

LOST FARM CAMP

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SWICKEY SHOOTS THE BEAR

LOST FARM CAMP

BY
HARRY HERBERT KNIBBS

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ILLUSTRATED BY HAROLD JAMES CUE

[image]

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TO GRETCHEN

Over a height-of-land the trail

Wanders down to an inland sea
Where never a keel nor a mirrored sail
Has ruffled its broad tranquillity,
Save a golden shadow that fires the blue
When I drift across in my birch canoe....

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Swickey shoots the Bear

"Where be they?" she whispered

"Here's your game," he said hoarsely

"I didn't know, Swickey—I thought—there was someone else"

CHAPTER I—SWICKEY SHOTS A BEAR

Old man Avery hurried from the woods toward his camp, evidently excited. His daughter Swickey stood watching the black kitten Beelzebub play a clever but rather one-sided game with a half-dead field-mouse. As Avery saw the girl, he raised both hands above his head in a comical gesture of imprecation.

"Swickey, thet bug-eatin' ole pork-thief's been at the butter ag'in!"

"Why, Pop, thet's the second time he's done it!"

"Yes, an' he scraped all the butter he could outen it, an' upset the crock likewise. Swickey, we've got to git that b'ar or take the butter outen the spring-hole."

The girl's brown eyes dilated. "Why don't you trap 'im, Pop?"

"Law ag'in' trappin' b'ars in August."

"Law ag'in' shootin' deer in August, too, ain't they?"

"Thet's diff'runt. We've got to have fresh meat."

"Ain't b'ar meat?" she asked ironically.

"Reckon 'tis."

"Then, why ain't you a-shootin' of him?"

The old lumberman rubbed his hand across his eyes, or rather his eye,

for the other was nothing more than a puckered scar, and his broad shoulders drooped sheepishly. Then he laughed, flinging his hand out as though it contained an unpleasant thought which he tossed away.

“Gol-bling it, Swickey, seems to me as lately every time I drew a bead on a deer, they was three front sights on the gun, and as many as three deer where they oughter been one. ‘Sides,” he continued, “I ain’t ketched sight of him so fur. Now, mebby if you seen him you could shoot—”

Swickey grabbed the astonished Beelzebub to her breast and did a wild and exceedingly primitive dance before the cabin door.

“Be-el-zebub!” she cried, “Be-el-zebub! he’s a-goin’ to leave me shoot a b’ar—me! I ain’t shot nothin’ but deer so fur and he’s shot more ’n a million b’ars, ain’t you, Pop?”

“Wa-al, mebby a hun’red.”

“Is thet more ’n a million, Pop?”

The smile faded from Avery’s face. Huge, gray-bearded, pensive, he stood for a moment, as inscrutable as the front of a midnight forest.

Swickey eyed him with awe, but Swickey at fourteen could not be suppressed long.

“Pop, one of your buttins is busted.”

Her father slid his hand down his suspender strap and wrinkled the loose leather end round his thumb.

“How many’s a hun’red, Pop?”

Avery spoke more slowly than usual. “You git the cigar-box where be my ca’tridges.”

“Be I goin’ to shoot now?” she exclaimed, as she dropped the kitten and skipped into the cabin.

“Got to see him fust,” he said, as she returned with the cigar-box and his glasses.

“Here they be, Pop, and here’s your ‘specs.” Avery adjusted his spectacles, carried the box of cartridges to the chopping-log and sat down. Beelzebub, who had recovered his now defunct field-mouse, tried to make himself believe it was still alive by tossing it up vigorously and catching it with a curved and graceful paw.

“You count ’em, Swickey, as I hand ’em to you.”

“One.”

“One,” she replied hurriedly.

“Two.”

“Two,” she repeated briskly.

“Three.”

“Thr-ee.” She turned the shells over in her hand slowly.

“Four.”

“Four’s ’nough to shoot a b’ar, ain’t it, Pop?”

“Five,” continued Avery, disregarding her question.

Swickey counted on her fingers. “One he guv me; two he guv me; then he guv me ’nother. Them’s two and them’s two and thet’s four, and this one makes five—is thet the name fur it?”

“Yes, five,” he replied.

“Yes, five,” replied Swickey. “Ain’t five ’nough?”

The old man paused in his task and ran his blunt fingers through the mass of glittering shells that sparkled in the box. The glint of the cartridges dazzled him for a moment. He closed his eyes and saw a great gray horse standing in the snow beneath the pines, blood trickling from a wounded forward shoulder, and then a huddled shape lying beneath the horse. Presently Nanette, Swickey’s mother, seemed to be speaking to him from that Somewhere away off over the tree-tops. “Take care of her, Bud,” the voice seemed to say, as it trailed off in the hum of a noonday locust overhead. The counting of the shells continued. Painfully they mounted to the grand total of ten, when Swickey jumped to her feet, scattering the cartridges in the grass.

“I don’t want to shoot no million b’ars or no hun’red to oncet.”

There were tears of anger and chagrin in her voice. She had tried to learn. The lessons usually ended that way. Rebellion on Swickey’s part and gentle reproof from her father.

“Don’t git mad, Swickey. I didn’t calc’late to hurt you,” said the old man, as he stooped and picked up the cartridges.

He had often tried to teach her what he knew of “book larnin’,” but his efforts were piteously unsuccessful. She was bright enough, but the traps, the river, her garden-patch, the kitten, and everything connected with their lonely life at Lost Farm had an interest far above such vague and troublesome things as reading and writing.

Once, after a perspiring half-hour of endeavor on her father’s part and a disinterested fidgeting on hers, she had said, “Say, Pop, I ain’t never goin’ away from you, be I?”

To which he had replied, “No, Swickey, not if you want to stay.”

“Then, ding it, Pop, ain’t I good ’nough fur you jest as I be, ’thout larnin’?”

This was an argument he found difficult to answer. Still, he felt he was not doing as her mother would have wished, for she often seemed to speak to him in the soft *patois* of the French-Canadian, when he was alone, by the river or on the hills.

As he sat gazing across the clearing he thought he saw something move in the distance. He scowled quizzically over his spectacles. Then he drew his

daughter to him and whispered, "See thar, gal! You git the rifle."

She glided to the cabin noiselessly and returned lugging the old .45 Winchester. Avery pointed toward a lumbering black patch near the river.

"He's too fur," she whispered.

"You snick down through the bresh back of the camp. Don't you shoot less'n you kin see his ear plain."

The girl stooped and glided behind the cabin, to reappear for a moment at the edge of the wood bordering the clearing. Then her figure melted into the shadows of the low fir trees. Avery sat tensely watching the river-edge.

Swickey had often rested the heavy barrel of the old rifle on a stump or low branch, and blazed away at some unsuspecting deer feeding near the spring in the early morning or at dusk, with her father crouching behind her; but now she was practically alone, and although she knew that bruin would vanish at the first suspicion of her presence, she trembled at the thought that he might seek cover in the very clump of undergrowth in which she was concealed. She peered between the leafy branches. There he was, sitting up and scraping the over-ripe berries from the bushes clumsily. She raised the rifle and then lowered it. It was too heavy to hold steadily, and there was no available branch or log upon which to rest it. A few yards ahead of her was a moss-topped pine stump. Shoving the rifle along the ground she wriggled toward the stump and sighed her relief when she peeped over its bleached roots and saw the bear again. He was sitting up as before, but his head was moving slowly from side to side and his little eyes were shifting uneasily. She squirmed down behind the rifle, hugging it close as her father had taught her. The front sight glistened an inch below the short black ear. She drew a long breath and wrapping two fingers round the trigger, pulled steadily.

With the *r-r-r-ri-p-p, boom!* of the Winchester, and as the echoes chattered and grumbled away among the hills, the bear lunged forward with a prolonged *whoo-owoow*, got up, stumbled over a log, and turning a disjointed somersault, lay still.

The old man ran toward the spot. "Don't tetch him!" he screamed.

From the fringe of brush behind the bear came Swickey, rifle in hand. Disregarding her father she deliberately poked bruin in the ribs with the gun-muzzle. His head rolled loosely to one side. She gave a shrill yell of triumph that rang through the quiet afternoon, startling the drowsy birds to a sudden riotous clamoring.

Avery, panting and sweating, ran to his daughter and clasped her in his arms. "Good fur you! You're my gal! Hit him plump in the ear." And he turned the carcass over, inspecting it with a critical eye.

"Goin' on five year, I reckon. A he one, too. Fur's no good; howcome it

were a bing good shot for a gal.”

“Don’t care if the fur ain’t no good, he’s bigger nor you and me put t’gether, ain’t he, Pop?”

“Wal, not more ’n four times,” said Avery, as he reached for the short, thin-bladed skinning-knife in his belt and began to deftly work the hide off the animal. Swickey, used to helping him at all times, held a corner of the hide here and a paw there, while the keen blade slipped through the fat already forming under the bear’s glossy black coat. Silently the old man worked at cutting up the carcass.

“Godfrey!” The knife had slipped and bit deep into his hand. “Why, Pop! Looks as if you done it a-pu’pose. I was watchin’ you.”

“It’s the specs. They don’t work right somehow.”

The girl ran to the cabin and returned with a strip of cloth with which she bound up the cut.

“Thar, pop. It ain’t hurtin’ you, be it?”

“N-o-o.”

“We kin bile some ile outen him,” said Swickey, as with a practical eye she estimated the results.

“Three gallon, mebby?”

“How much does thet make in money?”

“’Bout a dollar and a half.”

“Say, Pop!” She hesitated.

“Wa-al?”

“Kin I have the money for the ile?”

Her father paused, wiped his forehead with a greasy hand, and nodded toward the pocket containing his pipe and tobacco. She filled the pipe and lighted it for him.

“Say, Pop, I hear somebody singin’.”

“Wha—Jumpin’ Gooseflesh! If I ain’t clean forgot they was fifteen of them lumber-jacks comin’ fur supper. Ya-as, thar they be down along shore. Swickey, you skin fur the house and dig into the flour bar’l—quick! We’ll be wantin’ three bake-sheets. I’ll bring some of the meat.”

CHAPTER II—LOST FARM FOLK

Lost Farm tract, with its small clearing, was situated in the northern timber lands, at the foot of Lost Lake. Below lay the gorge through which the river plunged and thundered, its diapason sounding a low monotone over the three cabins on the hillside, its harsher notes muffled by the intervening trees.

When Hoss Avery first came there, bringing his little girl whom he had fondly nicknamed "Swickey," he climbed the narrow trail along the river, glanced at the camp, swung his pack from his shoulders, filled his pipe, and sitting on a log drew Swickey down beside him and talked to her, asking her her opinion of some things which she understood and a great many things which she did not, to all of which she made her habitual reply of "Yes, Pop."

That was when Swickey, ten years old and proudly conscious of a new black-and-red checkered gingham dress, had unwittingly decided a momentous question.

"You like this here place, Swickey?" her father had asked.

"Yes, Pop," and she snuggled closer in his arm.

"Think you and me can run the shebang—feed them lumber-jacks goin' in and comin' out, fall and spring?"

"Yes, Pop."

"Course you'll do the cookin', bein' my leetle woman, won't you?" And the big woodsman chuckled.

"Yes, Pop," she replied seriously.

"And you won't git lonesome when the snow comes and you can't play outside and ketch butterflies and sech things in the grass? They ain't no wimmen-folks up here and no leetle gals to play with. Jest me and you and the trees and the river. Hear it singin' now, Swickey! Bet you don't know what it's sayin'."

"Yes, Pop." But Swickey eyed her father a mite timidly as she twisted her dress round her fist. She hoped he would not ask her what the river was "really-truly, cross-your-heart-or-die, sayin'," but she had imagination.

"What be it sayin', Swickey?"

She rose to the occasion pluckily, albeit hesitating at first. "Why it's—it's—it's sayin', 'father, father, father,'—jest slow like thet. Then it gets to goin' faster and faster and says, 'Hello, Swickey! Hello, Pop! thet you?'—jest like thet. Then it goes a-growlin' 'long and says, 'Better stay fur a lo-o-ng time 'cause it's nice and big and—and—' and I'm hungry fur supper," she added. "Ain't thet what it says, Pop?"

Avery pushed his hat over his eyes and scratched the back of his head.

"Suthin' like thet. Yes, I reckon it says, 'Better stay,' and she says better stay, howcome I don't jest know—"

"Who is she, Pop?"

"Your ma, Swickey. She talks to me like you hear'n' the river talkin' some-

times.”

“She ain’t never talkin’ to me—reckon I be too leetle, ain’t I, Pop?”

“Ya-a-s. But when you git growed up, mebby she’ll talk to ye, Swickey. And if she do, you mind what she’s a-tellin’ you, won’t you, leetle gal?”

“Yes, Pop.” And she looked up at her father appealingly. “But ain’t I never goin’ to see her in my new dress, mebby?” And she smoothed the gingham over her knees with a true feminine hand and a childish consciousness of having on her “good clothes.”

“If God-A’mighty’s willin’, Swickey, we’ll both on us see her some day.”

“Who’s he, Pop? Is he bigger’n you be?”

“Ya-a-s,” he replied gently. “He’s bigger nor your Pop; but why was you askin’ thet?”

“Cause Jim Cameron, what drives the team, says you be the biggest man that ever come into these here woods.” She paused for breath. “And he said, he did, ‘thet even if you was a old man they warn’t no man he thunk could ever lick you.’” She drew another long breath of anticipation and gazed at her father admiringly. “And mebby you could make God-A’mighty giv my ma back to you.”

“Huh! Jim Cameron said I was a old man, hey? Wal, I reckon I be—reckon I be. But I reckon likewise thet me and you kin git along somehow.” He began to count on his fingers. “Now thar’s the feedin’ of the crews goin’ in to Nine-Fifteen, and feedin’ the strays comin’ out, and the Comp’ny settles the bills. Then thar’s the trappin’, and the snowshoes and buckskin and axe-handles. Oh, I reckon we kin git along. Then thar’s the dinnimite when the drive comes through—”

“What’s dinnimite, Pop?”

Avery ceased his calculating abruptly. He coughed and cleared his throat.

“Wal, Swickey, it’s suthin’ what makes a noise suthin’ like thunder, mebby, and tears holes in things and is mighty pow’ful—actin’ unexpected at times—” He paused for further illustrations, but Swickey had grasped her idea of “dinnimite” from his large free gestures. It was something bigger and stronger than her father.

“Is dinnimite suthin’ like—like God-A’ mighty?” she asked in a timid voice.

“Ya-a-s, Swickey, it are—sometimes—”

So Swickey and her father came to Lost Farm. The river had said “stay,” and according to Swickey’s interpretation had repeated it. They both heard it, the old giant-powder deacon of the lumber company, and his “gal.”

Woodsmen new to the territory had often misjudged him on account of his genial expression and indolent manner, but they soon came to know him for a man of his hands (he bared an arm like the rugged bole of a beech) and a man of his word, and his word was often tipped with caustic wit that burned the conceit of those who foolishly invited his wrath. Yet he would “stake” an outgoing woodsman whose pay-check was inadequate to see him home, and his

door was always open to a hungry man, whether he had money or not. He liked “folks,” but he liked them where they belonged, and according to his theory few of them belonged in the woods.

“The woods,” he used to say, “gets the best of most folks. Sets ’em to drinkin’ or talkin’ to ’emselves and then they go crazy. A man’s got to have bottom to live up here. Got to have suthin’ inside of him ’ceptin’ grub and guts—and I ain’t referrin’ to licker nohow—or eddication. When a feller gits to feelin’ as like he was a section of the woods hisself, and wa’n’t lookin’ at a show and knowin’ all the while he was lookin’ at a show; when he kin see the whole works to onct ’thout seein’ things like them funny lights in the sky mornin’s and evenin’s, and misses ’em wuss than his vittles when he be whar they ain’t, then he belongs in the bresh.”

Swickey used to delight in hearing her father hold forth, sometimes to a lone woodsman going out, sometimes to Jim Cameron, the teamster at the “Knoll,” and often to her own wee brown self as she sat close to the big stove in the winter, chin on knees, watching the fleecy masses of snow climb slowly up the cabin windows.

Four summers and four long winters they had lived at Lost Farm, happy in each other’s company and contented with their isolation.

There was but one real difficulty. Swickey’s needlecraft extended little farther than the sewing on of “buttins,” and the mending of tears, and she did need longer skirts. She had all but out-grown those her father had brought from Trammouth (the lumber town down river) last spring, and she had noticed little Jessie Cameron when at the Knoll recently. Jessie, with the critical eye of twelve, had stared hard at Swickey’s sturdy legs, and then at her own new blue frock. Swickey had returned the stare in full and a little over, replying with that juvenile grimace so instinctive to childhood and so disconcertingly unanswerable.

The advent of the bear, and Swickey’s hand in his downfall, offered an opportunity she did not neglect. She had asked her father if he would buy the oil for her before he got the money for it from Jim Cameron. Avery, busy with clearing-up after the men who had arrived that afternoon, said he “reckoned” he could.

“I don’t calc’late to know what’s got into ye. No use in calc’latin’ ’bout wimmen-folks, but I’ll give you the dollar and a half. Mebby you’re goin’ to buy your Pop a new dress-suit, mebby?”

“What’s a dress-suit, Pop?”

“Wal,” he replied, “I ain’t never climb into one, but from what I seen of ’em, it’s a most a’mighty uncumf’table contrapshun, hollered out in front and split up the back so they ain’t nothin’ left but the belly-band and the pants. Makes me feel foolish like to look at em, and I don’t calc’late they’d be jest the best kind of

clothes fer trappin' and huntin', so I reckon I don't need any jest now."

"Huh!" exclaimed Swickey, "I reckon *you're* all right jest as you be. Folks don't look at *your* legs and grin."

Avery surveyed himself from the waist down and then looked wonderingly at his daughter. Suddenly his eye twinkled and he slapped his palm on his thigh.

"Wa-al, by the great squealin' moo-cow, if you ain't—"

But Swickey vanished through the doorway into the summer night.

CHAPTER III—MUCH ADO ABOUT BEELZEBUB

Fourteen of the fifteen men, who arrived at Avery's camp that afternoon, came into the woods because they had to. The fifteenth, David Ross, came because he wanted to. Ever since he could read he had dreamed of going into the woods and living with the lumbermen and trappers. His aunt and only living relative, Elizabeth Ross, had discouraged him from leaving the many opportunities made possible by her generosity. She had adopted the boy when his father died, and she had provided for him liberally. When he came of age the modest income which his father's estate provided was transferred from her care, as a trustee, to him. Then she had offered him his choice of professions, with the understanding that her considerable fortune was to be his at her death. She had hoped to have him with her indefinitely, but his determination to see more of the woods than his summer vacations allowed finally resolved itself into action. He told her one evening that he had "signed up" with the Great Western Lumber Company.

Protests, supplications, arguments were of no avail. He had listened quietly and even smilingly as his aunt pointed out what seemed to her to be the absurdities of the plan. Even a suggested tour of the Continent failed to move him. Finally she made a last appeal.

"If your income isn't sufficient, Davy, I'll—"

He interrupted her with a gesture. "I've always had enough money," he replied. "It isn't that."

"You're just like your father, David," she said. "I suppose I shall have to let you go, but remember there is some one else who will miss you."

“Miss Bascomb has assured me that we can never agree, on—on certain things, so there is really nothing to keep me here,—except you,” he added in a gentler tone, as he saw the pained look on her kindly old face. “And you just said you would let me go.”

“Would have to let you go, Davy.”

“Well, it’s all the same, isn’t it, Aunt Bess?”

She smiled tearfully at his boyishness. “It seems to be,” she replied. “I am sorry about Bessie—”

The following morning he had appeared at an employment office where “Fisty” Harrigan of the Great Western had “taken him on” as a likely hand, influenced by his level gaze and direct manner. “Fisty” and David Ross promised to become good friends until, during their stay at the last hotel en route to the lumber camp, Harrigan had suggested “a little game wid th’ b’ys,” wherein the “b’ys” were to be relieved of their surplus change.

“They jest t’row it away anyhow,” he continued, as David’s friendly chat changed to a frigid silence. “T’ought you was a sport,” said Harrigan, with an attempt at jocularity.

“That’s just why I don’t play poker with that kind,” replied David, gesturing contemptuously toward the mellow fourteen strung in loose-jointed attitudes along the hotel bar. “I like sport, but I like it straight from the shoulder.”

“You do, hey?” snarled Harrigan, drawing back a clenched fist. Ross looked him full in the eye, calm and unafraid. Fisty’s arm dropped to his side. He tried a new tack. “I was only tryin’ you out, kid, and you’re all right, all right,” he said with oily familiarity.

“Sorry I can’t say the same for you, Harrigan,” replied David. “But I’m going through to the camps. That’s what I came in for. If I don’t go with this crew, I’ll go with another.”

“Forget it and come and have a drink,” said Fisty, trying to hide his anger beneath an assumption of hospitality. He determined to be even with Ross when he had him in camp and practically at his mercy. David declined both propositions and Harrigan moved away muttering.

So it happened that when they arrived at Lost Farm Camp, the last stopping-place until they reached the winter operations of the Company at Nine-Fifteen, Fisty and David were on anything but friendly terms. David’s taciturn aloofness irritated Harrigan, who was not used to having men he hired cross his suggestions or disdain his companionship. When they arose in the morning to Avery’s “Whoo—Halloo” for breakfast, Harrigan was in an unusually sour mood and David’s cheerful “good-morning” aggravated him.

The men felt that there was something wrong between the “boss” and the “green guy,” as they termed David, and breakfast progressed silently. A straw

precipitated the impending quarrel.

The kitten Beelzebub, prowling round the table and rubbing against the men's legs, jumped playfully to Harrigan's shoulder. Harrigan reached back for him, but the kitten clung to his perch, digging in manfully to hang on. The men laughed uproariously. Fisty, enraged, grabbed the astonished kitten and flung it against the wall. "What'n hell kind of a dump is this—" he began; but Swickey's rush for her pet and the wail she gave as Beelzebub, limp and silent, refused to move, interrupted him.

Avery turned from the stove and strode toward Harrigan, undoing his long white cook's apron as he came, but Ross was on his feet and in front of the Irishman in a bound.

"You whelp!" he said, shaking his fist under Harrigan's nose.

The men arose, dropping knives and forks in their amazement.

Fisty sat dazed for a moment; then his face grew purple.

"You little skunk, I'll kill you fur this!"

Avery interfered. "If thar's goin' to be any killin' did, promisc'us-like, I reckon it'll be did out thar," he said quietly, pointing toward the doorway. "I ain't calc'latin' to have things mussed up in here, fur I tend to my own house-cleanin', understand?"

Ross, who anticipated a "free-for-all," stood with a chair swung halfway to his shoulder. At Avery's word, however, he dropped it.

"Sorry, Avery, but I'm not used to that kind of thing," he said, pointing to Harrigan.

"Like 'nough, like 'nough—I hain't nuther," replied Avery conciliatingly. "But don't you git your dander up any wuss than it be, fur I reckon you got your work cut out keepin' yourself persentable fur a spell." He drew Ross to one side. "Fisty ain't called 'Fisty' fur nothin', but I'll see to the rest of 'em."

Harrigan, cursing volubly, went outside, followed by the men. Avery paused to offer a word of advice to Ross.

"He's a drinkin' man, and you ain't, I take it. Wal, lay fur his wind," he whispered. "Never mind his face. Let him think he's got you all bruk up 'n' then let him have it in the stummick, but watch out he don't use his boots on you."

Harrigan, blazing with rage, flung his coat from him as Ross came up. The men drew back, whispering as Ross took off his coat, folded it and handed it to Avery. The young man's cool deliberation impressed them.

Harrigan rushed at Ross, who dropped quickly to one knee as the Irishman's flail-like swing whistled over his head. Before Harrigan could recover his poise, Ross shot up and drove a clean, straight blow to Harrigan's stomach. The Irishman grunted and one of the men laughed. He drew back and came on again, both arms going. Ross circled his opponent, avoiding the slow, heavy blows eas-

ily.

“Damn you!” panted Harrigan, “stand up and take your dose—”

Ross lashed a quick stinging fist to the other’s face, and jumped back as Harrigan, head down, swung a blow that would have annihilated an ox, had it landed, but David leaped back, and as Harrigan staggered from the force of his own blow, he leaped in again. There was a flash and a thud.

The Irishman wiped the blood from his lips, and shaking his head, charged at Ross as though he would bear him down by sheer weight. Contrary to the expectations of the excited woodsmen, Ross, stooping a little, ran at Harrigan and they met with a sickening crash of blows that made the onlookers groan. Ross staggered away from his opponent, his left arm hanging nervelessly at his side. As Harrigan recovered breath and lunged at him again, Ross circled away rubbing his shoulder.

Harrigan’s swollen lips grinned hideously. “Now, you pup—”

He swung his right arm, and as he did so Avery shouted, “Watch out fur his boots!”

David’s apparently useless left arm shot down as Harrigan drew up his knee and drove his boot at the other’s abdomen. Ross caught Harrigan’s ankle and jerked it toward him. The Irishman crashed to the ground and lay still.

With a deliberation that held the men breathless, Ross strode to the fallen man and stood over him. Harrigan got to his knees.

“Come on, get up!” said Ross.

Harrigan, looking at the white face and gleaming eyes above him, realized that his prestige as a “scrapper” was gone. He thrust out his hand and pushed Ross from him, staggering to his feet. As the trout leaps, so David’s fist shot up and smashed to Harrigan’s chin. The Irishman staggered, his arms groping aimlessly.

“Get him! Get him!” shouted Avery.

Ross took one step forward and swung a blow to Harrigan’s stomach. With the groan of a wounded bull, the Irishman wilted to a gasping bulk of twitching arms and legs.

For a moment the men stood spellbound. Fisty Harrigan, the bulldog of the Great Western, had been whipped by a “green guy”—a city man. They moved toward the prostrate Fisty, looking at him curiously. Ross walked to the chopping-log in the dooryard, and sat down.

“Thought he bruk your arm,” said Avery, coming toward him.

“Never touched it,” replied Ross. “Much obliged for the pointer. He nearly had me, though, that time when we mixed it up.”

One of the men brought water and threw it on Harrigan, who finally got to his feet. Ross jumped from the log and ran to him.

“All right, Harrigan,” he said. “I’m ready to finish the job.”

Harrigan raised a shaking arm and motioned him away.

Ross stepped back and drew his sleeve across his sweating face.

“He’s got his’n,” said Avery. “Didn’t reckon you could do the job, but good men’s like good hosses, you can’t tell ’em until you try ’em out. Wal, you saved me a piece of work, and I thank ye.”

A bully always knows when he is whipped. Fisty was no exception to the rule. He refused Ross’s hand when he had recovered enough breath to refuse anything. Ross laughed easily, and Harrigan turned on him with a curse. “The Great Western’s t’rough wid you, but I ain’t—yet.”

“Well, you want to train for it,” said Ross, pleasantly.

One by one the men shouldered their packs and jogged down the trail, bound for Nine-Fifteen, followed by Harrigan, his usually red face mottled with white blotches and murder in his agate-blue eyes.

David stood watching them.

“So-long, boys,” he called.

“So-long, kid,” they answered.

Harrigan’s quarrel was none of theirs and his reputation as a bruiser had suffered immeasurably. In a moment they were lost to sight in the shadow of the pines bordering the trail.

“Now for the kitten,” said David. “I think he’s only stunned.” He went into the cabin, and much to Avery’s amusement, washed his hands. “A dirty job,” he said, catching the twinkle in the lumberman’s eye.

“A dum’ good job, I take it. Whar you from?”

“Boston.”

“Wal, I seen some mighty queer folks as hailed from Boston, but I don’t recollect’ any jest like you.”

David laughed as he went to the corner and stooped over Swickey, who sat tearfully rocking the limp Beelzebub in her dress.

“What’s his name?” he asked gently.

“Be—el—zebug,” she sobbed.

“Will you let me look at him—just a minute?”

Swickey unrolled her skirt, the kitten tumbled from her knees, turned over, arched his back, and with tail perpendicular shot across the cabin floor and through the doorway as though nothing had happened.

David laughed boyishly.

“He’s got eight of them left, even now.”

“Eight whats left?” queried Swickey, fixing two tearfully wondering eyes on his face.

“Eight lives, you know. Every cat has nine lives.”

Swickey took his word for it without question, possibly because “eight” and “nine” suggested the intricacies of arithmetic. Although little more than a healthy young animal herself, she had instinctively disliked and mistrusted most of the men who came to Lost Farm Camp. But this man was different. He seemed more like her father, in the way he looked at her, and yet he was quite unlike him too.

“That’s a big name for such a little cat,” said David. “Where did he get his name?”

Swickey pondered. “Pop says it’s his name, and I guess Pop knows. The ole cat she run wild in the woods and took Beelzebub ’long with her ’fore he growed up, and Pop ketched him, and he bit Pop’s thumb, and then Pop said thet was his name. He ketched him fur me.”

Just then Avery came in with a pail of water and Swickey set about clearing the table. David, a bit shaken despite his apparently easy manner, strolled out into the sunshine and down the hill to the river. “My chance with the Great Western is gone,” he muttered, “and all on account of a confounded little cat, and called ‘Beelzebub’ at that! Harrigan would fix me now if I went in, that’s certain. Accidents happen in the camps and the victims come out, feet first, or don’t come out at all and no questions asked. No, I’ll have to look for something else. Hang it!” he exclaimed, rubbing his arm, “this being squire of dames and kittens don’t pay.”

Unconsciously he followed the trail down to the dam, across the gorge, and on up the opposite slope. The second-growth maple, birch, and poplar gave place to heavy beech, spruce, and pine as he went on. Presently he was in the thick of a regiment of great spruce trees that stood rigidly at “attention.” The shadows deepened and the small noises of the riverside died away. A turn in the trail and a startled doe faced him, slender-legged, tense with surprise, wide ears pointed forward and nostrils working.

He stopped. The deer, instead of snorting and bounding away, moved deliberately across the trail and into a screen of undergrowth opposite him. David stood motionless. Then from the bushes came a little fawn, timidly, lifting its front feet with quick, jerky motions, but placing them with the instinctive caution of the wild kindred. Scarcely had the fawn appeared when another, smaller and dappled beautifully, followed. Their motions were mechanical, muscles set, as if ready to leap to a wild run in a second.

What unheard, unseen signal the doe gave to her offspring, David never knew, but, as though they had received a terse command, the two fawns wheeled suddenly and bounded up the trail, at the top of which the doe was standing. Three white flags bobbed over the crest and they were gone.

“How on earth did that doe circle to the hillside without my seeing her?” he

thought. Then he laughed as he remembered the stiff-legged antics of the fawns as they bounded away, stirring a noisy squirrel to rebuke. On he went, over the crest and down a gentle slope, past giant beeches and yellow birch whose python-like roots crept over the moss and disappeared as though slowly writhing from the sunlight to subterranean fastnesses. Dwarfed and distorted cedars sprung up along the way and he knew he was near water. In a few minutes he stood on the shore of No-Man's Lake, whose unruffled surface reflected the broad shadow of Timberland Mountain on the opposite shore.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "I suppose it's time to corral a legion of guide-book adjectives and launch 'em at yonder mass of silver and green glories, but it's all too big. It calls for silence. A fellow doesn't gush in a cathedral, unless he doesn't belong there." He sat looking over the water for perhaps an hour, contented in the restful vista around him. "I wish Aunt Elizabeth could see this," he muttered finally. "Then she might understand why I like it. Wonder who owns that strip of land opposite? I'd like to. Great Scott! but my arm's sore where he poked me."

A soft tread startled him. He swung round to find Hoss Avery, shod with silent moosehide, a Winchester across his arm, standing a few feet away.

CHAPTER IV—THE COMPACT

"After fresh meat?" asked Ross.

"Nope. Lookin' fur a man."

