Castonia close to the river. Most of the men of the settlement do their talking on the platform of Ide's store, with the spray spitting into their faces and the waters roaring at them. And go where he will, a Castonia man carries that sound in his ears and talks like a fog-horn.

[Pg 63]

The satirists of the section call Ide's store platform "The Blowdown." In the woods a blowdown is a wreck of trees. On Ide's platform the loafers are the wrecks of men. Here at the edge of the woods, at the jumping-off place, the forest sets out its grim exhibits and mutely calls, "Beware!" There are men with one leg, men with one arm, men with no arms at all; there are men with hands maimed by every vagary of mischievous axe or saw. There are men with shanks like broomsticks—men who survived the agonies of freezing. There is always a fresh subscrip-

paper hung on the centre post in Ide's store, meekly calling for "sums set against our names" to aid the latest victim.

Wade, looking at this pathetic array of cripples as he slowly swung himself over the wheel of the stage, felt that he was in congenial company; for the foot that MacLeod had so brutally jabbed with his spikes had stiffened in its shoe. It ached with a dull, rancor-stirring pain. When he limped across the platform into the store, carrying the girl's valise, he hobbled ungracefully. The loungers looked after him with fraternal sympathy.

"The boss spiked him down to the deepo," advised Tommy, slatting sweat from his forehead with muddy forefinger. "He's the new time-keeper."

"Never heard of the boss calkin' the chaney man before," remarked Martin McCrackin, rapping his pipe against his peg-leg to dislodge the dottle.

Tommy twisted his face into a prodigious wink, jabbed a thumb over his shoulder towards the store door, and gazed archly around at the circle of faces.

"He cut the boss out with the Ide girl!" He whispered this hoarsely.

The listeners looked at the door where Wade and the girl had disappeared, and then stared at one another. They had viewed the arrival of the stage with the dull lethargy of the hopelessly stranded. Now they displayed a reviving interest in life. [Pg 64]

"And that was all he done to him—step on his foot?" demanded a thin man, impatiently twitching the stubs of two arms, off at the elbows.

"Old P'laski got in!" said Tommy, with meaning. "Used his old elbows for pick-holes and fended Colin off."

"It will git him, though!" said another. He had shapeless stumps of legs encased in boots like exaggerated whip-sockets.

"You bet it will git him!" agreed McCrackin.

Rodburd Ide, busy, chatty, accommodating little man, trotted out of the store at this instant with a handful of mail to distribute among his crippled patrons.

"That's what the river boys call this crowd here," he said, over his shoulder, to Wade, who followed him. "The 'It-'ll-git-ye Club.' I guess It *will* get ye some time up in this section! Here's the last one, Mr. Wade. Aholiah Belmore—that's the man with the hand done up. Shingle-saw took half his fin. Well, 'Liah, don't mind! No one ever saw a whole shingle-sawyer. It's lucky it wasn't a snub-line that got ye. There's what a snub-line can do, Mr. Wade."

He pointed to the armless man and to the man with the shapeless legs.

"All done at the same time—bight took 'em and wound 'em round the snub-post."

"And it's a pity it wa'n't our necks instead of our legs and arms," growled one of the men—"trimmed like a saw-log and no good to nobody!"

"Never say die—never say die!" chirruped the jovial "Mayor of Castonia." He threw back his head in his favorite attitude, thrust out his gray chin beard and tapped his pencil cheerily against the obtrusive false teeth showing under his smoothly shaven upper lip. "Your subscription-papers are growing right along, boys. The first thing you know you'll have enough to buy artificial arms and legs, such as we were looking at in the advertisements the other day. It beats all what they can make nowadays—teeth, arms, legs, and everything." [Pg 65]

"They can't make new heads, can they?" inquired Tommy Eye, whose mien was that of a man who had something important to impart and was casting about for a way to do it gracefully.

"Who needs a new head around here?" smilingly inquired the "mayor."

"Him," jerked out Tommy, pointing to Wade. "Leastwise, he will in about ten minutes after the boss gits here." And having thus delicately opened the subject, Tommy's tongue rushed on. "He was good to me when I didn't know it!" His finger again indicated the time-keeper. "I ain't goin' to see him done up any ways but in a fair fight. But *he's* comin'. There's blood in his eyes and hair on his teeth. I heard him a-talkin' it over to himself—and he's goin' to kill the 'chaney man' for a-gittin' his girl away from him. Now," concluded Tommy, with a hysterical catch in his throat, "if it can be made a fair fight, knuckles up and man to man, then, says I, here's your fair notice it's comin'. But there's a girl in it, and girls don't belong in a fair fight—and I'm afeard—I'm afeard! You'd better run, 'chaney man.'"

Nina Ide was in the door behind her father. Her face was crimson, and she winked hard to keep the tears of vexed shame back—for the faces of the loungers told her that Tommy had been imparting other confidences. She did not dare to steal even a glance at Wade. She was suffering too much herself from the brutal situation. [Pg 66]

"A girl! 'His girl!'" repeated Ide, seeing there was something he did not understand. "Whose—"

"Father!" cried his daughter. And when he would have continued to question, snapping his sharp eyes from face to face, she stamped her foot in passion and cried, "Father!" in a manner that checked him. He stood surveying her with open mouth and staring eyes.

Dwight Wade had fully understood the quizzical glances that were levelled at him. It was not a time—in this queer assemblage—for the observance of the rigid social conventions. Taking the father aside would be misconstrued—and slander would still pursue the girl.

“Mr. Ide,” he cried, his eyes very bright and his cheeks flushing, “I want you and the others to understand this thing. It’s all a mistake. Mr. Britt introduced me to your daughter, and I paid her a few civilities, such as any young lady might expect to receive. But I seem to have stirred up a pretty mess. It’s a shameful insult to your daughter—this—this—oh, that man MacLeod must be a fool!”

“He is!” said the girl, indignantly.

“And he’s a fighter,” muttered Tommy Eye.

Rodburd Ide clutched his beard and blinked his round eyes, much perplexed.

“It isn’t a very nice thing, any way you look at it—this having two young men scrapping through this region about my girl. It isn’t that I don’t expect her to get some attention, but this is carrying attention too far.” He took her by the arm and led her to one side. “Nina, there is nothing between you and Colin MacLeod?”

“Nothing, father. We have danced together at the hall, and he has walked home with me—and that’s the only excuse he has for making a fool of himself in this way.”

[Pg 67]

“And—and this new man, here?”

“I never saw him till this very day! And he’s in love with John Barrett’s daughter. Oh, what an idiot MacLeod is! This stranger will think we’re all fools up here!” Tears of rage and shame filled her eyes.

Ide’s gaze, wandering from her face to Wade and then to the loafers, saw one of Britt’s great wagons topping the distant rise, and he heard a wild chorus of hailing yells.

“You run up to the house, girl,” he said.

“I’ll not,” she replied. And when he began to frown at her she clasped his arm with both her hands and murmured: “He’s a stranger and a gentleman, father, and they’re abusing him. He is nothing to me. He’s in love with another girl. It was through being obliging and kind to me that this horrible mistake has been made. Now, I’ll not run away and leave him to suffer any more.”

Rodburd Ide, an indulgent father, scratched his nose reflectively.

“It isn’t the style of the Ide family to leave friends on the chips, Nina,” he said—“not even when they’re brand new friends. We know what an ingoing lumber crew is, and he probably doesn’t, and it’s the green man that always gets the worst of it. So I’ll tell you what to do: Invite him up to the house, and you entertain him until P’laski and I can get this thing smoothed over.”

Tommy Eye, hovering near in piteous trepidation lest his kindly offices should miscarry, overheard the invitation that father and daughter extended to the young man, who was gloomily eying the approach of the wagon.

“Yess’r, they’ve got the right of it,” stammered Tommy, unluckily. “You’ll git it if ye don’t—and the ‘It-’ll-git-ye Club’ will see ye git it. Ye’d best run!”

[Pg 68]

Wade looked into the flushed face of the girl, at the officious father of commiserating countenance, and at the loungers who had heard Tommy’s condescending counsel and were looking at him with a sort of scornful pity.

Again that strange, sullen, gnawing rage at the general attitude of the world seized upon him. He felt a bristling at the back of his neck and in his hair—the primordial bristling of the beast’s mane.

“It is kind of you to invite a stranger,” he said, “but I fear that among these peculiar people even that kindness would be misconstrued. I belong with Britt’s crew. I’ll stay here.”

There was that in his voice which checked further appeal. The girl stood back against the wall of the store.

The Honorable Pulaski was the first off the wagon, and he greeted Ide with rough cordiality. When the latter began to whisper rapidly in his ear, he shook his head.

“I’ve wasted a good deal of valuable time and some temper holding those two young fools apart to-day,” he snapped. “The last thing MacLeod wanted to do was to lick me. Now, I’m too old to be mixed up in love scrapes. I’m going over to measure that spool stock, and the one that’s alive when I get back, I’ll load him onto the wagon and we’ll keep on up the river.” He strode away, leaving the “mayor” champing his false teeth in resentful disappointment.

But the autocrat of Castonia had a courage of his own. He set back his head and marched up to MacLeod, who was standing in the middle of the road, his jacket thrown back, his thumbs in his belt.

“Colin,” he demanded, indifferent as to listeners, “what’s all this about my girl? Can’t she come along home, minding her own business like the good girl that she is, without a fuss that has set

[Pg 69]

all the section wagging tongues? I thought you were a different chap from this!"

"He had his lie made up when he got here, did he?" growled MacLeod.

"I believe what my own girl says," the father retorted.

"So he's got as far as that, has he? I tell ye, Rod Ide, if you don't know enough—don't care enough about your own daughter to keep her out of the clutches of a cheap masher like that—the kind I've seen many a time before—then—it's where I grab in. Ye'll live to thank me for it. I say, ye will! You don't know what you're talking about now. But you'll know your friends in the end."

He put up one arm, stiffened it against Ide's breast, and slowly but relentlessly pushed him aside.

Viewed in the code of larrigan-land, the situation was one that didn't admit of temporizing or mediation. The set faces of the men who looked on showed that the trouble between these two, brooding through the hours of that long day, was now to be settled. As for his men, Colin MacLeod had his prestige to keep—and a man who had suffered a stranger to carry off the girl he loved without fitting rebuke could have no prestige in a lumber camp. And it was prestige that made him worth while, made him a boss who could get work out of men.

The uncertain quantity in the situation was the stranger.

With one movement of heads, all eyes turned to him.

He was not a woodsman, and they expected from him something different from the usual duello of the woods.

They got it!

For instead of waiting for the champion of the Umcolcus to take the initiative, this city man [Pg 70] calmly walked off the store platform at this juncture and bearded the champion.

"And there ye have it—two bucks and one doe!" grunted old Martin. "The same old woods wrassle."

The boss dropped his hands at his side as the time-keeper approached. He grinned evilly when he noted the limp. Wade came close and spoke without anger.

"I see you are still determined to be a fool, MacLeod. I want no trouble with you. Aren't you willing to settle all this fuss like a man?"

"That's what I'm here for," replied the boss, with grim significance.

"Then go and offer an apology to that young lady. Do it, and I'll cancel the one you owe to me."

If Wade had been seeking to provoke, he could have chosen no more unfortunate words.

"Apology!" howled MacLeod. "Do ye hear it, boys? Talkin' to me like I was a Micmac and didn't know manners! Here's an Umcolcus apology for ye, ye putty-faced dude!"

His lunge was vicious, but in his contempt for his adversary it was wholly unguarded. A woodsman's rules of battle are simple. They can be reduced to the single precept: Do your man! Knuckles, butting head, a kick like a game-cock with the spiked boots, grappling and choking—not one is called unfair. MacLeod simply threw himself at his foe. It was blood-lust panting for the clutch of him.

Those who told it afterwards always regretfully said it was not a fight—not a fight as the woods looks at such diversions. No one who saw it knew just how it happened. They simply saw that it had happened.



"WADE STOOD ABOVE THE FALLEN FOE"

To the former football centre of Burton it was an opening simple as "the fool's gambit" in chess. His tense arms shot forward, his hands clasped the wrists of the flying giant with snaps like a steel trap's clutch, his head hunched between his shoulders, he went down and forward, tugging at the wrists, and by his own momentum MacLeod made his helpless somersault over the college man's broad back.

[Pg 71]

And as he whirled, up lunged the shoulders in a mighty heave, and the woodsman fell ten feet away—fell with the soggy, inert, bone-cracking thud that brings a groan involuntarily from spectators. He lay where he fell, quivered after a moment, rolled, and his right arm twisted under his body in sickening fashion.

The girl gave a sharp cry, gathered her skirts about her, and ran away up the street.

"He's got it!" said 'Liah Belmore, with the professional decisiveness of the "It-'ll-git-ye Club."

"I've read about them things bein' done by the Dagoes in furrin' parts," remarked Martin McCrackin, gazing pensively on the prostrate boss, "but I never expected to see it done in a woods fight."

There was silence then for a moment—a silence so profound that the breathing of the spectators could be heard above the summer-quieted murmur of the Hulling Machine. Wade walked over and stood above the fallen foe. He was not gainsaid. Woods decorum forbids interference in a fair fight.

As he stood there a rather tempestuous arrival broke the tenseness of the situation. From the mouth of a woods road leading into the tangled mat of forest at the foot of Tumbledick came a little white stallion drawing a muddy gig.

Under the seat swung a battered tin pail in which smouldered dry fungi, giving off a trail of smoke behind—the smudge pail designed to rout the black-flies of summer and the "minges" of the later season.

An old man drove—an old man, whose long white hair fluttered from under a tall, pointed, visorless wool cap with a knitted knob on its apex. Whiskers, parted by his onrush, streamed past his ears.

[Pg 72]

He pulled up so suddenly in front of Ide's store that his little stallion skated along in the dust.

"Hullo," he chirped, cocking his head to peer, "Cole MacLeod down!"

He whirled, leaped off the back of the seat, and ran nimbly to the prostrate figure.

"Broken!" he jerked, fumbling the arm. "No—no! Out of joint!"

"Let the man alone," commanded Wade. "He'll need proper attendance."

"Proper attendance!" shrilled the little old man, with snapping eyes. "Proper attendance! And I guess that you haven't travelled much that you don't know me. Here, two of you, come and sit on this man! I'll have him right in a jiffy. Don't know me, eh?" He again turned a scornful gaze on the time-keeper. "Prophet Eli, the natural bone-setter, mediator between the higher forces and

man, disease eradicator, the 'charming man'—I guess this is your first time out-doors! Here, two of you come and hold Cole MacLeod!"

When Wade, knitting his brows, manifested further symptoms of interference, Rodburd Ide took him by the arm and led him aside.

"Let the old man alone," he said. "He'll know what to do. A little cracked, but he knows medicine better than half the doctors that ever got up as far as this."

They heard behind them a dull snap and a howl of pain from MacLeod.

"There she goes back," said Ide. "He's lived alone on Tumbledick for twenty years, and I suppose there's a story back of him, but we never found it out this way. We just call him Prophet Eli and listen to his predictions and drink his herb tea and let him set broken bones and charm away disease—and there's no kick coming, for he will never take a cent from any one."

[Pg 73]

Four men had carried MacLeod to the wagon. His forehead was bleeding but he was conscious, for the sudden wrench and bitter pain of the dislocated shoulder had stirred his faculties.

"Well, you've had it out, have you?" demanded the Honorable Pulaski, coming around the corner of the store and taking in the scene. "What did I tell you, MacLeod? Listen to me next time!"

"And you listen to me, too!" squalled MacLeod, his voice breaking like a child's. "This thing ain't over! It's me or him, Mr. Britt. If he goes in with your crew, I stay out. If you want him, you can have him, but you can't have me. And you know what I've done with your crews!"

"You don't mean that, Colin," blustered Britt.

"God strike me dead for a liar if I don't."

"It's easier to get time-keepers than it is bosses," said the Honorable Pulaski, with the brisk decision natural to him. He whirled on Wade. "You'd better go home, young man. You're too much of a royal Bengal tiger to fit a crew of mine." He turned his back and began to order his men aboard the tote teams.

Wade stood looking after them as the wagons "rucked" away, his face working with an emotion he could not suppress.

"Well, that's Pulaski all over!" remarked Ide at his elbow. "He'll fell a saw-log across a brook any time so as to get across without wetting his feet, and then go off and leave the log there."

He stood back and looked the young man over from head to feet, with the shrewd eye of one appraising goods.

"Mr. Wade," he said, at last, "will you step into my back office with me a moment?"

When they were there, the store-keeper perched himself on a high stool, hooked his toes under a round, thrust his face forward, and said:

[Pg 74]

"Here's my business, straight and to the point. I'm a little something in the lumbering line up this way, myself. What with land, stumpage rights, and tax titles I've got two townships, but they're off the main river, and I haven't done much with 'em. I'm going to be honest, and admit I can't do much with 'em so long as Britt and his gang control roll-dams, flowage, and the water for the driving-pitch the way they do. They haven't got the law with 'em, but that makes no difference to that crowd, the way they run things. Now, you don't know the logging business, but a bright chap like you can learn it mighty quick. And you've shown to-day that there are some things you don't have to learn, and that's how to handle men—and that's the big thing in this country as things are now. What I want to ask you, fair and plain, is, do you want a job?"

"What, as a prize-fighter?" asked the young man, surlily.

"No, s'r, but as a boss that can boss, and has got the courage to hold up his end on this river! I know this all sounds as though I were temporarily out of my head in a business way, but you've made a reputation in the last half hour here that's worth ten thousand to the man that hires you. There's money in the lumbering business, Mr. Wade. The men that are in it right are getting rich. But you've got to get into it picked end to. Here's the way you and I are fixed: you might wait for ten years and not find the opportunity I'm offering you. I might wait ten years and not find just the man I could afford to take in with me. I've sized you. I know what sort your references will be when I ask for 'em. You seem right. Are you interested enough to listen to figures?"

And then Ide, accepting amazed silence as assent, rattled off into his details. At the end of half an hour Wade was listening with a new gleam of resolution in his eyes. At the end of an hour he was blotting his signature at the bottom of a preliminary article of agreement that was to serve until a lawyer could draw one more ample.

[Pg 75]

"And now," said Ide, slamming his safe door and whirling the knob, "it's past supper-time and my folks are waitin'. And it's settled that you stay. I say, it's settled! Where else would you stop in this God-forsaken bunch of shacks? I've got a big house and something to eat. Come along, Mr. Wade! I'm hungry, and we'll do the rest of our talkin' on the road."

The young man followed him without a word. And thus entered Dwight Wade into the life of Castonia, and into the battle of strong men in the north woods.

In front of the store, as they issued, the "It-'ll-git-ye Club" was still in session, as though waiting for something. They got what they were waiting for.

"Boys," announced their satisfied "mayor," "I want to introduce to you my new partner, Mr. Dwight Wade—though he don't really need any introduction in this region after to-day. Bub!" he called to a youngster, "get a wheelbarrow and carry Mr. Wade's duffle up to my house." He pointed to the young man's meagre baggage that had been thrown off the tote wagon.

As Wade turned away he caught the keen eye of Prophet Eli fixed on him. The eye was a bit wild, but there was humor there, too. And the cracked falsetto of the old man's voice followed him as he walked away beside his new sponsor:

"Oh, the little brown bull came down from
the mountain,

Shang, ro-ango, whango-wey!
And as he was feelin' salutacious,
Chased old Pratt a mile, by gracious,
Licked old Shep and two dog Towsers,
Then marched back home with old Pratt's
trousers.

Whango-whey!"

[Pg 76]

"Yes, as I was tellin' you a spell ago—just a little cracked!" apologized Ide. "There's my house, there! The one with the tower. It would look better to me, Mr. Wade, if only my wife had lived to enjoy it with me." But his eyes lighted at sight of his daughter. She was standing at the gate waiting for them. "Her own mother over again, and the best girl in the whole north country, sir! It was man's work you did there to-day for the sake of my girl and her good name—I only wish her father had the muscle to do as much for her." He stretched out his puny arms and shook his head wistfully. "But there's one thing I can do, Mr. Wade. It can't be said that Rod Ide stood by and saw you get thrown out of a job for his daughter's sake, and didn't make it square with you!"

"Is that the reason you are offering this partnership to me?" inquired the young man, his pride taking alarm.

"No, sir!" replied the little man, with emphasis. But he added, out of his honesty: "It's straight business between us, sir, but it wouldn't be human nature if your best recommendation to me wasn't the fact that you've done for my girl the service that her father ought to have done, and I'm not goin' to try to separate that from our business. But before I get done talking with you, I'll show you that by the time you've helped me to win out against Pulaski Britt and old King Spruce you'll have earned your share in this partnership."

And then, with an air that was distinctly triumphant, he pushed Wade ahead of him through the gate, chatting voluble explanation to a girl who listened with a welcoming light in her gray eyes. It was a light that cheered a roving young man who had acquired friends by such a dizzying train of circumstances.

[Pg 77]

They talked until far into the night, he and Rodburd Ide.

The next day Christopher Straight was called into the conference.

"There ain't any part of the north country that Christopher don't know," eulogized Ide, caressing the woodsman's arm. "Forty years trapper, guide, and explorer—that's his record."

Wade gazed into the quiet eyes of the veteran as he grasped his hand, and needed no further recommendation than the look old Christopher returned. There are few men in the world with such appealing qualities as those who have passed their lives in the woods and know what the woods mean. Wade realized now, after his talk with Ide, the nature of the task that he faced. Knowing that Christopher Straight was to be his companion and guide, he was heartened, having seen the man.

And with intense eagerness to be away, he completed his modest preparations for the exploring trip, and set forth towards the great unknown of the north. He had Rodburd Ide's parting hand-clasp for reassurance, his daughter's sincere godspeed for his comfort, and the chance to do battle for his love. And he walked with Christopher Straight with head erect and a heart full of new hope.

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 78]

ON MISERY GORE

"I reckon if gab had been sprawl,
He'd have climb' to the very
top notch.
As it was, though, he made just
one crawl
To a perch in a next-the-



he two men "hopped" the broad expanse of Patch Dam heath, springing from tussock to tussock of the sphagnum moss. In that mighty flat they seemed as insignificant as frogs, and their progress suggested the batrachian as they leaped and zigzagged.

Ahead bounced Christopher Straight, the few tins of his scanty cooking-kit rattling in the meal-bag pack on his back.

At his heels came Dwight Wade, blanket-roll across his shoulders and calipers and leather-sheathed axe in his hands. Sweat streamed into his eyes, and, athlete though he was, his leg muscles ached cruelly. The September sunshine shimmered hotly across the open, and the young man's head swam.

Old Christopher's keen side glance noted this. With the veteran guide's tactful courtesy towards tenderfeet, he halted on a mound and made pretence of lighting his pipe. There was not even a bead of perspiration on his face, and his crisp, gray beard seemed frosty.

"I'm ashamed of myself," blurted the young man in blunt outburst. His knees trembled as he steadied himself after his last leap. [Pg 79]

"It ain't exactly like strollin' down the shady lane, as the song says," replied old Christopher, with gentle satire. He looked away towards the fringe of distant woods.

"We could have kept on around by the Tomah trail, Mr. Wade, but I reckon you got as sick as I did of climbin' through old Britt's slash. And until he operated there last winter it used to be one of the best trails north of Castonia. I blazed it myself forty years ago."

"And just a little care in felling it would have left it open," cried the young man, indignantly.

"There was orders from Britt to drop ev'ry top across that trail that could be dropped there, Mr. Wade. So, unless they come in flyin'-machines, there's been few fishermen and hunters up the Tomah trail this season to build fires and cut tent-poles."

"Does the old hog begrudge that much from the acres he stole from the people of the State?" demanded Wade.

"He'd ruther you'd pick your teeth with your knife-blade than pull even a sliver out of a blow down," replied Christopher, mildly. He tossed his brown hand to point his quiet satire, and Wade's eyes swept the vast expanse of wood, from the nearest ridges to the dim blue of the tree-spiked horizon.

Christopher put his hand to his forehead and gazed north.

"I can show you your first peek at it, Mr. Wade," he said, after a moment. "That's old Enchanted—the blue sugar-loaf you see through Pogeys Notch there. Under that sugar-loaf is where we are bound, to Ide's holdin's."

There was a thrill for the young man in the spectacle—in the blue mountains swimming above the haze, and in the untried mystery of the miles of forest that still lay between. Even the word "Enchanted" vibrated with suggestion. [Pg 80]

The zest of wander-lust came upon him later—a zest dulled at first by two days of perspiring fatigue, uneasy slumbers under the stars, breathless scrambles through undergrowth and up rocky slopes.

"That's Jerusalem Mountain, layin' a little to the right," went on Christopher. "That's Britt's principal workin' on the east slope of that this season. He'll yard along Attean and the other streams, and run his drive into Jerusalem dead-water—and that's where you and Ide will have a chore cut out for you." The old man wrinkled his brows a bit, but his voice was still mild.

The romance oozed from Wade's thrill. The thrill became more like an angry bristling along his spine. During the days of his preparation for this trip into the north country, Rodburd Ide—suddenly become his partner by an astonishing juncture of circumstances—had spent as much time in setting forth the character of the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt as he had in instructing his neophyte in the duties of a timber explorer. As a matter of fact, Ide left it mostly to old Christopher to be mentor and instructor in the art of "exploring," as search for timber in the north woods is called. Ide was better posted on the acerbities and sinuosities of Britt's character than he was on the values of standing timber and the science of economical "twitch-roads," and, with sage purpose, he had freely given of this information to his new partner.

"Don't worry about the explorin' part—not with Christopher postin' you," Ide had cheerfully counselled, when he had shaken hands with them at the edge of Castonia clearing. "You and he together will find enough timber to be cut. But you can't get dollars for logs until they're sorted and boomed—and that part means dividin' white water with Britt next spring. So, don't spend all your time measuring trees, Wade. Measure chances!" [Pg 81]

Now, with his eyes on the promised field of battle, Wade growled under his breath.

Britt!

For four days now he had struggled behind old Christopher through tangled undergrowth of striped maple, witch hobble, and mountain holly—Mother Nature's pathetic attempt to cover with ragged and stunted growth the breast that the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt had stripped bare.

"He cut her three times," Christopher explained. "First time the virgin black growth—and as handsome a stand of timber as ye ever put calipers to; second time, the battens—all under eleven inches through; third time, even the poles. That's forestry as he practises it! He's robbin' the squirrels!"

Britt!

Wade had seen rotting tops that would have yielded logs—the refuse of the first reckless and wasteful cutting. He had passed skidways and toiled over corduroy in which thousands of feet of good spruce had been left to decay. The deploring finger of the watchful Christopher pointed out butts hacked off head high.

"The best timber in the log left standin' there, Mr. Wade. But Pulaski Britt ain't lettin' his men stop to shovel snow away."

Britt behind him, in the tangled undergrowth! Britt about him, in the straggle of trees on the hard-wood ridges! Britt ahead of him, where the black growth shaded the mountains in the blue distance! The same Britt who had so contemptuously tossed him aside as useless baggage when Foreman Colin MacLeod had demanded his discharge!

Wade clutched calipers and axe, and went leaping after old Christopher with new strength in his legs.

But in spite of the vigor that resentment lent him, he was glad when the guide tossed off his pack beside a brook that trickled under mossy rocks on the hard-wood slope. It was good to hear the tinkle of water, to feel the solid ground after the weird wobbling of the sphagnum moss, and to snuff the smoke of the handful of fire crackling under the tea-pail.

[Pg 82]

They were munching biscuits and bacon, nursing pannikins of tea between their knees, when Christopher cocked an ear, darted a glance, and mumbled a mild oath as savor to his mouthful of biscuit.

"Set to eat a snack within a mile of Misery Gore and one of them crows will appear to ye. And that's the old he one of them all."

The old man who came shuffling slowly down the path was gaunt with the leanness of want, and unkempt with the squalor of the hopelessly pauperized.

"It's one of the Misery Gore squatters, Mr. Wade. All Skeets and Bushees, and married back and forth and crossways and upside down till ev'ry man is his own grandmother, if he only knew enough to figger relationship. All State paupers, and no more sprawl to 'em than there is to a fresh-water clam."

Old Christopher, with Yankee contempt of the thrifty for the willing pauper, grumbled on in his scornful explanations after the old man sat down opposite them. Wade, accustomed to politer usages, winced before this brutal frankness. He plainly felt worse than the subject, who looked from one to the other, his blue lips slavering at sight of the food.

"It ain't no use to set there and drool like a hound pup, Jed," snapped old Christopher, cutting another slice of bacon. "We're bound in for a fortnit's explorin' trip, and we ain't got no grub to spare."

The patriarch of Misery Gore drew a greasy bit of brown paper from his ragged vest, unfolded it, and took out what was apparently a long hair from his grizzly beard. He pinched the thicker end between his dirty thumb and forefinger, stroked the whisker upright, and held it before his gaping mouth. The whisker slowly bent over towards Christopher.

[Pg 83]

"'Lectric!" announced the experimenter, in thick, stuffy tones, as though he were talking through a cloth.

Again he gaped his toothless mouth, and the whisker bent towards the uninviting opening.

"'Lectric!" He grinned at them, rolling his watery eyes from face to face to seek appreciation. It was evident that he considered the feat remarkable.

"Full of it! Er huh! Full of it!" He stroked his thin fingers down his arm and slatted into the air. "Storms, huh? I know. Fair weather, huh? I know. Things to happen, huh? I know. I can tell."

He hitched nearer, and looked hungrily at the bread and bacon which Christopher immediately and ruthlessly began to wrap up.

"Them wireless-telegraph folks ought to know about you," grunted the guide. "Don't pay any attention to the old fool, Mr. Wade. He don't have to beg of us. Rod Ide furnishes supplies to these critters. Law says that the assessor of the nearest plantation shall do it, and then Ide puts in his bill to the State. You needn't worry about their starvin'."

"You'd all see us starve on Misery Gore," wailed the old man. "You'd all see us starve!" His tone changed suddenly to weak anger. "Ide's an old hog. No tea, no tobarker."

"Yes, and he ain't been so lib'ral with turkeys, plush furniture, and champagne as he ought to be," growled Christopher, relishing his irony.

"If there's anything that you really need, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Skeet," snapped the guide.

"—Mr. Skeet, I'll speak to Mr. Ide about it when—"

"Mr. Wade," broke in Christopher, "what's the need of wastin' good breath on that sculch? They get all they deserve to have. They're too lazy to breathe unless it come automatic. They let their potatoes rot in the ground, and complain about starvin'. They won't cut browse to bank their shacks, and complain about freezin'. The only thing they can do to the queen's taste is steal, and it's got so in this section that there ain't a sportin'-camp nor a store wangan that it's safe to leave a thing in."

[Pg 84]

He began to stuff tins into the mouth of the meal-sack, glowering at the ancient pauper.

"They nigh put me out of bus'ness guidin' hereabouts. Stole everything from my Attean camp that I left there—and it ain't no fun to tigger-lug grub for sports on your back from Castonia."

When the last knot in the leather thong was twitched close and the bountiful meal-bag was closed, old Jed abandoned hope and wheedling. He brandished the whisker at Christopher, his moth-speckled hand quivering.

"Old butcherman!" he screamed. "'Twas my Jed. Off here!" He set the edge of his palm against his arm.

Christopher's face grew hard under his frosty beard, but his cheeks flushed when Wade gazed inquiringly at him.

"It's a thief's lookout when there's a spring-gun in a camp," he muttered. "There was a sign on the door sayin' as much. It ain't my fault if folks has been too busy stealin' to learn to read. If you ever hear anything about it up this way, Mr. Wade, you needn't blame me. They had their warnin' by word o' mouth. I'm sorry it happened, but—"

"What happened?"

"Young Jed Skeet joined the 'It-'ll-git-ye Club' a year ago with a fin shot off at the elbow."

Christopher swung his pack to his back, thrust his arms through the straps, and marched away. Wade followed with a new light on some of the accepted ethics of human combat in the big woods. Old Jed shuffled behind, a toothless Nemesis gasping maledictions in stuffy tones.

[Pg 85]

"We'll swing over the ridge and go through Misery Gore settlement, Mr. Wade," said the old guide, after a time, divining the reason for his companion's silence. "It may spoil your appetite for supper, but it'll prob'ly straighten out some of your notions about me and that spring-gun."

On the opposite slant of the ridge a ledge thrust above the hard-wood growth, and Christopher led the way out upon this lookout.

"There! Ain't that a pictur' for a Sussex shote to look at, and then take to the woods ag'in?" he inquired, with scornful disregard for any civic pride the patriarch of Misery might have taken in his community.

The few miserable habitations of poles, mud, and tarred paper were scattered around a tumble-down lumber camp, relic of the old days when "punkin pine" turreted Misery Gore.

"I suppose the man who named it stood here and looked down," suggested Wade.

"It was named Misery fifty years before this tribe ever came here. I reckon they heard of it, and it sounded as though it might suit 'em. They're a tribe by themselves, Mr. Wade. They've been driven off'n a dozen townships that I know of. Land-owners keep 'em movin'. I reckon this is their longest stop. This Gore is a surplus left in surveying Range Nine. Sort of a no man's land. But they hadn't ought to be left here."

There was so much conviction in the old guide's tone, and the contrast of utter ruin below was so great, its last touch added by the pathetic old figure in rags at the foot of the ledge, that the young man's temper flamed. He had been pondering the spring-gun episode with no very tolerant spirit.

[Pg 86]

"For God's sake, Straight, show some man-feeling. Is the selfishness of the woods down to the point where you begrudge those poor devils that wallow of stumps and rocks?"

Christopher received this outburst with his usual placidity—the placidity that only woodsmen have cultivated in its most artistic sense.

"Look, Mr. Wade!" He swept his hand in the circuit that embraced the panorama of ridges showing the first touches of frost, the hills still darkling with black growth, the valleys and the shredded forest.

"There she lays before you, ten thousand acres like a tinder-box in this weather, dry since middle August. You've seen some of the slash. But you've seen only a little of it. Under those trees as far

as eye can see there's the slash of three cuttin's. Tops propped on their boughs like wood in a fireplace. Draught like a furnace! It's bad enough now, with the green leaves still on. It's like to be worse in May before the green leaves start. And about all those dod-fired Diggers down there know or care about property interests is that a burn makes blueberries grow, and blueberries are worth six cents a quart! They have done it in other places. They're inbred till they've got water for blood and sponges for brains. When the hankerin' for blueberries catches 'em they'll put the torch to that undergrowth and refuse, and if the wind helps and the rain don't stop it they'll set a fire that will run to Pogeys Notch like racin' hosses, roar through there like blazin' tissue-paper in a chimbley flue, and then where'll your black growth on Enchanted be—the growth that's goin' to make money for you and Rod Ide? I tell ye, Mr. Wade, there's more to woods life than roamin' through and cuttin' your gal's name on the bark. There's more to loggin' than the chip-chop of a sharp axe or the rick-raw of a double-handled gashin'-fiddle. And when it comes down to profit, you can't be polite to a porcupine when he's girdlin' your spruce-trees, nor practice society airs and Christian charity with damn fools, whether they're dude fishermen tossin' cigar-stubs or such spontaneously combustin' toadstools as them that live down yonder eatin' the State's pork and flour. I'm up here with ye to tell ye something about the woods, Mr. Wade. And it ain't all goin' to be about calipers, the diffrence between the Bangor and New Hampshire scale, and how stumpage ain't profitable under nine inches top measure—no, s'r, not by a blame sight!"

[Pg 87]

There was no passion in the old man's remonstrance, but there was an earnestness that closed the young man's lips against argument. He followed silently when Christopher led the way down towards the settlement. Old Jed took up his position at the rear.

The first who accosted them was a slatternly woman, her short skirts revealing men's long-legged boots. She rapped the bowl of a pipe smartly in her palm, to show that it was empty, and demanded tobacco. She scowled, and there was no hint of coaxing in her tones.

When Wade looked at her with an expression of shocked astonishment that all his resolution could not modify, she sneered at him.

"Oh, you think we don't know northin' here—ain't wuth noticin' 'cause we live in the woods, hey? Well, we do know something. Here, Ase, tell this sport the months of the year, and then let's see if he's stingy enough to keep his plug in his pocket."

Ase, plainly her son, lubberly and man-grown, roared without bashfulness:

"Jan'warry, Feb'darry, Septober, Ockjuber, Fourth o' July, St. Padrick's Day, and Cris'mus— gimme a chaw!"

[Pg 88]

Two or three men lounged out-of-doors—one with his arm significantly off at the elbow. But there was not even a shadow on his vapid face when he looked at Christopher, author of his misfortune.

"Ain't ye goin' to give me a piece of your plug, Chris?" he whined. "Seem's if ye might. You 'n' me's square now—I got your pork and you got my arm."

"There! Hear that?" growled Straight, in Wade's ear. "Put your common-sense calipers on this stand of human timber and see what ye make of it."

Wade, looking from face to face, as the frowsy population of Misery lounged closer about him, half in indolence, half in the distrustful shyness that the stupidly ignorant usually assume towards superior strangers, noted that though the men displayed an almost canine desire to fawn for favors, the women were sullen. The only exception was a very old woman who hobbled close and entreated:

"Ain't you got northin' good for Abe, nice young gentleman? Poor Abe! Hain't got no friend but his old mother." She hooked a hand as blue and gaunt as a turkey's claw into Wade's belt and held up her spotted face so close to his that he turned his head in uncontrollable disgust.

"Your hands off the gentleman, Jule," commanded Christopher, brusquely. "It's old Jule, mate of the old he one that has been chasin' us," he explained, with more of that blissful disregard for the feelings of his subjects that had previously shocked the young man. "There's old Jed and young Jed—old Jule and young Jule. They 'ain't even got gumption enough here to change names. And that's Abe—the choice specimen that she's beggin' for. Look at him and wish for a pictur'-machine, Mr. Wade!"

[Pg 89]

He had thought there could be no worse in human guise than those he had seen. But this huge, hairy, shaggy, almost naked giant, cowering against the side of a shack with all the timidity of a child, marked a climax even to such degeneracy as he had quailed before.

"Mind in him about five years old, and will always stay five years old," said the guide, pointing to the wistful, simpering face. "Body speaks for itself. Look at them muscles! I've seen him ploughin' hitched with their cow. Clever as a mule. He's the old woman's hoss. Hauls her on a jumper clear to Castonia settlement."

"An animal!" Wade gasped.

"Not much else. Afraid of the dark, of shadows, and women mostly. Strange women! Once a woman scared him in Castonia and he ran away like a hoss, draggin' the jumper. Old Jule hitched him to a post after that."

Cretinism in any form had always shocked Dwight Wade inexpressibly. He turned away, but the

old woman was in his path, begging.

The next moment a tall, lithe girl ran swiftly out of a hut, seized the whimpering old woman, tossed her over her shoulder as a miller would up-end a bag of meal, and staggered back into the hut, kicking the frail door shut with angry heel. Wade got an astonished but a comprehensive view of this "kidnapper." There was no vacuity in her face. It was brilliant, with black eyes under a tangle of dark hair disordered but not unkempt like that of the females he had seen in Misery. Her lips were very red, and the color flamed on her cheeks above the brown of the tan. In that compost heap of humanity the girl was a vision, and Wade turned to old Christopher with unspoken questions on his parted lips.

"Don't know," said the guide, laconically, wagging his head. "No one knows. She's with 'em. But you and me can see that she ain't one of 'em. She's always been with 'em as fur back's I know of her—and that was sixteen years ago, when she was in a holler log on rockers for a cradle."

[Pg 90]

"Stolen!" suggested Wade, desperately. The thought had a morsel of comfort in it. That a girl like that could belong by right of birth in this tribe, that a girl with—ah, now he realized why his heart had throbbed at sight of her—that a girl with Elva Barrett's hair and eyes could be doomed to this existence was a knife-thrust in his sensibilities.

And the toss of her head and the rebelliousness in the gesture—the defiance in the upward flash of the sparkling eyes—subdued in Elva Barrett's case by training—the mnemonics of love, whose suggestions are so subtle, thrilled him at the sudden apparition of this forest beauty. Reason angrily rebuked this unbidden comparison. He bit his lips, and flushed as though his swift thought had wronged his love. Old Christopher put into blunt woods phrase the pith of the thoughts that struggled together in Wade's mind. The guide was looking at the closed door.

"There's lots of folks, Mr. Wade, that don't recognize plain white birch in some of the things that's polished and set up in city parlors. I've wondered a good many times what a society cabinet-shop, as ye might say, would do to that girl."

"They must have stolen her," repeated Wade.

Old Christopher tucked a sliver of plug into his cheek.

"That would sound well in a gypsy fairy-story, but it don't fit the style of the Skeets and Bushees. They're too lazy to steal anything that's alive. They want even a shote killed and dressed before they'll touch it. Near's I can find out, the young one was handed to 'em, and they was too dadblamed tired to wake up and ask where it came from. They didn't even have sprawl enough to name her. I did that," he added, calmly. "Yes," he proceeded, smiling at Wade's astonished glance; "I was guidin' a sport down the West Branch just before they drove the tribe out of the Sourdnaheunk country—under old Katahdin, you know! I see her in that log cradle, and they was callin' her 'it.' So me 'n' the sport got up a name for her—Kate Arden, for the mountain. 'Tain't a name for a Maine girl to be ashamed of."

[Pg 91]

It suddenly occurred to Wade, gazing at the old man, that the quizzical screwing-up of his eyes was hiding some deeper emotion; for Christopher's voice had a quaver in it when he said:

"Poor little gaffer! Some one ought to have taken her away from 'em. But it's hard to get folks interested in even a pretty posy when it grows in a skunk-cabbage patch."

He looked away, embarrassed that any man should see emotion on his face, and uttered a prompt exclamation.

Threading their way in single file among the blackened stumps that bordered the Tomah trail to the north came a half-dozen men.

"That's Bennett Rodliff ahead, and he's the high sheriff of this county," growled the old man. "There's two deputies and two game-wardens with him—and old Pulaski Britt bringin' up in the rear. Knowin' them pretty well, I should say that it spells t-r-u-b-l-e, in jest six letters. I ain't a great hand to guess, Mr. Wade, but if some one was to ask me quick, I should say it was the same old checker-game that the Skeets and Bushees have been playin' for all these years, and that it's their turn to move."

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 92]

THE TORCH, AND THE LIGHTING OF IT

"We know how to raffle a log jam
apart,

Though it's tangled and twisted
and turned;

But the love of a woman and ways
of the heart

Are things that we never
learned."



he sheriff and his men tramped into the little clearing and gave the usual greeting of woods wayfarers—the nod and the almost voiceless grunt. The Honorable Pulaski was a little more talkative. He was also in excellent humor.

“Hear you and Rod Ide have hitched hosses, Wade!” he cried. “Sheriff here was tellin’ me. I’m mighty glad of it. That lets me out of thinkin’ I got you up here on a wild-goose chase. I was sorry to dump you, but it would take nine time-keepers to make a foreman like Colin MacLeod, and when he put it up to me you had to go. It was business, and business beats fun up this way.”

The young man did not reply. Words seemed useless just then.

The Honorable Pulaski turned from him briskly and ran an appraising eye over the miserable huddle of huts. With the true scent of primitive natures for impending trouble, the population of Misery edged around this group of new arrivals—the men in advance and wistful, the women behind and sullen.

“Well, boys,” said the Honorable Pulaski, “it’s just this way about it, and we can all be reasonable and do business like business men.” His air was that of a man dealing with children or savages. “As far as I’m personally concerned, I hate to bother you. But I represent the other owners of this township, and the other owners aren’t as reasonable about some things as I am.”

[Pg 93]

He paused to light a long cigar. No one spoke. He proffered one to Wade, who shook his head with a little unnecessary vigor.

Britt talked as he puffed.

“Now—pup—pup—now, boys—pup—you know as well as I do that you’ve squatted right in the middle of a lot of slash that we had to leave, and it lays in a bad way for fire. You ain’t so careful about fire as you ought to be.” He held up his cigar. “Here’s my style. I don’t smoke till I’m out of the trail. I—pup—pup—own land, and that makes a difference. You don’t own land. I don’t want to bring up old stories, but you know and I know that the prospects of six cents a quart for blueberries makes you forgetful about what’s been said to you. You’ve started some devilish big fires. Here’s the September big winds about due—and this one that’s just springing up to-day is a fair sample—and all is, the owners can’t afford to run chances of a fire that will stop God knows where if it gets running in this five thousand acres of dry tops and slash.

“Here’s Mr. Ide’s representative,” he continued, flapping a hand towards Wade. “They’ve got black growth to the north, and he’ll tell you just the same thing.”

“Well, Mister Mealy-mouth,” sneered young Jule, over the heads of the others, “git to where you’re goin’ to. We don’t want no sermons. It’s move ag’in, hey?”

“It’s move,” snapped the Honorable Pulaski, his ready temper starting at the woman’s insolent tone, “and it’s move damn sudden.”

[Pg 94]

Whether it was a groan or growl that came from the wretched huddle, Wade, looking on them with infinite pity, could not determine.

“I could put ye plumb square out of the county,” roared Britt; “I’ve got land jurisdiction enough to do it. But you be reasonable and I’ll be reasonable. I won’t drive ye too far. I’ll have four horses over from my cedar operation to tote what duds you want to take and haul the old women. Sheriff Rodliff and his men here will go along, and see that you have grub and don’t have to light fires. In fact, everything will be arranged nice for you, and you’ll like it when you get there.”

“Where?” asked young Jed.

“On Little Lobster—the old Drake farm,” said the Honorable Pulaski, trying to speak enthusiastically and signally failing.

“O my Gawd!” moaned young Jed; “most twenty miles to hoof it, and when ye git there no wood bigger’n alder-withes, and all the stones the devil let drop when his puckerin’-string bruk! Hain’t a berry. Hain’t northin’ to earn a livin’.”

“You never earned your living, and you don’t want to earn your living,” retorted Britt. “You just want to stay up here in the big timber and start fires.”

“No, Mr. Britt, we just want the chance to be human beings!” cried a tense and piercing voice. The girl had reappeared in the door of the hut. Above the meek lamentations of those about her, her voice was as the scream of a young hawk above the baaing of sheep. She pushed her way through them and stood before the Honorable Pulaski, palpitating, glowing, splendid in her fury. But she propped her brown hands on her hips—a woman of the mob—and Wade noted the attitude, and flushed at the shamed thought of the likeness to Elva Barrett.

[Pg 95]

In this crisis, by right of her intelligence, her daring, her superiority, the girl seemed to take her place at the head of the pathetic herd.

“That’s what we want, Mr. Britt. You’re driving us down to the settlements again. And then some bow-legged old farmer will lose a sheep by bears or a hen by hawks, and we’ll be set upon and driven back once more to the woods. And then you’ll come and huff and puff and blow our house

down and chase us away to the settlement. 'The law! The law!' you keep braying like a mule. You kick us one way; the settlements kick us another. Mr. Britt, I didn't ask to be put on this earth! But now that I'm here I've a right to ground enough to set my feet on, and so have these people. We are using no more of your stolen ground here than we'd be using in another place, and here we stay!" She stamped her foot.

"You young whippet," snorted the Honorable Pulaski, "don't sneer to me about the law when I've got eviction-papers in my pocket and the high sheriff of this county at my back."

"How about the law that makes wild-land owners pay squatters for improvements to land?" demanded the girl. "I know some law, too."

"Do you call those hog-pens improvements?" He swept his fat hand at the huts.

"You may pay some one a dollar an acre for that blue sky above us and claim that, too. You may claim all of God's open country here in the big woods. But I know that you can't shut even paupers out from the lakes and the streams any more than you can take away the sunlight from us."

"I don't know where you got your law, young woman, but I'd advise you to get better posted on the difference between right of way to State waters and squatting on private land. Now, I ain't got time to—" [Pg 96]

"We'll not go back to the settlement—not one of us." She set her feet apart and bent a fiery gaze on him.

Britt looked away from her to his circle of supporters. The deputies stooped over their gun-barrels to hide furtive grins at sight of the timber baron thus baited by a girl on his preserves. Even the broad face of the sheriff was crinkled suspiciously. The tyrant flamed with the quick passion for which he was noted in the north country.

"Look here, Rodliff!" His voice was like cracking twigs. "Pile the dunnage out of those huts. If any one gets in your way drive a stake and tie 'em to it." He thrust his bulgy nose into the air to sniff the direction of the wind. "Then set fire to every d—n crib. The wind's all right to carry it towards the bog."

"I don't believe you've got law enough in your pocket to do a thing like that, Mr. Britt," broke in Wade, with heat.

"You don't, hey?"

"Not to throw old men and women and children out of their houses and leave them shelterless a dozen miles from a building. There must be another way of getting at this eviction matter, Mr. Britt—one that's different from burning a hornet's nest."

"This don't happen to be any of your special business!" roared the tyrant. "If it was, you'd stand by property interests instead of backing State paupers."

"Mr. Sheriff, are you going to do that thing?"

"I'm here by order of the court, to do what Mr. Britt wants done to protect his property," replied the officer. "I'm to execute, not to plan nor ask questions."

"King Spruce runs this country up here, not human feelin's," muttered old Christopher in Wade's ear. "You won't get any satisfaction by buttin' in. I'm ready to move. I don't like to see such things done, and I don't believe you do. Come on!" He swung his meal-bag upon his shoulders. [Pg 97]

But the young man lingered doggedly, his eyes on the face of the girl.

"Buckin' a high sheriff and his posse ain't ever been reckoned as a profitable business speculation in these parts," mumbled the guide. "It wouldn't amount to a hoorah in tophet, and you'd probably wind up in the county jail."

The girl was gazing shrewdly at this sudden champion. There was no shade of coquetry in her glance. It was the frank gaze of man to man.

"I protest, Mr. Britt!" cried Wade.

"And that's all the good it will do," snorted that angry master of the situation. "Rodliff, you've got my orders!"

Young Jed, sidling near Britt, with the mien of a Judas and with manifest intent to curry favor, whimpered:

"We don't back her up in all she says, Mr. Britt. We ain't got rights and we know it, but we've got feelin's. Be ye goin' to do the us'al thing about damages, Mr. Britt?"

"Why," roared the tyrant, bluffly, "ain't the land-owners always made it worth your while to move? It's all business, boys! Don't let fools bust in. We don't want fire here. Get to Little Lobster as quick as the Lord'll let ye. We'll have six months' supply of pork, flour, and plug tobacco there waitin' for ye—all with the land-owners' compliments. We've always believed that the easiest way is the best way, but you don't buy that way by buckin'. Buck, and the trade is all off—and you get thrown into another county. Close your girl's mouth and keep it shut."

"There!" grunted old Christopher, "if ye haven't got any more sympathy to waste on critters like that"—a jab of his thumb at young Jed—"you'd better come along." [Pg 98]

But at sight of woe on the faces of the women, and mute entreaty in the eyes of the girl, Wade still lingered.

"She's speakin' for herself," whispered young Jed, hoarsely. "She don't want to leave the woods because your boss, Colin MacLeod, is courtin' her, and she's waitin' to see him, now that he's back from down-country."

Riotous laughter "guffled" in the throat of Pulaski Britt as he stared from the scarlet face of the girl to Wade's confusion.

"Courtin' her, hey? Another case of it? I say, Rodliff, pretty soon there won't be a whole arm or leg left on my boss if this young man here keeps chasin' him round the country and breaks a bone on him for ev'ry girl the two of 'em get against together."

He laughed to the full content of his soul, and then turned on the girl.

"Why, you ragged little fool, Colin MacLeod is crazier than a hornet in a thrashin'-machine over Rod Ide's girl. He's up in camp now with an arm in a sling to make him remember a fight he and this young dude here got into over her. And he's up there beyond Pogey Notch sitting on a stump swearing at the choppers and bragging with every other breath that he'll kill the dude and marry the girl—and I don't reckon he's changed his mind in two days since I saw him last."

"You lie!" screamed the girl.

"Hold on, there, Miss Spitfire," broke in the sheriff, himself highly amused by the humor of the situation as it appeared to him, "there isn't a man between Castonia and Blunder Lake but what is talking about it. A hundred men saw the fight. I reckon five hundred have heard MacLeod ravin' about how much he loves the Ide girl. So if he ever courted you it must have been just for the sake of getting used to the game." Even the fawning male citizens of Misery Gore cackled their little chorus in the laughter that followed the high sheriff's jest. [Pg 99]

She drew back slowly and gazed on them all, her lips rolled away from her white teeth. Those jeering faces from "outside" represented property, law, the smug self-satisfaction of all who despised Misery Gore's squalid breed.

They stood there in the midst of the land they so arrogantly claimed, ready to toss her away once more in the everlasting game of battledore and shuttlecock. They were afraid for the dollars that made them different from the wretches of Misery. They gloried in their dollars—they mocked her in that moment, the bitterness of which only her heart understood. Let them look out for their dollars, then!

Up there where the blue hills divided was sitting Colin MacLeod calling on the name of another woman and nursing a wound received for that woman's sake. Let him look out for himself!

"We can make the Blake-cutting camps with you to-night," said Britt, his mind on business once again. "We'll take good care of you, and you might as well start one time as another. Out with the stuff and down with the houses, Rodliff."

At the orders the men began to busy themselves, paying no further attention to Misery's inhabitants.

The girl ran into the hut, lifted one of the cedar splints that made the floor, and took out a section of iron gas-pipe—the most prized possession of the tribe. It was their wand of plenty. It was Mother Nature's crutch. Out of it flowed bounty.

Into the unplugged end she poured all the kerosene there was in a battered can. Then she stuffed into the tube a mass of wicking.

It was a torch—the torch for the blueberry barrens. Dragged after one, it left a blazing trail such as no other form of fire could produce. [Pg 100]

There was a flicker of fire in the rusty stove. She thrust the wicking into the coals, and on the iron stalk a flame-flower sprang into huge blossom.

She burst through the hut's rear window and ran straight for the edge of the clearing, towards the fuel piled high in the forest aisles.