Avery's good eye closed suggestively and he grinned. Standing his rifle in the crotch of a cedar, he drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket and carefully shaved a pipeful from it. Then he smoked, squatting beside David as he gazed across the lake.

"Purty lake, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," replied David.

"Chuck full of trout—big fellers, too. Ever do any fishin'?"

"A little. I like it."

"Slithers of deer in thet piece across thar," pointing with his pipestem to the foot of Timberland Mountain. "Ever do any huntin'?"

"Not much. Been after deer once or twice."

“Must have been suthin’ behind thet poke you gave Fisty this mornin’, I take it?”

“About one hundred and seventy pounds,” replied David, smiling. Avery chuckled his appreciation. Evidently this young man didn’t “pump” easily.

Puff—puff—“Reckon you never done no trappin’”

“No, I don’t know the first thing about it.”

Avery was a trifle disconcerted at his companion’s taciturnity. He smoked for a while, covertly studying the other’s face.

“Reckon you’re goin’ back to Tramworth—mebby goin’ to quit the woods, seein’ as you and Fisty ain’t calc’lated to do any hefty amount of handshakin’ fur a while?”

“Yes, I’m going back, to get work of some kind that will keep me up here. I wanted to learn a bit about lumbering. I think I began the wrong way.”

“Don’t jest feel sartain about thet, m’self. Howcome mebby Harrigan do, and he’s boss. He would have put you on swampin’ at one plunk a day and your grub. Reckon thet ain’t turrible big pay fur a eddicated man. They’s ’bout six months’ work and then you git your see-you-later pay-check fur what the supply store ain’t a’ready got.”

“It’s pretty thin picking for some of the boys, I suppose,” said David.

“Huh! Some of ’em’s lucky to have their britches left to come out in.”

“I didn’t expect to get rich at it, but I wanted the experience,” replied David, wondering why Avery seemed so anxious to impress him with the wage aspect of lumbering.

“Don’t calc’late you ever did any spec’latin’, did you?”

“Well, I have done some since I had my fuss with Harrigan this morning.”

Avery tugged at his beard thoughtfully.

“I’m turnin’ a penny onct in a while or frequenter. With the trappin’ winters, feedin’ the crews goin’ in and comin’ out, makin’ axe-handles and snowshoes, and onct in a spell guidin’ some city feller in the fall up to whar he kin dinnimite a moose, I reckon six hundred dollars wouldn’t cover my earnin’s. I could do more trappin’ if I had a partner. Mebby me and him could make nigh on to five hundred a year, and grub.”

“That’s pretty good,—five hundred clear, practically.”

“Ya-a-s.” Avery grunted and stood up, thrusting his pipe in his pocket. “Said I was huntin’ fur a man when you ast me. You’re the man I be huntin’ fur if you want a job bad ’nough to hitch up with me, and Swickey.”

Ross arose and faced him, his surprise evident in the blank expression of his face.

“I’m not out of cash,” he replied.

“Thet ain’t what I ast you fur,” said Avery, a shade of disappointment flick-

ering across his face. "I want a man to help."

"How much would it cost to outfit?" asked David.

"Wal, I got a hundred and fifty traps, and mebbly we could use fifty more, not countin' dead-falls for b'ar and black-cat. And you sure need a rifle and some blankets and some winter clothes. I figure fifty plunks would fit you out."

"I didn't know but that you would want me to put up some cash toward expenses,—provisions, I mean?"

"No," said Avery. "I reckon you ain't broke, but thet ain't makin' any diff'runce to me."

"That's all right, Avery. It wasn't the expense of outfitting. I simply wanted to know where I would stand if I did accept. But I have no recommendations, no letters—"

"Hell! I guess them two hands of your'n is all the recommendations I want. I've fit some m'self and be reckoned a purty fair jedge of hosses, and a man what is a good jedge of hosses knows folks likewise. I ain't in no hurry fur you to say yes or no." The old man swung his rifle to the hollow of his arm. "Take your time to think on it, and you kin stay to Lost Farm Camp jest as long as you are wishful. 'Tain't every day a eddicated man what kin use his hands comes floatin' into these here woods."

"Well," said David, "I've decided. There are reasons why I don't want to go back. It's a fair offer and I'll take it."

"Put her thar!" the huge bony fist of the lumberman closed heavily on David's hand, but met a grip almost as tense. "Me and you's partners. Half-and-half share of workin', eatin', earnin's, and fightin'—if there's any fightin' to be did. Reckon you'd better go to Tramworth and git fixed up and mebbly you calc'late to write to your folks."

They strode down the trail, Avery in the lead. As they neared the last turn which led them out to the footboard of the dam, he paused.

"My gal Swickey is growin' up to whar she oughter git larnin'. I sot in to learn her, but she's always a-squirmin' out of it by askin' me things what I can't answer and then gettin' riled at her Pa. Now if you could—'thout lettin' on as you was doin' it—larn her readin' and writin' and sech, I'd be pow'ful glad to pay you extra-like fur it."

So the cat was out of the bag at last. Avery wanted a teacher for his girl. The old man was willing to take a green hand as partner in trapping and share the proceeds with him for the sake of Swickey's education. Well, why not?

"I'll do what I can, Avery."

"Thet's the talk. Me and you'll make a lady of her."

As they approached the cabin a figure appeared in the doorway and the melodious treble of a girl's voice rang across the river. She disappeared as Avery's

Triton bellow answered.

"She's callin' us fur dinner," he explained needlessly.

"Did you get anything?" said Swickey, as they entered the cabin.

"He bagged me," said Ross, laughing.

"Whar'd he bag you?" exclaimed Swickey, solicitously looking at David for visible proof of her father's somewhat indifferent marksmanship.

"Over on No-Man's Lake—I think that's what he called it," replied David.

"He's a-goin' to stay, right along now. I've been wantin' to git a partner to help with the traps fur quite a spell."

"You ain't never said nothin' to me 'bout gettin' a partner," said Swickey, her vanity wounded. "You always said I was as good as any two men helpin' you."

Avery, a trifle embarrassed at his daughter's reception of the new partner, maintained an uncomfortable silence while dinner was in progress. He had hoped for delight from her, but she sat stolidly munching her food with conscious indifference to his infrequent sallies.

That evening, after David had gone to bed in the small cabin back of the camp, Avery sat on the porch with his daughter. For a long time she cuddled the kitten, busily turning over in her mind the possibilities of a whole dollar and a half. She had heard her father say that the new man was going to Tramworth in the morning. Perhaps he would be able to get her a dress. A dollar and a half was a whole lot of money. Maybe she could buy Pop some new "specs" with what she had left after purchasing the dress. Or if she had a book, a big one that would tell how to make dresses and everything, maybe *that* would be better to have. Jessie Cameron could sew doll's clothes, but her mother had taught her. The fact that Swickey could not read did not occur to her as relevant to the subject. She felt, in a vague way, that the book itself would overcome all obstacles. Yes, she would ask the new man to buy a book for her and "specs" for her Pop. How to accomplish this, unknown to her father, was a problem she set aside with the ease of optimistic childhood, to which nothing is impossible.

"Pop," she said suddenly.

"Wal?"

"Mebby you kin give me thet dollar-money fur the ile."

"Ya-a-s," he drawled, secretly amused at her sudden interest in money and anxious to reinstate himself in her favor. "Ya-a-s, but what you goin' to do? Buy Pop thet dress-suit, mebbey?"

"I reckon not," she exclaimed with an unexpected show of heat that astonished him. "You said dress-suits made folks ack foolish, and I reckon some folks acks foolish 'nough right in the clothes they has on without reskin' changin' 'em." With this gentle insinuation, she gathered Beelzebub in her arms and marched

to her room.

“Gosh-A’mighty but Swickey’s gettin’ tetchy,” he exclaimed, grinning. “Wal, she’s a-goin’ to have a new dress if I have to make it myself.”

When he went into the cabin, he drew a chair to the table and, sitting down, took two silver pieces from his pocket and laid them on Swickey’s plate. He sat for a long time shading his eyes with his hand. He nodded, recovered, nodded again. Then he said quite distinctly, but in the voice of one walking in dreams, “I know it, Nanette. Yes, I know it. I’m doin’ the best I kin—”

He sat up with a start, saw the silver pieces on the plate and picked them up.

“Swickey!” he called, “be you sleepin’?”

“Yes, Pop,” she replied dutifully.

He grinned as he went to her room. As he bent over her she found his head in the dark, and kissed him. “I’m sorry what I said ’bout the clothes, Pop. I don’t want no money-dollar—I jest want you.”

He tucked the money in her hand. “Thar it is. Dollar and a half fur the ile.”

She sighed happily. “I say thanks to my Pop.”

“Good-night, leetle gal.”

She lay awake long after he had left her, turning the coins over in her hot fingers. Presently she slipped from the bed and, drawing the blanket about her, stole softly to the door.

CHAPTER V—A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

With a soft rush of wings an owl dropped from the interior blackness of the midnight forest and settled on a stub thrust from a dead tree at the edge of the clearing.

Beelzebub, scampering sinuously from clump to clump of the long grass, flattened himself to a shadow as the owl launched silently from the limb, legs pointing downward and curved talons rigid. Wide, shadowy wings darkened the moonlit haze where Beelzebub crouched, tail twitching, and ears laid back. Suddenly he sprang away in long, lithe bounds; a mad patter of feet on the cabin

porch and he scrambled to his fastness in the eaves.

Slowly the great bird circled to the limb again, where he sat motionless in the summer night, a silver-and-bronze epitome of melancholy patience.

Below him a leafless clump of branches moved up and down, although there was no breeze stirring. The owl saw but remained motionless. Stealthily the branches moved from beneath the shadow of the trees, and a buck stepped to the clearing, his velvet-sheathed antlers rocking above his graceful neck. Cautiously he lifted a slender foreleg and advanced, muzzle up, scenting the warm night air. Down to the river he went, pausing at times, curiously intent on nothing, then advancing a stride or two until he stood thigh-deep in the stream. Leisurely he waded down shore, lifting a muzzle that dripped silvery beads in the moonlight.

Above him on the slope of the bank a door opened and closed softly. He stiffened and licked his nostrils. With the slight breeze that rippled toward him over the wavering grasses, he turned and plunged toward the shore, whirling into a dusky cavern of tangled cedars. With a swishing of branches he was gone.

"Ding thet deer," said Swickey, as she hesitated on the cabin porch. She listened intently. Sonorous and regular strains from her father's room assured her that he had not been disturbed.

She stepped carefully along the porch and into the dew-heavy grass, gathering the blanket closely about her. Beelzebub's curiosity overcame his recent scare and he clambered hastily from his retreat, tail foremost, dropping quickly to the ground. Here was big game to stalk; besides, the figure was reassuringly familiar despite its disguise. The trailing end of the blanket bobbed over the hummocks invitingly.

"*Ouch!* Beelzebub, you stop scratchin' my legs!" Swickey raised a threatening forefinger and the kitten rollicked away in a wide circle. She took another step. Stealthily the kitten crept after her. What live, healthy young cat could resist the temptation to catch that teasing blanket end? He pounced on it and it slipped from her nervous fingers and slid to the ground, leaving her lithe, brown young body bathed in the soft light of the summer moon. She dropped to her knees and extracted Beelzebub from the muffling folds. Then she administered a spanking that sent him scampering to his retreat in the eaves, where he peeked at her saucily, his wide round eyes iridescent with mischief. She gathered the blanket about her and resumed her journey, innocently thankful in every tense nerve that the cabin in which David Ross slept was on the other side of the camp. Patiently she continued on her way, keeping a watchful eye on Beelzebub's possible whereabouts until she arrived at the smallest of the three buildings. She took the silver pieces from her mouth, where she had placed them for safe-keeping while admonishing the kitten, and rapped on the pane of the open window.

David Ross had found it impossible to sleep during the early hours of the

night. The intense quiet, acting as a stimulant to his overwrought nerves, tuned his senses to an expectant pitch, magnifying the slightest sound to a suggestiveness that was absurdly irritating. The roar of the rapids came to him in rhythmic beats that pulsed faintly in his ears, keeping time with his breathing. A wood-tick gnawed its blind way through the dry-rot of a timber, *T-chick—T-chick—T-chick*—It stopped and he listened for it to resume its dreary progress. From the river came the sound of some one or something wading in the shallows. Each little noise of the night seemed to float on the undercurrent of that deep *hum-m* of the rapids, submerged in its heavier note at times, at times tossed above it, distinctly audible, always following the rushing waters but never entirely lost beyond hearing. Finally, he imagined the river to be a great muffled wheel turning round and round, and the sounds that lifted from its turning became visible as his eyes closed heavily. They were tangible annoyances, imps in staggled trousers and imps in calico dresses. The imps danced away to the forest and the dream-wheel of the river stopped abruptly. So abruptly that its great iron tire flew jangling across the rocks and fell a thousand miles away with a faint *clink, clink, clink*.

He sat up in bed listening. *Clink, clink*. He went to the window, leaned out, and gazed directly down into the dusky face of Swickey.

Without preamble she began.

"I shot a b'ar yest'day."

"You did! Well, that's pretty good for a girl."

"My Pop guv me the money fur the ile."

"Yes, but why did you come out to-night to tell me? Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid of what?" she asked, with an innocence that despite itself was ironical.

"That's so. There's nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

She hesitated, drawing the blanket closer about her.

"Nothin'—'cept you."

"Afraid of me? Why, that's funny."

"I was sca'd you'd laugh at me." Then she whispered, "I dassent tetch my clothes, 'cause Pop would have waked up, so I jest put on this, and come."

"That's all right, Swickey. I'm not going to laugh."

"I say thanks fur thet."

Such intensely childish relief and gratitude as her tone conveyed, caused David to feel a sense of shame for having even smiled at her pathetically ridiculous figure. He waited for her to continue. Reassured by his grave acceptance of her confidence, she unburdened her heart, speaking with hesitant deliberation and watching his face with a sensitive alertness for the first sign of ridicule.

"You're goin' to Tramworth in the mornin', ain't you?"

"Yes."

"I reckon you could buy me a book if I guv the money-dollar fur it?"

"A book! What kind of a book, Swickey?"

"Big as you kin git fur this," she said, thrusting the moist dollar into his hand; "a book what tells everything, to sew on buttins and make clothes and readin' and writin' and to count ca'tridges fur a hun'red—and everything!"

"Oh, I see!" His voice was paternally gentle. "Well, I'll try to get one like that."

"And a pair of 'specs'"—she hesitated as his white, even teeth gleamed in the moonlight—"fur Pop," she added hurriedly.

"All right, Swickey, but I—"

"His'n don't work right."

"But I don't just know what kind of 'specs' your father needs. There are lots of different kinds, you know."

Her heart fell. So this man with "larnin'"—his man who could fight Fisty Harrigans and make dead kittens come alive and jump right up, didn't know about "specs." Why, her Pop knew all about them. He had said his didn't work right.

The troubled look quickly vanished from her face, however, as a tremendous inspiration lifted her over this unexpected difficulty.

"Git 'specs,'" she whispered eagerly, "what Pop kin skin a b'ar with 'thout cuttin' his hand." There! what more was necessary except the other silver piece, which she handed to David with trembling fingers as he assured her he would get "just that kind." In her excitement the coin slipped and fell jingling to the cabin floor.

"I—beg—your—pardon."

She had heard David say that and had memorized it that afternoon in the seclusion of the empty kitchen, with Beelzebub as the indifferent object of her apology. She cherished the speech as a treasure of "larnin'" to be used at the first opportunity. Ross missed the significance of her politeness, although he appreciated it as something unusual under the circumstances.

"You won't tell Pop?" she asked appealingly.

"No, I won't tell him."

She retraced her steps toward the main camp, bankrupt in that her suddenly acquired wealth was gone, but rich in the anticipated joy that her purchases would bring to her father and herself accurate eyesight and "book-larnin'."

David wanted to laugh, but something deeper than laughter held him gazing out of the window, across the cabin roofs to where the moon was rocking in the haze of the tree-tops on the distant hills. Long after she had regained her bedroom and crept hurriedly beneath the blanket to fall asleep and dream

of Beelzebubs wearing bright new “specs” and chasing little girls across endless stretches of moonlight, he was still gazing out of the window, thinking of his little friend and her trust.

CHAPTER VI—TRAMWORTH

David was awakened by the sound of chopping. He arose and dressed sleepily. After a brisk ablution at the river’s edge he came up the hill, where he found Avery making firewood.

“Mornin’. Skeeters bother you some?”

“Guess I was too sleepy to notice them,” replied David.

He watched the old man swing the axe, admiring his robust vigor. Then he stooped and gathered an armful of wood. As he lugged it to the kitchen, Avery muttered, “He’s a-goin’ to take holt. I have noticed folks as is a-goin’ to take holt don’t wait to ask how to commence.”

“Where’s Swickey?” said David, as he came for more wood.

“Up to the spring yonder.”

David was about to speak, but thought better of it. When he had filled the wood-box he started for the spring.

“He’s a-goin’ to spile thet gal, sure as eggs,” said the old man, pausing to watch David.

But he whistled cheerfully as he moved toward the cabin. Presently the rattling of pans and a thin shaft of blue smoke from the chimney, a sizzling and spluttering and finally an appetizing odor, announced the preparation of breakfast.

“If they don’t come purty quick,” said Avery, as he came to the doorway and looked toward the spring path, “they’ll be nothin’ left but the smell and what me and Beelzebub can’t eat.”

As he turned to go in, David and Swickey appeared, both laughing. He was carrying both water-pails and she was skipping ahead of him.

“Pop, we seen some fresh b’ar tracks nigh the spring.”

“You did, hey?”

“Yip. Big uns. We follered ’em for a spell, goin’ back into the swamp.”

“Huh! Was you calc’latin’ to bring him back alive, mebbey?”

Swickey disdained to answer. Her prestige as a bear hunter was not to be discounted with such levity.

After breakfast Avery tilted his chair against the wall and smoked. David laughingly offered to help Swickey with the dishes. He rolled up his sleeves, and went at it, much to her secret amusement and proud satisfaction. Evidently "city-folks" were not all of them "stuck-up donothin's," as Mrs. Cameron had once given her to understand, even, thought Swickey, if they didn't know how to drain the rinsing-water off.

"When you get to the Knoll," said Avery, addressing David, "Jim Cameron will hitch up and take you to Tramworth. Like as not he'll ask you questions so long's he's got any breath left to ask 'em. Folks calls him 'Curious Jim,' and he do be as curious as a old hen tryin' to see into a jug. But you jest say you're outfittin' fur me. That'll make him hoppin' to find out what's a-doin' up here. I be partic'lar set on havin' Jim come up here with the team. I got 'bout fifty axe-helves fur him. He's been goin' to tote 'em to Tramworth and sell 'em fur me sence spring. If he thinks he kin find out suthin' by comin' back to-night he'll make it in one trip and not onhitch at the Knoll and fetch you up in the mornin'. If he did thet he'd charge us fur stablin' his own team in his own stable, and likewise fur your grub and his'n. It's Jim's reg'lar way of doin' business. Now I figure them axe-handles will jest about cover the cost of the trip if he makes her in one haul, and from what I know of Jim, he'll snake you back lively, wonderin' what Hoss Avery's up to this time."

"I'll hold him off," said David, secretly amused at his new partner's shrewdness.

David departed shortly afterward, striking briskly down the shady morning trail toward the Knoll, some ten miles below. It was noon when he reached Cameron's camp, a collection of weathered buildings that had been apparently erected at haphazard on the hillside.

Cameron was openly surprised to see him.

"Thought you went into Nine-Fifteen with Harrigan's bunch?"

"No! I was headed that way, but Harrigan and I had a misunderstanding."

Curious Jim was immediately interested.

"Goin' back—goin' to quit?"

"I have quit the Great Western. I'm going to Tramworth to get a few things." He delivered Avery's message, adding that the old man seemed particularly anxious to have the proposed purchases that night. "There's some of the stuff he declares he must have to-night," said David, "although I don't just understand why."

"Short of grub?" asked Jim.

"By Jove, that may be it! He did tell me to get a keg of molasses."

Cameron sniffed as he departed to harness the team. “Molasses! Huh! They’s somethin’ deeper than molasses in Hoss Avery’s mind and that city feller he’s in it. So Hoss thinks he can fool Jim Cameron. Well, I guess not! Sendin’ me a message like that.”

He worked himself into a state of curiosity that resulted in a determination to solve the imaginary riddle, even if its solution entailed spending the night at Lost Farm.

“You ain’t had no dinner, have you?” he asked as he reappeared.

“No, I haven’t,” replied David. “But I can wait till we get to town.”

“Mebby you kin, but you ain’t a-goin’ to. You come in and feed up. My missus is to Tramworth, but I’ll fix up somethin’.”

After dinner, as they jolted over the “tote-road” in the groaning wagon, Cameron asked David if he intended to stay in for the winter.

“Yes, I do,” he replied.

“Sort of lookin’ around—goin’ to buy up a piece of timber, hey?”

“No. Avery offered me a job and I took it.”

“Huh!” Curious Jim carefully flicked a fly from the horse’s back. “You’re from Boston?”

“Yes.”

Curious Jim was silent for some time. Suddenly he turned as though about to offer an original suggestion.

“Railroads is funny things, ain’t they?”

“Sometimes they are.”

Jim was a bit discouraged. The new man didn’t seem to be much of a talker.

“Hoss Avery’s a mighty pecooliar man,” he ventured.

“Is he?” David’s tone conveyed innocent surprise.

“Not sayin’ he ain’t straight enough—but he’s queer, mighty queer.”

Ross offered no comment. Tediously the big horses plodded along the uneven road. The jolting of the wagon was accentuated as they crossed a corduroyed swamp.

“I think I’ll walk,” said David, springing from the seat.

“That settles it,” thought Cameron. “He don’t want to talk. He’s afeared I’ll find out somethin’, but he don’t know Jim Cameron.”

The desolate outskirts of Tramworth, encroaching on the freshness of the summer forest, finally resolved themselves into a fairly level wagon-road. Cameron drew up and David mounted beside him.

“Reckon you want Sikes’s hardware store first,” said Jim.

“No. I think I’ll go to the hotel. You can put up the horses. I’ll get what I want and we’ll call for it on the way back.”

At the hotel Cameron accepted his dismissal silently. When he returned

from stabling the team he noticed David was standing on the walk in front of the hotel, apparently in doubt as to where he wanted to go first.

"Do you know where there is a dressmaker's shop," he asked.

"Dressmaker's shop?" Cameron scratched his head. "Well—now—let's see. Dressmaker's sh—They's Miss Wilkins's place round the corner," he said, pointing down the street.

"Thank you," said Ross, starting off in the opposite direction.

Cameron's curiosity was working at a pressure that only the sympathy of some equally interested person could relieve, and to that end he set out toward his brother's where Mrs. Cameron was visiting. There he had the satisfaction of immediate and attentive sympathy from his good wife, whose chief interest in life, beside "her Jim," and their daughter Jessie, was the receiving and promulgating of local gossip, to which she added a measure of speculative embellishment which was the real romance of her isolated existence.

After purchasing blankets, a rifle, ammunition, traps, and moccasins at the hardware store, David turned to more exacting duties. The book and the "specs" next occupied his attention. With considerable elation he discovered a shop-worn copy of "Robinson Crusoe," and paid a dollar for it with a cheerful disregard of the fact that he had once purchased that identical edition for fifty cents.

He found an appalling variety of "specs" at the drug store, and bought six pairs of various degrees of strength, much to the amazement of the proprietor, who was uncertain as to whether his customer was a purchasing agent for an Old Ladies' Home, or was merely "stocking-up" for his old age.

"Haven't crossed the Rubicon yet," muttered David, as he left the drug store and proceeded to the dry-goods "emporium." Here he chose some mild-patterned gingham, with Avery's whispered injunction in mind to get 'em plenty long enough anyhow.

With the bundle of cloth tucked under his arm, he strode valiantly to the dressmaker's. The bell on the door jingled a disconcerting length of time after he had entered. He felt as though his errand was being heralded to the skies. From an inner room came a pale, dark-haired little woman, threads and shreds of cloth clinging to her black apron.

"This is Miss—er—"

"Wilkins," she snapped.

"I understand you are the most competent dressmaker in Tramworth."

Which was unquestionably true. Tramworth supported but one establishment of the kind.

"I certainly am."

"Well, Miss Wilkins, I want to get two dresses made. Nothing elaborate. Just plain sensible frocks for a little girl." He gained courage as he proceeded. An

inspiration came. "You don't happen to have a—er—niece, or daughter, or"—Miss Wilkins's expression was not reassuring—"or aunt, say about fourteen years old. That is, she is a big girl for fourteen—and I want them long enough. Her father says, that is—"

"Who are they for?" she asked frigidly.

"Why, Swickey, of course—"

"Of course!" replied Miss Wilkins.

David untied the bundle and disclosed the cloth.

"Here it is. I'm not—exactly experienced in this kind of thing." He smiled gravely. "I thought perhaps you could help me—"

Miss Wilkins was a woman before she became a dressmaker. She did what the real woman always does when appealed to, which is to help the male animal out of difficulties when the male animal sincerely needs assistance.

"Oh, I see! No, I haven't a niece or daughter, or even an aunt of fourteen years, but I have some patterns for fourteen-year-old sizes."

"Thank God!" said David, so fervently that they both laughed.

"And I think I know what you want," she continued.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a bill.

"I'll pay you now," he said, proffering a five-dollar note, "and I'll call for them in about three hours. There's to be two of them, you know. One from this pattern and one from this."

"Oh, but I couldn't make one in three hours! I really can't have them done before to-morrow night."

David did some mental arithmetic rapidly.

"What is your charge for making them?" he asked.

She hesitated, looking at him as he stood, hat in hand, waiting her reply.

"Two dollars each," she said, her eyes fixed on his hat.

The males of Tramworth were not always uncovered in her presence, when they did accompany their wives to her shop.

"I have to leave for Lost Farm at five o'clock, Miss Wilkins. If you can have one of the dresses done by that time, I'll gladly give you four dollars for it."

"I've got a hat to trim for Miss Smeaton, and a dress for Miss Sikes and she wants it to-morrow—but, I'll try."

"Thank you," replied David, depositing the cloth on the counter and opening the door; "I'll call for it at five."

From there he went toward the hotel, where he intended to write a letter or two. As he turned the corner some one called:—

"Ross! I say, Ross!"

Startled by the familiarity of the tone rather than by the suddenness of the call, he looked about him in every direction but the right one.

“Hello, Davy!”

The round face and owlish, spectacled eyes of “Wallie” Bascomb, son of *the* Walter Bascomb, of the Bernard, White & Bascomb Construction Company of Boston, protruded from the second-story window of the hotel opposite.

“Come on up, Davy. I just fell out of bed.”

The face withdrew, and David crossed the street, entered the hotel, and clattered up the uncarpeted stairs.

“Hey! where are you, Wallie?”

A door opened in the corridor. Bascomb, in scanty attire, greeted him.

“Softly, my Romeo. Thy Juliet is not fully attired to receive. Shut the door, dear saint, the air blows chill.”

They shook hands, eyeing each other quizzically. A big, white English bull-terrier uncurled himself and dropped from the foot of the bed to the floor.

“Hello, Smoke! Haven’t forgotten me, have you?”

The terrier sniffed at David and wagged his tail in grave recognition. Then he climbed back to his couch on the tumbled blankets.

“Now,” said Bascomb, searching among his scattered effects for the toothbrush he held in his hand, “tell Uncle Walt, why, thus disguised, you pace the pensive byways of this ignoble burg?”

“Outfitting,” said David.

“Brief, and to the point, my Romeo.”

“For the winter,” added David.

“Quite explicit, Davy. You’re the same old clam—eloquent, interestingly communicative.”

David laughed. “What are you doing up here? I supposed you were snug in the office directing affairs in the absence of your father.”

“Oh, the pater’s back again. I guess the speed-limit in Baden Baden was too slow for him. He’s building the new road, you know, N. M. & Q. Your Uncle Wallie is on the preliminary survey. Devil of a job, too.”

“Oh, yes. I heard about it. It’s going to be a big thing.”

“Yes,” said Bascomb, peering with short-sighted eyes into the dim glass as he adjusted his tie, “it may be a big thing if I”—striking an attitude and thumping his chest—“don’t break my neck or die of starvation. Camp cooking, Davy—whew! Say, Davy, I’m the Christopher Columbus of this expedition, I am, and I’ll get just about as much thanks for my stake-driving and exploring as he did.”

Bascomb kicked an open suit-case out of his way and a fresh, crackling blue-print sprang open on the floor.

“That’s it. Here we are,” he said, spreading the blue-print on the bed, “straight north from Tramworth, along the river. Then we cross here at Lost Farm, as they call it. Say, there’s a canny old crab lives up there that holds

the shell-back record for grouch. Last spring, when we were working up that way and I took a hand at driving stakes, just to ease my conscience, you know, along comes that old whiskered Cyclops with a big Winchester on his shoulder. I smelled trouble plainer than hot asphalt.

“‘Campin’?’ he asked.

“No,’ I said. ‘Just making a few dents in the ground. A kind of air-line sketch of the new road—N. M. & Q.’

“‘Uhuh!’ he grunted. ‘Suppose the new rud ’s a-comin’ plumb through here, ain’t it?’

“‘Right-o,’ said I.

“I guess he didn’t just cotton to the idea. Anyway he told me I could stop driving ‘them stakes’ on his land. I told him I’d like to accommodate him, but circumstances made it necessary to peg in a few more for the ultimate benefit of the public. Well, that old geyser straightened up, and so did I, for that matter.

“‘Drive another one of them,’ he said, pointing to the stake between my feet, ‘and I reckon you’ll pull it out with your teeth.’”

Bascomb lit a cigarette and puffed reflectively. “Well, I never was much on mumble-the-peg, so I quit. The old chap looked too healthy to contradict.”

David sat on the edge of the bed rubbing the dog’s ears.

Bascomb observed him thoughtfully.

“Say, Davy, I don’t suppose you want to keep Smoke for a while, do you? He’s no end of bother in camp. He has it in for the cook and it keeps me busy watching him.”

“The cook? That’s unnatural for a dog, isn’t it?”

“Well, you see our aboriginal chef don’t like dogs, and Smoke knows it. Besides, he once gave Smoke a deer-shank stuffed with lard and red-pepper, regular log-roller’s joke, and since then his legs aren’t worth insuring—the cook’s, I mean. You used to be quite chummy with Smoke, before you dropped out of the game.”

“I’ll take him, if he’ll come,” said David. “Just what I want, this winter. He’ll be lots of company. That is, if you mean it—if you’re serious.”

“As serious as a Scotch dominie eating oysters, Davy mon.”

“Won’t Smoke make a fuss, though?”

“Not if I tell him to go. Oh, you needn’t grin. See here.” Bascomb called the dog to him, and taking the wide jaws between his hands he spoke quietly. “Smoke,” he said, “I’m going to leave you with Davy. He is a chaste and upright young man, so far as I ken. Quite suitable as a companion for you. You stick to him and do as he says. Look after him, for he needs looking after. And don’t you leave him till I come for you, sir! Now, go and shake hands on it.”

The dog strode to David and raised a muscular foreleg. Laughing, David

seized it and shook it vigorously.

"It's a bargain, Smoke."

The terrier walked to Bascomb, sniffed at his knees and then returned to David, but his narrow eyes moved continually with Bascomb's nervous tread back and forth across the room.

"What's on your mind, Wallie?"

"Oh, mud—mostly. Dirt, earth, land, real-estate; but don't mind me. I was just concocting a letter to the pater. Say, Davy, you don't want a job, do you? You know some law and enough about land deals, to—to cook 'em up so they won't smell too strong, don't you?"

"That depends, Walt."