In that moment of blind and desperate fury she realized that the wind was swinging into the north. It was there that MacLeod was sitting at the foot of Pogey Notch. Ah, what a furnace-flue that would make!

She did not pause to reason. Her single wild desire was to send the fire leaping towards him.

The roar of voices behind—voices entreating, voices of malediction—made her smile. Above all was the Honorable Pulaski's bull roar. She began to drag the torch.

"Catch her! Damnation, catch that girl!" howled Britt.

She reached the edge of the distant woodland.

Immediately his cry changed to "Shoot her!" He did not mean it the first time he cried it. He did mean it the second time. The deputies stared after her and juggled their weapons on their arms.

"Shoot her, or fifty thousand acres of timber are gone!"

But that was quarry before which official guns quailed.

In his fury and his panic and his desperate fear for his fortune, Britt seized a gun from the nearest deputy and aimed it.

Wade struck it up, muttering an indignant oath. Britt made as though to club him out of the way. The young man clutched the gun and twisted it from Britt's quivering clutch. When Britt lunged forward to seize another rifle Wade struck him under the jaw, and he went down like a felled ox.

[Pg 101]

The girl was out of sight in the woods, but yellow smoke shot with bright flame marked her course.

"I could have told him," mused old Christopher, looking on the Honorable Pulaski, struggling dizzily to his feet, "havin' watched her more or less since I named her, that she wa'n't a real sociable kind of a girl to joke with on matters that's as serious to women as love is."

Sheriff Bennett Rodliff spoke the prologue to that conflagration:

"There is h—l in the core of that fire," he said.

Sometimes a little mischief, started by chance down the slopes of events, gathers like a rolling snowball into a vast bulk of evil. But more often in matters of evil it is the intent of the impulse that governs. It seems at such times as though inanimate nature were responding to human malevolence.

The fire that started that day on Misery leaped to its grim business with a spontaneity as fierce as the mad hate behind it.

One man acts in a crisis with more directness and efficiency than many men, each of whom waits on the other. They had stood and stared after the girl when she ran into the woods with the hissing fire streaming behind her. The pursuers that finally did start stopped promptly to witness the fight between the young man and the baron of the Umcolcus. Human fists in play afford more of a spectacle than even an incipient conflagration. When the man who goes down is a man who in the past has always been aggressor and victor, interest is more acute.

Dwight Wade did not linger to prolong the conflict to which the furious Britt invited him. Christopher Straight had started for the woods on the track of the fugitive girl, and Wade ran after him, his knuckles tingling gloriously. The thrill of that one moment, when his fist met the flesh of the man who had insulted him, made him realize that when one searches the depths of human nature hate, as well as love, has its delights.

[Pg 102]

Pressing closely on the heels of Christopher, who had waited for him, he dove into the yellow smoke.

"We've got to find that young she-devil!" gasped the old man. "It's better for us to find her than for Britt to get hold of her."

But by that time the quest was an uncertain one.

There is craftiness in a woods fire when it is seeking to establish itself.

The fire sent up first from the crackling slash thick, rolling, bitter clouds of smoke to veil its beginnings. Running to the left, where the fresher clouds seemed to be springing, the two men caught sight of the girl. But she was already far to the right, running and leaping like a deer, her hideous torch still flaming. Then the smoke shut down and she was hidden.

A blazing mass of tops, twisted in a blowdown, fronted them, and they were forced to make a long detour. They saw the wind wrench torches out of the mass, torches that whirled aloft and went scaling away to the north. Puffs of smoke showed where they had alighted. Here and there the tops of little spruces and firs set a net for the torches, afforded roosting-places for the flame birds that winged their red flight across the sky. The flame did not merely burn these trees; the trees fairly exploded; their resinous fronds and tassels were like powder grains.

A wind gust rent the smoke for an instant and showed the pursuers the spread of the growing destruction. It already was sprinkled over acres.

"She's started fair, and the devil's helpin' her!" mourned the old man.

[Pg 103]

At that moment the huge bulk of a man went lurching past them. It was Abe, the foolish giant of the Skeets. In the glimpse they caught before the smoke swallowed him, in his hairy nakedness, he seemed a gigantic satyr; he leaped here and there to avoid the blazing patches in the leaf litter and humus, and his movements seemed like a grotesque dance.

"The old woman has sent him after the girl," explained Christopher, with quick comprehension. "Come on!"

Dodging, choking, crouching for air, they followed him. At last they overtook the author of all the mischief. She threw away her torch when they came upon her, and faced them without shame.

She was panting in utter exhaustion, and clung to a tree for support.

“Bring her, Abe!” commanded Christopher, in a tone that the giant understood, and he took her up in his brawny arms despite her angry struggles. “No, not that way!” shouted the old man, when Abe whirled to make his way back through the fire zone. “It’s spread too far,” he explained to Wade; “we’ve got to keep ahead of it.” With a blow to emphasize his order, he drove Abe ahead of him, and they hurried towards the north, the conflagration at their heels.

Far ahead of them Jerusalem Mountain lifted the poll of its gray ledge. It blocked the broad valley to the north. For those in the van of that fire it was the rock of refuge. The tote road led that way. The fugitives crashed through the undergrowth into the road. The fire had already crossed it to the south of them. They took their way to the north, their eyes on Jerusalem Mountain.

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 104]

BY ORDER OF PULASKI D. BRITT

“Twinkle, twinkle, ‘Ladder’
Lane,
With your wavin’ winder-
pane,
Up above the world so
high,
Like a flash-bug in the
sky.”



he fire-lookout at the Attean station winked this ditty humorously with playful heliograph to “Ladder” Lane, lookout on the high, bald poll of old Jerusalem Knob. The Attean lookout got it by telephone from Castonia. Lyrists unreported.

Jerusalem station is more serene in its isolation than the other five lookouts on the mountains of the north country. It has no telephone. Lane allowed to his lonely self that he got more news than he really wanted, anyhow. And most of the news was of the sort that the humorous Attean lookout, or the equally humorous Squaw Mountain man, considered likely to tease the cranky solitary on the highest and farthest outpost of the chain of lookouts. They whiled away their solitude by gossipy chattings over the wire. Lane confined himself to terse winkings that would have been gruff were it possible for a heliograph to be gruff. He seemed to take a certain grim pride in the fact that he was a thousand feet higher than any of them and commanded three hundred thousand acres.

Sitting now in the glare of the September sunshine on the flat roof of his cabin, he gravely and stolidly scrawled down the words of the verse as the Attean heliograph, blinking and glaring, spoke to him in the Morse code.

[Pg 105]

“Huh!” he grunted, and went on writing with stubby pencil his interrupted day’s entry in his official diary. For the twenty-fifth time he wrote:

“Clear, bright, and still dry.”

He screwed his eyelids close to peer into the heavens bending over him, hard as the bottom of a brass kettle. He took off his hat and held it edgewise at his forehead while his gaze swept the mighty range of his vision. An imaginative person might have smiled at the likeness between his brown and bald poll, thrust above the straggle of hair, and the bare and bald poll of old Jerusalem, rounding above the straggle of growth on its lower slopes.

Some one bawled at him from the ground below. Lane did not start, though that was the first human voice he had heard in two months.

The young man who stood there, and who had come across the gray ledges from the edge of the timber growth, carried an arm in a sling.

“Do you ever look at anybody if they’re nearer than ten miles away?” inquired the visitor, with the teasing irony that it seemed popular in the Umcolcus region to employ with “Ladder” Lane.

When the old man stood up the fitness of his sobriquet was apparent. He unfolded himself, joint by joint, like a carpenter’s rule, and stood gaunt as a bean pole and well towards seven feet in height.

The name painted on the door of the photograph “saloon” that even now lies rotting on the banks of Ragmuff in Castonia settlement is: “Linus Lane. Tintypes and Views.” No one in Castonia ever knew whither he had come. Oxen or horses and a teamster hired for each trip had dragged the rumbling van from settlement to settlement at the edge of the woods, and finally to Castonia, where it arrived hobbling on three wheels, one corner supported by a dragging sapling. Lane strode ahead, swearing over his shoulder at the driver, and his ill-temper did not seem to leave him even when he had opened his door for business. It is remembered that his first customer was old Bailey, who was corresponding with an unknown woman down-country, and who came for a

[Pg 106]

tintype with hair and whiskers colored to the hue of the raven's wing, evidently desiring to make an impression on his correspondent. And when old Bailey, shocked and disappointed at the painful verity of the tintype, had muttered that it didn't seem to be a very pretty picture, Lane, who was doubled like a jack-knife under the saloon's low roof, had yelled at him:

"Pretty picture! You come to me with a face like a scrambled egg dropped into a bucket of soot and complain because you don't get a pretty picture! Get out of here!"

And he stopped slicing up the sheet of tintypes, slammed it on the floor, drove out old Bailey, nailed up the door of the saloon, and started for the big woods with his few possessions on his back.

To those who remonstrated on behalf of the offended old Bailey, Lane said he had been feeling like that for some time, and was taking to the woods before he expressed his disgust by killing some one.

Therefore, the job on the top of Jerusalem that fell to him quite naturally, after his many years' sojourn as a recluse at its foot, was a job that fitted admirably with his scheme of life.

"And it looks up there like it must have looked when Noah said, 'All ashore that's goin' ashore,' on Mount Ariat, or wherever 'twas he throwed anchor," announced Tommy Eye, of Britt's crew, returning once from a Sunday trip to the fire station.

[Pg 107]

For, painfully acquired, with gouges, clawings, and scratches to show for it all, "Ladder" Lane had accumulated companions of his loneliness, to wit:

One bull moose, captured in calfhood in deep snow; two bear cubs; a raccoon; a three-legged bobcat, victim of an excited hunter; two horned owls; and a fisher cat.

On this menagerie, variously tethered or crated in sapling cages, the visitor with the disabled arm bestowed a contemptuous side glance while he blinked at the tall figure on the cabin's flat roof.

Without haste Lane worked himself through the roof-scuttle like an angle-worm drawing into his hole; without cordiality he appeared at the cabin door, lounging out into the sunshine.

"I suppose you are still doing the second-hand swearing for Britt, MacLeod," he suggested.

The young man grunted.

"How did ye hurt your arm? Britt chaw it?"

"Peavy-stick flipped on me," growled the young man, willing to hide his humiliation from at least one person in the world—and the hermit of the Jerusalem station seemed to be the only one sufficiently isolated.

"Huh! I thought his name was Wade." There was no spirit of jest in the tone. The old man surveyed him sourly. "That's what the Attean helio said."

"Is that what you use them things for—to pass gossip like an old maid's quilting-bee?"

"There's a good deal in this world in letting a man place his own self where he belongs," remarked Lane, with calm conviction. "I've let you prove yourself a liar."

He turned and went into the cabin and back up the stairs to the roof, picking up a huge telescope as he went. Something in the valley seemed to have attracted his attention. MacLeod followed, his face red, oaths clucking in his throat.

[Pg 108]

In the nearer middle ground of the great plat of country below Patch Dam heath was set into the green of the forest like a medallion of rusty tin. To the west of it smoke began to puff above the tree-tops.

"On Misery," mumbled Lane, his long arms steadying his instrument. Then, with the caution of a man of method, he went into the scuttle-hole and secured his range-finder.

"What's the good of tinker-fuddlin' with that thing?" demanded MacLeod; "it's on Misery, as you said."

"Two hundred and fifty-nine degrees," muttered the fire-scout, booking the figures in his dog-eared diary.

"Say, about that fire, Mr. Lane," blurted MacLeod, nervously. "I'm up here to-day by Mr. Britt's orders to tell you not to report it. It's on Misery Gore, and he's there looking after it, and it ain't goin' to be worth while to report. I know all about it, and that's the truth."

Lane, without bestowing a glance on the speaker, was setting up his heliograph tripod. At the young man's last words he grunted over his shoulder:

"So it was a peavy-stick! But they told me his name was Wade."

"Now you look here," stormed the timber baron's boss, "you can slur all you want to about my lyin', but I tell you, Lane, this is straight goods. You report that fire, after the orders you've got from Britt, and you'll lose your job. I know what I'm talkin' about."

Lane kneeled, his thin trousers hanging over his slender shanks like cloth over broomsticks. MacLeod stifled an inclination to take him in one hand and snap him like a whip-lash. The old man was peering through the centre hole in the sun-mirror, bringing his disks into alignment.

"Britt has got orders from the court, and he's there to put the Skeets and Bushees out and torch off their shacks. That's all there is to that fire, Lane, and Britt don't want a stir and hoorah made about it. He told me to tell you that. He says the cussed newspapers get a word here and a word there, and they're always ready to string out a lot of lies about King Spruce and wild-landers, and how they abuse settlers, and all that rot—and it hurts prominent men, like Mr. Britt and his associates, because folks get wrong ideas from the papers. Now you know that! Don't report that fire, Lane." [Pg 109]

It was fulsome appeal and eager appeal, and MacLeod was apparently obeying some very emphatic orders from his superior, who had supplied language as well as directions of procedure.

But the old fire-warden kept on with his preparations, exact, careful, without haste.

"He said you understood—Britt did," clamored MacLeod, hastening around in front of the heliograph. "You know it ain't right to have those people there in this dry time, with all that slash about 'em. Mr. Britt will make it all right with them—the same as the land-owners always do. It will be the papers that will lie and call the land-owners names for the sake of stirrin' up a sensation about leadin' men—makin' politics out of it, and gettin' the people prejudiced so as to put more taxes onto wild lands." More of Britt's ammunition! "Mr. Britt said you'd understand—and you do understand—and you can't report that fire."

Lane set his gaunt grasp about the handle of the screen, ready to tilt it for the first flash.

"I understand just this, MacLeod—that I'm a fire-warden of the State, sworn to do my duty as my duty is spread before me." He swept his left arm in impressive gesture. "Look behind you! Do you see that?"

Smoke was ballooning from the notch of the woods below them. Round puffs seemed to be dancing in fantastic ballet from tree-top to tree-top. [Pg 110]

"That's a fire, MacLeod. I take no man's say-so as to what and why. That may be Pulaski Britt smoking a cigar. It may be Jule Skeet's new spring bonnet on fire. I don't care what it is. It's a fire, and it's going to be reported. Stand out of range."

His code-card was in the top of his hat. He waved the headgear impatiently at MacLeod, his right hand still on the handle of the screen.

MacLeod knew what the orders of Pulaski D. Britt meant. Britt had not hesitated to rely upon the loyalty of "Ladder" Lane, for Britt, when State senator, had caused Lane to be appointed to the post on Jerusalem. MacLeod reflected, with fury rising like flame from the steady glow of his contemptuous resentment at this old recalcitrant, that Pulaski Britt would never make allowance for failure under these circumstances. To be sure, that fire yonder didn't look like a carefully conducted incineration of the dwellings of Misery Gore, and it was a little ahead of time—that time being set for the calm of early evening. But orders from Britt were—to his men—orders from the supreme tribunal.

"Britt put you here!" stuttered MacLeod.

"I'm working for the State, not Pulaski D. Britt," replied the old man.

"And I'm working for Britt, and, by — he runs the State in these parts! Him and you and the State can settle it between you later, but just now"—he swung to one side, leaned back, and drove his foot with all the venom of his repressed rage against the apparatus—"that fire report don't go!"

"Ladder" Lane, serene in his proud conjuration, "The State," had expected no such enormity. The heliograph skated on its spider legs, went over the edge of the roof, and, after a hushed moment of drop, crashed upon the ledge with shiver and tinkle of flying glass. [Pg 111]

The boss of "Britt's Busters" turned and darted through the scuttle and down the stairs, excusing this flight to himself on the ground of his out-of-commission arm.

He leaped out into the sunshine and clattered away over the ledges, the spikes in his shoes striking sparks.

He had made half a dozen rods when he heard the old man scream "Halt!" MacLeod kept on, with a taunting wave of his well hand above his head. The next moment a rifle barked, and the bullet chipped the ledge in front of him.

"The next one bores you in the back, MacLeod!"

He stopped then, and whirled in his tracks.

Lane stood at the edge of his roof, his rifle-butt at his cheek.

"Come back here!"

"You ain't got the right to hold me up, Lane. I'll have the law on ye!"

“Come back here!”

There was a grate in the tone, a menace not to be braved.

The young man shuffled slowly towards the cabin, roaring oaths and insults to which Lane deigned no reply.

MacLeod did not try to run when the warden disappeared for his trip to the door. He waited sullenly.

Near the door was a good-sized, empty cage of strong saplings, built in “Ladder” Lane’s abundant leisure, for the reception of any new candidate for the menagerie. The old man jerked his head sideways at it. There was a gap of three saplings in the side, and the poles stood there ready to be set in.

“I won’t be penned that way!” yelled MacLeod. “I ain’t no raccoon!”

But the bitter visage of the warden, the merciless flash of his gray eyes, and the glint of the rifle-barrel, swinging into line with his face, combined with the sudden remembrance that it was hinted that “Ladder” Lane was not always right in his head, drove the stubborn courage out of MacLeod. He slunk rather than walked into the cage with the mien of a whipped beast. The old man set the saplings one by one into place, and nailed them with vigorous hammer-blows.

[Pg 112]

“How long have I got to stay here, Lane?” he pleaded.

“Till I can turn you over to them who will put you where you belong for destroying State’s property and interfering with a State officer.”

The old man turned away and gazed out over the forest stretches between Jerusalem and Misery. MacLeod, clutching the bars of his cage with his left hand, looked, too.

It was no puny torching of the Misery huts that he was looking on, and he realized it with growing apprehensiveness as to his zeal in suppressing news.

Vast volumes of yellow smoke volleyed up over the crowns of the green growth. It was a racing fire—even those on Jerusalem could see that much across the six miles between. Spirals waved ahead like banners of a charging army. Its front broadened as the fire troops deployed to the flanks. Ahead and ever ahead fresh smoke-puffings marked the advance of the skirmish-line. Now here, now there, drove the cavalry charges of the conflagration, following slash-strewn roads and cuttings, while the dun smoke ripped the green of the maples and beeches.

“It’s liable to interest Pulaski D. Britt somewhat when he finds out why Jerusalem lookout ain’t callin’ for a fire-posse,” Lane remarked, bitterly.

The situation seemed to overwhelm the boss. He looked with straining gaze at the rush of the conflagration, and had no word for reply.

[Pg 113]

“But it may not all be loss for you,” the old man proceeded, grimly. “Perhaps the girl will be burned up—perhaps that was in your trade with Britt.”

“I don’t know what you mean about any girl,” mumbled MacLeod, looking away from the old man’s boring eyes.

“You’re a liar again as well as a dirty whelp of a sneak.”

Lane spat the words over his shoulder, stumping away, the bristle of his gray beard standing out like an angry porcupine’s quills.

“I don’t allow anybody to put them words on me!” roared MacLeod.

“You don’t, heh?” Lane whirled and stumped back. He bent down and set his face close to the saplings, his eyes narrowing like a cat’s, his nose wrinkling in mighty anger. “You can steal time paid for by Pulaski D. Britt, and hang around Misery Gore, and coax on an ignorant girl into a worse hell than she’s living in now”—he pointed a quivering finger at the smoke-wreathed valley —“when you know and I know, and everyone on these mountain-tops of the Umcolcus knows and gossips it with the settlements, that you’ve picked her up only to throw her farther into the wallow where you found her. It’s the Ide girl you’re courtin’. It’s poor little Kate of Misery that you’re killin’. There isn’t another man in the north woods mean enough to steal from a girl as poor as she is—steal love and hope and faith. It’s all she’s got, MacLeod, and you’ve taken all.”

The young man grunted a sullen oath.

“There’s a lot I could say to you,” raged Lane, “but I ain’t going to waste time doing it. I’ll simply express my opinion of you by—”

He spat squarely into the convulsed face of MacLeod, and went away into his cabin.

"LADDER" LANE'S SOIRÉE

"And down from off the mountains in the
shooting sheets of flame
The devils of Katahdin come to play their reg'lar
game.
So 'tis: men hold tight! Pray for mornin' light!
Katahdin's caves are empty and hell's broke
loose to-night!"

—Ha'nt of Pamola.



As the hours of the day went on, Colin MacLeod, caged, helpless, set high on the bald brow of old Jerusalem, where every phase of the great fire was spread before his eyes, found abundant opportunity to curse himself for a fool. In time, of course, Attean or some other point would realize the extent of the conflagration and call for help. But now, hidden under Jerusalem and confined to the slash under the green trees, it was a racing ground-fire that crouched and ran. It came rapidly, but in a measure secretly. It showed a subtlety of selection. It did not waste time on the green forest of beeches and maples. It was hurrying north towards its traditional prey. That prey was waiting for it, rooted on the slopes of Jerusalem and the Umcolcus, on the Attean and the Enchanted—the towering black growth of hemlock, pine, and spruce—the apple of Pulaski Britt's commercial eye—the hope of his associates. Once there, it would spring from its crouching race on the ground. It would climb the resinous trunks and torch and flare and rage and roar in the tinder-tops—a dreaded "crown-fire" that only the exhaustion of fuel or the rains of God would stop. [Pg 115]

Attean would see that fire leaping past Jerusalem, and would swear and wonder and report too late.

Just now hours were as precious as days.

Men could do nothing at mid-day with the wind lashing behind. MacLeod knew well how that fire should be fought. But with men on the way ready to flank it at nightfall and work ahead of it with pick and shovel and beating branches of green—the winds stilled and the dews condensing—it could be conquered—it must be conquered then, if at all.

Woods fires sleep at night. The men who fight them may as well sleep at mid-day.

With the dropping of the sun and the sinking of the winds the fires drowse and flicker and smoulder. Then must one attack the monster; for at daybreak he is up, ravening and roaring and hungry.

And now—not even Britt's own crew of loggers at the foot of Jerusalem had word and warning. MacLeod bellowed appeals to be let out. He besought Lane to hurry down the mountain to camp. He howled frightful oaths and threats and abject promises.

At dusk the old man came out of his cabin, and brought bread and water and bacon to his captive without a word. He fed him with as much unconcern as he brought browse to the tethered bull moose and distributed provender suited to the various tastes of his menagerie.

The darkness settled in the valleys first, and one by one fire-dottings pricked out—blazing junipers and the stunted new growth of evergreen. From Jerusalem the great expanse seemed like a mighty city, its windows alight, its streets and avenues illuminated gloriously.

MacLeod, silenced except for an occasional hoarse quack of appeal, paced his little cage, despairing.

"Ladder" Lane sat on the flat roof silent as a spectre. So the hours dragged past. [Pg 116]

"I thought so!" grunted the old man at last. "That's what I've been sitting up for."

From his eyry he saw a light flickering in the stunted growth far down Jerusalem, zigzagging nearer. At last it emerged and came across the ledges—a flare of hissing birch bark stuck into a cleft stick. There were several men hastening along in the circle of its radiance. Lane could hear from afar their gruntings of exhaustion.

"If I ain't mistook, it's your friend Britt," remarked the old man, maliciously, as he passed MacLeod's cage on his way to meet the visitors.

And it was Britt—Britt with his hat in his hand, perspiration streaming into his beard, his stertorous breath rumbling in his throat. Lane knew the man who bore the torch as Bennett Rodliff, high sheriff of the county.

"It's been—God!—awful work—but we've—come round the east—edge of it, Lane," panted Britt. Commanding general in the grim conflict, he had been willing to burst his heart in order to establish headquarters in the one spot from which he could mobilize his forces and direct their tactics. "How many men have you ordered in, Lane?"

"Not a man!"

"Not a—not a—you stand there and tell me you haven't reported and called for every man that

Attean and Squaw can reach!" He began to curse shrilly.

"You'd better save your wire edge, Mr. Britt," counselled Lane. "You're going to need it. Come here till I show you something."

One of the sheriff's men lighted a fresh sheet of bark at the dying flare of the other, and Lane led the way to the cage, where MacLeod peered desperately between the saplings.

"Just a moment, Mr. Britt!" broke in the warden, again checking the lumber baron's fury. "This man came up here to-day with what he said were your orders not to report that fire, and—" [Pg 117]

"That fire!" roared Britt, fairly beside himself. "Why, you devilish, infernal—"

"A moment, I say! When I set up my heliograph he kicked it off the roof. There it lies just as it fell. You and he can settle your part of it! As for my part of it, I have arrested him by my authority as a fire warden. The sheriff, here, can take him whenever he gives me a receipt and makes note of my complaint."

"I did what you told me to, Mr. Britt," protested MacLeod, his voice breaking. "He was reportin' the first puff of smoke, and said that you and your orders could go to thunder. He didn't pay any attention—and I just did what you told me to. I—"

"Shut up!" The Honorable Pulaski, crimson with anger, fearful of his own part in this conspiracy, and shamed by the exposure of his methods, bellowed his order. "We'll settle this later. Knock away those saplings, some one. MacLeod, get down this mountain, even if you break your neck doing it, and get your crew to the front of that fire! I—I—haven't got breath to talk to you the way you need to be talked to. As you stand, you're only half a man on account of a girl." He darted a quivering finger at the disabled arm.

"And it's your other little d—n fool of a girl at Misery that torched that fire when she heard that you'd jilted her. Now, is it women or woods after this?"

"Woods, Mr. Britt!" stammered the boss, eager to conciliate this raging bull.

"Then get to the front of that fire and stop it, even if you have to lie down and roll over on it. It's a fire your pauper sweetheart started, and you've arranged, by your infernal bull-headedness, to let it burn. Stop it or keep going! It won't be healthy in my neighborhood." [Pg 118]

"I'll stop it or die tryin', Mr. Britt."

Lane leaned his back against the cage and faced the group, his gaunt arms reaching from side to side.

"You can't free a prisoner that way, Mr. Britt," he said, firmly. "You take this man away from me—or if the high sheriff, here, lets him go—I'll report the thing under oath to the governor and the people of this State; and I reckon you can't afford to have that done. I propose to have it known why Linus Lane didn't do his duty in reporting that fire."

"Take that old fool away from there and let that man out," commanded Britt, his passion blind to consequences. He could see no way out of his muddle. He seemed to be in for wicked notoriety, anyway. Just now his one thought was to get "Roaring Cole MacLeod," master of men, at the head of that fire, to hold it in leash until more assistance came. He knew his man. He understood that MacLeod, bitter in the consciousness of his blunder, was now worth six men. "Rodliff, I'll take the consequences!" he shouted. "Let my boss out."

But the high sheriff seemed to be doubtful as to the consequences that he also would have to accept. Just then he had clearer notions of official responsibility than did the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt.

"This man is under arrest all regular," protested Rodliff, "and I've just the same as heard him own up that he interfered with Warden Lane in his duty. The governor himself wouldn't have the right to order me to let a prisoner go before a hearing on the case. That's law, Mr. Britt, and—"

"Talk that south of Castonia," broke in the Honorable Pulaski. "Just now law won't put that fire out and save a fifty-thousand-acre stand of black growth. Lane, you've got to be reasonable. There've been mistakes, but they'll be made good. You can't afford to be bull-headed in this thing." [Pg 119]

But the old man did not move from the cage. The flaring of the torch lighted his solemn and unrelenting face. The worried face of MacLeod peered out over one of the extended arms.

"What—what was it happened to 'em on Misery, Mr. Britt?" he asked, humbly.

"I told you!" snapped Britt, glad of a momentary excuse to cover embarrassment of this general defiance of his dignity. "Your black-eyed beauty there, that you've been fooling with when my back's been turned, is jealous of Rod Ide's girl, and took to the bush with a blueberry-torch dragging at her heels to show her feelings. I'd have shot her like I would a rabbit if it hadn't been for your particular friend Wade." The wrathful sneer of the Honorable Pulaski was a snarl that would have done credit to "Ladder" Lane's bobcat. "When you come to settle accounts with that critter, MacLeod, break his leg, and charge it on my side of the ledger."

"So he was there, hey?" asked the boss, eagerly.

"He was there long enough to hit me like a prize-fighter when I was protecting my property."

"Why didn't you kill him?" demanded the boss, with venom.

"By the time I got a gun he was out of sight at the tail of the fire, chasing the girl—he and old Chris Straight. I believe they were proposing to rescue the girl," concluded Britt, with a mirthless chuckle. "The only consolation I'm getting out of that fire down there is that maybe it's burning that Wade and the girl, whatever they call her, and will chase the Skeets and Bushees south and catch them, too. If it does I'll be willing to let a thousand more acres burn."

But it appeared that the choicest section of the Honorable Pulaski's charitable hopes was doomed to disappointment. [Pg 120]

A torch, tossing from the edge of the stunted growth, marked the approach of some one.

"The top of Jerusalem seems liable to be a popular roosting-place for all them that ain't wearing asbestos pants," remarked the high sheriff, dryly. "A rush of excursionists during the heated spell, as the summer-boarder ads say! Lane, can you give the crowd anything to eat at your tavern except broiled moose and fricasseed bobcat?"

The pleasantry evoked no smile. For the little group at the cabin, Pulaski Britt first of all, with his keener eyes of hate, recognized those who were approaching.

Old Christopher Straight came ahead with the torch. The girl of Misery Gore, moving more slowly now that she saw the group at the top of Jerusalem, her face sullen, her head cocked defiantly, was at his back, and Dwight Wade was at her side. Far behind, at the edge of the torch's radiance, slouched a huge figure of a man. It was foolish Abe, the hirsute giant of the Skeets.

"And now, speaking of arresting in the name of the law," snarled the lumber baron, "and your duty that you seem so fond of, Rodliff, get out your handcuffs for something that's worth while. It's three years in state-prison for maliciously setting fires on timber lands. It's a long vacation in the county jail for assaulting a man without provocation. There's the girl who set that fire; there's the man that struck me. So you see, Lane, your prisoner is going to have company."

Lane came suddenly away from the cage. The torch showed his face working with strange emotion.

"Mr. Britt," he said, appealingly, to the astonishment of the senator, who understood this sour woods cynic's nature, "there are crimes that ain't crimes in this world—not even when they're judged by God's own scale. There's your fire yonder! Some one is responsible for it—but not that poor girl!" [Pg 121]

"I saw her set it myself, you devilish idiot!"

"Not that poor girl, I say. Those that threw her—her, with the pride of good blood that she felt but didn't understand—her, with her hopes and brains that her blood gave her—"

"Blood!" roared the Honorable Pulaski. "What do you know about her pedigree?"

"Those that threw her into that pen of swine are responsible," went on the warden. "Men like you, that have persecuted her and wonder why she doesn't squeal like the rest of those idiots; men like the whelp in that cage, trying to wrong her and throw her back into hell—all of you are responsible for that fire. You bent the limb. It has snapped back and struck you in your faces. It's the way of the woods."

"Well, of all the infernal nonsense I ever listened to, this sermon on Mount Jerusalem clears the skidway," blurted Britt. "You stand up at the trial and repeat that, Lane, and you'll get your picture into the newspapers."

"And I guess a lot of the rest of us will before this scrape gets straightened out," muttered the high sheriff, bodingly.

"Mr. Britt, you're going to be sorry for it if you drag that poor abused girl to prison," said Lane, with such fire of conviction that the timber baron, cautious in his methods, and always fearing the notoriety that would embroil the great secrets of the timber interests with public opinion, blinked at the oracular old warden and then at the still defiant face of the girl. Like most untrained natures in whom passion has unleashed natural high spirit, she seemed incapable of calm reconsideration. She had made such protest against the enormity of her persecution as opportunity had put into her heart as right and into her hands as feasible. [Pg 122]

"We were fools to bring her here and toss her into the old hyena's claws," muttered Wade in Christopher's ear. "We might have known that he and his crowd would make for Jerusalem."

"I did know it," returned the old guide, quietly. "And I knew just as well what would happen to us in the runaway of that fire to-morrow."

"Lane," broke in the Honorable Pulaski, with decision, "two trials won't stir this thing any worse than one. You've arranged for one. Go ahead with MacLeod. I'll have the girl."

Those who looked on Lane's face only knew that mighty passions were shaking him. His voice broke and quavered.

"Mr. Britt, things have been mixed for me in this world till I don't hardly know what is right. I've

tried to do my duty as it's been laid out for me. But in climbing up to it there's some things I haven't got the heart to step on. Perhaps in this thing we're mixed in now we've all been more or less wrong. I don't know. I haven't got the head to-night to figure it out. Perhaps it's best that what has happened on Jerusalem to-day don't get out. I don't know as that's right. But I'll say this: give me the girl; you can take MacLeod."

The Honorable Pulaski hesitated, "hemmed" hoarsely in his throat, clutched at his beard, looked significantly at the high sheriff, and then called him apart by a nod of his head.

When he returned to the group he said, crisply: "It's a trade! Under the circumstances, I don't suppose even such a little tin god as you will have anything to say about it outside," he sneered, running his red eye over Dwight Wade. The young man did not reply, but his face gave assent. [Pg 123]

Lane pried away the saplings, and MacLeod stepped out.

"Give him a camp lantern," commanded Britt. "Get your men into that fire at daylight."

"Tell me that they've all been lying about you, Colin," cried the girl, her cheeks crimson, her heart going out to him at sight of his face, "and I'll go with you! I'll work with you! I'm sorry for it if it's made you mad with me." All her sullen anger was gone. She leaned towards him as though she yearned to abase herself.

With Britt's flaming eyes on him, MacLeod only moved his lips without words.

"Ladder" Lane came out of the cabin with two lanterns. A set of lineman's climbers jangled dully at his belt.

"No, you'll not go, girl!" he cried, brusquely.

With hands on her hips, she threw back her head, her nostrils dilating.

"I've paid a big price for you this night," he went on, more gently, "and it isn't to a cur of that kind that I'll be giving you. MacLeod, here's your lantern! Away, now!"

"And I'll go, I say, if you'll tell me they've lied. Colin, darling, tell me!" But he started away, spurred by a ripping oath from the Honorable Pulaski. She tore herself from the restraining grasp of Wade and ran after her lover.

At her movement, Abe, cowering in the gloom away from the torch-lighted area of ledge, started behind her with canine loyalty. He had followed her into the fire zone when his mother had screamed command into his ear. His mother and this girl, her protégée, were the only ones who ever looked at him without disgust.

"Abe!" shouted "Ladder" Lane. He spoke in a peculiar tone—a tone in which the fool evidently recognized something of an old-time authority; for he uttered a little bleat, in curious contrast with his giant bulk, and halted. "Fire, Abe!" cried Lane, brandishing his arm in the direction of the distant flamings. "Mother want her saved from fire. Fetch, Abe!" [Pg 124]

It was a tone of authority that the witling recognized, and it commanded his weak will and giant strength. He sped after the girl, seized her in spite of her furious protest, and bore her back to the cabin, her struggles exciting only his amiable grins.

Lane rushed him and his burden into his hut.

"Now, Abe, mother say watch her. No go into the fire! Watch till I come!" He came out with placid confidence that his order would be obeyed, and the mien of the giant gave excellent confirmation.

"Men," he said, grimly, looking round on their faces, "I'd rather trust that girl to the fool than to all of the rest of humankind; but I've had reasons in my life to distrust men, and the higher the men the more I distrust them. Don't any of you interfere in that duet in there. There's only one thing that I ask you to do here till I come back—whoever stays here—feed the animals. You can't corrupt them." He was "Ladder" Lane once more, sour in his satire.

"Where are you going, Lane?" demanded Britt.

The old man shook a telephone cut-in sender at him.

"I'm going through the woods ahead of that fire to tap the Attean line and send my report and call for men," he said, calmly. "I'm still the fire warden of Jerusalem region."

He set away, striding over the ledges, his lantern winking between his thin legs.

"Looks like a cross between a lightning-bug and a grumpy-long-shanks," observed the sheriff, his cheerfulness increased by the happy disposal of his troublesome prisoners. "Travelling on underpinning like that, he'll have his word in before daybreak." [Pg 125]

But Pulaski Britt had not yet satisfied the curiosity that stirred as soon as greater matters had been settled. He ran after the warden, shouting an order to wait.

The little group heard the colloquy, for Lane did not stop, and the Honorable Pulaski had to bellow his question.

"Say, Lane, in case anything should happen to you! Ain't you going to let me do the square thing?"

If this girl is yours, say the word. I'll look after her. Is she yours?"

"No!" yelled the old man, with a fury in his tones like the rasp of a file on their flesh as they listened. And the next words seemed to be a cry wrung from him without his will: "If she were, I'd have killed you and Colin MacLeod before this!"

He went flitting down the slope of Jerusalem Knob like a will-o'-the-wisp, and they stood in silence and watched him out of sight.

That night the tenantry of Jerusalem Knob divided itself silently and sullenly into groups which ignored each other.

Britt and his people took blankets from the fire station, and established makeshift camps down in the fringe of the trees.

Wade and Christopher Straight went apart, and composed themselves as best they could on some gray moss that tufted the ledge. Their duty was plain. That fire threatened Enchanted, once it should sweep through the chimney draught of Pogey Notch. They must stay there and fight it at the pass through which it was marching to invade their territory. Rodburd Ide promised to have the Enchanted crew following them within a week. It might be that their men were already on the way. Their route lay through Pogey, and Wade would be there ready to captain them.

[Pg 126]

The camp was left to the girl and her unkempt guardian. She sat silent and full of bitter rage; but she understood the vagaries of the fool's character well enough to realize that after Lane's orders to Abe even her persuasions could have no effect; the valley fires that lighted the windows of the camp gave effective point to Lane's commands. The giant crouched by the open door and gazed upon the sullen glowings in the vast pit below, muttering his fears to himself.

CHAPTER XI

[Pg 127]

IN THE BARONY OF "STUMPAGE JOHN"

"Wilderness lord of the olden time,
Stalwart and plumed pine;
They have dragged thee down to the
roaring town
From the realms that once were thine.
And he who reigns in thy stately stead
Has never a time o' truce,
For the axe and saw and the grinder's
maw
Have doomed thee, too, King Spruce."

—Kin o' Ktaadn.



At half-past four in the dark of the morning "Dirty-apron Harry's" nickel alarm-clock purred relentlessly, and he rolled out of his bunk, his eyelids sticking like a blind puppy's. At seventeen, youth relishes morning naps. But, as cookee of Barnum Withee's camp on "Lazy Tom" operation, he was chosen to be the earliest bird to crow. His first duty as chanticleer was to wake "Icicle Ike" and "Push Charlie," the teamsters, whose hungry charges were stamping impatient hoofs in the hovel. He dressed himself while stumbling across the dingle to the men's camp, his eyes still shut. This feat was not as difficult as it sounds. The difference between Harry's night-gear and day raiment was merely a Scotch cap and the canvas robe of office that gave him his title.

The teamsters grunted when he shook them, and followed him out of the frowsy, snore-fretted atmosphere of the big camp. They did their morning yawnings and stretching as they walked. When Duty calls "Time!" to a woodsman the body is on the dot, even if the soul lags unwillingly.

[Pg 128]

The humorists of the woods have it that the cookee pries up the sun when he jacks the big pot out of the bean-hole. For such an important operation, "Dirty-apron Harry" went at it listlessly.

The bean-hole was beyond the horse-hovel, sheltered in the angle of a little palisade of poles whose protection would be needed when the winter's snows drifted. Harry wearily dragged a hoe in that direction after he had kindled a fire in the cook-house stove. He did not look up to the first pearly sheen of sunrise streaming through the yellow of the frost-touched birches. The glory of the skies would wake him too soon. He gave up the final fuddle of slumber grudgingly, his dull mind still piecing the visions of the night, his soul full of loathing for the workaday world of greasy pots and dirty tins. But when he turned the corner of the bean-hole shelter he dropped out of dreams with the suddenest jolt of his life. A black bear was trying to dig up the bean-pot, growling softly at the heat of the round stones she uncovered. Two cubs sat near by, watching operations with great interest, their round ears up-cocked, their jaws drooling expectantly. The big bear whirled promptly and cuffed the hoe out of Harry's limp grasp, leaped past him before his trembling legs could move him, and scuffed away into the woods, with her progeny crowding close to her sheltering bulk. The cookee sped in the other direction towards the hovel with as

great alacrity.

"Bears?" echoed "Push Charlie," appearing with his pitchfork at the hovel door. "Stop your squawkin'. I seen half a dozen yistiddy, and all of 'em streakin' north up this valley. Heard 'em whooffing and barkin' last night, travellin' past here on the hemlock benches." He pointed his fork at the terraced sides of the valley above them.

[Pg 129]

"It's only excursion parties bound for the Bears' Annoal Convention up at Telos Gorge," suggested "Icicle Ike," rapping the chaff out of a peck measure.

The cookee, woods-camp traditional butt of jokes, stared from one to the other, trying to recover his composure.

"And Marm Bear there wanted to take along that pot of beans for the picnic dinner," added Charlie.

"I think it's goin' to be a general mass-meetin' to discuss the game laws," said Ike. "The boys who were swampin' the twitch-roads yistiddy told me that deer kept traipsin' past all day and—well, there goes three now."

White "flags" flitted through the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing, and a startled "Whick-i-whick!" further up the valley-side hinted at the retreat of still others. Their departure was probably hastened by the cook's shrill "Who-e-e-e!" the general call for the camp. He came out of the cook-house scrubbing his hands and bare arms with a towel.

"Git that bean-pot here! What are you standin' round on one foot for?" he demanded, testily. When the cookee began to stutter explanations, brandishing freckled arms to point the route of the fugitives, the cook interrupted, but now there was humor in his tones.

"Thunderation, you gents is sartinly slow to understand what's before your eyes! Don't you know why all these animiles is runnin' away from down there?" He jerked a red thumb over his shoulder towards the south. "Ain't 'Stumpage John' Barrett down there with Withee, lookin' over that tract where we operated last season?"

Sly grins of appreciation appeared on the faces of the teamsters.

[Pg 130]

"Ain't you got any notion of what particular kind of language 'Stumpage John' has been lettin' out of himself for the last twenty-four hours?"

"Well, the idee is," said the cook, "he is down there cussin' to that extent that he's cussed every animile off'n Square-hole township. Animiles is natcherally timid, delicate in the ears, and hates cussin'. The deer come first because they can run fastest. Bears left as soon as they could, and is hurryin'. Rabbits will come next, and the quill-pigs are on the way. Then I reckon Barnum Withee will fetch up the rear. Oh, it must be somethin' awful down there!" He faced the south with grave mien. His listeners guffawed.

But a moment later "Push Charlie" stepped clear of the hovel and sniffed with canine eagerness. There was a subtle, elusive, acrid odor in the air. It seemed to billow up the valley, whose shoulders circumscribed their vision so narrowly.

"I reckon," he stated, "that he's throwed so much brimstone around him reckless that he's set fire to the woods."

"That's the way with some of these big timber-owners," remarked the cook, still in humorous mood. "They raise tophet with a sport because he throws down a cigar-butt, and they themselves will go out right in a dry time and spit cuss words that's just so much blue flame. It's dretful careless!" he sighed.

"But when you come to think of what he found there on that township," said Charlie, "you have to make allowances. More'n a third of the board measure left right there on the ground as slash, and slash that's propped on the branches of the tops like powder-houses on stilts. And the whole township only devilled over at that! Barn only took the stuff that would roll downhill into the water when it was juggled."

[Pg 131]

"You ain't blamin' your own boss, be ye?" demanded the cook.

"Not by a darned sight!" rejoined Charlie, stoutly. "If I was an operator, doin' all the hard liftin', with a rich stumpage-owner with a rasp file goin' at me on one end and a log-buyer whittlin' me at the other, I'd figger to save myself. But I've always lived and worked in the old woods, gents. I ain't one of those dudes that never want to see an axe put in. The old woods need the axe to keep 'em healthy. We, here, need the money, and the folks outside need the lumber. But when I see enough of the old woods wasted on every winter operation to make me rich, and all because the men that are gettin' the most out of it are fightin' each other so as to hog profits, it makes me sorry for the old woods and sick of human nature."

The morning bustle of the camp began in earnest now. Men crowded at the tin wash-basins on the long shelf outside the log wall. As fast as they slicked their wet hair with the broken comb they hurried into the meal camp. There they heaped their tin plates with beans steaming from the hole where they had simmered overnight, devoured huge chunks of brown bread deluged with molasses, and "sooped" hot coffee.

The odor of warm food was good in the nostrils of old "Ladder" Lane, the fire warden of

Jerusalem, as he strode down the valley wall towards the camp. He hung his extinguished lantern on a nail outside the cook camp and stooped and entered the low door. Among woodsmen the amenities of a camp are as scant as welcome is plentiful. Lane seized up a tin plate, loaded it with what he saw in sight, and began to eat hastily and voraciously.

"Fire?" inquired the cook.

Lane jerked a nod of affirmation.

"Where?"

"Misery."

"Big?"

Another nod.

"Talk about your bounty on wildcats and porky-pines," raged the cook, slamming on a stove-cover to emphasize his remarks, "the State treasurer ought to offer twenty-five dollars for the scalp and thumbs of every Skeet and Bushee brought in."

The fire warden ran his last bit of brown bread around his plate, stuffed it dripping into his mouth, and stood up after sixty seconds devoted to his breakfast.

"Where's Withee?" he asked the boss chopper, who had lounged to the camp door and was stuffing tobacco into his pipe.

"Off on Square-hole," replied the boss, with a sideways cant of his head to show direction.

"Fire on Misery eating north towards the Notch," reported Lane, with laconic sourness. "Withee ought to send twenty-five men." He was already starting away.

"He'll probably be back by night," said the boss chopper, "if 'Stumpage John' Barrett gets through swearin' at him about that last season's operation."

Lane stopped and whirled suddenly, the lineman's climbers at his belt clanking dully.

"John Barrett in this region!" he blurted.

"For the first time in a lot o' years," returned the boss, with a grin. "Suspected that Barn devilled Square-hole and wasted in the cuttin's as much as he landed in the yards. I reckon it ain't suspicion any more! He's been down there on the grounds two days. But he don't get any of my sympathy. A man who stole these lands at twenty cents an acre, buying tax titles, and has squat on his haunches and made himself rich sellin' stumpage,^[1] has got more'n he deserved, even if half the timber is rottin' in the tops on the ground."

The gaunt jaws of "Ladder" Lane set themselves out like elbows akimbo. He whirled and started away again as though he had fresh cause for haste.

"I don't want to take any responsibility for sending off any of the crew," called the boss. "What particular word do you want to leave for Withee?"

Lane settled into his woods lope and darted into the Attean trail without reply.

"I'll be here with my own word," he muttered, talking aloud, after the habit of the recluse.

"And what do you make of that now?" asked the cook of the boss, scaling Lane's discarded plate into the cookee's soapy water. "Why ain't he up on his Jerusalem fire station instead of rampagin' round here in the woods?"

"He was rigged out to climb a pole and had a telephone thingumajig with him," suggested the boss.

"He's strikin' acrost to tap the Attean telephone and send in an alarm, that's what he's doin'. Prob'ly his old lookin'-glass telegraft is busted," he added, with slighting reference to the Jerusalem helio. He followed his men, who were streaming up the tote road towards the cuttings. Far ahead trudged the horses, drawing jumpers. From the cross-bars the bind-chains dragged jangling over the roots and rocks.

In five minutes only three men were in sight about the camps—the cook, making ready a baking of ginger-cakes; the cookee, rattling the tins from the breakfast-table and whistling shrill accompaniment to the clatter; and the blacksmith, busy at his forge in the "dingle," the roofed space between the cook-house and the main camp.

It was just before second "bean-time" when Lane came back along the Attean trail and staggered, rather than walked, into the "Lazy Tom" clearing. His face was gray with exertion, and sweat coursed in the wrinkles of his emaciated features.

"Shouldn't wonder from your looks that you'd made time," suggested the cook, cheerfully, as the warden stumbled up to the door. "From here to the Attean telephone-line and back before eleven is what I call humpin'. You've been to Attean, hey?"

"Yes," snapped the old man. "I've reported that fire and done my duty."

"In that case, you've prob'ly got a better appetite than you had this mornin'," remarked "Beans," hospitably. He started to ladle from the steaming kettle of "smother" on the stove.

"Nothing to eat for me!" broke in Lane, sullenly. "Are Withee and John Barrett back yet?"

"Oh, they'll stay out till dark all right. Barrett will want to count trees as long as he can see."

"I'll wait, then!" Lane started towards the men's camp, but the cook stopped him.

"If you're reck'nin' to lie down for a nap, warden, don't get into them bunks. Them Quedaws have brought in the usual assortment of 'travellers' this season, and I don't want to see a neat man like you accumulate a menagerie. Now you just go right across there into Withee's private camp. He'd say so if he was here. I'll do that much honors when he ain't here. You won't wake up scratchin'."

Without a word Lane turned and strode across to the office camp, went in, and slammed the door shut after him.

"He's about as sour and crabbed an old cuss to do a favor for as I ever see," remarked the cook, fiddling a smutty finger under his nose. "But a man never ought to git discouraged in this world about bein' polite." He caught sight of the advance-guard of returning choppers up the road, and whirled on the cookee. "You freckle-faced, hump-backed, dead-and-alive son of a clam fritter, here come them empty nail-kags! Get to goin', now, or I'll pour a dish of hot water down your back."

[Pg 135]

"Is that what you call bein' polite?" growled the cookee.

The cook kicked at him as he fled into the meal camp with a pan of biscuits.

"They don't use politeness on cookees any more than they put bay-winders onto pig-pens!" he shouted.

There were two bunks in the little office camp, one above the other. "Ladder" Lane curled his long legs and tucked himself into the gloom of the lower bunk. His eyes, red-rimmed and glowing with strange fire under their knots of gray brow, noted a rifle lying on wooden braces against a log of the camp wall. He rose, clutched it eagerly, and "broke it down." Its magazine was full. He jacked in a cartridge, laid the rifle on the bunk between himself and the wall, and lay down again.

Most men, after the vigil of a night and bitter struggle of the day, would have slept. Lane lay with eyes wide-propped. His mind seemed to be wrestling with a mighty problem. Once in awhile he groaned. At other times his teeth ground together. Twice he put the rifle back on the wall, shuddering as though it were some fearsome object. Twice he got up and retook it, and the last time muttered as though his resolution were clinched.

After the resolution had been formed he may have dozed. At any rate, the first he heard of Barrett and Withee they had sat down on the steps of the office camp, and the loud, brusque, and authoritative voice of one of them went on in some harangue that had evidently been progressing for a long time previously.

"Damme, Withee, I tell you again that you've robbed me right and left! You left tops in the woods to rot that had a pulp log scale in 'em. You devilled the township without sense or system. You cut out the stands near the waterways without leaving a tree for new seed. You left strips standing that will go down like a row of bricks in the first big gale we have. But what's the use in going over all that again? You know you haven't used me right. The sum and substance is, you pay me a lump sum and square me for damages to that township or I'll cancel this season's stumpage contract. I'm using you just as I propose to use the rest of the thieves up here."

[Pg 136]

There was silence for a little time. The voice of the other man was subdued, even disheartened.

"I've said about all I can say, Mr. Barrett," he ventured. "Of course, you're rich and I'm poor, and if you cancel the contract I can't afford to go to law. But I've borrowed ten thousand dollars to put into this season's operation, and I've got it tied up in supplies and outfit. I've just got located and my camps finished. The way things have worked for me, I ain't made any money for three years, and I've put my shoulder to the wheel and my own hands to the axe. The operator can't make money, Mr. Barrett, the way he's ground between the owners of stumpage and the men down-river who buy his logs in the boom. You talk of closing your contract with me! Do you know of a man who can afford to do any better by you than I have—just as long as things are the way they are now?"

"Oh, I reckon you're about all alike," returned the lumber baron, ungraciously. "I've been a fool to believe anything stumpage buyers have told me. I ought to have come up here every year and looked after my property. But that would be prowling around in these woods that aren't fit for a human being to live in, and neglecting my other business to keep you fellows from stealing. Not for me! I've got something better to do. Clod-hoppers that don't want to stay in their fields all day with a gun kill one crow and hang it on a stake for the live ones to see. I'm sorry for you, Withee, but I'm going to make a special example of you."

[Pg 137]

"It don't seem hardly fair to pick me out of all the rest, Mr. Barrett."

"Well, it's business!" snapped the other. "And business in these days isn't conducted on the lines of a Sunday-school picnic."

"Ladder" Lane, who had been staring straight up at the poles of the bunk above his head, had not moved or glanced to right or left since the brusque, tyrannical voice outside had begun to declaim. Now he swung his feet off the bunk and sat on its edge. He fumbled behind him for the rifle and dragged it across his knees.

The night had fallen. The one window of the office camp admitted a sallow light. From the main camp came the drone of an accordion and the mumble of many voices. Lane realized that supper had been eaten.

"You're right about business, Mr. Barrett," Withee went on, a touch of resentment in his voice. "Your Bangor scale is 'business.' You talk about wasting tops! If an operator leaves the taper of the top on a log, he's hauling a third more weight to the landing, and then your Bangor scale gives him a third less measure than on the short log."

"The legislature established the scale; I didn't," retorted Barrett.

"Yes, but you rich folks can tell the legislature what to do, and it does it! We fellows that wear larrigans haven't anything to say about it." In his grief and despair he allowed himself to taunt his tyrant. "Your legislature has peddled away all the rights on the river to men with power enough to grab 'em. Look here, Mr. Barrett, while you toasted your shins last winter we worked here like niggers, in the cold and the snow, the frost and the wet—and the first man to get his drag out of our work was you. You got your stumpage-money. And when my logs were in the water, first the Driving Association that you're a director in, with its legislative charter all right and tight, took its toll. Then the River Dam and Improvement Company took its toll, and you're a director in that. Then the Lumbering Association, owned by your bunch, had its boomage tolls. Then the little private inside clique had its pay for 'taking care of logs,' as they call it. Then on top of all the rest, the gang had its tolls for running and shoring logs in the round-up boom, and finally the man who bought 'em scaled down the landing-measure on which you drew stumpage. I couldn't help myself. None of us fellows that operate can help ourselves. It's all tied up. We had to take what was given. Your tolls for this, that, and the other figured up about as much as stumpage. And when the last and final drag was made out of my little profits—there were no profits! I came out in debt, Mr. Barrett. That's all there was to show for a winter's hard work away from my home and family, in these woods that you say ain't fit for a human bein' to live in. That's what you're doin' to us—and you're all standin' together against us poor fellows to do it."

[Pg 138]

"Same old whine of the old crowd of operators," drawled Mr. Barrett. "If you old-fashioned chaps can't keep up with the modern business conditions you'd better get into something else and give the young fellows a chance."

"Get into the poor-house, perhaps," Withee replied, bitterly. "My father lumbered this river. I worked with him, before the big fellows had to have both crusts and the middle of the pie. I don't know how to do anything else. Every cent I've got in the world is tied up in my outfit. For God's sake, Mr. Barrett, be fair with me!"

[Pg 139]

It was the pitiful appeal of the toil of the woods at its last stand. But "Stumpage John" Barrett resolutely reflected the autocracy of giant King Spruce.

"This whole matter was gone over at our last directors' meeting, Withee. We have decided, one and all, that we won't have our timber lands butchered and gashed and devilled to make profit for you fellows. Our charters give us our rights, and business is business. We've got to stand stiff, and we're going to stand stiff until we show you what's what. I told my associates I would come up here and make an example, and I'm going to do it. Now, that's all, Withee! It's no good to argue. The timber interests can't afford to do any more fooling."

"Gents," broke in the voice of "Dirty-apron Harry," "cook sent me to say that your supper is ready."

"Tell cook I'm ready, too," snapped Barrett, grunting off the step. "I thought your cattle were never going to get out of that meal camp, Withee. You feed 'em too much! That's where your profits are going to."

Lane heard him snuffing.

"This smoke seems to be getting thicker, Withee. It must be something more than a bonfire, wherever it is."

"Cook is waiting to tell you," said Harry. "He didn't want to break in on your business talk, seein' that you was both so much took up with it. Warden from Jerusalem was through here this morning to give alarm and call for fighters. He's takin' a nap in the office camp, waitin' for Mr. Withee."

"A loafer like the rest of 'em!" snorted Barrett, starting away. "Dig him out, Withee, and send him to me. I'm going to eat."

At the sound of his retreating footsteps "Ladder" Lane unfolded his gaunt frame, stood up, and swung the rifle into the hook of his arm. He opened the office door and came upon Withee standing where Barrett had left him. In the gloom the operator's toil-stooped shoulders and bowed legs were outlined by the flare from the cook-camp. He continued his mutterings as he turned his head to look at Lane, his gray beard sweeping his shoulder.

[Pg 140]

"It's runnin' north from Misery, Mr. Withee," reported the warden. "It's runnin' in the slash and goin' fast. If it gets through Pogey Notch it means a crown fire in the black growth."

"I hope it'll burn every spruce-tree between Misery and the Canada line!" barked the furious old operator. "If I could stand here and put it out by spittin' on it I wouldn't open my mouth."

"I've 'phoned the alarm through Attean," went on Lane, calmly, with no apparent thought except his duty. "You ought to send twenty-five men."

"Not a man!" roared the operator. "Let the infernal hogs save their own timber lands. They want all the profit in 'em; let 'em stand all the loss, then."

"Look here, Withee," said the warden, implacably, "you know the law as well as I do. A fire warden has the same right as a sheriff to summon a posse when a fire is to be fought. Every man that is summoned and don't go pays a fine of ten dollars unless he is sick or disabled, and you'll have to stand good for your crew."

"I know it!" bellowed Withee, beside himself. "Some more of the devilish law they've cooked up to make us work like slaves for their profits. Talk about monarchies! Talk about freedom, whether it's in a city or in the woods! We ain't anything but cattle. The rich men have stood together and made us so."

"I didn't make the law, Withee. I'm simply delivering my errand as the State orders me to do. I've done my duty. It's up to you." He sighed, shifted the rifle to the other arm, and mumbled behind his teeth, "Now I'll attend to a little matter of business that ain't the State's."

[Pg 141]

He started for the door of the meal camp, the operator on "Lazy Tom" stumping angrily at his heels.

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 142]

THE CODE OF LARRIGAN-LAND

"Here's a good health to you, family man,
From the depths of our hearts and the
woods;
Boughs for our bunks and salt hoss in junks
Ain't hefty in way o' world's goods.
Keep your neck near her arms and your
cheek near her kiss,
And don't ever come here to the troubles o'
This!
We've tasted of This and we know what it
lacks—
We lonesome old baches—
Of peavies and patches,
Bills, Tommies, and Jacks of the Axe."

—The Family Man.



Barrett was at the table, his back towards the door. He was filling a pannikin with whiskey from a silver-mounted flask. The cook, who had been silently admiring his smart suit of corduroy, was now more intently and longingly regarding the amber trickle from the mouth of the flask. But John Barrett was not a man to ask menials to share his bowl with him. His shaven cheeks looked too hard even to permit the growth of beard.

The cook, whirling at the sound of Lane's moccasins on the chip dirt, was officious according to his promulgated code of politeness.

"Here's the warden from Jerusalem, Mr. Barrett. I done the honors of camp the best I could, seein' that you and Mr. Withee wa'n't here." In mentioning honors, the cook had one lingering hope that the stumpage-king would share his flask with a State employé, and that he himself might participate as one present and one willing.

[Pg 143]

But the timber baron did not turn his head. He stirred sugar in his whiskey and growled.

"Do fire wardens up this way earn their pay, sleeping, like cats, in the daytime?"

Lane had stepped just inside the door, his moccasins noiseless on the shaved poles.

"How near is that fire to the black growth, and how are they fighting it?" demanded Barrett.

"It started on Misery"—Lane began, in the same tone that had characterized his former reports.

But at his first word Barrett jerked his head around, stared wildly, stood up, and then sat down astride the wooden bench. With his eyes still on the man at the door, he fumbled for the pannikin of whiskey and gulped it down. Lane went on talking.

"And if they can get enough men ahead of it perhaps they can stop it in Pogeys Notch," Lane concluded.

The hands that clutched the gun trembled, but his eyes were steady, with a red sparkle in them. The lumber king endured that stare for a few moments, like one writhing under the torture of a focussed sun-glass. He glanced to right and left, as though seeking a chance for flight. The only exit was the door, and the tall, grim man stood there with his rifle across his arm.

"Say it, Lane! Say it!" hoarsely cried Barrett, at last, unable to endure the silence and the doubt.

"I have nothing to say—not now," said Lane. "I'll wait here until you eat your supper. My lantern is hanging on the nail there, cook. Will you fill it and light it?"

There was a subtle, strange menace in his bearing that the cook and Withee, staring, their mouths gaping, could not understand. But it was plain that the man at the table understood all too well.

"Why didn't you take it when I sent you the offer?" asked Barrett, his voice beginning to tremble. [Pg 144]
"I wanted to settle. It was up to me to settle. It was a bad business, Lane, but I—"

"It's a private matter you're opening up here before listeners, Mr. Barrett," broke in Lane. "It's my business with you, and you haven't got the right to do it. Just now you go ahead and eat your supper. You'll need it, for you're going to take a walk with me."

In his perturbation, forced to eat, as it seemed, by the quiet insistence of the warden, Barrett swallowed a few mouthfuls of food. But he cowered, with side glances at the grim man by the door. Then he pushed his plate away, choking. Maddened by the silent watchfulness, he stood up.

"I'll see you in the office," he muttered. "I'll tell you now and before witnesses that I'm ready to settle. I've always been ready to settle. It would have been settled long ago if you had let my man talk with you. Now, let's not have any trouble, Lane, over what's past and gone. I'll do anything that's reasonable."

He shot an appealing glance at Withee.

"We'll take Withee with us," he declared. "We'll talk in the office."

"We'll talk under no roof of yours and on no land belonging to you," answered Lane, firmly. "We'll talk private matters before no third party. If you're done your supper, Mr. Barrett, you'll come with me where we can stand out man to man in God's open country with no peekers and listeners—and that's more for your sake than it is for mine. I've done nothing in this life that I'm ashamed of."

"Do you take me for a fool?" roared the land baron, hiding fear under an assumption of his usual manner. "Do you think I'm going into the woods alone with you?"

"You are, Mr. Barrett."

[Pg 145]

"By —, I won't!"

"I'm no hand for a threat," grated Lane, in a low, strange voice, "but you'll come with me. You know why you'll come with me, because you know what I'm likely to do to you if you don't come."

Barrett looked past the man at the door. The dingle was full of crowding faces, for the altercation had called every man out. There was some consolation for Barrett in the spectacle of this silent, wondering mob. After all, he was on his own land, and these men must acknowledge him as their master.

"Here! a hundred dollars apiece to the men who grab that lunatic and take that rifle away from him!" he shouted, darting a quivering finger at the warden. But before any one made a move Withee stepped forward into the lamplight. With open, waving palm he imposed non-interference on his crew.

"Hold on, Mr. Barrett," said he. "Before we run into trouble by arresting a man that's an officer, we want to know whys and wherefores."

"Don't you know why he wants to make me go away into the woods?" bawled the lumber king.

"We can't very well know without bein' told," replied Withee, and an answering grumble from his men indorsed him.

"He wants to murder me—murder me in cold blood!" Barrett fairly screamed this. "I know what his reason is," he added, seeing that their faces showed no conviction.

"I've known Linus Lane ever since he came into this region," said Withee, breaking the awed hush that followed the baron's startling words. "I never knew him to be anything but peaceable and square. A little speck odd, maybe, but quiet and peaceable and square. Most of the men here know him that way, too."

Another answering mumble of assent.

[Pg 146]

"Odd!" echoed Barrett, grasping at the suggestion. "You've said it. He's a lunatic. He will kill me."

"What for?" called the chopping-boss, bluntly. His natural desire to get at the meat of things quickly was stimulated by ardent curiosity.

"You are all sticking your noses into a matter that doesn't belong to you!" cried Lane, his well-known crustiness showing itself, though it was evident that he was hiding some deeper emotion. "I want this man to go with me. It's business. And he's going!" His voice was almost a snarl, but there was a resoluteness in the tone that awed them more than violence would have done.

"Are you going to give me up to a murderer?" bleated Barrett, for his study of the faces in the lamplight did not reassure him.

"Hadn't you better let us step out, and you talk your business over with him right here, Linus?" inquired Withee, conciliatingly.

"He's going with me, and he's going now!" shouted Lane, his repression breaking. "The man that gets in our way will get hurt."

He banged his rifle-butt on the floor, and those who looked on him shrank before his awful rage.

"Put on your hat, Barrett, and walk out!" he shrilled. "Make way, there! This is my man, by — and he knows in his dirty heart why he's mine."

But Barnum Withee's quiet woodsman's soul was not of a nature to be intimidated, and his instincts of fairness, when it was between man and man, had been made acute by many years of woods adjudication.

"Hold on a minute, Linus!" he entreated, stepping between the two men with upraised hand. "You are both under my roof, and you've both eaten my bread to-day. I never got between men in a fair, square quarrel. I won't now. But you've got a gun, and he hasn't. I don't want to know your business. But if there's trouble between you it's got to be settled fair. You can't drag a man out of my camp to do him dirty—and it would be the same if it was only young Harry there that you were tryin' to take."

[Pg 147]

"Good talk!" yelled the boss.

"I'll give a hundred dollars—" began Barrett, seeing the advantage swinging his way; but Withee broke in with indignation.

"No more of that talk, Mr. Barrett!" he cried. "I'll run my own crew when it comes to pay or to orders. Now, Warden Lane, what are you going to do with this man when you get him where you want to take him?"

"I don't know!" snapped Lane, to the amazement of his listeners. And he added, enigmatically, "I can tell better after I've asked him some questions."

"Ain't you ready to tell us that you'll use him man-fashion?" persisted Withee.

The deep emotion which "Ladder" Lane had been trying to hide whetted the bitterness of his usual attitude towards mankind.

"I'm not ready to let any fool mix himself into my affairs. We've argued this question long enough, John Barrett. Now you—step—out!" He leaped aside from the door, cocked the rifle, and motioned angrily with its muzzle.

"Stay right where you are, Mr. Barrett," said the old operator, resolutely. "I'll stand for fair play."

"And you'll get your pay for it, Withee, my friend!" stuttered his creditor, eagerly. "I don't forget favors. You stand by me, and you'll get your pay."

"I haven't anything to sell, Mr. Barrett," said Withee, doggedly.

"But I've got something to give you," persisted the frightened magnate, edging near him, and striving to hint confidentially. "You stand by me, and when it comes to contracts—"

[Pg 148]

"I'm not buyin' anything, Mr. Barrett!" He signalled the lumber king back with protesting palm. "I'm simply tellin' Lane that he can't take a man out of my camp to do him dirty. And in that there's no fear and no favor!"

Lane gazed at the determined face of the operator and at the massing men who crowded at the door, and whose nods gave emphatic approval of Withee's dictum. No one knew better than he the code of the woods; no one understood more thoroughly the quixotic prejudices and simple impulses which moved the isolated communities of the camps. Just then they would not have surrendered Barrett to an army, and Lane realized it.

The eyes focussed on him saw the tense ridges of his seamed face tighten and the gray of an awful passion settle there.

"After all the rest of it, you're forcing me to stand here and put it in words, are you, you sneak?" he yelped, thrusting that boding visage towards the timber baron. "You're hiding behind these men! Well, let's see how long they'll stand in front of you! You've got to have 'em hear it, eh? Then you listen to it, woodsmen!" His voice broke suddenly into a frightful yell. "He stole my wife! He stole her! I say he stole her! That's what I want of him, now that he's here where I can meet him in God's open country, plain man to plain man!"

"He's lying to you," quavered Barrett. But his eyes shifted, and the keen and candid gaze of the woodsmen detected his paltering.

"I was away earning an honest living, and he came along with his airs and his money and fooled her and stole her—stole her and threw her away. It was play for him; it was death for her, and damnation for me. I ain't blaming her, men"—his voice had a sob in it—"she was too young for me. I ought to have known better. Our little house was on his land that he had stolen from the people of this State. Then he came and stole *her!*"

[Pg 149]

He was now close to Barrett, his bony fist slashing the air over the baron's shrinking head.

"It wasn't that way," stammered Barrett. "I was up there with some friends fishing and exploring on my lands. It was years ago. The young woman cooked meals for us. I went farther north to some other townships of mine, and she went along to take care of camp. That's all there was to it, men!" He spread out his palms and tried to smile.

"You stole her!" iterated Lane. "I came home, men, and she was gone out of our little house. I found just four walls, cold and empty, the key under the rug, and a letter on the table—and I've got that letter, John Barrett! And when you were tired of her up there in the woods you tossed her away like you tossed the lemon-skins out of your whiskey-glass. You didn't wait to see where she fell—she and your child—your child! Curse you, Barrett, I've never wanted to meet you! I sent word to you to keep out of these woods. I sent that word by the man you asked to bribe me—as though your money could do everything for you in this world! You thought you could sneak in here after all these years, because I was tied on the top of Jerusalem. But I'm here! What do you think, men? The fire that is roaring up from Misery township was set by this man's own daughter—the child that he tossed away in the woods. You that know the Skeets and Bushees know her. She set the fire! That's why I'm here. It's his child—his and hers. I don't know whether heaven or hell planned it, but now that I've met you, Barrett, you're going with me!"

He strode back to the door and stood there, the rifle again across the hook of his arm. His flaming eyes swept the faces in the dingle. Their eyes gave him a message that his woodsman's soul interpreted.

[Pg 150]

"There's the truth for you, men, since you had to have it!" he shouted. "Once more I'm going to say to John Barrett—'Step out.' And if there's still a man among you that wants to keep that hound in this camp I'd like to have that man stand out and say why."

There was not a whisper from the throng. They stood gazing into the door with lips apart. Silently they crowded back, as though to afford free passage.

Barrett noted the movement and wailed his terror.

"It means trouble for you, Withee, if you let him take me."

The old operator surveyed him with a lowering and disgusted stare.

"Mr. Barrett," he said, "I've told you that I have nothing to sell. All that I want to buy of you is stumpage, and I've got your figures on that and your opinion of me. I don't ask you to change anything." He turned away, muttering, "He'll have to think pretty hard if he can do anything more to me than what he's already threatened to do."

Calm once more, and inexorable as fate, Lane motioned towards the door.

"My final word, Barrett: March!"

As he gazed into the faces about him, not one gleam of friendliness anywhere, desperation or a flicker of courage spurred the magnate. In that moment John Barrett had none of the adventitious aids of his autocracy—none of the bulwarks of "Castle Cut 'Em." He was only a man among them—fairly demanded by another man to settle a matter of the sort where primordial instinct prompts a universal code. He drove his hat on his head and strode through the door, his head bent.

Lane took his lighted lantern from the cook's hand and followed. He had his teeth set tight, as though resolved to say no more. But at the edge of the camp's lamplight he whirled and faced the crew. Barrett halted, too, as though hoping for some intervention.

[Pg 151]

"Look here, men," said Lane, "I want to thank you for being men in this thing. And seeing that you've been square with me I don't want to go away from here leaving any wrong idea behind me. I don't know just what's going to happen between this man and me, for a good deal depends on him. But you've known me long enough to know that I'm not the crust-hunting kind that cuts a deer's throat when he's helpless. You put your confidence in me when you put this man in my hands. And I'll say to you, I'll do the best I know!"

"We ain't givin' any advice to you that knows your business better'n we do," called out the boss of the choppers. "But let it be man to man—good woods style!"

"Good woods style!" echoed the crew, in hoarse chorus. It was plain that their minds were dwelling on only one solution of the difficulty.

Lane stepped back and set the rifle against the log wall. "I was near forgetting," he said, apologetically. "I'm so used to carrying a rifle. This belongs here."

"Take it," suggested Withee, with a touch of grimness in his tones.

"I don't need it," Lane answered, quietly. He whirled and started away, and Barrett sullenly preceded him. They clambered up the valley wall, the pale lantern-light tossing against the hemlock boughs. The crew of "Lazy Tom" watched in silence until the last flicker vanished among the trees of the Jerusalem trail.

"Well," said the chopping-boss, drawing a long breath, "it appears to me that there are some things that money can't do for old 'Stumpage John,' big as he is in this world! One is, he's found he can't buy up the 'Lazy Tom' crew to back him in a dirty job of woman-stealin'."

[Pg 152]

"I'd like to be there when it happens," panted "Dirty-apron Harry," excitedly.

"When what happens?" demanded the boss.

"Well—well—I—I dunno!" confessed Harry.

"Umph!" snorted the boss, "now you're talkin' as though you know 'Ladder' Lane as well as I know him. The man who can stand here and tell what old Lane is goin' to do next can prophesy earthquakes and have 'em happen."

He pulled out his watch.

"Nine o'clock!" he roared. "Lights out and turn in!"

CHAPTER XIII

[Pg 153]

THE RED THROAT OF POGEY

"Though it ain't for me nor for any
one
To say how the awful thing was
done,
We know that the hand of a grief-
crazed man
Is set to many a desperate plan."

—On *Isle le Haut*.



It was a saffron dawn. It was a dawn diffuse and weird. A smear of copper in the east marked the presence of the sun. For the rest, the sky was a sickly monochrome, a dirty yellow, a boding yellow. It was not a wind that blew; a wind has somewhat of freshness in it. It was simply smoky air—air that rolled sullenly—choking, heavy, bitter, acrid air that was to the nostrils what the sky was to the eye.

After they had toiled around the base of the mountain and were well into Pogey Notch, the man ahead, stumbling doggedly and stubbornly, found water. It was only a little puddle, cowering from the drouth. The trees had helped it to hide away. They had scattered their autumn foliage upon it, beeches and birches which were grateful, for the pool had humbly cooled their feet in the hot summer.

The man ahead, thirst giving him almost a canine scent, fell rather than kneeled beside the pool, thrust his face through the leaves, and guffled the stale water. Then he plunged his smarting eyes, wide open, into the shallow depths.

When he faced once more the smother of the smoke and the man who stood over him, he seemed to have a flash of new courage. His eyes blazed again, his rumpled gray hair seemed to bristle.

[Pg 154]

But his defiance was only the desperation of the coward at bay.

"You've teamed me all night, Lane—from Withee's camp to here. I have asked questions, and you haven't answered me; but now, by —, say what you want of me, and let's have this thing over!"

It was an air that would have cowed an inferior in John Barrett's office in the city, where tyranny swelled the folds of a frock-coat and was framed in the door of a money vault.

But this weary man in knickerbockers, his puffy face mottled by the hues of self-indulgence and haggard after a night of ceaseless tramping along a woods trail, was not an object of awe as he squatted beside the pool like a giant frog.

The woodsman who stood over him, his gaunt face seamed and brown, his bony frame erect to the height that had won him the sobriquet of "Ladder" Lane, seemed now the man of dignity and authority. He was of the woods. He was in the woods. Two nights without sleep, miles of bitter struggle through the forest to report that conflagration roaring north to Misery township, and now puffing its stifling breath upon them, and the agony of recollection that John Barrett's crossing his path had dragged out—all these gave no sign in "Ladder" Lane's features and mien. Even his voice was steady with a repression almost humble.

What John Barrett did not know was that this humbleness was that of one who stood in the presence of a mighty problem, awed by it. In the long hours of self-communion, as he had plodded on, driving the timber baron before him, he had pondered that problem until his weary brain reeled. Introspection had always made his simple nature dizzy.

[Pg 155]

Now the tumult and torment in his soul frightened him. Over and over again in the darkness of the night, as he had followed at the heels of Barrett, he had whispered, in a half-frightened manner, to himself: "I told him to keep away! And now he's here!"

He had looked at the back of the man, stumbling ahead of him in the lantern-light, and had pitied him in a sort of dull, wondering fashion. He had pitied him because he knew that Barrett, despoiler of his home, seducer of his wife, was helpless in his hands. And because "Ladder" Lane realized that grief and isolation had made him over into such a one as sane men flout or fear, he was afraid of himself.

"This here is as good a place as any, Mr. Barrett," he said.

By striving to be calm, even to the point of being humble, Lane tried to tame the dreadful beast that he knew his inner being had become. But Barrett, pricking his ears at this humbleness, was too foolish to understand. In the mystery of the night he had feared cruelly. With day to reinforce his prestige, it occurred to him that the man was cowed by his presence and by the reflection that a person of influence cannot be kidnapped with impunity.

"I can make it hot for you, Lane, for dragging me out of camp and running me all over creation," he blustered, grasping at what he considered his opportunity to regain mastery. "But I'm willing to settle and call quits. I've always been ready to settle. Now, out with it, man-fashion! How much will it take?"

Another of those red flashes from the sullen coals of many and long years' hatred roared up in Lane like the torching of a pitch-tree. He had been trying for hours to beat those flashes down, for they made him afraid.

[Pg 156]

He trembled, blinking hard to see past the red. His hands fumbled nervously at his sides, as though seeking something that they could seize upon for steadiness. If the wind would only blow upon his face—a wind of the woods, clear, cool, and hale—he felt that he might get his grip on manhood once more.

But the woods sent up to him only the fire-breath. It whispered destruction.

If he only could look up to a bit of blue sky he felt that it might charm the red flare from his eyes.

But the yellow pall that masked the sky was the hue of combat, not peace.

All out-doors seemed full of menace. The nostrils found only bitter air. The smarting eyes saw only the sickly yellow. A normal man would have cursed at the oppression of it all, without exactly knowing why every nerve was on the rack. The recluse of Jerusalem Mountain, out of gear with all the world, with mind diseased by the chronic obsession of bitter injury, stood there under the glowering sky of that day of ravage and ruin, and felt himself becoming a madman. And yet he set a single idea before him for realization, and tried to keep his gaze on that alone, and to be calm. And the idea was an idea of forcing an atonement. How crudely conceived, Lane could not realize, for his mind was passing the stage of clear comprehension.

"I probably haven't got enough money with me," went on the timber baron, sullenly. "But my word is good in a matter like this. I don't want it talked about—you don't want it talked about. I'll overlook—you'll overlook! Give me your figures, and you'll get every dollar."

And still Lane was calm, and replied in a voice that quavered from an emotion that Barrett failed to understand.

[Pg 157]

"When you stole my wife away, Mr. Barrett, there were men that came to me and advised me what they would do if a rich man came along and took a woman from them, just to amuse himself for a little."

"There are people trying to stick their noses into business that doesn't concern them, Lane," snorted the baron, regardless that one edge of this apothegm threatened himself.

"I've been alone a good deal since it happened," went on Lane, in a curious, dull monotone, "and I've spent most of my time thinking what I'd say to you and do to you if you stood before me. I hoped it never would happen that you'd stand before me, man to man. I didn't hunt you up to find out what I'd do or say, for I was afraid."

He shivered, and Barrett, in his fool's blindness, stiffened his shoulders with a sudden air of importance, and allowed himself to scowl with a suggestion that perhaps Lane was wise to avoid him.

"You see, I was always making it end up in my mind that I should kill you. There didn't seem to be any other natural end to it. I had to kill you to square it. And that's why I was afraid. It was always one way in my thoughts. I never could—never can plan out any other way to end it; and murder is an awful thing, sir."

Barrett, who had been straightening, crouched farther back on his haunches and lost his important air.

"In my thoughts I always gave you half an hour to think it over, and stayed looking at you, and then killed you." There was a sudden convulsion of Lane's features, a smoulder in his eyes, that thrilled Barrett as though some one had whispered in his ear—"Lunatic."

The warden's groping hands had clutched the heavy lineman's climbers dangling from his belt, and were now set about them so tightly that muscles were ridged on the bony surface. Barrett became gray with fear. But Lane's ferocity disappeared as suddenly as it had flared.

[Pg 158]

"It all goes to show that in this world most men don't do what they think they'll do, when it comes to a big matter. I don't want to kill you, now that I have you where I want you." He looked down on the frightened man with a sort of pitying scorn. "It would be like batting a sheep to death. I don't want even to talk about your taking her away. It—it chokes in my throat! She's dead—and I guess she wanted to go away with you that time or she wouldn't have gone. That's just the way it seems to me now! And that's why I don't want to talk about it. It seems funny to feel that way, after all the thinking I've done about what I would do to you."

"The idea is, you're taking the sensible, business man's view of it," stammered Barrett. "I was young then, and up here in the woods, and—oh, as you say, it is better not to talk it over. We all make mistakes." He was pulling his wallet out of his corduroy coat. He evidently felt that the sight of money would prolong this "sensible, business man's view" of the situation. He did not want to take any more chances that the other and vengeful view would return, which had shown its flame in Lane's contorted face. "Now, I've got here—"

"To hell with your dirty money!" shrieked the warden, in a frenzy that was a veritable explosion out of his calmness. He kicked the wallet from the hands of the amazed timber baron. And when Barrett tried to stammer something, Lane leaned down and yelled, cracking his fists in the other's shrinking face:

"That's the way you and your kind want to cure everything—a dollar bill greased with a grin and stuck onto the sore place! Put that kind of a plaster on your city sneaks if you want to. But do you think I want it—here?" He swung his arm in a huge gesture and embraced the woods. "Your money is no good, John Barrett—here!" Another sweep of the long arm. Then he stooped and scabbled up a handful of dry leaves. He pushed them into Barrett's face. "Here, sell me your soul and your decency for that! You won't? Why not? You get your handfuls of greasy money just as easy! You only grab out and take! I don't sell for any stuff that's come at as easy as that."

[Pg 159]

"Say what you want, Lane," stuttered the timber baron, huddling back from this madman.

"You'll pay in the way I'll tell you to pay," raged the creditor, thrusting his fierce face close. "You'll pay out of your pride and your heart instead of your pocket. That's the kind of coin you've stripped me of! You stole my wife. She's dead. Settle your accounts with her in hell when you meet her there. But the girl—your young one—yours and hers—that you threw into the woods like you'd leave a blind kitten—"

"She was left with people who were paid well—" Barrett broke in, but Lane slapped him across the mouth.

"I know where she was left—left with a nest of skunks, so that you could hide your disgrace in the woods. I've watched her all these years. I've been waiting for the right time to come. It's here. Your girl is up there on the top of Jerusalem Mountain in my camp, Barrett. An idiot—a dog on two legs—is guarding her. He's the only friend she's got. That's your daughter. Now, you're going to take her!"

"Take her?" echoed the cringing millionaire.

"Take her—that's what I said. It belongs to her. Now give it to her."

[Pg 160]

Barrett misinterpreted Lane's interest. His face lighted with a sudden thought that to him seemed a happy one.

"Look here, Lane," he said, eagerly, "I didn't realize but what the girl was getting on all right. I ought to have inquired. But I didn't dare to. A man in my position has to be careful. Now she needs some one to take care of her. I'll admit it. I'm sorry it hasn't been attended to before. Let this matter rest between us two without any stir. I'll give you ten thousand dollars to act as the girl's guardian. Take her out of these woods. And I'll put ten thousand more at interest for her."

"I take that spawn—I take her?" demanded Lane, beating his thin hand on his breast. "I'd as soon pick up a wood adder! Take *her*—the living reminder of what's made me what I am? Do you suppose I hate you any worse than I hate her for being what she is?" But he checked himself; a sudden emotion—a strange emotion—mastered him, and he sobbed as he muttered, "Poor little girl!" Then his anger flamed again. "By —, Barrett, I ought to kill you now, anyway!" He clutched the irons at his belt. But after a moment, with a wrench of his shoulders, he pulled himself out of his frenzy.

"You are going to take that girl to your home. You are going to acknowledge her as your daughter. You are going to give her what belongs to her." He was grim now, not frenetic.

Barrett's whole body quivered. His voice was husky with appeal.

"I want to talk to you, man to man. I'm going to show you that I have confidence in you, Lane. I'm not saying this to any one else—only to you. It's a big matter, Lane. It will prove that I want to be

[Pg 161]

square with you.”

“You’re going to take her, I say!”

“For ten years, Lane, the big lumber interests in this State have been trying to get the right man into the governor’s chair. You are interested in timber. You are a State employé. We all need certain things, and now we are in a way to get them. I’m going to be the next governor of this State, Lane. I’ve got the pledges, from the State committee down through the ranks. I’m going to be nominated in the next State convention. I’ve spent fifty thousand already. Now, you see, I’m being frank and honest with you.” His voice had a quaver. He was explaining as he would explain to a child. “All the timber interests are behind me. See what it means if I am turned down? A scandal would do it. It’s the petty scandal that kills a man in this State quicker than anything else—scandal or a laugh! I can’t carry that girl out of the woods and declare her to be my daughter. It would kill all my chances for nomination. The papers would be full of it. And think of my family!”

Lane’s crude idea of an atonement was not so vague now. His brain whirled more dizzily, for the problem was bigger—and so was the revenge. He chuckled. It was the spirit of revenge, after all, that was driving him, and his madman’s soul now realized it and relished it. He looked up at the saffron sky and snuffed the scorching air. He felt the impulse seething up from the ruin of the forest, and with almost a sense of relief loosed the grip that had been holding him above the tide of his soul’s fire and blood.

He ran and recovered Barrett’s wallet from among the leaves, and searched it hastily. He found among the papers a few folded blank sheets bearing John Barrett’s name and monogram. There was a fountain-pen stuck in a loop. The paper and the pen he shoved into Barrett’s hands. [Pg 162]

“Write it!” he screamed. “Write it that she is your daughter, and agree to take her and do right by her. Write it! I wouldn’t take your word. I want a paper. You’ve got to take her.”

Barrett went pale, but his thick lips pinched themselves in desperate resolve. With the aspiration of his life close to realization he knew all that such a document could do to him. He stood up and tossed the paper away.

“I’m willing to do right by the girl in the best way I can,” he said, firmly; “but as to cutting my throat for her, I won’t do it. You’ve got my word. That’s all I’ll do for you.”

“It’s all?” asked Lane, with bitter menace. “All, after what you’ve done to me?”

“I won’t do it,” he repeated, stiffly.

The next instant, and so quickly that a cat could not have dodged, Lane struck forward with one of the irons. Barrett saw the flash and felt the impact; his brain clanged once like a great bell, and he crumbled together rather than fell.

He was standing when he revived. But his hands were lashed by strips of his torn corduroy coat—drawn behind him around the trunk of a birch and tied securely. Other strips of the cloth bound legs and body close to the tree. Lane mouthed and leaped in front of him—a maniac.

“Enjoy it!” he screamed. “There’s a thousand-acre fire out in that level. Here’s its chimney-flue. It’s going through here on its way to Enchanted. It’s going fast when it comes along, and it will be your first taste of what’s laid up for you in eternity. Burn! And when you’re burning just remember that your daughter set it—set it because you left her to grow up a hyena instead of a woman.” [Pg 163]

He whirled and started away at Barrett’s first wild appeal.

“I wouldn’t take your word! You wouldn’t write it! You didn’t intend to keep it!”

CHAPTER XIV

[Pg 164]

THE MESSAGE OF “PROPHET ELI”

“And the good, kind skipper and all
his crew
Got a purse and some medals, tew,
And a lot o’ praise for a-savin’ me
From an awful death in the ragin’
sea.
And I got jawed ‘cause I left that
way,
And the boss he docked me tew
weeks’ pay.”

—Hired Man’s Sea-song.

ane’s quick ear was the first to catch a new sound. He stopped and looked down into the Pogey trail. Barrett ceased his wails, and looked and listened, too.



Men of the woods who knew Prophet Eli of Tumbledick were never surprised to see him appear anywhere in the Umcolcus region. And it was usually a time of trouble that he chose for his appearance. In his twenty years' search of the forest he had found trails and avenues that were hidden to others. In places where veteran guides wandered and blundered, Prophet Eli knew a short-cut or detour, and moved with wraithlike swiftness, enjoying his reputation for surprises with the keen relish of the shatter-pate.

Those who did not call him "Prophet Eli," his own choice of title, dubbed him "Old Trouble," for he scented disaster with an elfish sense, and followed it north, east, and west.

He came down the Pogey Notch on a ding-swingle. It was drawn by his little white stallion. A ding-swingle is the triangle of a trimmed tree-crotch, dragged apex forward, its limbs sprawling behind. With peak mounted on a sapling runner it is the woods vehicle that best conquers tote roads.

[Pg 165]

From under the prophet's knitted woollen cap, with its red knob, his white hair trailed upon his shoulders. His white beard brushed the oddly checkered jacket, flamboyant with its bizarre colors.

"The Skeets and the Bushees are still running south," he cried at the two men, in shrill tones. "But I'm around to the front of the trouble, as usual."

He appeared to have no eyes for the plight of the trussed-up Barrett, who began to shout desperate appeals to him. He cocked shrewd eyes at "Ladder" Lane, who, with a muttered oath, started to scramble down the slope towards him. Perhaps he saw a threat in the madman's face.

He glanced once more at Barrett, as though interested a bit in that miserable man's frantic urgings, and piped this amazing query, "Don't you think a stuttering man is an infernal fool to have a name like McKechnie Connick?"

Then he lashed his long reins against the side of his stallion and sped away down the valley.

Lane followed him, running.

They left an existent millionaire and a prospective governor helplessly grinding the skin from his shoulders against a birch-tree, and bellowing anathema on "lunatics."

The Honorable Pulaski D. Britt, sweat pouring down his purple face as he raged from crew to crew on the fire-line, was not surprised to behold Prophet Eli emerge from the smoke, riding his ding-swingle. In twenty years Mr. Britt had often beheld the prophet at troublous junctures. In his present state of vehement anxiety the king of the Umcolcus felt his temper flare at sight of this herald of ill-omen.

[Pg 166]

"Met the Skeets and the Bushees, and they're still running south. Don't you think a man with pumple-feet is an infernal fool to try to learn to skate?"

Britt, thrusting past through the underbrush of the tote road, whirled and poised his foot to kick the inoffensive stallion, as mute expression of his rage and contempt. But he withheld the kick at the apparition of "Ladder" Lane. The warden came running. He fairly burst out of the smoke.

That he was pursuing Prophet Eli for no good to the latter occurred to the Honorable Pulaski in one startled flash, as he looked at the warden's savage face. He stepped between the men. But it was not to protect the prophet, whom he dismissed from his mind as utterly as though the forest sage were a fugitive rabbit. Mr. Britt had a pregnant question to ask of Lane on his own account, and he bellowed it at him, clutching at his arm.

"Where did you leave John Barrett?"

Lane halted at his touch, and glowered on him without reply.

"What's the matter with you, Lane? You look like a crazy man. What did you want of Mr. Barrett, anyway? What did you drag him out of Barnum Withee's camp for? Don't try to bluff me. I know about it. Barnum got here with his crew at daylight to fight fire, and his men have been talking about it. What right have you got to be bothering John Barrett? I haven't had time to get facts. I've got something else on my mind than other folk's troubles. But I know you've picked trouble with Barrett. Why, great Judas, you long-shanked fool, that man is goin' to be the next governor of this State! You must have heard of John Barrett! Trying to arrest John Barrett! What did you take him for—a game-poacher? Or have you gone clean out of your wits? What have you done with him?"

[Pg 167]

During the timber baron's harangue Lane kept his eyes on the prophet, meeting the latter's blinking regard with sullen threat in his eyes.

"Blast ye! Answer me!" roared the Honorable Pulaski. "Where is Mr. Barrett? I want to discuss this fire situation with him."

"Then go find him," growled the fire warden.

"Where is he?"

Lane raised his gaunt arm and swung it the circle of the horizon.

"There!" he snarled. He still kept his gaze on the prophet, as though to note the least intention to betray him. But it appeared that the sage of Tumbledick was in no mood for dangerous revelations. He thrust up one grimy finger.

"May be there!" he remarked. He pointed the finger straight down. "May be there!" He jumped his stallion ahead with a crack of his reins and disappeared in the smoke. Lane cast after him a look baleful, but relieved, and whirled and made away in the direction of Jerusalem.

"Me standing here wasting my time on a couple of whiffle-heads with that fire waltzing into my black growth!" Britt muttered, turning his wrath on himself, since there was no one else in sight. "It must be only some fool scare about Barrett. A man like him can take care of himself."

He stumped on, turning to climb a spur of ledge from which, as commander-in-chief, he might take an observation. Less than a mile to the south, he spied the thing that he had been dreading.

The ground fire, lashed by the rising wind of the morning, had leaped off the earth and become a crown fire. It had entered the edge of the black growth. [Pg 168]

One after the other the green tops of the hemlocks and spruces burst into the horrid bloom of conflagration. They flowered. They seeded. And the seeds were fire-brands that scaled down the wind, dropping, rooting instantly, and blossoming into new destruction.

"She can't be stopped! She can't be stopped!" moaned Britt. "She's headed for the Notch, and then tophet's let loose!"

But with the persistence of his nature he set off to rally the crew to a flank movement.

With the inadequate force it was rather a skirmish than a battle for those who fought in the face of the great fire.

Through the night, with shovels and green boughs they had attacked the conflagration's outposts. The red army of destruction took this punishment sullenly. The main fire seemed to crouch and doze in the night, dulled by the condensation of dews and lacking the spur of the winds.

At daylight Barnum Withee had arrived with his men and set them to trenching along the tote road parallel with the advance of the fire. He had not reconsidered his bitterness against his tyrant John Barrett. But the unconquerable instinct of the veteran woodsman, anxious to save his forest, had driven him to the scene.

To Barnum Withee's crew Dwight Wade and Christopher Straight attached themselves by entirely natural selection, having excellent personal reasons for avoiding the direct commands of the Honorable Pulaski Britt.

And to Wade, struggling with blistered hands to drive his mattock through roots and vegetable mould to the mineral earth, appeared Prophet Eli on his ding-swing. The prophet surveyed him with almost arch look, and piped, in his shrill tones: [Pg 169]

"Oh, the little brown bull came down from
the mountain,
Shang-roango, whey?"

Wade stared at him with a vivid recollection of the first time he had seen that strange figure and had heard that song.

"So you didn't think I knew how to mend bones, eh, young man? Never heard of Prophet Eli, the charmer-man, the mediator between the higher and lower forces, natural healer and regulator of the weather? Don't you think a man an infernal fool to dig a hole out of the dirt when it is so much easier to dig a hole out of the air and put dirt around it?"

Wade, not feeling inclined towards a discussion of this sort, fell to his labor again.

"If John Barrett's daughter set this fire, why ain't John Barrett here to help put it out?" shrilled the prophet, and Barnum Withee hearing the amazing query, came hurrying out of the smoke. He found Wade staring at the man with astonished inquiry in his face.

"You heard him say that, did you, Mr. Wade?" demanded Withee, with an emotion the young man could not understand.

It was the bare mention of John Barrett's daughter that had stirred Dwight Wade; for in his soul's eye but one picture rose when she was mentioned—Elva Barrett of the glorious eyes and the loving heart—the one woman in the world for him—denied to him by the father who ruled her.

"I heard him—yes," said Wade; "but what kind of lunatic's raving is it?"

"It may not be a lunatic's raving, Mr. Wade," returned Withee, enigmatically, his face grave. [Pg 170]

The prophet cast a look about, striving to peer into the smoke, as though apprehensive that some one whom he didn't want in his confidence might be listening. In a lower tone he went on:

"If a man has got a daughter and is tied to a tree, how much will 'Ladder' Lane scale to be cut up into bean poles?"

There was alarm on Withee's features now. He took Wade by the arm and led him aside a few steps.

"That old fellow has got something on his mind, Mr. Wade," he said, earnestly, "and it may be bad business. My men have been talking here to-day, as men will talk, though I advised them to keep their mouths shut. It may bring the 'Lazy Tom' crowd into the thing. If there's bad business on, I want you to be able to say outside that I haven't messed into affairs that wa'n't mine. It may have to be proved in court, and the word of a gentleman like you is worth that of fifty rattle-brained choppers."

"I don't understand, Mr. Withee. I can't appear as witness in matters I haven't seen."

"You can say I was here on the fire-line attendin' to my own business when it happened—if it has happened," cried Withee. "You can say that I had no hand in it. It's this way, Mr. Wade, if you haven't heard. Did any of my men tell you that John Barrett—you've heard of 'Stumpage John' Barrett—was at my camp last night?"

"I heard nothing of it," said Wade. He leaned forward with excitement in his face, for the tone and the air of the lumberman were ominous.

"He was at my camp, and Lane, the Jerusalem warden, after having words with him over an old matter between them, made Mr. Barrett go away into the woods with him—and I think Lane was about half crazy at the time."

[Pg 171]

"And you let an insane man force Mr. Barrett into the woods?" demanded Wade, indignantly.

Withee straightened, and his face took on a sort of sullen pride. "It's on that point that I want to explain to you, for my own sake. I don't know whether you're a friend of John Barrett's or whether you ain't. But when I hear him confess right before me that he has stolen away another man's wife and broken up that man's home forever, and has never done anything to square himself, then I let that matter alone, for it's a matter between man and man. And my men and I let John Barrett and Linus Lane settle their own business."

"How?" cried Wade, his face pale. "My God, man, it can't be that John Barrett did a thing like—"

"I heard him own to it," persisted Withee. "And what's more, it's John Barrett's daughter that lived with the Skeets and the Bushees, abandoned by him. And when I know a thing like that about a man, Mr. Wade, he can't look to Barn Withee to stand behind him."

Dwight Wade staggered back against the tree and put his arms around it to steady himself. Had he not seen the girl he might have scorned to believe such a story. But all his first emotions at sight of her there in her squalid surroundings rushed back upon him now. He had seen in this forest waif too many suggestions of Elva Barrett, and had been ashamed to own to himself that his heart confessed as much, as though it were an insult to the girl who reigned in his heart.

"So, I say," repeated Withee, as if to reassure himself, "I let them settle their own business."

"But how?" gasped the young man.

"You can prove nothing by me," said the lumberman, with a toss of his hand and wag of his head, pregnant gestures of disclaimed responsibility. "But that old fellow sitting on that ding-swingle never put those hints together without havin' something about it on his mind. I never knew trouble to happen in these woods unless he was there to see some part of it."

[Pg 172]

"What have you seen, old man?" demanded Wade, impetuously.

"Saw the crow catch the hen-hawk. Isn't a man with a harelip an infernal fool to learn to play a fife?"

But Wade, coming close to the sage, noted a strange twinkle in the blue eyes under the knots of gray brow. It was a glance so sane, so significant, so calculating, that the young man had no voice to utter the angry retort on his lips. It suddenly occurred to him that perhaps Prophet Eli of Tumbledick had not always been understood by those who jeered him. The keen glance noted Wade's changing expression and understood it.

"It was Rodburd Ide said it to me," the prophet stated, lowering his tone. "He said it was between you and John Barrett's pretty girl until old John drove you into the woods. Hey?" The young man's face flushed redly and he was about to reply, but the prophet put up a protesting hand. "It was Rodburd Ide said to me that John Barrett didn't think you were good enough for his daughter. Now you follow me! I want to hear John Barrett whine. I want to see John Barrett squirm. Coals of fire! Coals of fire, young man! What is Prophet Eli's mission? Coals of fire! I cure those who have mocked me, don't I? I like to hear 'em whine. I want to see them squirm. You follow me. Coals of fire!"



**"WRITHING AT HIS BONDS, HIS
CONTORTED FACE TOWARDS THE RED
FLAMES GALLOPING UP THE VALLEY"**

And singing this over and over to himself, he whirled his stallion and hurried away. Wade ran behind him without question, for he guessed while he feared. Withee started, but turned back to his men with a sullen oath. [Pg 173]

It was a long and a bitter chase through the smother of the smoke, and in the very forefront of the racing conflagration. At last Pogey Notch had begun to suck at the raging fires with its granite lips. It was the chimney-flue of the amphitheatre of Misery. The flames roared from tree to tree. Wade ran, stooping forward, clutching at the cross-bar of the ding-swingle. Without that help he never would have been able to reach the spot where at last he found John Barrett, writhing at his bonds, squealing like an animal—his contorted face towards the red flames galloping up the valley.

The prophet had left his vehicle to guide the rescuer up the slope. He stood by, grinning with enjoyment, when the two men faced each other. He chuckled when Wade cut the bonds. He laughed boisterously when Barrett, weeping like a child, threw his arms around the young man's neck.

"Coals of fire!" he shrilled. "Heap 'em on! They're hotter than the other kind that are dropping on you!"

Then he ran from them a few steps and rapped his skinny knuckles on a scar breast high on a tree.

"Your trail!" he cried. "It's here! It's blazed clear to the bald head of old Jerusalem. Get up there on the granite. Then sit down and talk it over! Coals of fire!"

They heard him shrieking it back at them as he fled up the Notch. And the two men took the trail, strangling, gasping, feeling their direction from blaze to blaze on the trees, fighting their way up from the Gehenna of Pogey.

CHAPTER XV

[Pg 174]

BETWEEN TWO ON JERUSALEM

"So he didn't have no doctor but a bowl o' ginger tea,
And it didn't seem to help him, not so far as we could see."

—Gettin' Larry Home.

hen they came out upon the bare granite, long after mid-day, they fell upon their faces, and lay there without speaking or the desire to speak. They did not open their smarting eyes.



Over and over again Wade heard a dull rumble which his stricken senses failed to understand. But when a hollow boom reverberated among the hills and jarred the granite under his face he sat up. He saw the purple flash shiver across the swaying smoke, heard the splitting crack of the bolt, and felt a raindrop on his face.

"Thank God, Mr. Barrett, it has come at last! The rain!" he shouted. And the timber baron staggered to his feet, and turned a bloodshot gaze on the panorama of blazing forest and sheeting heavens. Then he looked at Wade, blinking stupidly and searching his soul for words.

"I haven't got the language, Mr. Wade—" he began. But the young man broke upon his stammering speech.

"There's no need of saying anything," he said, looking away. "I don't want to hear any thanks."

"I was left there to die—tied up there and left to die by a crazy fool that tried to blackmail me—that's it, tried to blackmail me. And I'll put him where he belongs. It was the most infernal plot ever put up on a man. Blackmail and murder!" He gabbled his charges hysterically. The shock of his experience had unmanned him. "You can't blackmail a man like me without suffering for it. I'll put him into the deepest hole in the insane asylum—with a gag in his mouth." He was going on to relate his experience, but Wade again interrupted him.

[Pg 175]

"I won't bother you to tell it, Mr. Barrett," he said, coldly. "I know how it happened. Mr. Withee told me this morning."

"It's all lies and blackmail!" screamed Barrett, his fury rising at thought of this gossip. "Withee is against me, too. I told him I'd take his stumpage contract away, and this is how he is getting back. I'll have him and his whole crew in jail for blackmail if he doesn't shut his yawp."

A roar of thunder drowned his voice, and he stood, with the rain pelting on him, shaking his fists above his head. But by the twist of his mouth Wade saw that he was still cursing "blackmail."

The sight angered him. In as insulting a passion had John Barrett railed at him, Dwight Wade, when he had asked for the hand of John Barrett's daughter. The man had tossed his arms in the same way when he called Wade "a beggar of a school-master."

"Don't call it blackmail and murder—not to me, Mr. Barrett," he said, harshly.

"Don't you know it's blackmail and a put-up job to ruin me?" roared the timber baron.

Wade stood up now and faced him. Torrents of rain beat upon them, and they took no heed; for the face of the young man was working with a mighty emotion and the features of the other man showed that sudden fear had come upon him.

"Have you ever seen that daughter of yours that you left to wallow with human swine?" demanded Wade, with a fury he could not restrain. "Well, I have!" Into those words he put all the bitter resentment of months of remembrance of John Barrett's insults.

[Pg 176]

"And I have seen the daughter you cherish in your home. I don't need any man's say-so to prove to me that they're both your children, Mr. Barrett. You stand convicted in the eyes of every man who has eyes and who sees Elva Barrett and then looks on poor Kate Arden—even her name a cruel jest! I don't want to hear a man like you lie, Mr. Barrett. Don't talk any more to me about blackmail." He shook his fist at the roof of the Jerusalem fire station, just showing above the ledges. "I know that girl over there is your daughter. Now go slow, Mr. Barrett, with your threats of what you will do to Lane. If there is any unwritten law, he deserves to have the forfeit of the life that I've helped to save. That's still a matter between you two. But as to that girl yonder, I propose to ask something. What are you going to do with her?"

Barrett muttered incoherently, dazed by the new light of Wade's words.

"Your blackmail story may go with woodsmen, Mr. Barrett. But if Lane should go out of these woods with his story and that girl to back it he can hold you up to execration by every decent person in the State. The girl proves it in every feature of her face."

"The lunatic tried to make me take her home, own her publicly, and treat her as a daughter—and he demanded that to ruin me. It would ruin me in my political prospects, Wade. You know it. I'm willing to do what's right. But I can't do that." His courage revived a little. "I'd rather go down fighting."

The young man pondered awhile.

"I don't want you to think that I'm persecuting you for any of the trouble between us, Mr. Barrett," he said, at last. "That is all over and done with. But as a man who knows what that poor girl has been condemned to, and like others here who can tell by their own eyes that Lane is speaking the truth, I'm going to see that she gets a fair show."

[Pg 177]

Barrett concealed his private doubts as to the young man's animus. But sudden dread of this new weapon in his foe's hand mastered him.

"In the name of God, help me out, Wade!" he pleaded, dropping all his obstinacy. "I couldn't argue with that crazy man. I'll put the girl to school. I'll give her money. She shall have everything heart can wish—except my home. Think of my family, Mr. Wade! Think of my daughter! I want to have the respect of my family, Mr. Wade, for the few years that are left to

me. Help me, and you won't be sorry for it. I'll—"

"I want no pay and no promises," broke in the young man. "You have been free with your cry of blackmail. You can never taunt me with that. I'm simply appealing to your manhood. But I'm going to see that your daughter gets her rights, and that is no threat—it is justice."

"Aren't those rights enough—what I have said?" urged Barrett.

"Perhaps they are. They are probably all she can expect. People hardly ever get all they deserve in this world—either in blessings or punishments." His tone was bitter. And he stood apart and gazed out over the broad expanse to the south, his brow wrinkling. He was trying to analyze the emotions that made him champion the outcast.

The thunder-heads had rolled on, but like mighty and noisy engines they had dragged behind them masses of clouds that covered the skies with a slaty expanse, and a storm, settled and steady, poured down its grateful floods. [Pg 178]

Already the fire was dying. Only here and there scattered flames fought the streaming skies from the tops of resinous trees.

"Mr. Barrett," said Wade, at length, "the girl is at Lane's. You can't meet her now. It is not the time and place. Probably Lane has returned there. I don't think his mind is right—and after knowing the wrong you did him, I can understand why. You've time to reach Britt's camp before night. It is in the clearing to the north. You are an old woodsman. You can find your way there."

Barrett nodded relieved assent.

"You have asked me to help you. As that includes helping this poor girl most of all, I am going to do what I can, for the sake of you and your family." Barrett gave a quick glance at him, but the young man's face was impassive. Perhaps the timber baron had hoped, for his own temporary guarantee, to see a flash of the old love in Wade's eyes. "I'm going to request you to leave this matter in my hands for the present. I will see Withee, and try to stop gossip in that quarter. Will you give me the right to—well, to modify some of your threats? And as to Withee—I believe you spoke of a contract!"

John Barrett stood straighter now. The sneer of conscious authority, the frown of tyranny, had gone from his face. There was a frankness in his face and a sincerity in his tones that few persons had seen or heard before. But the new inspiration was logical and real. The young man who stood before him had just waived a mean vengeance so nobly that his heart swelled. His doubts were quieted.

"My boy," he said, softly, pulling off his cap and standing bareheaded in the rain, "I'm alive now, after the experience of looking straight into the eyes of death and giving up every hope. And, I tell you, it seemed hard to die—just now, when the best hopes of my life are coming true. I had time to think. I thought. I know I talked hard just a bit ago. But I wasn't myself then. I was too near the smoke and fire." He stopped and put his hand to watering eyes. "I can see clear now. And I've got over my bitterness, and I guess now I can understand the Golden Rule. That's my word, and there's my hand on it. Now talk for me to those I've hurt." [Pg 179]

They clasped hands. But it was Barrett who made that overture.