"Well, the deal I have in mind depends, all right. It's hung up—high. It's this way. That strip of timber on the other side of No-Man's Lake, up Lost Farm way, has never seen an axe nor a cross-cut saw. There's pine there that a friend of mine says is ready money for the chap that corrals it. I wrote the pater and he likes the idea of buying it out and out and holding on till the railroad makes it marketable. And the road is going plumb through one end of it. Besides, the pater's on the N. M. & Q. Board of Directors. When the road buys the right-of-way through that strip, there'll be money in it for the owner. I've been after it on the Q.T., but the irate gentleman with the one lamp, who held me up on the survey, said that 'if it was worth sellin', by Godfrey, it was worth keepin'.' I showed him a certified check that would seduce an angel, but he didn't shed a whisker. My commission would have kept me in Paris for a year." Bascomb sighed lugubriously. "Do you want to tackle it, Davy?"

"Thanks for the chance, Wallie, but I'm engaged for the winter, at least."

"Congratulations, old man. It's much more convenient that way,—short-term sentence, you know,—if the young lady doesn't object."

Bascomb's banter was apparently innocent of insinuation, although he knew that his sister had recently broken her engagement with David.

If the latter was annoyed at his friend's chaff, he made no show of it as he stood up and looked at his watch.

"That reminds me, Wallie. I'm due at the dressmaker's in about three minutes. Had no idea it was so late."

"Dressmaker's! See here, Davy, your Jonathan is miffed. Here I've been scouring this town for anything that looked like a real skirt and didn't walk like a bag of onions or a pair of shears, and you've gone and found one."

"That's right," said David, "but it was under orders, not an original inspiration."

"Hear that, Smoke! Davy'll bear watching up here."

"Come on, Wallie. It's only a block distant."

“All right, Mephisto. Lead on. I want to see the face that launched a thousand—what’s the rest of it?” said Bascomb, as they filed down the stairs.

As they entered the little shop round the corner, Wallie assumed a rapturous expression as he gazed at the garishly plumed hats in the window.

“Might have known where to look for something choice,” he remarked. “Now, that hat with the green ribbon and the pink plume is what I call classy, eh, Davy?”

They entered the shop and presently Miss Wilkins appeared with the new gingham on her arm.

“I just managed to do it,” she said, displaying the frock from ingrained habit rather than for criticism.

“Isn’t it a bit short?” asked Bascomb, glancing from her to David.

Miss Wilkins frowned. Bascomb’s countenance expressed nothing but polite interest.

David was preternaturally solemn.

“Don’t mind him, Miss Wilkins. He’s only a surveyor and don’t understand these things at all.”

“Only a surveyor!” muttered Bascomb. “Oh, mother, pin a rose on me.”

He walked about the shop inspecting the hats with apparent interest while the dressmaker folded and tied up the frock. When they had left the place and were strolling up the street, Bascomb took occasion to ask David how long he had been “a squire of suburban sirens.”

“Ever since I came in,” replied David cheerfully.

“Is the to-be-ginghamed the real peaches and cream or just the ordinary red-apple sort?”

“Neither,” replied his friend. “She’s fourteen and she’s the daughter of your up-country friend the Cyclops, or, to be accurate, Hoss Avery.”

“Oh, Heavings, Davy! But she must be a siren child to have such an intelligent purchasing agent in her employ.”

David did not reply, as he was engaged at that moment in waving the parcel containing the dress round his head in a startling, careless manner.

“Easy with the lingerie, Davy dear. Oh, it’s Cameron you’re flagging—Curious Jim—do you know him?”

“Distantly,” replied David smilingly.

“Correct, my son. So do I.”

Cameron acknowledged the signal by hurrying to the rear of the hotel. In a few minutes he appeared on the wagon, which he drove to the store, and David’s purchases were carefully stowed beneath the seat.

“Where’ll I put this?” said Cameron, surreptitiously squeezing the parcel containing the dress.

"Oh, the lingerie," volunteered Bascomb. "Put that somewhere where it won't get broken."

"The which?" asked Curious Jim, standing astride the seat.

"Lingerie, Jim. It's precious."

"How about Smoke?" David turned toward Bascomb.

"I'll fix that," said Wallie, calling the dog to him. "Up you go, old fellow. Now, you needn't look at me like that. Great Scott! I'm not going to sell you—only lend you to Davy."

The dog drew back and sprang into the wagon. It was a magnificent leap and Cameron expressed his admiration earnestly.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, "he's whalebone and steel springs, ain't he? Wisht I owned him!"

"Well, so-long, Davy." Bascomb held out his hand. "Oh, by the way, I suppose the reason for your advent in this community is—back in Boston wondering where you are, isn't she?"

David laid a friendly hand on the other's shoulder.

"Wallie," he said, speaking low enough to be unheard by the teamster, "you mean right, and I understand it, but it was a mistake from the first. My mistake, not Bessie's. Fortunately we found it out before it was too late."

Bascomb was silent.

"And there's one more thing I wanted to say. Avery of Lost Farm is my partner. I should have told you that before, but you went at your story hammer-and-tongs, before I could get a word in. I'm going to advise him, as a business partner, to hold up his price for the tract."

Bascomb's eyes narrowed and an expression, which David had seen frequently on the face of the elder Bascomb, tightened the lips of the son to lines unpleasantly suggestive of the "market."

"It's honest enough, Davy, I understand that, but don't you think it's a trifle raw, under the circumstance?"

"Perhaps it is, but I should have done the same in any event."

Bascomb bit his lips. "All right. A conscience is an incumbrance at times. Well, good-bye. I'll be up that way in a few weeks, perhaps sooner."

With a gesture of farewell, David climbed into the wagon.

Smoke stood with forepaws on the seat, watching his master. When he could no longer see him, he came solemnly to David's feet and curled down among the bundles. He, good soldier, had received his captain's command and obeyed unhesitatingly. This man-thing, that he remembered vaguely, was his new master now.

In the mean time Bascomb was in his room scribbling a hasty note to his father. He was about to seal it when he hesitated, withdrew it from the envelope,

and added a postscript:—

“I don’t think Davy Ross knows *why* we want Lost Farm tract, but I’ll keep an eye on him, and close the deal at the first opportunity.”

CHAPTER VII—THE BOOK AND THE “SPECS”

The wavering image of the overhanging forest was fading in the somnolent, foam-dappled eddies circling lazily past Lost Farm Camp when Jim Cameron’s team, collars creaking and traces clinking, topped the ridge and plodded heavily across the clearing. Smoke swayed to the pitch and jolt of the wagon, head up and nose working with the scent of a new habitation. As the horses stopped, David and Smoke leaped down. Beelzebub immediately scrambled to his citadel in the eaves, where he ruffled to fighting size, making small unfriendly noises as he walked along the roof, peering curiously over the edge at the broad back of the bull-terrier. Cameron unhitched the team leisurely, regretting the necessity for having to stable them out of earshot from the cabin. “I’ll find out what a ‘loungee’ is or bust,” he confided to the horses, as he whisked the rustling hay from mow to manger.

“We been keepin’ supper fur you,” said Avery, as David came in, laden with bundles. “Set right down. Jim won’t keep you waitin’ long if he’s in his reg’lar health. But where, this side of the New Jerusalem, did you git the dog?”

“That’s Smoke. Here, Smoke, come and be introduced.”

The dog allowed Swickey and her father to pat him, but made no overtures toward friendship. Avery eyed the animal critically.

“He’s a born fighter. Kin tell it by the way he don’t wag his tail at everything goin’ on. Likewise he don’t make up to be friends in a hurry, like some dogs, and folks.”

“I hope he won’t bother Beelzebub,” said David, as Smoke, mouth open and tongue lolling, watched the kitten peek at him from the doorway.

“They’ll be shakin’ hands afore long,” said Avery. “Thet cat’s got spunk and he ain’t afraid of nothin’ reason’ble, but he ain’t seen no dogs yit. He’ll get sorter used to him, though.”

When Cameron came in he glanced at the end of the table. None of the bundles had been opened. He ambled out to the wash-bench and made a perfunctory ablution. Judging by the sounds of spouting and blowing which accompanied his efforts, he was not far from that state of godliness which soap and water are supposed to encourage, but the roller-towel, which he patronized generously, hung in the glare of the lamp, its limp and gloomy folds suggesting that nothing remained for it but kindly oblivion. In fact, David, who succeeded Cameron at the wash-basin, gazed at the towel with pensive interrogation, illumined by a smile as hand over hand he pulled it round and round the creaking roller, seeking vainly for an unstaked claim.

Supper over, the men moved out to the porch and smoked. Swickey, busy with the dishes, glanced frequently at the bundles on the table, wondering which one contained her precious book and the "specs fur Pop." The dishes were put away hurriedly and she came out and joined the men.

"Now, Swickey," said her father, "you jest tell Jim how you shot the ba'r. Me and Dave's got them things to put away and you kin keep Jim comp'ny."

Swickey, fearing that she would miss the opening of the bundles, gave Cameron a somewhat curtailed account of her first bear hunt, and Cameron, equally solicitous about a certain mysterious package, listened with a vacant gaze fixed on the toe of his dusty boot.

In the cabin David and Avery were inspecting the purchases.

"Glad you got a .45," he said, handling the new rifle. "They ain't no use diddlin' around with them small bores. When you loose a .45 at anything and you hit it, they's suthin' goin' to happen direct. But did you get the dresses?"

"Only one," replied David. "The other will be ready for us the next time we go to Tramworth. But I want to talk business with you. I met a friend to-day,—a Mr. Bascomb of the new railroad survey."

Avery hitched his chair nearer.

"You don't say?" he exclaimed a few minutes later. "Wal, it's 'bout what I figured, but I can't make out jest why they's so mighty pa'tic'lar to get the whole piece of land. You see, if they ain't suthin' behind it, land up here ain't wuth thet money, mine or anybody else's."

Cameron came in and took down the drinking-dipper. Over its rim he surveyed the table. The bundles were still unopened. With an expression of disgust he walked to the door and threw half the contents of the dipper on the grass. Then he sat down beside Swickey, moodily silent and glum.

Again he arose and approached the dipper. Still the partners were talking in guarded tones. He drank sparingly and returned the dipper to its nail. The parcels were as he had seen them before.

"Drivin' team makes a man pow'ful thirsty, eh, Jim?"

"That's what," replied Cameron. "'Sides, they's a skunk prowlin' round out there," he added, pointing through the doorway, "and a skunk jest sets my stomach bilin'."

"Thought I smelled *suthin'*," said Avery, with a shrewd glance at the teamster.

"Skunks is pecooliar things," said Cameron, endeavoring to prolong the conversation.

"The't's what they be," said Avery, turning toward David.

"Them 'loungerees' is pecooliar actin' things, too, ain't they?" said Cameron.

The old man rose to the occasion superbly, albeit not altogether familiar with the species of animal so called.

"Yes, they be," he remarked decisively. "I et one onct and it liked to kill me. Reckon it hung too long afore it was biled."

David had immediate recourse to the drink-dipper. The cough which followed sounded suspiciously like a strangled laugh to Cameron's sensitive ears.

"Huh!" he exclaimed, with some degree of sarcasm; "sounds as if he'd et one hissself to-day."

He sat down, filled his pipe and smoked, feeling that if he was not entitled to their confidence he was at least entitled to their society. Presently his pipe fell to the floor as his head nodded in slumber.

"Guess I'll turn in, Hoss," he remarked, recovering the pipe and yawning abysmally.

"I fixed up the leetle cabin fur you," replied Avery. "I'll go 'long out and onlock it. Keep it locked account of skunks comin' in and makin' themselves to home."

As the teamster and Avery went out, Swickey ran to David. "Where be they?" she whispered. "Quick! afore Pop comes!"

He pointed to the package. She broke the string and whisked off the paper. She opened the book, unfortunately for her first impression, at a picture of the "Man Friday," clothed with "nothing much before and a little less than half of that behind." A shade of disappointment crossed her eager face. Evidently there were rudiments to master, even in dressmaking. But it was her book. She had earned it, and her face glowed again with the buoyant rapture of childhood as she clasped the volume to her breast and marched to her room. She dropped it quickly on the bed, however, and returned. "I 'most forgot the 'specs,'" she said self-accusingly. She untied the smaller package and drew them out, "one, two, three, four," six pair of glittering new glasses. Evidently the potency of money was unlimited. She laid them down, one at a time, after vainly endeavoring to see through them.

[image]

“WHERE BE THEY?” SHE WHISPERED

“Your father’s eyes are different,” explained David.

She danced gleefully across the room and back again. Smoke followed her with deliberate strides. He knew they were to be *the* friends of that establishment. She ran to the bedroom and returned with her book. Assuming a serious demeanor, one leg crossed over the other, book on knee and a pair of glasses perched on her nose, she cleared her throat in imitation of her father.

“Is he comin’?” she asked.

“Yes, I hear him,” replied David.

“S-s-h!” She held up a warning finger.

Avery had the kitten in his arm when he entered. “Fished him off the eaves and brung him in to get acquainted with the dog—Sufferin’ catfish!” he exclaimed, as he gazed at Swickey. “Where’d you—?” He glanced at David, who nodded meaningly.

Slowly the old man stepped to his daughter’s chair. He took the “specs” and the book gently from her, and laid them on the table. She felt that her father was pleased, yet she knew that if she didn’t laugh right away, she would surely cry. He was so quiet, yet he smiled.

Presently he held out his hands. She ran to him and jumped into his arms, her black hair mingling with his snowy beard as he carried her to her room.

When he returned, he sat down, shading his eyes from the light of the lamp. Presently he chuckled.

“Wal, a feller’s a fool anyway till he’s turned forty. And then if he is a mind to he can look back and say so,—to hissself, quiet-like, when nobody is a-listenin’,—and even then I reckon he won’t believe hissself.”

“Thinking of Cameron?” said David.

“No,” replied Avery sententiously; “wimmen folks.”

David pushed the parcel containing the “loungeree” toward him. Avery untied it and spread the dress across his knees, smoothing it reverently, as the newness of the cloth came to his nostrils. “Makes me think of her mother.” His voice deepened. “And my leetle gal’s growin’ up jest like her.” He sat with his head bent as though listening. Then from the interior of the cabin came Swickey’s laugh, full, high, and girlish. Avery folded the dress carefully and went to her room.

As David arose to go to his cabin, he started and checked an exclamation.

Smoke and Beelzebub stood facing each other, the dog rigid and the kitten's tail fluffed beyond imagination. Beelzebub advanced cautiously, lifted a rounded paw, and playfully touched the dog's nose.

Smoke moved his head a fraction of an inch to one side. The kitten tilted his own head quizzically, as though imitating the dog. Then he put up his pert, black face and licked Smoke's muzzle. The dog sniffed condescendingly at the brave little adventurer, who danced away across the floor in mimic fright and then returned as the dog laid down, stretching his forelegs and yawning. The kitten, now that a truce was proclaimed, walked back and forth in front of Smoke, flaunting his perpendicular tail with no little show of vanity.

David spoke to the dog. With an almost shamefaced expression the big terrier got up and followed his master out, across the cool grass, and into still another abode.

To him the man-thing was a peculiar animal. He had one place to eat in, another to sleep in. The man-thing also protected impudent, furry, disconcerting kittens that it wouldn't do to kill—

CHAPTER VIII—SMOKE FINDS EMPLOYMENT

September drifted imperceptibly into October, and even then there were days when coats were shed and sleeves rolled up as the noon sun burned down on the tawny gold and scarlet of the woodside. It was not until the sedges grew brittle on the river edges and the grasses withered that November sent forth its true harbingers of winter—small fluttering white flakes that covered the ground sparsely.

With the keen tang of the first snow stirring his blood, David swung down the river-trail toward Tramworth, Smoke padding at his heels. With Avery's help he had built a snug winter camp near the three cabins, and although not in the best location available, it reflected some Celtic astuteness on David's part, as it was centred on the prospective right-of-way of the new road. His present errand involved the purchase of a stove, cooking utensils, and the other essentials to independent housekeeping. He found out, early in his undertaking to teach

Swickey, that he could not maintain the prestige necessary, in her continual presence.

He felt pleased with himself that brisk November morning. He had his own cabin, neat, new, fragrant. He had learned to swing an axe during its construction. He had not missed the first deer he hunted, and thereby had earned Swickey's condescending approval. *She* had killed a "b'ar." In the setting of traps and dead-falls he won Avery's appreciation by a certain deftness and mechanical ability. But, above all, was the keen joy he felt when he thought of the Bascombs' recent offer of twenty-five thousand dollars for Lost Farm tract.

"There is something behind it," he muttered. "Avery gave five thousand for the land. But why don't they appraise it and sell it from under us. They could. By Jove, I have it! The Great Western Lumber Company is back of the N. M. & Q., and they want the pine. Why didn't I think of that before."

Unused to observing signs on the trail, he failed to notice the moccasin tracks in the light snow ahead of him, but Smoke picked up a scent and trotted along, sniffing and blowing. Then he came to heel again, evidently satisfied. The man-thing he followed ought to know that the people who made the tracks were not far ahead, and that one of them had turned off in a clump of firs they were just passing.

He noted the dog's actions subconsciously, his mind busy with the problem of how to get the best results from the sale which he knew must come eventually, despite Avery's assertion that "No blamed railrud would come snortin' across his front yard, if he knew it."

He had about decided to advise his partner to sell and avoid complications, but only the right-of-way and retain the stumpage—

Wh-e-e-e—Pang! His pack jumped from his shoulders as a bullet clipped a beech and sung off at a tangent with a mournful *ping—ouing—ing*.

From the hillside above him, again came the sharp *Pang! Pang!* of a high-power rifle. He flung up both arms, whirled half round, and dropped on the frozen trail. Smoke bristled and growled, pacing with stiff forelegs round his master. He nuzzled the limp hands and whined. He trembled and a ridge of hair rose along his spine. He was not afraid, but the rage of an impotent avenger shook him. This man-thing had been struck down—from where?—by whom?

He sniffed back along the trail till he came to the tracks that swung off into the firs. He leaped to the hunt, following the scene over knoll and hollow. An empty brass shell lay melting the thin snow around it. He nosed it, then another and another. They were pungently disagreeable to his nostrils. The tracks circled back to the trail again. They were leading him to where his master lay—he knew that. Near the fringe of undergrowth that edged the trail the big white terrier stiffened and raised his homely nose. A new man-smell came to him and he hated

it instinctively. With the caution and courage of the fighter who loves battle for its own sake, he crept through the low, snow-powdered branches noiselessly. He saw a dark figure stooping above his master.

Smoke gathered his haunches beneath him and shot up, a white thunderbolt, straight for the naked, swarthy neck. The man heard and whirled up his arm, but that hurtling death brushed it aside and the wide straining jaws closed on the corded throat and crunched. The man fumbled for his knife, plunging about on his knees. It had slipped round in front. With a muffled scream he seized the dog's throat. Smoke braced his hind legs in the man's abdomen, arched his back, and the smooth thigh muscles jumped to knots as he tugged, once—twice—

Blotched with crimson, muzzle dripping, he drew back from the twitching shape, lay down and lapped his steaming breast and legs. His work was done.

Finally he arose and sniffed at that silent nothing beneath the firs. Then he went over and sat beside the other man-thing, waiting—waiting—

Presently David stirred, groaned, and raised tremblingly on his elbow. Smoke stood up. "Home, Smoke!" he murmured inarticulately, but the dog understood. He sprang up the trail in long leaps, a flying horror of red and white.

"Must have—hurt—himself." David was gazing stupidly at the dead man. This thing was a joke—everything was a joke—Swickey, her father, Jim Cameron, Smoke, David Ross—*ung-gh!* His grinning lips drew tense across his clenched teeth. A lightning whip of pain shot through his temples, and the white trail, worming through the dark-green pit of the forest, faded, and passed to the clouds. A smothering blackness swooped down and enveloped him.

CHAPTER IX—JIM CAMERON'S IDEA

Below, at the Knoll, Fisty Harrigan and Barney Axel, one of his foremen, had entered Cameron's camp.

Mrs. Cameron, a tall, broad-faced, angular woman, greeted them from a busy kitchen with loud masculine familiarity. "Jim's out to the stable. He'll be in in a minute."

They drew off their caps and mackinaws, rubbing their hands above the

wide box-stove as they stamped the snow from their moccasins.

"Where's Jessie?" asked Harrigan.

"She's to Jim's folks at Tramworth," replied Mrs. Cameron, wrapping the end of her apron round her hand and reaching into the oven. "Jim said it was about time she learned somethin',—them biscuits ain't commenced to raise yet,—and I reckon he's right. He says that Avery young-one can read her letters and write 'em, too. That man Ross is a-teachin' her. So Jessie's goin' to school this winter." She lifted a dripping lid from a pot on the stove and gave a muscular impetus to its contents. "But I can't fancy that Avery young-one learnin' anything 'ceptin' to make faces at other folkses' children and talkin' sassy to her betters!"

Harrigan acquiesced with a nod.

Barney Axel stood, back to the stove, gazing out of the window.

"Indian Pete's takin' his time about that deer, Denny. Reckon he's waitin' for us to come and help him tote it out?"

Harrigan glanced at the speaker's back. "Might 'a' missed. I didn't hear no shot, did you?"

"Nope."

Just then Cameron came in with a bridle in his hand.

"Hello, Denny! H'lo, Barney. Set down—don't cost nothin'. Missus 'll have grub ready in a minute. When did you get here? Didn't hear you come in."

"Oh, we been here quite a spell—waitin' fur Pete."

"Where's Pete—Injun Pete, you mean?"

"Uhuh. He sneaked in, a ways back, lookin' fur a deer. Said he seen one—"

"Thought you seed it fust—when you looked back that time." Axel turned and looked at Harrigan.

"No," said Harrigan decisively. "He seen it first." Mrs. Cameron felt that her visitors were slighting her, even if the Company was paying for their meals. She had introduced the topic of Swickey Avery. Was she going to cook dinner for three hungry men and get nothing in immediate return for it except dishes to wash? Not she.

"That little snip, Swickey Avery," she began; but Cameron shuffled his feet and glanced appealingly at his Amazonian spouse to no avail;—"that little snip," she continued, opening the oven door and closing it with a bang that made Harrigan start, "came traipsin' down here in a new dress—a new dress, mind you! and told my Jim she had 'nother 'loungeree' to home. Said Davy Ross had jest ketched it. And my Jim was fool enough to pretend he wanted to see Hoss Avery, and he sets to and walks—walks over to Lost Farm,—and what do you think she showed him?"

Harrigan realized that the question was launched particularly at him. "Showed who?" he queried. He had been thinking of something far different.

"Why, Jim!" she replied irately, red arms folded and thin lips compressed in bucolic scorn.

"Search me," said Harrigan absently.

"A calicah dress! Now, if you, Barney Axel," she said, "kin see any sense in callin' a calicah dress a 'loungee'—"

Something rattled the door-latch faintly. Harrigan started, recovered himself, and nervously bit a chew from his plug.

"Guess it's Pete," said Cameron, dropping the bridle he was mending, and opening the door. He looked, and stepped back with an exclamation of horror.

His face as white as the snow at his feet, hat gone, hair clotted with blood, and hands smeared with a sickening red, David Ross stood tottering in the doorway. His eyes were heavy with pain. He raised an arm and motioned weakly up the trail. Then he caught sight of Harrigan's face over Cameron's shoulder. The soul of a hundred Highland ancestors flamed in his eyes.

"Your man," he said, pointing to Harrigan, "is a damned poor shot." He raised his hand to his coat-collar and fumbled at the button,— "And he's dead—up there—"

Cameron caught him as he wilted across the threshold, and, with Barney Axel, helped carry him to the bedroom.

Harrigan had gone pale and was walking about the room.

Barney stood in the bedroom doorway, watching him silently. "So that's the deer Fisty sent the Indian back fur. Always knowed Fisty'd jest as leave kill with his dukes, but settin' a boozy Indian to drop a man from behind—Hell! that's worse than murder."

Cameron came from the bedside where his wife was bathing David's head with cold water and administering small doses of whiskey.

"What did he mean, sayin' your man was a dam' poor shot?" Curious Jim fixed Harrigan with a suspicious glare.

Fisty tugged into his coat. "You got me. Injun Pete slipped into the bresh lookin' for a deer he seen,"—Harrigan glanced apprehensively at Barney,— "and it looks like as if he made a mistake and took—"

"From what Ross said afore he keflummixed, I guess he did make a mistake," said Jim dryly, "but I'll hitch up and go and have a look anyway. Then I'll go fur the Doc. Comin' along?"

Cameron drove and the two lumbermen walked silently behind. Just beyond the first turn in the trail they found the body and beside it many animal tracks in the snow. A new Winchester lay at the side of the trail.

"My God!" cried Harrigan, as he jumped back from the dead man, "his throat's cut!"

Curious Jim was in his element. Here was something to solve. He threw

the reins to Barney Axel and examined the tracks leading into the bushes. He followed them for a short distance while his companions waited. "Nothin' up there," he said, as he returned. Then he walked along the trail toward Lost Farm. Finally he turned and came back briskly.

He was unusually quiet as they drove toward his camp. At the Knoll he brought out a blanket from the stable and covered the thing in the wagon.

"I'm goin' to Tramworth with this," he said, jerking his head toward the body, "and git Doc Wilson. Missus says Ross is some easier—only tetcht by the bullet—lifted a piece of scalp; but I guess you better keep the missus comp'ny, Barney, for sometimes they get crazy-like and bust things. I've knowed 'em to."

"You was goin' to Tramworth anyhow, warn't you?" asked Cameron, as he faced Harrigan.

"Sure thing, Jim," replied Harrigan, a trifle over-eagerly. "There's some stuff at the station fur the camp, that we're needin' bad."

"Denny," said Cameron solemnly, as the wide-tired wagon shrilled over the frosted road, "'t warn't no knife that cut Injun Pete's throat. That big dog of Ross's done the job, and then skinned back to Lost Farm to tell Hoss Avery that they was somethin' wrong." He paused, looking quickly sideways at his companion. Then, fixing his gaze on the horses' ears, he continued, "And they was, for Injun Pete warn't three feet from young Ross when the dog got him."

"Hell, but you're gettin' mighty smart—fur a teamster."

Harrigan's self-control was tottering. The three words, "for a teamster," were three fates that he unleashed to destroy himself, and the moment he uttered them he knew it. Better to have cursed Cameron from the Knoll to Tramworth than to have stung his very soul with that last speech. But, strangely enough, Curious Jim smiled serenely. Harrigan saw, and understood.

They drove slowly down the trail in the cold, dreary afternoon, jolting the muffled shape beneath the blanket as they lumbered over the corduroy crossing the swamp. Pete the Indian meant little enough to Cameron, but—

He pulled up his horses and stared at Harrigan's feet. The Irishman glanced at him, then down. A lean, scarred brown hand lay across his foot. "Christ!" he shrieked, as he jumped to the ground. The horses bounded forward, but Cameron pulled them up, talking to them gently.

"I was goin' to ask you to get down and pull it back a piece," he called to Harrigan, who came up, cursing at his loss of nerve. "The dum' thing's been pokin' at my legs for a half an hour, but I guess you didn't notice it. The old wagon shakes things up when she ain't loaded down good."

Again Harrigan felt that Jim Cameron was playing with him. He, Fisty Harrigan, the bulldog of the Great Western, chafed at his inability to use his hands. He set his heavy jaw, determined to hold himself together. What had he

done? Why, nothing. Let them prove to the contrary if they could.

They found the sheriff at the hotel. In the privacy of his upstairs room he questioned them with easy familiarity. As yet no one knew nor suspected what brought them there, save the thick-set, ruddy, gray-eyed man, who listened quietly and smiled.

“Got his rifle?” he said suddenly, still smiling.

“It’s in the wagon. I brung it along,” replied Cameron.

“Denny, will you step down and get it?” The sheriff’s tone was bland, persuasive.

Harrigan mistrusted Cameron, yet he dared not refuse. As the door closed behind him the sheriff swung toward Cameron.

“Now, out with it!” The tone was like the snapping of pine in the flames.

“How in—” began Cameron, but the sheriff’s quick gesture silenced him.

“Here they be,” said Jim. “Three shells I picked up ’bout two rods from the trail. Injun Pete might ’a’ took young Ross for a deer *onct*, but three times—”

Harrigan’s hand was on the door-knob. The sheriff swept the shells into his pocket.

“Thanks, Denny,” he said, as he emptied the magazine and laid the rifle on the table. “A 30-30 is a good deer gun, but it’s liable to over-shoot an inch or two at short range.”

CHAPTER X—BARNEY AXEL’S EXODUS

Indian Pete’s death was the talk of Tramworth for a month. The “Sentinel” printed a vivid account of the tragedy, commenting on the Indian as having been a crack shot and emphasizing the possibility of even experienced hunters making grave mistakes. Much to the sheriff’s disgust the article concluded with, “In again reviewing this tragedy, one important fact should not be overlooked. The Indian fired three shots at the supposed deer. This information we have from a trustworthy source.” In a later issue the sheriff read, “Mr. Ross visited Tramworth last week, accompanied by the brave animal that so nobly avenged the alleged ‘mistake,’ as described in a recent issue of this paper. Both seem to be in

excellent health.”

This issue of the “Sentinel” eventually reached the lumber-camps clustered about the spot where township lines Nine and Fifteen intersected. It was read with the eager interest that such an article would create in an isolated community that had known and liked or disliked “Injun Pete.” Some of the lumbermen expressed approval of the dog, appreciating the unerring instinct of animals in such cases. Others expressed a sentimental sympathy for the Indian, and Smoke’s history would have been a brief one had their sanguinary threats been executed. Most of the men seemed to consider David Ross as a victim of circumstance rather than an active participant in the affair. Yet in one shadowy corner of the main camp it was recalled by not a few that Ross had made Harrigan “take the count,” had in fact whipped him in fair fight. There were head-shakings and expressive silences over this; silences because Harrigan had friends in the camp, and he was czar.

One evening, much to the surprise of every one, Barney Axel, who had been gloomily uncommunicative heretofore, gave them something to think about, especially as he was regarded as Harrigan’s closest friend, and a man prone to keep his own counsel.

It happened that Joe Smeaton, an axe-man at the main camp, and universally unpopular owing to his habit of tale-bearing, was rehearsing the “Sentinel’s” account of Indian Pete’s death to an interested but silent audience.

“Denny’s hit kind of hard,” he ventured at random.

Several nodded.

“He kind of liked Pete.”

More nods and a muttering of “That’s so—he sure did.”

Then, out of the smoke-heavy silence following, came Barney Axel’s voice, tense with the accumulated scorn of his secret knowledge.

“He’ll be hit harder yet!”

There was a covert threat in the tone. Pipes stopped wheezing. The men stared anywhere but at each other. This was high treason.

“Fisty’s drinkin’ too much,” he added, covering his former statement with this counter-suggestion, which seemed to satisfy every one but Smeaton. He took occasion to repeat the conversation to Harrigan that night in the seclusion of the wangan office.

“He said that, did he?” Harrigan’s heavy brows drew together. Smeaton nodded. Harrigan spat on the glowing stove viciously. “Things at the ‘Wing’ ain’t runnin’ jest to suit me. Barney’s been boss there just three years too long. He’s sufferin’ fur a new job, and he’ll get it.” Then he turned to Smeaton. “Joe, you can take charge at the ‘Wing’ in the mornin’.”

Early next day Fisty and Joe Smeaton drove over to Axel’s camp. They

found him in the woods, hard at it with his men, as usual. The “Wing” was the best-managed camp at Nine-Fifteen.

“Barney,” said Harrigan, taking him to one side, “I’m thinkin’ you’d like a better job.”

“Ain’t got no kick, Denny,” said Axel, eyeing Smeaton suspiciously.

“You’ve been foreman here for three years. I’m thinkin’ you’d like a change—to a better payin’ job.”

“Well, if it’s more pay—I would that,” said Axel. “What’s the job?”

Harrigan stepped close to him. “It’s lookin’ fur another one,” he said. “You kin go!”