"I'll wait for you at Britt's camp—until you come and tell me what I'm to do," said the timber baron. And then he turned and trudged away across the wet ledges.

Wade gazed after him until he disappeared in the stunted growth. He gazed sourly into the palm of the hand that the millionaire had squeezed, and reflected that perhaps Barrett's precipitate repentance was off the same piece as his own forgiveness of the bitter matter that lay between them. Being a young man inclined to be honest with himself, Dwight Wade confessed that the fabric of his forgiveness had a selvage that already showed signs of ravelling. He was a little angry at his state of mind.

"And yet it sounded like a campaign speech to catch votes," he muttered.

He was still angrier at himself then, for, put into words, his doubt seemed an unjust suspicion.

"I must have got more of a jolt than I thought when I dropped from ideals to the real," he pondered, gazing out through the slanting lines of rain. "I seem to have about as many grudges against humanity as old Lane himself."

When he looked towards the roof of the little fire station he awoke to the consciousness that the rain was wet and the wind searching. To himself, in a sudden flash of introspection, he seemed to be as unkempt within as without. There on the granite of the bare mountain, with the forces of nature conquering the last embers of the mighty conflagration, the narrower things of life and living—the amenities, the trammels that man patiently puts upon himself for the sake of the social fabric—appeared vain and delusive ideals. It was not thus that the strong battled and won. [Pg 180]

"Considering what sort of a man they're making of me up here, where cast-iron is better than velvet, I think it's likely, John Barrett, that it has been lucky for you that you have a daughter away down there."

He set his face in long gaze to the southern hills, bulked dimly behind the mists.

"As for Kate Arden—" He shook his head despondently, and walked away across the glistening granite towards "Ladder" Lane's house.

CHAPTER XVI

[Pg 181]

IN THE PATH OF THE BIG WIND

"So we fellers of the camp, when the wind-spooks
rave and ramp,
We fasten up the dingle-door with spike and extry
clamp;
For it ain't a mite against 'em if the boldest chaps
do hide
When the big old trees go tumblin', crash and
bang, on ev'ry side."

—*Ha'nt of Pamola.*



John Barrett, millionaire, realized rather vaguely that he had left something on the bald poll of Jerusalem Knob. It was after he had grasped Dwight Wade's hand, both of them standing shelterless under the skies, the welcome rains beating into their faces.

John Barrett, millionaire, stumbling wearily to shelter at the foot of Jerusalem Knob, having left something in that upper vastness where soul forgot the petty things, realized—vaguely again—that he had found what he had left. The Honorable Pulaski D. Britt seemed to pass it to him in a hand-clasp.

On Jerusalem, John Barrett had left much of his insolence, more of his selfishness, and all of his vindictiveness. Dwight Wade, generous in his own triumph, had shamed the baser feelings out of him. And yet that new poise of a sincerer manliness seemed to be charmed away suddenly by the mere touch of Pulaski Britt's big hand. That hand represented the brutal tyranny of the barons of the woods. It was thrust out in welcome over the threshold of the wangan camp, and Britt hauled in his fellow-baron with boisterous greeting.

[Pg 182]

"It's been hell for all of us, John, but I reckon you've been in the hottest corner of it if what they tell me is true. I didn't have time to ask for any details, not with that infernal fire on my hands, but it isn't the first time that rascals have poked up fools in these woods to pay off old grudges against timber-land owners. I've hit back hard a few times myself. This time we'll hit hard enough to teach 'em a lesson that will stick awhile." He put his head out of the door and yelled an order to the cook.

"It—it may not be best to push things too hard," faltered Barrett, spreading his wet, blue hands to the blaze of the Franklin stove. "Things have come up that—"

"They've tried the same bluff on me," blustered the host. "They loaded old Lane up with threats of what he'd do. It's all conspiracy and blackmail. There's more behind it than we realize now. But we'll dig 'em out, Barrett. We've got to smash the whole thing now or they'll have us on the run. I didn't suppose Barnum Withee was the kind of man to work out a grudge the way he did, but it shows us the danger in bein' too easy with any of 'em. Old Lane is only crazy. It's this Wade we want to bang the hardest. I'll tell you what I believe, John. I'll bet cents to saw-logs he's been hired to come up here and start a rebellion. There are interests in this State that will do it. By Judas, in twenty-four hours I'll show 'em!"

The tacit partnership of honorable reparation bound by hand-clasp on Jerusalem had not the elements to make it endure in Pulaski Britt's domains, with Pulaski Britt to sound his old-time rallying call of greed and tyranny. That earlier partnership, sealed by the arms of Old King Spruce, had never been dissolved, and Barrett was once more becoming "Stumpage John," cold and hard and calculating.

[Pg 183]

"Look here, Pulaski," he blurted out, in sudden confidence, "there's a little more to this than you understand just now. I'm in a devil of a position. I—I—" He hesitated, staring into the fire and waving his hands slowly in the steam that rose from his sodden garments.

"I haven't done just right, I suppose, but there are reasons why, that a man like you will understand. I just left that Wade fellow up on the top of Jerusalem. We've had a talk. He didn't understand very well."

"Did he offer to trade something for the sake of gettin' that daughter of yours that he's in love with?" demanded Britt, maliciously.

"I don't know," confessed the other. "I'm under obligations to him, Pulaski. He cut me loose from a tree to-day in Pogeys Notch. In another ten minutes the fire would have got me."

"Great Jehosaphat!" exploded the host. "Tried to kill you! A timber grudge carried that far!" He stamped about the little camp. His face wrinkled with apprehension and fury. He had a sudden vivid mind-picture of his own reign of tyranny, and realized that if John Barrett had been

attacked, Pulaski Britt had more reason to fear. "It's a call for a lynchin', John," he said, hoarsely. "And I've got a crew that will do it."

"It was Lane that tied me—the fire-station warden," Barrett went on.

"And Withee turned you over to him, knowin' he'd do it!" stormed the baron. "His men blabbed it that Lane had taken you. Withee, Wade—we'll clean out the whole coop of 'em!"

But John Barrett did not seem to warm up to this plan of vengeance. He still kept his eyes on the fire. His shoulders were hunched forward with something of abjectness in their droop.

[Pg 184]

"You haven't got some whiskey handy, have you, Pulaski?" he asked, plaintively. "I don't feel well. I've had an awful night and day."

Britt brought the liquor from a cupboard, cursing soulfully and urging vengeance. But after Barrett drank from the pannikin he leaned his face to the blaze again and broke upon the Honorable Pulaski's vicious monologue.

"I've told the wrong end first—but there are some things easier to say than others. It was Linus Lane who tied me to that tree and left me to die there, but"—Barrett rolled his head sideways and gave Britt a queer glance from his eye-corners—"did you ever see my daughter Elva, Pulaski?"

Britt blinked as though trying to understand this sudden shifting of topic, and wagged slow nod of assent.

"Have you ever seen that girl of the Skeet settlement—the one that doesn't belong to them?" Barrett half choked over the question.

"Have I seen her?" roared the Honorable Pulaski, no longer paying attention to incongruity of questions. "Why, that's the draggled-tailed lightnin'-bug that set this fire that we've been fightin' for forty-eight hours, and that only this rain stopped from bein' a fifty-thousand-acre crown-fire! Have I seen her! I was there when she set it, and only the grace o' God and that Wade's fist saved her from bein' shot, and shot by me! I would have killed her like I'd kill a quill-pig!"

Barrett did not look up from the fire.

"Then you've seen both those girls, you say? I haven't seen this one in the woods here. But this Wade told me to-day that they very much resemble each other. He has heard some gossip and is making threats. He seems to think I ought to take the girl and care for her."

[Pg 185]

Britt began a bitter diatribe, coupling the name of Wade and the girl as examples of all that is inimical to timber interests and timber owners—but he checked himself suddenly as soon as his native shrewdness mastered his passion. A flicker in his eyes showed that a light had burst upon his mind. He strode back and forth behind Barrett's stool, and gazed down upon the stumpage king's bent back.

"Look here, John," he demanded, bluffly, at last, "was there any truth in the story that was limpin' round in these woods about you almost twenty years ago? There was a woman in it—somebody's wife. I've forgotten who."

"It was Lane's wife," admitted Barrett, finding confession good for the soul of one who stood bitterly in need of practical advice—and Pulaski Britt was nothing if not practical. "I was up here prospecting, and she was bound to follow me up to camp, and I was infernal fool enough to let her. And when it came time for me to go out of the woods I couldn't take her—you can see that for yourself! I thought I had provided for her—I would have done it, but she dropped out of sight, and I couldn't go hunting around and stirring up gossip. Same way about the child."

"Young one has had a nice, genteel bringin'-up," remarked the Honorable Pulaski, sarcastically. Hard though his nature was, he had the sincerity of the woods, and he felt sudden contempt for this man who had uprooted for one brief sniff of its perfume a woods blossom that he could not wear.

"I didn't realize it until Lane told me at Withee's camp. I had hoped she had fallen into good hands. It's a devil of a position to be in," the other mourned, returning to his prior lament.

"Well," remarked Britt, inexorably, "you can't exactly complain because you are now gettin' only a little of what Lane and the girl have been gettin' a whole lot of all these years. It ain't any use to whine to me, John. I don't pity you much. I've been hard with men, but, by Cephas, I've never been soft with women! It don't pay."

[Pg 186]

"It seems as though you ought to be willin' to advise me a little," pleaded Barrett. "I'm ready to do what I can for the girl, now that I've found out about her. But Lane insisted on my taking her out with me and declaring her to the world as my daughter. And when I refused he tied me to the tree."

"Oh, ho! It wasn't just for the old original revenge, then?" queried Pulaski, his expression indicating a more charitable view of "Ladder" Lane's assault on the vested timber interests as represented by Stumpage John Barrett. "Well, if the girl is your young one she ought to have a chance!"

In his turn, Barrett got up and paced the floor. "Such a thing would kill my chances of being the next governor of this State, and you and the whole timber crowd have got a lot at stake there."

"Well, I've got to admit, havin' played politics myself somewhat," said Britt, unconsoingly, "that a quiet little frost of scandal will nip off a budding leaf that a wind like this wouldn't start."

He tapped the frame of the chattering window. In the hush of their voices they heard the wind volleying through the trees and roaring high overhead among the black clouds. Night had fallen. The crew had long before finished supper, and the cook had twice summoned the inattentive two in the wangan to a second table spread more sumptuously.

"And what kind of a trade is it your friend Wade wants to make with you?" inquired Britt. "Takin' the thing by and large, you must be in for a prime hold-up. If he should say, 'Your daughter or your life—political life!'—I reckon you'd have to change your mind about his qualifications as a son-in-law, wouldn't you?" He eyed Barrett keenly and heard his oaths with relish. "You see," persisted the host, "though old Lane is probably out of this for good, after trying to kill you, and you can handle Barnum Withee and the rest of these woods cattle in one way or another, this Wade chap is sittin' across from you with about every trump in the deck under his thumb. What does he say he wants?"

[Pg 187]

"He doesn't say," muttered Barrett. "He hasn't asked for anything. He's thinking it over."

"It's the cat and the mouse, and him the cat!" suggested the Honorable Pulaski, with manifest intent to irritate. "I should have most thought you would have thrown your arms around his neck after your rescue and yelled in his ear: 'My daughter is yours, noble man! Take her and my money, and live happy ever after!' These fellows that write novels always have 'em do that sort of thing—and the novel-writers ought to know!"

"There's no novel about this thing!" retorted Barrett, angrily. "My girl knows whom she is expected to marry—and she'll marry him when the right time comes. And it won't be a college dude without one dollar to rub against another! I'm in a devil of a hole, Pulaski, but do you think for one minute that I'm going to let that Wade make a slip-noose of this thing and hang me up with my heels kicking air? I'll either choke him with thousand-dollar bills, or—or—"

He glanced at Britt and forbore to finish the sentence.

The door opened just then and Tommy Eye, teamster, poked in his grizzled head.

"Cook has lost his voice hollerin' 'Beans!' gents," he reported, and Britt whirled on his heel and led the way out.

[Pg 188]

"After supper, after supper, John!" he snapped, testily, when the other repeated his plea for advice. "We'll come back here and find a plan blossoming in our cigar smoke." They hurried away to the cook-camp, bending against the rush of the wind. "Put some wood on that fire, Tommy," Britt called over his shoulder.

With the scent of the inebriate, Tommy had sniffed whiskey when he opened the camp door; his drunkard's eye caressed the bottle that the Honorable Pulaski had forgotten to replace in the cupboard. He stood dusting from his sleeves the bark litter of the wood he had brought and softly snuffed the moisture at the corners of his mouth as he gazed. One wild impulse suggested that he take the bottle and run into the woods.

"No," said Tommy, aloud, in order that his voice might brace his determination. "It would be stealin', and, bless God, Tommy Eye never stole when he was sober. I may have stole when I was drunk and didn't know it, but I never stole when I was sober." He paused. "I wish I wasn't sober," he sighed. He took up the bottle, turned it in his grimy hands, gustfully studied the streakings of its oil on the glass, and at last sniffed at the open mouth. "Ah-h-h-h, rich men have the best, and they have plenty. Some people don't think it is wrong to steal from rich men. I do. But if he was here he'd probably say: 'Tommy, you have brought the wood—you have mended the fire. It is a cold night, and sure the wind is awful! Tommy, take one drink with me and work the harder for P'laski Britt on the morrer.'"

He took the bottle away from his nose, stared at the window's black outline, listened to the clattering frame, and muttered, again sighing: "Sure and them wor-rds don't sound just like the wor-rds that P'laski Britt would say, but in a night like this it isn't always easy to hear aright. I wouldn't steal—but I'll dream I heard him say 'em. 'One drink, Tommy,' I hear him say."

[Pg 189]

He set the bottle to his lips, tipped it, closed his eyes, and drank until at last, breathless and choking, he felt the bottle suck dry.

"Bless the saints!" he gasped; "it was one drink he said, and sure with my eyes shut I couldn't see how big was the drink." He felt the thrill of the mighty potation from head to toes. His meek spirit became exalted. "If I should go out now," he mumbled, "he would say that I stole it. But I will stay here with the bottle in my hand just as it was when I took the one drink. I will show him. And, after all, it is not much he can do to me—now!" He rubbed a consolatory palm over his glowing stomach. He stood there, beginning at last to rock slowly from heel to toe, until he heard voices and footsteps. The preoccupied barons had not lingered over their repast. "No, I'll not run away. I'll not steal," muttered Tommy Eye, "but—but I'll just crawl under the bunk, here, to think over the snatch of a speech I'll make to him. And a bit later I'll feel more like bein' kicked."

From the safe gloom of his covert he noted that they had brought back with them the boss, Colin MacLeod. Britt turned down the wooden button over the latch of the door and gave his guests cigars.

They smoked in silence for a while, and then Britt spat with a snap of decision into the open fire and spoke.

"MacLeod, a while ago, when we were talkin' about Rodburd Ide's girl, Nina, I told you that I wouldn't interfere in your woman affairs again—or you told me not to interfere—I forgot just which!" There was a little touch of grim irony in his tones—irony that he promptly discarded as he went on. "About that Ide girl—you ought to know that you can't catch her—after what has happened. I know something about women myself. The girl never took to you. If she had cared anything about you she would have run to you and cried over you when you were lying there in the road where Dwight Wade tossed you. That's woman when she's in love with a man. Don't break in on what I'm saying! This isn't any session of cheap men sittin' down to gossip over love questions. It may sound like it, but it's straight business. Don't be a fool any longer. But there's a girl that you have courted and a girl that thinks a lot of you, because I heard her say so one night on Jerusalem Knob. You ought to marry that girl."

[Pg 190]

The Honorable Pulaski again checked retort by sharp command.

"That girl isn't of the blood of the Skeets and Bushees, and you know it. She is a pretty girl, and once she is away from that gang and dressed in good clothes she will make a wife that you'll be proud of. Now, what do you say, Colin? Will you marry that girl?"

MacLeod stared from the face of his employer to the face of John Barrett, the latter displaying decidedly more interest than the questioner. Then he stood up and dashed his cigar angrily into the fire. Blood flamed on his high cheek-bones and his gray eyes glittered.

"What has marryin' got to do with my job, or what have you got to do with my marryin'?" he asked, in hot anger.

The Honorable Pulaski continued bland and conciliating.

"Keep on all your clothes, Colin, my boy," he counselled. "Don't say anything to me that you'll be sorry for after I've shown you that I'm only doin' you a friendly turn. But I've found out a mighty interesting thing about this girl—Kate Arden, they call her. As a friend of yours I'm givin' you the tip. It would be too bad to have a girl with a nice tidy little sum of money comin' to her slip past you when all you have to do is to reach and take her."

[Pg 191]

The boss's face was surly.

"You must have been talkin' with some one in Barn Withee's crew," he suggested.

"And what does Withee's crew say?" demanded Britt, with heat.

"It wasn't a sewin'-circle I was attendin' out on that fire-line," retorted MacLeod, with just as much vigor. "There was somethin' bein' talked, but I didn't stop to listen."

"Look here, MacLeod," cried his employer. Britt came close to him and clutched the belt of his wool jacket. "There are some nasty liars in these woods just now. There are some of them that will go to state-prison for attempted blackmail. You are too bright a man not to realize which is your own side. I know you well enough to believe that all the lunatics and slanderers this side of Castonia couldn't turn you against your friends. And you've got no two better friends than John Barrett and I."

"I'm not gainsaying it, Mr. Britt. But what has joinin' this matrimonial agency of yours got to do with your friendship or my work?"

"I've found out, Colin, that this girl has got money comin' to her from her folks. She doesn't know about it yet. No one knows about it, except us here. She never belonged to the Skeets and Bushees. She was stolen. This money has been waitin' for her. Barrett and I are bank-men, and things like this come to our attention when no one else would hear of it. There's—there's—" Britt paused and slid a look at Barrett from under an eyebrow cocked inquiringly. Barrett slyly spread ten fingers. "There's ten thousand dollars comin' to her in clean cash, Colin. Now, what do you think of that?"

[Pg 192]

"I think it's a ratty kind of a story," said MacLeod, bluntly.

Britt's temper flared.

"Don't you accuse me of lyin'," he roared. "The girl has got the money comin', I say."

"Maybe it *is* comin'," replied the boss, doggedly; "but has she got any name comin'? Has she got any folks comin'? Has she got anything comin' except somebody's hush-money?"

The woodsman's keen scenting of the trail discomposed the Honorable Pulaski for a moment. But after a husky clearing of his throat he returned to the work in hand.

"Folks, you fool! You can't dig folks up out of a cemetery. If her folks had been alive they'd have hunted up their girl years ago. They were good folks. You needn't worry about that. There's no need now to bother the girl about her folks or the money. She wouldn't know how to handle it if she had it in her own hands. It needs a man to care for her and the cash. We don't want a cheap hyena to fool her and get it. You're the man, Colin. Marry her, and the ten thousand will be put into your fist the day the knot is tied."

"It sounds snide and I won't do it," growled MacLeod, seeming to fairly bristle in his obstinacy. "Not if she was Queen of Sheby."

"Le' him go, then!" murmured a voice under the bunk. "Here's a gen'lum puffick—ick—ly willin'."

The Honorable Pulaski turned to behold the simpering face of drunken Tommy Eye peering wistfully from his retirement.

"I'll do it ch-cheaper, so 'elp me!" said Tommy, pounding down the empty bottle to mark emphasis.

"Yank that drunken hog out o' there, MacLeod!" roared Britt, after a preface of horrible oaths. [Pg 193] And when Tommy stood before him, swaying limply in the boss's clutch, he cuffed him repeatedly, first with one hand, then with the other. The smile on the man's face became a sickly grimace, but he did not whimper.

"'Spected kickin'," he murmured. "Jus' soon be cuffed." He held up the empty bottle that he still clung to desperately. "Want to 'splain 'bout one drink—" he began. But Britt wrenched the bottle from his hand, raised it as though to beat out Tommy's brains, and, relenting, smashed it into a corner.

"So you've laid there and listened to our private business," he said, malevolently. "You've heard more than is good for you, Eye."

"Didn't hear nossin'," protested Tommy. "Was thinkin' up speech. Jus' heard him say he wouldn't marry—marry—"

"Marry who?"

"'Queen of Sheby,' says he, with all her di'monds. I'll marry her. I'll settle down wiz Queen of Sheby."

"He's too drunk to know anything," said MacLeod. "Open the door, Mr. Britt, and I'll toss him out."

And he flung the soggy Tommy out on the carpet of pine-needles with as little consideration as though he were a bag of oats.

He turned at the door and looked from Britt to Barrett.

"You've put a big thing up to me, gents, and you've sprung it on me like a crack with a sled-stake. If I got dizzy and answered you short it was your own fault. Give me a night to sleep on it."

Outside he twisted his hand into the collar of Tommy Eye and started towards the main camp, dragging the inebriate. "I'll see that he keeps his mouth shut, gents," he called back to them.

"You needn't worry, John," announced Britt, closing the door and pulling out another cigar. "He'll do it." He waited for the sulphur to burn from the match, and lighted his tobacco, a smile of triumph wrinkling under his beard. [Pg 194]

"You don't usually tackle Pulaski D. Britt for good, practical advice without gettin' it," he went on. "The girl is crazy after MacLeod. You'll find MacLeod square when he makes a promise. He's got fool notions about those things. And when she's married to him and settled down here in these woods, where she belongs, the chap that wants to make her Exhibit A in a slander against John Barrett will find himself up against a mighty tough proposition. You see that, don't you? Now the next thing is to get her out of the hands of that gang that want to use her against you."

He mused a moment.

"All that we need to do is to send a man up to Jerusalem to-morrow, and say that you're all ready to start for outside and propose to take the girl along. If any one in this world has any rights over her, you have. They can't refuse. And now we'll go to bed, John, for if ever two men needed sleep, I reckon we're the ones."

But it was not unbroken slumber that came to them. The big winds outside roared with the sound of a bursting avalanche. Over the camp the sawing limbs of the interlaced crowns shrieked and groaned. There were deeper, further, and more mystic sounds, like mighty 'cellos. And when the great blow was at its height the wangan camp, built upon the roots of the splay-foot spruces, swayed with the writhing of the roots, creaked in its timbers, and seemed to toss like a craft on a crazy sea. There were noises near at hand in the woods like the detonations of heavy guns. Every now and then the earth shivered, and thunderous echoes boomed down the forest aisles.

"Do you hear 'em John?" called Britt, at last. He had long been awake, and had marked the restless stirrings of the other in the bunk below him. [Pg 195]

"I've been listening an hour," said Barrett, despondently, "and it's big stuff that's coming down. Our loss by fire was small change to what this means to us, Pulaski. Withee has devilled my lands until there isn't a wind-break left."

A roar like the awful voice of a park of artillery throbbed past them on the volleying wind.

"I feel as though it was kissing a thousand dollars good-bye every time I hear one of those noises," said Britt. "The devil can play jack-straws in the Umcolcus region after this night, and

find a new bunch every day."

At last they looked dismally out on the dawn. The great gale had blown overhead and away, the rearguard clouds chasing it, and the hard growth, stripped of every vestige of leaf, gave pathetic testimony to the bitterness of the conflict of the night.

The two lumber barons, staring anxiously up at the slopes of the black growth for signs of ravage, were confronted by Tommy Eye, meek, repentant, and shaky.

"Sure, the witherlicks and the swamp swogons did howl last night, gents, and they all did say as how Tommy Eye ought to be ashamed of the size of his drink. And I've come back to you to get my kick." He turned humbly.

The Honorable Pulaski D. Britt accepted the invitation with alacrity, and dealt the kick with a vigor that fetched a squawk from the teamster. The timber tyrant's mood that morning welcomed such an opportunity, even as a surcharged cloud welcomes a lightning-rod or a farm-house chimney. But once the kick had been dealt the Honorable Pulaski felt less wire on the edge of his meat-axe temper.

"And now I'll take my discharge," said Tommy. "MacLeod gave me an order on you for my pay." [Pg 196]

Britt snatched away the paper and tore it up.

"Get into that hovel and look after your horses." But when Tommy turned to go his employer called him back. "I've got another job for you just now, you snake-chaser. You need to chew fresh air, and you'll find a lot of it on top of Jerusalem. I don't know just how much you understood of our business in the wangan camp last night, Eye, and I don't care. You know me well enough to understand that if you ever blab any of it I'll have your ha' slet out of you!" Tommy cringed under a furious glare. "It will depend on how well you do an errand for me now whether or not I feed you to bobcats. You get that, do you?"

Again the teamster bowed his wistful assent.

"I wish I hadn't let Sheriff Rodliff and his men leave," remarked Britt to "Stumpage John," eying Tommy with some disfavor. "But perhaps this fool can do the trick better than a sheriff's posse. Sending the posse might make talk and stir suspicions."

"The quieter it's done the better," suggested Barrett. "After my talk with Wade—which was pretty soft, as I remember it—it will seem natural for me to send after the girl—and by just such a messenger as this."

"So we'll send the fool—you're right!" affirmed Britt. "Tommy," he directed, wagging a thick finger under the man's attentive nose to mark his commands, "you hump up to that fire station on Jerusalem as quick as leg-work will get you there, and you'll find a young girl. There are not enough young girls up there so that you'll make any mistake in the right one. You tell the one that's in charge, or whoever claims to be in charge, that the girl has been sent for. You'll probably find that fellow Dwight Wade takin' the responsibility. Tell him that it's all right, and that the gentleman he made the talk with is prepared to back up all promises. Bring the girl back with you." [Pg 197]

"Girls was never much took with me, and I never was handy in makin' up to girls," protested Tommy, his face puckering in alarm. "She prob'ly won't come, and then I'll get kicked again."

"You'll get kicked again mighty sudden if you don't do as I tell you, and do it quick and do it right!" roared Britt, starting off the camp platform. And Tommy, cowed by his tyrant, stood not upon the order of his going. He was trotting with a dog-waddle when he disappeared up the Jerusalem trail.

"He ought to be back by noon," said Britt. "In the mean time we'll eat breakfast and then cruise for blowdowns. And I'm thinkin' it isn't goin' to be a very humorous forenoon for timber-land owners."

Nor was it. Dolefully and silently they traversed wastes of splintered devastation, blocked ram-downs, choked twitch-roads, and hideous snarls of cross-piled timber.

CHAPTER XVII

[Pg 198]

THE AFFAIR AT DURFY'S CAMP

"The boss was a-thinkin' to swat him, but allowed he had better not,
For 'twas trouble bad that Dumphy had, whatever
it was he'd got."

hen the timber barons came in sight of the camp at noon, Tommy Eye, returned emissary, was seated on the edge of the wangan platform with attitude and countenance of alarmed expectancy. By his side was old Christopher Straight, the guide who had accompanied Dwight Wade from



Castonia settlement.

"I done it—I said as you said for me to say," Tommy began, eagerly, "and Mr. Straight here will tell you the same. I said it first to old Noah up there, and he was startin' off with his animiles like as they done with the ark stranded, and he swore me up hill and down, and—"

"Shut up!" barked the Honorable Pulaski, in a perfectly fiendish temper after the sights of that forenoon. "Did you bring that girl? And if you didn't, why not?"

"I can tell you better, perhaps, Mr. Britt," broke in old Christopher, calmly. "She has been left on Mr. Wade's hands, and Mr. Wade feels that he ought to be careful. Warden Lane, who had charge of her, seems to have lost his wits. All last night—it was an awful night, gentlemen, on Jerusalem—he was out on the ledges raving and howling. I think that a matter that Mr. Barrett will understand was troubling up his conscience, if that's the word for it. This mornin' he seemed to be clean out of his head. He knocked the saplin's off his cages and let out the animals, and they followed him off down into the woods—"

[Pg 199]

"Moose, bobcat, fisher-cat—" But Tommy ceased his enumeration to dodge a vicious sweep of Britt's palm.

"I guess he left the place for good, seeing he took his rifle and his pack," continued the guide. "I thought the timber owners might like to know that their fire station is abandoned. As for the girl," he hastened to add, "Mr. Wade told me to say that for reasons that Mr. Britt would understand he didn't think she ought to come here."

"Because she's lost her head over my boss, MacLeod, eh?" demanded Britt.

"You saw yourself that the girl wasn't to be controlled easily when the young man was present," said Christopher, mildly. "So he believes if there is business to be talked to her and about her it will be better to meet somewhere else."

"The blasted coward is afraid to come with her or let her come," sneered the Honorable Pulaski. "Well, we'll go up there; and we'll take a few men along and find out who's runnin' this thing—a college dude or the men who own these timber lands." Mr. Barrett would have advised more pacificatory talk. But Mr. Britt was in a mood too generally unamiable that day to heed prudence and wise counsel.

"You'll have only your own trouble for your trip," remarked Straight. "This man here said that Mr. Barrett was all ready to leave the woods. Mr. Wade has left the top of the mountain with the girl, and will meet Mr. Barrett to the south of Pogeys Notch. You'll not have to go out of your way, sir," he explained.

[Pg 200]

"Well, where?" snapped Britt.

"I'm here prepared to lead Mr. Barrett to the place, and I suggest that if he's ready we'll be on our way. You'll probably want to fetch the Half-way House at nightfall, sir."

This patent distrust of Pulaski Britt and his designs angered that gentleman quite beyond the power of even his profanity. But he knew Christopher Straight too well to attempt to bulldoze that hard-eyed old woodsman.

"Is this select assembly too good to have me come along?" he inquired, his thick lips curling under his beard.

"I think Mr. Wade will be glad to have you there," said Christopher, mildly. "He didn't say anything to the contrary. He expects Mr. Barrett to have some one to keep him company as far as the stage road, though he thought it probably would be a woodsman. But Mr. Wade gave particular instructions about any crowd comin' along, and he'll not meet any one if your boss MacLeod is in the party. That's straight talk. He's had all the trouble with your boss that he cares for."

After a withering survey of Straight, which the old guide endured with much composure, Britt beckoned Barrett away with a jerk of his head, and the two strolled behind the horse-hovel.

"There you have it, John," he snarled, more ireful as a champion than the unhappy principal. "It's a put-up job. He's goin' to plaster the girl onto you. It's his play. He's goin' to use it for all it's worth."

"It will be better for me to take her out than to have him chase along after me with the girl and the story—if that's the way he feels; and it's plain that he means to make trouble," said Barrett, moodily. "I can put her away somewhere in a boarding-school, and—"

The Honorable Pulaski broke upon this doleful capitulation with contemptuous brusqueness.

[Pg 201]

"You talk like a fool, John! Take that girl outside these woods and give her an education? File her teeth so that she can set 'em into your throat? You teach her to read and to write and to know things, and that's what it will amount to in the end. The girl has got to stay here!" He embraced the big woods in a vigorous gesture. "She belongs here! And the only way to keep her here is to put her in the hands of a man that—"

Colin MacLeod had followed them to their retreat behind the hovel, and was standing at a little

distance, looking at them.

"Come here, Colin!" And Britt advanced to meet him and clutched his arm, the arm that Dwight Wade had dislocated in that memorable battle in Castonia. "Boy, if you are a coward, now is your time to own it. Old Straight has come down here to tell us that Wade has that girl in his hands. He knows what she's worth. He wants to meet Barrett and myself. You can guess why. He proposes to get hold of that money. He knows we control it. We can't help ourselves if she chooses to stay with him."

The able old liar of the Umcolcus knew his man as the harper knows his instrument. He felt the muscles ridge under his clutch.

"He has sent word that he won't have you at the meeting. Ask Straight! He'll give you the message. The dude knows he wouldn't stand the show of a snowball in tophet with you there where the girl could see you. If you're a coward, say so, and we'll look further."

"By —, I'm no coward, and you know it!" growled the boss.

"He's licked you once and cut you out with one girl," persisted Britt. "The whole Umcolcus knows that! When they find out that he's got away with a girl that has been in love with you, and with ten thousand dollars in the bargain, why, boy, even Tommy Eye will dare to put up his fists to you!"

[Pg 202]

In MacLeod's tumultuous mind it was no longer love's choice between Nina Ide and Kate Arden; it was the hard, bitter passion of the primitive man—the instinct to grasp what a foe is coveting for the sake of humiliating that foe. Again MacLeod felt himself thrust forth by circumstances to be the champion of his kind. That man from the city was of the other sort.

"Mr. Britt," he choked, "let me at him once more!"

"Oh, that will be all right!" said the baron; "but we're not pulling off a prize-fight, MacLeod. Scraps are interestin' enough when there isn't more important business on hand. There happens to be business just now. The whole idea is, are you ready to marry the girl?"

MacLeod had approached them grimly resolved to be defiant on that point. The flicker in his eyes now was the shadow of that resolution departing.

"If it's him against me again," he snarled, "I'll marry a quill-pig and ask no questions."

"Not exactly cheerful talk to hear from a prospective bridegroom marryin' money and good looks," commented the Honorable Pulaski, dryly; "but a promise is a promise, MacLeod, and I never knew you to break one you made me. Shake!"

By the way in which both Barrett and MacLeod turned inquiring gaze on him, the Umcolcus baron understood that he was tacitly elected autocrat of the situation, and he proceeded about his task with the briskness characteristic of his habit of command.

"John, you get your dinner, bid us an affectionate farewell, and go along with old Straight. Go alone. Tell him you left all your duffel at Withee's camp and don't need any guide. I'll look after the rest of it. Chris Straight can hide his dude and the girl, but he can't pull up the ground behind him."

[Pg 203]

They started off promptly after the noon snack, the taciturn Christopher offering no comment on Mr. Barrett's amiable compliance, and apparently blandly unsuspecting that the Honorable Pulaski concealed guile under a demeanor which had suddenly become pacific.

Men who had made their warfare more by craft and less by brute strength would have been more wily. John Barrett and Pulaski Britt had always been too confident of their own power to think subterfuge necessary. Barrett, especially, as he strode along at the heels of old Christopher, was so well content with his own first essay in duplicity that his taking-down was correspondingly humiliating. They were resting, he and the old guide, after a tough scramble around a blowdown that they had encountered a mile or so from Britt's camps.

With a jerk of his chin Christopher indicated a far-off sound on the back trail.

"Pretty busy, that woodpecker is, Mr. Barrett!"

"Stumpage John" assented, wondering at the same time how such an old woodsman could misinterpret that chip-chop. "The fool Indian ought to make allowance for a blowdown," he reflected, angrily. "He's following too close."

"In this world you expect cheap men to lie and cheat," remarked Christopher, serenely. "But you don't hardly expect State senators and candidates for governor to be that sort."

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded Barrett, with heat.

"I mean that Britt's Indian, Newell Sockbeson, is following us and makin' a double-blaze for—well, I suppose it's so that Pulaski Britt and his men can chase us up. As to why, you probably know better than I do, Mr. Barrett."

[Pg 204]

The timber baron stared at this disconcerting old plain-speaker without finding fit words for reply.

"It can hardly be that he's goin' to all that trouble simply to get the girl. Mr. Wade is ready to turn the girl over to you, Mr. Barrett. Why is it that men ain't willin' to play fair in this world? What does Pulaski Britt want to meddle in this thing for?"

"I think you're wrong about the Indian following us," paltered the millionaire. "You're only guessin' about that, Straight."

"When I see Pulaski Britt talk to an Indian, when I see that Indian pack a lunch, take a camp-axe, and hide at the mouth of the trail, I don't have to guess, Mr. Barrett. Some of us old fellows of the woods see a whole lot of things without seemin' to take much notice." He got up off the tree-trunk where he had been sitting and made ready to take the trail again, swinging his pack to his shoulders.

"There wouldn't have been any misunderstanding if Wade had sent the girl back by the messenger," protested Barrett. "And if he didn't have something up his sleeve he would have done so. The girl is nothing to him, and he's meddling in affairs that are none of his business."

"You'd better save that talk and tell it to him," said the old guide, grimly. "I'm going to take you to where we arranged to meet if every man that Britt can rake and scrape on his ten townships comes followin' at my back. I've thought it over, and the more witnesses there are to some things the better it is for all concerned—or the worse!"

And reflecting on what these words might mean, and now a little dubious as to the sagacity of Pulaski Britt in handling delicate negotiations, "Stumpage John" plodded on with less content in his heart. [Pg 205]

Two miles farther down the trail, at a place that Barrett recognized as the old Durfy camps, Straight signalled by discharging his rifle, and Dwight Wade came into sight with the girl. Foolish Abe of the Skeets followed far behind like a sheepish dog, uncertain whether to expect kick or caress.

"You may as well know first as last that the whole pack is followin' a little way behind," snorted old Christopher, in disgust. "Britt sent an Indian to snuff the trail and blaze the way. I did your errand, that's all. You've got time to get away. You may want to keep on tryin' to do business with a crowd that ain't square. I don't!" He turned and walked away, sat down, and filled his pipe.

"I had Straight explain to you why it was better to meet privately here," declared Wade, with honest resentment glowing in his eyes. "But I'm not going to run. I've had hard work to get this young woman to consider your proposition to educate her, Mr. Barrett." He held her by the hand, and spoke out with a candor that convinced the lumberman that here there was neither reservation nor complicity. The girl eyed him sulkily, without interest, as she looked at all outsiders. "I have told this young woman that you, as a timber-land owner, are sorry for all the troubles that the Skeets and Bushees have had in years past, and want to make up in some way. I've told her you're ready to send her to some good boarding-school. As she can't read or write, she doesn't know what this means, and she can't express her thanks. But I'm sure that later she'll understand your kindness and generosity. The girl is untrained, and she knows it. I hope you'll overlook any lack of gratitude, Mr. Barrett. She'll know how to express it some day."

John Barrett, looking into a face which recalled the face of the daughter whom he loved and cherished in his city home, felt one throb of strange emotion, and then realized in all his selfish nature that affection is more a matter of habit and cultivation than an affair of instinct. After one thrill his soul shrank from her. He had not expected the girl to be so like. He caught himself wishing that he had not made the compact with the inexorable Britt, and listened for the noise of the men-pack with shame and some regret. On the other hand, this girl, unkempt for all her beauty, insolent with the insolence of ignorance, staring at him from under her knitted brows, was impossible, he reflected, as an asset of a man with a reputation to preserve and an ambition to fulfil. Instead of feeling the instinct of tenderness, he looked at this wild young thing of the woods with uneasy fear in his shifting eyes. [Pg 206]

With honest resentment, Wade noted the baron's reluctance to make his word good.

"You think I'm a meddler, Mr. Barrett," he said, coming close to the other, "but don't think that I'm satisfying any personal grudge when I ask that you care for this poor girl! Perhaps you would have done so anyway, without my suggestion. I hope so."

"I think I could arrange my own business without any outside help," said Barrett, dryly. He began to feel that he could get out of the situation better if he aroused his own resentment.

"Mr. Barrett, it was chance that put the girl in my way and taught me her story. I've been Don Quixote enough to see her through this thing. I'm sorry it happens to be you on the other side. I'm afraid you don't give me credit for unselfishness."

"I'll allow you all the credit you deserve," said "Stumpage John," sullenly. "I understand, without your telling me, that you are gentleman enough to keep this matter behind your teeth on account of my family. I thank you, Wade. I'll take charge of the girl from now on." [Pg 207]

He looked back up the trail anxiously, and the young man's gaze followed. A man loafed into sight from among stubs blackened by fire.

"There's Newell Sockbeson," remarked old Christopher. "I heard him making his last blaze a few

minutes ago.”

“I don’t know just what your plan is, Mr. Barrett,” said Wade, the red in his cheeks. “I’ve been hoping that you trusted me to act the gentleman, even if I couldn’t act the friend. Mr. Straight and I stand here as witnesses that you have taken charge of this girl.” He now spoke low. “But you haven’t told me that you indorse the little plan I adopted to relieve you from any explanations and to make the thing seem natural to her.”

Wade’s face showed that he expected a frank promise.

“Mr. Straight will go to the stage road with you,” added the young man. At this hint of watchfulness the face of Barrett darkened. “As a school-teacher, I know something of the boarding-schools of the State, and I’ll—” The timber baron’s temper flamed at this plain intent to advise.

“I’ve taken charge of the girl, I say! Your responsibility ends. You were apologizing a moment ago for meddling. Now, don’t go to—”

“I didn’t apologize,” replied Wade, with decision. “And I don’t intend to. And my responsibility ends only when I know that this unfortunate creature is placed in a good school to get the advantages that she has been robbed of all these years.”

The hot retort from Barrett ended in his throat with a cluck. “The devil!” he blurted, staring down the trail.

Dwight Wade, whirling to look to the south, could not indorse that sentiment. Close at hand was Nina Ide, riding a horse with the grace of a boy, whose attire she had adopted with a woods girl’s scorn of conventions. Wade hurried to meet her, cap in hand and eager questions on his lips. The color mounted to her face, and she shook out the folds of a poncho, looped across the saddle, and draped it over her knees.

[Pg 208]

“No, it’s not strange, either,” she broke in to say. “Your partner—and that’s father—had to come up here on business, and I’ve come along with him, just as I always do when he comes here in the partridge season.” She patted a gun-butt. “But I didn’t expect to find fire and smoke and lightning and rain and tornadoes up here, any more than I looked for you at Pogey Notch when you were supposed to be exploring for a winter’s operation on Enchanted. Now you will have to explain to your partner here!” And he turned from her smiling face to shake hands with Rodburd Ide.

“Every man who can handle brush and mattock is expected to be at the head of a fire in time of trouble!” chirped the “Mayor of Castonia.” He tipped back his head to beam amiably on his partner. “Did it get through onto us, Wade?”

“The rain stopped it half-way up Pogey.”

“Then God was good to us! Isn’t that so, Mr. Barrett?” And the cheerful little man trotted along to grip the hand of “Stumpage John.” That gentleman glowered sullenly, and tried to explain his gloom by muttering about “blowdowns” being worse than fires. He looked ill. As he came down the trail a fever had been rising in his blood. He went away by himself, and sat down feeling faint and weak.

“Old Enchanted is all right,” said Ide. “There’s a thousand acres of black growth there, every tree standin’ with its arm about its brother. You mustn’t let ‘em devil you, Mr. Barrett!” he called.

[Pg 209]

Mr. Barrett, his lowering gaze on Wade, agreed mentally.

“Well, this is certainly a convention of the timber interests!” cried the brisk little autocrat of Castonia. He pointed up the trail, where the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt was advancing alone.

Wade withdrew unobtrusively, and stood beside Nina Ide. Perhaps he hoped that her talk might bring some word of Elva Barrett.

But at last even Rodburd Ide’s cheery consciousness became impressed by the fact that neither Britt nor Barrett seemed to relish any chat on timber topics. And he broke upon a constrained silence to suggest to Wade that they proceed—taking it for granted that now his partner’s way lay to the north, along with his own.

“There’s—there’s—” Wade stammered, and now for the first time Ide and his daughter marked the girl of the Skeet settlement leaning moodily against the side of the Durfy hovel, the unkempt Abe hovering apprehensively in the background.

“Ah ha!” piped Ide. “There are the remnants, eh? We met the rest of the colony hiperin’ out of the woods. They’ve gone to Little Lobster, girl, and the old woman is worryin’ about you.”

Wade stared straight at Barrett. The timber baron understood the challenge of his eyes. He was commanded to declare his intentions. In spite of himself, he scowled. It was a scowl of recalcitrancy. And the young man, angered by the presence of Britt and the evident appearance of treachery, shot his bolt.

“There is a piece of good-fortune for this poor girl, Mr. Ide. Mr. Barrett proposes to educate her, and he’s going to take her with him out of the woods.”

"She has been gettin' a lot of attention lately," blurted the Honorable Pulaski, with malice and derision. "For the past three or four days, Rodburd, your young partner here has been her steady company. They have just come strollin' alone together down the Lovers' Lane from Jerusalem Knob." He fixed his keen eyes on the astonished face of Nina Ide. His narrow nature believed that, like other girls, she could be stirred to quick jealousy. And knowing her influence over her father, he foresaw trouble ahead for the partnership between Ide and Wade. "Seems to be in the air up this way now for the young men to gallivant through the woods with the Skeet girl. Wade here seems to have cut out Colin MacLeod." Then the coarse old jester sneered into the indignant face Wade turned to him.

"It will be a good thing for her to go to school," said Ide, a little puzzled by the evident antagonism of these men. "It will be kind of you, Mr. Barrett."

"Say, look here, Ide," cried Britt, in his irritation suddenly deciding to play the strong hand with this young interloper, "your friend Wade here, being a school-teacher, seems to have school on the brain. He also seems to be full of ready-made plans for men older and better than he is. From things that come to me, he has picked up a lot of foolishness about these Skeets and Bushees and this girl since he's been cruisin' round these woods. Mr. Barrett and myself have made arrangements to take care of the rest of that pauper settlement, and the Skeets probably told you so when you met them."

Ide nodded acknowledgment.

"We'll look after the girl, too." He walked up to Wade and snapped his fingers, unable to resist his desire to bully. "Now, young fellow, you've been stickin' your nose pretty deep into other men's business. Take it out, or I'll twist it off your face. Any one would think that this girl matter was runnin' the world in these parts. There's been too much talk about what's of no consequence. Go along with your partner. You're on my land. Keep movin'."

But all of Dwight Wade's stubborn obstinacy rose in his breast; all his youthful chivalry flamed in his face.

"I've no more business with you, Britt!" he said, significantly; and Britt's face flamed with the remembrance of a certain knock-down blow. "My business is with you, Mr. Barrett, and you know what it is. You keep the word that you've given me about this girl, or I'll set you before the people of this State in your right colors—and you needn't croak blackmail to me, for you can't frighten me."

"I—I—don't see that it's any business of yours—of yours, Wade," stammered the pacificatory Ide, catching the courage of protest from the rather indignant face his daughter turned on the young man.

"And I don't see that it is the business of any of you!" stormed Kate Arden. She came close to the group of men and stood with brown hands propped on her hips, her head thrown back, and the insolent stare of her black eyes seeking face after face. "I'll be passed about from hand to hand no longer. I don't want any old purple-faced fool to send me to school." Barrett winced. "And as for you," she sneered, turning on Wade, "you attend to your own business until I ask you to help me in mine."

The Honorable Pulaski saw his opportunity.

"Colin MacLeod!" he bawled.

And with a rush that betrayed his impatience, the boss of the Busters came out of his hiding-place up the trail.

The girl gave a sharp cry of joy at sight of him.

But MacLeod, half-way to them, saw the girl on the horse and stopped as suddenly as he had started. Even at that distance they noted that his face worked with piteous embarrassment.

"You've given in your promise, MacLeod! Don't forget that!" roared Britt. "There's the boy for you, my girl! He wants to marry you. Go with him!"

"And you'll be a fool of a gir-rl if ye do!" squalled a voice. It was Tommy Eye, yelling from the top of the Durfy hovel, to which he had clambered unobserved. "I know I'm a drunk. I know I ain't worth anything to anybody!" he gabbled. "But ye saved my life once, Mr. Wade, when I didn't know it!" He flapped entreating hands at Wade, and that young man stepped in front of the furious Britt with such determination on his face that the woods tyrant halted. "But ye'll be a fool gir-rl, I say! I was under the bunk last night when they planned it. He don't love ye! I heard him say so. He called you names! Colin MacLeod, ye ain't the liar enough to stand out here and say ye didn't."

MacLeod, his adoring eyes on Nina Ide, had no word to say. The features of Kate Arden, who stared at him with her heart in her eyes, twisted with a promise of bitter tears. This, then, was the girl of Castonia, with whom they had taunted her!

"It's only for grudge and money he's goin' to marry you!" persisted Tommy. "May I rest forever in purgatory with no masses for my soul if that ain't the truth!"

With the instinct of the animal repulsed, the girl read more in the face of MacLeod than she

understood from the declaration of Tommy Eye.

She looked from face to face again, but the flame was gone from her eyes. There they stood, the silent, hostile, bitter phalanx from outside—oppressors and scorners. There she stood—alone!

And she fell face down upon the ground—the only mother she had ever known—a heart-broken, weary, lonely, sobbing child. [Pg 213]

Nina Ide reached her before the others moved. Twice the girl fought her way out of her arms. Twice the sympathetic little mother-heart of the Castonia beauty conquered the rebel and retook her, whispering to her eagerly. And she held her tear-streaked face close to her shoulder, and patted the grimy little fingers between which tears were trickling. There was something inexpressibly pathetic even in the unkemptness of the stricken girl, in her torn dress and the brown skin of face and hands, touched here and there by the stain of exposure to the blackened forest. And in her loneliness, feeling for the first time in her life real sympathy from one of her sex, gathering with grateful nostrils the faint perfume that whispered of the refinement and comfort that her heart had sought almost unconsciously and had never found, at last the girl ceased her struggles and clung to her new friend. The waif's true instinct was proving this friend's sincerity more surely than the whispered assurances proved it. And Nina Ide bent to her ear, and murmured:

"We will hate him together, poor little girl! He is not a good man to have a girl's love."

"When the hysterics are all over," remarked the Honorable Pulaski, sarcastically, "we'll take the young woman off your hands."

"You'll not take her off *my* hands!" retorted Nina, with spirit. "She's going back home with me."

"You haven't got any rights over her!" barked Britt.

"Perhaps, then, Mr. Barrett is ready to stand up and say what his rights are," suggested Wade, with bitter hint of retaliation in his tones.

Barrett, pale with the illness that was seizing him, grew paler yet with anger and terror, for he feared exposure.

The Honorable Pulaski picked up the gage of battle with all the alacrity of his irascible nature. [Pg 214]

"For a dog-fight, that girl will be as good a bone as anything else!" he growled, under his breath. And then he whirled on his heel and bellowed:

"Wake up there, MacLeod! If you can't make love to the girl you are goin' to marry, I reckon you can at least fight a little to get her! Call in the crew!"

He walked up to Ide. "Better call off your girl, Rod," he advised, bluffly. "This isn't any of her business, or yours either."

"I figure that a Skeet girl belongs as much to us as to you," snapped the doughty little man from Castonia. "If my girl takes interest enough in her to invite her home, I think you'd better let her go."

"Well, I've got a crew of a hundred men posted back here a few rods in the woods to back me up when I say she stays right where she belongs." His tone was offensive, and Rodburd Ide's anger flared.

"My business just now in here, Britt, is to bring a hundred men for our Enchanted operation. They're down there by the brook eating lunch. I don't want any trouble over this, but there's some nasty reason back of this girl matter, and I won't stand for any persecution of a helpless creature. My men back me when I say she goes home with my girl. Hello, men for the Enchanted! Up this way in a hurry!"

The look that Nina flashed at her father was inspiration for him!

As his men came into sight over the bank the crew of Britt tramped towards them down the trail.

"Nina," said Ide, "you'll have to go back now. Chris Straight will go with you. Take the girl on the horse with you, and let Chris lead by the headstall. You'll go all safe. Hurry away from here! But after you get started, take your time to the Half-way House. There's no one going to get past down this trail to chase you and bother you." [Pg 215]

There was determination in the voice of the little man, and his daughter kissed him at the same time that Dwight Wade was patting his shoulder.

Wade ran along by the side of the horse for a little way, and, when he turned, eagerly kissed Nina Ide's gloved hand.

"God bless you for a little saint!" he gasped. "You'll understand this some day, perhaps."

"I understand that she is alone and needs a friend," she responded—"just as you needed a friend when you were only Britt's 'chaney man.'" She smiled archly at him and passed out of sight, old Christopher tugging at the bits of the horse.

Wade went back in the forefront of the thronging crew of the men for Enchanted.

"As I said, Britt, I don't want trouble," repeated Rodburd Ide, "but you'll please remember that the lower corner of your township is here at Durfy's camp. I reckon the men for the Enchanted will camp right here on the trail for a few hours. The man that tries to push past to trouble my daughter or her friend will get hurt."

"They are goin' past just the same!" shouted Britt, fiercely.

"My God, Pulaski, think of consequences!" pleaded "Stumpage John," in low tones. He arose with difficulty and staggered to Britt's side. His tones quavered with weakness. "I'd be ruined by the story of what it was all about. I'm sick. I only want to get home. I don't want to see trouble here."

Britt glared at his associate, at Wade, Ide, and at last at Colin MacLeod, who was staring in the direction of Nina Ide.

The tyrant snorted his disgust.

"Take the combination of a candidate for governor, some fool women, crazy men, love-sick idiots, and"—his eyes swept the scene in vain search for Tommy Eye—"a pooch-mouthed blabber, and it's enough to trig any decent, honest, sensible woods fight ever yarded down. Barrett, you're right! You'd better get home and get on your long-tailed coat and plug hat as soon as you can. You and your private"—he sneered the word—"business don't seem to fit in up here."

[Pg 216]

He folded his arms and, with his men behind him, stood looking over the crew for the Enchanted, who, cheerfully and without question, stood blocking the way.

"It may not happen just now," he grunted, "but it's on my mind to say that some day these two gangs will get together when there isn't a governor's boom to step on, nor women to get mussed up."

And the gaze of fury that he bent on Dwight Wade was returned with interest.

An imaginative man might have seen the new spirit of the woods facing the old.

But there was no imaginative man there—there were only men who chewed tobacco and wondered what it all meant.

CHAPTER XVIII

[Pg 217]

THE OLD SOUBUNGO TRAIL

"And never a knight in a
tournament
Rode lists with a jauntier mien,
Than he of the drive who came
alive
Thro' the hell of the Hulling
Machine."

—The Spike-sole Knight.



Larry Gorman, "the woodsman's poet," whose songs are known and sung in the camps from Holeb to Madawaska, was with Rodburd Ide's incoming crew. His three most notable lyrics are these: "I feed P.I.'s on tarts and pies," "Bushmen all, your ear I call until I shall relate," and "The Old Soubungo Trail."