A wolfish grin twisted Axel’s lips and Harrigan reached for his hip-pocket; but, disregarding him, the discharged foreman leaped to Smeaton and planted a smashing blow in his face. “That’s one I owe you, Joe. Stand up ag’in and I’ll pay the whole ’count and int’rest.”

Smeaton, on his knees, the blood dripping from his mouth and nose, spat out curses and incidentally a tooth or two, but he refused to stand up. Harrigan had drawn his gun and stood swinging it gently, and suggestively. Axel swung round and faced him, his eyes contemptuous as they rested on the blue gleam of the Colt.

“Got any fust-class reason for firin’ me so almighty fast?” he asked quietly.

“No,” said Harrigan, “’cept I’m t’rough wid you.”

“Don’t be so ram-dam sure of that, Mr. Denny Harrigan,” he said, turning his back and going for his mackinaw, which was down the road near the men.

Smeaton looked up and saw the gun in Harrigan’s hand. He arose and walked quietly toward his boss, who was still watching Axel. Fisty felt the gun jerked from his grip, and before he could even call out, the big .44 roared close to his ear and he saw Axel’s shirt-sleeve twitch, a second before he leaped behind a spruce for protection.

Smeaton flung the gun from him and ran toward the shanty, as the men came up from here, there, and everywhere. The shot had been too near them to pass unnoticed.

Harrigan recovered the Colt and slid it in his pocket, as Axel came from behind the tree, white, but eyes burning.

“It’s all right, boys,” he shouted. “Went off by accident. Nobody’s goin’ to get shot.”

They picked their steps back through the heavy snow, one “Pug” Enderly grunting to his companion, “Dam’ a man that’ll carry a gun, anyhow.”

“Keep your hands easy, Denny Harrigan,” said Axel. “I got a better way to get even with you, and you knows it.”

Harrigan fingered the butt of the Colt in his pocket. So Barney was going

to peach about—no, he couldn't prove anything about Ross and the Indian, but he did know too much about a certain find on Lost Farm tract. Harrigan snarled as he realized that Axel held the whip-hand.

He jerked the gun from his pocket, murder gleaming in his agate-blue eyes. "Now, you git, quick!" he snapped, leveling the short, ugly barrel at Axel's head.

"It's mighty nigh time—you're right," said Axel. "When a boss gits crazy 'nough to come at the men he's hirin', with a gun, it's about time to quit. And I'm goin'," he added, stalking to where his snowshoes were planted in a drift; "and if you dast, shoot ahead while I'm gettin' ready."

Harrigan stood watching him as he laced the thongs of his snowshoes. He realized that Axel's going meant the squelching of his prospects, the unmasking of the find on Lost Farm, and he temporized gruffly.

"You can't make it by to-night, Barney."

"Can't, eh? Well, my bucko, I'm goin' to."

He straightened to his gaunt height and shook first one foot, then the other. "Guess they'll stick."

Then he swung down the road, passed the men at work, without a word to them, and disappeared in the forest.

The pulse of his anger steadied to a set purpose with the exertion of breaking a trail through the fine-bolted snow which lay between him and the Tramworth "tote-road." When he came out on the main road, he swung along vigorously. At the end of the second mile he stopped to light his pipe and shed the mackinaw, which he rolled and carried under his arm. It was piercingly cold, but, despite the stinging freshness of the morning, he was sweating. He knew that he must reach Lost Farm before nightfall. He trudged along, a tall, lonely figure, the lines of his hard-lived forty years cut deep in his weather-worn face. The sun rode veiled by a thin white vapor, a blurred midday moon. He glanced up and shook his head. "She's a-goin' to snow," he muttered. From nowhere a jay flashed across the opening ahead of him. Again he stopped and lit his pipe. Then he struck up a brisker gait. The long white miles wound in and out of the green-edged cavern through which he plodded. *Click! clack! click! clack!* his snowshoes ticked off the stubborn going. He fell to counting. "A dum' good way to git played out," he exclaimed. He fixed his gaze on the narrow, tunnel-like opening left by the snow-feathered branches that seemed to touch in the distance and bar the trail, endeavoring to forget the monotonous tick of his snowshoes.

A little wind blew in his face and lifted a film of snowdust that stuck to his eyelashes. He pulled off his mitten and brushed his eyes. There on the trail, where had been nothing but an unbroken lane of undulating white, stood a great brown shape. As Barney tugged at his mitten the shape whirled, forelegs clear

of the snow, and *Whish!* a few shaking firs, a falling of light snow from their breast-high tops, and the moose was gone.

“Go it, ole gamb’l roof!” shouted Barney, as the faint *plug, plug, plug*, of those space-melting strides died away. Before he realized it he was counting again. Then he sang,—a mirthless, ribald ditty of the shanties,—but the eternal silence swallowed his chant so passively that he ceased.

A film of snow slid from a branch and powdered the air with diamond-dust that swirled and settled gently. Above, a thin wind hissed in the pine tops.

The sun had gone out in a smother of ashy clouds, and the trees seemed to be crowding closer. *Pluff! pluff!* a mass of snow slid from the wide fan of a cedar, and breaking, dropped softly in the snow beneath.

Barney quickened his stride. A single flake, coming out of the blind nothingness above, drove slanting down and sparkled on his leather mitten. Then came another and another, till the green-fringed vista down which he trudged was suddenly curtained with whirling white. The going became heavier. The will to overcome the smothering softness that gave so easily to the forward thrust, yet hung a clogging burden on each lift of the hide-laced ash-bows, redoubled itself as he plunged on. Presently the trail widened, the forest seemed to draw back, and he found himself on the wide, white-masked desolation of Lost Lake.

Panting, he stopped. Instantly the rising wind struck freezing through his sweat-dampened shirt. He jerked on his coat. “I’ll make her yet—but I guess I’ll stick to the shore. How in tarnation I come to miss the road gets me, but this is Lost Lake all right, and a dum’ good name fur it.”

He turned toward the forest that loomed dimly through the hurtling white flakes. When he reached its edge he looked at his watch. It was four o’clock. He had been traveling six hours without food or rest. He followed the shore line, frequently stumbling and falling on the rocks that lay close to the surface of the snow. The wind grew heavier, thrusting invisible hands against him as he leaned toward it. It was not until after his third fall that the possibility of his never reaching Lost Farm overtook him. Before he realized it, night was upon him, and he could scarcely see the rim of his snowshoes as he drew them up, each step accomplished by sheer force of will. He thought of the men who had left the camp above and had never been heard from. It was bad enough, when a man’s light went out in a brawl, or on the drive; but to face the terror of the creeping snow, lost, starving, dragging inch by inch toward a hope that was treason to sanity. Finally, raving, cursing, praying, dying, alone—

Well, it was “up to him” to walk. He struggled on in the darkness. Had he known it, he was almost opposite the trail that crossed the dam at the foot of Lost Lake and wound up the hillside to Avery’s camp. Again he stumbled and fell. The fury of despair seized him and he struggled in the resistless snow. His foot was

caught in some buried branches. Had it been daylight he would have reached down and carefully disentangled himself, but the terror of night and uncertainty was on him. He jerked his leg out and was free, but the dangling web of a broken snowshoe hung about his ankle. The ash-bow had snapped.

“Done!” His tone commingled despair and anger. Then the spirit, which had buoyed on the lashing current of many a hazardous enterprise, rallied for a last attempt.

“What! Quit because I think I’m done? The dam’ snowshoe is busted, but I ain’t—yet.”

He hobbled toward the trees, fighting his slow way with terrible intensity. Beneath a twisted cedar he rested. The cold took hold upon him and lulled him gently.

“I’ll fix her up and plug along somehow.” He examined the shoe. “Take a week to fix that,” he muttered. “Guess I’ll start a fire and wait till mornin’.”

He felt in his pockets. He had used his last match in lighting his pipe. “Wal, I was a fool to fly off the handle ’thout grub or matches or nothin’. Wal, I kin cool off now, I reckon.”

He felt drowsily comfortable. The will to act was sinking as his vitality ebbed beneath the pressure of cold and hunger.

He gritted his teeth. “What! let my light go out afore I get a finishin’ crack at Denny Harrigan?”

In the blanket of night a pin-prick of red appeared. It moved, vanished, moved again.

“Dreamin’,” he grumbled. His head sunk on his chest. Once more he lifted his frosted eye-lids. The red point was moving.

“Last call fur supper,” he said; and bracing his hands against the cedar, he drew in a great breath and shouted.

“Hallo-o-o!” came faintly to him on the wind.

“Hallo-o-o—yerself,” he added, in a drowsy whisper. His last round was spent.

David Ross, on his way from Avery’s cabin to his own, heard the far-away call. He immediately turned and walked toward the spot where Axel was. As he drew near he circled about, peering under the bending branches. He looked here and there, holding the lantern high above his head. Nothing answered as he called. Nothing moved. He turned back toward the trail, round which twinkled the lights of Lost Farm Camp. The wind had hushed. The snow fell lazily. In the silence a rustling caught his ear. Axel, huddled against the cedar trunk, had slipped sideways, his coat scraping against the loose-fibred bark.

David traced the sound to a snowshoe sticking up in the drift beneath the tree. Then a moccasined foot, a red-striped stocking, and finally he was kneel-

ing by the unconscious Barney, shaking him vigorously. The lumberman's eyes slowly opened, then closed again heavily. David placed his lantern in the lee of the cedar and, kicking off one of his own racquettes, belabored Axel with it unsparingly.

Finally, the torpor broke and Axel opened his eyes. "A'right, a'right," he muttered. "Git up in a minute—jest a minute—"

In the half-hour it had taken David to reach him, the frost had gripped Axel's blood with clogging fingers that were not to be easily shaken off. Slipping his snowshoe on again, he propped the drowsy figure against the tree and worked himself under the inert shoulders. He reached up and grasped the wide coat-collar, then straightened himself suddenly. He had the lumberman on his back, but could he stagger through that killing half-hour again? Hanging the lantern on a low stub as he stooped beneath the burden of that dead weight on his shoulders, he turned toward the camp, fighting his way first and wondering how he did it afterwards.

Hoss Avery was pouring hot coffee between Axel's blue lips when the latter coughed and his eyes unclosed.

David, holding the lamp above him, stooped nearer. A look of recognition brightened Barney's heavy eyes for a moment.

"Jest—the—man—I'm—lookin'—fur," he whispered. Then he yawned, turned on his side and David thought he heard those grim lips murmur, "Sleep."

CHAPTER XI—THAT GREEN STUFF

RRR-R-UUF! *R-r-r-r-uff!* Swickey grabbed Smoke's collar and stood astride of him, holding on with both hands. "He ain't goin' to bite—'cause he don't growl when he's goin' to bite."

Barney Axel came from the front room of the cabin, limping a little. "'Course not! Smoke ain't got nothin' ag'in' me, have you, Smoke?"

The dog had paid little attention to the lumberman during the three days he had been "resting up" at Lost Farm, as Ross and Avery had been in the cabin most of that time; but this morning they were both out, toting in firewood on the

hand-sleighs.

“He’s jest pertendin’,” said Swickey, patting the terrier and encouraging him to make friends with Barney.

But Smoke was inclined to maintain a position of vigilant neutrality. Somewhere in the back of his head he had recorded that particular man-smell, and he took many uneasy paces between Swickey and Barney, keeping the while a slanted and suggestive gaze on the latter.

“Pop says ever since Injun Pete was killed, they’s folks might shoot Smoke.”

Axel’s pipe didn’t draw well. The pine splinter which he thrust in the stove occupied his entire attention.

“Pop says they won’t, if he sees ’em fust.”

“Reckon that’s right,” said Barney noncommittally.

“The sheriff was up to see Pop and Dave.”

“So?”

“Yip. And Jim Cameron come, too.”

“Ain’t su’prised at that.”

“Smoke he didn’t growl at them.”

“That dog knows his business,” replied Barney.

The conversation lagged. Axel sat smoking, eyes ceilingward and chair tilted at a perilous angle. “Fisty Harrigan give me the dirty end of the stick,” he thought. “But I got holt of the stick and Fisty’s goin’ to git it back ag’in good and plenty. Here I be settin’ easy and com’f’table right on the job. Hoss Avery and his partner Ross is plumb square, both of ’em. And the young feller’s mighty smart, keepin’ the ole man from sellin’ even if he don’t know they’s a fortune of money up there in Timberland, layin’ right on the ground waitin’ for him to come and find it. And, by gum, he’s a-goin’ to find it. All bets is off with Denny Harrigan and me. He done me and I’m goin’ to do him; and Ross he pulled me out of the snow, dumb near friz, and I reckon when I show him what’s over on Timberland, I’ll be square with the whole bilin’ of ’em. Then me fur Canady. Them St. John’s folks need men. Guess I kin land a job, all right.”

Swickey wanted to talk, but Barney’s abstraction awed her. She left the room finally, and returned with her “Robinson Crusoe.” She sidled up to the lumberman and laid the book on his knee. Still he smoked, apparently oblivious to the girl’s presence.

“Barney.” The tone was cajoling.

“Wal, sis?”

“Kin you read?”

“Wal, some.”

“Pop kin!” This was a challenge.

Barney glanced at the volume. “You want me to read this here?” he said,

his chair clumping to the floor.

“Yes.”

“Thanks. I *was* feelin’ kind of lonesome.”

He studied the first page for a long time. Then he settled back against the wall again, apparently absorbed in the book.

Swickey stood patiently waiting. She shifted from one foot to the other. *Tick-tack. Tick-tack.* The cabin was silent save for the rhythmic perseverance of the old clock. Smoke lay in front of the stove watching her.

“Barney!”

He glanced up, a surprised expression seaming his forehead.

“Kin you read—so’st I kin hear?”

“Why, sure!”

The suggestion seemed a novel idea to him. He turned back to the first page and began slowly, often pausing to illustrate the meaning with colloquialisms that to Swickey were decidedly interesting. He had already read the first page and he intended to make it last as long as possible. He felt fairly safe on the ground he had already covered, but new territory loomed ahead. “Let’s see,” he said, approximating the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word, “c-o-n-v-” but the stamping of feet on the porch saved him.

Avery and Ross entered, ruddy with exercise. Smoke raised his head and dropped it again with a grunt of satisfaction.

“Wal, Barney, how’s the feet?” said Avery, drawing off his mittens.

“Siz’able,” he replied.

“Kind of think you’d better not try to make thet explorin’ trip this a’ternoon. It’s heavy goin’.”

“Guess I kin hump along somehow. Jim’s comin’ up with the team fur me t’morrow, so I figure we’d best be joggin’ over there to Timberland.”

“Jest as you’re wishful. Me and Dave’s ready.”

“Kin I go?” asked Swickey.

“Reckon you better stay and keep Smoke comp’ny,” replied her father. “Dogs gits tol’able lonesome when they’s alone, jest the same as folks. They git to thinkin’ ’bout their famblys and friends and—”

“Has Smoke got a *fambly*?” asked Swickey.

“Wishin’ they was back home ag’in same as thet Robi’son Crusoe feller, all alone on a big island s’rounded by cannibells jest dyin’ to git a taste of white meat biled tender—”

“They roasted ’em,” corrected Swickey.

“Thet’s right—roasted; and they’s no tellin’ what thet dog might do. He might take a notion to go home by hisself—”

“I’d shet the door,” said Swickey.

"Huh! s'pose thet'd make any diff'runce. Why, if thet dog sot out to do it, he'd go through a winder like a hoss kickin' a hole in a fog. You stay by Smoke, thet's a good gal."

Swickey was silenced. The thought of losing Smoke outweighed the anticipated joy of lacing on her small snowshoes and accompanying the men on the trip about which there seemed to be so much mystery.

After dinner the three men filed out of the cabin and down across the frozen river, then up toward No-Man's Lake, David breaking the trail, Avery and Barney Axel following. They crossed the windswept glare of the lake, carrying their snowshoes. Round the base of Timberland Mountain they crept like flies circling a sugar-cone, slowly and with frequent pauses. David carried a rifle, Avery an axe, and Barney his own complaining body, which was just a trifle more than he bargained for at the start. His feet telegraphed along the trunk-line (so to speak) to give them a rest. But Barney was whipcord and iron, and moreover he had a double purpose of gratitude and revenge to stimulate him.

They came to the mouth of a black, ice-bound brook, and, following his directions, skirted its margin for perhaps a half-mile through the glen which wound along the north side of the mountain.

"It's somewhere right here," he called from the rear, where he had been examining the blaze on a pine. The two men waited for him, and, following his slow pace, were presently on a comparative level where a branch of the stream swung off toward the east. The second stream ran through a shallow gorge of limestone ledges, their ragged edges sticking up through the snow at intervals.

"Fust time I ever sighted this stream," said Avery. "Howcome we got a line of traps t'other side of the main brook."

Axel leaned wearily against a tree. His vengeance was costing him more physical pain than he cared to admit.

"There's where it is," he said, pointing to the ledges. "Mebby you might poke around with the axe a bit. You'll know it when you find it."

Avery handed the axe to David, who scooped away the snow and tapped a sliver of shale from the ledge. "Nothing here," he said, "except stone."

"Try a piece funder along," said Axel. "That surveyor feller, young Bascomb, could show you. He's been here, and so has Harrigan."

David tried again. This time he broke away a larger piece of rock and threw it aside to peck at a crevice. Presently he laid down the axe and came to Avery, holding something in his hand.

They crowded close to him. He held out his hand, disclosing a shining, dark-green mineral with little white cracks on its grained surface.

"That's her!" said Axel.

Avery took the piece of mineral from David and looked at it curiously,

turning it over and over in his hand.

"Thet green stuff!" he exclaimed skeptically. "Thet green stuff! And thet's what they was a'ter. Wal, I'll be henpogged! What's it good fur? What d'you call it?"

"Asbestos," said David.

"That's her," assented Barney.

David picked a sliver from the mineral and shredded it to a white fibre. "Got a match?"

Avery handed him one. He lit it, and, holding the white shreds in the flame, watched them grow red, then pale to a grayish white ash, but the substance was unconsumed.

"That's her!" said Barney. "And there's miles of it strung along this here creek. Drillin' and dinnimite 'll show more. Fisty set a blast in up there," he said, pointing above them, "but I promised him I'd never squeak about there bein' asbestos on your land—and I hain't nuther. I never told you they was asbestos here. I said they was suthin' wuth comin' a'ter, and you come and found it. I reckon I'm square with Fisty Harrigan now—and mebbly with you," he added, turning to David, "fur diggin' me out of the snow."

"What's it wuth?" said Avery.

"Well, if there's the quantity that Barney seems to think there is, it's worth a whole lot more than Bascomb offered you," replied David.

"Yes," said Axel, "and Denny was in on the deal with young Bascomb. Denny put him on to it, expectin' to make a fortune. Said he found it cruisin' fur the Great Western."

"Cruisin' fur the Great Western?" exclaimed Avery. "What's Harrigan been doin' cruisin' my land fur timber fur them?"

"Oh, they'll get it some day," replied Axel. "They've got a pull down to the State House."

"Wal, they ain't got it yit," said Avery, pocketing the sample. "And they ain't a-goin' to."

"They's one thing more I was a-goin' to say." Barney Axel gazed at the rim of his snowshoe. "Denny Harrigan was my friend onct. That's up the spout now. But Injun Pete was set on to do what he come dum' near doin' and mebbly you kin guess who set him on. And the feller that set him up to it won't quit till he's done you up. I ain't mentionin' no names, but you licked him onct—and you're the fust man that ever done it. The next time," he continued slowly, "don't you quit till you've finished the job—cold."

"Much obliged, Barney," said David. "I'll remember."

The next day, after Axel had left with Cameron for Tramworth, the partners had an interesting session. Ross was to go to Boston and bring a mining expert

back with him,—but not till spring had swept an easier footway to the mountain and laid bare the ledges for a more comprehensive inspection. They wanted to find out what the asbestos was really worth, and then, if it promised well, to mine it themselves.

“It will take time and money,” said David. “These things always move slowly, and it takes money to interest capital.”

“Wal,” replied Avery, “you got the time,—next spring,—and mebby I kin rake t’gither a leetle dough. How much do you reckon it’ll take to git started?”

“Oh, a thousand or two for initial expenses; perhaps more.”

“Smotherin’ cats! But I reckon you know somethin’ ’bout sech things—havin’ a law eddication.”

“You could mortgage the land and operate with the money,” said David, “but it’s risky.”

“Say, Dave, ain’t me and you done purty fair so fur?”

“Yes,” replied David, smiling, “we have. But my interest in the trapping lets me out. It’s your land and your asbestos.”

“Ya-a-s,” drawled Avery whimsically, studying the other’s face. “It’s my land, and my asbestos, and you’re my partner, and Swickey’s my gal, and I reckon I kin pay the man what’s eddicatin’ her as much as I dum’ please.”

“If the man is willing,” replied David.

“If he ain’t, it won’t be for because ole Hoss Avery don’t pay him enough. We’re goin’ halves on this here deal the same as the trappin’ and the eddicatin’ and sech.” He put his hand on David’s shoulder and whispered, “Listen to thet!”

It was Swickey, perched in Avery’s armchair, spelling out letter by letter the first page of her “Robinson Crusoe,” to Smoke, who sat on his haunches before her, well aware that she demanded his individual attention to the story, yet his inner consciousness told him that it was a good half-hour past supper-time.

CHAPTER XII—“US AS DON’T KNOW NOTHIN’”

With the June rains came the drive, thousand after thousand of glistening logs that weltered in the slow rise and fall of the lake, crowding, rolling, blundering

against each other, pounding along shore on the rocks, and shouldering incessantly at the chain-linked booms that sagged across the upper end of the conglomeration of timbers. Rain-dappled spaces appeared here and there in that undulating floor of uneasy logs, round which two floating windlasses were slowly worming another boom from shore to shore. Round and round the capstans stepped red-shirt, blue-shirt, gray-shirt, their calked boots gnawing a splintered, circular path on the windlass rafts.

Below the three cabins, and close to the river, stood the smoking wangan of weathered tents, flopping in the wind that whipped the open fireplace smoke across the swinging pots, and on down the gorge, where it hung eddying in the lee of rain-blackened cliffs.

Peaveys stood like patient sentinels, their square steel points thrust in stranded logs. Pike-poles lay here and there, their sharp screw-ends rusting in the rain. They seemed slight and ineffectual compared with the stout peaveys, whose dangling steel fingers hung suggestively ready to grasp with biting spur the slippery timber; and *Y-hey!* from the men, and the log would grumble over the shingle and plunge in the lake with a surly rolling from side to side. But the peavey's attenuated brother, the pike-pole, was a worker of miracles in the hands of his master, the driver.

Ross, who had been watching with keen interest the manœuvres of the rivermen, stood with his shoulders against a buttress of the dam, muffled in sou'wester and oilskins. Logs were shooting from the apron of the sluiceway and leaping to the lift of the foaming back-water, like lean hunters taking the billowy top of a wind-tossed hedge. A figure came toward where he stood and called to him, but the roar of the water through the sluiceway drowned his voice. Then Harrigan, brushing the rain from his face, stood before him.

"Here you! get a roll on that log there, or—"

He pointed to where two of the crew were standing, knee-deep in the backwash of the stream, tugging at a balky timber that threatened to hang up the logs that charged at it and swung off in the current again.

"No, you won't," said David, turning his face to Harrigan. "Thought I was one of the crew loafing?" A faint twinkle shone beneath his half-closed lids. It vanished as he leveled his clear gray eyes on Harrigan's. "That's the fourth mistake you've made regarding me. Aren't you getting tired of it? I am."

Harrigan had not seen Ross since the shooting, and, taken aback by suddenly coming upon him, he stared at David a little longer than the occasion seemed to warrant.

Coolly the younger man lifted his sou'wester and ran his fingers through his hair. "It's on this side," he said, disclosing a red seam above his ear, "if that's what you are looking for. Shot any deer lately?"

“You go to hell!”

Ross stepped up to him and pointed across the opposite hill to where the dim crest of Timberland Mountain loomed in the rain.

“Bascomb & Company haven’t bid high enough for the raw material, including you. That’s all.”

Harrigan’s loose, heavy features hardened to a cold mask of hate as the full meaning of David’s words struck home. Then the sluggish blood leaped to his face and he stooped for the peavey at his feet, but David’s foot was on it like a flash. “None of that!”

They faced each other, shoulder to shoulder, David’s eyes measuring the distance to Harrigan’s jaw. In the intense silence the patter of rain on their oilskins sounded like the roll of kettledrums.

“Hey, Denny!” Up on the dam a dripping figure waved its arms.

“I’ll git you yit, you—”

“Swallow it!” David’s voice rang out imperiously. The wound above his ear tingled with the heat of blood that swept his face.

Harrigan drew back and turned toward the beckoning figure.

“Go ahead,” said David; “I don’t carry a gun.”

As Fisty swung heavily along the shore, Avery came from down river with one of the men.

“They’re pilin’ up at the ‘Elbow,” he said, as he approached. “They’s a full head of water comin’ through the gates, but she’s a-goin’ to tie up.”

“That means the outfit will be here indefinitely,” said David.

“Reckon it do. Comin’ up to the house?”

“No; I think I’ll go over and see if Smoke is all right.”

“That’s right: I’ll send Swickey over with some grub fur him,” said Avery, as he moved on up the slope.

“Well, it’s pretty tough on old Smoke, chained up and worrying himself out of appetite, because he can’t understand it all,” thought David, as he climbed the easy slope to the stable.

The clink and rustle of a chain in the straw came to him as he unlocked the rusty padlock and opened the door. Smoke stood blinking and sniffing. Then on his hind legs, chain taut from collar to manger, he strained toward his master, whimpering and half strangled by his effort to break loose. David drew an empty box to the stall and sat down.

“Smoke,” he said playfully, “we’re going back to Boston pretty soon. Then no more hikes down the trail; no more rabbits and squirrels to chase; and no more Swickey to spoil you. Just Wallie and the horses and maybe a cat or two to chase.”

The dog sat on his haunches, tongue lolling, but eyes fixed unwaveringly

on David's face. He whined when Swickey's name was mentioned, and while David listlessly picked a straw to pieces, he turned and gnawed savagely at his chain. Surely they had made a mistake to shut him away from the good sun and the wind and the rain. The consciousness of unseen presences stamping past his door, strange voices, new man-smells, the rumbling of logs in the river, the scent of smoke from the wangan, all combined to irritate him, redoubling his sense of impotency as a champion and guardian of his adopted household.

The door of the main camp opened and closed. With the slant of the rain beating against her came Swickey, a quaint figure in her father's cap and gay-colored mackinaw. She had a bowl of table scraps for Smoke, who ceased whining and stood watching her approach. David took the basin from her hands and gravely offered her a seat on the box; but she declined with a quick smile and dropped on her knees beside Smoke, caressing his short, pointed ears and muscular fore-shoulders. The dog sniffed at his food disdainfully. What did meat and bones amount to compared with prospective liberty? With many words and much crooning she cajoled him into a pretense of eating, but his little red eyes sought her face constantly as he crunched a bone or nosed out the more appetizing morsels from the pan.

"Dave," she said, addressing him with the innocent familiarity of the backwoods, "you're goin' to take Smoke to his real home again, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'll have to, I think. But this is as much his real home as Boston was."

"Are you comin' back again?"

"I think so, Swickey. Why?"

"Are you goin' to bring Smoke back when you come?"

"I'm afraid not. You see he belongs to Mr. Bascomb the surveyor. He was coming up here to get Smoke and—and talk with me about certain things, but he was called home by wire. Had to leave immediately."

"What's it mean—'called home by wire'?"

"By telegraph. You remember the telegraph wires in the station at Tramworth?"

"Yip. Hundreds of 'em."

"Well, people call telegraphing, 'wiring,' and a telegram a 'wire.'"

"Ain't telegraph its real name?"

"Yes; but wire is shorter—easier to say."

"Is that why you said it?"

"Not exactly. But why?"

"Oh, nothin'; only when Pop had a cold and I said to you he could sca'cely talk 'cause he had frost in his pipes, you said it was wrong to say that, and to say 'my father has a sore throat.' Ain't 'frost in your pipes' quicker than sayin' 'my father has a sore throat'?"

She looked up from Smoke as David laughed, her gravely smiling lips vivid in contrast with the clear, healthy brown of her rounded young cheek.

He gazed at her a moment, and the pert, shabbily-clad Swickey of a year ago returned his gaze for a fleeting instant. Then a new Swickey, with full, brown eyes and the rich coloring of abundant health, pushed back the frayed cap from her smooth, girlish forehead, and laughed, laughed with the buoyant melody of youth and happiness.

“You’re actually pretty, Swickey.”

She grasped the import of his words with a slow realization of the compliment, perhaps the first that had ever been paid her, and a sudden consciousness of self overwhelmed her throat and cheek with rushing color. She pulled her skirt, that Smoke had disarranged, closer about her knees.

“Pop says my mother was pretty—awful pretty. I never seen her, ’cept in her picture. Pop’s got it with all gold on the edges of the box and a cover that goes ‘snap’ when he shuts it.”

“Yes,” replied David absently.

He was thinking of the pale beauty of another and older girl, a tall, slender woman, whose every feature bespoke ancestral breeding. He could not imagine her as a part of this picture, with its squalid setting, nor even as a part of the splendid vista of glistening spring foliage sprinkled upon the background of the hillside conifers that climbed the height of land opposite. Palms and roses, the heavy warm air of the conservatory, sensuous, soothing, enervating.... Wallie Bascomb’s sister ... Elizabeth Bascomb. “Well, it had been a mistake.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Bascomb senior will sit up straight when I name our price,” he muttered. “Strange how this thing has worked out ... and Bessie won’t understand...”

Smoke, nuzzling his hand, recalled him to his surroundings. He did not realize that he had been speaking, but Swickey sat with eyes intently fixed on his face.

“I thought—” he began.

“I unhitched the chain when you was talkin’ to yourself like Pop does,” explained Swickey.

David stooped and patted the dog, who jumped from him to Swickey and back again, overjoyed and impartially affectionate.

“Be careful not to let him out alone,” said David. “Smoke isn’t popular with the men.”

“Pop says they’ll be”—(“There’ll be,” corrected David)—“there’ll be suthin’ doin’ if any of the crew tetches Smoke!”

“Well, you and I will look after him for a while, Swickey. Then no one will touch him.”

Together they walked leisurely toward the cabin, hand in hand, Swickey swinging the empty bowl, all unconscious of Smoke's capering and rushing in circles round his liberators. He quieted down and trotted silently behind them when his first joy had evaporated. They didn't seem to enter into the spirit of the thing.

David, unlike his usual self in Swickey's presence, was silent to taciturnity. Boston, of which he was thinking, seemed vague and unreal, a place he once knew. His surroundings were the only realities, and now that he was going away they seemed to hold him with a subtle force he could not analyze. Was he really growing fonder of his life here, of Swickey and her father, than he cared to acknowledge?

"Fraid Dave'd get lost in the long grass?" said Avery, who stood in the doorway, grinning as they came up.

David stopped and turned toward Swickey. She slowly withdrew her fingers from his.

"I reckon Dave's sick," she replied.

"How sick?" queried her father, with undisguised solicitude.

"Sick of us as don't know nothin'," she answered, her cheeks flaming. And she pushed past the figure in the doorway and disappeared into her room.

"Wal, sweatin' catfish! What ails the gal? She was puffin' like a hen drawin' rails when she went past me. Huh!"

The old man fumbled in his pocket for tobacco, oblivious to Smoke's appeal for notice. Then the dog trotted quietly after Swickey, who in the sanctuary of her own tiny bedroom was crying her heart out. Smoke was sympathetic from his cold, friendly nose to the tip of his querulous tail, which wagged in an embarrassed way; and he licked her chin at intervals when it was visible, with dumb solicitude for the sorrow of his idol, a sorrow wholly incomprehensible to him, and vague even to Swickey, but more emotionally potent, perhaps, for that very reason.