When Rodburd Ide's hundred men "met up" with the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt's hundred men at the foot of Pogeys Notch, Larry Gorman displayed a true poet's obliviousness to the details of the wrangle between principals. He didn't understand why Pulaski Britt, blue with anger above his grizzled beard, and "Stumpage John" Barrett, mottled with rage, should object so furiously when Rodburd Ide's girl took away the tatterdemalion maid of the Skeets, nor did Larry ask any questions. If this be the attitude of a true poet, there was evidently considerable true poetry in both crews, for no one appeared to be especially curious as to the why of the quarrel. However, the imminence of a quarrel was a matter demanding woodsmen's attention. It might have been noted that Poet Gorman cut the biggest shillalah of any of them. And while he rounded its end and waited for more formal declaration of hostilities, he lustily sang the solo part of "The Old Soubungo Trail," with a hundred hearty voices to help him on the chorus:

[Pg 218]

"I left my Lize behind me,
Oh, she won't know what to
do,
I left my Lize for the Old Town
guys,
And I left my watch there, too.
I left my clothes at a boardin'-
house,
I reckon they're for sale,

And here I go, at a heel-an'-toe,
On the old Soubungo trail.
Sou-bung-o! Bungo!
'Way up the Bungo trail!"

Spirit rather than melody characterized the efforts of these wildwood songsters. The Honorable Pulaski Britt, who didn't like music anyway, and was trying to talk in an undertone to timber baron Barrett, swore a deep bass obligato.

He did not take his baleful gaze from Dwight Wade, who had gone apart, and was leaning against the mouldering walls of the Durfy hovel.

"You had your chance to block their game, and you didn't do it, John. You make me sick!" muttered the belligerent Britt. "You've let that college dude scare you with threats, and old Ide champ his false teeth at you and back you down. You don't get any of my sympathy from now on. I had a good plan framed. You knocked it galley-west by poking yourself into the way. They've got the girl. They'll use her against you. You can fight it yourself after this."

Barrett stared uneasily from one crew to the other.

"It would have been too tough a story to go out of these woods," he faltered. "Two crews ste'boyed together by us to capture a State pauper." [Pg 219]

"A story of a woods rough-and-tumble, that's all!" snorted Britt. "And these dogs wouldn't have known what they were fightin' about—and would have cared less. And while they were at it I could have taken the girl out of sight! You spoiled it! Now, don't talk to me! You go ahead and see if you can do any better." He tossed his big hand into the air and whirled away, snuffing his disgust.

Larry Gorman, having peeled a hand-hold on his bludgeon, was moved to sing another verse:

"I ain't got pipe nor 'backer,
Nor I ain't got 'backer-box;
I ain't got a shirt, and my brad-
boots hurt,
For I ain't a-wearin' socks.
But a wangan's on Enchanted,
Where they've got them things
for sale,
And I don't give a dam what the
price it am
On the old Soubungo trail.
Sou-bung-o! Bungo!
'Way up the Bungo trail!"

Sturdy little Rodburd Ide, magnate of Castonia, bestrode in the middle of the trail to the south. His head was thrown back, and his mat of whiskers jutted forward with an air of challenge. To be sure, he did not exactly understand as yet the full animus of the quarrel. He had heard his partner, Dwight Wade, announce on behalf of Honorable John Barrett that the latter proposed to educate the girl protégée of the Skeets' tribe. He had noted that the timber baron did not warm to the announcement in a way that might be expected of the true philanthropist.

Tommy Eye's astonishing declaration from the house-top that the timber magnates of Jerusalem townships were proposing to marry the girl off to Colin MacLeod, boss of "Britt's Busters," and that, too, in spite of MacLeod's lack of affection, had some effect in enlisting Ide's sympathies and interference. But his daughter's spirited championship of the poor girl was really the influence that clinched matters with the puzzled Mr. Ide. [Pg 220]

"Rodburd," declared the Honorable Pulaski, approaching him on the contemptuous retreat from Barrett, "you've gone to work and stuck your nose into matters that don't concern you. Your man Wade there, instead of attending to your operation on Enchanted, has been spending his time beaung that girl around these woods and stirring up a blackmail scheme. I'm telling you as a friend that you'd better ship him. He's going to make more trouble for you than he has yet. He isn't fit for the woods. I found it out and fired him. Do the same yourself, or you'll never get your logs down and through the Hulling Machine."

"Do you mean that you're going to fight him on the drive on account of your grudge?" demanded Ide.

"I don't mean that," blustered Britt. "It's the man himself who'll queer you."

"I don't believe it," replied Ide, stoutly. "There are some things goin' on here that I don't understand the inside of up to now; but as for that young man, I picked him for square the first time I laid my eyes on him at Castonia. I've had him looked up by friends of mine outside, and now I know he's square. You can't break up our partnership by that kind of talk, Britt. Now own up! What's the nigger in the woodpile here, anyway?" The little man was still unbending, but his eyes snapped with curiosity.

But the Honorable Pulaski's shifty eyes dodged the inquiring stare of the Castonia man. The view down the tote road in the direction in which Nina Ide and Kate Arden had disappeared under

convoy of Christopher Straight seemed to be a more welcome prospect than that frankly inquisitive face. And the view down the trail also suggested a safer topic for conversation. [Pg 221]

"I believe in indulgin' a girl's whims, Rod, but this is a time when you've let yourself go too far. That lucivee^[2] kitten that your daughter has lugged off home set this fire that we've been fightin' up here. She set it maliciously, in the face and eyes of Sheriff Rodliff and myself. She's the worst one of the whole lot, and as a plantation officer you know the Skeets and Bushees pretty well. Are you goin' to let your girl take a critter like that back home with her?" He noted a flicker of consternation in the little man's eyes. "Now, don't be a fool in this thing. Let a half-dozen men run after that girl and fetch her back. She don't belong in any decent home. John Barrett and I have arranged a plan to take care of her and keep her out of mischief."

But again the timber magnate's eyes failed to meet the test of Ide's frank stare.

"I've known you a good many years, Pulaski," said he. "I've done a lot of business with you, and you can't fool me for a minute. You've been into a milk-pan, for I can see cream on your whiskers."

"I'm only warnin' you not to harbor such a criminal!" stormed the other. His wrath slipped its leash once more. The presence of Dwight Wade, his very silence, seemed tacit proclamation of victory and the boast of it. "The girl belongs back here, and we're goin' to have her back. If your men don't fetch her, mine will."

But Ide set his short legs astride a little more solidly.

"As first assessor of the nearest plantation, I can handle the State pauper business of these parts, and do it without help," he said.

"You mean that meddlin' girl of yours is runnin' it," taunted Britt.

In his heart the fond father realized the force of the taunt, and knew why he was blocking that trail so resolutely. A mother bear would have shown no more determination in closing the retreat of her cubs. [Pg 222]

"If for any reason that I don't understand as yet you want the guardianship of that girl, Britt," he declared, "come down any time you want to and get your rights legally. But just now I'm tellin' you again that you and your men can't get past here. And if you do, you'll go with cracked heads."

And once more Pulaski D. Britt substituted oaths for action.

Stamping back towards his men, he saw Tommy Eye squatting like a jack-rabbit on the top of the Durfy camp. That guileless marplot offered a fair target for his rage against the world in general.

"MacLeod," bawled Britt to the boss, who had not yet pulled himself together after that final flash of scorn from the eyes of Nina Ide, "pull that drunken loafer off that roof and yard the men back to camp!"

"I'm discharged out of your crew, Mr. Britt," squealed Tommy, a quaver of apprehensiveness in his voice. "I've discharged myself. I've told the truth about what you was tryin' to do. So I ain't fit for you to hire."

It was not the unconscious satire of the statement that put a wire edge on the Honorable Pulaski's temper. It was Tommy Eye's rebelliousness, displayed for the first time in a long life of utter subservience.

"You won't be fit for anything but bait for a bear-trap ten minutes after I get you back to camp," bellowed the tyrant. "MacLeod, get that man down!"

"Don't you want to hire a teamster, Mr. Ide?" bleated Tommy, crawfishing to the peak of the low roof. "You know what I be on twitchro'd, ramdown, or in a yard. You don't find my hosses calked or shoulder-galled." He hastened in nervous entreaty: "You hire me, Mr. Ide. I never had a team sluiced yet. You know what I can do in the woods." [Pg 223]

The plaintiveness of the frightened man's appeal touched Wade. He realized the weight of misery this pathetic turncoat might expect thereafter at the hands of Britt and his crew of "Busters." MacLeod was advancing towards the ladder that conducted to the roof, his sullen face lighting with a certain amount of satisfaction. Wade put himself before the ladder.

"Hirin' men out from under isn't square woods style, Tommy," said Ide, shaking his head.

"That man isn't a slave," protested Wade. "He is the only man I've found in these woods with courage enough to stand up for what's right, Mr. Ide. I don't believe in leaving him to those who are going to make him suffer for it."

"Up to now, you dude, you've done about everything that shouldn't be done in the woods!" cried Britt. "But there's one thing you can't do, and that's take a man out of my crew."

"It's an unwritten law, Wade," protested his partner. "It isn't square business to meddle with another operator's crew."

"When a case like this comes up, it's time to change the law, then," declared Wade, with

savageness of his own, the menacing proximity of MacLeod acting on his anger like bellows on coals.

"I can't afford to be mixed into anything of the sort," persisted Ide.

"And nobody but a fool would try it, Rod. I've warned you to get rid of him. You can see for yourself now! He don't fit. He's protectin' fire-bugs, standin' out against timber-owners' interests, and breaking every article in the code up here."

"And I'm likely to keep on breaking the kind of code that seems to go north of Castonia!" cried the young iconoclast. For a moment his flaming eyes dwelt on the face of the Honorable John Barrett, and that gentleman, who had been wondering just what shaft his own recalcitrancy would next draw from this champion of the oppressed, looked greatly perturbed. "Mr. Ide, do you forbid me to hire this man?"

[Pg 224]

"N-no," admitted his partner, rather grudgingly.

"Then you're hired, Eye." Wade looked up and answered the gratitude in Tommy's eyes by a nod of encouragement. "Come down, my man, and get into our crew. You've acted man-fashion, and I'll back you up in it."

"Let it stand—let it stand as it is," whispered Barrett, huskily, clutching at the arm of Britt as that furious gentleman surged past him. "If we tackle the young fool now he's apt to blab all he knows about me. It's a ticklish place. Handle it easy."

"I'll handle it to suit myself!" stormed Britt, yanking himself loose. "You set back there if you want to, and play dry nurse to your twins—your family scandal on one arm and your governor's boom on the other. But when it comes to my own crew and my private business, by the Lord Harry, I'll operate without your advice!"

He began to call on his men, rallying them with shrill cries. He ordered them to surround the camp and take the rebel. In the next breath he bade MacLeod to go up the ladder and pull Tommy down.

"Poet" Larry Gorman, who had been gradually edging near the spot which he had sagely picked as the probable core of conflict, set himself suddenly before Colin MacLeod as the boss advanced towards Wade with a look in his eye that was blood-lust. MacLeod had a weather-beaten ash sled-stake.

"Sure, and a gent like him don't fight with clubs," said Gorman. "We've all heard about his lickin' ye once, and man-fashion, too! Now, go get your reputation. Start with me." The redoubtable bard poked his shillalah into MacLeod's breast and drove him suddenly back. At this overture of combat the men for Enchanted came up with a rush. They met the "Busters" face to face and eye to eye.

[Pg 225]

"We're all axe-tossers together, boys!" cried Gorman. "Ye know me and you've sung my songs, and ye know there's no truer woodsman than me ever chased beans round a tin plate. Now, Britt's men, if ye want to fight to keep a free man a slave when he wants to chuck his job, then come and fight. But may the good saints put a cramp into the arm of the man that fights against the interests of woodsmen all together!"

Under most circumstances even such a cogent argument as this would not have stayed their hands. But coming from Larry Gorman, author of "Bushmen All," it made even the "Busters" stop and think a moment. And when MacLeod was first and only in renewing hostilities—obeying Britt's insistent commands—Gorman again held him off at the end of his bludgeon, and shouted:

"Oh, my cock partridge, you're only brisk to get into the game because you're daffy over a girl. You'd wipe your feet on Tommy Eye or any other honest woodsman to polish your shoes for the courtin' of her."

It was a taunt whose point the "Busters" realized and relished. It was even more forceful than Larry's first appeal. Some of the men grinned. All held back. But for MacLeod it was the provocation unforgivable. He drew back his arm and swept his stake at Larry's head. That master of stick-play warded and leaped back nimbly.

"Fair, now! Fair!" he cried. "They're all lookin' at us, and there can't be dirty work." Gorman's face glowed, for he had won his point. His wit had balked a general combat. His massing fellows had tacitly selected him as their champion. He had put the thing on a plane where the "Busters" were a bit ashamed to take part. They turned their backs on Britt in order to watch the duellists more intently. They knew that Larry Gorman was vain of two things—his songs and his stick-swinging.

[Pg 226]

"What say ye to waitin' till your shoulder ain't so stiff?" he inquired, with pointed reference to the injury MacLeod had received at the hands of Wade. His mock condolence pricked Colin to frenzy. He drove so vicious a blow at the bard that when the latter side-stepped the boss staggered against the side of the camp.

"But sure I can make it even," said Larry, facing him again without discomposure; "for I'll sing a bit of song for you to dance by."

The merry insolence of this brought a hoarse hoot of delight from both sides. And pressing upon

his foe so actively that the crippled MacLeod was put to his utmost to ward thwacks off his head and shoulders, this sprightly Cyrano of the kingdom of spruce carolled after this fashion:

“Come, all ye good shillaly
men.
Come, lis-ten unto me:
Old Watson made a
walkin’-cane,
And used a popple-tree.
The knob it were a rouser
—
A rouser, so ‘twas said—
And when ye sassed old
Watson
He would knock ye on the
head.”

MacLeod got a tap that made his eyes shut like the snap of a patent cigar-cutter.

“Chorus!” exhorted the lyrist. And they bellowed jovially:

“Knick, knock,
Hickory dock,
And he’d hit ye on the
head!”

[Pg 227]

Larry leaped back, whirled his stick so rapidly that its bright peeled surface seemed to spit sparks, and again got over the boss’s indifferent guard with a whack that echoed hollowly.

MacLeod was too angry to retreat. He was too angry to see clearly, and his brain rang dizzily with the blows he had received. His injured shoulder ached with the violence of his exertions. But his pride kept him up, and forced him to meet the fresh attack that Gorman made—an attack in which that master seemed to be fencing mostly to mark the time of his jeering song:

“Old Watson was a good old
man,
And taught the Bible class,
But he didn’t like the story
Of the jawbone of the ass.
‘Why didn’t he make a popple-
club,’
So Uncle Watson said,
‘And scotch the tribe of the
Phlistereens
By bangin’ ‘em on the head?’”

The blow that time staggered MacLeod.

“Chorus!” called “Poet” Larry. But before he could rap his antagonist at the end of that roaring iteration the Honorable Pulaski was between them, having at last contrived to fight his way through the ranks of the crowding men. He narrowly missed getting the blow intended for the boss. He yanked the sled-stake out of the nerveless grasp of the sweating and discomfited MacLeod, and raised it.

“Be careful, Mr. Britt,” yelled Gorman. His mien changed from gay insouciance to bitter fury. “You’ve struck me once in my life, and I took it and went on my way, because I was getting your grub and your pay. You strike me to-day, and I’ll split your head open like a rotten punkin!”

[Pg 228]

Britt had begun to rant that he could thrash the whole Enchanted crew single-handed. He was maddened by the lamblike demeanor of his own men. But he knew a desperate and dangerous man when he saw him. At that moment Larry Gorman was dangerous. The tyrant lowered his club and backed away, muttering some wordless recrimination at which the poet curled his lip. Seeing his chance, Tommy Eye hooked his legs about the uprights and slid down the ladder with one dizzy plunge, struck the ground in squatting fashion, and shot head-first into the ranks of his protectors.

But after that masterly raillery of Gorman’s there was no fight left in the “Busters.” And his vengeful bearding of the Honorable Pulaski left the autocrat himself speechless and helpless.

Tommy Eye’s trembling hand fingered his chin, his wistful eyes peered over the shoulders of his new friends, and he knew he was safe. The “Busters,” nudging each other and growling half-humorous comment, began to sift out of the yard of the Durfy hovel, and lounge back along the trail towards the Jerusalem camp.

“D—n ye for cowards!” yelled the Honorable Pulaski, viciously flinging the ash sled-stake after them.

“Oh, but they’re not cowards!” cried Larry. In his bushman’s soul he realized that even now a chance taunt, a random prick of word, might start the fight afresh. “Every man-jack there is known to me of old, and the good, brave boys they are! But your money ain’t greasy enough, Mr.

Britt, to make good men as them fight to take away a comrade's man-rights."

The "Busters" nodded affirmation and kept on. One man stepped back and halloed: "Right ye are, Larry Gorman! And when ye try to get your Enchanted logs first through the Hulling Machine next spring, ye'll find that we're the kind of gristle that can't be chawed. That'll be man's business, and no Teamster Tommy Eye to stub a toe over!"

[Pg 229]

There was a grin on the man's face, but none the less it was a challenge, and Larry accepted it.

"Sure, and we'll be there!" he called. "We'll be there with hair a foot long, pick-pole^[3] in one hand, peavy-stick^[4] in the other, ready for a game of jack-straws in the white water and a fist-jig on the bank!"

"And will ye write it all into a song, Larry Gorman?"

"All into a song it shall go!"

And roaring a good-natured cheer over their shoulders, the "Busters" filed away into the mouth of Pogeys Notch.

"You may as well move, boys," ordered Rodburd Ide. "This business here isn't swampin' yards nor buildin' camps!"

The men for Enchanted cheerfully shouldered dunnage-sacks, and in their turn set off up the Notch.

"Here's Tommy Eye's bill of his time, Mr. Britt," said Gorman, holding out a crumpled paper to the choking tyrant. Tommy himself had prudently departed, bulwarked by his new comrades.

"I'll not pay it!" blustered Britt. "He broke the contract!"

"No more does he want you to pay it," replied Larry, serenely, speaking in behalf of the amiable prodigal. "He says to credit it on that one drink of whiskey he took out of your bottle, and when he earns more money workin' for honest men he'll pay ye the rest."

He tore the paper across and across, snapped the bits in Britt's face, turned, and followed the crew.

CHAPTER XIX

[Pg 230]

THE HOME-MAKERS OF ENCHANTED

"The clank of the press and the scream
of the saws,
The grunt of the grinder that slavers and
chaws
At the fibre o' pulp-wood, the purr of the
plane,
Sing only one song to the big woods o'
Maine.
So here's for a billion down race-way
and sluice—
Hell for the hemlock, the pine, and the
spruce."

—Off for the Woods.



ohn Barrett was first to break the embarrassed silence that fell upon the four men left at the camp. Rodburd Ide's brows were wrinkled, and his lips were parting to ask the questions that his curiosity urged. Britt was wrathfully gazing after the insolent Larry. Dwight Wade had taken up his pack and calipers, and was waiting for Ide with some impatience.

"Mr. Wade," began the Umcolcus baron, nervously, "I hope you will understand my position in this matter, and see why it was necessary to make some change in the plan we discussed on Jerusalem."

"I sha'n't try to understand it," snapped Wade. "You volunteered promises. I took those promises to the person most interested, and you've seen fit to drop out from under. That ends our business—all the business we had in common, Mr. Barrett."

But the baron was anxious to placate. He began guarded explanations, to which Ide was listening intently, but Wade cut them short with a scorn there was no mistaking.

[Pg 231]

"The only sort of interest I took in that unfortunate girl has been maliciously misinterpreted, Mr. Barrett. She was thrown on my hands in a way that you thoroughly understand. Mr. Ide, as a plantation officer, has relieved me of the responsibility. You can talk with him hereafter."

"But what—what are you going to say to him?" faltered Barrett, forced to show his anxious fear, since Wade was moving away.

In his physical weakness, in the illness that was sapping his nerve, he became wistfully paltering.

"Nothing," replied the young man, curtly, but with a decisiveness there was no misunderstanding. "The matter has ceased to be any business of mine. My business hereafter—and I say this to my partner—is concerned wholly and entirely with certain lumbering operations on Enchanted township."

He went away, following the crew. Rodburd Ide, eager to be gone, and seeing in the affair thus flatly dropped by Wade only a phase of the older animosity between Britt and the young man—a quarrel that might seek any avenue for expression, even a State pauper—demanded of Barrett:

"Do you lay any special claim to the girl?" His tone was that of an official only.

"Of course he doesn't," broke in Britt, seeing that his associate was groping for a reply. "We did think of trying to help her, but what's the use? There isn't any more gratitude in that sculch than there is in a pine knot. Send her back to the tribe."

The little Castonia magnate looked relieved.

"She's all right with my girl till I get home," he said. "Then the affair will take care of itself, like all those things do."

Barrett had picked up one of the discarded bludgeons and was supporting himself on it. His legs trembled visibly when he walked to Ide's side. [Pg 232]

"Rodburd," he said, appealingly, "I can see that you think this thing strange. I don't want you to have wrong ideas. You and I have known each other too long to get into quarrels. You have seen that I have been trying to smooth matters here to-day. I can't talk it over with you now. I'm sick—I'm a sick man, Rodburd! I've been through a dreadful experience up here."

"You don't look well," returned Ide, solicitously, his ever-ready sympathy enlisted.

Barrett's face was haggard and his eyes were bloodshot. He wavered on his feet, tipping from heel to toe like a drunken man.

"You ought to get out of these woods as quick as you can," the Castonia man went on.

Even Britt saw now that his associate was in a bad way. He gave a keen glance at him, and shouted to MacLeod, who was waiting at the edge of the woods, "Send back four of my men!"

"I feel dreadfully," mourned Barrett. His grit and his excitement had been keeping him up. Now, like most strong men who have to confess that they are conquered, he gave way to his illness with utter abandonment of courage.

"Mr. Barrett," said Ide, surveying him pityingly, "I can see that you're a sick man. I don't want to say that to frighten you, but because you ought to know it. You'd better only try to make Castonia, and have a doctor sent there. My girl will be there as soon as you are. You go to my house, and get doctored up before you tackle the trip down-river. That buckboard ride will kill you if you try it in the shape you're in now."

"You'd better do as he says, John," advised Britt, checking the timber baron's feeble protests. [Pg 233] "I'm going to have these four men make a litter for you and lug you. You can stand that sort of ridin', but unless you are in better shape when you get to Castonia you wouldn't be good for that stage ride. Use common-sense, and rest up at Rodburd's house."

"Give the men their orders," whispered the little Castonia magnate in an aside to Britt. "It's fever, and a bad one if I ain't mistaken. By the time he's got to my place he'll probably be too sick to give any orders of his own. I never saw a man grow sick so fast. Tell the men to leave him there." He talked impatiently, for his crew had disappeared up the trail. "I've got to be hurryin'," he added. "Mr. Barrett, make my home yours!" he cried over his shoulder, as he trotted off. "I'll be back in a few days—as soon as I get this crew of mine located."

The four men were already at work securing poles and boughs for the litter.

Barrett sat down upon a tussock, and held his throbbing head in his hands. He began weakly to complain that Britt had made a mistake in bringing his men and insisting on possession of the girl.

The Honorable Pulaski promptly checked the incoherent expostulations of the stumpage baron.

"No, I haven't committed you, either," he blurted. "Bluff it out! It's the only way to do. It's the way I advised you to do in the first place. The thing looks big to you here in the woods. You're down on the level with it. Get back into the city, and get your tail-coat on and your dignity, and sit up on top of that governor's boom of yours, and the story will only be political blackmail if they try it on you. But they won't. That Wade fellow is one of those righteous sort of asses that like to read moral lessons to other people, and especially to you, so he can work out his grudge. But he's all done. I know the sort. The thing began to scorch his fingers and he chucked it. He's got enough to attend to in these woods. Don't you worry." [Pg 234]

"But I do worry," mourned Barrett. "And there's the girl to consider. God save me, Pulaski, she's

mine! Her looks show it. I can't sleep nights after this, unless she is taken care of in a decent way."

"There'll be a dozen methods of doin' it when the time is ripe," urged the other, consolingly. "As it is now, you get out of these woods and stay out, and attend to your business—which is my business, too, when it comes to the governor matter. By —, you've seen enough in this trip to understand that we haven't got any too safe timber laws as it is. If the farmers get control next trip it means trouble for such of us as take to the tall timber. Buck up, man! Don't believe for a minute that we're goin' to let a college dude and a State pauper queer you. The thing will work itself out."

He uttered a sudden snort of disgust, gazing over Barrett's shoulder.

"Foolish Abe" of the Skeets had edged out of the bush, the silence after the uproar of voices and conflict encouraging him. He seemed pitifully bewildered. An instinct almost canine prompted him to take the trail to the south, for his only friend, the girl of the tribe, had gone that way. But a strange female had gone with her, and of strange females he entertained unspeakable fear.

"Here, you cross-eyed baboon," called the Honorable Pulaski, "go! Scoot!" He pointed north in the direction in which the Enchanted crew had disappeared. "Young man want you. Follow him. Stay with him. Run!" He picked up his discarded sled-stake, and the fool hurried away towards the Notch. "I'd like to see that human nail-keg plastered onto the Enchanted crew for the winter," remarked Britt, with malice. "There's no fillin' him up. He'll eat as much as three men, and that Wade is just enough of a soft thing not to turn him out. If I can't bore an enemy with a pod-auger, John, I'll do it with a gimlet—a gimlet will let more or less blood."

[Pg 235]

Five minutes later Barrett was borne on his way south, his courage braced by some final arguments from his iron associate, his mind made up to adopt the course of indignant bluff suggested by the belligerent Britt.

And Britt was stumping north, driving the blubbering Abe before him with sundry hoots and missiles.

When the poor creature came crawling to the fire on hands and knees at dusk that evening, hairy, pitiable, and drooling with hunger, Rodburd Ide accepted him with resignation, though he recognized Britt's petty malice; for unless he were driven, Abe Skeet would never have come past a well-stocked lumber-camp to follow wanderers into the wilderness.

That night the Enchanted crew camped on Attean Stream, a short day's journey from their destination. The tired men snatched supper from their packs and fell back snoring, their heads on their dunnage-bags.

They were away in the first flush of the morning, Rodburd Ide leading with his partner. Wade welcomed the little man's absorbed interest in the business ahead of them. Ide asked no questions about the incident at Durfy's. Wade put the hideous topic as far behind other thoughts as he could, and soon other thoughts crowded it out.

As they passed from the zone of striped maple, round-wood, witch-hobble, and mountain holly that Mother Nature had drawn across her naked breast after the rude hand of Pulaski Britt had stripped the virgin growth, his heart lifted. Under the great spruces of Enchanted the town's bricks, streets, and human passions seemed very far away.

[Pg 236]

Before he slept that night he had had an experience that thrilled the sense of the primitive self hidden within him, as it is hidden in all men, and covered by conventions.

He had staked the metes and bounds, the corners, the frontage, all the dimensions of a new home, where no roof except the crowns of trees had ever shut sunlight off the earth.

Mankind in general opens eyes within walls that the hands of those coming before have built.

Many have no occasion to seek ever for other quarters than those their fathers have given them. With most the limit of exploration is the quest for a new rental. Mankind who build, build along settled streets, first taking note that sewers and water systems have been installed.

Even in the woods most crews come up to find that the advance skirmishers have builded main camp, meal camp, horse-hovels, and wangan. Owing to the sudden forming of Rodburd Ide's partnership with the young man whom Fate threw in his way, and his equally sudden determination to operate on virgin Enchanted, there had been no time for preliminaries. Even the tote teams with the first of the winter's supplies were miles away down the trail, for in the woods the human two-foot outclasses the equine four-foot.

Therefore, Wade, perspiring in the forefront of the toilers, saw the first tree topple, heard it crash outward from the site of the camp, and tugged with the others when it was set into place as the sill. When he stood back and wiped his forehead and gazed on that one lonesome log it made roofless out-doors seem bigger and more threatening. The rain was pattering from a cold sky. The thrall of centuries of housed ancestors was on him. Roof and walls had attached themselves to his sentiency, even as the shell of the snail is attached to its pulp.

[Pg 237]

But the next moment Larry Gorman started a song, and the rollicking hundred men about him took it up and toiled with merry thoughtlessness of all except that God's good greenwood was about them and God's sky above them, and Wade bent again to labor, ashamed that he had

counted shingles and plaster as standing for so much.

They put up eight-log walls for the main camp, notching the ends. A hundred willing men made the buildings grow like toadstools. While the walls were going up men laid floors of poles shaved flat on one side. Others brought moss and chinked the spaces between the logs of the walls. The first team up brought tarred paper and the few boards needed for tables and like uses. The tarred paper and cedar splints roofed all comfortably.

The second team brought stove, tin dishes, and raw staples—and cook and cookee walked behind.

And when old Christopher Straight came at the tail of the procession as fast as he could hurry back from Castonia settlement, the camps stood nearly complete under the frown of Enchanted Mountain, Enchanted Stream gurgling over brown rocks at the door.

The distant whick-whack of axes told where the swampers were clearing the way, and the tearing crash of trees punctuated the ceaseless “ur-r rick-raw!” of the cross-cut saws. The only axe scarf on Ide’s trees was the nick necessary to direct their fall. They were felled by the saw.

Two days of exploration on the spruce benches straight back from the stream showed up several million feet of black growth easily available for a first season’s operation.

Ide, Wade, and old Christopher cruised, pacing parallels and counting trees. And when they sat down on an outcropping of ledge the young man made so many sagacious observations that Ide’s eyes opened in amazement.

[Pg 238]

“Where did you learn lumberin’?” he demanded.

“I wasn’t aware that I knew it—not as it is viewed from a practical stand-point,” replied Wade, humbly. “I was going to ask you in a moment if you wouldn’t like to have me keep still so that you and Christopher could talk sense.”

“I never heard better opinions on a stand of timber and a lay of land,” affirmed his partner. “It looks as though you’d been holdin’ out on me,” he added, with a grim smile.

The young man smiled back. There was a certain grateful pride in his expression.

“I know how old woodsmen look at book-learned chaps, Mr. Ide. Pulaski Britt told me once. I was simply trying on you a bit of an experiment with my little knowledge of books. I was waiting to have you and Christopher pull me up short. I’m rather surprised to find that you think what I said was good sense. But after a book-fellow has bumped against practical men like—like Mr. Britt for a time, he begins to distrust his books. It’s simply this way, Mr. Ide: I had a few young men in my high-school who were interested in forestry of the modern sort, and I worked with them to encourage them as much as I could. It is almost impossible for a reading-man in these days not to take an interest in the protection of our forests, for the folks at Washington are making it the great topic of the times.”

“Well,” remarked Ide, with a sigh of appreciation, “I never read a book on forestry in my life, and I never heard of a lumberman in these parts who ever had. But if you can get facts like those you’ve stated out of books, I reckon some of us better spend our winter evenin’s readin’ instead of playin’ pitch pede.” He got up and gave the young man a complimenting palm. “Wade,” he said, earnestly, “I’ll own up that I’ve been a little prejudiced against book-fellows myself. Instead of givin’ an ignorant man the contents of the book—the juice of it, as you might say—in a way that won’t hurt, they are so anxious to have him know that it’s book-learnin’ they’ve got, they’ll bang him across the face with it, book-covers and all. I like your knowledge, because it’s goin’ to help us in handlin’ this thing we’ve bit off up here. But I’ll be blamed if I don’t like your modesty best of all.”

[Pg 239]

He picked up his calipers, stuck them under his arm, and started for camp with a haste that showed full confidence in his partner’s ability.

And the next morning he buttoned the camp letters in his coat, and started south for Castonia with the outgoing tote team.

“I don’t worry about this end,” he said, at parting, “and you needn’t worry about mine. Don’t be afraid of going hungry. There’s nothin’ like full stomachs to make axes and saws run well. It will have to be hand-to-mouth till snow flies, then I’ll slip you in stores enough to fill that wangan to the roof. Good heart, my boy! We’re goin’ to make some money.”

Wade followed him to the edge of the clearing with his first sense of loneliness tugging within him.

“Safe home to you, Mr. Ide,” he said, “and my respectful regards to Miss Nina, if you will take them. I suppose—she will—probably—the girl she took away—” he stammered.

“By thunder mighty!” cried the Castonia magnate, whirling on him, “I’d forgotten all about that Skeet girl, or Arden girl, or whatever they call her.”

He eyed the young man with a dawning of his old curiosity, but Wade met his gaze frankly.

[Pg 240]

“The affair of the girl is not mine at all,” he said. “Simply because she seemed superior to the tribe she was with, I hoped Mr. Barrett would do as he partly promised—use a few dollars of his money to help her from the muck. Such cases appeal to me, because I’m not accustomed to

seeing them, perhaps.”

“If my girl is interested in that poor little wildcat, you needn’t think twice about her bein’ taken good care of,” cried the admiring father.

And gazing into the wholesome eyes and candid face of the little man, Wade reflected that perhaps Fate had handled a problem better for John Barrett’s abandoned daughter than he himself, in his resentful zeal, had planned.

He shook Ide’s hand hard, and, with the picture of John Barrett’s other daughter in his dimming eyes and the love of John Barrett’s other daughter burning in his lonely heart, he turned back towards the woods, whose froned arms, tossing in the October wind, beckoned him to his duty.

CHAPTER XX

[Pg 241]

THE HA’NT OF THE UMCOLCUS

“For even in these days P. I.’s
shake
At word of the phantom of Brassua
Lake;
And all of us know of the witherlick
That prowls by the shores of the
Cup-sup-tic;
Of the side-hill ranger whose
eyeballs gleam
In the light of the moon at Abol
stream.”

—The Ha’nts.



A few days after the men of Enchanted were housed, those who gazed southeast from the mountain shoulder saw a smear of white on the horizon. It was the first snow on lofty Katahdin.

Tommy Eye greeted that sight most enthusiastically. Like a good teamster, he was anxious for “slippin’.”

“Bless the saints, old Winter has pitched camp down there, and is mixin’ up a batch of our kind of weather,” he said to Wade. “Injun Summer had better grab up what’s left of her flounces and get out from under.”

But Winter proceeded about his business with majestic deliberateness. He patted down the duff under the big trees with beating, sleety rains; and when the ground was ready for the sowing of the mighty crop, he piled his banks of clouds up from the south, and, though he gave the coast folk rain, he brought the men of the north woods what they were longing for—snow a-plenty; snow that heaped the arms of the spruces, filled all the air with smothering clouds, and blanketed the ground.

[Pg 242]

Wade, blinking the big flakes out of his eyes as he breasted the swirling storm, came across to the main camp from the wangan, his pipe and tobacco-pouch in hand. He rejoiced in his heart to see the snow driving so thickly that the camp window was only a blur of yellow light smudging the whiteness. This first real storm of the winter promised two feet on a level, and guaranteed the slipping on ram-downs and twitch-roads.

The cheer of the storm permeated all the camp on Enchanted. The cook beamed on Wade with floury face. The bare ground had meant bare shelves. He predicted the first supply-team for the morrow. He had been thriftily “making a mitten out of a mouse’s ear” for several weeks. Tommy Eye, ploughing back from his good-night visit to the horse-hovel, proclaimed his general pleasure for two reasons: No more bare-ground dragging for the bob-sleds; no more too liberal dosing of bread dough with soap to make the flour “spend” in lighter loaves. “Eats like wind and tastes like a laundry,” Tommy had grumbled.

The boss of the choppers moved along to give Wade the end of the “deacon seat,” and grinned amiably.

“That’s a cheerful old song she’s singing overhead to-night,” he remarked.

It needed a lumberman’s interpretation to give it cheer.

There were far groanings, there were near sighs; there were silences, when the soft rustle of the snow against the window-glass made all the sound; there were sudden, tempestuous descents of the wind that rattled the panes and made the throat of the open stove “whummle” like a neighing horse.

Wade lighted his pipe with deep content. He enjoyed the rude fraternity of the big camp. There was but little garrulity. Those who talked did so in a drawling monotone that was keyed properly

[Pg 243]

to the monotone of the soughing trees outside—elbows on knees and eyes on the pole floor. Clamor would not have suited that little patch of light niched in the black, brooding night of the forest. But there was comfort within. The blue smoke from pipe bowls curled up and mingled with the shadows dancing against the low roof. The woollens, hung to dry on the long poles, draped the dim openings of the bunks. The “spruce feathers” within were still fresh, and resinous odors struggled against the more athletic fragrance of the pipes.

Most of the men loafed along the “deacon seat,” relaxed in the luxury of laziness for that precious three hours between supper and nine o’clock. A few, bending forward to catch the light from the bracket-lamp, whittled patiently at what lumbermen call “doodahs”—odd little toys destined for some best girl or admiring youngster at home. “Windy” McPheters regaled those with an ear for music by cheerful efforts on his mouth-harp, coming out strong on the tremolo, and jiggling the heel of his moccasined foot for time. And when “Windy” had no more breath left, “Hitchbidddy” Wagg sang, after protracted persuasion, the only song he knew—though one song of that character ought to suffice for any man’s musical attainments.

Its length may be understood when it is stated that it detailed all the campaigns of the first Napoleon, and “Hitchbidddy” sang it doubled forward, his elbows on his crossed knees, and the toe of his moccasin flapping for the beat. He came down “the stretch” on the last verse with vigor and expression:

“Next at Waterloo those Frenchmen fought,
Commanded by brave Bonaparte
[pronounced ‘paught’],
Assisted by Field Marshal Ney—
He never was bribed by gold.
But when Grouchy let the Prussians in
It broke Napoleon’s heart within.
‘Where are my thirty thousand men?
Alas, stranger, for I am sold.’
He led one gallant charge across,
Saying, ‘Alas, brave boys, I fear ‘tis lost.’
The field was in confusion with dead and
dying woes.
When the bunch of roses did advance,
The English entered into France—
The grand Conversation [*sic*] of Napoleon
arose.”

[Pg 244]

To signal that the song was done, “Hitchbidddy” dropped the tune on the last line, and in calm, direct, matter-of-fact recitative announced that “the grand Conversation of Napoleon arose.” In the fifty years during which that song has been sung in the Maine lumber-camps, no one has ever displayed the least curiosity as to that last line. Away back, somewhere, a singer twisted a nice, fat word of the original song, and it has stayed twisted, and no one has tried to trouble it by idle questions.

“Hitchbidddy’s” most rapt listener was Foolish Abe of the Skeets. The shaggy giant squatted behind the stove beside the pile of shavings he was everlastingly whittling for the cook-fire. It was the only task that Abe’s poor wits could master, and he toiled at it unceasingly, paying thus and by a sort of canine gratitude for the food he received and the cast-off clothes tossed to him.

A mumbled chorus of commendation followed the song. But the chopping-boss, his humorous gaze on the witling, remarked:

“I reckon I’ll have to rule that song out, after this, ‘Hitchbidddy.’”

“What for?” demanded the amazed songster.

[Pg 245]

“It seems to have a damaging and cavascacious effect on the giant intellect of Perfessor Skeet,” remarked the boss, with irony. “Look at him!”

Abe was on his knees, stretching up his neck and twitching his head from side to side with the air of an agitated fowl.

“We’ll make it a rule after this to have only common songs, like Larry Gorman’s,” continued the boss, with a quizzical glance at the woodsman poet. “These high operas are too thrillin’.”

But those who stared at Abe promptly saw that his attention was not fixed on matters within, but without.

“He heard something,” muttered one of the men. “He’s got ears like a cat, anyway.”

If the giant had heard something it was plain that he heard it again, for he dropped his knife and scrambled to his feet.

“Me go! Yes!” he roared, gutturally; and, obeying some mysterious summons, his haste showing its authority, he ran out of the camp.

“Catch that fool!” yelled the boss. But the first of those who tumbled out into the dingle after him were not quick enough. The night and the swirling storm had swallowed him. A few zealous

pursuers ran a little way, trying to follow his tracks, lost them, and then came back for lanterns.

"It's no use, Mr. Wade," advised the boss. "He's got the strength of a mule and the legs of an ostrich. The men will only be takin' chances for nothin'. He's gone clean out of his head, and there's no tellin' when he'll stop."

And Wade regretfully gave orders to abandon the chase. He and the others stood for a time gazing about them into the storm, now sifting thicker and swirling more wildly. He was oppressed by the happening, as though he had seen some one leap to death. What else could a human being hope for in that waste? [Pg 246]

"He's as tough as a bull moose, and just as used to bein' out-doors," remarked the boss, consolingly. "When he's had his run he'll smell his way back."

Teamster Tommy Eye was the most persistent pursuer. He came in, stamping the snow, after all the others had reassembled in the camp to talk the matter over.

"Did ye hear it?" demanded Tommy. "I did, and I run like a tiger so I could say that at last I'd seen one. But I didn't see it. I only heard it."

"What?" asked Wade, amazed.

"The ha'nt," said Tommy. "I've always wanted to see one. I was first out, and I heard it."

"What did it sound like?" gasped one of the men, his superstition glowing in his eyes.

"It's bad luck forever to try to make a noise like a ha'nt," said Tommy, with decision. "Nor will I meddle with its business—no, s'r. 'Twould come for me. Take a lucivee, an Injun devil, a bob-sled runner on grit, and the gabble of a loon, mix 'em together, and set 'em, and skim off the cream of the noise, and it would be something like the loo-hoo of a ha'nt. It's awful on the nerves. I reckon I'll take a pull at the old T. D." He rammed his pipe bowl with a finger that trembled visibly.

"I've seen one," declared, positively, the man who had inquired in regard to the sound. "I've seen one, but I never heard one holler. I didn't know it was a ha'nt till I'd seen it half a dozen times."

"Good eye!" sneered Tommy. "What! did it have to come up and introduce itself, and say, 'Please, Mister MacIntosh, I'm a ha'nt'?"

"I've seen one," insisted the man, sullenly. "I was teamin' for the Blaisdell Brothers on their Telos operation, and I see it every day for most a week. It walked ahead of my team close to the bushes, side of the road, and it was like a man, and it always turned off at the same place and went into the woods." [Pg 247]

"Do you call that a ha'nt—a man walkin' 'longside the road in daylight—some hump-backed old spruce-gum picker?" demanded Tommy.

"The last time I see it I noticed that it didn't leave any tracks," declared the narrator. "It walked right along on the light snow, and didn't leave any tracks. Funny I didn't notice that before, but I didn't."

"You sartinly ain't what the dictionary would set down as a hawk-eyed critter," remarked Tommy, maliciously. "It must have been kind of discouragin', ha'ntin' you."

"It was a ha'nt," insisted the man, with the same doggedness. "I got off'n my team right then and there, and got a bill of my time and left, and the man that took my place got sluiced by the snub-line bustin', and about three thousand feet of spruce mellered the eternal daylights out of him. Say what you're a mind to—I saw a thing that walked on light snow and didn't make tracks, and I left, and that feller got sluiced—everybody in these woods knows that a feller got killed on Telos two winters ago."

"Oh, there's ha'nts," agreed Tommy, earnestly. "Mebbe you saw one; only you got at your story kind of back-ended."

The old teamster had been watching incredulity settle on the face of Dwight Wade, and this heresy in one to whom his affections had attached touched his sensitiveness.

"You're probably thinkin' what most of the city folks say out loud to us, Mr. Wade," he went on, humbly. "They say there ain't any such things as ha'nts in the woods. It would be easy to say there ain't any bull moose up here because they ain't also seen walkin' down a city street and lookin' into store windows. But I'd like to see one of those city folks try to sleep in the camp that's built over old Jumper Joe's grave north of Sourdnaheunk." [Pg 248]

There was a general mumble of indorsement. It became evident to Wade that the crew of the Enchanted were pretty stanch adherents of the supernatural.

"Hitchbidddy" Wagg cleared his throat and sang, for the sake of verification:

"He rattled underneath, and he
rattled overhead;
Never in my life was I ever scared
so!
And I did not dast to lay down in that
bed

"They can't use that place for anything but a depot-camp now," stated Tommy; "and it's a wonder to me that they can even get pressed hay to stay there overnight."

"Well, from what I know of human nature," smiled Wade, "I should think that hay and provisions would stay better overnight in a haunted camp than in one without protection."

He rapped out his pipe ashes on the hearth of the stove and rose to go.

"And don't you believe that it was a ha'nt that called out Foolish Abe?" asked Tommy, eager to make a convert. "You saw that for yourself, Mr. Wade."

"I am afraid to think of what may have happened to that poor creature," replied Wade, earnestly, looking into the black night through the door that he had opened. He heard the chopping-boss call: "Nine! Turn in!" as he strove with the storm between the main camp and the wangan, and when he stamped into his own shelter the yellow smudge winked out behind him—such is the alacrity of a sleepy woods crew when it has a boss who blows out the big lamp on the dot of the hour. He shuddered as he shut out the blackness. He had no superstitions, but the unaccountable flight of the witting, and the eerie tales offered in explanation and the mystic night of storm in that wild forest waste unstrung him. He went to sleep, finding comfort in the dull glow of the lantern that he left lighted.

[Pg 249]

Its glimmer in his eyes when the cook called shrilly in the gray dawn, "Grub on ta-a-abe!" sent his first thoughts to the wretch who had abandoned himself to the storm. He hoped to find Abe whittling shavings in the cook-house.

"No, s'r, no sign of him, hide nor hair," said the cook, shaking his head. "Reckon the ha'nt flew high with him."

The snow still sifted through the trees—a windless storm now. The forest was trackless.

"For a man to start out in the woods in that storm was like jumpin' into a hole and pullin' the hole in after him," observed the chopping-boss. That remark might have served as the obituary of poor Abe Skeet. The swamper, the choppers, the sled-tenders, the teamsters, trudging away to their work, had their minds full of their duties and their mouths full of other topics during the day.

And all day the cook bleated his cheerful little prophecy in the ears of the cookee: "The tote team will be in by night." That morning, with his rolling-pin, he had pounded "hungryman's ratty-too" on the bottom of the last flour-barrel to shake out enough for his batch of biscuits, and he burned up the barrel, even though the pessimistic cookee predicted that "the human nail-kags" would eat both kitchen mechanics if the food gave out.

Dwight Wade, at nightfall, surveyed the bare shelves of the cook camp with some misgivings.

"Don't you worry," advised the master of that domain. "Rod Ide ain't waitin' three weeks for good slippin' jest for the sake of settin' in his store window and singin' 'Beautiful snow'! He sure got a load of supplies started on that first skim o' snow, and they're due here to-night—" The cook paused, kicked at the cookee for slamming the stove-cover at that crucial moment of listening, and shrilled, "There she blows!"

[Pg 250]

Wade heard the jangle of bells, and hastened to meet the dim bulk of the loaded sled. The driver did not reply to his delighted hail, but before he had time to wonder at that silence some one struggled out of the folds of a shrouding blanket and sprang from the sled. It was a woman; and while he stood and stared at her, she ran to him and grasped his hands and clung to him in pitiful abandonment of grief.

It was Nina Ide. In the dim light Wade could see tears and heart-broken woe on her face. He had had some experience with the self-poise of the daughter of Rodburd Ide. This emotion, which checked with sobs the words in her throat, frightened him.

"It's a terrible thing, and I don't understand it, Mr. Wade," quavered the driver. He slipped down from the load and came and stood beside them. "We was in Pogey Notch, and the wind was blowin' pretty hard there, and I told the young ladies they'd better cover their heads with the blankets. And I pulled the canvas over me, 'cause the snow stung so, and I didn't see it when it happened—and I don't understand it."

"When what happened?" Wade gasped.

"They took her—whatever they was," stated the driver, in awed tones. "I didn't see 'em or hear 'em take her. And I don't know jest where we was when they took her. I went back and hunted, but it wasn't any use. They was gone, and her with 'em. They wasn't humans, Mr. Wade. It was black art, that's what it was."

[Pg 251]

"Probably," said Tommy Eye, with deep conviction. He had led the group that came out of the camp to greet the tote team. "There were ha'nts here last night. They got Foolish Abe."

"They sartinly seem to mean the Skeet family this time," said the driver. "It was that Skeet girl—the pretty one that's called Kate—that they got off'n my team."

The men of the camp, surrounding the new arrivals, surveyed Nina Ide with respectful but eager curiosity.

"If I was a ha'nt," growled the chopping-boss, "and had my pick, I reckon I'd have shown better judgment." His remark was under his breath, and the girl did not hear it. She clung to Wade. Her agitation communicated itself to him. A sense of calamity told him that there was trouble deeper than the disappearance of the waif of the Skeet tribe.

Her words confirmed his suspicion. "My God, what are we going to do, Mr. Wade?" she sobbed. "I planned it; I encouraged her. It was wild, imprudent, reckless. I ought to have realized it. But I knew how you felt towards her. I wanted to help her and—and you!"

Something in the horror of her wide-open eyes told him plainly now that this could not be merely the question of the loss of one of the Skeets. And with that conviction growing out of bewildered doubt, he went with her when she led him away towards the office camp. A suspicion wild as a nightmare flashed into his mind. In the wangan she faced him, as woe-stricken, as piteously afraid, as though she were confessing a crime against him.

"It was John Barrett's daughter Elva on that team with me," she choked. "She wanted to come—but I'll be honest with you, Mr. Wade. She wouldn't have come if I hadn't encouraged her—yes, put the idea into her head and the means into her hands. I've been a fool, Mr. Wade, but I'll not be a coward and lie about my responsibility."

[Pg 252]

He gazed at her, his face ghastly white in the lantern-light.

"She wanted to—she was coming here—she is lost?" he mumbled, as though trying to fathom a mystery.

Infinite pity replaced the distraction in the girl's face.

"Forgive me, Mr. Wade!" she cried. "Not for my folly—you can't overlook that. Forgive me for wasting time. But I didn't know how to say it to you." She put her woman's weakness from her, though the struggle was a mighty one, and her face showed it. "I won't waste any more words, Mr. Wade. John Barrett has been at my father's house for weeks. He has been near death—he is near death now, but the big doctors from the city say that he will get well. He must have been through some terrible trouble up here."

She looked at him with questioning gaze, as though to ask how much he knew of the strain that had prostrated John Barrett, the stumpage king.

"He was in great danger—and his exposure—" stammered Wade.

But she went on, hurriedly:

"It was fever, and it went to his head, and he talked and raved. His daughter came from the city and nursed him, and she has heard him talking, talking, talking, all the time—talking about you, and how you saved him from the fire; talking about a woman who is dead and a man who is alive, and a girl—"

"Does Elva Barrett—know?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"It was too plain not to know—after she saw that girl, Mr. Wade. The girl was there at our house—she is there now. It isn't all clear to us yet. We have only the ravings of a sick man—and the face of that girl. Father doesn't understand all of it, either. But he knows that you do, although you haven't told him." She clutched her trembling hands to hold them steady. "And he has talked and talked of other things, Mr. Wade—the sick man has. He has said that you have his reputation, and his prospects, and the happiness of his family all in your hands, and that you are waiting to ruin him because he has abused you; and he has tossed in his bed and begged some one to come to you and promise you—buy you—coax you—"

[Pg 253]

"It's a cursed lie—infernal, though a sick man babble it!" Wade cried, heart-brokenly. "It holds me up as a blackmailer, Miss Nina. It makes me seem a wretch in Elva's eyes. And yet—was she—was she coming here thinking I was that kind—coming here to beg for her father?" he demanded.

"We—I—oh, I don't like to tell you we believed that of you," the girl sobbed. "No, I didn't believe it. But if you had only heard him lying there talking, talking! And you were the one that he seemed to fear. And we thought if you knew of it you wouldn't want him to worry that way. And if we could carry back some word of comfort from you to him—She wanted to come to you, Mr. Wade, and I encouraged her and helped her to come—because—because—" The girl caught her breath in a long sob, and cried: "She loves you, Mr. Wade! And I've pitied you and her ever since that day in the train when I found out about it."

It was not a moment to analyze emotions. Nina Ide, in her ingenuous declaration of Elva Barrett's motives in seeking him, had made his heart for an instant blaze with joy. For that instant he forgot the shame of the baseless babblings of the sick man, the awful mystery of Elva Barrett's disappearance. The blow of it—that Elva Barrett was gone—that she was somewhere in those woods alone, or worse than alone, had stunned him at first. Groping out of that misery, striving to realize what it meant, he had faced first the hideous thought that she might believe him mean enough to seek revenge. Then came the dazzling hope that Elva Barrett so loved him that she adventured—imprudently and recklessly, but none the less bravely—in order to make her love known. Then over all swept the black bitterness of the calamity.

[Pg 254]

"But you must have some suspicion—some hint how she was taken or how she went!" he cried.

"In Heaven's name, Miss Nina, think! think! You heard some outcry! There was some hidden rock or stump to jar the sled! The man did not search along the road far enough! She must be lost—lost!" and his voice rose almost to a shriek.

"There was no cry, Mr. Wade. And I went back with the man. We searched; we called—we even went as far as the place where we covered ourselves with the blankets. We could find no track, and the snow was driving and sifting. The man does not know it was Elva Barrett," she added.

He suddenly remembered the driver's statement.

"She came in Kate Arden's clothes," confided the girl. "Those who saw her ride out of Castonia, Mr. Wade, thought it was Kate Arden. And Kate Arden, in Elva Barrett's dress, is sitting now beside John Barrett, holding his hand, and his daughter's face has soothed him. He thinks it is his daughter beside him. They are so like, Kate and Elva. We waited until we had made sure. It was my plan. And Kate obeyed me. I don't know what she is thinking of. She is sullen and silent, but she took the place by his bed when I told her to. Then it could not be said that John Barrett's daughter had come seeking Dwight Wade."

Even in this stress he could still feel gratitude for the subterfuge that checked the tongues of gossip.

"I wish father had more authority over me," sobbed the girl. "He wouldn't have let us come on such a crazy errand if I hadn't bossed him into it." The lament was so guilelessly feminine that Wade put aside his own woe for the moment to think of the girl's distress. [Pg 255]

"This will be your home until I can send you back, Miss Nina," he said, gently. "I will have old Christopher bring in your supper and mend your fire."

"And about her, Mr. Wade?" she cried.

"I'm going," he said, simply, but with such earnestness that her eyes flooded again with tears.

CHAPTER XXI

[Pg 256]

THE MAN WHO CAME FROM NOWHERE

"He hadn't a word for no one, not even for me or Mike,
And whenever we spoke or tried to joke, he growled like a Chessy tyke."



Dwight Wade found a lively conference in progress in the main camp.

Tommy Eye was doing most of the talking, and it was plain that his opinions carried weight, for no one presumed to gainsay him.

"And I'll say to you what I'm tellin' to them here, Mr. Wade," continued the teamster. "You saw for yourself what happened here last night. A ha'nt done it. And the ha'nt done this last. They're pickin' Skeets right and left."

"Ha'nt must be in the pay of Pulaski D. Britt," remarked one rude joker. "He's been the one most interested in gettin' the tribe out of this section."

Dwight Wade, love and awful fear raging in his heart, was in no mood to play dilettante with the supernatural, nor to relish jokes.

"We'll have done with this foolishness, men!" he cried, harshly. "A girl has been lost in these woods." He was protecting Elva Barrett's incognito by a mighty effort of self-repression. The agony of his soul prompted him to leap, shouting, down the tote road, calling her name and crying his love and his despair. "I want this crew to beat the woods and find her."

"She can't ever be found," growled a prompt rebel. "I heard the driver tell. She was picked right up and lugged off. There ain't any of us got wings." [Pg 257]

"Oh, you've got to admit that there are ha'nts!" persisted Tommy, with fine relish for his favorite topic. "And they pick up people. I see one, in the shape of a tree, pick up an ox once and break his neck."

"D—n you for drooling idiots!" raved Wade, beside himself. It was the first outlet for the storm of his feelings.

He ordered them to get lanterns and start on the search—he strode among them with brandished fists and whirling arms, and they dodged from in front of him, staring in amazement.

"My Gawd," mourned Tommy, "this camp has had the spell put on it for sure! The ha'nt has driv' the boss out of his head, and will have him next. And if it can drive a college man out of his head, what chance has the rest of us got?"

Panic was writ large in the faces of the simple woodsmen, and fear glittered in their eyes. A single queer circumstance would merely have set them to wondering; but these unexplainable events, following each other so rapidly and taking ominous shade from the glass that lugubrious Tommy Eye held over them, shook them out of self-poise. It needed but one voice to cry, "The place is accursed!" to precipitate a rout, and old Christopher Straight had the woodsman's keen scent for trouble of this sort.

"A moment! A moment, Mr. Wade!" he called. He patted the young man's elbow and urged him towards the door. "I want to speak to you. Keep quiet, my men, and go in to your supper."

As he passed the cook-house door he sharply ordered the cook to sound the delayed call—the cook being then engaged in discussing, with chopping-boss and cookee, a certain "side-hill lounge," a ha'nt that wrought vast mischief of old along Ripogenus gorge. [Pg 258]

"Mr. Wade," advised the old man, when they were apart from the camp, "I'm sorry to see you get so stirred up over the Skeet girl, for I don't believe she appreciates your kindness. I have this matter pretty well settled in my own mind. I don't know just why Miss Nina is up here, nor why she has brought that girl back—or tried to. It is plain, though, that the girl has deceived her."

"I don't understand," quavered Wade, struggling between his own knowledge and old Christopher's apparent certainty.

"The Skeet girl, having her own reasons for wanting to come this way from Castonia, got as far as Pogey Notch, slipped off the team, and made her way to Britt's camp on Jerusalem to join Colin MacLeod. It's all a put-up job, Mr. Wade, and they've simply done what they set out to do in the first place, when Britt and his crew followed John Barrett and me to Durfy's. So I wouldn't worry any more about the girl, Mr. Wade. Let her stay where she plainly wants to stay."

Wade blurted the truth without pausing to weigh consequences. He bitterly needed an adviser. Old Christopher's calm confidence in his own theory pricked him.

"Great God, man, it isn't the Skeet girl! It is John Barrett's daughter—his daughter Elva!"

For a moment Christopher gasped his amazement, without words.

"There have been strange things happening outside since we've been locked in here away from the news," the young man went on, excitedly. "It is Elva Barrett, I tell you, Christopher, and she has been stolen."

"Then it's a part of the plot—somehow—some way," insisted the old man. "Colin MacLeod, or some one interested for Colin MacLeod, saw that girl, and took her for the Skeet girl. I've never seen Elva Barrett, but you've told me that the Skeet girl is her spittin' image—or words to that effect," corrected the old guide. [Pg 259]

"And she was dressed in Kate Arden's clothes!" groaned Wade, remembering Nina Ide's little scheme of deception.

"Then she's at Britt's camp—mistaken for the Skeet girl, as I said," declared Straight, with conviction.

"But hold on!" he cried, grasping Wade's arm as the young man was about to rush back into the camp, "that's no way to go after that girl—hammer and tongs, mob and ragtag. In the first place, Mr. Wade, those men in there are in no frame of mind to be led off into the night. I know woodsmen. They've been talkin' ha'nts till they're ready to jump ten feet high if you shove a finger at 'em. This is no time for an army—an army of that caliber. They know well enough now at Britt's camp that it isn't Kate Arden. And I'll bet they're pretty frightened, now that they know who they've got. It's a simple matter, Mr. Wade. I'll go to Britt's camp and get the young lady. I'll go now on snow-shoes and take the moose-sled, and I'll be back some time to-morrow all safe and happy."

"I'll go with you," declared Wade.

"It isn't best," protested the old man. "I've no quarrel with Colin MacLeod. It means trouble if you show in sight there without your men behind you."

"But I'm going," insisted Wade, with such positiveness that old Christopher merely sighed. "I'll let you go into the camp alone," allowed Wade, "for I am not fool enough to look for trouble just to find it; but I'll be waiting for you up the tote road with the moose-sled, and I'll haul her home here out of that hell."

"I can't blame you for wantin' to play hoss for her," said the woodsman, with a little malice in his humor. "And if she is like most girls she'll be willin' to have you do it." [Pg 260]

Ten minutes later the two were away down the tote road. They said nothing of their purpose except to Nina Ide, whom they left entrenched in the wangan—a woods maiden who felt perfectly certain of the chivalry of the men of the woods about her.

The storm was over, but the heavens were still black. Wade dragged the moose-sled, walking behind old Christopher in the patch of radiance that the lantern flung upon the snow. Treading ever and ever on the same whiteness in that little circle of light, it seemed to Wade that he was making no progress, but that the big trees were silently crowding their way past like spectres, and that he, for all his passion of fear and foreboding, simply lifted his feet to make idle tracks.

The winds were still, and the only sounds were the rasping of legs and snow-shoes, and the soft thuddings of snow-chunks dropped from the limbs of overladen trees.

In the first gray of the morning, swinging off the tote road and down into the depths of Jerusalem valley, they at last came upon the scattered spruce-tops and fresh chips that marked the circle of Britt's winter operation.

The young man's good sense rebuked his rebelliousness when Christopher took the cord of the sled and bade him wait where he was.

"I don't blame you for feeling that way," said the old man, interpreting Wade's wordless mutterings; "but the easiest way is always the best. If she is there she will want to come with me, where Miss Ide is waiting for her, and the word of the young lady will be respected. I'm afraid your word wouldn't be—not with Colin MacLeod," he added, grimly.

And yet Dwight Wade watched the lantern-light flicker down the valley with a secret and shamed feeling that he was a coward not to be the first to hold out a hand of succor to the girl he loved. That he had to wait hidden there in the woods while another represented him chafed his spirits until he strode up and down and snarled at the reddening east. [Pg 261]

At last the waiting became agony. The sun came up, its light quivering through the snow-shrouded spruces. Below him in the valley he heard teamsters yelping at floundering horses, the grunting "Hup ho!" of sled-tenders, and the chick-chock of axes. It was evident that the visit of Christopher Straight had not created enough of a sensation to divert Pulaski Britt's men from their daily toil. Wade's hurrying thoughts would not allow his common-sense to excuse the old man's continued absence. To go—to tear Elva Barrett from that hateful place—to rush back—what else was there for Straight to do? In the end the goads of apprehension were driving him down the trail towards the camp, regardless of consequences.

But when, at the first turn of the road, he saw Christopher plodding towards him, he ran back in sudden tremor. He wanted to think a moment. There was so much to say. The old man came into sight again, near at hand, before Wade had control of the tumult of his thoughts.

The sled was empty.

Christopher scuffed along slowly, munching a biscuit.

"They wouldn't let her go? I—I thought they had made you stay—you were so long!" gasped the young man, trying by words of his own to calm his fear.

"She isn't there, Mr. Wade," said the old man, finishing his biscuit, and speaking with an apparent calmness which maddened the young man. This old man, placidly wagging his jaws, seemed a part of the stolid indifference of the woods.

"I brought you something to eat, Mr. Wade," Christopher went on. He fumbled at his breast-pocket. "We've got tough work ahead of us. You can't do it on an empty stomach." [Pg 262]

"My God! what are you saying, Straight?" demanded the young man. "They're lying to you. She is there. She must be. There's no one—"

"And I say she isn't there," insisted Christopher, with quiet firmness. "I know what I'm talking about. You're only guessin'."

"They lied to you to save themselves."

"Mr. Wade, I know woodsmen better than you do. There are a good many things about Colin MacLeod that I don't like. But when it came to a matter of John Barrett's daughter Colin MacLeod would be as square as you or I."

"You told them it was John Barrett's daughter?"

"I did not," said the old man, stoutly. "There was no need to. If it had been John Barrett's daughter she would have been queening it in those camps when I got there. She hadn't been there. There has been no woman there. Colin MacLeod and his men didn't take Miss Barrett from that tote team. And I've made sure of that point because I knew my men well enough to make sure. She isn't there!"

"There is no one else in all these woods to trouble her," declared Wade, brokenly.

"No one knows just who and what are movin' about these woods," said Christopher, in solemn tones. "In forty years I've known things to happen here that no one ever explained. Hold on, Mr. Wade!" he cried, checking a bitter outburst. "I'm not talking like Tommy Eye, either! I'm not talking about ha'nts now. But, I say, strange things have happened in these woods—and a strange thing has happened this time. Barrett's daughter is gone. She's been taken. She didn't go by herself." He gazed helplessly about him, searching the avenues of the silent woods. [Pg 263]

"North or east, west or south!" he muttered, "It's a big job for us, Mr. Wade! I'm goin' to be honest with you. I don't see into it. You'd better eat."

The young man pushed the proffered food away.

"You eat, I say," commanded old Christopher, his gray eyes snapping. "An empty gun and an empty man ain't either of 'em any good on a huntin'-trip."

He started away, dragging the sled, and Wade struggled along after him, choking down the food.

When they had retraced their steps as far as the Enchanted tote road, Christopher turned to the south and trudged towards Pogey Notch. The trail of the tote team was visible in hollows which the snow had nearly filled. The snow lay as it had fallen. The tops of the great trees on either side of the road sighed and lashed and moaned in the wind that had risen at dawn. But below in the forest aisles it was quiet.

Had not the wind been at their backs, whistling from the north, the passage of Pogey Notch would have proved a savage encounter. The stunted growth offered no wind-break. The great defile roared like a chimney-draught. As the summer winds had howled up the Notch, lashing the leafy branches of the birches and beeches, so now the winter winds howled down, harpers that struck dismal notes from the bare trees. The snow drove horizontally in stinging clouds. The drifting snow even made the sun look wan. The quest for track, trail, or clew in that storm aftermath was waste of time. But the old man kept steadily on, peering to right and left, searching with his eyes nook and cross-defile, until at the southern mouth of the Notch they came to Durfy's hovel.

Christopher took refuge there, leaning against the log walls, and mused for a time without speaking. Then he bent his shrewd glance on Wade from under puckered lids.

[Pg 264]

"There's no telling what a lunatic will do next, is there?" he blurted, abruptly.

Wade, failing to understand, stared at his questioner.

"I was thinkin' about that as we came past that place where 'Ladder' Lane trussed up John Barrett and left him, time of the big fire," the old man went on. "Comin' down the Notch sort of brought the thing up in my mind. It's quite a grudge that Lane has got against John Barrett and all that belongs to him."

Wade was well enough versed in Christopher Straight's subtle fashion of expressing his suspicions to understand him now.

"By —, Straight, I believe you've hit it!" he panted.

"I've been patchin' a few things together in my head," said the old man, modestly, "as a feller has to do when dealin' with woods matters. I've told you that queer things have happened in the woods. When a number of things happen you can fit 'em together, sometimes. Now, there wasn't anything queer at Britt's camps to fit into the rest. I came right on 'em sudden, and there wasn't a ripple anywhere. I didn't go into the details, Mr. Wade, in tellin' you why I knew Miss Barrett wasn't there. It would have been wastin' time. But now take the queer things! Out goes Abe Skeet into the storm! Who would be mousin' around outside at that time of night except a lunatic—such as 'Ladder' Lane has turned into since the big fire? You saw on Jerusalem how Lane could boss Abe—he jumped when Lane pulled the string.

"And it was Lane that called him out of our camp," the old man went on. "No one else could do it—except that old Skeet grandmother. Lane has been in these woods ever since he abandoned the Jerusalem fire station. He's no ordinary lunatic. He's cunnin'. He's only livin' now to nuss the grudge. Now see here!" Christopher held up his fingers, and bent them down one by one to mark his points. "He has ha'nted camps in this section to locate Abe Skeet. Knowed Abe Skeet could probably tell where Kate Arden had gone, Abe havin' been left to guard her. Called Abe out to go with him to get that girl back—maybe havin' heard that John Barrett got out of these woods scot-free and had dumped the girl off somewhere else. Lane is lunatic enough to think he needs the girl to carry out his plan of revenge. And he does, if he means to take her outside and show her to the world as John Barrett's abandoned daughter, as it's plain his scheme is. Lane and Abe started down towards Castonia. Heard tote team, and hid side of road (would naturally hide). Saw girl that looked like Kate Arden (even dressed in her clothes, I believe you told me?). Followed the team, and when she covered herself in the blanket, as though to make herself into a package ready for 'em, they grabbed her off the team before she had time to squawk. Had her ready muzzled and gagged, as you might say! Mr. Wade, as I told you, I've been patchin' things in my mind. I ain't a dime-novel detective nor anything of the sort, but I do know something about the woods and who are in 'em and what they'll be likely to do, and I can't see anything far-fetched in the way I've figgered this."

[Pg 265]

While his fears had been so hideously vague Wade had stumbled on behind his guide without hope, and with his thoughts whirling in his head as wildly as the snow-squalls whirled in Pogey. Now, with definite point on which to hang his bitter fears, he was roused into a fury of activity.

"We'll after them, Christopher!" he shouted. "They've got her! It's just as you've figured it. They've got her! She will die of fright, man! I don't dare to think of it!" He was rushing away. Christopher called to him.

[Pg 266]

"Just which way was you thinkin' of goin'?" he asked, with mild sarcasm. "I can put queer things together in my mind so's to make 'em fit pretty well," went on the old man, "but jest which way to go chasin' a lunatic and a fool in these big woods ain't marked down on this snow plain enough so I can see it."

Wade, the cord of the moose-sled in his trembling hands, turned and stared dismally at Straight. The old man slowly came away from the hovel, his nose in the air, as though he were sniffing for inspiration.

"The nearest place," he said, thinking his thoughts aloud, "would be to the fire station up there." He pointed his mittened hand towards the craggy sides of Jerusalem. "They may have started hot-foot for the settlement. Perhaps 'Ladder' Lane would have done that if 'twas Kate Arden he'd got. But seein' as it's John Barrett's own daughter—" He paused and rubbed his mitten over his face. "Knowin' what we do of the general disposition of old Lane, it's more reasonable to think that he ain't quite so anxious to deliver that particular package outside, seein' that he can twist John Barrett's heart out of him by keepin' her hid in these woods."

The young man had no words. His face pictured his fears.

"It's only guesswork at best, Mr. Wade," said Christopher. "It's tough to think of climbin' to the top of Jerusalem on this day, but it seems to me it's up to us as men." They looked at each other a moment, and the look was both agreement and pledge. They began the ascent, quartering the snowy slope. The dogged persistence of the veteran woodsman animated the old man; love and desperation spurred the younger. The climb from bench to bench among the trees was an heroic struggle. The passage across the bare poll of the mountain in the teeth of the bitter blast was torture indescribable. And they staggered to the fire station only to find its open doors drifted with snow, its two rooms empty and echoing.

[Pg 267]

"I was in hopes—in hopes!" sighed the old man, stroking the frozen sweat from his cheeks. "But I ain't agoin' to give up hopes here, sonny." Even Wade's despair felt the soothing encouragement in the old man's tone.

"We've got to fetch Barnum Withee's camp on 'Lazy Tom' before we sleep," said the guide. "There'll be something to eat there. There may be news. We've got to do it!" And they plodded on wearily over the ledges and down the west descent.

They made the last two miles by the light of their lantern, dragging their snow-shoes, one over the other, with the listlessness of exhaustion. The cook of Withee's camp stared at them when they stumbled in at the door of his little domain, their snow-shoes clattering on the floor. He was a sociable cook, and he remarked, cheerily, "Well, gents, I'm glad to see that you seem to be lookin' for a hotel instead of a horsepittle."

Not understanding him, they bent to untie the latches of their shoes without reply.

"T'other one is in the horsepittle," said the cook, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of his bunk in the lean-to. "He was brought in. I've been lookin' for something of the sort ever since he skipped from the Jerusalem station. Lunatics ain't fit to fool 'round in the woods," he rambled on.

"Who've you got in there?" demanded Christopher, snapping up from his fumbling at the rawhide strings.

"Old 'Ladder' Lane," replied the cook, calmly. "Murphy's down-toter brought him here just before dark. He's pretty bad. Froze up considerable. Toter heard him hootin' out in the swirl of snow on the Dickery pond and toled him ashore by hootin' back at him. No business tryin' to cross a pond on a day like this! 'Tain't safe for a young man with all his wits, let alone an old man who has beat himself all out slam-bangin' round these woods this winter.

[Pg 268]

"Yes, he's pretty bad. Done what I could for him, me and cookee, by rubbin' on snow and ladlin' ginger-tea into him, but when it come to supper-time them nail-kags of mine had to be 'tended to, and here's bread to mix for to-morrow mornin'. We don't advertise a horsepittle, gents, but you wait a minute and I'll scratch *you* up somethin' for supper. The horsepittle will have to run itself for a little while."

Wade and the old man stared at each other stupidly while the cook bustled about his task. For the moment their thoughts were too busy for words. Even Christopher's whitening face showed the fear that had come upon him.

"Guess old Lane was comin' out to get a letter onto the tote team," gossiped the cook. "I was lookin' through his coat after I got it off and found that one up there."

He nodded at a grimy epistle stuck in a crevice of the log, and went down into a barrel after doughnuts which he piled on a tin plate.

Noiselessly Christopher strode to the log and took down the letter and stared at the superscription, and without a word displayed the writing to Wade. It was addressed to John Barrett at his city address.

The cook was busy at the table.

"By Cephas, this is *our* business!" muttered the old man. And, turning his back on the cook, he ripped open the envelope. On a wrinkled leaf torn from an account-book was pencilled this message:

"You stole my wife. I've got your daughter. Now, damn you, crawl and beg!"

[Pg 269]

"Look here, cook," called Straight, sharply, "there's bad business mixed up with Lane. Don't ask me no questions." He flapped the open letter into the astonished face of the man to check his words. "We've got to speak to Lane, and speak mighty quick."

"He was in a sog when I put him to bed," said the cook. "Didn't know what, who, or where. They

say lunatics want to be woke up careful. You let me go." He took a doughnut from the plate and started for the lean-to, grinning back over his shoulder. "He may be ready to set up, take notice, and brace himself with a doughnut."

The two men waited, eager, silent, hoping, fearing—each framing such appeal as might touch the heart of this revengeful maniac.

They heard the cook utter a snort of surprise; then they saw the flame of a match shielded by his palm. A moment later he came out and stood looking at them with a singularly sheepish expression.

"Gents," he blurted, "I'll be cussed if the joke ain't on me this time! I went in there to give the horsepittle patient a fresh-laid doughnut to revive his droopin' heart, and—"

"Is that man gone?" bawled Christopher, reaching for his snow-shoes.

"Yes," said the cook, grimly; "but you can't chase him on snow—not where he's gone. He's deader'n the door-knob on a hearse-house door."

CHAPTER XXII

[Pg 270]

THE HOSTAGE OF THE GREAT WHITE SILENCE

"Round the bellowin' falls of Abol we lugged him
through the brush,
And Death had marked his forehead: 'To a Woman.
Kindly Rush!'"



When Christopher and Wade started up and hurried into the lean-to, the cook of the "Lazy Tom" camp went ahead carrying a lamp to light the place whose rude interior had so suddenly been made mystic by death.

"Yes, s'r," says I to him," he repeated, with queer, bewildered, hysterical sort of chuckle. "I says to him, jolly as a chipmunk in a beech-nut tree, I says, 'Set up and have a doughnut all fresh laid,' and I'll be bunga-nucked if he wa'n't dead! And that's a joke on me, all right!"

He held the lamp over the features of old "Ladder" Lane, and Dwight Wade and Christopher Straight bent and peered.

"Look; if he ain't grinnin'!" whispered the cook, huskily. For one horrid moment it seemed to Wade that the fixed grimace of the death-mask expressed hideous mirth. The scrawl that the young man still clutched in his fist held the words that the dead lips seemed to be mouthing: "You stole my wife. I've got your daughter. Now, damn you, crawl and beg!" And at the thought of Elva Barrett, hidden, lost—worse than lost—somewhere in that great silence about them, Wade's agony and anger found vent in the oath that he groaned above the dead man, who seemed to lie there and mock him.

[Pg 271]

But Christopher Straight gently laid his seamed hand on the shaggy fringe of the gray poll.

"It was a hot fire that burned in there, poor old fellow," he murmured. "And those that knew you can't be sorry that it's gone out."

He pressed his hand up under the hanging jaw, and smoothed down the half-opened eyelids. And when he stepped back, after his sad and kindly offices, the old man's face was composed; it was the worn, wasted face of an old man who had suffered much; grief, hardship, hunger, and all human misery were writ large there in pitiful characters, in hollow temple, sunken cheeks, pinched nostrils, and lips drawn as one draws them after a bitter sob. And over its misery, after a long look of honest grief, the old woodsman drew up the edge of the bunk's worn gray blanket, muttering as soothingly as though he were comforting a sick man: "Take your rest, old fellow! There's a long night ahead of you."

With bowed head Wade led the way into the main camp. He stumbled along blindly, for the sudden tears were hot in his eyes. He regretted that instant of anger as a profanation that even his harrowing fears for Elva Barrett could not excuse. For Linus Lane, lying there dead, he reflected, was the spoil of the lust of Elva Barrett's father, as his peace of mind and his sanity had been playthings of John Barrett's contemptuous indifference; and who was he, Dwight Wade, that he should sit in judgment, even though his heart were bursting with the agony of his fears?

"In the woods a tree falls the way of the axe-scarf, Mr. Wade," said old Christopher, patting his shoulder. "John Barrett felled that one in there, and he and his got in the way of it. Don't blame the tree, but the man that chopped it."

[Pg 272]

"Where is she, Christopher? What has he done with her?" demanded the young man, hoarsely. He did not look up. His eyes were full. He was trying to unfold the scrap of paper, but his fingers trembled so violently that he tore it.

They had not marked the hasty exit of the cook. But his return broke in upon the long hush that had fallen between Wade and the woodsman. He was bringing Barnum Withee, operator on "Lazy Tom," and his chopping-boss, and the men of "Lazy Tom" came streaming behind, moved by curiosity.

"And I says to him—and these gents here will tell you the same—I says, 'Set up and have a fresh-laid doughnut!'" babbled the cook, retailing his worn story over and over.

"I didn't know you were here," said the hospitable head of the camp, "till cook passed it to me along with the other news, that poor Lane had parted his snub-line. I looked him over when he was brought in, but I didn't see any chance for him." And after inviting them to eat and make "their bigness" in the office camp, he went on into the lean-to.

"Put on your cap, boy!" said old Christopher, touching Wade's elbow. The grumble of many voices, the crowd slowly jostling into the camp, the half-jocose comments on "Ladder" Lane disturbed and distressed Christopher, and he realized that the young man was suffering acutely from a bitter cause. "Come out with me for a little while."

The wind had lulled. The heavens were clear. The Milky Way glowed with dazzling sheen above the forest's nicking, where the main road led. Wherever the eye found interstice between the fronds of spruce and hemlock the stars spangled the frosty blue. There was a hush so profound that a listener heard the pulsing of his blood. And yet there was something over all that was not silence, nor yet a sound, but a rhythmical, slow respiration, as though the world breathed and one heard it, and, hearing it, could believe that nature was mortal—friend or kin.

[Pg 273]

Christopher walked to the first turn of the logging-road, and the young man followed him; and when the trees had shut from sight the snow-heaped roofs and the yellow lights and all sign of human neighbors, Christopher stopped, leaned against a tree, and gazed up at the sparkling heavens.

"I reckoned your feelings was gettin' away from you a bit, Mr. Wade," said the old man, quietly, "and I thought we'd step out for a while where we can sort of get a grip on somethin' stationary, as you might say. In time of deep trouble, when they happen to be round, a chap feels inclined to grab holt of poor human critters, but they ain't much of a prop to hang to. Not when there's the big woods!"

"The big woods have got her, Christopher," choked the young man, despairingly. "And I'm afraid!"

"The big woods look savagest to you when you're peekin' into them from a camp window in the night," declared the old man. "But when you're right in 'em, like we are now, they ain't anything but friendly. Look around you! Listen! There's nothing to be afraid of. Let the big woods talk to you a moment, my boy. Forget there are men for just a little while. I've let the woods talk to me in some of the sore times in my life, and they've always comforted me when I really set myself to listen."

"My God, I can only hear the words that are written on this scrap of paper!" cried Wade. He shook "Ladder" Lane's crumpled letter before the woodsman's face, and Christopher quietly reached for it, took it, and tore it up.

[Pg 274]

"When a paper talks louder than the good old woods talk, it's time to get rid of it," he remarked, and tossed the bits over the snow.

"I ain't goin' to tell you not to worry," Christopher went on, after a time. "I'm no fool, and you're no fool. It's a hard proposition, Mr. Wade. A lunatic whirling in a snow-cloud like a leaf, round and round, and then driftin' out, and no way in the world of tellin' where he came from! And there's some one—off that way he came from—that you want terrible bad! Yet even that lunatic's tracks have been patted smooth by the wind. It's no time to talk to human critters, Mr. Wade. It would be 'Run this way and run that!' Let the woods talk to you! They've been wrastlin' the big winds all day. They'll probably have to wrastle 'em again to-morrow. And they'll be ready for the fight. Hear 'em sleep? The same for you and for me, Mr. Wade. Go in and sleep, and be ready for what comes to-morrow."

He walked ahead, leading the way back to camp, and Wade followed, every aching muscle crying for rest, though his heart, aching more poignantly, called on him to plunge into the forest in search of the helpless hostage the woods were hiding.

It is not in the nature of woodsmen to pry into another's reason for this or that. Barnum Withee gave Christopher Straight a chance to tell why he and his employer were so far off the Enchanted operation; but when Christopher Straight smoked on without explaining, Barnum Withee smoked on without asking questions. In one of the dim bunks of the wangan Wade breathed stertorously, drugged with nature's opiate of utter weariness. And after listening a moment with an air of relief, Christopher broke upon Withee's meditations.

"Was you tellin' me where Lane has been makin' his headquarters since he skipped the fire station?" he inquired, innocently.

[Pg 275]

"I was thinkin' about him, too," returned Withee, promptly. "Headquarters! Does an Injun devil with a steel trap on his tail have headquarters while he's runnin' and yowlin'? Whether he's been in the air or in a hole since he went out of his head, time of the fire, I don't know. Eye ain't been

laid on him till he come out of that snow-squall, walkin' like an icicle and hootin' like a barn owl."

"Heard of any goods bein' missed from any depot camps?" pursued the woodsman, shrewdly. "That might tell where he's been hangin' out."

"No," said the operator, suddenly brusque. Then he looked up from the sliver that he had been whittling absent-mindedly, and fixed keen eye on Straight. "Say, look here, Chris, if you and your young friend are over here huntin' for Lane, or for any documents or papers or evidence to make more trouble for Honorable John Barrett, I've got to tell you that you can't ring me in. Honorable Barrett and me has fixed!"

"I reckoned you would," said Christopher. "Stumpage kings usually get their own way."

"Well, it's different in this case," declared the operator, triumphantly, "and when I've been used square I cal'late to use the other fellow square, and that's why I'm tellin' you, so that you won't make any mistakes about how I feel towards Mr. Barrett. I don't approve of any move to hector him about that Lane matter. He says to me at Castonia—"

"When?"

"No longer ago than yesterday. I came through from down-river with two new teamsters and a saw-filer, and hearin' Mr. Barrett was able to set up and talk a little business for the first time, I stepped into Rod Ide's house, and we fixed. He threwed off all claims for extry stumpage and damages on Square-hole. And when a man gives me more than I expect, that fixes me with him."

[Pg 276]

"Ought to, for sartin," agreed Christopher. "Change of heart in him, or because you knowed about the Lane case?" The tone was rather satirical, and Withee flushed under his tan.

"You don't think I went to a sick man's bedside and blackmailed him, do you, like some—"

"Friend Barn," broke in the old woodsman, quietly, "don't slip out any slur that you'll wish you hadn't."

"Well," growled the operator, "it may be that 'Stumpage John' Barrett ain't always set a model for a Sunday-school, but if I had as pretty a daughter as that one that was settin' in his room with him, and as nice a girl as she seems to be, though of course she didn't stoop to talk to a grizzly looservee like me, I'd hate to have an old dead and decayed scandal dug up in these woods, and dragged out and dumped over my front-yard fence in the city!"

And Christopher remembered what he had remarked on one occasion to Dwight Wade, when they had seen the waif of the Skeet tribe on Misery Gore, and now he half chuckled as he squinted at Withee and muttered in his beard, "Lots of folks don't recognize white birch when it's polished and set up in a parlor."

"What say?" demanded the operator, suspiciously.

"I'm so sleepy I'm dreamin' out loud," explained Christopher, blandly, "and I'm goin' to turn in." And he sighed to himself as he rolled in upon the fir boughs and pulled the spread about his ears. "There's some feller said that good counsel cometh in the morning. Mebbe so—mebbe so! But it will have to be me and the boy here for the job, because old Dan'l Webster, with all his flow of language, couldn't convince Barn Withee now that it's John Barrett's daughter that is lost in the woods. I know now why something told me to go slow on the hue and cry."

[Pg 277]

CHAPTER XXIII

[Pg 278]

IN THE MATTER OF JOHN BARRETT'S DAUGHTER

"Warmth and comfort? Ay, all these
Under the arch of the great spruce
trees;
But our cup o' content holds naught
but foam!—
No woman's hand to make a home."



Wade did not wake when the cook's wailing hoot called the camp in the morning. It was black darkness still. He slept through all the clatter of tin dishes, the jangle of bind-chains as the sleds started, the yowl of runners on the dry snow, and the creaking of departing footsteps. The sun quivered in his eyes when he rolled in the bunk at touch of old Christopher's hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, but you needed it all, my boy!" protested the woodsman, checking the young man's peevish regrets that he had slept so long. "Come to breakfast."

Barnum Withee had eaten with his men, but he was waiting in solitary state in the cook camp, smoking his pipe, and moodily rapping the horn handle of a case-knife on the table.

"Law says," he remarked to his guests, continuing aloud his meditations, "that employer shall send out remains of them that die in camp. But I ain't employer in this case, and I'm short of

hosses, anyway, and the tote team only came in yesterday, and ain't due to go out again for a week."

"It makes a lot of trouble, old critters dyin' that ain't got friends," observed Christopher, spooning out beans. [Pg 279]

"You may mean that sarcastic, but it's the truth just the same," retorted Withee. "He ain't northin' to me. What I was thinkin' of, if you were bound out—"

"Ain't goin' that way," said the woodsman, giving Wade a significant glance.

"Well, from what things you let drop last night," grumbled the operator, "I figured that you were more or less interested in old Lane, and perhaps were lookin' him up for somethin', and if so you ought to be willin' to help get him out and buried in a cemetery. He ain't a friend of mine and never was, and it ain't square to have the whole thing dumped onto me."

Wade, his heart made tender by his own grief, gazed towards the lonesome isolation of the lean-to with moistening eyes. Alone, living; alone, dead! But Christopher put into cold phrase the burning fact they had to face.

"We've got business of our own for to-day, Barnum, and mighty important business, too."

And pulling their caps about their ears, and tugging their moose-sled, they set away, up the tote road to the north, leaving Barnum Withee not wholly easy in his mind regarding their motives.

It was from the snow-swirl on Dickery Pond that "Ladder" Lane had emerged, even then death-struck. It was straight to Dickery that Christopher led the way, and two hours' steady trudging brought them there.

"So it was from off there he came," muttered the woodsman, blinking into the glare of the snow crystals on its broad surface. "But where, in God's name, he came from it ain't in me to say!"

It was one of those still winter days when even the wind seems to be bound by the hard frost. The sliding snow-shoes shrieked as shrilly with the sun high as they had in the early morning. There was no hint of melting. [Pg 280]

"There are five old operations around this pond, and a set of empty camps on each one," said Straight. "I've been to each one of them in times past, and I know where the main roads come out to the landings. But it's slow business, takin' 'em one after the other. Perhaps we ought to go back and beat the truth of this thing into Barnum Withee's thick head, and start the hue and cry—but—but—I'd hoped to do it some better way."

"Straight," panted the young man, "it's getting to be perfectly damnable, this suspense! Let's do something, if it's only to run up the middle of that pond and shout!"

"Well," snorted the old guide, irrelevantly, "I've been lookin' for old Red Fins to come along for two days now, and I ain't disappointed. If there's trouble anywhere in this section, old Eli has got a smeller that leads him to it." Wade whirled from his despairing survey of the pond and saw Prophet Eli. He was coming down the tote road on his "ding-swingle," urging on his little white stallion with loose, clapping reins. Huge mittens of vivid red encased his hands, and his conical, knitted cap was red, and was pulled down over his ears like a candle-snuffer.

Wade felt a queer little thrill of superstition as he looked at him, and then sneered at himself as one who was allowing good wit to be infected by the idle follies of the woods. And yet there was something eerie in the way this bizarre old wanderer turned up now, as he had appeared twice before at times that meant so much, at moments so crucial, in Wade's woods life.

Prophet Eli swung up to them, halted, and peered at them curiously out of his little eyes.

"Green, blue, and yellow," he blurted, patting his much-variegated wool jacket. "And red! Red mittens good for the arterial blood. Why don't you wear them?" [Pg 281]

"Say, look here, prophet—" began Christopher, blandly respectful.

"Green is nature's color. Calms the nerves. Blue, electricity for the system—got a stripe of it all up and down my backbone. Good for you. Ought to wear it. Yellow, kidneys and cathartic. You'd rather be sick, eh? Be sick. Clek-clek!" He clucked his tongue and clapped his reins. But Christopher grabbed at the stallion's headstall and checked him.

"I believe the idea is all c'rect, prophet, and I'll use it, and I'll try to make it right with you. But just now I'm wantin' a little information, and I'll make it right with you for that, too. You're sky-hootin' round these woods all the time. Now, where's Lane been makin' his headquarters?—you ought to know!"

"What do you want him for? State-prison or insane asylum?" snapped the prophet.

"I don't want him," said the woodsman, solemnly. "He's spoken for, Eli. He's down there, dead, in Barn Withee's camps."

The little gray eyes blinked quickly. What that emotion was, one could not guess. For the voice of the prophet did not waver in its brisk staccato. "Dead, eh? Hate-bug crawled into him and did it. I told him to stay in the woods and the hate-bugs couldn't get him. Told him twenty years ago. But he wasn't careful. Let the hate-bug get him at last. Dead, eh? I'll go and get him."

"Get him?" echoed Christopher.

"Promised to bury him," explained the prophet, promptly. "Wanted to be buried off alone, just as he lived. Rocks for a pillow. Expects to rest easy. I helped him dig his grave and lay out the rocks a long time ago. And I'll tell no one the place—no, sir."

"Well, that lets Withee out of trouble and expense," said the woodsman, "and you'll get a good reception down that way. Now, prophet, where's he been hiding? You know, probably. It's important, I tell you." The old man had struck his stallion, and the animal was trying to get away. But Christopher held on grimly.

[Pg 282]

"You call yourself a good woodsman?" squealed the indignant Eli.

"I reckon I'll average well."

"If any one wants anything of 'Ladder' Lane now," cried the prophet, "it must be for something that he's left behind him! Left behind him!" he repeated. He stood up on the "ding-swingle," and ran his keen gaze about the ridges that circled the lake.

"Was it something that could build a fire?" he demanded, sharply. Christopher, in no mood for confidences, stared at the peppery old man. "You call yourself a good woodsman, and don't know what it means to see that!" He pointed his whip at a thin trail of white smoke that mounted, as tenuous almost as a thread, above the distant shore of Dickery Pond. "No lumbermen operating there for three years, and you see that, and are lookin' for something, and don't go and find out! And you call yourself a woodsman!" Without further word or look he lashed the stallion; the animal broke away with a squeal, and Prophet Eli's "ding-swingle" disappeared down the tote road in a swirl of snow.

"No, I ain't a woodsman!" snorted Christopher. He started away across the pond at a pace that left Wade breath only for effort and not for questions. "I ain't a woodsman. Standin' here and not seein' that smoke! Not seein' it, and guessin' what it must mean! I ain't a woodsman!" Over and over he muttered his bitter complaints at himself in disjointed sentences. "I'm gettin' old. I must be blind. A lunatic can tell me my business." His anger rowelled him on, and when he reached the opposite shore of the lake he was obliged to wait for the younger man to come floundering and panting up to him.

[Pg 283]

"I don't feel just like talkin' now, Mr. Wade," he said, gruffly. "I don't feel as though I knew enough to talk to any one over ten years old." He strode on, tugging the sled.

An abandoned main logging-road, well grown to leafless moose-wood and witch-hobble, led them up from the lake. Christopher did not have to search the skies for the smoke. His first sight of it had betrayed the camp's location. He knew the roads that led to it. And in the end they came upon it, though it seemed to Wade that the road had set itself to twist eternally through copses and up and down the hemlock benches.

The camps were cheerless, the doors of main camp, cook camp, and hovel were open, and the snow had drifted in. But from the battered funnel of the office camp came that trail of smoke, reaching straight up. Crowding close to the funnel for warmth, and nestled in the space that the heat had made in the snow, crouched a creature that Wade recognized as "Ladder" Lane's tame bobcat. This, then, was "Ladder" Lane's retreat. Inside there—the young man's knees trembled, and there was a gripping at his throat, dry and aching from his frantic pursuit of his grim guide.

"Mr. Wade," said Christopher, halting, "I reckon she's there, and that she's all right. I'll let you go ahead. She knows you. I don't need to advise you to go careful."

And Wade went, tottering across the unmarked expanse of snow, the pure carpet nature had laid between him and the altar of his love—an altar within log walls, an altar whose fires were tended by—He pushed open the door! Foolish Abe was kneeling by the hearth of the rusty Franklin stove. And even as he had been toiling on Enchanted, so here he was whittling, whittling unceasingly, piling the heaps of shavings upon the fire—unconscious signaller of the hiding-place of Elva Barrett.

[Pg 284]

For a moment Wade stood holding by the sides of the door, staring into the gloom of the camp, for his eyes were as yet blinded by the glare of out-doors.

And then he saw her. Her white face was peering out of the dimness of a bunk. Plainly she had withdrawn herself there like some cowering creature, awaiting a fate she could not understand or anticipate. One could see that those eyes, wide-set and full of horror, had been strained on that uncouth, hairy creature at the hearth during long and dreadful suspense.

Through all that desperate search, in hunger, weariness, and despair, he had forgotten John Barrett, contemptuous millionaire; he remembered that John Barrett's daughter Elva had confessed once that she returned his love, and he had thought that when they met again, this time outside the trammels of town and in the saner atmosphere of the big woods, she might understand him better—understand him well enough to know that John Barrett lied when he made honest love contemptible by his sneers about "fortune-seekers." They were all very chaotic, his thoughts, to be sure, but he had believed that the ground on which they would meet would be that common level of honest, human hearts, where they could stand, eye to eye, hands clasping hands, and love frankly answering love.

But love that casts all to the winds, love that forgets tact, prudence, delicacy, love without premeditation or after-thought, is not the love that is ingrained in New England character. She gazed at him at first, not comprehending—her fears still blinding her—and he paused to murmur words of pity and reassurance.

And then Yankee prudence, given its opportunity to whisper, told him that to act the precipitate lover now would be to take advantage of her weakness, her helplessness, her gratitude. If he took this first chance to woo her, demanding, as it were, that she disobey her father's commands, and putting a price on the service that he was rendering her, might her good sense not suggest that, after all, he was a sneak rather than a man?

[Pg 285]

They call the New England character of the old bed-rock sort hard and selfish. It is rather acute sensitiveness, timorous even to concealment.

And in the end Dwight Wade, faltering banal words of pity for her plight, went to her outwardly calm. And she, her soul still too full of the horror of her experience to let her heart speak what it felt, took his hands and came out upon the rough floor.

The shaggy giant squatting by the hearth bent meek and humid eyes on the young man. "Me do it—me do it as you told!" he protested. He patted his hand on the shavings. He was referring to the task to which Wade had set him on Enchanted. To the girl it sounded like the confession of an understanding between this unspeakable creature and her rescuer. Wade, eager only to soothe, protested guilelessly, when she shrank back, that the man was not the ogre he seemed, but a harmless, simple fellow whom he had been sheltering and feeding at his own camp. And then, by the way she stared at him, he realized the chance for a horrible suspicion.

"I don't understand," she moaned. "It's like a dreadful dream. There was an old man who sat here and muttered and raved about my father! And this—this"—she faltered, shrinking farther from Abe—"who brought me here in his arms! And you say he came from your camp! Oh, these woods—these terrible woods! Take me away from them! I am afraid!"

She dropped the shrouding blanket from her shoulders, and he saw her now in the garb of the waif of the Skeets. And under his scrutiny he saw color in her cheeks for the first time, replacing the pallor of distress.

[Pg 286]

"I had thought there was excuse for this folly—reason for it. I thought it was my duty to—" She faltered, then set her teeth upon her lower lip, and turned away from him. "Oh, take me away from these woods! Something—I do not know—something has bewitched me—made me forget myself—sent me on a fool's errand! The woods—I'm afraid of them, Mr. Wade!"

It came to him with a pang that the woods were not offering to his love the common ground of sincerity that he had dreamed of. Elva Barrett, ashamed of her weakness, would not remember generously an attempt to take advantage of her distress when every bulwark of reserve lay in ruins about her, and he felt afraid of his burning desire to take her in his arms and comfort her. Thus self-convinced, he failed to realize that the girl with her bitter words was merely striving, blindly and innocently, to be convinced—and convinced from his own mouth—that she had been wise in her folly, devoted in her mission, and honest in the love that had found such heroic expression in her adventuring.

She looked at him, and saw in his face only the struggle of doubt and hopelessness and fear, and misinterpreted. "You know what the woods have done to make shame and wretchedness, Mr. Wade!" she cried, a flash of her old spirit coming into her eyes. "Men who have been honest with the world outside and honest with themselves have forgotten all honesty behind the screen of these savage woods."

Her cheeks were burning now. She drew the blanket over herself, hugging its edges close in front, covering the attire she wore as though it were nakedness. And in that bitter moment it was nakedness—for the garb she had borrowed from Kate Arden symbolized for her and for him a father's guilty secret laid bare.

[Pg 287]

"Take me away from the woods!" she gasped.

The look that passed between them was speech unutterable. He had no words for her then. In silence he made the long sledge ready for her. Christopher helped him, silent with the reticence of the woodsman. If he had even glanced at Elva Barrett no bystander could have detected that glance. There were thick camp spreads on the sled. Christopher's thoughtfulness had provided them, and when they had been wrapped about her the two men set away, each with hand on the sled-rope.

"We'll go the short way back to Enchanted," said the old guide, answering Wade's glance. "Back across Dickery, up the tote road, and follow the Cameron and Telos roads. It will dodge all camps, and keep us away from foolish questions. I've got enough in my pack from Withee's camp for us to eat."

Abe floundered behind, keeping them in sight with the pertinacity of a dog, and he ate the bread that Straight threw to him with a dog's mute gratitude.

Only the desperation of men utterly resolved could have accomplished the journey they set before them. The girl rode, a silent, shrouded figure; the men strode ahead, silent; Abe struggled on behind, ploughing the snow with dragging feet. When the night fell they went on by the lantern's

light.

It was long after midnight when they came at last to the Enchanted camps, walking like automatons and almost senseless with fatigue. Wade lifted the girl from the sled when they halted in front of the wangan. Her stiffened and cramped limbs would not move of themselves. And when she was on her feet, and staggered, he kept his arm about her, gently and unobtrusively.

"This is the best home I have to offer you," he said. "Nina Ide is here waiting. We will wake her, and she will do for you what should be done. Oh, that sounds cold and formal, I know—but the poor girl waiting in there will put into words all the joy I feel but can't speak. My head is pretty light, and my heels heavy, and I don't seem to be thinking very clearly, Miss Barrett," he murmured, his voice weak with pathetic weariness.

[Pg 288]

She was struggling with sobs, striving to speak; but he hastened on, as though at last his full heart found words.

"This is—this—I hardly know how to say this. But I understand why you came." He felt her tremble. "But, my God, Elva, I don't dare to believe that you thought so ill of me that you were coming to plead with me for your father's sake." It was not resentment, it was passionate grief that burst from him, and she put her hands about his arm.

"I told you it was folly that sent me," she sobbed. "But he had been unjust to you, Dwight. Oh, it was folly that sent me, but I wanted to know if you—if you—" She was silent and trembled, and when she did not speak he clasped her close, trembling as pitifully as she.

"Oh, if you only dared say that you wanted to know whether I still loved you!" he breathed, in a broken whisper. "And I would say—"

It seemed that his heart came into his throat, for her fingers pressed more closely upon his arm. In that instant he could not speak. He pretended to look for Christopher, but that wise woodsman's tact did not fail. He saw Christopher disappearing into the gloom of the dingle, and heard the careful lisp of the wooden latch in its socket and the cautious creak of the closing door. There was only the hush of the still night about him, and when he turned again the starlight was shining on Elva Barrett's upraised face. And her dark eyes were imperiously demanding that he finish his sentence—so imperiously that his tongue burst all the shackles of his sensitive prudence.

[Pg 289]

"And I would say that my love is so far above the mean things of the world that they can't make it waver, and it is so unselfish that I can love you the more because you love your father and obey him. And all I ask is that you don't misunderstand me." There was deep meaning in his tones.

"Oh Dwight, my boy," she moaned, "it's an awful thing for a daughter to disobey her father. But it's more awful when she finds that he—" But he put his fingers tenderly on her lips, and when she kissed them, tears coursing on her cheeks, he gathered her close, and his lips did the service that his fingers retired from in tremulous haste.

"My little girl," he said, softly, "keep that story off your lips. It is too hard, too bitter. I may have said cruel things to your father. He may tell you they were cruel. But remember that she had your eyes and your face—that poor girl I found in the woods. And before God, if not before men, she is your sister. And so I gave of my heart and my strength to help her. And I know your heart so well, Elva, that I leave it all to you. It's better to be ashamed than to be unjust."

"She *is* my sister," she answered, simply, but with earnestness there was no mistaking. "And you may leave it all in my hands."

Then fearfully, anxiously, grief and shame at shattered faith in a father showing in the face she lifted to him, she asked:

"It was he, was it not—the old man that took me away and sat before me and cursed me? He was her—her husband?"

His look replied to her. Then he said, soothingly: "It was not in our hands, dear. But that which is in our hands let us do as best we can, and so"—he kissed her, this time not as the lover, but as the faithful, earnest, consoling friend—"and so—to sleep! The morning's almost here, and it will bring a brighter day."

[Pg 290]

She drew his head down and pressed her lips to his forehead.

"True knighthood has come again," she murmured. "And my knight has taken me from the enchanted forest, and has shown me his heart—and the last was best."

Still clasping her, he shook the door and called to the girl within; and when she came, crying eager questions, he put Elva Barrett into her arms and left them together.

As he walked away from the shadow of the camp into the shimmer of the starlight he felt the wine of love coursing his veins. His muscles ached, weariness clogged his heels, but his eyes were wide-propped and his ears hummed as with a sound of distant music. His thoughts seemed too sacred to be taken just then into the company of other men. He dreaded to go inside out of the radiance of the night. He turned from the door of the main camp when his hand was fumbling

for the latch, pulled his cap over his ears, and began a slow patrol on the glistening stretch of road before the wangan. The crisp snow sang like fairy bells under his feet. Orion dipped to the west, and the morning stars paled slowly as the flush crept up from the east. And still he walked and dreamed and gazed over the sombre obstacles near at hand in his life into the radiance of promise, even as he looked over the black spruces into the faint roses of the dawn.

Tommy Eye, teamster, stumbling towards the hovel for the early foddering, came upon him, and stopped and stared in utter amazement. He came close to make sure that the eerie light of the morning was not playing him false. Wade's cheerful greeting seemed to perplex him.

[Pg 291]

"It isn't a ha'nt, Tommy," said the young man, smiling on him.

"I have said all along as how it had got you," declared Tommy, with ingenuous disappointment, looking Wade up and down for marks of conflict. "But it may be that the ha'n'ts want only woods folk and are afraid of book-learnin'! So you're back, and the girl ain't, nor Christopher, nor—"

"We're all back," explained Wade, calculating on Tommy's news-mongering ability to relieve him of the need of circulating information. "We found the—the one that was lost. That was all! She was lost, and we found her, and we even found Foolish Abe, and he came back with us last night. There was no mystery, Tommy. They were simply lost, and we found them. They're asleep."

Tommy fingered the wrinkled skin of his neck and stared dubiously at Wade.

"You'll see Abe whittling shavings just the same as usual this morning," added the young man. "By-the-way, you and he may be interested to know that Lane, the old fire warden, died at Withee's camp the other day." For reasons of his own Wade did not care to make either the news of the rescue or its place too definite.

"Then," declared Tommy, hanging grimly to the last prop left in his theory, "that accounts for it. 'Ladder' Lane is dead, and has turned into a ha'nt. It was him that called out the fool. And he'll be making more trouble yet. You'd better send for Prophet Eli, Mr. Wade, because the prophet is a charmer-man and can take care of old Lane."

"He has taken care of him already," said the young man. "We saw Prophet Eli, and he started right away to attend to the case." And Tommy's face displayed such eminent satisfaction that Wade had not the heart to destroy the man's belief that his book-learned boss had adopted a part of the woods creed of the supernatural. It was a day on which he felt very gentle towards the dreams of other persons, for his own beautiful dream shed its radiance on all men and all of life.

[Pg 292]

That she was there, safe, brought by amazing circumstances into the depths of the woods, and under his protection, seemed like a vision of the night as he walked back and forth and watched the morning grow.

When the sun was high and the men had been gone for hours, he put his dream to the test. He rapped gently on the wangan door, and her voice, a very real and loving voice, answered. With his own hands he brought food for the two girls and spread a cedar-splint table, and served them as they ate, and ministered in little ways, through the hours of the day, and watched Elva's pallor and weariness give way before tenderness and love. With the poor shifts of a lumber-camp he, not intending it, taught her heart the lesson that love is independent of its housing.

He rode with them on the tote team to the northern jaws of Pogey Notch the next day, and sent them on, nestled in a bower of blankets. There had been no further word between them of the great thing that had come into their lives. They tacitly and joyously accepted it all, and left the solution of its problem to saner and happier days. But the face that she turned back to him as she rode away under the frowning rocks was a glowing promise of all he asked of life. And as he plodded back up the trail he went to his toil with tingling muscles and a triumphant soul.

CHAPTER XXIV

[Pg 293]

THE CHEESE RIND THAT NEEDED SHARP TEETH

"So, mister, please excuse us, but you open up that sluice,
Or Gawd have mercy on ye, if I turn these gents here loose!"

—The Rapogenus Ball.



odburd Ide, fresh-arrived from Castonia in hot haste, saw well to it that he and Dwight Wade were safe from interruption in the wangan camp. He even drove a sliver from the wood-box over the latch of the door. Wade, summoned down from the chopping by a breathless cookee to meet his partner, gazed upon these nervous, eager precautions in some alarm.

"Now, brace your feet, and get hold of something and hang on hard," advised the "Mayor of Castonia."

"Good Heavens, Mr. Ide, what has happened to her?" gasped the young man. His trembling hands clutched at the edge of the splint table, hallowed by Elva Barrett's smiles of love across it.

"Her!" snorted the little man, in indignant astonishment. "You don't think I've whaled up here hell-ti-larrup on a jumper to sit down and talk about women, do you?"

"But Miss Barrett—" gulped Wade.