CHAPTER XIII—DAVID'S "REAL GOOD-BYE"

Dear Davy:—Only a line to say how d’do, and tell you that things are booming here, especially in the office. The pater asks me to say that he, as chairman of a certain committee of inflated gold-bugs, will accept your figure for the entire Lost Farm tract (survey inclosed), provided the figure is anywhere within reason, whatever that means. This is with the understanding that the present tenants vacate on or before June 1st, 19—.

The N. M. & Q. will have their iron laid as far as Tramworth by that time.

I suppose you have become quite a woodsman by this time, but I can’t for the life of me see how you can stand it up there in winter; summer is bad enough.

By the way, if it is not too much trouble, you might bring Smoke along when you come out, if you ever do. I’ve given up hoping you will. Bess seems to think she wants Smoke, although she didn’t see him once a month when he was at home.

My illustrious father has cooked up a new job for me—I’m a promoter now. Shake.

Davy, I have a surprise for you when you come; something that will make you sit up and take notice, I’ll bet. In the mean time, beware the seductions of Tramworth, and dressmakers in particular. Speaking of Tramworth reminds me of the account I saw of your accident. Congrats, old man, on your ability to dodge bullets. I intended to write sooner, but have been on the jump every minute. Smoke did the Indian up for fair, bless his little heart (I mean Smoke’s). But we can talk it over when you arrive. Regards to old Cyclops and the siren child.

Sincerely,

—WALTER E. BASCOMB.

David tucked the letter into his pocket, and closing the door of his cabin walked over to Avery’s camp.

“Pop’s down on the dam talkin’ to Jim,” said Swickey from the doorway.

“All right. I’ll jog down and see him.” He turned back after a step or two. “Did Jim say he was going back this afternoon?”

“I dunno,” replied Swickey listlessly.

He looked at her. She seemed older, more serious than usual. Slowly he realized that she was no longer the child of yesterday, but a girl budding rapidly into womanhood, which seemed natural enough when he remembered what her life had been up to the time he had first met her. She was virtually doing a woman’s work at the camp; had been for a number of years. Then she was of the type that matures rapidly. Outdoor air and exercise had developed her physically, and she had always been of full proportions for her age. The color glowed in her cheeks as he gazed at her.

“Swickey, what’s the matter? Have I offended you in any way? You haven’t

spoken to me since yesterday.”

“Nothin’,” she replied. “You ain’t done nothin’.”

“Don’t you mean: ‘You haven’t done anything?’” he asked kindly.

“Nope.” She offended deliberately.

“Swickey!” His tone of gentle reproof was new to her. Self-accusation, laboring in her heart, sent a full tide of color to her brows, but she did not speak.

“Is it Smoke?” he asked.

She nodded. Yesterday that answer would have sufficed her conscience, but to-day....

“I’m sorry,” he said, stepping across the porch and to the path. He had gone as far as the end of the camp when she called.

“D—Dave!”

He came back to her, an amused light in his eyes.

“I lied, I did. ’Tain’t Smoke—it’s you, too,” she cried, the tears welling to her eyes.

“Me?” he exclaimed. Then he understood. “You poor youngster. There, don’t cry. I’m coming back and, by crickey! I’ll bring Smoke, too, if it’s possible.” He drew nearer to her and put his hand on her shoulder. “You’ve got your father, and there isn’t a finer man on earth than he. Besides, I won’t be away so very long if I can help it.”

But David’s words failed to comfort her.

“’Tain’t Pop I want,” she sobbed, “like I want you.”

“But, Swickey—”

She came close, pressing her face against him. Suddenly she flung her arms about his neck, her tempestuous affection striking a thrill through his body as her warmth crept to him. Despite the many interests of his new life, he had been lonely and she brought it home to him in her own abrupt way.

“Why, Swickey, I didn’t know you cared so much. Come! I’ll promise to come back just as soon as I can, and we’ll have some new books, and glorious winter evenings together to read and talk and study.”

He drew her hands from his shoulders, and as he did so she threw back her head and half affectionately, half defiantly whispered, “Ain’t you goin’ to kiss me—jest once—afore you go?”

The appeal of her tearful eyes and upturned, trembling lips, half pouting with a thirst inexplicable to her, found answer as he stooped and kissed her with grave tenderness.

“Good-bye, Swickey. I’m going to-night, if Cameron will take me through to Tramworth. The letter he brought has changed my plans. Of course I’ll see you again, but this is our real good-bye, little girl.”

“I’m fifteen anyway,” she replied, smiling through her tears.

"I'll send you a birthday present when I get home. How would you like a nice, woolly, white mackinaw coat, with little blue squares round the edges? I know where I can get one."

"Oh, heaps!" she exclaimed rapturously. "Will you?"

"As sure as you're Swickey!"

She watched him as he hurried toward the dam where her father and Curious Jim were vehemently discussing the new railroad. Something white lay on the floor at her feet. She picked it up and studied the address on the envelope. It was Bascomb's letter to David. Intending to return it to him when he came back, she placed it on the clock-shelf and busied herself with the daily routine of housekeeping.

Cameron's fist was in the air as David came to where Avery and he stood.

"I seen 'em as plain as I see Dave Ross a-comin'," he asserted.

Avery seemed doubtful.

"A whole line of 'em strung along the river. Then they stopped. Seein' they was plenty of logs stranded, I clumb across, and sure as shootin', on the other side they commenced ag'in with N. M. & Q. stamped on every ding one of 'em."

"Jim's a-tellin' me them surveyor fellers marked out a new line fur the railroad, crossin' the Branch about five mile below here tow'ds the Knoll!"

David contained his surprise. "Is that so?" he answered easily.

"Sure as hens 'll squawk," said Cameron.

"You're sure it isn't an old survey?"

"They're fresher than them," he replied, kicking a survey stake at his feet.

Ross glanced at Avery, but the old man's gaze was fixed on Cameron's face.

"Why'd you tell me about it, Jim?" he asked abruptly.

Cameron shuffled his feet in the shingle, and pensively bit a chew from his plug. He busied himself adjusting the tobacco satisfactorily, evidently preparing for a long siege.

"M-m-um, well," he began, "thought it might int'rest you if the road was to cross the Branch there, instid of here," emphasizing the location by again kicking the stake. "Probably you know why better than I do. I was jest spec'latin' on that."

"Jim," said Avery, fixing him with a shrewd eye, "whar you been pokin' round lately?"

Curious Jim shifted from one foot to the other.

"I can smell somethin' comin' plain as burnin' grevvy—"

Cameron grinned in anticipation of his hearers' astonishment when he should tell them what *he* knew.

"When the drive went through last week, I was to Tramworth. You know the back room in Bill Smeaton's harness-shop. Well, I was settin' there, pickin'

over some findin's to mend my harness,—Bill havin' gone out on a personal errand,—and somebody comes in, follered by another feller. One of 'em says, 'Hey, Bill!' Seein' as my name's Jim, I jest said nothin'"—a smile twitched Avery's beard—"but set there. Pretty soon the feller what follered the first feller in, says, 'Guess he's gone out fur a drink,' which was c'rrect. Then they sorter hung around fur a minute or two, talkin' about the drive and this here new railroad, and some folks as ain't more'n a mile from here; and then Fisty says, 'Well, Red, Barney's done us on the asbestos and that one-eyed ole'—"

"Go ahead," interrupted Avery, "I been called thet afore now."

"Has got it comin' his way so fur," continued Cameron, "'but the game ain't all played out yet."

Curious Jim drew himself up and looked from one to the other of the partners. "That's all—'cept they went out, Fisty and Jim Smeaton, and I climb out of the back window after a spell and waited till Bill Smeaton come back. Then I went in the front ag'in and got what I was after."

"Wal, is thet all?" said Avery.

"All of that," replied Cameron. "Later on I was in the hotel, and when I went out to the stable to hitch up, they was a couple of fellers talkin' kind of loud in the alley back of the stable. They had liquor in 'em, I reckon. One of 'em says to the other, 'What good is it goin' to do 'em if the railroad don't cross on their land?' Now, that's what set me thinkin' they might be some manœuvrin' goin' on what might int'rest you."

"Jim," said Avery, "if what you say is true, you never done a better day's work in your life. We're goin' to need a fust-class man with a team when the—when things gits to runnin' right. It'll be stiddy work and good pay. Dave here is goin' to Boston to-morrow to see about it and he'll be wantin' you to take him to the train, I reckon."

"I was," said David, "but all this has changed my plans. I want to go just as quick as I can. Can you take me down to-night?"

"Guess I can make her," replied Curious Jim. "It's goin' to rain afore long," he added, looking at the sky.

"Never mind the rain, Jim. I'll be ready in five minutes," and David hastened toward his cabin.

An hour later they were jolting down the trail in the big wagon. As they entered the woods, David turned and waved his hat. A hand flickered up and down on the distant cabin porch. He could not see the figures distinctly, Avery shading his eyes with a great hairy hand, as he gazed at the retreating wagon, and Swickey, standing beside him, eyes fixed on the edge of the forest, and the memory of David's real good-bye still warm in her heart and tingling on her lips.

CHAPTER XIV—THE FLIGHT OF SMOKE

They passed Cameron's place without stopping, much to the disappointment of the good woman of that establishment, whose real fondness for David was hidden beneath the rough bark of bucolic assertiveness with which she chose to mask her natural kindness of heart.

"There goes Jim and that man Ross, tearin' past here like as if wagons and hosses didn't cost nothin'," she remarked. "And they're drivin' into what's like to be the biggest drenchin' of their lives, if I'm any jedge."

She snatched the meagre array of stockings, sheets, and underwear from the clothes-line, bundling them hurriedly in her long, muscular arms, and disappeared into the house, followed by the first scattering harbingers of a heavy June downpour that presently came, spreading black spots on the soft gray of the sun-bleached door.

Racketing over the road at a brisk trot, a quarter of a mile below, went the team, David clinging to the seat and wondering how Cameron managed to maintain his swaying poise with both hands on the reins and his mind engrossed with nothing more serious than asking stuttering questions as to what his companion thought the new road—*Bump! Judas!*—was up to now?

"She's a-goin' to break loose in a minute," yelled Cameron, as a gust of wind flapped his hat-brim over his eyes. With one hand he reached beneath the seat and drew out a grain sack, which he flung round his shoulders, tucking the ends beneath his suspenders.

"C-c-cant, he-he-lp it now," replied David. "I want to make that ten-thirty train."

He cast a glance over his shoulder to where Smoke stood, legs spread to the lurch of the wagon, and a canine grin of fixed intensity gripped between his set jaws.

With the quick chill of air that blew in their faces came the roar of the rain through the leaves.

The broad, round flanks of the horses worked rhythmically, and each huge forefoot rose and fell with trip-hammer precision. A sharp drive of wind bent the tops of the young wayside firs groundward. The wagon pitched over a knoll and took the rutted grade below it at a speed that kept the horses' flanks quivering with the anticipated shock of the clacking whiffletrees, as the traces slackened and then snapped taut again with a jerk. Then somewhere in the southern sky a long, fiery seam sprang open and winked shut again, followed by a hush in which the battering of the horses' feet on the shale was like mimic thunder.

A dull grumbling rolled out of nowhere and boomed lazily across the crouching hills, dying away in the distant valleys.

"Fraid of lightnin'?" asked Cameron, pulling up the horses as they descended a steep pitch in the road.

"No, but I don't like it."

"I be," said Cameron.

David glanced at his dripping face, which seemed strangely white in the gathering dusk.

"Had a hoss struck onct—when I was drivin' him. That's as close as I—"

A whirl of flame spurted from the trees on the roadside. A rush of shattering noises tore the false truce of silence to a million shreds, and the top of a giant hemlock fell crashing through the trees below it and lunged across the road. The team plunged backward, and David saved himself from a headlong dive between the rearing animals by the sheer force of his grip on the seat. The roar of the rain, as it pounded on the corduroy of the "swamp-stretch," drowned Cameron's voice as he called to the horses. Curious Jim's fear of lightning was not altogether a selfish one. He treated his horses like human beings in so far as he could, and they shuddered uneasily in the slack harness as they stood in front of the wrecked tree-top, but they did not run, as David feared they would.

Cameron handed the lines to David and went to their heads with a reassuring familiarity of voice and touch that quieted them.

"You go ahead a piece and look if they's room to get by."

David dropped to the road and felt his way cautiously over the slippery logs. A white flash lit the dripping leaves around him, disclosing an impassable barrier of twisted limbs through which gleamed the riven top of the hemlock.

"We can't make it with the team," he shouted.

"You jest hold the hosses a spell." David came back to him. "No—go back and take the lines. I'll have a squint at things."

The teamster crept forward in the gloom and peered at the obstruction. Presently he came back and reached beneath the wagon. David heard him loosen the chain and brake-shoe attached to the axle. Again Cameron moved toward the fallen tree, the chain clanking behind him. "Now, I'll onhitch and see if we can

snake her to one side. Where in thunder's that axe?"

He found it and drove out the king-pin. The tongue of the wagon thudded to the road as the horses stepped free.

"They's jest one chanct in a hundred we kin make it," he called, as he started toward the tree.

Another flash burned through the cavernous gloom, and David saw his companion stooping among the fallen branches. Then he heard the chain jump taut with a snap, followed by myriad rustlings as the horses leaned to the creaking collars. He could hear Cameron's voice urging them easily as they stumbled on the slippery corduroy. With a groan the tree swung parallel to the trail. The horses stopped.

"She's a-comin'," called Jim. "If they'd only light up ag'in so I could resk snakin' her a leetle—"

With the flash that followed, Cameron called to the horses. Ross could hear them shouldering through the underbrush at the edge of the swamp.

"E-e-easy, thar!" Cameron backed the team and unhooked the chain. "Reckon we kin jest about squeak by," he said, as he swung the hard-breathing horses to the wagon again. "She's lettin' up some, but that ain't sayin' much." After some delay he found the axe which he had dropped after driving out the king-pin. He drove it in place again and climbed to the seat.

"When we git by this piece of corrugated cussedness, I calc'late we'll make a noise like as if suthin's comin'," he remarked, wiping his forehead with a dripping hand. "Kin you see what's the time?"

"About nine-thirty. I looked when you were unhitching. I won't have time to change my clothes at the hotel."

"Reckon not," replied Jim, as he swung the horses round the crowding branches that whipped their flanks and snapped along the side of the wagon. In a few minutes they were on the natural roadbed again, swishing through pools of muddy water, and clanking over the stony stretches at a brisk trot.

A tiny red glow appeared on the edge of the night. It crept higher and higher as they jingled toward it. Presently it was a lamp, framed in the cottage window of the first habitation on the outskirts of Tramworth. Then more lights sprang out of the darkness, gleaming faintly through rain-blurred panes.

A dog ran out of a dooryard as they passed, barking raucously. Smoke growled his disapproval. It was bad enough to get wet to the hide without being insulted by an ill-bred animal whose valor was proportionate, in adverse ratio, to the proximity of the front gate. Smoke knew that kind.

They turned a corner and trotted smoothly down the main street of the town. On the right, at the foot of the street, shone the low red and green switch-lights of the railroad. The station baggage-room was open, and the lamplight

spread out across the glistening, wet cinders of the approach to the platform. Cameron whirled the team alongside and David jumped out, Smoke at his heels.

“Boston—single.”

The station agent stamped the ticket and shoved the change under the wire screen.

“Two bundles on this,” he said, handing his ticket to the baggage-man, and lifting his belongings to the platform. “I suppose the dog can come in the smoker with me?”

“’Gainst the rules. Have to buy a ticket for him. He goes in the baggage.”

The air quavered with the rumble of the on-coming train. A long shaft of light shot round a distant curve.

“Here, Smoke!” David attached the red ticket to the dog’s collar. “You’re live baggage this trip.”

“You’ll have to have a chain or they won’t take him,” said the baggage-man.

“Got a piece of rope, Jim?”

“Nope. They’s some on your duffle.”

“Here you are.” The baggage-man appeared with a cord which he hastily knotted in the dog’s collar. “I’ll put him aboard with your stuff.”

“All right,” answered David, as the train roared past and slowed down. “Well, good-bye, Jim.”

“So-long, Dave. I’ll keep an eye on Fisty.”

“Smoker? Three coaches forward,” said a brass-buttoned official in answer to David’s question.

David swung to the car steps as the train started, and stood for a second waving to Cameron. As he turned to mount the steps he saw a familiar shape shoot down the glistening platform and disappear in the darkness, a red ticket fluttering at its throat.

CHAPTER XV—BOSTON

“Smoke! Smoke!” he called, as the white figure shot across the patch of light from the station doorway and vanished up the Tramworth road. Then he realized the futility of his recent action, and laughed. As the step on which he

stood glided smoothly past the end of the platform, his attention was attracted to another figure, standing with mouth open and eyes gazing with an absurdly wistful expression toward the place where Smoke was last visible. It was the baggage-man, with a piece of broken cord in his hand.

"Cheer up, old man!" shouted David, as the train slipped past. Then he turned and entered the car. "Might have known Smoke wouldn't lead just like a little woolly lamb on wheels. Hang it, though, what will Wallie say? Well, I've got the claim check for him, anyway."

He found a seat near the end of the car, flung up the window and filled his pipe. "Couldn't sleep if I tried, so I'll just have it out with myself now. Then I'll try the sleeper."

Settling comfortably in the corner of the seat, he glanced down the aisle of the car through the smoky haze that blurred the lamps and swirled through the ventilators. The man across the aisle lay huddled in his seat, mouth open and head joggling as he slept. Near the middle of the coach four men were playing cards. The muscular impetuosity of the one who was leading his trumps with a flourish that suggested swinging a pickaxe amused David more than it offended by its uncouthness. He understood that type of man better than he had a year ago.

Through the murk came the winking eye of the conductor's lantern.

"That your dog that broke loose?" he asked.

"Yes." David handed him his ticket.

"Too bad. I saw him go. He just raised up and gave one jump. Shot out of the baggage before they could grab him."

"I'm glad they didn't try to grab him," said David.

"From what I seen of him I guess that's right. North Station? Eight-thirty." He leaned across the aisle and shook the sleeping man's arm. "Belvidere next stop. Your station."

Ahead in the night sprang the parallel silver ribbons, the glistening rails that shot beneath the rocking Titan of steam and steel and wound smoothly away to nothing as the train thundered on. David could hear the humming wheels beneath him clack quickly over the switch-points of infrequent freight sidings and then the reëchoed roar as the train whirled between the forest walls, driving the long shaft of its head-light through the eerie gloom of the dripping woodlands.

He rapped the ashes from his pipe and closed the window. The scar above his temple throbbed and pained him. He passed his hand through his hair. His head felt hot, despite the chill that ran through his limbs. His hand trembled as he felt for his pipe again. "This won't do," he muttered. "Wonder what the dickens is the matter with me? I never felt this way before."

Then he drew a memorandum book from his pocket and sat gazing into

space, frequently jotting down figures. Soon he was completely absorbed in the intricacies of approximating roughly the cost of establishing a plant to mine the asbestos on Lost Farm. "Now if the N. M. & Q. crosses five miles below us, it's going to make quite a difference. I doubt that a spur from Timberland would be practicable. Perhaps it's a bluff—this new survey. Maybe the old survey was a bluff. Bascomb had it in his power to do as he pleased about that. Anyway, the stuff's there and he wants it. If they were going to cross at Lost Farm, we should have received notice from their attorneys before this, that's certain. Right of eminent domain would settle that. Well, we'll stick to our guns and fight it out. It's bully!" he exclaimed aloud. "It's worth while; and if we win out, well, Swickey will have to change her first name, that's certain. She will go to school, of course." He tried to picture Swickey as a gracefully gowned young woman like—no, not like Elizabeth Bascomb. She could never be like Bessie; and yet—why should she be like any one but herself. The memory of Swickey's last appeal came to him keenly; the pleading eyes, the parted lips—

He arose, opened the car door, lurched across the platform to the next car, where he dropped into a more comfortable seat, and pulling his hat-brim over his eyes, fell asleep.

Several hours later he awoke as the train rumbled over the reverberating timbers of the approach to Boston. He gazed sleepily through the misty window at the familiar environs of the city. He felt strangely uncomfortable and out of place as he stepped to the station platform and moved toward the gates with the shuffling crowd about him. The reek of oil and steam from the pulsating engine was particularly disagreeable. Several people glanced at him curiously as he came out on the street.

He shook himself together, and boarding a car sat gazing moodily at the opposite window. How flat and squalid the buildings appeared. How insignificant and how generally alike the people. They seemed to lack individuality and forcefulness, these pallid, serious-faced regulars of the civilian army of wage-getters. His native city had never appealed to him in this way before. It was vast, of course; but its vastness was a conglomeration of little things that produced the impression of size. The wide sweep of the hills about Lost Farm and the limitless horizon of the free woodland spaces came to him in sharp contrast, as he turned his thoughts to the present need that had brought him back to his home.

"A bath and a good sleep will straighten me out," he thought.

As the car stopped beyond a cross-street he got off and walked toward a hotel.

"My baggage is at the North Station," he told the clerk, as he registered and handed his checks to him. "Send it to my room when it comes."

"That man's sick," said the clerk, as David disappeared in the ascending

elevator. "Writes a good hand," he remarked, turning the register toward him. "David Ross, Boston. Hum-m. But you can't always judge by the clothes."

About three o'clock that afternoon, David appeared at the hotel desk with a small parcel in his hand. "I shall be here a day or two, perhaps longer. I'm going to have a few things sent. You may have them put in my room."

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk, somewhat impressed by David's manner. "I'll send them right up."

David strolled to the door and paused, gazing listlessly up and down the street. Then he stepped out, crossed the Common, and walked down the long hill toward his aunt's house. When he arrived there the maid ushered him immediately to the cosy living-room.

"Miss Ross is out, Master David, but she expects you, and your room is ready."

"I'll step up for a minute," he replied.

When he returned, attired in a quiet-colored business suit and fresh linen, he called the maid and told her he was going out for a few hours. "Tell Miss Ross I'll be back to dinner if possible, but not to wait for me."

"Yes, sir. Excuse me, Master David, but you don't look fit to go out. You're that pale I hardly knew you."

"Oh, I'm all right. A little tired, that's all. Don't say anything of the kind to Aunt Elizabeth, though."

Half an hour later he entered the private offices of Walter Bascomb, Sr., where he was received with a suave cordiality that left an unpleasant impression.

"Wallie is at the club," said Bascomb, motioning him to a seat and offering him a cigar. Taking one himself, he leaned back in his ample chair and smoked, regarding David with speculative eyes that were bright but undeniably cold.

"Well," he said, flicking the ash from his cigar, "how are you making it up in the woods?"

"Doing nicely, thank you."

"Wallie has been telling me of your—er—occupation, your partnership with a certain Mr. Avery of Lost Farm."

"Yes."

"Like that kind of thing?"

"Better than I do this," he replied, with a comprehensive gesture which might have been interpreted as embracing the city, the office, or themselves in particular.

"Yes?" The suavity of the tone did not disguise a shade of contempt. Bascomb swung round to his desk and drew a paper from one of the pigeon-holes.

"I've a proposition to make you, Ross." He tossed his cigar away and turned to David again. "I have been elected president of a stock company, a concern

interested in northern real estate. You understand about the Lost Farm tract and the N. M. & Q. Also my personal offer of twenty-five thousand for the land. Will you take it?"

"No," replied David. "It's worth more."

"Well, I have to differ with you. But what I want to know is, have you any financial interest in that property, or are you simply acting as legal adviser to the present owner? In the first instance, I'm ready to make you a substantial offer in cash. In the second, I am ready to use my influence in securing an appointment for you on our advisory board. The position will carry a monthly compensation equal to that of our regular attorneys. We have splendid prospects of doing a business that will pay large and regular dividends. We are already capitalized for five hundred thousand; so you see," he concluded, "we can handle the deal without much fear of competition from—a rival company, for instance."

"May I ask what you intend to do with the land when you get it?" said David.

"Well, ahem! as to that—See here, Ross, I can trust you, as an old friend of the family, can't I?"

"If you put it that way, yes," replied David, "although I want you to know first that I've decided about the Lost Farm tract."

Bascomb folded the paper he held and tapped the arm of his chair reflectively. "Well," he said finally, "what's your decision?"

"To keep the land."

Bascomb wondered if Ross was bluffing for a higher figure, or whether his young friend knew the real value of the property.

"Very well, David. Now as to your question as to what we would do with the property if we purchased it. I don't see that that is immediately relevant to my proposition. Of course Wallie has told you enough to make it clear that the N. M. & Q. will have to have the right-of-way on Lost Farm. My purchase of it has to do with that aspect of the situation."

"Well, Mr. Bascomb, I'm afraid it's impossible to come to an understanding." Ross shrugged his shoulders.

"Now, don't misunderstand me," said Bascomb, bringing his palm down smartly on the arm of his chair. "The Northern Improvement Company make you the propositions I have outlined, through me, as president of that concern. The company is connected in no way with the N. M. & Q. It's a straight business deal from start to finish."

"I won't contradict you there, Mr. Bascomb. You have no doubt legalized any prospective manœuvres of the Improvement Company. However, I can't accept either of your offers. As to my financial interest in the property, I have practically none. As Mr. Avery's partner, I have assumed the responsibility of

advising him. I thank you for your offer, however.”

“How much do you want for the land?” Bascomb’s eyes glittered behind his gold-rimmed glasses, but he maintained his easy professional smile.

“Not a cent. We’re not going to sell.”

“Come, now, Ross. I can bluff also,” replied Bascomb, forcing a laugh. “Name your figure.”

“I’ll do it if you’ll tell me—prove to me conclusively—that the N. M. & Q. is going through Lost Farm tract over the line of the first survey.”

Bascomb laughed easily. “There’s never anything absolutely certain about railroads, my son, but we didn’t spend twenty thousand on the first survey for nothing.”

“Merely as a matter of curiosity,” said David, “how much did the second survey cost?”

“The second survey? Oh, yes, I see,” he replied in a tone intended to emphasize the insignificance of that matter; “a little difference of opinion among the directors as to the best route, you know. There is no doubt in the world but that the Lost Farm approach to the bridge over the gorge is the better one. As I recall it, it cost merely a few days’ extra work—about twelve hundred dollars, I believe.”

“Thank you,” said David, rising and taking his hat.

Bascomb stared at him. Exasperation and surprise commingled in his gaze. Ross’s indifference was puzzling. He recovered himself immediately, however. “Oh, by the way, David, Walter said he wanted to see you. He’s probably at the club now; but if you don’t find him there, drop in this evening. We should all be glad to see you.”

“Thank you, but I’m not feeling quite up to it—a bit tired.” He stared stupidly at the elder man for a moment and a feverish flush burned in his face as he fumbled with the pocket of his coat. He drew out a small box and laid it on the office table. “It’s too heavy,” he muttered. “Can’t carry it.”

“What’s the matter, David?”

“Nothing at all, only I wish you would sit still and not keep waving your arms that way—it’s annoying.”

“You’re not well, David. Sit down a minute.”

“No, I want to get to Tramworth before night. It’s getting dark and it’s a devil of a road.”

Ross made no effort to go, but sat turning his hat round and round in his hands.

“I’ll call a carriage—”

Bascomb’s voice sounded like thunder in David’s ears and his figure seemed to dwindle to a pin-point, then tower to the ceiling.

“No!” shouted David, springing to his feet, “I’ll walk.” He started for the door, staggering against a chair which he flung out of his way, “No! I’ll walk.” Then he swung the door open and faced Bascomb. He flung out a trembling hand and pointed across the room. “No—but your man is a damned poor shot—and he’s dead—up there.”

Before Bascomb could recover from his astonishment, David turned and strode down the corridor. He stepped into the elevator, the door clanged shut, and before Bascomb’s ring was answered by the appearance of the ascending carriage, David was in the street, hurrying round corners in a vain attempt to flee from the blinding pain that he felt would become unbearable if he ceased walking.

Bascomb returned to his office. “He’s crazy—gone all to pieces. I thought he seemed queer when he came in. Well—” The little box on the table caught his eye. He picked it up, untied the string and opened it. “Aha!”

There were several samples of asbestos in the box.

He examined them, then replaced them carefully and tied up the box again. He pressed a button on his desk.

“William,” he said, as his office-boy appeared, “if a Mr. Ross should call when I am out, give him this box.”

Then Bascomb went to his desk and pulled the telephone toward him. “Livingstone,” he said, as he got his number, “this is Bascomb.... Yes, about the asbestos on Lost Farm. No, better come over here. I’ve got some new samples ... five-inch fibre.... Just wanted you to look at them.... Good-bye.”

CHAPTER XVI—THE MAN IN THE STREET

Shortly after David had left the offices of Bernard, White & Bascomb, Wallie Bascomb came down the broad steps of the Saturn Club, and stepped briskly into his big slate-colored machine. “Jimmy,” he said, addressing the boyish-looking chauffeur, “what’s the speed limit between here and home?”

“Eight miles, sir,” said the other, as he reached forward for the starting-lever. He had answered that question frequently and thoroughly understood its

import.

“I want to be back here in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

The lever shot forward. Slowly the car swung in a half-circle, was reversed and backed across the street. It lunged forward again as the clash and groan of the whirring gears gave place to the multiple throbbing of the sixty-horse-power cylinders.

“If you happen to get the cramp in your leg, Jimmy, just push on the accelerator pedal. That’ll help some.”

The chauffeur nodded, and the throbbing of the engine grew to a sonorous hum as the car shot down the street.

Bascomb leaned back in the comfortable tonneau and glanced at his watch. “Half-past five. Let me see—allow fifteen minutes to dress—ten back to the club—five to see old Tillinghast, confound the punctual old pirate—that’s six o’clock. Then ten back to the house (I hope Bessie won’t keep me waiting) and dinner at seven. Miss Ross is another stickler for ‘on time or bust.’ Well, it won’t be Jimmy’s fault if we don’t do either. Now, I wonder what’s up? Bessie has been thicker than bees with Miss Ross ever since Davy flew away. And now I’m haled from a nice comfy corner in the club to have dinner with that estimable Scotchwoman. Bet she’ll talk Davy from *consommé* to coffee.”

The car slowed down as they hurtled over a cross-street where a blue helmet and a warning hand appeared and vanished. Bascomb grinned as they swung to the curb a block farther down the street.

“You’re two minutes ahead of schedule, James. How’s your leg?”

“Much easier, sir,” replied that youth, working his foot on the brake-pedal tentatively.

Bascomb ran up the steps and entered the wide hallway, so similar, in its general characteristics of ponderous ornamentation, to a hundred others on the street, and rushed up the soft carpeted stairs.

“Hello, Bess!”

“Hello, Wallie. No, you can’t come in, but I’ll be down in—five minutes.”

“Well, if you’re at the ‘can’t-come-in’ stage I can see five minutes do a glide from six-thirty to seven and not shed a hair. Little brother Wallie is in for a quick change from ‘sads’ to ‘glads.’ I’ll be back for you at half-past six exactly.”

“You’ll be *back*? Walter Bascomb, where are you going? I’m nearly ready.”

Wallie thrummed on the closed bedroom door.

“Down town—important. Asbestos gentleman with large check-book. Must dress. Ta ta, sis.”

He hurried to his room and reappeared in a few minutes in evening clothes. He stepped softly past his sister’s door and down the stair, a sleek, full-bodied

figure, with much in the erect carriage of the head and breadth of shoulder suggesting the elder Bascomb. At that moment his sister swept from her room and came to the head of the stairs. He saw her as he swung into his coat.

"Don't detain me, Bessie dear," he said, anticipating her. "I'll be back quicker than—Jimmy made it in five minutes coming up."

"Walter, you'll kill some one some day. It's a shame, the way you make James drive. I know he's not a bit reckless, but you just, just—"

"Bye-bye, sis. I'll be back at six-thirty."

"No, James isn't reckless—not a bit," he muttered, as he ran down the steps; "are you, Jimmy?"

"Are I what, sir?"

"Are you able to make the club again in five minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knew Bessie was wrong," he said mysteriously, as he entered the machine.

James, inferring that his ability to "make time" had been questioned by Miss Bascomb,—although not a little surprised, as she had always cautioned him to drive reasonably,—made the trip in four minutes, despite the increased traffic of the hour.

Punctually at half-past six they were at Bascomb's home again.

Elizabeth Bascomb, gowned in soft gray, with here and there a touch of silver which accentuated the delicate coloring of her cheeks and lent her a certain aristocratic hauteur, came down the steps and stepped lightly into the car. Her brother drew her cloak about her shoulders.

"You look just like Ophelia—in the second act, you know, Bess."

She accepted his somewhat over-picturesque compliment with a tolerant smile.

"I say, Bess, don't pay any attention to me. I'm only one of the accessories,—Miss Ross's place, James,—but you might let me look at you once in a while. I haven't seen much of you lately."

She turned her full blue eyes toward him and gazed thoughtfully at his eager face, as they sped easily up the long slope of the hill.

"Father told me that Mr. Ross was in town—had been at the office," she said presently, smoothing the back of her gloved hand pensively. "He said David left the office in a rather peculiar manner."

"Didn't know the pater was home. So Davy's back in civilization again. Well, I'm not surprised. Davy is a stiff-necked beastie at times. Wonder whether he brought Smoke or not? I asked him to in my last letter."

"I don't know," replied his sister. "Papa said he asked for you."

"Well, he'll probably show up to-morrow. By Jove, perhaps he's at his aunt's now!"

"I had thought of that," said Miss Bascomb quietly.

"You don't seem enthusiastic about it, sis."

"Why should I be?" she replied indifferently.

"That's so; but, Bessie,"—and he took her hand and patted it playfully,—
"why shouldn't you be?"

"Little brothers shouldn't ask too many questions," she replied, assuming his manner playfully.

"Of course not. But seriously, Bess,—I never believed in trying to do the 'bless you, my children' business, you know that,—what is wrong between Davy and you? Great Scott!" he exclaimed with boyish enthusiasm, "Davy Ross is worth a whole regiment of—my kind. Honest Injun, Bess, he's going to *do* something one of these days. It's in his eye."

The car swung round a corner and gathered speed as they slipped down a quiet side street.

"What is the trouble, Bess?"

"Nothing," she replied indifferently.

"That settles it. When 'nothing's' the matter, the bun is off the stove. A girl can overlook larceny, bigamy, arson, robbery, contempt of court, and murder, but 'nothing,'—he sighed ponderously.

"Walter!"

"Beg your pardon—whatever it was—yes?"

"You're getting dreadfully—slangy, Walter."

"Getting? Since when?"

"It's growing on you."

They glided down the smooth asphalt silently. Presently she turned to him, placing both hands on his knee.

"Papa said he had asked David to call. Now, papa knows that David and I have had a misunderstanding. Why should he deliberately ignore me and invite David to the house? I know he won't accept."

"Don't be too certain, Bess. There may be reasons."

"What reasons?"

"Oh, business. Davy's crossed the pater's trail up in the woods—and happens to have stumbled on to a rather good thing—if he only knows it."

"Does papa want him to know it?"

"Why, how serious you are, Bessie. How should I know what the pater's up to?"

"If you're going to prevaricate, Wallie, I'll not ask any more questions."

"Oh, come, now, Bess, business is business—"

"I didn't regard our chat as just business," she replied.

"Of course it isn't. I meant between Davy and the governor. Anyway, I

don't see why you shouldn't know—if you'll promise not to say a word to any one."

"Do you need to ask me that?"

"No," he answered hesitatingly. He glanced at his sister, noting the faint pallor of her delicate features. "Poor Bess," he thought, "she's hit harder than I imagined."

"Well, I'll tell you, Bessie. Things haven't been running smoothly in the office. The pater's really in bad shape financially. We had a chance to make good on a land deal up North till Davy blundered on to the same thing, and he's got the whip-hand. If we can interest Davy—"

"You needn't say any more, Walter. I understand—"

"I'll tell you all about it when we have more time, Bess, but we're too near—" He grasped her arm and threw himself in front of her as the car slid sideways, the rear wheels skidding across the pavement as the chauffeur jammed the brake-pedal down and swung the steering-wheel over at the same instant.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"It's all right, sis," he assured her, as he jumped to the pavement and ran round to the front of the car where James was stooping over a huddled figure.

"My God, Jimmy! Did you hit him?"

"Missed him by a hair," said the trembling chauffeur, as he knelt beside the prostrate figure. "Saw him laying there when I was right on top of him. Guess he's had a fit or something."

Bascomb lifted the shoulders of the prostrate man to a level with the headlights of the car. As the white light streamed over their faces he stifled an exclamation. The chauffeur stepped back.

"S-s-sh! It's Mr. Ross, a friend of mine. Tell Miss Bascomb it's all right."

But his sister had followed him and stood gazing at the upturned ghastly face.

"Wallie!" she cried, "it's David. Oh, Wallie—"

James sprang to her as she swayed, and drooped to a passive weight in his arms.

Together they carried her up the steps and into the house. Miss Ross directed them to an upper room, where with quiet directness she administered restoratives to the unconscious girl.

Bascomb motioned to James, who descended the stairs, and crossing the walk, stooped over the inert figure. He tried to lift the man to the car, but was unable to more than partially drag him along the pavement.

"Miss Bascomb is all right now. She fainted, and no wonder," said Bascomb, as he joined the chauffeur. Together they placed David in the car. "Just a minute, Jimmy." He dashed upstairs and to the bedroom.

“What was it, dearie?” Miss Ross was smoothing the girl’s forehead with a soothing hand.

“A man—in the street—we nearly ran over him.”

Her brother signaled his approval with his eyes and turned toward Miss Ross. “You’ll excuse me, but I’ll have to run up to the hospital with him. He seems to have had a fit of some kind. I’ll be back soon.”

“It’s Miss Ross’s nephew. I didn’t tell her,” he said, as he climbed into the chauffeur’s seat. “You make him as comfortable as you can, Jimmy. The hospital’s the place for him. It’s quicker if he’s hurt—besides, I didn’t have the heart to tell her, but I’ll have to when I come back.”

The car jumped forward as he spoke, and Jimmy, half supporting the sick man, remembered nothing distinctly except the hum of the engines and two long streaks of light on each side of the roadway until they slowed down at the doors of the hospital.

They waited in an anteroom while David was being examined by a corpulent and apparently disinterested individual, who finally called an attendant and gave a few brief directions.

“No fractures and apparently no internal injuries, but he’s had a close call sometime or other,” he concluded, running his fingers over the scar above David’s temple. “I’ll step out and see his friends.”

“Why, hello, Bascomb. Didn’t recognize you at first. Who is the chap?”

“Davy Ross, Miss Ross’s nephew. I think you know her, Doctor Leighton.”

“To be sure. So that’s her nephew. I’d forgotten him.”

“What’s wrong with him, Doctor?”

“Can’t say yet. I’ll telephone Miss Ross right away that there’s no immediate danger. Fine woman, Miss Ross.”

“I’m going back there myself, Doctor, so if there is any message—?”

“Can’t say yet, but you might tell her that I will look after him. Knew his father,” said the surgeon, cleaning his glasses and replacing them. “May have to operate. That wound above his ear, you know.”

“That was a rifle bullet. He got shot up North last year.”

“H-u-m-m. Well, we’ll see.”

CHAPTER XVII—NEWS FROM LOST FARM

"I think I shall come in the evening. It will be much cooler and more pleasant for him, Doctor. Yes, if you will, please. It's two o'clock now. About six o'clock. Thank you."

Miss Ross hung up the telephone receiver and sat for a moment at the alcove desk in her living-room. She reached forward and taking a number of letters and papers from a pigeon-hole, ran them over carefully, and tremblingly replaced them. Then she called her maid and told her to order the carriage for half-past five. "Master David is coming home this evening," she explained. "We will have dinner at seven, as usual."

After the maid had gone, Elizabeth Ross sat for a long time with her hands folded on her lap and her eyes fixed on the darkened window where a keen ray of August sunshine pierced a chink in the shutters and ran slanting across the interior twilight to the opposite wall. She was thinking of her nephew's accident and the consequences which had so unexpectedly overwhelmed him. The operation had been successful and there would be no recurrence of the disastrous effects due to the original unskilled treatment of the wound.

The doctor had advised rest and freedom from excitement and worry. She wondered, now that David was coming back home, how long he would be satisfied with such a regimen, especially as he had of late expressed annoyance at his detention in the hospital, assuring his aunt that he was not only in fine fettle, but also there were business matters that required his immediate attention. It fretted him to think of the idle weeks that had slipped past since that June evening when he had stepped from the curb to cross the street to his aunt's house, had almost reached the opposite curb when he grew blind in the dusk...

She sighed as she recalled her first visit to the hospital, where that unnatural face had lain so expressionless, so dully indifferent and white, looking up at her but seeing nothing. He was all she had in the world—had been virtually her son since his childhood. Never had his nearness to her heart, his large share in all that she thought or did, been so forcibly apparent to her. Her affection for him had no subtlety. It was as sterling, as unbending as her love for truth, and the name of Ross. She realized a lack in herself of certain superficial qualities of grace and subtlety, and immediately prepared herself to anticipate his slightest wish, as though she had not been unconsciously doing that since he was a youngster in knickerbockers.

The sun-ray through the shutters swung higher in the room. It touched a brass ornament and wavered in a tangent to the ceiling, where it shimmered and changed like moving water. She gazed dreamily toward the window, then nodded, recovered herself as a carriage rolled easily past, the hoof-beats of the horses muffled by the over-heated asphalt pavement. She nodded again, and finally her eyes closed in sleep.

The maid's tap at the door awakened her suddenly. "The carriage is here, Miss Ross."

"Gracious me! I had no idea it was so late."

A half-hour later David was in the carriage with her, as they drove homeward.

"Why, Davy, you act as though I hadn't seen you for a fortnight," she exclaimed, as he kissed her. "The idea of kissing me right on the street with those two nurses and the doctor grinning on the steps."

"Well, auntie, they can't see us now," he exclaimed, as he kissed her again. "Tell William to drive as slowly as he likes. I don't want to see a bed again for ages."

She flushed happily and patted his hand. "So you are really going to stay with your old aunt for a while and not run off to the woods again and get—have something horrible happen to you?"

"No. I have too much to do here," he replied. "I wonder—did you see any letters for me—?"

"Only three, Davy. Two of them are apparently from your Mr. Avery, judging by the post-mark—Tramworth—and the handwriting on the envelopes. The other had Bernard, White & Bascomb's return address on it. I called up Walter Bascomb and told him the doctor had forbidden you any excitement or business. He said the letter was of no particular importance."

"Yes," said David, gazing at the familiar buildings as they drove along in the cool of the evening. "By the way, Aunt Bess, did you happen to find a little brown box among my things?"

"No, Davy. I looked over everything carefully. I don't remember having seen it. There were some things came from a hotel downtown. They telephoned to me. I told them to send the things, and your bill."

"That's so. I'd forgotten about that hotel."

He was silent until they reached the house, where he politely refused William's proffered assistance up the steps. He took his aunt's arm playfully; "Just as though I needed to," he said. "I'll keep you busy enough, William, for I'll need the carriage every day now."

After dinner, while they were sitting in the unlighted drawing-room, he asked for his letters. "I'll get them," he said, springing up, but his aunt restrained him with gentle insistence.

"Davy, you mustn't jump up like that till you're stronger."

She brought the letters and turned on the lights, coming to him anxiously as she noted the accentuated pallor caused by his attempt to forestall her courtesy.

"Thank you. You'll excuse me, won't you, but I'm anxious about Avery and Smoke."

“Smoke?”

“Yes. Wallie’s bull-terrier.”

“Oh, yes, I remember.”

He opened one of the letters and read slowly, his brows drawn together in an effort to decipher his partner’s chirography. “Listen to this, Aunt Bess. Talk about dogs remembering things.”

He turned back to the first page of the letter and began:—

Lost Farm Camp, June 18.

Dave Ross dear sir, Jim Cameron come Up nex day after you went bein curious to find what becom of Smoke. I thought he would never Git his tong back in his hed he was pantin from runnin Clean from Tramworth I guess, and a piece of rope on his coler. Jim says he drov from the Station and was Jest passin hikes house What owns the Dog what barks at everything includin hissself And Smoke was jest Finishin off the dog when Jim Hollered Smoke and he quit. Jim says he knowed it was Smoke by the Red ticket tied to him but Smoke lit out fur here and me and Swickey was Sleepin when she hearn Smoke scratchin the Door. Hikes Dog chawed Some of the Ticket but I reckon it is good yit. and Swickey grabbed Smoke Around the neck and Took him To bed cryin and laffin. We got Smoke alright And if the Surveior wants him I kin ship him but I Thought you would Rite and say so. Swickey is kind of quiet like mostly sense you went. Hoping this Finds you in Good health as it leaves me yours truly

— JOHN AVERY.

“My goodness! And that’s your friend at Lost Farm. No wonder he wants you to teach his daughter, David. Do you really enjoy living with such people?”

“It isn’t just the people, Aunt Bess. It’s the place, the surroundings, the simplicity of everything—and it’s big. Boston isn’t big, it’s just complex.”

Miss Ross sighed, endeavoring to understand her nephew’s rather unintelligible distinction.

“I know I can’t explain it, Aunt Elizabeth. One can feel the difference, though. There’s room to breathe in up there.”

She smiled at his enthusiasm for the North Country, with a sincere gratitude that he was able to feel enthusiasm for anything after his prolonged sickness.

“This is not so long,” he said, turning the page of another letter from Avery. “Mostly business.” He frowned and re-read the sheet. “Pshaw! I don’t like that. It’s too much like trickery. By the way, auntie, do you happen to know where

Wallie Bascomb has been this summer?"

"Bessie told me he had gone into the woods again. She mentioned it when she brought the roses."

"Oh, those were Bessie's roses then? You didn't tell me, you know."

"She asked me to say nothing about it. It quite slipped out, David. I'm sorry."

He gazed at his aunt curiously for a moment. "It was nice of Bessie. I didn't think she cared enough—"

"That's because young people are so self-centred and blind, David;—especially young men who are apt to be a trifle masterly, in some ways."

"I suppose you mean me?" he replied, laughing.

"Davy lad," she said, her wrinkled face alight with an old hope revived, "David, do you really care for Bessie?"

"Of course I do," he answered promptly. "She's a jolly good girl. I admire her lots."

His aunt smiled again. "I didn't mean that way, David."

He crumpled the letter in his hand and thrust it in his pocket. "Well, I did care—once."

"Don't you now?"

He hesitated, staring at his white fingers. "I don't know exactly. I think not. You see Wallie and his father know enough about my plans, and I about theirs, to make it difficult for anything of that kind. Frankly, I'm fighting them for a fortune. It's up there," he continued, gesturing toward the north. "They want it and we've got it. They're going to make trouble for us if they can. They'll do it politely enough, of course, but—wait a minute—" He tore the third letter open and glanced at it hastily.

"I thought so. I left that box of asbestos samples in Bascomb's office that day..."

He took Avery's second letter from his pocket again and smoothed it on his knee.

"... so not hearin' from you I sot still and waited. Long Come young Glass-eyes perlite as axel-greas and said the railrud were goin to cross five mile below Lost Farm. I tole him I knowed that fur a considerable spell. He looked Supprised a minit and then said he was willin to stick by the fust deal and pay me my figer fur the land I tole him You was Boss on that shift and he said you was sick. I reckoned he was talkin strait seein I aint heard from you he giggered His feet around a spell and said all right and I will take Smoke Back to Tramworth. Reckon he Must a tried tien him in the baggage-car same as you done

For Smoke was back here nex mornin Smilin al over. Smoke did not bring No Ticket back This trip so mebbly he did not git as fur as the Station. Sense you ben gone Swickey she is took with the idea of goin to Tramworth to scule nex fall.... Hopin this finds you in good health as it leaves me yours truly

— JOHN AVERY.”

David folded the letter slowly. “It’s the asbestos, Aunt Elizabeth. A chap named Harrigan found it while cruising a strip of Avery’s land. Somehow or other he told Wallie about it. It’s a find all right—there’s miles of it in the creekbed, right on the surface. We’re going to take an expert up there and inspect it—it’s five-inch fibre and worth a fortune. We expect to mine and sell it. Heavens, I wish this confounded head of mine hadn’t acted up at the wrong time.”

“But you’re going to get well, David. The doctor says you will have to rest and be quiet for a few months—”

“A few months? Why, that’s all I have been doing since I came back.”

“Yes, I know. Now, tell me all about this asbestos and your work. Just lie back and be comfortable and I’ll listen.”

For perhaps half an hour David talked Lost Farm tract and right-of-way while his aunt tried patiently to follow his explanations. She disliked to tell him that his plans might be delayed on account of the length of time necessary for a complete recovery, but an opportunity offered and she seized it.

“So that is why you want to get well in such a hurry, David? I don’t like to discourage you, but Doctor Leighton says you won’t be able to do anything but get well for at least a year. He’s coming to talk with you about it in a day or two.”

“A year! Why, Great Scott! Aunt Bess, I simply must get things moving right away. Avery expects me to.”

“Why right away?”

“Why, because—because—don’t you see Bascomb is working day and night for possession?”

“But he hasn’t got it, David.”

“No.”

“Well, don’t worry. Promise me that you won’t do anything more than write letters until you see the doctor, won’t you?”

“I—I—of course I will, Aunt Elizabeth, if you ask it. You’ve been awfully kind—and I’ve been no end of trouble to you.”

“Davy!”

“I know—but it’s a shame, hang it all. I’m all right now.”

But the trembling of his hand which rested on the arm of the chair belied

his statement.

“Come, Davy, you’re tired. I’ll see you to your room as I used to.”

Together they mounted the stairway, her arm in his.

“Good-night, laddie. If you want anything, call me. I shall hear you.” She kissed his forehead, and patted his shoulder reassuringly. “It will all come right in the end, David. Just have patience with yourself—and me.”

“You! Why, Aunt Bess, if—you weren’t my aunt, I’d—I’d marry you to-morrow!” he exclaimed. “You’re the only woman that ever did amount to shucks, anyway.”

“I ken weel what you mean, Davy Ross,” she replied teasingly, as he turned toward his door. “And I ken wha you be thinkin’ about the noo.”

Laughing, he turned toward her again. “Bet you don’t!” he said, assuming her tone of raillery.

“It mon begin wi’ a ‘B’?”

“You’re wrong, auntie. It happens to be an ‘S,’ and I’m going to buy her a birthday present to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XVIII—A CONSULTATION

It was several days afterward, however, before David was able to go out. The reaction from the excitement of his home-coming left him contented with the quiet of the cool living-room, where he wrote to Avery, and eventually called up Bascomb Senior, with whom he had a brief talk regarding the progress of the N. M. & Q. He acknowledged Bascomb’s note in regard to the asbestos samples, stating that he would call for them, which was thoroughly agreeable to the engineer, who wanted to see him.

That afternoon, about four o’clock, Dr. Leighton called. Miss Ross was out, for which both he and David were thankful, as it gave them an opportunity “to get down to bed-rock,” as David expressed it.

The doctor smiled at David’s assertion that he had completely recovered and wanted to do something beside rest.

“I’m tired of resting,” said David.

“Yes, I know. You’re all right now and you’ll be all right later on if you take care of yourself. Keep out of the sun and loaf; just loaf and invite your—friends. I know it’s the hardest kind of work for you. It isn’t the wound—the outside of your head that needs humoring. You’ve had a shock that has upset things and you can thank your stars that you’re not up there—permanently.”

Dr. Leighton chuckled and ran his handkerchief round his perspiring face.

“I didn’t think it was quite so serious,” replied David.

“It isn’t now, and won’t be, if you give yourself half a chance. Do you know what spinal meningitis is?”

“I have an idea.”

“Well, just satisfy yourself with the idea. Don’t offer yourself as a subject for clinical investigation, that’s all.”

David was silent for a few minutes.

“I want to thank you for your personal attention to my case, Doctor—”

“Don’t mention it. I don’t know just what your plans are, but I understand that you have some interest in connection with the N. M. & Q. that’s worrying you. You talked about it in the hospital—when you weren’t exactly yourself, you know. You had a favorite theme, something about Bascomb, Smoke, and asbestos that you kept up pretty continuously.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said David, smiling. “You don’t know how I felt when I realized that I was losing my grip on things. ‘Smoke’ is a dog; Wallie Bascomb’s bull-terrier. I think I chased that dog a thousand miles the first few days I was in the hospital.”

“Don’t doubt it. Well, I must go.” The Doctor slid a plump hand down his watch-chain and glanced at his watch. “Well, Ross, you know what to do. I can’t do any more for you than I have. You must work out, or rather rest out, your own salvation now, and it ought to be rather an agreeable task. I haven’t had a rest for three years. Now, about this N. M. & Q. business. From the reports recently circulated among the stockholders, this lumber road won’t be in operation for a year or two yet, if that is any satisfaction.”

“It isn’t the road entirely,” said David. “There are some matters in connection with the proposed right-of-way—”

“Yes,” interrupted the Doctor, “I heard that matter discussed at the last meeting. I happen to have a little money invested in that project myself. Bascomb talked me into it. In fact, there are a number of physicians interested.”

“Is that so? Well, that’s interesting. I’d like to meet you when you have more time, and talk it over.”

“See here, young man, you’re talking business, and that’s what I advised you not to do.”

“Yes, but with my physician in attendance—that makes some difference.

Won't you extend your charity and spare me a few minutes more. Can't you 'phone to the hospital? I have something that will interest you, now that I know you have stock in the N. M. & Q."

"Well, Ross, as a physician I ought to say no, but as your friend, well, I'll listen, say ten minutes."

"Good!" exclaimed David, taking a piece of paper from the desk. "Now I'm going to swear you to secrecy."

"I'm sworn," said the Doctor. "Go ahead."

David made a hasty sketch of the Lost Farm tract and the first survey. "Now here we are," he said. "First survey crosses the river here; second survey about five miles below. Up here," he continued, "is Timberland Mountain, and here is the creek crossing the line of the first survey." He paused and glanced at the Doctor's face. "In that creekbed is a fortune in asbestos—miles of it. Now the original intention of the directors was to run the road round the base of the mountain and cross the creek here. You can see that the second survey would take the road through five miles below the mountain."

"Yes, I see," said the Doctor; "but why do they want to go away off there?"

"Well, Bascomb knows that the mineral is on Lost Farm. He has tried to purchase the land, but it is not for sale. It belongs to my partner, a Mr. Avery."

"Right of eminent domain?" queried the Doctor.

"Of course, so far as the right-of-way is concerned, but that doesn't touch the asbestos. What I'm getting at is this. Bascomb apparently controls the directors. He's an engineer and they leave the fine points to him. Now he can easily swing the road to the second survey and—*bang!* There goes the market for the asbestos. It won't pay to cart it five miles to the road."

"Does the second survey cover accessible territory for road building?" asked the Doctor.

"No," replied David. "It's one of the worst pieces of swamp-land I ever saw."

"I see. So Bascomb is using that to bluff you into selling?"

"That's about it."

"And the stockholders pay for his little idiosyncrasies, hey?"

"They will if he has his way."

The Doctor studied the sketch closely for a moment. "You've got this thing correct?" he asked finally.

"Not to a scale—but approximately correct," replied David.

"Hu-m-m!" The Doctor leaned back and looked at his companion, but there was no gleam of recognition in his expression. Presently he arose. "Will you let me have this sketch for a few days?"

"Certainly," replied David.

"Of course, I'm not a practical railroad man," said the Doctor, as he folded

the paper and slipped it in his memorandum book, "but I don't see why the N. M. & Q. shouldn't have the asbestos tonnage. Do you?"

"No, I don't;—that is, if the directors are made alive to the fact that the stockholders know what they want and intend to have it."

"That's it. I won't promise anything, but you might drop a line to your partner and tell him to sit tight till he hears from you. Now you've had enough business for a month. Take a drive this evening and keep away from downtown till you hear from me. I'm going to produce this paper at the next meeting and get my name in print as a practical railroad man, which isn't so, but I'm not averse to a little advertising."

"I didn't know men of your—your profession did that kind of advertising," said David.

"My son, if you knew some of the stunts physicians do to keep themselves before the public, you'd—well, you might smile and then again, you might not."

Dr. Leighton drew on his gloves, settled his coat-collar with a shrug of his corpulent shoulders, and departed.

CHAPTER XIX—PIRACY

Not until nearing the middle of September did the intense heat wavering over the hoof-marked asphalt of the streets give way to the refreshing coolness of the light breezes that preceded the infrequent and gentle rains of early autumn.

David chafed at his monotonous routine of morning walks, afternoon drives, and "Evening Transcripts." The tang of the air, coming briskly round a corner, set his pulses throbbing with a desire "to pack his kit and trek," anywhere, so long as it would take him away from the tunnel-like walls of brick and brownstone and the geometrical accuracy of grass-plot, curb, and sidewalk. At times this desire to flee from the questionable "advantages" of civilization to the unquestionable sanity and freedom of the forest became unendurable, especially when October's crisp, invigorating mornings wakened him to gaze across the clustered chimney-pots to where the river rippled, bronze-cold, in the early sun.

"If it were not for Aunt Elizabeth, I'd go to-morrow," he said, as he returned from his shower one morning, ruddy from head to foot with vigorous toweling.

“By Jove, I know what I’ll do. I’ll get hold of Wallie and have it out with him. That ought to be exciting enough to satisfy me for a day or two at least. I’m getting altogether too healthy to stand this sort of life. I need room to move round in—town’s too small for me.”

As he dressed, he noticed his rifle standing in the corner. Its soiled and worn canvas case looked grim and businesslike, contrasted with its quiet-colored and orderly surroundings. As he knotted his tie carefully, he caught the reflection of the rifle in the glass. Without waiting to put on vest or coat, he strode to the corner, stripped the case from the gun, and eyed it enthusiastically. A faint smell of wood-smoke came to him. He balanced the rifle in his hands and then raised it to his shoulder abruptly, sighting at a particularly ghoulisn looking chimney-pot. He cocked the Winchester, centred the bead on the unoffending chimney-pot, and without dreaming that the rifle was loaded, pulled the trigger.

The prisoned roar of the explosion of the heavy .45 stunned him for a moment. “Great Caesar! And that thing’s been loaded ever since—ever since—well, I guess I was a bit off to leave a cartridge in that gun. Heavens! I hope Aunt Bess isn’t frightened.”

But his aunt’s white face in the doorway was a silent accusation that brought him to her as shamefaced as a reprimanded schoolboy.

“Davy! Davy! what did you do?”

“I’m awfully sorry. It was stupid and foolish of me, but I couldn’t resist the temptation to sight at one of those chimney-pots—and I had no idea the rifle was loaded.”

“I didn’t know what had happened, David.”

Her tone implied more than she was aware of, as his countenance showed. He flushed and looked away from her, as the full meaning of her remark came to him.

“Don’t worry, Aunt Bess. It’s nothing like that; simply a superabundance of October air. Please go to your room. It’s drafty here.”

He finished dressing, glancing at intervals, toward the rifle, which he finally slid into the case and stood in the corner. Before going downstairs he went to the window and looked out, withdrawing his head with a boyish grin as he saw the shattered top of the chimney-pot.

“Hit it anyway,” he said, as he came down to the dining-room.

After breakfast he went out, walking briskly toward town, unconscious, as he enjoyed the keen edge of the morning, that a troubled face had watched him from the drawing-room window until the intervening houses hid him from view.

When he arrived at Bascomb’s office he found that both Wallie and his father were out. Leaving a note he betook himself to a bookstore and made several purchases, which he addressed and carried to an express office.

Then he idled along the street, gazing casually at the store windows. Finally he stopped at a display of sportsmen's supplies and entered the shop. After an overhauling of the many-colored coats submitted to his exacting inspection, he selected a heavy fine-textured garment, fawn-colored, and with an edging of tiny blue squares. He again entered the express office, where an obliging but mystified clerk waited upon him, asking his companion at the desk if "Swickey" was a Polish name or what? David overheard the question and said quite seriously, "No, young man, it's Andalusian for gypsy."

On his way to Bernard, White & Bascomb's offices, he paused frequently, engrossed with the plan he was formulating, which was to make Wallie a point-blank offer to join him, eliminate the elder Bascomb from the Northern Improvement Company, and work the proposed plant together with the capital already subscribed. "It looks like piracy, but from what Dr. Leighton tells me, old man Bascomb is on his last legs financially, and that means—well, Bessie is used to luxury; besides, Wallie's not half bad if he would only brace up and dig in. Perhaps the old man will be glad to sit back and let Wallie go ahead when he finds that he can't swing it himself. I'll do it for Bess, anyway, and probably get sat upon for offering."

"Well, here goes," he said, as he entered the corridor of the office building. "It smells like bribery and looks like corruption, but I'll risk it."

As he waited for the descending elevator, Wallie Bascomb entered the street door.

"Well, Davy, but you're looking fit and sleek enough to worry the duennas. How are you making it?"

"Making what, Walt?"

"Everything, anything, trouble, feminine anxiety—Say, Davy, I'm right glad to see you around again. You know that little Flossie faithful at the hospital wouldn't let me see you. Doctor's orders, you know."

"Which one?" asked David, stepping to one side as a worried-looking individual dashed into the elevator.

"Insulting attorney," said Bascomb, with a gesture toward the rapidly ascending car. "He has his troubles, too.—Which one? Oh, yes; the little one with the complexion and the starry orbs that make you want to say things to her. I called several times. Got used to being refused admittance to the repair shop. She was all to the lovely, though."

David noticed Bascomb's healthy color and remarked upon it.

"Yes. Been up among the fuzzies again. N. M. & Q. Were you going up to see the pater?"

"Don't intend to, now I have seen you. Can you spare a little of your valuable time, Walt?"

“Sure! Glad to cut off a slice for you. How’ll you have it, hot or cold?”

“It will be—cold, I think,” replied David.

The Saturn was all but deserted, and they found a secluded corner where Bascomb, after giving an order, sank comfortably into one of the wide leather chairs.

“Sizz, Davy?” he asked, as a squat, emblazoned bottle and its accompanying siphon were placed at his elbow.

“Thank you—but it’s a trifle too early for me.”

Ross watched Bascomb as he manipulated the bottles with a practiced hand. Wallie’s genial countenance expressed such unruffled satisfaction and good-will that David found it difficult to begin. He accepted a proffered cigar, bit it tentatively, turned it in his fingers, and without lighting it, began abruptly.

“Wallie, about that asbestos—” He paused as Bascomb looked up quickly from the glass he held. “Do you know of any reason why we should continue to fight this thing out in the dark?”

Bascomb tapped the glass with his finger-nails. “Not now,” he replied coolly.

“Was there ever any good reason for it?”

Bascomb shifted his position, turning toward the window with an absent stare. “Yes, I think there was.”

“Of course, it was practically your find, or Harrigan’s,” said David; “but don’t you think your last trip to Lost Farm was playing it a trifle raw, under the circumstances?”

“Of your being in the hospital?”

“Yes.”

Bascomb colored slightly, smiled as he recalled his use of a similar expression in speaking to Ross once, and replied,—

“Governor’s orders, Davy.”

David ignored his companion’s quibble. “You said there was a reason—?”

“There was—and is.” He faced David squarely. “Maybe you have heard rumors of it, Davy, and you’re the first and last man that I’ll ever tell this to—and it’s as straight as—you are.”

“Thanks,” said David, a bit briefly.