"Miss Barrett—" Ide checked himself, discreet even in his impatience. "Miss Barrett is all right, and the girl is all right, and—say, look-a-here, my boy, don't you think of a girl, don't you look at a girl, don't you even dream of a girl, for the next two months!" He drove his hard little fist upon the sacred table. [Pg 294]

He leaned forward, and his very beard bristled at the young man. "Forget your mother, forget your grandmother, forget that there is anything to you except grit and muscle. For if ever two men had a man's work cut out for 'em we're the ones. If ever two men found themselves on the outside of a ripe cheese and needed teeth to gnaw in, we're the men. Money! I can't see anything but dollar bills hangin' from those spruce-trees. But you've got to put on brad-boots and climb to get them. You've got to walk over men to get 'em!" He was striding about the little room. "I reckon I seem a little excited," he added, with a catch in his voice. "But by the priest that hammered the tail for the golden calf, I've got reasons to be excited. I've smelt it comin' for two years, son! I 'ain't said anything. I didn't say anything to you when I took you into partnership; I didn't dare to. But I smelt it all the time. I 'ain't watched the comin's and goin's of certain men at Castonia for nothin'! Let 'em bring guns and fishin'-poles! They can't fool me. I smelt it comin'. And now, by —, it's come!" Again he banged his fist on the table and glared down on his partner.

The partner stared back at him with so much dismay and reproachful inquiry that Ide blew off his superfluous excitement in one vigorous "Poof!" and sat down.

"The sum and substance of it is, those old Hullin' Machine falls ain't goin' to bellow away all them thousands of hoss-power in empty noise any longer. But they've made a noise big enough to reach the crowd that's organized to fight the paper trust. See now?"

Wade's eyes gleamed in swift comprehension.

"The independents are goin' to develop that power. They're goin' to build the biggest paper-mill in the world there. They're goin' to extend the railroad up to Castonia. They're goin' to do it all on an old charter that every one had forgotten except the lobby clique that put it through and has been holdin' it for speculation. And why I know it all and no one else knows it on the outside yet, my boy, is because they've had to come to *me!* They've *had* to come to *me!*" [Pg 295]

And he promptly answered the eager though mute inquiry in the young man's eyes.

"Every dollar that I could save, rake, and borrow for years I've been putting into shore rights and timber. What timber country I couldn't buy I've leased stumpage on. I've smelt it all comin'. And now they've had to come to me, Wade. They've bonded the shore rights for a purchase, and it's all settled."

"With all my heart I'm glad for you, Mr. Ide!" cried the young man, with a sincerity that put a quiver into his voice. And both hands seized the hands of the magnate of Castonia in a grip that brought gratified tears to the other's eyes.

"I know it has always been a surprise to you, Wade, that I was so ready and anxious to give you a lay on the timber end," the little man went on. "But I knew it was time to operate on these cuttin's this season. There are things you can't hire done with plain money. I wanted courage, grit, and honesty. Most of all, I needed absolute loyalty. There's been too much buyin' up of men in these woods. The old gang is a hard one to fight. I reckon I've got you with me."

"Heart, soul, and body, now as from the first, Mr. Ide."

"And the lay I've given you is the best investment I could have made," declared the partner. "I want you to feel that it is straight business. It was no gift. You're earnin' it. But the big bunch is ahead of you, boy!" His tone was serious.

"Your make will come out of the timber lay. I've said I smelt this comin'. If it hadn't come this year we should have sent our logs 'way down-river along with the rest, and done the best we could to steal a profit after Pulaski Britt and his gang had charged us all the tolls and fees they could think of, and made us accept their selling-scale. But now! But now!" His voice became tense, and he leaned forward and patted the young man's arm. "The Great Independent—and that's the name of the new organization, and it's a name that's goin' to roar like the Hullin' Machine in the ears of the trust—wants every log we can hand over to 'em this season. What they don't use in construction work and in their new saw-mill they'll pile to grind into pulp next year. [Pg 296]

"I've got their contract, Wade. Every log to be scaled for 'em on our landings! And I reckon that will be the first time a square selling-scale was ever made on this river. No Pirate Britt and his gang of boom-scale thieves for us this time! Every honest dollar we make will come to us. And there'll be a lot of 'em, son."

Wade, even though Rodburd Ide had so brusquely commanded him to forget his love, felt that love stirring in the thrill that animated him now. Did not success mean Elva Barrett? Did not fair

return from honest toil mean that he could face John Barrett, bulwarked by his millions? Forget his love? Ide couldn't understand. His love was a spur whose every thrust was delicious pain. But now that the great secret was out, Rodburd Ide's tide of enthusiasm seemed to be in somewhat ominous and depressing reflux.

He spread upon the splint table a lumberman's map, and his hands trembled as he did so.

"You've done as I told you, and only yarded at the ends of the twitch-roads, and haven't hauled to landings?" he inquired.

Wade nodded.

[Pg 297]

"I was waitin', I was waitin'," explained the other, nervously scrubbing his hand over the map. "If nothin' had happened at Umcolcus Hullin' Machine this year we'd have landed our logs on Enchanted Stream and run 'em down into Jerusalem, and taken our chances along with Britt's logs. 'Twas a hard outlook, Wade. The last time I dared to operate here I did that, and you'll find jill-pokes with my mark stranded all along the stream. The old pirate took my drive because he claimed control of the dams, charged me full fees, and left behind twenty-five per cent. of my logs, claiming that the water dropped on him. But I noticed he got all of his out. It's what we're up against, my son. If I'd tried to fight him with an independent drive he would have had me hornswoggled all the way to the down-river sortin'-boom, and then would have had my heart out on the scale. It's what we're up against!" he repeated, despondently. "There isn't any law to it. It's the hard fist that makes the right up this way. I'm tellin' you this so you can understand. You've got to understand, my boy. I wish it was different. I wish it was all square. I hate to do dirty things myself. I hate to ask others to do 'em."

It was not entirely a gaze of reassurance that the young man turned on him. Ide avoided it, and with stubby finger began to mark the map to illustrate his words. Wade leaned close. He realized that a new and grave aspect of the situation was to be revealed to him. Getting the timber down off the stumps had absorbed his attention utterly. As to getting it to market, he had been awaiting the word of his partner and mentor.

"Here it is!" growled Ide. "It's a picture of it! And if it ain't a good picture of the damnable reason why no one else but Pulaski Britt and his crowd can make a dollar on these waters, then I'm no judge. Here we are on Enchanted—mountain here and pond here! The dam at our pond will give us water enough to get us down to Britt's dam on Enchanted dead-water. Then we've got to deal with Britt. Law may be with us, but in dealin' with Britt up here in this section law is like a woodpecker tryin' to pull the teeth out of a cross-cut saw. Britt has got the foot of Enchanted Stream, and he controls Jerusalem Stream that gobbles Enchanted. That's our outlook to the east of us. Now to the west, and only two miles from our operation here, is Blunder Stream. Runs into Umcolcus main river, you see, like Jerusalem Stream away over here to the east. Straightaway run. Fed by Blunder Lake, up here ten miles to the north—that is, it ought to be fed! And it ought to be the stream to take our logs. But more than thirty years ago, without law or justice, Britt closed in the rightful western outlet of Blunder Lake with a big dam, and dug a canal from the eastern end to Jerusalem Stream, and every spring since then he's used the water for the Jerusalem drive. A half a dozen small operators have been to the legislature from time to time to get rights. Did they get 'em? Why, they didn't even get a decent look! Old King Spruce doesn't go to law or the legislature askin' for things. King Spruce takes them. Then the laborin' oar is with the chaps who try to take 'em away. Even if a thing is unrighteous, Wade, it doesn't stir much of a scandal in politics to keep it just as it is. It's what we're up against, I say!"

[Pg 298]

He held down the map, his finger on Enchanted, as though typifying the power that held them and their interests helpless. Wade gazed upon the finger-end. He felt it pressing upon his hopes. His brows wrinkled, but he said nothing.

"The Great Independents will make that name heard by the next legislature, I've no doubt," Ide went on, "but that's a year from now. In the mean time we've got five millions or so of timber here at this end, and its market and the money waitin' at the other end, which is Castonia. And there's another thing, Wade, and it's the biggest of all: we've got to hold our timber above the Hullin' Machine. Nature has fixed the place for us. There's the dead-water behind Hay Island. With Britt drivin' our logs, he'd ram 'em hell-whoopin' through the Hullin' Machine, and find an excuse for it, and then buy 'em in down-river at his own price. If we undertook to follow him down Enchanted and Jerusalem, he wouldn't leave enough water to drown a cat in. I'm taking the time to show you this thing as it stands, son. You've got to see all sides of it."

[Pg 299]

Ide's little gray eyes were gleaming at him, and the expression of his face showed that he was narrowing possibilities to one prospect, and was wondering whether his partner had grasped the full import of that prospect.

"I think I see all sides of it, Mr. Ide," he said, at last. Then he put his fingers on the thin thread that marked the course of Blunder Stream. "And the only side that doesn't hurt the eyes seems to be this side, west of Enchanted Mountain."

"Well, even then it depends on what kind of specs you've got on," returned Ide.

"Suppose we forget that dam at the west end of Blunder and Britt's canal to the east for just a moment, Mr. Ide. If we got our logs down the side of Enchanted Mountain and landed them on Blunder Stream we'd stand our only show of heading Britt's drive at the Hullin' Machine, wouldn't we?"

"You was reckonin' on havin' water under 'em, wasn't you?" inquired the little man, with good-natured satire. "Wasn't plannin' on havin' 'em walk like a caterpillar, nor fly down, nor anything of the sort?"

"I was reckoning on water," returned the young man, flushing slightly, "but I was not discussing Blunder Lake. I asked you to leave that out for a moment." [Pg 300]

"Leave out Blunder Lake, and you haven't got a brook that will float chips," said Ide. Then he jumped up and shot his fists above his head. "But with a drivin'-pitch in Blunder Stream we can have the head of our drive down into Umcolcus River and to Castonia logan while Pulaski Britt is still swearin' and warpin' with head-works across Jerusalem dead-water. We'd have our head there before he had a log down the last five miles of lower Jerusalem into the main river. We'll have our sheer booms set and our sortin'-gap, and we'll hold our logs and let his through—his and the corporation drive that he's master of, and has been master of for thirty years. He's been the river tyrant, Wade; but with our head first at Castonia, and our booms set, and we willin' to sort free of expense to them followin', I'd like to see the man that would dare to interfere with our common river rights. The old Umcolcus was rollin' its waters for the use of the tax-payin', law-abidin' citizens of this State before old Pulaski Britt and his log-drivin' association gang of pirates was ever heard of. They've usurped, Wade! They've usurped until they've made possession seem like ownership. I've picked you as a man that can handle the men that's under him, and isn't afraid of Pulaski Britt. And it's got to be a case of reach and take what belongs to you. If they've got any law with 'em in this thing, it's law they've stolen like they've stolen the timber lands."

"I've never intended to break law in my dealings with men," said Wade, with a cadence of mournfulness in his tones. "Law up in the big woods doesn't seem to be quite as clear-cut as it is in men's relations outside. But can there be honest law, Mr. Ide, that will allow men like Pulaski Britt to step in and deprive a man of rightful profits earned by his own hard labor—to deprive him of—" He was thinking then, despite of himself, of Elva Barrett, but choked and added, wistfully, "When it's only an even show a man asks, a fair chance to travel his own course, it seems hard that there are men who go out of their path to trip him." It was not lament. He had the air of one who displayed his convictions to have them indorsed. [Pg 301]

"It's Britt's way," retorted the other, curtly. "He's made money by doin' it, and expects to make a lot more by bossin' the river."

"I want to see Mr. Britt," said Wade, quietly.

"See Britt! You don't think for a minute you're goin' to induce him to take our drive or do the square thing on the water question, do you?"

"But I want to see him for a reason of my own, Mr. Ide. I'm frank to say I don't expect any justice from Britt, after my experience with him; but there is such a thing as justification for myself. I see you don't understand." He noted the little man's wrinkling brows. "I don't know that I'm exactly sure of my own mind. But I can't seem to bring myself to fight this thing according to the code of the woods. I'm going into it with every ounce of strength and hope that's in me, and there's just one preliminary that I want for my peace of soul. I want to see Pulaski Britt."

"If I was gettin' ready to fight the devil," remonstrated Ide, "I reckon I'd keep away from his brimstone-pot. He's at his Jerusalem camp," he added, grudgingly. "He went through two days ago."

"Then that's where I'll go to find him," said Wade, decisively.

Rodburd Ide fingered his nose and gazed on his partner with frank scepticism. "Whatever you want with Britt, you're wastin' your time on him"—his tone was sullen—"and the wind-up will be another peckin'-match with that long-legged rooster, MacLeod. I say, save time and strength for our own business, Wade." [Pg 302]

"And I say I've got business with Pulaski Britt, and propose to go to him like a man," declared Wade. "You and I can't afford to have any misunderstanding about this, Mr. Ide. You have said you picked me to handle this end. I've got to handle it in my own way, so far as dealings with men go. I'll take your advice—I'll *ask* your advice on details of the work, because I don't know. As to my business with Mr. Britt, there is no doubt in my mind. I want you to go with me."

And in the end Mr. Ide went, nipping his thin lips, not wholly convinced as to the logic of the step, but with his opinion of Dwight Wade's courage and self-reliance decidedly heightened, and he reflected with comfort that those were the qualities he had sought in his partnership.

CHAPTER XXV

[Pg 303]

SHARPENING TEETH ON PULASKI BRITT'S WHETSTONE

"The people in the city felt the shock of it that day.

And they said, in solemn gloom,

"The drive is in the boom,
And O'Connor's drawn his wages; clear the
track and give
him room."



For a long time they rode side by side on the jumper without a word. Mr. Ide decided that his reticent companion was pondering a plan for the approaching interview, and was careful not to interrupt the train of thought. He was infinitely disappointed and not a little vexed when Wade turned to him at last and inquired, with plain effort to make his voice calm, whether John Barrett had recovered sufficiently to go home.

"He? He went two weeks ago—he and his girl," snapped the little man, impatiently.

After a moment he began to dig at the buttons of his fur coat, and dipped his hand into his breast-pocket. He brought out a letter.

"Here's a line Barrett's girl left to be sent in to you the first chance." He met the young man's reproachful gaze boldly. "When a man's got real business to attend to," he snorted, "he ain't to blame if he disremembers tugaluggin' a love-letter." He gave the missive into Wade's hands, and went on, discontentedly: "What kind of a crazy-headed performance was it those girls was up to when they came up into these woods? I've had too much on my mind to try to get it out of my girl, and probably I couldn't, anyway, if she took a notion not to tell me. She has her own way about everything, just as her mother did before her," he grumbled.

[Pg 304]

"I have no possible right to discuss Miss Nina Ide's movements, even with her father. Miss Barrett's affairs are wholly her own. May I read my letter?"

"May you read it?" blurted Ide, missing the delicacy of this conventional request. "What in tophet do you think I've got to do with your readin' your own letters?" And he subsided into offended silence, seeking to express in this way his general dissatisfaction with events as they were disposing themselves.

Though the cold wind stung bitterly, Wade held the open letter in his bare hands, for he longed for the touch of the paper where her hand had rested.

"MY DEAR DWIGHT,—We are going home. The darkness has not lifted from us. For my light and my comfort I look into the north, where I know your love is shining. My sister was sitting by my father's side when I returned, and he was awake from his long dream and knew her, but he had not spoken the truth to her, and if she knows she has not told. And the cloud of it all is over us, and I cannot speak to him or open my heart to him. He did not even ask where I had been. It is as though he feared one word would dislodge the avalanche under which he shrinks. And I have to write this of my father! So we are going home. Love me. I need all your love. Take all of mine in return."

When Wade folded it he found Rodburd Ide studying his face with shrewd side glance.

"Have you any idea what 'Stumpage John' is goin' to do with the other one—the left-hand one?" he inquired, blandly. "Favor each other considerably, don't they? It told the story to me the first time I saw them together, after the right-hand one got there to my place. You can't hardly blame John for not takin' the left-hand one out with him, same as my girl sort of expected he would, same as his own girl did, too, I reckon."

[Pg 305]

"Did he say anything to—" stammered Wade, and hesitated.

"Nothin' to me," returned the magnate of Castonia, briskly. "Didn't have to. Knowed I knew. Day he left he tramped up and down the river-bank for more'n two hours, and then come to me with his face about the color of the Hullin' Machine froth and asked me to call the girl Kate into the back office of my store. I wasn't tryin' to listen or overhear, you understand, but I heard him stutter somethin' about takin' her out of the woods and puttin' her in school, and she braced back and put her hands on her hips and broke in and told him to go to hell."

"What?" shouted Wade, in utter astonishment.

"Oh, not in them words," corrected Ide. "But that's what it come to so far as meanin' went. And then she sort of spit at him, and walked out and back to my house."

He clapped the reins smartly on the flank of the lagging horse, as though this sort of conversation wasted time, and added: "She's still at my house, and the girl says she's goin' to stay there—so I guess that settles it. Now let's get down to some business that amounts to somethin'! What are you goin' to say to Pulaski Britt?"

But if Dwight Wade knew, he did not say. He sat bowed forward, hands between his knees, the letter between his palms, his jaw muscles ridged under the tan of his cheeks, and so the long ride ended in silence.

When they were once in the Jerusalem cutting it was not necessary to search long for the Honorable Pulaski Britt, ex-State senator. They heard him bellowing hoarsely, and a moment later were looking down on him from the top of a ramdown. A pair of horses were floundering in the deep snow, one of them "cast" and tangled in the harness. The teamster stood at one side holding the reins helplessly. The snow was spotted with blood.

[Pg 306]

"You've let that horse calk himself, you beef-brained son of a bladder-fish!" roared Britt. "You ain't fit to drive a rockin'-horse with wooden webbin's!" He dove upon the struggling animal, and, hooking his great fists about the bit-rings, dragged the horse to his feet. "Stripped to the fetlocks!" mourned the owner. He surveyed the bleeding leg and whirled on the teamster. "That's the second pair you've put out of business for me in a week. Me furnishing hundred-and-fifty-dollar horses for you to paint the snow with!" He ploughed across to where the man stood holding the reins, and struck him full in the face, and the fellow went down like a log, blood flying from his face. "Mix some of your five-cent blood with blood that's worth something!" he yelled. "If there's got to be rainbow-snow up this way, I know how to furnish it cheaper."

"That's a nice, interestin' gent down there for you to tackle just now on your business proposition," observed Ide, sourly. "Now, suppose you use common-sense, and turn around and go back to Enchanted!"

But the Honorable Pulaski suddenly heard the jangle of their jumper-bell, and stared up at them.

"Gettin' lessons on how to run a crew, Ide?" he asked. And seeing that the teamster was up and fumbling blindly at the tangled harness, he advanced up the slope. "I 'ain't ever forgiven you for takin' Tommy Eye away from me. That man's a *teamster*! It was a nasty trick, and perhaps your young whelp of a partner there has found out enough about woods law by this time to understand it."

[Pg 307]

"Mr. Britt—" began Wade.

"I don't want to talk to you at all!" snapped the tyrant, flapping his hand in protest.

"Nor I to you!" retorted Wade, in sudden heat. "But as Mr. Ide's partner I have taken charge of the woods end of our operation, and I've got business to talk with you. We haven't begun to land our logs yet because—"

"It's a wonder to me that you've got any cut down, you dude!" snorted Britt, contemptuously.

"Because we haven't had an understanding about the drive," went on the young man, trying to keep his temper. "Now, about logs coming down Enchanted and into Jerusalem—"

"You'll pay drivin' fees for every stick."

"And you'll take our drive with yours?"

"No, sir. I won't put the iron of a pick-pole into a log with your mark on it!" declared Britt.^[5]

"Mr. Britt," said Wade, his voice trembling in the stress of his emotions, "as an operator in this section, as a man who is asking you straight business questions as courteously as I know how, I am entitled to decent treatment, and it will be better for all of us if I get it."

"Threats, hey?" demanded Britt, malignantly.

"No threats, sir. If you won't take our drive for the usual fees and guarantee its delivery, will you let us drive it independently?"

"Not with my water—and you'll pay fees just the same!"

"*Your* water! Who made you the boss of God's rains and rivers? Have you any charter, giving you the right to turn the State waters of Blunder Lake from their natural outlet and keep everybody else from using them?"

[Pg 308]

Britt clacked his finger in his hard palm and blurted contemptuous "Phuh!" through his beard.

"Show me any such charter, Mr. Britt, or tell me where to find the record of it, and I'll accept the law."

"Hell on your law!" cried the tyrant of the Umcolcus.

"Aren't you willing to let the law decide it, Mr. Britt?"

"Hell on your law!"

Three times more did Wade, his face burning in his righteous anger, his voice trembling with passion, ask the question. Three times did the Honorable Pulaski Britt fling those four words of maddening insult back at him. And Wade, his face going suddenly white, snatched the reins from Ide's hands, struck the horse, whirled him into the trail, and drove away madly. Down the aisles of the forest followed those four words as long as Pulaski Britt felt that their iteration could reach the ears of listeners.

"So you finished your business with him, did you?" inquired Ide, at last, allowing himself, as a true prophet, a bit of a sneer.

"I got just what I went after," snarled the young man. "I got in four words the fighting rules of these woods, explained by the head devil of them all, and, by —, if that's the only way for an honest man to save his skin up here, they can have the fight on those lines! Take the reins, Mr. Ide; I want to straighten this thing in my mind."

Little passed between them on the return journey, but they talked far into the night, leaning towards each other across the little splint table in the office camp.

The next morning they climbed the side of Enchanted, following the main road that had been swamped to Enchanted Stream. On the upper slopes they came upon the log-yards, and heaps of great, stripped spruces piled ready for the sleds. Farther up the slopes they heard the monotonous “whush-wish” of the cross-cut saws and the crackling crash of falling trees.

[Pg 309]

In the Maine woods it is not the practice to haul to landings until the tree crop is practically all down and yarded on the main roads. This practice in the case of the Enchanted operation that winter was providential; for in the conference of the night before Rodburd Ide and his partner had definitely abandoned Enchanted Stream. That decision left them the alternative of Blunder Stream. It was the only plan that fitted with Rodburd Ide’s new hopes based on the log contract in his breast-pocket. For months he had dimly foreseen this crisis without clear conception as to how it was to be met. But the possibilities of the gamble had fascinated him.

In his calculations he had tried to keep prudence to the fore. But he had been waiting so long that at last prudence became dizzy in the swirl of possibilities. He had never intended to make Dwight Wade his mere cat’s-paw. But the vehement courage of that sturdy young man, as displayed in the battle of Castonia, had touched something in Rodburd Ide’s soul. All through his quiet life he had seen might and mastery make money out of the woods. And so at last he himself ventured, trusting much to the might and mastery he found in this self-reliant young gentleman whom Fate had flung into his life. Gasping at the boldness of it, he was willing that the whole winter’s cut of the Enchanted operation should be landed upon Blunder Stream. That there was a way to get their water he admitted to himself, but he did not dare to think much upon the means. Dwight Wade, driven by fierce anger against Pulaski Britt, who blocked his way to the girl whom his own hands could win but for Britt, smote the splint table and declared that there should be a spring flood in Blunder Stream.

[Pg 310]

“And if you fear lawsuits, being a man of property, Mr. Ide, you should not know what I intend to do. You may be held as a partner. Dissolve that partnership. You may be held as an employer. Discharge me when this log-cut is landed. Protect yourself. I have only my two hands for them to attach.”

The little man blinked at him admiringly, and then patted his shoulder.

“You needn’t tell me what you intend to do. You are the one for this end, and I can trust you. But when it comes to responsibility and the law, Wade, if those thieves try it on, after all they’ve stolen, you’ll find Rod Ide right with you. You’re my partner, and you’ll stay my partner,” declared Ide, stoutly.

He repeated it as they swung around the upper granite dome of Enchanted, and looked down the western slope into Blunder valley.

“There’s the place for your main road, Wade,” he said—“down that shoulder there! Swamp a half-mile of the steep pitch and you’ll come into the Cameron road, and it will take you to the stream. You’ll need about fifteen hundred feet of snub-line for that sharp incline there, and I’ll have it up to you by the time you are ready for it. Put the swale hay to the rest of the pitches. It will trig better than gravel. Don’t let ’em put a chain round a runner. You want to keep your road so smooth that every load of logs will go down there like a boy down a barn rollway. Sprinkle your levels and keep ’em glare ice. By —, it’s a beauty of an outlook for a landing-job! Cut your high slopes this trip. Keep your logs above the level of that shoulder, and every hoss team will make a four-turn day of it. We’ll save a dollar a thousand on the landing-proposition alone, over and above the Enchanted road chance! And up there—” He gazed to the north up the valley over the wooded ridges, and then hushed his voice, as though there lay somewhere in that blue distance a thing that he feared.

[Pg 311]

“Up there is a lake of water, Mr. Ide, that God designed to flow down this valley, and it’s going to find its own channel again—somehow! I hope that doesn’t sound like cheap boasting. It’s only my idea of the right.”

He led the way back around the granite dome above the spruce benches, and the old man followed in silence.

Two hours later Rodburd Ide was off and away for Castonia, his jumper-bell jangling its echoes among the trees. He had hope in his heart and a letter in his pocket. The hope was his own. The letter was addressed to John Barrett’s daughter, and the superscription had brought a little scowl to the brows of the magnate of Castonia. Somehow it seemed like communication with the enemy. But Dwight Wade, writing it in the stillness of the night, while the little man snored in his bunk, had seemed in his own imaginings to be putting into that letter, as one lays away for safe keeping in a casket, all that heart and soul held of love and candor and tenderness. It was as though he intrusted those into her hands to preserve for him against the day when he might take them back into life and living once more. Just now they did not seem to belong to this life on Enchanted; they did not harmonize with the bitter conditions. He pressed down the envelope’s seal with the fantastic reflection that he was sending out of the conflict witnesses in whose presence he might stand ashamed.

Therefore, it was not treason that Rodburd Ide bore in the pocket of his big fur coat. Dwight Wade had sent tenderer emotions to the rear. He stood at the front, ready to meet iron with iron and fire with fire.

THE DEVIL OF THE HEMPEN STRANDS

"When the snub-line parts and the
great load starts

There's nothing that men may do,
Except to cower with quivering
hearts

While the wreck goes thundering
through."

—The Ballad of Tumbledick.



ays of winter snow and blow; days of sunshine, hard and cold as the radiance from a diamond's facets; days of calm and days of tempest; days when the snowflakes dropped as straight as plummets, and days when the whirlwinds danced in crazy rigadoons down the valleys or spun like dervishes on the mountain-tops! And all were days of honest, faithful toil in the black growth of Enchanted, and the days brought the dreamless sleep o' nights that labor won.

In those long evenings hope lighted a taper that shone brightly beside the lantern of the office camp in whose dull beams Dwight Wade wrote long and earnest letters. But these were not to John Barrett's daughter; the conditions of their waiting love had tacitly closed the mail between them.

Again Dwight Wade, in the honesty of his soul, had seen a light of hope that contrasted cheerily with the red glare of might against might which made his decency quail. He saw a chance to win as a man, not as a thug.

The most brilliant young attorney of the newer generation in the State had been Wade's college mate. To him Wade detailed in those long letters the iniquitous conditions that fettered independent operators in the north country, and gave the case into his enthusiastic keeping. It meant digging into the black heart of the State's political corruption, timber graft, and land steals. It was a task that the young attorney, with earnest zeal and new ideals of civic honor, had long before entered upon. He seized upon this store of new ammunition with delight, and Wade rejoiced at the tenor of his replies. That the law and the right would intervene in Blunder valley to preserve him from a conflict in which he must use the shameful weapons selected by Britt for the duello was a promise that he cherished. And thus heartened, he toiled more eagerly.

[Pg 313]

It was well into February before they began to haul their logs to the landing-place on Blunder Stream. But even with an estimated five millions to dump upon the ice of Blunder, time was ample, for the snub-line down the steep quarter-mile of Enchanted's shoulder made a cut-off that doubled the efficiency of the teams. It was the crux of the situation, that snubbing-pitch. With its desperate dangers, its uncertainties, its celerity, it was ominous and it was fascinating. But it was the big end of the great game. Dwight Wade made himself its captain. Tommy Eye, master of horses, came into his own and was his lieutenant.

Those two trudged there together in the gray of the dawn; they trudged back together in the chilled dusk, still trembling with the racking strain of it all.

Wade, cant-dog in hand, stood beside the snubbing-post and gave the word for every load to start, and watched every inch of its progress with tense muscles and pounding heart. Tommy Eye mounted the load and took the reins from the deposed driver as each team came to the top of the pitch; and the snorting, fearing horses seemed to know his master touch, and in blind faith went into their collars and floundered down under the fateful looming of the great load. Thus, every hour of the day, Tommy Eye silently, boldly ventured his life in the interests of the man who had once saved it, and Dwight Wade watched over his safety from the top of the slope. No word passed between the two. But they understood. There was no other man in the north country with the soothing voice, the assuring touch on the reins, and the mystic power to inspire confidence in dumb brutes—no other man that could bring the qualities that Tommy Eye brought to his task, coupled with the blind courage to perform. The horses turned their heads to make sure that he held the reins and was adventuring with them. Then they went on.

[Pg 314]

The snubbing-post was a huge beech, sawed to leave four feet of stump. It had been adzed to the smoothness of an axe-handle. The three-inch hawser clasped it with four turns, and two men, whose hands were protected by huge leather mittens, kept the squalling coils loosened and paid out the slack, when the cable was hooked to the load of logs on its way down the slope in order to hold it back. And when the coils yanked themselves loose and the rope ran too swiftly, even making the leather mittens smoke, Wade, with his cant-dog, threw the hawser hard against the stump and checked it. It was a trick that Tommy Eye taught him, and it required muscle and snap. At the instant of peril he drove his cant-dog's iron nose into the roots of the stump, surged back on his lever, and pinched the rope between post and ash handle of the tool. Friction checked and held the load, but it was muscle-stretching, back-breaking labor.

And all the time there was the rope to watch to make sure that no rock's edge or sharp stick had severed a strand, for broken strands uncoil like a spring under the mighty strain. There were the

[Pg 315]

flipping bights of the coiled hawser to guard against as the men paid it out. Men are caught by those bights and ground to horrible death against the snubbing-post.

In time that rope came to have sentience in the eyes of Wade. Some days it seemed to be possessed by the spirit of evil. It would not run smoothly. It fed out by jerks, getting more and more of slack at each jump. It began to sway and vibrate between post and load, a wider arc with every jerk, a gigantic cello-string booming horrible music. It snarled on the post; it growled grim and sinister warning along its tense length. So terrible are these wordless threats that men have been known to surrender in panic, flee from the snubbing-post, and let destruction wreak its will. Hence the silent and understanding partnership between Tommy Eye, shadowed by death on the load, and Dwight Wade fiercely alert at the snubbing-post.

There came a day when the spirit of evil had full sway.

The weather was hard, with gray skies and a bone-searching chill. The hawser, made smooth as glass by attrition, was steely and stiff with the cold. It had new voices. Once it leaped so viciously at the legs of one of the post-men that he gave a yell and ran. In the tumult of his passion and fear Wade cursed the caitiff, his own legs in the swirl of the bights, his cant-dog nipping the rope to the post and checking it short. And far down the slope Tommy Eye, his teeth hard shut on his tobacco, waited without turning his head, a mute picture of utter confidence.

It was while Wade held the line, waiting for the men to re-coil the hawser into safe condition to run, that the Honorable Pulaski Britt appeared. He came trotting his horses down the Enchanted main road and jerked them to a halt at the top of the pitch. Two men were with him on the jumper. Each wore the little blue badge of a game warden.

"We are after a man named Thomas Eye, of your crew," said one of the men, catching Wade's inquiring gaze. "We've traced that cow-moose killing to him—the Cameron case." [Pg 316]

For an instant Wade's heart went sick, and then it went wild. Such an impudent, barefaced plot to rob him of an invaluable man at this crisis in his affairs seemed impossible to credit. It was vengefulness run mad, gone puerile.

"Mr. Britt has signed the complaint and has the witnesses," said the warden. "We've got a warrant and we'll have to take the man."

"And there he is on that load," said the Honorable Pulaski, pointing his whip-butt.

"Hold that line, men," commanded Wade, coming away from the post. "Tommy Eye has not been out of my camp, wardens. He is absolutely indispensable to me. He has killed no moose. But if it can be proven I'll pay his fine."

"It takes a trial to prove it," said the warden, dryly. "That's why we're after him."

"Britt, I didn't think you'd get down to this," stormed the young man.

"I'm not a game warden," retorted the baron of the Umcolcus. "You're dealin' with them, not me."

He sat, slicing his whip-lash into the snow, and watched the young man's bitter anger with huge enjoyment. And when Wade seemed unable to frame a suitable retort he went on: "If you think I've got anything to do with taking that crack teamster out of your crew, you'd better thank me. Anything that interferes with your landing your logs in a blind pocket like Blunder Stream is a godsend to you and Rod Ide." His temper began to flame. "What do you think you're going to do there? Do you calculate to steal any of my water? Do you think that whipper-snapper whelp of a lawyer that you've set yappin' at our heels is goin' to spin a thread for you against the men that have run this section for thirty years? If you've only got the law bug in your head, give it up. But if you have the least sneakin' idea of troublin' that dam up there"—he shook his fist into the north—"coil your snub-line and save time and money; for, by the eternal Jehovah, blood will run in that valley before water does!" [Pg 317]

In the pause that followed one of the wardens asked, "Do you propose to resist the arrest of Eye, Mr. Wade?"

The question was an incautious one. In a flash the young man saw that this last sortie of the Honorable Pulaski was not so much an adventure against Tommy Eye as against himself—with intent to embroil him with the officers of the law. That might mean more trouble than he dared reflect upon. He had a very definite apprehension of what the legal machinery of Britt and his associates might do to him if he afforded any pretence for their procedure.

One of the wardens dropped off the jumper at a word from Britt, and the timber baron urged his horses down the slope, the other officer accompanying him.

Tommy Eye sat on his load, still with gaze patiently to the front, waiting in serene confidence the convenience of his employer. That back turned to Wade was the back of the humble confider, the back of the martyr. In his sudden trepidation at thought of his own imperilled interests, were he himself enmeshed in the law, Wade had thought to leave Tommy's possible fate alone. But now, almost without reflection or plan, he ran down the hill. The martyr's serene obliviousness struck a pang to his heart. In those days of strife and toil and understanding Tommy Eye had grown dear to him. Britt, turning, yelled to the officer at the top of the slope, "Give that snub-line a half-hitch and hold that load!"

A bit of a rock shelf broadened the road where the logs were halted. Britt lashed his horses around in front of the load with apparent intent to intimidate Tommy. The warden dropped off the jumper and shut off retreat in the rear. And Wade, running swiftly, carrying his cant-dog, came and leaped upon the load and stood above Tommy—his protecting genius, but a genius who had no very clear idea of what he was about to do.

[Pg 318]

No one ever explained exactly how it happened!

The warden, who was at the top of the pitch and who did it, gazed a moment, saw what he had done, and fled with a howl of abject terror, never to appear on Enchanted again. The men at the snub-post stated afterwards that he came to them, hearing Pulaski Britt's orders, elbowed them aside with an oath, and took the hawser. He probably undertook to loosen the coils to make a half-hitch; but a game warden has no business with a snub-line when the devil is in it.

It gave one triumphant shriek at its release, and then—"Toom! Toom! Toom!"—it began to sing its horrible bass note. It was slipping faster and faster around the snubbing-post under the strain of Tommy Eye's load, which it had been holding back.

Tommy Eye knew without looking—knew without understanding. He knew—that most terrible knowledge of all woods terrors—that he was "sluiced." He screamed once—only once—and the horses came into their collars. Their hot breath was on the back of Pulaski Britt's neck when he started—started with a hoarse oath above which sang the shrill yelp of his whip-lash, and behind him, on the icy slope, slid the great load of logs now released from anchorage to the snubbing-post and guided only by the nerve of Tommy Eye.

"Jump, Mr. Wade! Jump!" gasped the teamster. But Wade drove the peak of his cant-dog into a log and clung to the upright handle. He looked back. The great hawser spun itself off the spindle of the post and chased down the hill in spirals, utterly loose and free.

[Pg 319]

It was no dare-devil spirit that held him on the load. His soul was sick with horrible fear. It was something that was almost subconsciousness that kept him there. Perhaps it was pity—pity for Tommy Eye, so brave a martyr at his post of duty. In the flash of that instant when the great load gathered speed he stiffened himself to leap, then he looked at Tommy's patched coat and remembered his oft-repeated little boast: "I've never left my hosses yet!" And so if Tommy could stay with his horses, he, Dwight Wade, could stay with Tommy! There was a queer thrill in his breast and the sting of sudden tears in his eyes as he decided.

The first rush of the descent was along an incline, steep but even. There were benches below—each shelf ten feet or so of jutting level—that broke the descent. Wade saw the jumper of Pulaski Britt strike the first bench. The old man went off the seat into the air, and when he fell he dropped his reins, clutched the seat, and kneeled, facing the pursuers, his face ghastly with terror. He crouched there, not daring to turn. Even if he had held his reins they would have been as useless in his hands as strips of fog. Ledges and trees hemmed either side. There was only the narrow road for his flying horses, and they ran straight on, needing neither whip nor admonitions.

The groan of five thousand feet of timber chafing the bind-chains when their great load struck the shelf was like the groan of an animal in agony. The chains held. It was Tommy who had seen to every link and every loop. Then, for the first time in his life, Wade heard the scream of horses in mortal fear. The lurch of the forward sled lifted the pole, and for one dreadful instant both animals kicked free and clear in air.

Tommy Eye shot two words at them like bullets. "Steady, boys!" he yelled. His head was hunched between his shoulders. His arms were out-stretched and rigid. Tommy Eye, master of horses! It was his lift on the bits at just the fraction of a second when they needed it that set them on their feet when the pole dropped. And down the next descent they swooped.

[Pg 320]

From his height Wade looked straight into the eyes of Pulaski Britt. It seemed that with every plunge of their hoofs Tommy Eye's horses would smash that puffy face. The checks of the benches, when the huge load struck and staggered from time to time, allowed Britt's lighter equipage a little start. But the mighty projectile that drove on him down the smooth slopes gained with every yard, for the thrusting pole swept the horses off their feet in plunge after plunge. And then it was Tommy Eye's desperate coolness that helped them to their infrequent footing. All of the man's face that Wade could see was a ridged jaw muscle above the faded collar of his coat. The peak of his cap hid all but that.

There was a curve at the foot of the snub slope. The wall of trees that closed the vista was disaster spelled by balled trunk and sturdy limb. There stood the nether millstone: the upper was rushing down, and the grist would be flesh of horses and men. No man could see any other alternative. That horses, shaken every now and then on the up-cocked pole as helplessly as kittens, could bring that load around the curve was not a hope; it could be nothing but a dream of desperation.

As to what Tommy Eye dreamed or thought, his passenger had no hint. There was only the patch of cheek showing under the tilted cap. But the reins were just as tight, the out-stretched arms just as steady. Wade crouched low, his eyes on that rigid jaw muscle.

Suddenly, with a yell like the cry of something wild, Eye sprang to his feet, bestriding the logs, bracing himself for some mighty effort. They were at the Curve of Death! There came a surge on

[Pg 321]

the tight reins, eight hoofs dug the snow in one frantic thrust, and they went around—they went around! With horses and driver straining to one side the great load pitched, swerved, and, after one breathless instant, swept on in the road around the curve.

Twenty rods farther on they struck the hay, spread thickly for the trig—the checking of the runners. And the sled-runners, biting it, jerked and halted, the bind-chains creaked, the chafing logs groaned—and they were stopped! The lathering horses stood with legs wide spraddled, their heads lowered, their snorting noses puffing up the snow.

Tommy Eye dug the tobacco from his cheek and thoughtfully tossed it away. Britt's team had disappeared, reins dragging, the horses running madly, the whitened, puffy face flashing one last look as it winked out of sight among the trees.

"I've dreamed of such a thing as this," observed Tommy, at last, a strange tremor in his tones. "I've dreamed of chasin' old P'laski Britt, me settin' on five thousand feet of wild timber and lookin' down into his face and seein' him a-wonderin' whether they'd let him into the front door of hell or make him go around to the back. It's the first time he was ever run good and plenty, and I done it—but," he sighed, "it was damnation whilst it lasted!"

He turned now and gazed long and wistfully at Wade.

"Ye stuck by me, didn't ye, Mr. Wade?" he said, softly. "Stuck by me jest like I was a friend, and not old, drunken Tommy Eye! I reckon we'll shake on that!" And when they clasped hands he asked, with the wistful, inexpressible pathos of his simple devotion to duty: "What was it all about? I jest only know they sluiced me!"

And Wade gasped an explanation, Tommy Eye staring at him with wrinkling brows and squinting eyes. [Pg 322]

"Come to arrest me for northin' I hadn't done?" he shrilled. "Come to take me off'n a job where I was needed, and where I was earnin' my honest livin'?"

"They had the warrant, and Britt swore out the lying complaint."

"Mr. Wade," said Tommy, after a solemn pause, "I've done a lot of things in this life to be ashamed of—but jest gittin' drunk, that's all. I ain't never done a crime. But jest now, if it hadn't been for that toss-up between supper in camp or hot broth in tophet to-night, I'd be travellin' down-country, pulled away from you when you need me worst, and all on account of P'laski Britt. If that's the chances an honest man runs in this world, I'm an outlaw from now on!"

Wade stared at him in amazement, for there was a queer significance in Tommy's tone.

"An outlaw!" repeated Tommy, slapping his breast. "Yes, s'r, I'm an outlaw! An outlaw so fur as P'laski Britt is concerned. I've showed him I can run him! Did you see him lookin' at me? He'll dream of me after this when he has the nightmare."

He took Wade by the arm.

"I 'ain't been sayin' much, Mr. Wade, but I see how things are gettin' ready to move in this valley. You ain't built for an outlaw. But you need one in your business. I'm the one from now on."

He pulled his thin hand out of his mitten and shook it towards the north in the direction in which Blunder Lake lay.

"You need an outlaw in your business, I say! I'm tough from now on. I'll be so tough in April that you'll have to discharge me. There's no knowin' what an outlaw will do, is there, Mr. Wade? I'd ruther go to jail as an outlaw than as a drunk, like I've done every summer. They look up to outlaws. They make drunks scrub the floors and empty the slops." His voice trembled. "Oh, you needn't worry, Mr. Wade! I'll be proud to be an outlaw. And I ain't northin' but old Tommy Eye, anyway." [Pg 323]

He slid down off the load and went between the horses' heads, and fondled them and kissed them above their eyes.

"Brace up, old fellers!" he said. "You won't have to pull no more to-day. I reckon you've done your stunt!"

"I—I don't understand this outlaw business, Tommy," stammered Wade, looking down on him from the load. Tommy peered up, his head between the shaggy manes of the horses.

"Don't you try to, Mr. Wade!" he cried, earnestly. "There ain't no good in tryin' to understand outlaws. They ain't no kind to hitch up to very close. Don't you try to understand them!" And as he bent to unhook the trace-chains he muttered to himself: "I ain't sure as I understand much about 'em myself, but there's one outlawin' job that it's come to my mind can be done without takin' private lessons off'n Jesse James, or whoever is topnotcher in the line just now. In the mean time, let's see that warden try to arrest me!"

But as days went by it became apparent that the wardens and the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt considered that they had precipitated an affair on Enchanted whose possible consequences they did not care to face.

THE "CANNED THUNDER" OF CASTONIA

"A woodsman hates a coward as he
hates diluted rye,
Stiff upper-lip for livin', stiff backbone
when you die!"



When April came, and with caressing fingers began to stroke the softening snow from the mountain flanks, she found full half a million of the Enchanted cut still on the yards.

"If it's to be a gamble, let's make it a good one," Rodburd Ide had counselled his partner. "Pile on every stick that winter's back will carry. Pile till it breaks!"

Dwight Wade had a trustworthy "kitchen cabinet" of advisers in old Christopher Straight, Tommy Eye, and the chopping-boss; and with them as counsellors he ventured further than his own narrow experience would have prompted.

On nights when April slept and the trickling slopes were stiffened by the cold, the crew of the Enchanted stole a march on spring. They awoke at sundown with the owls. They ate breakfast in the gloom of early evening. And, with the moon holding her lantern for them in the serene skies, they rushed their logs into the waiting arms of Blunder valley. That those arms would surrender the timber when the time was ripe seemed more certain as the days went by. The word of their zealous young man of law was encouraging. There had been pleas, representations, digging over of old charters, hunt through dusty records, citation of precedents, and some very direct talk regarding a thorough legislative investigation of conditions in the north country to regulate the rights of independent operators. [Pg 325]

It was admittedly too big a question to be hurried. Litigation fattens by what it feeds on. Grown ponderous, it marches, slow and dignified, in short stages between terms, and sits and rests and puffs at every cross-road of argument, exception, appeal, and writ of error. Even that exigency of five millions of timber waiting in Blunder valley could not hasten the settlement of the young reformer's main contention or the big question. But there are in this life some deeper sentiments than enthusiasm in reform. The old college friendship between Dwight Wade, famous centre of Burton's eleven, and the little quarter-back whom he had shielded was one of those deeper sentiments. And now the lawyer, for the sake of that friendship, was willing to buy Dwight Wade's success in Blunder valley by honorable compromise on certain points where compromise was honorable.

With a man open to sane reason and moral decency a compromise might have been effected. But after Pulaski D. Britt had craftily drawn out proffer of a truce and proposition of a trade in one phase of the great question of water-rights, he burst into a bellow of "blackmail" that echoed from end to end of the State. The words bristled in the newspapers controlled by the land barons and was rolled on the tongues of gossip. And as humanity in general, selfish in its easy-going way and jealous of resolute activity, likes to believe ill of reformers, men were readier to believe Britt than to give a motive of honest friendship its due. The jeers of the mob make what some people like to call "public opinion." And sometimes when public opinion is loudly gabbling and can be politely referred to in case of doubt, there can be found judges who will listen with one ear to the voices of the street and with the other to the specious representations of the man in power. [Pg 326]

So it came about that the judge presiding at the *nisi prius* term in the great county dominated by Pulaski D. Britt hearkened in chambers to some very distressing details set before him by that gentleman and certain other "employers of labor" and "developers of the great timber interests." The judge pursed his lips and with his tongue clucked horrified astonishment at stories of brutal assaults made "on members of Pulaski Britt's crew" (this being Dwight Wade's desperate defence of himself, as pictured by Britt), and other tales of lunatics provoked to deeds of violence towards aforesaid "developers"; of incendiaries spirited away from officers; of men stolen out of Britt's crew (poor Tommy Eye's rescue from torture, as revamped for evidence by the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt); and, lastly, of that desperate and malignant attempt on the life of Honorable Pulaski D. Britt when a load of timber was sluiced at him from the shoulder of Enchanted Mountain.

Dwight Wade had not put into the hands of his lawyer the details of those pitiful secrets of the woods; for not only his honor as a man set a seal on his lips, but the sacredness of his love imposed higher obligation still. So his lawyer listened, amazed, incredulous, but incapable of refuting these tales in the categorical way that the law demands.

So much, then, for what "the gang" had done for Pulaski D. Britt and his interests. Britt lacked neither words nor will to make the story a black one.

As to what they intended to do, the Honorable Pulaski declaimed, with quivering finger rapping tattoo on the map of the Blunder valley, his voice hoarse with emotion and the perspiration of apprehensiveness streaking his puffy cheeks. [Pg 327]

And with past enormities standing undefended, what might not a judge believe as to future atrocities when the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt had made the prediction, his chief exhibit of intended outlawry being five millions of timber stranded in Blunder valley, and requiring "stolen

water” to move it? His last argument was an uncontradicted allegation of attempted compromise, his last word “Blackmail!” shot at the face of the opposing lawyer while his stubby finger vibrated under the lawyer’s nose.

Therefore, at the end of it all, the clerk of courts wrote, the judge signed, and five minutes after the ink was dry High Sheriff Bennett Rodliff buttoned his coat over the folded paper and set his face towards Enchanted.

Forty-eight hours later, having travelled by train, by stage, by sledge, and on foot, he stood before Dwight Wade in the midst of his crew at the landings in Blunder valley, gave the paper to him, and watched his face while he read it. Being a man who enjoyed his own authority and exulted in the power of the law when it dealt crushing blows, the high sheriff noted with satisfaction that the young man’s face grew pale under its tan.

“Get the sense, do you?” inquired the sheriff, allowing himself the relaxation of a chew of tobacco after his headlong rush into the north; “it’s an injunction. You can’t meddle with Blunder Lake dam; can’t h’ist gates; can’t take water!” He gazed about him at the heaped logs piled in the bed of the stream. “Kind o’ seems to me,” he observed, with smug rebuke, “that I’d have been slow in landin’ logs down here till I knowed what the law court was goin’ to do about these water-rights. Law steps slow and careful, and this whole thing has got to wait till it gets way up to the full bench. Lettin’ you have water here might be an admission by the big crowd that they was all wrong on the chief proposition. The big crowd ain’t that kind!”

[Pg 328]

Wade had read the injunction through to its bitter end. Every stilted phrase, every estopping, restraining word of its redundancy, was like a bar between him and his hopes. It was a temporary injunction. But the date set for a hearing on the question of permanency was a date that made those log-piles in Blunder valley loom in his dizzy gaze like monuments to buried expectations.

“Where was our lawyer when this damnable document was issued?” he cried, shaking the paper under the sheriff’s nose. His heart was aflame against the thing called Law. The sheriff stood there as Law’s representative, expressing in his blank face such unfeeling acceptance of the situation as hopeless, that Wade wanted to jam the paper between those jaws wagging blandly on their tobacco.

“Oh, he was there!” remarked Rodliff, dryly. “Perhaps if he hadn’t been there your case would have come off better. Judges ain’t got much use for lawyers when the shyster kind get shown up in a graft game. The fellow who named this Blunder valley years ago,” he observed, running his eyes over the log-piles once more, “must have had a gift of second-sight. Rod Ide’s always been cal’lated to be level-headed. It’s a wonder to me he let you fool him into this. I’ve heard considerable about it outside. But it’s worse than I’d reckoned on.”

For a sickening instant the thing showed to Wade in its blackest light. To be sure, it was the Law that struck down his hands. But it was plain that the Law was, after all, only a part of the game—and his enemies had invoked it and had won.

“Look here, men!” shouted the high sheriff, turning from his survey of this defeated wretchedness, “I want you to take note of what I’ve done here. I’ve served an injunction on your boss. It means that he’s got to leave Blunder Lake dam alone. Him and all his crew! Understand?”

[Pg 329]

The men had been slowly gathering near on the log-piles, in order to get drift of what this visit meant. Some of them had private reasons for wondering what business a high sheriff was on; all of them were curious. And the sheriff saw Tommy Eye in the forefront.

“By-the-way, Eye,” he called, “the wardens want you! You’d better come along out with me and save trouble.”

“I’m an outlaw,” cried Tommy, defiantly, “and I won’t come with nobody!”

The sheriff blinked at the man who had been his uncomplaining prisoner for so many summers, and seemed to be trying to digest this defiance.

“I’m an outlaw!” repeated the man. “I ain’t to work for nobody. I’ve jacked my job here. I’m just plain outlaw. I ain’t responsible to nobody. Nobody ain’t responsible for me. You tell that to everybody concerned. I’m an outlaw!”

Rodliff, still with wondering eyes on Tommy, slowly worked a revolver out of his hip-pocket.

“Come down off’n that pile!” he shouted. “I want you!”

But once the revolver was out the target was not visible. Three leaps, his calk boots biting the logs, put Tommy out of sight behind the pile. Two minutes later they heard him among the trees far up the slope of Blunder valley. He was still shouting his declaration of outlawry, and the diminuendo of tone indicated that he was running like a deer.

The high sheriff shoved back his revolver, scowling up at the grinning faces on the log-piles. But he found no hint of similar amiability in Wade’s expression when he turned to face the young man; and after surveying him up and down with much disfavor, he shook his fist in a gesture that embraced them all, and started away, flinging over his shoulder the contemptuous remark that he seemed to have “lighted in a pretty tough gang.” The significance of that expressed conviction was not lost on the young man. It revealed what machination was doing. Britt, bulwarked by the

[Pg 330]

courts and public sentiment, was not to be fought by the outlawry he had invoked as the code of combat.

An hour later Dwight Wade was urging his horse towards Castonia. If Rodburd Ide or a message from Rodburd Ide were on the way north he would meet the situation so much the sooner. The sting of his bitter thoughts and the goad of his impatience would not allow him to stay at Enchanted. He wanted to know the exact facts "outside." He did not dare to jeopardize his partner by the rashness his bitter anger once contemplated.

A half-mile down the tote road Tommy Eye dashed at him from the covert of the spruces.

"I reckoned you'd be goin', Mr. Wade!" he panted. "I ain't intendin' to bother you—but what did Ben Rodliff say that was—that paper that he clubbed you with?"

The pitiful intensity of his loyal anxiety struck Wade to the heart. "It was an injunction, Tommy," he explained, patiently. "It's an order from the court. Oh, it's horribly unjust! It may be law, but it isn't justice; for justice would take into account a man's common rights, and wouldn't tie them up by pettifogging delays." He was talking as much to himself as to the poor fellow who clung to the thill. The words surged into his mouth out of his full soul. "I have been square with men, Tommy, square and decent. I believe in law, and I want to respect it. But when law obeys Pulaski Britt's bidding, and takes you by the throat and kneels on you and chokes you, and lets such a man as Britt walk past on his own business, free and clear, it's law that's devil-made."

[Pg 331]

But the incantation of that law was having its effect on a nature that was more docile than it realized. In his hot anger he had said he would fight Britt with the tyrant's own lawless choice of weapons. He looked back and remembered that he had intended to do so. A sheriff with a gold badge and a bit of paper had prevailed over his bitter resolution when Pulaski Britt and his army at his back would have failed to cow him.

The dull roll of a distant detonation came to them in the little silence that followed on Wade's outburst. It came from the west, where men of the Enchanted crew were at work widening the granite jaws of Blunder gorge to give clear egress to the Enchanted drive. In that moment of his utter despair the roar of the rend-rock was a mocking voice.