“The pater’s dipped. Every cent he has is tied up in the N. M. & Q., and the road’s costing more to build than he figured on. Bernard, White & Bascomb are stung, and that’s all there is to it. It isn’t the first time either. The Interurban contract, two years ago, panned out bad. The pater tried to recoup on the market. You can guess the rest. His personal account wouldn’t pay my laundry bill. When I wrote to him about the asbestos on Lost Farm, he jumped at the chance to float that scheme and organized the Northern Improvement Company, on his

nerve and a little business prestige. To come down to the ghastly, Davy, Northern Improvement capital has been paying our current expenses. If that deal falls through,—Bascomb’s lips curled sarcastically,—“it’s the front page in the Yellow Horrors for us, and God knows what they’ll do to the pater. Of course I can dig up something out of the wreck, but Bessie—”

“I’m glad you told me,” interrupted David. “Now I appreciate your position—and my own. It makes it less difficult for me to go ahead with my scheme.”

“I knew you would,” replied Bascomb, misunderstanding him. “In fact, I told the pater that nothing this side of flowers and little Davy in the front carriage would stop you. So you’re going to put your deal through?”

“Yes, if I can swing it, but that depends on you and your father.”

“Correct, my jewel. Of course it’s a big thing for you. To buck the pater and his illustrious son takes nerve, doesn’t it, Davy?”

“More than that. But see here, Walt, my partnership with Avery means nothing more than a working interest. I don’t own a foot of the land. I’m here to interest capital, though. Then mine the stuff and market it. Of course I expect to make something, and I’m willing to risk what little capital I have.”

“I have told Bessie about all there is to tell,” said Bascomb, watching David’s face closely. “She said she knows you won’t give it up, even if it indirectly sends us to the bread-line.”

“That doesn’t sound just like you, Walt. Besides, I just don’t like Bessie’s name mentioned in this connection.”

“Of course not. I appreciate that, Davy, and I’ll be good.”

“Well, you needn’t be sarcastic, Walt. It’s not your most becoming style.”

“If I had anything to bet,” replied Bascomb, “I’d lay three to one you’ll win out,—marry the siren child,—suppress the Cyclops, and become one of our ‘most influential,’ etc.”

“You would probably lose. Especially on the siren child, as you call her. By the way, where’s Smoke?”

“Reasonable question, my son, but unanswerable. We parted company somewhere near Tramworth, without explanations or regrets, on Smoke’s part anyway. That dog’s cut out for a bushwhacker. Boston’s too tame for him after that ‘Indian Pete’ affair. Wonder whom he’ll massacre next? I was beginning to get a bit shy of him myself.”

“He probably felt it, and vamoosed,” said David.

“He probably felt hungry,” replied Bascomb, with an unpleasant laugh. “A man’s in a bad way when his dog won’t stick to him. Perhaps he smelt the wolf at the door of the house of Bascomb.”

“You’re drawing it pretty fine, Wallie.”

“Oh, damn the dog, and you, too.”

“See here, Walt,”—David stood up and straightened his shoulders. “I’ll take that from you, but you’d better retract about the dog. And that reminds me, now you’re stripped for action, how much did you give Harrigan for his find—the asbestos?”

“That, Mr. Claymore-and-Kilts, is none of your damned business.”

“Good!” exclaimed David. “Now, you’re more like your real self than I’ve seen you yet. The Saturn is a hospitable club. I think I’ll put up my name some day.”

“Speaking of sarcasm,” began Bascomb, but the expression of David’s face checked him. “My God, Davy, you don’t realize what it means to tell a chap what I’ve told you and get turned down as—”

“I think I do, Walt,” interrupted David. “I’m not going to insult either of us by saying I’m sorry, but if you want to come into this thing—help me organize a company independent of the N. M. & Q., you understand, I have a few friends who are willing to go in with me, and I’d like to make you one of them.”

Bascomb’s astonishment held him speechless for a moment.

“But my father!” he exclaimed.

“That’s for you to decide.”

“Hang it, you old pirate, I’d like to at that if I can get the governor to see it. I’ll put it up to him to-night. But, Great Scott, man, it’s charity!”

“Not a bit of it. It may look that way to you, but I came here with the intention of making some such proposition. Don’t you see it will mean less work for me in the end? The Northern Improvement money is as good as any. I’ll take over your father’s stock till he gets on his feet, or you can take it, and we’ll cover any deficits with my money, and no one will be the wiser. The asbestos will be a paying thing in a year or two. In the mean time we’ll manage to get along.”

“Well, for cool, canny head-work, Davy, you’ve got a Boston lawyer faded to a whisper. And for unadulterated decency you’ve got a vestal virgin—”

“Tush,” said David, as they walked toward the vestibule. “It’s one o’clock, and I promised Aunt Elizabeth I’d be home at twelve.”

That afternoon, some hours later, Bascomb was in his father’s office, where they talked over Ross’s proposition. Finally, the elder man, who had been gazing out of the window, turned in his chair and faced his son.

“All right, Walter. Go ahead. I’ll have the stock transferred. Ross will make a go of it if any one will. I didn’t expect this of him, though. It took more moral courage for him to do it than most men have. I didn’t know he thought so much

of you.”

“Oh, it isn’t altogether on my account, Dad. You might know that; and as for moral courage, I think it was a pretty classy piece of Morganeering.”

“Which one?” queried the elder Bascomb, smiling.

“Does that make any difference?” asked Wallie. “But, say, Dad, you don’t think I’m a deserter, do you? My going over to the enemy seems to be about the only way out of our trouble; besides, your stock will be in my name, and really, it’s only Davy’s way of being a friend. Bess, you know—”

“Yes,” interrupted the elder man wearily, “I understand. I’ve worked for thirty years, and here I am practically accepting charity from a young fellow who wanted to marry my daughter and didn’t because I objected to his sentimental idea about going into the woods to make his mark. Well, I’ve arranged to go away—for a rest. You go ahead and do what you can.”

“What’s the matter, Dad?” Bascomb came to his father and laid his hand affectionately on his shoulder.

“The doctor says—”

“Doctor! Why, I didn’t know there was anything wrong with you that way.”

“The doctor says I need a rest,” continued the elder man. “I’m going to Florida for the winter, with Bessie. Sorry you can’t come, Wallie, but when things get straightened out—” He hesitated and glanced at his son.

“We’ll straighten ’em,” replied Wallie cheerfully. “But about that second survey?”

“That has been abandoned. It wasn’t—practical, you know.”

“Hum! Yes, I know. Well, I’m off to get Livingstone. See you at dinner, Dad.”

As the younger man waited for the elevator, he muttered, “Poor old pater—down and out completely. Well, it’s up to me to make good.”

CHAPTER XX—HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

“Yes, mam, I come fur Swickey.”

Avery, muffled in winter clothing, his white beard powdered with snow,

seemed to Miss Wilkins to embody in his huge proportions the spirit of the December storm that swept hissing by her door, striking fantastic forest silhouettes on the shop windows behind which stood a dejected-looking array of plumes and bonnets, only dimly visible to the passer-by.

"Oh, Mr. Avery, I didn't know you at first. Come right in and sit down. Nanette has gone over to the store for me. She'll be back right away."

The old man moved cautiously through the narrow doorway, to the sewing-room of the shop, allowing generous margins as he passed tables and chairs, for his natural respect for "wimmen-folks" was augmented to a nervous self-consciousness, surrounded as he was by so many outward and visible signs of femininity in various stages of completion.

"You just make yourself to home. Take off your coat and scarf. Here,"—she pushed a big rocking-chair toward him,—“draw right up to the stove and get warm.”

"Thanks, Miss Wilkins, but I be tol'able warm. You said Swickey was comin' right back?"

"Yes; she just went over to the dry-goods store for me. You'll be surprised to see how much Nanette has grown."

"Do all the folks call her Nanette now?" asked Avery.

"I think so. You see 'Nanette' is so much prettier than 'Swickey.' I have always called her Nanette. She is getting used to it, and so are her friends. Of course; Jessie Cameron—" Miss Wilkins hesitated.

"Yes, of course. Thet's diff'runt. Jessie knowed her when she was Swickey and nothin' else."

Avery rocked slowly, working the chair away from the stove by gradations. Despite his long, cold ride from the Knoll, little beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. Anticipation and Miss Wilkins kept him warm.

"Nanette is doing well at school," said the little dressmaker, as she snipped busily with her scissors. "She is naturally bright. All she needed was other young girls about her as an incentive to study."

"Thet's right," Avery agreed promptly. "I allus said so. Swickey was allus incensive to studyin' if it was brung out. I sweat consid'able tryin' to bring it out, but Dave Ross was the man what got her started. He was thet patient and pa'tic'lar, never gettin' riled, but settin' thar learnin' her in the evenin's and she askin' questions as would swamp a goat. Them kind of questions as would jest nachally set me to argifyin' and fergittin' 'bout learnin' her. But he kep' on, pleasant-like, until she got curious to learn, jest to spite herself, I reckon. When he went to Boston, she jest couldn't keep still,—frettin' and frettin' but sayin' nothin'. I seed they was suthin' comin', and when she said she wanted to come to Tramworth to school, I pertended to be suprised, but I wa'n't."

“Is Mr. Ross coming to Lost Farm again? You said you expected him last fall.”

“I were. But things in Boston kep’ him flyin’ round thar. He’s been organizin’ and consolidatin’, and he were a’most ready to come up last year when the snow come and it wa’n’t no sense of his comin’ til spring. And he were a mighty sick man likewise. His aunt she writ me a letter sayin’ how clust he come to passin’ on beyant, and fur me to go slow when I writ to him, account of stirrin’ him up. But he’s all right now, and he says he’s a-comin’ in the spring, sure as eggs. Reckon Swickey’ll be glad. She sot a lot of store by her Dave. I reckon I done so, too, fur I was thet lonesome-like m’self. He was good comp’ny of the quiet kind, suthin’ like a tree in the front yard what ain’t attractin’ much attention til it’s gone. Of course Jim Cameron come up. But Jim he jest sets me itchin’ all over—sorter feelin’ like as if he was dyin’ to see inside of everything in the house, includin’ yourself. Mebby you have noticed thet about Jim. Howcome he’s a good friend. Beats all how he took to Dave; always talkin’ ’bout him and askin’ when he’s comin’ back, and Jim don’t hanker after most city-folks nuther. Thet’s a pow’ful good stove you got.”

“Is it too warm? I’ll just check it.” Which Miss Wilkins did with a deft hand wrapped in the corner of her apron.

“Bout her board,” said Avery, drawing a shiny wallet from his pocket. “I reckon as it’s comin’ nigh on to Christmas I’ll pay you fur the rest of the year and up to nex’ spring.” He counted out the sum and handed it to her. “Thet sets me thinkin’.” He arose and successfully navigated the perils of the sewing-room and presently returned with a bundle. “Left this in the front when I come in, and a’most forgot it.”

He untied the string and out rolled what seemed to be several glossy otter pelts.

“Goodness!” exclaimed Miss Wilkins, a trifle surprised.

“These here,” continued Avery, “is me and Swickey’s present to Miss Jane Wilkins fur Christmas, and takin’ care of his gal. Thought mebby you’d like ’em. I sent ’em to Dave Ross in Boston and he had ’em made up in the latest style of fashion, howcome the muff are big ’nough most fur a whole fambly—kind of small-sized sleepin’-bag, eh?”

“Oh, they’re beautiful, Mr. Avery!” said Miss Wilkins, smoothing the silvery-brown fur and tucking her chin in its soft depth. “I just love them, but what will Nanette say?”

“Jest what I do, Miss Wilkins,—thet you took care of her, and made her dresses and showed her how to wear ’em, and learned her sewin’, and mebby done more fur her than any pusson,—even Dave Ross,—and they’s nothin’ this side of murder Hoss Avery ain’t willin’ to do fur you!”

“Well,” replied the dressmaker, smiling at her guest’s enthusiasm, “I can never thank you enough, and Nanette has been a great help to me.”

Avery felt for his tobacco, then changed his mind abruptly as he realized where he was. Conversation with Miss Wilkins was becoming embarrassing. He was afraid of doing what his daughter called simply “saying things” under stress of the emotion which was rapidly filling the void left by his late unburdening of his heart to the little dressmaker. The soothing influence of tobacco would have steadied him. She noticed his uneasiness and promptly invited him to smoke “all he wanted to.”

Avery’s appreciation of her courtesy was soon filling the room with curls and shreds of smoke, and, in keeping with his nature, it was a strong appreciation.

“There was one thing I wanted to speak about, Mr. Avery.” Miss Wilkins’s tone became more serious than heretofore. “Nanette is an attractive girl, and she’s seventeen.”

Avery nodded.

“And one or two of the young men have been seeing her home from school lately. I don’t mind that, of course,—Nanette is sensible,—but I thought I would speak about it. Young Andy Slocum seems quite interested in Nanette, and he’s wild at times, although he’s nice enough when he wants to be.”

“He’s a pow’ful good man on the drive—fur a young one,” replied Avery. “Got a heap of nerve, and cool fur a kid. Last spring he was hangin’ round my camp consid’able, makin’ hisself pleasant-like when the drive went through. Thought it was kind of queer that he should be int’rested in ole Hoss Avery. So it was Swickey he was thinkin’ of?”

“Oh, I don’t know how serious he is about it. You know young men—There’s Nanette now!”

Avery stood up as the shop doorbell clinked and jangled, and Swickey, breathless from her run across the street, cheeks rosy and brown eyes glowing, rushed to her father and flung her arms about him, kissing him again and again.

“Oh, Pop, I’m so glad you came to take me home. I couldn’t bear to think of you up there alone at Christmas-time.”

She stood looking up into his face, her hands on his shoulders, and her neat, blue-gowned figure tense with happiness.

“My! but you’re growing every day—and you ain’t growin’ thin nuther. Your ma was jest such a gal when I married her. Wal, I reckon we’ll have to git started. It gits dark purty quick nowadays, and Jim’s waitin’—”

“What beautiful furs. Oh, Pop, they’re for—”

“Miss Wilkins’s Christmas present from Swickey and her Pa. They’s a bundle in the sleigh fur you, too. Jim says it’s from Boston,—like ’nuff he knows,—seein’ he called at the station fur it,—and mebbey you kin guess who sent it.”

Swickey's face flushed slightly, but she said nothing.

"If you git ready now, Swickey, we kin go."

"All right, Pop. Shall I bring my snowshoes?"

"You might fetch 'em. No tellin' how things'll be gettin' home to-night. Bundle up good—it's nippy."

"Nippy? Huh!" exclaimed Swickey, as she hurried to her little bedroom upstairs. "It's just grand and I love it."

She took off her shoes, drew on an extra pair of heavy stockings, and going to her trunk brought out her small moosehide moccasins which she laced up snugly about her trim ankles. Then she bowed to herself in the small mirror, and, gathering up her skirts, danced to and fro across the room with girlish exuberance and happiness. Panting, she dropped to her knees before her trunk and found her "best" fur cap and gloves.

"Going home with Pop!" she kept repeating. "Going to see Smoke and Beelzebub and—Pop and I'll go hunting and get that moose."

"That moose" was a huge bull that had been haunting the outskirts of Lost Farm, seen by Avery on his rounds to and from the traps, and mentioned to Swickey in the letter which had preceded his arrival in Tramworth to take her home for Christmas.

With snowshoes slung over her shoulder, she reappeared in the sewing-room, laughing happily at Miss Wilkins's expression of pleased surprise.

"You look like a regular—exploress, Nanette."

"I'm Swickey, now, till I come back," she replied. "And I'm ready, Pop."

Avery donned his coat and muffler and shook hands with Miss Wilkins. She followed them to the door, beaming with the reflection of their happiness.

"Good-bye. Don't catch cold. And do be careful, dear."

Cameron drove over from the hotel and they climbed into the sleigh, Avery on the seat with the teamster, and Swickey, bundled in blankets, sitting back to them in the rustling straw. The horses plunged through the roadside drift and paced slowly down the main street of Tramworth. Swickey reached under the seat and found the parcel her father had spoken of. "It's from Dave, but I wonder what's in it?" She drew off her glove and picked a small hole in the paper. Another layer of paper was beneath it. She broke a hole in this and disclosed a wooden box. It was long and narrow and its weight suggested metal. "I know!" she exclaimed. "It's the rifle Dave wrote about." She hugged the package childishly, whispering, "My Dave! and just for my own self."

Through the silent outskirts they went, the team trotting at times, then walking as the town road merged imperceptibly into the forest trail. The big horses arched their necks and threw their shoulders into the harness as the deep snow clogged the runners of the sleigh. Sometimes the momentum of the load

carried them down a short pitch, the sleigh close on the horses' heels. Cameron talked almost constantly to his team, helping them with his voice, and at each "spell" he would jump down, lift their feet and break out the accumulated clogs of snow. Avery swung his arms and slapped his hands, turning frequently to ask Swickey if she were warm enough.

The long, gloomy aisle winding past the hardwoods in their stiff, black nakedness, and the rough-barked conifers planted smoothly in the deep snow, their cold brown trunks disappearing in a canopy of still colder green, crept past them tediously. The sleigh creaked and crunched over snow-covered roots, the breathing of the horses keenly audible in the solemn silence, as their broad feet sunk in the snow, and came up again, the frozen fetlocks gleaming white in the gloom of the winter forest.

"Smoke's keepin' house, Swickey. Reckon he'll be jumpin' glad to see you."

"Of course. Poor old Smoke. When we get rich, he's going to stay with me all the time."

"If he lives long enough, I reckon he will, eh, Jim?"

"No tellin'," replied Cameron, with profound solemnity; "no tellin'. I've knowed worse things than thet to happen."

"Worse things than what?" said Swickey, "getting rich?"

"Egg-sackly," replied Curious Jim. "Gettin' rich ain't the worst. It takes a heap of money to keep on *bein'* rich; thet's the worst of it. Kind of a bad habit to git into. Ain't worried 'bout it myself," he added. "I got a plenty of other business to think of."

Avery did not ask Jim what his "other business" was beside teaming and doing odd jobs for the Lumber Company, for he realized the teamster's chief concern in life was to see what "other folks" were doing, although, speaking "by and large," Cameron's inquisitiveness was prompted by a solicitude for the welfare of his friends. Upon his lean shoulders Curious Jim carried the self-imposed burden of an Atlas.

Slowly the horses toiled over the corduroy stretch, and presently Cameron's camp became visible through the trees.

"Here we be at the Knoll. Now, you and Swickey come in and have suthin' hot. It's gettin' dark and colder than a steel trap in January."

"You go in yourself, Jim. Me and Swickey'll wait. We be kind of anxious to git home. Smoke's been in the house sence mornin' and I reckon the fire's out and he ain't had nuthin' to eat."

"All right. I'll take these here things in to the missus."

From the doorway Mrs. Cameron shouted an invitation, but Swickey and her father were firm. Once in the house, they knew that she would not accept their refusal to stay for the night.

Curious Jim returned to the sleigh in a few minutes and they creaked along toward Lost Farm. The early winter night, which surrounded them with muffling cold, pierced the heavy blankets round Swickey and nipped the cheeks and fingers of the two men. The trail found its way through the stark trees, a winding white path of uniform width that gleamed dimly ahead through the dusk of the overhanging branches. Slowly they topped the knoll on which the three cabins stood, banked window-high with snow. The camp looked cheerless in the frosty glimmer of its unlighted windows.

As the traces clacked, Smoke heard and barked his welcome.

"T warn't as heavy goin' as I thought it would be," remarked Cameron, as he swung the sleigh close to the cabin, his head nearly level with the snow-filled eaves. "Hear thet dog whoopin' to git out. Guess he smells you, Swickey."

Avery clambered down, broke through the drift to his door, and entered. Smoke jumped to his shoulder with a joyous whine and then darted past him toward the sleigh.

"Smoke! Smoke!"

As she handed the bundles to Cameron, the terrier sprang up to her, only to fall back in the smothering snow, in which he struggled sturdily, finally clambering into the sleigh with such vigor that he rolled over the side and on his back in the straw, where Swickey playfully held him, a kicking, struggling, open-mouthed grotesque of restrained affection.

Light glowed in the windows as Avery built the fire and lighted the lamps. It wavered through the frosted panes and settled on the horses, who stood, nostrils rimmed with frost and flanks steaming, like two Olympian stallions carved from mist.

"Why, Pop!" exclaimed Swickey, "you haven't been using the front of the house at all. It's just the same as I left it when I was here last."

"Nope," replied Avery. "Me and Smoke and Beelzebub's middlin' comf'table in the kitchen,—and it saves wood; but I'll start the front-room stove and things'll get het up in no time."

"How's the trapping?" asked his daughter, as she hung her cap and coat in the little bedroom.

"Middlin'. Ain't did what I calc'lated to this season," he replied, as he dumped an armful of wood on the floor.

"Fur scarce?"

"Not eggsackly scurse—but I've been findin' my traps sprung reg'lar with nothin' in 'em, and 'bout a week ago I noticed some snowshoe tracks nigh 'em what never was made by Hoss Avery. They is a new camp—Number Fifteen-Two, they calls it—where they commenced to cut this winter, right clus to Timberland. I ain't sayin' some of Fifteen-Two's men's been stealin' my fur, but I'm

watchin' fur em. Fisty Harrigan's boss of Fifteen-Two. Been set down a peg by the comp'ny 'count of his drinkin' and carryin'-on."

"Yes. I saw him in Tramworth, once," replied Swickey.

"If Fisty's up to pesterin' me," said the old man, "or thet brick-top Smeaton what's with him,"—he struck a match viciously,—“they'll be some pow'ful tall doin's when I ketch 'em."

"Now, Pop, you're getting too old to think of doing anything like that. If anything happened to you, I don't know what I'd do."

"Course not," replied her father, smiling broadly, as she came and squatted, Indian fashion, in front of the stove. "Course not. Don't calc'late you be worryin' 'bout anything happenin' to Fisty or Red, be you?"

She laughed merrily. "Why should I? I don't belong to either of them."

"So you ain't forgot you belongs to your Pa, yit? Wal, I guess eddication ain't spoilin' you a'ter all. It do spile some folks what gits it too sudden-like; them as ain't growed up 'long with it nacheral."

Swickey gazed at the red chink of the damper. Suddenly she sprang up. "Why, Pop! I was forgetting about supper."

"Why, Swickey,—I forgot—'bout supper likewise," said her father, mimicking her. "I'll fetch in some meat. Got a nice ven'son tenderline in the shed, and you kin make some biscuits and fry them p'tatus; and I got some honey from Jim last fall,—he ought to be in purty quick now,—and they's some gingerbread and cookies in the crock. I reckon with some bilin' hot tea and the rest of it, our stummicks kin limp along somehow till mornin'."

"Whew! she's colder than a weasel's foot down a hole," exclaimed Curious Jim, a trifle ambiguously, as he came in with a gust of wind that shook the lamp-flame.

Beelzebub, solemn-eyed and portly, lay before the kitchen stove, purring his content. Smoke followed Swickey, getting in her way most of the time, but seemingly tireless in his attentions. Avery smoked and talked to Cameron in subdued tones as he watched his daughter arrange the table-things with a natural grace that reminded him poignantly of the other Nanette. "Jest like her—jest like her," he muttered.

"Yes, he does like her, don't he?" remarked Cameron, referring to Smoke's ceaseless padding from stove to table and back again.

"Wal, I reckon!" said Avery. "Had two chances fur a car-ride to Boston, but he come back here a-flyin' both times. You can't fool a dog 'bout whar he'd ruther be, same as you kin some folks."

"No, you can't," replied Cameron sagely, "speshully on a winter night like this one."

Swickey left the men to their pipes when she had washed the supper dishes,

and went to the front room, where she opened the box from “Boston,” emitting a delighted little cry as she drew out the short rifle from its leather case. A card attached to it was closely written over with a friendly little expression of Christmas cheer from David. She tucked the card in her dress and ran to the kitchen with the rifle.

“Wal, a shootin’-iron!” exclaimed Avery, turning toward her. “Thet’s what I call purty nifty. From Dave? Wal, thet are nice!”

“Cartridges, too!” said Swickey. “Soft-point .44’s.”

“Wal, we’ll git thet moose now, sure,” said Avery, examining the rifle.

Curious Jim maintained a dignified silence. When the first joy of opening the box and displaying its contents had evaporated, he arose and shuffled toward the door, pausing mysteriously on the threshold. “You ain’t seen all they is yit,” he said, closing the door and disappearing in the night.

Avery looked at Swickey and she at him. Then they both laughed. “Thet’s Jim’s way,” said Avery.

The teamster returned with two more bundles which he placed on the table. “There they be,” he said, trying vainly to conceal his interest in their contents, “and it’s night before Christmus.”

In his excitement he had overlooked that one of the packages was addressed to him.

Swickey brought the bundles to her father. “You open them, Pop; I opened the other one.”

The old man pulled out his jack-knife and deliberately cut the string on the larger package. A gay red and green lumberman’s jacket lay folded in the paper. Avery put it on and paraded up and down grandiloquently.

“Whee-oo! Now, who’s puttin’ on style?” said Cameron.

“From Dave likewise,” said the old man. “And I be dum’ giggered if here ain’t”—he fumbled in the pockets—“a pair of buckskin mitts. Wal, I commence to feel like a walkin’ Christmas tree a’ready.”

“And they’s anuther,” said Jim, eager that the last parcel should not be overlooked.

Avery glanced at the address, held the bundle away from him, then laid it on his knee. “Wal, I ain’t a-goin’ to open *thet* one to-night.”

Cameron’s face expressed a keen disappointment that was out of keeping with his unusual self-restraint.

“You might open it, Jim, seein’ as it’s addressed to you.”

With studied indifference the teamster untied the string and calmly opened the package. “What’s thet?” he asked, handing a card to Swickey.

“Why, it’s l-i-n-g-e-r-i-e, lingerie,” she replied, with a puzzled expression.

Curious Jim’s countenance expressed modulated scorn for her apparent

ignorance. "Now, you *spelled* it right, but you ain't *said* it right," he remarked sagely. "Thet's' loungeree,' meanin' shirts and things mostly for wimmen. I was some worried 'bout that word for a spell, and so I ast the school-mam to Tramworth, and she did some blushin' and tole me. And sure enough it's shirts," he exclaimed, taking two heavy flannel garments from the package; "fur me, I reckon by the size. And here's another leetle bundle fur Jessie and one for the missus. And a pipe." This latter Cameron examined closely. "Silver trimmin's, amber stem, and real French brier—and I carried thet clean from Tramworth and never knowed it!"

He immediately whittled a palmful of tobacco and filled the pipe, lighted it with great deliberation and much action of the elbow, and sat back puffing clouds of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Now, who's putting on style?" said Swickey, and they all laughed.

So they sat the rest of the evening, each thinking of David, until Swickey, drowsy with the heat of the big stove, finally bade them good-night and went to her room.

"I'm glad Ross is comin' up next spring," said Cameron.

"So be I," replied Avery.

"Some young folks I could name needs settin' back where they belong," ventured Cameron mysteriously.

"Seen Andy Slocum lately?" asked Avery, in a casual manner.

"Huh?" Cameron was startled at his companion's uncanny "second-sight" as he mentally termed it. "Oh, Andy?—sure—seen him stand-in' in the window of the hotel when we druv by comin' home."

CHAPTER XXI—THE TRAPS

In a swirling mist of powdered snow that all but obscured the sun, two figures appeared below the three cabins and moved over the unbroken white of the clearing toward Lost Lake. They were muffled to the eyes—heavily clad against the biting wind of that Christmas morning, and they walked, one behind the other, the taller of the two breaking a trail, with his short broad snowshoes, for his companion.

Joe or "Red" Smeaton, as he was called, watched them from the screen of a clump of cedars on the hillside. "Cameron's gone," he muttered. "Seen him drive down the Tramworth road half-hour agone. Guess they hain't nobody 'ceptin' the dog at the camp, fur there goes the ole man and the gal. Wonder where they be p'intin' fur? Hain't goin' nowhere near the trap-line. They's headed straight fur 'Fifteen-Two,' if they keep goin' long enough."

He drew back from the branches and picked up a gunnysack at his feet. It was half filled with stiff objects that he shook together before he finally slung the bag to his shoulder and tramped along Avery's "line," passing the unsprung traps, but stopping whenever a luckless fisher or fox lay frozen across the harsh steel jaws that opened grudgingly to the pressure of his knee, as he unlocked the biting rims and drew out those pitifully inert shapes.

"Harrigan, Smeaton and Company is doin' fine—doin' fine," he said, as he unsprung the fifth trap and shoved its victim into his bag. "Got enough fur here to keep us in booze a week, and ole Hoss Avery is payin' for it, or if he ain't *payin'* for it, he's losin' it—the ole white pirut."

Smeaton's dislike for Avery had no tenable foundation, save that Harrigan hated the old man and it was natural for "Red" to follow Harrigan's lead. Fisty had befriended Smeaton when he was able to do so, and now that Fisty's fortunes were on the wane, Smeaton held unwaveringly to his boss, with a loyalty worthy of a bigger cause and a better man.

Harrigan was wont, when in liquor, to confide the Lost Farm secret to Smeaton, with many mysterious allusions to "doing for certain folks that stood in his way,"—all of which Smeaton digested with drunken gravity until he became inoculated with the idea that he, too, had a grudge against the Lost Farm folk. From Camp "Fifteen-Two" to Avery's "line" was a comparatively short journey. Harrigan had suggested pilfering the fur, and Smeaton promptly acted on the suggestion by making cautious rounds of the traps. Twice he had gathered in Avery's lawful spoils, and this trip was the third. He approached the end of the "line" with considerable hesitancy, peering through the trees as he shuffled toward No-Man's Lake, at the head of which Camp "Fifteen-Two" lay hidden in the towering pines of Timberland Mountain.

"Here's where my tracks fur 'Fifteen' don't go no furdar," he muttered, dropping the bag and unlacing his snowshoes.

Tying them to the pack, he swung the load to his shoulders, stepped to the lake, and skirted the edge of the timber, keeping on a strip of bleak, windswept ice that left no trail. As he came to a little cove where the wind had banked the snow breast-high round its edges, he climbed to a slanting log and began to cross it. Halfway over, and some six feet from the frozen lake beneath, he slipped on the thin snow covering the log. He tottered and almost regained his poise when

a chip of bark shot from beneath his foot and he fell, striking the frozen lake with the dead shock of his full weight, the bag and snowshoes tumbling beside him. Dazed, he turned to get up, but sank to his face with clenched teeth and a rasping intake of breath. He lay still for a few seconds and then tried again. His right leg, on which he had fallen, dragged and turned sideways unaccountably. He drew the bag to him and propped himself against it. Carefully he felt down his leg. A short distance below the hip it was numb, while above the numbness it pained and throbbed horribly.

“She’s bruk—damn it. If I holler, like as not ole Hoss’ll come sky-hootin’ along and finish the job, and I wouldn’t blame him at that. Can’t drag myself furder than the shore in this snow, but I’ll do time that fur anyhow.”

Painfully he pushed the bag ahead of him and crawled toward the trees, his face ghastly with the anguish that made him, even in his distress, a caricature of suffering. His red hair stuck stiffly from beneath the visor of his cap, and his freckled face became grotesque as his features worked spasmodically.

He made himself as comfortable as he could and, with the *sang-froid* of the true woodsman, lit his pipe and smoked, planning how best to attract attention to his plight, “A fire might fetch the boys. Yes, a fire—”

The faint *c-r-r-ack* of a rifle sounded from somewhere over Timberland Mountain way. Then came an almost palpable silence following the echoes. He raised on his elbow. A speck appeared on the opposite shore of the lake, moved swiftly down it a short distance, and then shortened as it swung in his direction. It grew larger until he was able to distinguish the wide horns and twinkling legs of a moose, as it came unswervingly across the frozen waters, directly toward him. Larger and larger it grew until he could see the wicked little eyes and the long ears distinctly.

“By gravy! He’s a-comin’ right in at the front gate. Reckon I’ll have comp’ny in no time or less’n that. He’s hit somewhere, but not bad—he’s travelin’ too stiddy. Mostly scared.”

Smeaton lay back for a moment, then his curiosity drew him groaning to his elbow again. The moose was but a few yards from him.

“Whoo-ay!” he shouted.