"And that's all there is to an injunction?" demanded Tommy. "Ben Rodliff hands you a paper, and spits tobacker-juice on the snow, and calls you a fool, and goes down past here, like he did a little while ago, swingin' his reins and singin' a penny'yal hymn? Only has to do that to tie up the whole Enchanted drive that we hundred men have sweat and froze and worked to get onto the landings?"

"Only that, Tommy," replied Wade, bitterly. "The law is sitting there on Blunder dam. You can't see it, but it's there, and it says, 'Hands off!'"

"There's something you can see, though," Tommy declared. "You can see two men in a shack that's been built over the gates of Blunder Lake dam. One sleeps daytimes, the other sleeps nights, and they've both got Winchesters. I've been there private and personal, and looked 'em over."

[Pg 332]

"I don't want any of my men lurking about that dam," commanded Wade.

Tommy Eye cinched his worn belt one notch tighter over his thin haunches and buttoned his checkered wool jacket. "I ain't one of your men," he growled, with such sudden and sullen change in demeanor that Wade stared at him in amazement. "I've gone into the outlaw business, and I've told you so, and I've told Ben Rodliff so."

They heard the thudding boom of dynamite once more, and the absolutely fiendish look that came into Tommy's face as he turned his gaze towards Blunder valley enlightened his employer.

"That sounds good to me!" shrieked the teamster. It was as though one of the docile Dobbins of the hovel had suddenly perked up ears and tail and begun to play the part of a beast of prey.

When Tommy ran back into the spruces Wade shouted after him, insistently and angrily. But he did not reply, and after a time Wade drove on, cursing soulfully the whole innate devilishness of the woods. That another weak nature had run amuck after the fashion to which he had become accustomed in his woods experience seemed probable; but he had neither time nor inclination to chase Tommy Eye. As to Blunder Lake dam, he reflected that the eternal vigilance of the Winchesters guaranteed Pulaski Britt's interests in that direction, and, soul-sick of the whole wicked situation, he was glad that the Winchesters were there. He had failed. He could at least own that much man-fashion to Rodburd Ide.

It was a messenger that he met—not the partner himself. And as he had anticipated, the messenger summoned him to Castonia. The last few miles of his journey took him along the bank of the Umcolcus. The big river had already thrown off its winter sheathing and was running full and free. It was waiting for the northern lakes, still ice-bound, to surrender their waters and sweep the logs down to it.

[Pg 333]

Rodburd Ide's stout soul uttered no complaints when the two had locked themselves in the little back office of the store. But his mute distress and bewilderment in the face of calamity sanctioned by the law touched his young partner more than complaints would have done. The fighting spirit was gone out of the little man.

"I didn't reckon it could go against us that bad, not after what the lawyer said. He seemed to know his business, Wade. But maybe he was too honest to fight a crowd like that. It's a crusher to come after hopes was up like mine was. I even went to work the minute the ice slid down-river, and set our sheer-booms above the logan and got the sortin'-gap ready. I was that sure our logs were comin' down. But it ain't your fault, Wade, and it ain't mine. It's just as I told you once before. It's what we're up against!"

And then, striving for a pretext to end the doleful session, he invited Wade to walk up the river-bank. He wanted to show him the site for the new great mills. "They can't steal that much away from me, my boy," he said, trying to be cheerful. "The mills will have to buy out of the corporation drive this year, seeing that we're coopered on our contract. That means so much more good profit for Britt and his crowd. They've got their smell of what's comin', too, and that's probably why they fought so hard to get the injunction. They're in for a big make and their own prices this year. But the more I know about that charter of the Great Independent the more trouble I can see for the old crowd when the next legislature gets to tearin' this thing to pieces. The G. I.'s know what they're doin'. They'll have their rights. And when the big wagon starts little fellers like you and me can climb aboard and ride, too. But the big wagon won't start till next year," he added, sadly.

[Pg 334]

Out-of-doors they did not talk. The roar of the Hulling Machine dominated everything, and the spume-clouds swaying above it spat in their faces. On the platform of Ide's store the pathetic brotherhood of the "It-'ll-git-ye Club" sat in silent conclave, stunned into a queer stupor by the bellow of the Hulling Machine, even as habitual opium-eaters succumb to the blissful influence of the drug.

Above the falls an island divided the river. On the channel side the waters raced turbulently. The island sentinelled the mouth of the logan that deeply indented the shore on the quiet side of the river. Ide had installed a system of sheer-booms. They spanned the current diagonally, and were to be the silent herders that would edge the log-flocks away from the banks, crowd them to centre at the sorting-gap, and keep them running free. Below the sorting-gap there were two sheer-booms—divergent. One ushered the down-river logs back into the current that dashed towards the Hulling Machine. The other would swing the logs of the Enchanted drive into the quiet holding-ground of the logan.



"WHAT I SAY ON THIS RIVER GOES!"

The thought of the heaped logs in Blunder valley, the memory of the dynamite bellowing its farewell to him over the tree-tops, and now the spectacle of these empty booms, had the eloquence of despair and the pathos of failure for Dwight Wade. And as the two of them—he and his partner—stood there and gazed silently, they were forced to face bitter accentuation of their stricken fortunes. Pulaski D. Britt, master of the Umcolcus drive, came on his way north at the head of his men. It was an army marching with all its impedimenta. There were many huge bateaux swung upon trucks that had hauled them around the white-water. Men launched them into the eddy above the Hulling Machine, and began to load them with tents, cordage, and the wangan stores.

[Pg 335]

Rodburd Ide and his young partner stood at one side, and surveyed this scene of activity without speaking. And Britt marched up to them, raucous and domineering with the masterfulness of the river tyrant. It had long been the saying along the Umcolcus that Pulaski Britt got mad a week

before the driving season opened, and stayed mad a week after it ended.

"Ide," he cried, "you and I seem to be always in trouble with each other lately! But it's of your own makin', not mine! These sheer-booms that you've stuck in here obstruct navigation. I want to get my boats up. You've got to cut these booms loose."

"Mr. Britt," returned Ide, his tones quivering with passion, "two men in each bateau crew can shove those booms down with pick-poles and let a bateau over without wasting a minute's time. You've brought those bateaux over all your own sheer-booms below here—you've got your own booms above. You've been riding over 'em for thirty years. Now be reasonable."

"You run back down there to your store and get onto your job of sellin' kerosene and crackers," advised the Honorable Pulaski, sarcastically. "Don't you undertake to tell me my business. As river-master, I say those logs obstruct navigation, and what I say on this river goes!"

"You talk, Britt, as though a title that you've grabbed onto, the same as you have everything else along this river, amounted to anything in law," objected the magnate of Castonia. "I own the land that those booms are hitched to, and you're not goin' to bluff me by any of your obstruction-to-navigation talk. You've managed to get most things along this river this spring your own way, but I reckon I know when you've gone about far enough. Don't try to rub it in!"

[Pg 336]

Mr. Britt, serene in his autocracy as drive-master, was in no mood to bandy arguments nor waste time on such as Rodburd Ide.

He whirled away, lifted a wooden box from one of the wagons, and set it down gingerly.

"MacLeod!" he called. The boss came away from the river-bank, where he was superintending stowing of supplies. "Unpack this dynamite, and blow damnation out of those booms—the sortin'-gap first!"

The man twisted his face in a queer grimace.

"I don't think I'll do it, Mr. Britt," he said, curtly.

He looked away from Britt when the tyrant began to storm at him, and fixed his eyes on Wade's face with an expression there was no reading.

"No, I ain't no coward, either," he said, at last, interrupting his employer's flow of invective. "But dynamitin' other folks' booms with the folks lookin' at you ain't laid down in a river-driver's job; and I ain't got any relish for nailin' boot-heels all next summer in a jail workshop."

"I'll take the responsibility of this!" shouted Britt.

"Then you'd better do the job, sir," suggested MacLeod, firmly. "Law has queer quirks, and I don't propose to get mixed into it."

There was no gainsaying the logic of the boss's position. The Honorable Pulaski noted that the men had overheard. He noted also that there were no signs of any volunteers coming from the ranks. And so, with the impetuosity of his temper, when the eyes of men were upon him, he set his own hand to the job. With a cant-dog peak he began to pry at the box-cover.

And Colin MacLeod, hesitating a moment, walked straight up to Dwight Wade—to that young man's discomposure, it must be confessed. Wade set his muscles to meet attack. But MacLeod halted opposite him, folded his arms, and gazed at him with something of appeal in his frank, gray eyes. There was candor in his look. In their other meetings Wade had only seen blind hate and unreasoning passion.

[Pg 337]

"Maybe you've got an idea that I'm a pretty cheap skate, Mr. Wade," he blurted. "Maybe I am, but it ain't been so between me and men unless there was women mixed in. My head ain't strong where women is mixed in. You hold on and let me talk!" he cried, putting up his big hand. "I've got eleven hundred dollars in the bank that I've saved, my two hands, and a reputation of bein' square between men. That's all I've got, and I want to keep all three. I had you sized up wrong at the start. I mixed women in without any right to. I misjudged the cards as they laid. I used you dirty, and I got what was comin' to me. Now I've found out. I know how things stand with you all along the line, from there"—he pointed south towards the outside world that held Elva Barrett—"to there on Enchanted. And I'm sorry! I'm sorry I ever got mistaken, and made things harder for a square man. You heard what I just said to Mr. Britt. I wanted you to hear it. All is, I'd like to shake hands with you and start fresh. It may have to be man to man between us yet on this river, but, by —, for myself I want it man-fashion."

He cast a glance behind him. Britt had the box open, and had dug out of the sawdust some cylinders in brown-paper wrappings. When MacLeod whirled again to face Wade the latter put out his hand without reservation in face or gesture. Months before, such amazing repentance and conversion might have astonished him, but now he understood the real ingenuousness of the woods. Pulaski Britt, hardened by avarice and outside associations, was not of the true life of the woods. This impulsive boy, with his mighty muscles and his tender heart, was of the woods, and only the woods.

[Pg 338]

MacLeod came one step nearer to Rodburd Ide, and pulled off his hat.

"If it ain't too much trouble, Mr. Ide, I wish you'd tell Miss Nina that I've done it square and righted it fair. And don't scowl at me that way, Mr. Ide! It was a dream—and I've woke up! It was

park.
We roofless go, with the cook's bateau to follow our
hungry crew—
A billion of spruce and hell turned loose when the Allegash
drive goes through."

—Ballad of the Drive.



Wade's poor beast was staggering when at last he topped the horseback overlooking Enchanted valley. He himself plodded behind the jumper, clinging to it, walking to keep awake. He had started in the dusk, he had been nearly twenty-four hours on the road from Castonia, and it was growing dusk again. He was too utterly weary to be surprised when Tommy Eye came hurrying down from a knoll that commanded a long view of the tote road. The light of a little camp-fire glowed on the knoll, and he saw that a horse was tethered there.

"I'm gettin' to be a worse outlaw than ever, Mr. Wade," declared the teamster. "I've stole one of your hosses, and grub and hay from the store camp, and I'm livin' here in the woods. I've been waitin' for you," he added, wistfully. "I might have slept a little last night when I didn't know, but I reckon I didn't. I figgered you'd come. I've been waitin' for you. They can't say I'm one of your men, Mr. Wade. I'm livin' here in the woods."

[Pg 342]

"Look here, Eye," blurted his employer, roughly, "I haven't any time nor taste for fool talk just now. You take the horse back to camp and get on your job." He started on.

"You don't sound as though you'd got what you went after," cried Tommy, unabashed. He came trotting behind. "You didn't get satisfaction, then, Mr. Wade! Injunction still there, hey? You didn't get—"

"What did you suppose I'd get from Pulaski Britt, you infernal fool?" His own brutality towards the faithful servitor made him ashamed. But the spirit of evil that had taken possession of him was speaking through lips that he surrendered in weariness of body and bitterness of soul. And when a shade of repentance smote him at sight of Tommy trotting sorrowfully at his side, he gasped out of his woe. "He has dynamited our booms, Tommy. Did it with his own hands. And now"—he threw up his arms towards Blunder Lake—"wait till to-morrow!"

Tommy Eye stopped without a word and let Wade go on.

"Wait till to-morrow?" he mumbled, as he scrambled back up the knoll. "Wait till to-morrow, when I've got a two-hoss load of canned thunder planted under Blunder dam, and the devil helpin' me by puttin' them two to sleep ev'ry night, snorin' like quill-pigs?" He waited until Wade had stumbled out of sight, then cinched upon his horse the blankets that had served for couch during his vigil, mounted, and urged the animal through the woods, kicking heels into its flanks.

There were men of the crew who heard an unwonted sound in the midnight hush of the Enchanted camp. It was a dull, heavy, earth-thudding noise that swept down from the north over the tree-tops and travelled on through the forest. Men awoke and asked themselves what had awakened them, and went to sleep again, and knew not what it meant.

[Pg 343]

Wade did not hear the sound. Exhaustion had fettered his senses when he crawled into his bunk in the office camp. What he did hear, as he roused himself in the gray of early dawn to set his hand to the desperate task he was resolved upon, was the splattering rush of a horse's feet in the spring ooze of the tote road and a human voice that shrieked, hysterically: "Man the river, damn ye! Man the river!"

It was Tommy Eye. He was crouched on the back of his horse when the men came tumbling out. His little eyes were like fire-points. The wattles of his neck were blood-gorged. He spat froth as he raved at them.

"Man the river, I tell ye! She's b'ilin' full from bank to bank. Ben Rodliff's injunction busted to blazes and the Enchanted drive started slam-whoopin', and it's me that's done it!"

"You hellion, have you blowed Blunder dam?" shouted the chopping-boss, while Dwight Wade was still gasping for words.

"Blowed Blunder dam!" shrieked Tommy, "Why, I've blowed Blunder dam so high that Ben Rodliff's injunction can't get to it in a balloon. I've blowed a gouge ten feet deep in the bed-rock. I've let the innards out of Blunder Lake. She's runnin' valley-full, ice-cakes dancin' jigs on the black water! And when they ask who done it, tell 'em it was me—Tommy Eye, the outlaw! Tommy Eye, with a two-hoss load of canned thunder!" He tried to shake his fists above his head, but groaned, and one arm dropped as though it were helpless. Blood was caked on his hand and wrist. He did not wait for Wade to ask the question.

"It's the pay I got for wakin' 'em up in time to run, Mr. Wade. I give 'em a chance. They give me a thirty-thirty! They'd have give me more if they could have shot straighter. I'm an outlaw, but there ain't no blood on my head, Mr. Wade."

[Pg 344]

He slid off the horse and staggered towards the cook camp.

"Gimme mine in my hand, cook!" he called. "I'll eat it while I'm runnin'. For it's man the river, boys!"

And the rest of them ate running, too. Wade led them, determined that no one should head him in the race. He heard the husky breathing of the hundred runners at his back when he swept around the granite dome of Enchanted and came in view of the valley. They stopped, panting, and surveyed the scene for a moment. They saw the tumbling waters, yeasty and brown. They heard the groan and grunt of dissolving log-piles as the fierce tide tore at them and bore away the logs. And each man took a new grip on his cant-dog handle and loped on.

It was plain that Tommy Eye had spoken the truth. That flood was not the mere outrush through shattered dam-gates. Blunder Lake was emptying itself through a rent deeper than nature had set in its side. In a stream-bed of intervalles and broad levels the Enchanted drive would have been scattered to its own disaster. But Blunder valley was slashed deep between the hills. The turbid flood that raced there was penned. The log-herds could only butt the granite cliffs and surge on. There was but one outlet—the mad current of Blunder Stream pouring down to its junction with the Umcolcus.

They “manned the river,” scattering along, one man posted at a curve in sight of another. A hat waved meant that a jam was forming and called for help. And when timber jack-strawed too wildly to be readily loosened by cant-dog and pick-pole they dynamited. There was no time for “knittin’-work” on that drive.

Tommy Eye, with meal-sack slung over his shoulder, made himself custodian of the “canned thunder.” It was Larry Gorman, woodsman poet, who first called him “Tommy Thunder.” If you go into the north country you can probably find some one to sing you the song that Larry Gorman composed, the first verse running:

[Pg 345]

“Come, listen, good white-water chaps. Who was that man,
I wonder,
Who turned himself to an outlaw bold and put the bang-
juice under?
Who was it cracked the neck of her, ‘way up at old Lake
Blunder,
When hell broke loose and sluiced our spruce?
‘Twere done by Tommy Thunder!”

His was the recklessness of mania. Men who saw him coming along the shore with his horrid burden dodged into the woods. Where and when he slept no one knew. Daytime and night-time he was racing to where logs had cob-piled. Roars that boomed among the hills told that he had arrived. In the first gray of morning men saw him warming his dynamite over a camp-fire, and shuddered and hurried away. To find the king log of a jam and drop his cartridge where it would have instant effect, he took chances that made men turn their backs. It isn’t pleasant to see a man macerated by grinding logs or scattered across the sky.

No word passed between Tommy Eye and Dwight Wade. Those days and nights when the Enchanted drive was on its roaring way down Blunder Stream towards the Umcolcus River were not the sort of days that invited conversation. On the ordinary stream-drives to the main river, in the desperate hurry of the driving-pitch, men work as many hours as they can stand up. With the drive under control, they can at least stop sluicing in the dead hours of the night. But the Enchanted drive that spring was a wild beast that never closed its eyes. As it raged along they did not dare to leave it alone for an hour. Men raced beside it, clutched at it, clung as long as they were able, and dropped off, stunned by the stupor of exhaustion.

[Pg 346]

After a few hours some one’s prodding foot stirred them back to wakefulness, and they stumbled up and began the fight once more. Outside of a charge in battle, there is no place where individual rivalry is so keen and eager as in a driving-crew on hard waters. Men do not require to be urged to do their utmost. “Coward” and “shirk” are sneers that cut deeply down-river.

Wade, rushing from point to point, cant-dog in hand, his shoes mere pulp, his clothes in tatters, saw men asleep with their faces in the tin plates that the cookee had heaped with food. They had gone to sleep with the first mouthful, hungry as demons, but overcome the moment their feet stopped moving.

Some he found asleep where they were posted to “card”^[6] certain ledges. He beat them about the head with the flat of his hand, and they awoke and thanked him with wistful smiles that touched his heart. But brutal force had started the Enchanted drive, brutal force marked its rush, and it had to be brutal force that could keep it going. Brutal force took toll in the logs that were splintered by dynamite, but it was a toll that circumstances demanded. A man unwilling to take the chances that Tommy Eye took would have wasted thousands of feet instead of hundreds, and Wade knew it, and gulped words of gratitude when they met, hurrying on the shore.

Half-way to the Umcolcus, Lazy Tom Stream enters Blunder, and here Wade found Barnum Withee rushing in his logs and eager to accept an invitation to join drives. Withee was asking no questions. He did not need to. He understood. What had been done upstream was none of his business. He could declare that much when he got his drive down, and could defend himself from complicity. In the mean time he would take advantage of the situation.

[Pg 347]

There were now one hundred and sixty herders of the wild flock, with Barnum Withee, one of the best men on the river, to take command of the rear.

So Wade went to the front—to Castonia, sweeping down the swollen Umcolcus in one of Withee’s

bateaux with four men at the oars. He had played violence against violence in the big game. It was natural to suppose that Pulaski Britt by this time had his fists clinched ready to retaliate.

On either side of his bateau as he hurried to Castonia the logs ran free. But they were all his own logs, this advance-guard, marked with the double diamond and cross.

Had Rodburd Ide done his part, and were they being held at Castonia?

He found the booms set again, Rodburd Ide in command at the sorting-gap, and various members of the "It-ll-git-ye Club" sitting along the shore with guns across their knees. Every able-bodied man in Castonia was on the booms with a pick-pole, and already the double-diamond logs were swirling and herding in the logan.

"It's done, and they'll have us into court, but, by —, we'll have some ready money to fight 'em with!" screamed the little man, grasping Wade's hand as the bateau swung broadside to the sorting-gap platform. And when he had heard the story of "Tommy Thunder, outlaw," that his partner hurriedly related, his mouth parted in a grin, even though his forehead puckered with apprehension.

"But will it let us out, Wade?" he asked. "The man took it on himself out of his grudge against Britt. But will it let us out?"

"It's your money that is in this thing, and not mine," returned the young man, "and I suppose it's natural for you to think of your property first. But as for me, Mr. Ide, I'll take what profits are coming to me from this operation, and I'll stand in with poor old Tommy Eye, jointly indicted, jointly in the dock, jointly in jail, till the last dollar is spent. For he did just what I meant to do!"

[Pg 348]

For an instant Ide's eyes flickered. Then they became shiny.

"My boy," he said, "the Enchanted Township Lumber Company is incorporated, and you and I own the stock. With your consent, I'm goin' to make over ten shares of that stock to Thomas Eye before I sleep to-night. I reckon this company stands ready to fight its battles and protect its members."

"Mr. Ide," gulped Wade, contritely, "forgive me for that hasty speech. But God help me, partner, I've been in hell since I saw you last, and I'm full of the fires of it! I think you can understand."

He crouched there in the bateau, clutching the gunwale with hands that trembled until they shook his body to and fro. His face was streaked with the grime of days and nights of toil. His eyes were haggard with sleeplessness. Fasting had hollowed his cheeks. Such lines as only the bitter things of life can set in the human countenance were traced deep upon the brown skin. In his rags and his weariness he was as one who had been conquered instead of one who had fulfilled. The little man of Castonia reached down and patted his shoulder with a hand that had a father's sympathy in its touch.

"Bub," he murmured, "I'm goin' to take some other time to tell you what I think of you. Just now I want you to go down to the house. My Nina will know what to do for you and what to say to you. She has some letters for you to read before you go to sleep, and I reckon they'll give you pleasant dreams."

Kate Arden opened the door and welcomed him with a smile, the first he had ever seen on her face. His heart came into his mouth at sight of her. Never had she seemed so like Elva Barrett. But before he had word with her Nina Ide came running, floury hands outspread, her face alight above her housewife's tire. She stood on tiptoe, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

[Pg 349]

"Brother Dwight! Brother Dwight!" she half sobbed. "Oh, Brother Dwight, I didn't know—I didn't realize—I didn't understand, or I would have held you back until you had torn these two arms from my shoulders. I prayed for you and watched for you. They buy their logs with blood up there. But it shall not be with your blood, Dwight. I have hated father all these days. He knew what you were going back to, and didn't stop you!"

"It was all my own affair, little girl," Wade returned, gently—"my duty, to which I was bound by fair man-promise. And I've got our logs into the river, but it has been the kind of work that blisters souls, Sister Nina!" His voice had a pathetic quaver of weariness.

"I was at the sorting-gap when the first one came, and I knelt and kissed it," she said, smiling at him from misty eyes. "And then I wrote to the one of all the world and told her about a hero."

An hour later he lay asleep in a darkened room, the tense lines gone from his face, his lax hand spread over a letter, finding the sweetest solace in slumber he had known for many a day.

At the first peep of light next morning he was at the sorting-gap in full command, removing a burden of responsibility from Rodburd Ide which had made that little man a quaking wreck of his ordinarily self-reliant self; for in every log that had come spinning around the upper bend of the Umcolcus his fears had seen the peak of Pulaski Britt's rushing bateau.

That the river tyrant would come, furious beyond words, was a fact accepted by Dwight Wade, and Wade was ready to meet him. But every hour that passed without bringing the drive-master meant so much more towards the success of the Enchanted drive.

[Pg 350]

The logs came in stampeding droves. Withee's were mixed among the "double diamonds," but there were no delays at the sorting-gap. Two crews fed them through—one for day and one for

night, with a dozen lanterns lighting their work. Wade was resolved that Britt should lack at least one argument in the bitter contention. The sorting should be done faithfully and promptly, and the down-river drive should be hurried on its way. But at the end of four days not one of the logs nicked with the "double hat," Britt's registered mark, had shown up. Nor did Britt himself appear.

A sullen, suffering man of Britt's crew, who came walking into Castonia with hand held above his head to ease the agony of a felon, brought the first news.

Blunder Lake dam had been blown up, he reported, and such a chasm had been opened in the bed-rock that the lake had vomited its waters to the west until the bed of Britt's shallow canal to the east was above the water-line. Britt had only his splash dams along Jerusalem for a driving-head. In the past years the pour of the canal had given him a current in Jerusalem dead-water. Now he was trying to warp his logs across there with head-works and anchor. But the south wind was howling against him, and no human muscle could turn the windlass, even when the oaths of the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt dinned in the ears of his toilers. All this the new-comer related.

"And it's something awful to hear!" said the man. "He walks the platform of that head-works, back and forth and back and forth. He cusses God and the angels, the wind and all it blows across. And then when he is well worked up to cussin', he 'tends to the case of the devil that blowed up Blunder Lake dam. And his face is as red as my shirt, and the veins stick out on his forehead as big as a baby's finger. They say that you can't cuss only about so much without somethin' happenin' to you. I've read about the cap'n of a ship that done it too much once, and his ghost is still a-sailin'. All I've got to say is that if Pulaski Britt don't stop, he'll get his."

[Pg 351]

The "It-'ll-git-ye Club" had listened to this recital intently. It agreed forebodingly. In fact, in special session the club passed a vote of dismal prophecy for the whole Jerusalem operation.

CHAPTER XXIX

[Pg 352]

THE PARADE PAST RODBURD IDE'S PLATFORM

"'Twas a hundred wet miles to the
handiest rail,
And his home it was fifty more;
And behind on our bateau's
bubblin' trail
Raced Death with his muffled
oar."

—Ballad of the Drive.



Two days later the "It-'ll-git-ye's," as sombre prophets, were distinctly cheered by the sight of Boss Colin MacLeod borne past Rodburd Ide's store on a litter. They were hurrying him to the hospital down-river, and he had his teeth set into his lip to keep back the groans.

"No, sir! No fifty more miles of that for you, my boy," declared Ide, when he was told that MacLeod's arm and leg were broken. "Into my house you go, and the doctor comes here." And MacLeod was put to bed in the spare room, weeping quietly.

"It was the head-works warp done it, Mr. Wade," he moaned, turning hollow eyes upon his sympathizer. "Broke and snapped back. I told him man's strength couldn't warp them logs across against that wind, but he was bound to make us do it. He said I was a coward, Mr. Wade. But I took the place at the guide-block to show I wasn't. And then he cursed me for gettin' hurt!"

When Wade left the room he found Kate Arden waiting outside. During the days he had been at Castonia the girl had appeared to avoid him. She had paled when he spoke to her, replied curtly, and hurried away as though she feared he was about to broach some topic that would distress her. Yet it was not towards him merely that she had displayed that apprehensive reserve. Not even to Nina Ide did she open her heart, and Nina told Wade of this with wonderment and grief. She had been docile, even to the subterfuge of sitting silent by John Barrett's bedside when Elva Barrett had resigned her trust to seek Dwight Wade in the wilderness. She had made no comment, asked no questions. She had showed dumb gratitude, and eagerly sought such household tasks as could be intrusted to her untrained hands. But wistful shrinking, the air of a wild thing confined but not tamed, was with her ever.

[Pg 353]

Now, when she faced Wade outside the door, her eyes shone like stars, her cheeks flamed, and the old fearlessness and determination were in her features.

"I shall take care of him," she said. "I shall nurse him, and no one but me! I shall know how, Mr. Wade. He'll need me now. You go and tell them all that I shall nurse him. No one else shall do it."

It was the woods mate claiming her own. It was more than love as convention has classed it. It was the fire, lighted by the primordial torch of passion, which burns and does not reason, not to be smothered by rebuff or abuse; its pride not the calculating pride of a resentment that can

divorce it from its object, but the pride of blind, utter loyalty through all.

Dwight Wade had gone near enough to the heart of things to understand this love.

He looked at her a little while, sympathy lighting his eyes and vibrating in his voice as he answered her:

“You shall have him, poor little girl, because he needs you.”

He opened the door for her, closed it behind her, and left them alone together.

Two days later the “It-’ll-git-ye Club” realized the full climax of ominous prophecy and was correspondingly content. The Honorable Pulaski D. Britt was brought out from Jerusalem dead-water and taken down-river, a helpless hulk of a man grunting stertorous breaths, the right hand, which had waved command all those years along Umcolcus, now hanging helpless at his side, his right leg dangling uselessly as they lifted him along to a wagon. [Pg 354]

It was the fate that the choleric tyrant had invited. That last and mightiest rage of his life, when with swollen veins and purple face he had stamped about the head-works platform, had done for Pulaski Britt and his weakened blood-vessels what those who knew him well had predicted. Wade was not surprised, for the suppression of Britt by this means and at this frantic climax in Britt’s affairs was too entirely logical. It came to him suddenly that he felt a sense of relief, and then he wondered with shame whether he had hoped for it. Then he dismissed the speculation as unprofitable and not agreeable. The tyrant was in chains of his own forging. His logs came limping along in scattered squads, and were sent through the sorting-gap and down-river.

The new master of the corporation drive was not cordial when he appeared, hurrying towards headwaters. But he was not hostile, either. He surlily demanded expedition at the Castonia sorting-gap, and went on up-river.

There are some combatants who, seeing a crisis approaching, feel that it is their best policy to sit down and wait until the crisis comes to them. This implies the calculation that perhaps the crisis may go around the other way, but it is not the policy for the intrepid. In his present mood Dwight Wade decided to go to meet the crisis, with head erect and shoulders back.

He addressed the president of the Umcolcus Lumbering and Log-driving Association, requesting a conference with him and the directors of the body. If the letter thinly screened a demand for that conference it was the fault of Dwight Wade’s resolute determination to face the issue. [Pg 355]

The letter remained long unanswered. Its receipt was not even acknowledged. The delay seemed to be contemptuous slighting of a possible overture of amicable settlement. Rodburd Ide sadly reasoned to this conviction, and daily gazed towards the south in search of the sheriff bringing writs of attachment with as much trepidation as he had gazed north in the black days when he expected Pulaski Britt.

Dwight Wade was hardly more sanguine. And yet he was heartened by letters from his lawyer, who was up and at the foe once more. The lawyer intimated that an earnest conference was going on among the big fellows of the timber interests. In the past, prior to sittings of the legislature, they had heard the ominous stampings of the farmer’s cowhide boots and the mutterings about unrighteous privileges, filched State timber lands, and unequal taxation. In the secret sessions of those directors the stand-pat roarings of their woods executive had drowned all pacific suggestions of compromise. But now the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt lay at home, unable to lift the ponderous hand which had pounded emphasis.

In the end Wade decided that the big fellows were waiting to settle what they were to say before they summoned him to conference. That he was correct was proven by the letter that came at last. It was a courteous letter; it appointed a time of meeting, and named as the place John Barrett’s office in “Castle Cut ’Em.”

On the evening before Wade left Castonia, Colin MacLeod summoned him, a cheerful convalescent who looked out daily into the new flush of June, and restlessly moved his stiffened limbs in his chair, and counted the days between himself and the free life out-of-doors. [Pg 356]

“Mr. Ide was tellin’ me why you are goin’ and where you are goin’,” said MacLeod, with simple earnestness. Kate Arden was sitting with her head on his knee, and he was smoothing her hair gently. “I wanted the little girl to stay here while I talked this to you. I told you about my dream once, man-fashion. I’ve told her about it. I ain’t excusin’ or screenin’ myself. I didn’t know, that’s all. I never tried to fool this little girl, Mr. Wade. They lied who said I did. I pitied her, Mr. Wade. But it’s a hard place to start in lovin’ a girl where I saw her first—and I’d seen some one else before I saw her. But I know now, sir. I’ve told her so all these days that she’s been with me, so true and tender. I reckon I never was in love before. I wouldn’t have acted that way with you, sir, if I really was in love and trusted. But there ain’t no mistake this time, Mr. Wade!” He gulped, a sob in his throat and a smile in his eyes. “I’m her man for ever and ever. She knows it and she’s glad. And I know she’s all mine, and I’m the happiest man in the whole north country.”

He broke in upon Wade’s eager burst of congratulation.

“There’s just one more word I wanted to say—sort of in the way of business, Mr. Wade.” There was a peculiar expression upon his face. “Maybe when you’re outside some one—*some one* may drop a word or inquire about her business—you know—something about her.” His look of strange

significance became deeper, and Wade understood. "All is, you might say that she and Colin MacLeod are goin' to get married, and Colin MacLeod ain't askin' anybody for her—only herself and God. God ain't denyin' His Fatherhood to a girl as good as she is. Colin MacLeod ain't askin' anything else—ain't allowin' anything else. Say that to 'em. He's got his own two hands and eleven hundred dollars saved, and the big woods for her and for him. She and I wouldn't be happy outside the big woods, Mr. Wade. Say it all to 'em, sir, if any one drops a word to you—and they probably will, because you've had words with them. You'll know how to say it. But make it plain that it will be dangerous business for any man to reach out his hand to her or to me with anything in it—and tell 'em it's Colin MacLeod says that," he added, bitterly.

[Pg 357]

"The only things you need, Colin," cried Wade, advancing towards him, "are good-will and friendship, and both are in the hand I give you."

At the door he turned.

"Will you wait until I come back, Colin?" he asked. "I would like to stand up with you when you are married—Nina Ide and I."

"I'll wait, Mr. Wade," returned the other, tears of gratitude springing to his eyes. "And may luck go with you in this business."

That fervent wish, put again into words, followed him next morning when he departed from Castonia. This time it was Tommy Eye who said it—Tommy Eye, fresh down with the rear of the drive, and a very timorous and apprehensive figure of an outlaw. But he seemed to be a little disappointed after Wade had assured him that the matter of Blunder Lake dam would be assumed by the Enchanted Company, and that Tommy himself had nothing to fear.

"I reckon you can do it, Mr. Wade. You can do most anything you set out to," sighed Tommy. "Howsomever, I kind of figgered on that outlaw business to keep me away from down-river. The city ain't good for the likes of me. They begin to rattle the keys of the calaboose the minute I get off'n the train."

[Pg 358]

"Tommy," commanded Wade, severely, "don't you go down-river this season. You stay here and attend to the work we've got marked out for you."

"That's just as good a wheel-trig as the outlaw proposition would be," declared Tommy, his face clearing. "Orders from you settles things, Mr. Wade. Here I stay."

On the morning of his departure Rodburd Ide's daughter walked with Wade to the store, where the stage started. In the days of their late intimacy the girl had grown into his heart. The sincerity of a sister, self-reliance and womanly sympathy had characterized her attitude towards him from the first; and she had welcomed a friendship which lifted her to a comrade's level. She was as yet an altruist in matters of the heart; she frankly and openly interested herself only in the loves of others.

Wade knew all the unspoken words that her sympathy dictated when, standing out before them all, she clasped his hand before he clambered over the wheel of the old stage.

He saw no very clear horizon for his own love, but his comrade's smile heartened him, and the flutter of her handkerchief carried its message of good courage when the stage pitched down the slope that hid Castonia settlement.

The road to "Castle Cut 'Em" lay before him. At that moment the Honorable John Barrett loomed so largely as a foe that Dwight Wade's thoughts were of his fight. Of his love he hardly dared to think at all.

The "It-'ll-git-ye Club" watched the departure of the stage that day with more than usual interest, also with somewhat deeper gloom.

The knowledge that Dwight Wade and his partner had assumed all blame for the destruction of Blunder Lake dam was current in all the north country.

[Pg 359]

King Spruce's delay in visiting punishment only made the situation graver in the estimation of the prophets of evil. King Spruce had many weapons, and in the past had promptly seized the one nearest at hand and dealt a crushing blow when provocation was given. The fact that the new drive-master had passed on without even as much as a threat of retribution was taken as an ominous presage. It was agreed that when King Spruce remained grimly silent so long, in order to revolve a project of retaliation, he must be whittling an especially mighty bludgeon.

The members of the "It-'ll-git-ye Club" very frankly expressed thoughts of this tenor to the half-dozen men who arrived at Castonia in the early morning to take the stage down-river with Wade. The men gloomily agreed. Two of them showed signs of funk at the last moment, and had to be coaxed on board the stage by the young man.

These were the sort of men that Wade had seen a year before in the general rooms of "Castle Cut 'Em." They were independent operators and stumpage-buyers, who had responded to the messengers and letters that Wade had been sending out.

There were more of them who joined the party at the railroad; others came into the train as it stopped here and there on the way to the junction. All of them seemed impressed by that sense of gloom and apprehension; there was not a sanguine face.

But in their unanimity of dolorousness they displayed a further interesting characteristic. They seemed entirely ready to accept this young man as their leader and their champion; in fact, as he went among them, they confessed that they had come along only because he had assured them that he would bear the brunt of the approaching conflict. The experience of years had shown them that they had no one man or combination of men among themselves who could go up against King Spruce. They even distrusted each other's honesty, for every man realized all the iniquity of the game of graft and grab that had characterized their dealings with each other and with the main power in the past.

[Pg 360]

That they should let this new-comer lead them was because he had already proved his mettle and his fearlessness, and the whole north country knew it. He had beaten Pulaski Britt at his own game, he had defied King Spruce, and now he was willing to beard the tyrant in his own castle, and only asked their presence at his back in order that the sight of them might prove his assertions and aid to win some grace for all of them.

Therefore, they had answered his appeal and had gone with him. But they went without alacrity, and were encouraged only by the despondent belief that at least matters could not be made any worse.

CHAPTER XXX

[Pg 361]

THE PACT WITH KING SPRUCE

"We 'lowed he was caught, and we never thought we'd see
Mike any more;
But he took and he kicked a bubble up, and he rode all
safe to shore."

—The "Best White-water Man."



So it came about that once more, after a year had passed, Dwight Wade walked up the hill towards "Castle Cut 'Em," where the sunlight shimmered upon grim walls. The mills along the canal screamed at him as he passed. His fancy detected derision in the squall of the saws.

A score of men plodded along with him—broad-backed, silent men who, now that they were under the frown of King Spruce's citadel, muttered their forebodings to one another. Resentment and desperation had left their hearts open to the young man's appeal when he urged a union against the tyrant. But now their reluctance hinted that their determination was built on some very shifty sands. He remembered the man who had declaimed a year before so stoutly, and had been turned aside from his purpose by a few words whispered in a corner.

And so it was without high hopes that Wade led the way into the broad stairway to the castle. He wished that the men would pound down their feet on those stairs so that King Spruce would know that they were coming as bold and honest men should come. But his little army tiptoed up, their heavy boots creaking as do the boots of decorous mourners at a funeral.

[Pg 362]

When he opened the door of the big general room his face did not show that he was disheartened. He had determined not to come to John Barrett as a mere petitioner. He was no longer allowing hope to soften the bitter business of demanding.

He saw the situation more plainly now than he saw it when he had bidden farewell to Elva Barrett in Pogeys Notch. There could be no hope of truce between himself and John Barrett. By winning the love of John Barrett's daughter, by possessing himself of the secret of John Barrett's shame, he realized that he had committed offences that the pride of Barrett could not pardon. He had followed this by striking the first blow against the autocracy of King Spruce in the north country, and he was now appearing before King Spruce's high chamberlain as the leader of the rebels whom his deed had spurred to rebellion.

In spite of his great love for Elva Barrett, he felt a sense of exaltation because he had the power to put that love behind him in his dealings with the man he had resolved to fight. It was a relief to convince himself now that Barrett was his implacable foe. Any other belief would have made him less courageous.

And when John Barrett, at sound of the tramp of many feet in the outer room, opened the door of his private office and stood framed there, Dwight Wade welcomed the spectacle of his antagonist. Barrett's face was saturnine when he surveyed the group.

"I do not understand this, Mr. Wade," he said. "You and I arranged a conference. But there was no arrangement for a general hearing."

"The question of conditions on the Umcolcus is a question that takes in all of us who operate there, Mr. Barrett," said Wade. "I'm present to answer to matters that can be charged to my individual responsibility, but the interests of all of us have a bearing on that responsibility, and we are here to have a fair understanding."

[Pg 363]

Barrett stepped back, and motioned the young man to enter the private office.

"If you have come to speak for these men," he said, "you may step in here, and we will see if we can arrange to have the directors meet them later."

"Well, Mr. Wade," he remarked, when they were alone, "so you have become a magnate in the north country in strictly record time!"

"Sarcasm won't help us any in settling this matter!" cried the young man, warmly. "I can understand very well, Mr. Barrett, how you from your position look down on me in mine. But I have at least become some sort of a business man, and I—"

"You have become an almighty good business man," declared the land baron, with such a ring of sincerity in his voice that the young man stared at him in sudden astonishment, "and in a little while we will talk business."

"That is all I'm here to talk," said Wade, the red coming into his cheeks.

When he had left the group of the lumbermen he noticed that some of them bent lowering looks upon him. They had seen other men invited apart and bought from their purpose. Wade wondered if the Honorable John Davis Barrett was not about to trade amnesty on the Blunder dam charge for betrayal of the men who had come at his back to "Castle Cut 'Em."

Then a sense of shame at such suspicion came to him, as John Barrett began to speak:

"Mr. Wade," said he, "you are more of a chap in every way than you were the last time you were in this office, but—you are still young." From that moment the older man had the advantage. And yet Barrett was not calm. He sat down at his desk, and tossed his papers as he talked. His gaze wavered. His jowls hung heavy and flabby. The marks of his prostrating illness had not left him. But in the gloom of his face there was depression that did not arise from physical causes. Barrett's bitter experience had drawn its black cloud around him. He pulled out the shelf of his desk, set his elbows upon it as though to steady his nerves, and faced Wade.

[Pg 364]

"Young man," he began, "the way the world looks at those things—from the stand-point of some one who hasn't been through the fire—I can afford to look down on you from my height as a moneyed man, and as something more in this State. An outsider might think so. But, by —, you are the one that can look down on me, for you are square and clean!"

He would not allow Wade to interrupt.

"I haven't called you in here to buy or bulldoze you. There is a matter between us that hasn't been settled. I made you a promise on Jerusalem Mountain that I didn't keep. I had excuses that seemed good to me then. They don't look that way now. They didn't look good to me when I got off my sick-bed at Castonia. Did Rodburd Ide tell you anything about my talk with the girl?"

"He told me, Mr. Barrett."

The magnate plunged on desperately.

"I don't think you're dull, Mr. Wade, but you can't understand what it meant to me when my child turned on me, spat in my face, and left me. It wasn't merely the bitterness of that one moment—the blistering memory of it goes to sleep with me and wakes up with me. It's with me in every look my daughter Elva gives me, though the poor child tries to hide from me that her old faith and trust have left her. I'm not going to whine, young man, but I'm in hell—in hell!"

[Pg 365]

His voice broke weakly. Then there was silence in the room. Wade heard only the yell of the distant saws and the shuffle of the woodsmen's feet as they paced the big reception-hall of King Spruce.

Between the two men there was too much understanding for empty words of sympathy.

"Lane is dead," blurted the millionaire, at last. "What will become of the girl?"

"MacLeod is to marry her. She nursed him through his sickness at Castonia; they love each other very sincerely, Mr. Barrett, and you need have no trouble about her future. Neither of them will ever trouble you; in fact, MacLeod asked me to say as much for him."

Barrett was silent a long time, his gaze on the floor. He looked up at last, and his eyes shone as though a comforting thought had come to him.

"There's one thing I can do. I've got money enough to make them independent for life. Be my agent in that, Mr. Wade, and—"

"I have another message from MacLeod. I have grown to know the man pretty well, and you'd best take my advice. He says it will be dangerous business for any man to put out a hand to him with anything in it."

"You mean they won't take a fortune when I am ready to hand it to them?"

"I mean it, Mr. Barrett. There are strange notions among some of the folks of the big woods. Your money is of no use. I advise you frankly not to offer it. At any rate, I'll not insult MacLeod by being your messenger."

The timber magnate whirled his chair and gazed away from Wade, looking into the depths of his big steel vault.

At the end of a few minutes Wade spoke to him, but he did not reply. When the young man accosted him again, after a decent pause, Barrett spoke over his shoulder without turning his face.

[Pg 366]

"The directors and myself will meet your party in the board-room across the hall in half an hour, Mr. Wade."

It was not the voice of John Barrett. It was the thin, quavering tone of a man who was mourning, and wished to be left alone.

Wade went quietly away.

He was John Barrett once more when Wade saw him half an hour later at the head of the big table in the directors' room. All the board was there except Britt.

The lumbermen whom Wade headed stood in solid phalanx at the foot of the room. There were no chairs for them. But they accepted this fact patiently.

Wade, a little in advance of his associates, looked into the face of the Honorable John Barrett, now impassive once more. But there was a strange gleam in the eyes. In the hush it seemed that the directors were waiting for Wade to speak—it was the coldly contemptuous silence of King Spruce ready to hearken.

The young man accepted this waiting as his challenge. He stepped to the lower end of the huge table; John Barrett arose at the other end, and bent forward, leaning on his knuckles.

"Gentlemen," he said, his tone courteous, his air pacificatory, "Mr. Dwight Wade, of the Enchanted Lumber Association is here to-day to confer with us on those matters that have already been considered by us in executive session. I wish first, with your permission, to inform him on one point that we have already decided. My statement will enable us to avoid discussion of an unpleasant matter—I may say, an unprofitable matter."

It was plain to be seen that Mr. Barrett was dominating this session, as he had undoubtedly dominated the preliminary session in which the sentiment of King Spruce towards Dwight Wade had been crystallized. Somehow the young man understood that the strange look in Barrett's eyes meant reassurance.

[Pg 367]

"The destruction of Blunder Lake dam was a mistake," continued Barrett, but without even a note of reproach in his voice.

"I am ashamed to have to fight that way for common rights that have been stolen," said the young man. "It's nasty fighting, and I don't want to fight that way any more."

"We don't, either," broke in a director, bluntly. "There's no money in it."

"A moment, gentlemen," interposed Barrett, "I have the floor. I don't propose to speak any ill of an associate—an unfortunate associate. I refer to Mr. Britt, who has for so many years been our executive in the north woods. But I can say frankly, as I have said to his face, that we have deplored some of his measures as unwise. We have tried to restrain him, but we have not been able to hold him back. Let us be charitable, gentlemen, and say merely that old-fashioned lumbering in this State has been conducted on wrong ideas. The manner of putting in Blunder Lake dam is a case in point. In compromising the present disputes between the timber interests and the other tax-paying interests of the State, I'll be frank to say that the history of that dam would not be helpful. Prosecuting you, Mr. Wade, would entail going into the history of that dam. Therefore, we shall not prosecute you; and an arrangement has already been made by which you are purged of contempt of court in the matter of the injunction."

He grew earnest.

"You have undoubtedly come here to tell us, Mr. Wade, that the woods are being butchered for immediate profit; that the present system of lumbering forces operators to use destructive measures. But we can't enter into argument on that. We admit it. We have been slow about getting together to correct those abuses. We also admit that the time seems to have arrived when we must have a different system. I have been upon my timber tracts during the past year, and have received new light on a great many matters that I had not taken pains to inform myself on. I now view the situation differently, and my associates have coincided with my views."

[Pg 368]

For the others it was merely a business confession of error, an appeal for compromise. To Dwight Wade, looking into the eyes of John Barrett and studying his strange expression, it was much more, and his heart beat quickly. "The whole situation will undoubtedly take a new aspect from now on. We propose, on our part, to leave the past just as it is; set mistakes against mistakes, gentlemen, and clean the slates."

He straightened, dropping his air of confidential appeal.

"Next week, gentlemen, the convention of my party will nominate me to be the next governor of this State. I need not tell you that the nomination means election. I fully realize my responsibilities. I propose to assume them, and to execute them honestly. I declare here before my associates, as I shall later to the people of the State, that if I am elected I shall be a governor

of the whole people, and not of any faction. Personally I shall be glad, Mr. Wade, to have you and all others interested come before the next legislature, present complaints and arguments, and let this whole matter be settled justly. You will find that you and your supporters, as well as we, have interests to protect against the demagogues. In the new conditions that are coming to prevail in public matters, those who manage to keep the full measure of their rights are exceedingly fortunate. Against those new conditions it is folly to fight. But in correcting abuses the pendulum sometimes swings too far. I think we can fairly ask you, Mr. Wade, and those operators who may follow your leadership, to join us in protecting what rightfully belongs to us—to all of us. You will understand that I am offering no hint of bulldozing nor inviting corrupt collusion. It has come to a time when we cannot afford to jeopardize our party or our property, and the safety of both is concerned in a full and frank settlement of this question of the timber lands."

[Pg 369]

He gazed inquiringly at this young man who had come up to the fortress to fight, and now found fortress and foe dissolving like a mirage. There was but one manly attitude to take towards a public pledge of that sort.

"Mr. Barrett," declared Wade, earnestly, "on that basis you have my honest co-operation." He took his hat. There was no excuse for remaining longer in a directors' meeting of the Umcolcus Lumbering Association. His head whirled with the suddenness of this new situation.

There was a general mumble of indorsement from the men massed at the rear of the room, but one of the group spoke out after a moment's hesitation: "I'm glad to hear you talk of a square deal before next legislature, Mr. Barrett, but I can't help rememberin' that when some of us went up to the state-house two years ago, to see if we couldn't get a few rights, we butted square up against a lobby that was handlin' some fifteen thousand dollars of King Spruce's money to beat us with, and to keep things right where they were."

There was no mistaking Barrett's sincerity now.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "I have just been admitting that there have been mistakes made in handling this matter. I didn't intend to go into details. It is not a pleasant task. But when I say that this matter shall have fair and square hearing in future, I mean it. And I pledge for myself and my associates—call us 'King Spruce,' if that means most to you—that not one dollar will be used by us in the next legislature, except for expenses of counsel and witnesses before the committees—the same legitimate expenses that you of the opposition will incur."

[Pg 370]

There was no Thomas among them who could persist in the face of a declaration like that. They dispersed.

Barrett overtook Wade in the corridor, slipped his hand beneath the young man's arm, and, without a word, led him back into the private office.

"I want to ask you a question, Mr. Wade," he said, still holding him by the arm. "Once, in stress of feelings and under peculiar circumstances, I promised certain things and did not fulfil them. You therefore have a perfect right to be sceptical as to my good faith now. I ask you—are you?"

"No, Mr. Barrett, I am not," returned Wade, with simple earnestness.

"Thank you, my boy!" His voice broke on the words. "When even a square and clean man gets to my age he begins to realize that the world is a bigger creditor of his than he had figured in the past," he went on, after a pause. "In the last few months I have had some bills presented to me that have found me a miserable bankrupt in spite of what my vault holds. You know what my debts are. Linus Lane was right when he told me that my kind of currency couldn't pay those debts. The dead have gone, leaving me their debtor; the living hold me their debtor still. My boy, when I realize what I owe and how useless that stuff is in there"—he shook his hand at the open door of the vault—"I loathe my money! You know what I owe to one child, and you have brought me word that I can never pay her. You know just as well what I owe to another child—I have taken from her most of her faith and love and happiness. Thank God, I can pay that debt in part, and I know the human heart well enough now to understand that I shall be paying the greater part."

[Pg 371]

He left Wade abruptly, and walked to the window and looked down into the street. He beckoned to the young man without turning his head. Wade, coming to his side, saw Elva Barrett's pony phaeton.

"I told my creditor to come here, and you see she is prompt," said Barrett, with a wistful smile. "She has accepted what I offer in settlement of my debt, and I offer you my hand, and tell you, with all the earnestness of my soul, that since I have come to realize values I approve my creditor's judgment. I have agreed to pay promptly on demand. Don't keep her waiting."

He pushed his "collateral" out into the corridor, and shut the door behind him.

Wade ran down the stairway, his hat in his hand, and came upon the sidewalk into the glare of the June sunshine. She was there! The silk of the phaeton's parasol strained a soft and tender light upon her face, and her glorious eyes received him, coming towards her, as though into an embrace. He swayed a little as he crossed the sidewalk, for his eyes swam. And before he reached her he turned and cast one look back at the great building behind him. He seemed to want to reassure himself about something—to see solid bricks and stone—to convince himself that it was not a fairy palace in which he had so amazingly and suddenly found the full fruition of all his hopes.

“What have they been doing to you in the ogres’ den, Dwight, boy?” she asked, a ripple of laughter in her voice. [Pg 372]

“I—I don’t know!” he stammered. “It all happened so suddenly. Take me away, sweetheart, where I can see a tree. I want to find my bearings once more!”

The pony trotted away demurely—so demurely that the girl surrendered one hand to him, and he held it tight-clutched between them, wordless, a mist in his eyes.

“Then it did astonish you, after all?” she ventured, breaking the silence.

For reply he pressed her hand. She was first to speak again.

“I know what a strange boy you are, Dwight,” she said, with a touch of humor in her tones. “For the peace of your soul for ever and ever, and the satisfaction of your pride, I want to tell you that my father offered me to you—I did not beg you from my father; but”—she hesitated and looked at him slyly—“I didn’t question the legal tender! Now that you are a business man, I suppose we ought to use business terms!”

But with his great love shining in his eyes, he pointed away from the staring houses, where the road wound on under the trees and the peace of perfect understanding lay beneath.

THE END

FOOTNOTES:

- [1] The right to cut trees on the seller’s land. Payment is based on the measurement of the logs as they are brought to the landing and piled ready for the drive.
- [2] Lynx, corruption of the French-Canadian name, *loup-cervier*.
- [3] An ashen pole, shod with an iron screw-point.
- [4] The Maine variety of the cant-dog, illustrated on the [cover](#).
- [5] Lest the remarkable attitude of the Honorable Pulaski D. Britt be considered an improbable resource of fiction, the author hastens to state that the Maine legislature, in considering the repeal of a log-driving charter, had exactly this situation submitted to it.
- [6] To disentangle and set free logs caught in the rocks.

TRANSCRIBER’S NOTE:

Minor changes have been made to correct typesetters’ errors; otherwise, every effort has been made to remain true to the author’s words and intent.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KING SPRUCE, A NOVEL ***

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