The moose swerved, never slackening his regular stride, and passed swiftly down the lake to a point fringed with cedars. Smeaton heard a faint crackle as he crashed through them and vanished.

“Call ag’in, you lopin’ ole woodshed.” But Smeaton’s tone lacked humor. The cold was taking hold upon him, striking through from stomach to spine with stabbing intensity.

Two specks appeared on the opposite shore and came toward him in the tracks of the moose.

[image]

“HERE’S YOUR GAME,” HE SAID HOARSELY

“They’re comin’, and I don’t give a cuss who they be, so long as they find me.” He lay back waiting in grim silence. Nearer came the hunters. “I kin see red and green,” he muttered,—“and skirts. Joe Smeaton, this ain’t your lucky day.”

When Swickey and her father came to where the tracks of the moose swerved, they paused and glanced toward where Smeaton lay.

He raised stiffly and called to them. “Here’s your game,” he said hoarsely.

They hastened toward him, Avery in the lead and Swickey, carbine in hand, following.

“Wal, if it ain’t Joe Smeaton—and busted. What’s the matter, Joe?”

“Leg’s bruk. Fell offen the log.”

Avery glanced at the log and then at the bag beneath Smeaton’s head.

“Trappin’?” he asked quietly.

Smeaton endeavored to grin, but the pain twisted his mouth to a groan.

“Why, Pop, he’s hurt!” exclaimed Swickey.

“Co-rect, Miss—I be.”

Avery knelt by the prostrate figure. “I’d have suthin’ to say to you if she wa’n’t here; howcome you’re busted and Hoss Avery ain’t jumpin’ on no feller when he’s down. You’re comin’ to my camp and git fixed up.”

“Swickey,” he said, turning to the girl, who stood watching them, “you know where my shack is down shore. Wal, they’s a hand-sleigh thar. You git it. We’re a-goin’ to need it.”

“Goin’ to tote me to ‘Fifteen-Two,’ ain’t you?” queried Smeaton, as Swickey went for the sleigh.

“Nope. Lost Farm. Fifteen ain’t no place fur you. Who’s a-goin’ to set the leg?”

“That’s your fur in the bag,” said Smeaton.

“I knowed thet—afore I seed ye. Them’s Canady snowshoes. I know them tracks,” replied Avery, with a sweep of his arm toward Smeaton’s raquettes. “I was layin’ fur you,” he continued; “howcome I didn’t calc’late to find you layin’ fur me, so handy like.”

“Damn your ole whiskers, Hoss Avery, I ain’t scared of you!”

“Thet so?” said the old man, grinning. “Wal, I reckon you ain’t got no call to be sca’d. I reckon your breakin’ thet leg has saved me breakin’ the rest of ye what ain’t bruk a’ready; but it’s Christmas to our house—and seein’ it do be

Christmas, and not thet I'm pityin' ye any—you're a-comin' 'long with me and Swickey."

CHAPTER XXII—"RED" SMEATON'S LOVE AFFAIR

Avery rather enjoyed having Smeaton at his camp. It gave him some one to talk to during the long weeks of winter and early spring that followed. "Red" sulked at first, but the old man overcame this by his unwavering kindness and good humor.

Fisty Harrigan had waited anxiously for Smeaton's return. Finally, he sent a man to Tramworth, suspecting that "Red" had sold the pelts and was dissipating the proceeds in riotous living. Upon ascertaining Smeaton's whereabouts, Harrigan, mistrusting his informant, came to Lost Farm himself just after Swickey had left for her final term at the Tramworth school. What Avery said to Harrigan before he allowed him to see his partner was in part overheard by the latter, as he lay bolstered up in the old man's bed. He grinned as Avery drove home some picturesque suggestions of what might happen in the way of physical violence, "to folks ketched stealin' other folkses' fur." Avery intimated that a broken leg was a mere incident compared with the overwhelming results should he undertake to assist Providence in administering justice.

Harrigan listened with poorly dissembled hate, which was not appreciably overcome by Smeaton's attitude of apparent satisfaction with his host and his surroundings. The Irishman licked his lips nervously while he talked with "Red" and seemed ill at ease, possibly on account of the proximity of Smoke, who lay crouched near the box stove in an attitude of alert patience.

Several days after Harrigan's departure, Smeaton called to Avery, who was in the kitchen mixing biscuits. The old man came in, arms bare to the elbow and a dash of flour on the end of his nose.

"Wal, Joe?"

Smeaton twisted his shoulders uncomfortably, but said nothing.

"Wantin' a drink?"

Smeaton nodded.

The old man went out and returned with the dipper. "Reckon I hain't jest a fust-class nuss," he said, "but you'll have to put up with me fur a spell yit. How's the leg feelin'?"

"Can't kick," replied Smeaton.

"I persume not," replied Avery, with a touch of irony.

"Say, Hoss—I—a feller—you wouldn't say as I was much on looks, would you?"

"Not if I didn't want to put a dent in my rep'tation fur callin' hosses hosses."

"U-huh. I knowed it. Wimmen-folks don't fancy red hair as a giniral thing, do they?"

"Depends on the man what's wearin' it. Had red hair m'self when I were a colt. Don't jest rec'llect any females jumpin' fences when I come by."

"Your'n's white now," said Smeaton, with a shade of envy in his pale blue eyes.

"What they is of it. But what you drivin' at?"

Smeaton flushed and blinked uneasily. "Oh, nothin'—'cept I was thinkin' when I got this here hind leg so she'd go ag'in, mebbly I'd kind of settle down and quit lumberin' and farm it. Have a place of my own."

"What's her name?" said Avery, quite seriously.

"Huh!" Smeaton's eyes glared in astonishment. "I ain't said nothin' 'bout gettin' married, Hoss."

"Course you ain't. Nuther have I." Avery's beard twitched.

"Now, if a feller was thinkin' of gettin' married to a gal," continued Smeaton, "do you reckon she'd think he was gettin' kind of old, if he was, say, thutty-five?"

"Thet's suthin' like the red hair, Joe. Depends mostly on the man. I was older'n thet when I got married.—But I got to mix them biscuits. A'ter supper I'm willin' to listen to the rest of it."

"All right, Hoss,"—Smeaton sighed heavily,— "but I guess they ain't no 'rest of it' yit."

Several weeks elapsed before the subject was mentioned again. The doctor had been up from Tramworth to take the splints from Smeaton's leg and had mentioned Swickey's message to the convalescent, which was that she hoped he would soon be able to be up again, and that she knew he would be just as strong and active as ever in a little while.

"Strong and active. Strong and active." The phrase fixed itself in Smeaton's memory and he repeated it to himself daily, usually concluding with, "Wal, I guess I am—even if I ain't no dude fur looks."

When "Red" was able to hobble about the house, it was noticed by Avery that he gave more than a passing glance at the kitchen looking-glass after his regular ablutions. By a determined and constant application of soap and water

he discovered that he could part his hair for a distance of perhaps two inches, but beyond that the trail was a blind one. He shaved regularly, and sent to Trammworth for some much-needed clothing. Avery attributed "Red's" outward reformation to his own example, never dreaming that the real cause was Swickey, who, for the first two weeks of Smeaton's disability, had tended him with that kindly sympathy natural to her and her father, a sympathy which seemed to the injured man, unused to having women about him, nothing less than angelic. Her manifest interest in his welfare and recovery he magnified to proportions that his egotism approved immensely, but could hardly justify through any known sense of attractiveness in himself.

For the first time in his life, "Red" Smeaton was in love, and the illusion of vague possibilities was heightened rather than otherwise by Swickey's absence.

"Suthin' wuss than a busted leg ails Joe. He ain't 'Red' no more. He's gettin' almost fit to be called Joseph, by stretchin' things a leetle, and it ain't my doin's, howcome I done what I could. I'm sca'd he's got a shock to his spine or suthin' when he fell that time. He ain't actin' nacheral, 'ceptin' his appetite. He ain't hurt thet none."

Avery soliloquized, Beelzebub asleep on his knee, as he watched Smeaton working in the garden-patch which was left soft by the recent spring rains.

"Says he's goin' back on the drive when she comes through—and she'll be comin' purty quick now. Mighty resky, I take it. But Joe knows his business. Danged if I ain't gettin' to like the cuss."

Beelzebub stretched himself lazily, and worked his claws luxuriously, and incidentally through Avery's blue jeans.

"Hi, thar, Beelzy, you hop down. My leg ain't no fence-post!"

The cat dropped to the ground, turning a reproachful eye on the old man.

"Reckon Joe's did enough fur to-day. He sot at it hisself, howcome it won't hurt him none. Hey, Joe!"

Smeaton turned and limped toward the cabin, dragging the hoe after him.

"What do you think about the drive this spring?" asked Avery. "She goin' to be late?"

"Been purty dry," replied Smeaton. "Only 'bout two feet in the cut and the gates both on 'em down. I ain't expectin' to see 'em before June."

"Dave's comin' in June," remarked Avery, half to himself.

"Calc'late she'll tie up here sure," continued Smeaton. "Bad enough when they's plenty of water. They'll need the dinnimite ag'in."

"Ya-a-s. I shot the last two tie-ups fur 'em, but you recollect you was drivin' yourself."

"U-huh."

"Jim Cameron's tellin' me young Andy Slocum's goin' on the drive ag'in"

this trip. He's got guts, but ain't he a leetle young fur the job?"

"Hell! there's nothin' to drivin' nowadays," replied Smeaton. "Any kid can turn the trick with a good man to tell him what to do. 'Sides, Andy's ole man is jobbin' fur the Comp'ny and Andy's got to work the same as any of us. He won't work fur the ole man, so he gits him a job with the Great Western to be shet of him."

"Pull?" queried Avery.

Smeaton winked suggestively.

"Wisht I knowed jest when they was goin' to run 'em through. My gal Swickey's got a camera what Dave Ross sent her and she's jest dyin' to take some pictures of the drive. She writ me about it, and I sent word by Jim thet I'd let her know in time so'st she could come along up with the picture-machine."

"I'm thinkin' of goin' over to 'Fifteen-Two,' to-morrow, and I'll find out what I kin 'bout the drive," said Smeaton.

"I'm obleeged to you, Joe. They ain't no rush about it, howcome I reckon you're gettin' lonesome-like fur the boys."

Smeaton leaned on the hoe he had been scraping clean with his foot. "No, I hain't. What I'm gettin' lonesome fur is a pay-check what's comin' and a chanct to make a leetle more drivin', and then I'm goin' to pay Hoss Avery what I owes him, includin' the skins I tuk, and put the rest in a piece of land and farm it. No more lumberin' fur mine."

"If you can hold your lady friend off a spell, mebbly I kin give you a job on the asbestos. They's a expert and some city-folks comin' up in June and look around this here asbestos diggin's. When we git started it'll beat farmin' all to shavin's."

"Say, Hoss, you're whiter than a skunk's necktie, you are. By hokey, I'm haffen a mind to go you on thet."

Visions of a cabin and a grass-plot, with a certain dark-eyed young woman keeping house, fired Smeaton's inflammable imagination. He secretly vowed that Hoss would make the "all-firedest, plumb-squardest" father-in-law this side of a place frequently mentioned in his daily conversation.

"Jest an idee fur you to chaw on, Joe," said Avery. "But if you'll quit huggin' thet hoe-handle and come inside we'll have suthin' more solid-like."

Ridges of honeycombed snow lay in the cold, sunless hollows of the woods, slowly melting as each succeeding noon brought milder weather. With the April rains the myriad inch-deep streams sprang to clamoring torrents that swelled and burst over the level of their gutted courses. They lapped the soft loam from the tree-roots until the clear snow-water was stained with streaks of brown, in which floated mildewing patches of clotted leaves.

Moss-banked logs and boulders steamed as the sun found them through the dripping trees, and a faint, almost imperceptible mist softened the nakedness of beech and maple, while on the skyline the hills wavered in a blue opaqueness that veiled their rich dark-green pinnacles of spruce and pine.

On the skidways dotted along the North Branch, that swept eddying into Lost Lake, the lumbermen toiled from the first glimmer of dawn until dusk, running the logs to the river until its broad surface was one moving floor of crowding timbers. Day after day the logs swept down to the lake and rolled lazily in the slow wash of the waves, and day after day the lumbermen dogged them with grim persistence until the timbers, herded at the lower end of the lake, lay secure against adverse winds behind the booms.

From Lost Farm Camp, Avery could see the smoke of the wangan below, as he stood on the cabin porch watching the distant figures on the lake shore; as they moved here and there, their actions, at that distance, suggesting the unintelligible scurrying of ants.

"They ain't wastin' no time!" he exclaimed. "Cook's on the job a'ready, and Swickey ain't here yit. Howcome they's goin' to be plenty of chances to take pictures afore they run *thet* drive through. Water's turrible low fur this time of year." He shook his head. "Wal, when the railrud gits here, thet'll settle the drive. Reckon this is the last time the boys will run 'em through. Lumberin' ain't what it used to be." He shook his head again as the memory of his early days with the Great Western came to him.

Smoke, who squatted beside him, stood up and sniffed, nose high in air.

"What you smellin', Smoke? Injuns?"

The dog wagged his tail a very little, but kept his eyes fixed on the edge of the clearing where the Tramworth road entered.

"Yes, I hear 'em, too, Smoke. Guess it's Swickey and Jim. Reckoned she'd come purty quick now, seein' as Joe Smeaton's been to Tramworth three times to tell her."

As the wagon drew nearer, Avery peered beneath his hand. "If thet's Jim Cameron, he's changed some sence he was here last. It's Swickey sure 'nough, but who that feller is a-drivin'—why, it's Jim's hosses, but, bless my buttins, if it ain't Joe Smeaton drivin' 'em. Hello, Joe! What become of Jim?"

Smeaton pulled up the team and Swickey jumped down, and fondled

Smoke. Then she turned to greet her father.

"Sick," said Smeaton. "Took sick last Sat'day with ammonia—so Miss Cameron says. I knowed Swickey was sot on photygrafin' the drive, so I borried the team offen Jim and brung her."

"It was very kind of you, Joe," said Swickey, blushing.

"Thet's all right, Swickey. I ain't forgettin' what your Pa done fur me,—and I ain't a-goin' to. Guess I'll drive back to the Knoll, fur Jim's pow'ful oneasy 'bout this here team."

"Better stay and have dinner, Joe," said Avery, as Swickey, rollicking with Smoke, went into the cabin.

"Guess I'll jog along, Hoss. Say," he continued, "you got the finest, bulliest gal what ever growed up in these here woods, Hoss Avery." And then, as though ashamed of his enthusiasm, he turned and climbed to the wagon-seat, swung the horses with a jerk that threatened an upset, and careened down the hill at a pace that surprised Avery by its recklessness.

"Wal, Swickey, so you're here—and lookin' like a bunch of hollyhocks. How's Miss Wilkins?"

"Just as nice as ever. My, Pop! but it's warm in here with the stove going."

"Wal, 't ain't so warm when the sun goes down," he replied, glancing at her flushed face. Her lids drooped. "What's the matter, Swickey?"

"Oh, nothing—I"—she hesitated and sat down by the window, her foot tapping the floor.

"Thought mebby you had suthin' to say. Ain't worried 'bout anything, be you?" He patted her head, gazing down at her with quiet tenderness.

She looked up and laughed, but there were tears in her eyes. "Oh, Pop, I just must tell you. Don't laugh at me, but I know it sounds foolish. Joe Smeaton asked me to marry him."

"Joe Smeaton—asked—ye—to marry him? Wal, jumpin' snakes, what's a-comin' next?"

"He was very nice about it," she replied. "He said he wanted to settle down and go to farming—and that he knew I couldn't ever like him. Said he hadn't any right to ask, but he just couldn't help it. That he couldn't sleep until he heard me say 'Yes' or 'No,' and that he'd stop chewing tobacco forever if—Oh, dear! I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, he was so serious and so uncomfortable—and he was chewing tobacco when he asked me. I cried a little, I guess. Anyway, he said he knew I'd say 'No,' but that he felt better already. Then I laughed and so did he, and that made me cry again, it sounded so mournful. Poor Joe."

"Poor soapsuds!" exclaimed Avery. "The idee of him, thet red-headed, chiny-eyed—"

"Father!"

“Wal, I reckon Joe has feelin’s the same as any human critter. He ain’t the wust feller this side of ‘Fifteen’—and I can’t say as I blame him.”

Swickey’s color flooded to her brows. “That isn’t all, Pop. There was another one—Andy Slocum.”

Avery’s chest swelled as he suppressed an exclamation. “I promised not to laugh, Swickey, but I’m feared I’ll bust if I don’t do suthin’ else. ’Nother one! Andy Slocum? Jest wait a minute while I light up and smoke—it’ll come easier.”

He filled his pipe, lighted it, and puffed solemnly. “Go ahead, Swickey. I’m bracin’ up and waitin’.”

“You aren’t angry, are you, Pop?”

“Not the kind you mean. I ain’t mad at nobody in pa’tic’ler. Jest bilin’ inside like when a feller steps on a bar’l-hoop in the grass. No sense in gettin’ mad at the hoop, and no sense in gettin’ mad at hisself fur steppin’ on it—and no use gettin’ mad anyhow—but thet ain’t sayin’ he don’t get mad.”

Swickey continued hurriedly. “Andy used to come and see me at Miss Wilkins’s when he was not in the lumber-camp. I thought he just liked me the same as the other boys—”

“Other boys—ya-a-s,” said Avery, removing his pipe and spitting deliberately on the clean floor of the room, which unusual action proved his complete absorption in the subject.

“—Till he wrote me that letter and sent the ring—”

“Oh, he sent a ring, hey? Go ahead, Swickey, my insides is settlin’ down.”

“Of course I sent it back—Miss Wilkins said I ought to,”—Swickey sighed,—“and one Sunday he met me after church and walked home with me. That was the time when he said he wanted to marry me—and tried to kiss me. I was afraid of him at first, but I don’t think he will ever try to do that again.”

“Did you cuff him good?” said Avery.

“No, I didn’t have to do that. But I told him something he’ll remember. You know Andy thinks all the Tramworth girls are just waiting to marry him. Besides, he drinks whiskey, and I’ll never marry a man who does that.”

“I ain’t howlin’ temp’rance m’self,” said her father, “but you’re plumb c’rrect, leetle gal.” He paused for a moment and contemplated the bowl of his pipe. “Dave Ross don’t drink—thet is, so fur as I know.”

Swickey ignored his reference to David. “Andy promised to quit drinking—”

“Did he quit fust or promise fust?” Avery’s tone conveyed a certain degree of skepticism.

“I don’t know.” She arose and went to her father, throwing her arms round his neck. “I don’t know, Pop. I wish,” she sobbed, “I wish my mother was here to talk to.”

“Thar, thar, leetle gal, I wisht she was too. Many’s the time I’ve been wantin’ to talk to her ’bout—wal, you, fur instance, and lots of other things. See, you’re makin’ Smoke feel bad, to say nothin’ of your Pa. I don’t care how many fellers wants to marry you, so long as they don’t. Thar! now you’ve upset my pipe right on your dress.”

Swickey hurriedly disengaged herself and brushed the ashes from her skirt.

“Dave says in his letter that that young Bascomb, the surveyor feller, is comin’ up with him. They ought to be along purty soon now.”

“What! that Mr. Bascomb that tried to buy our place—and get the asbestos?”

“Yes, thet’s the feller.”

“I didn’t think Dave would have anything to do with him after what happened. What is *he* coming for?”

“Dave writ that he and Bascomb had jined forces—said he’d explain when he comes. I reckon it’s all right, seein’ as it *is* Dave; howcome I’m kind of tired worryin’ ’bout the whole dinged business, but I gave my word to Dave and I’m going to stick to it.”

“Of course you are, Pop. Dave would be disappointed if anything went wrong now.”

“Thet’s it. I ain’t forgettin’ what Dave Ross done fur you when he fust come here; not sayin’ that that makes all the diff’rence. Dave’s purty good leather at most anything he tackles.”

Swickey made no comment and the old man arose and walked to the door.

“Guess I’ll jog down to the dam and see what’s doin’. Thet’ll give you a spell to ketch your breath ag’in.”

“All right, Pop.”

Swickey sat gazing out of the window. She was thinking of a summer midnight some three years ago, when a very frightened, barefooted little girl had tapped on a cabin window to waken the Dave whom she scarcely knew then—and of his patience and gravity when she asked him to purchase the book and the “specs” for Pop. “He didn’t really laugh once,” she thought, and her heart warmed toward the absent David as she pictured him traveling once more to Lost Farm, eager, as his letters had stated, “to see her and her father again more than any one else in the world.” How well she remembered his keen, steady glance; his grave lips that smiled so unexpectedly at times; even the set of his shoulders and the vigorous swing of his stride.

She stepped to the glass and surveyed her face with an expression of approval. She drew quickly back, however, as the crunch of calked boots sounded on the porch.

“One of the men to see Pop,” she thought, and went to the door. “Oh, it’s

you!"

The rugged, boyish figure of Andy Slocum, clothed in riverman's garb, confronted her.

"Why, I thought—" She hesitated, leaning against the door-frame.

"Oh, it's me all right. On the job with both feet. I come up to have a talk with you." He breathed heavily, and stared at her in a manner too direct to be natural, even for him.

"If it's about me"—she began—"why, Andy, I can't. I just can't. You know that."

"T ain't much of a reason, Nanette—'just can't.' I've been comin' to see you for more than a year now. What makes you say you 'just can't'? Ain't I good enough for you?"

She smiled. Then her face became suddenly grave.

"Andy, I like you—I always liked you; but, honest now, Andy, do *you* think a man that comes straight from Jules's place to ask a girl to marry him is going to quit drinking *after* he's married?"

Slocum's face flamed. "Who said I was at Jules's place?"

She smiled again. "It didn't need telling, Andy. You're saying it plainer every minute. Besides," she continued, "I saw you coming from Jules's when I came from Tramworth with Joe Smeaton."

Slocum laughed. "Joe Smeaton? Is it him?"

She resented his tone by maintaining a silence that he interpreted as an assent to his question.

"Ain't they no chance if I quit?"

"I want you to quit, Andy," she replied slowly, as a motherly, almost pitying expression settled on her young face. "I like you more than most any of the men I know, but I guess there's no chance. I can't help it."

Slocum stood before her like a self-conscious and disappointed schoolboy. He had what his associates termed "plenty of nerve," but Swickey's clear brown eyes seemed to read him through and through, and he resented it by exclaiming,—

"It's that man Ross, then."

Swickey flushed despite herself.

"I knowed it," he said quickly. "So that's what he's been hanging round Lost Farm for. Hoss Avery's partner! Makin' no show of courtin' you—and he wins. Well, I'll say this, Ross is straight, and seein' somebody had to get you, I'm glad it's him instead of that plug Smeaton."

Swickey's eyes twinkled. "So somebody had to get me—you're sure about that, Andy?"

He frowned, but she stepped close to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Andy, I like you better than ever for saying what you did about Mr. Ross,

but he has never said a word to me about—that. I was only fifteen when he left here.”

“Then it’s Joe. But how in thunder you can—”

She interrupted him gently. “It’s nearly supper-time, Andy, and my father will be along soon.” She looked straight in his face and smiled wistfully. “Andy, good-bye. You’re going on with the drive, and perhaps I won’t see you again till next spring.” And much to his astonishment she bent forward and kissed him. “Good-bye, Andy.”

Never a word said the young riverman as he turned and clattered down the trail, his calked boots rasping on the pebbles. He paused as he came opposite the wangan tents. He could hear some of the men laughing and talking about Joe Smeaton.

“Hell!” he muttered; “he wins—I lose. No accountin’ for a girl’s likes. But she kissed me and that’s mine to keep—and it’s all I get.”

He felt a half-guilty pleasure in the knowledge that she had kissed him, “without even askin’,” he added, as he thought of it. Unfortunately he missed the serene joy that might have assuaged his disappointment to some extent had he been capable of understanding the quality of the love that prompted Swickey’s action.

As it was, he swung blindly past a group of men who spoke to him, and entered the woods bordering the Tramworth road. “Huh!” exclaimed one of the men; “Andy’s gettin’ swelled up on his new job.”

“From where he’s headed for, I reckon he’s goin’ to Jules—fur some nerve.”

“Jules sellin’ booze ag’in?” asked the first speaker.

“Ag’in?” replied the other. “When did he quit? Huh, Pug, he’s allus got it—when you’re heeled.”

CHAPTER XXIV—RIVALS

About six o’clock in the evening of the next day, when the boys at “Fifteen-Two” were finding room for their legs under the long pine tables spread with an imposing array of cookies, doughnuts, hot biscuit, fried ham, potatoes, jam, and pies, Slocum, stumbling through the doorway, paused in the shadow cast by the

lamps.

The log-jam down the river was being discussed in rich and glowing numbers. The talk was colored with fragmentary experiences of former days on the drive. Statistics were handled carelessly, to say the least, and disputed in pointed language, which, if not always logical, seemed convincing, especially to the speakers. The men rasped each other with barbed and prickly oaths that passed with them as slang. Every one was happy in a boisterous fashion, when Slocum, hitherto unnoticed, exclaimed,—

“They ain’t a bug-chasin’ son-of-a-duck what can find the tender spot in a jam quicker ’n ole Hoss Avery. He ain’t a lady’s man”—with a leer at Smeaton—“and he ain’t scared of nothin’ what walks, creeps, or flies.”

He raised an outstretched arm grandiloquently, to command the attention he thought due, and continued with drunken solemnity,—

“Cept me.”

“Are you walkin’, creepin’, or flyin’ now, Andy?”

Slocum swayed a little and scowled. Then he drew himself up with questionable dignity.

“Cept me,” he repeated.

The men laughed. “It’s a good thing Hoss ain’t here,” said the blacksmith, “’cause he’d be so scared he couldn’t eat nothin’.”

Slocum, vaguely realizing that he was being made sport of, with the illogical turn of a drunken mind, cursed the absent Hoss Avery rabidly.

“Thet’ll do, Andy,” said Joe Smeaton kindly. “You jest keep a few of them fancy trimmin’s against the next time you meet Hoss. Mebby he’ll like to hear ’em and mebby he won’t.”

“What’s it to you, you sneakin’, red-headed sliver—” He hesitated, then pursued his former line of argumentation. “I kin make him eat ’em raw,” he whispered melodramatically.

“Like to be thar when you’re feeding him,” said Smeaton good-naturedly.

The men laughed again. There was a bantering note in the laughter, especially from Harrigan’s end of the table.

“And you, too, you red-headed—!” said Slocum, shaking his fist at Smeaton.

The laughter died away. The men were unnaturally quiet.

Smeaton mastered himself with an effort. “You’ll be gettin’ pussonel next.”

He was apparently unruffled, although a red tinge, creeping slowly up the back of his neck, showed what the effort had cost him.

Slocum, dully conscious that he had assumed a false position, hunted more trouble to cover his irritation. As the cookee, a lad of sixteen, passed him, he snickered. Slocum turned, and, much quicker than his condition seemed to warrant, struck the lad with the flat of his hand. The cookee, taken by surprise,

jumped backward, caught his heel on one of the benches and crashed to the floor, striking his head on the bench as he fell.

Joe Smeaton jumped and struck in one motion. Slocum took the floor like a sack of potatoes.

“Guess that settles it,” said Smeaton, as he stood over the quiet form, waiting for the next move.

The men shuffled to their feet, and gathered round, silent but sharp-eyed. If there was to be any more of it they were ready. Finally, one of them took a drinking-pail from one of the tables and poured a generous stream on the cookee.

Some one offered a like service to Slocum, but Harrigan interfered, shouldering his way through the group. “Leave him be! I’ll take care of him. They ain’t no one goin’ to raise hell in this here shanty long as I’m boss. Here you, Sweedie, give us a lift.”

They carried the limp, unconscious Andy to the stable and laid him in a clean stall. Harrigan paused to throw a blanket over him. When he returned to the shanty the cookee was seated on a bench crying.

“Here, you! Shut up and git back on th’ job, quick!”

The strain eased a bit when the boy resumed his occupation. Andy Slocum’s friends evidently thought their man deserved his “medicine.”

“Joe took more lip than I would ’a,” remarked a disgruntled belligerent.

“That so?” asked another. “Well, they’s some here as would of used boots followin’ the punch, and been glad to git the chanct at Andy—not namin’ any names.”

Next morning Harrigan sent the cookee out to call Slocum to breakfast, but the young riverman had departed. “Prob’ly back on the job,” remarked one.

“Yes, and it’s where we’ll all be afore night. Things is tied up bad in the gorge. Then the wangan fur us—tentin’ on the ole camp-ground fer fair, but, oh, Lizzie, when we hit Tramworth—lights out, ladies.”

“Lucky if some of your lights ain’t out afore you hit there,” came from a distant corner of the shanty.

“Aw, say, deacon blue-belly, come off the roost. Say, fellus, let’s eat.”

CHAPTER XXV—ON THE DRIVE

Joe Smeaton's regard for Swickey had been increased rather than diminished by her kindly but decisive answer to his suit. "If they ever was angels what wore blue dresses, she's one of 'em," he confided to himself, as he beckoned mysteriously to the cookee. The rest of the men had already filed out of the camp and down toward the river.

"Here, Sliver, want to make a quarter?" The lad ambled toward him. "Sure ting, Joe,—it's up to you."

"When you git through here I want you to skin over to Hoss Avery's place and tell his gal Swickey—now quit grinnin' and git this straight—thet they's goin' to be some doin's down the gorge to-day. Harrigan's got his back up and says he'll bust thet jam or every log-roller on the drive—which means, speakin' easy-like, thet he's goin' to *try*. Tell Swickey Avery to bring her picture-takin' machine, with the compliments of Joe Smeaton. Savvy? Here's the two-bits."

"I'm on, Red," replied the cookee, dodging a lunge from the lumberman and pocketing the quarter. "Fix up purty, for she'll be lookin' at you."

The cookee sped or rather fled on his errand. Smeaton looked about, then went to his bunk and drew out a soft, pearl-gray hat with silk-bound edges and wide band. He had purchased it in a moment of exuberance when the possibility of Swickey's saying "yes" was unclouded. He straightened it out, gazed at it admiringly for a moment, and then, flinging his old hat in the corner, he set the pearl-gray felt jauntily on his shock of red hair.

"T ain't every day a feller gits his picture taken by a gal, or thet kind of a gal," he muttered, as he strode from the camp with a fine swagger.

"And look who's here!" cried one of the men, as he joined them at the riverside.

"Whoo-pee!" came in a Piute chorus from the boys.

"Where you goin' to preach nex' Sunday?" cried one.

"President of the new railroad!" shouted another.

"Oh, mother, but ain't she a lovely lid!"

Smeaton jammed the hat down about his eyes, grinned sheepishly, and held his peace. Meanwhile the cookee was retailing to Swickey the recent happenings at Camp Fifteen-Two, including a vivid account of the "scrap," in which his share, he emphasized, was not the least.

"Hit me when I wasn't lookin'," he concluded, with a tone which suggested that had he been looking some one else would have regretted it. "But Joe Smeaton, he fixed him. Slammed him one and Andy went to sleep on it. Said you was to come down to the jam and take his picture," he added untruthfully, "with Joe Smeaton's compliments—fer a quarter."

"Thank you, Mr. —?"

"Hines is my name."

“Mr. Hines.”

The cookee, feeling that he had been rather abruptly dismissed, returned to camp to finish his morning’s work. Swickey locked the cabin and, tapping a farewell to Smoke, who stood watching her at the window, she walked briskly down the road, swinging her camera and humming. Harrigan had called her father early that morning. Avery had handled the dynamite for the Great Western for years before he came to Lost Farm, and although practically retired from this class of work, his ability to “get things moving” was appreciated by Harrigan, who was an experienced driver himself. The old man was sitting on a log, bending busily over something, when Swickey appeared.

“Hello, Swickey. Thought mebbly you’d be comin’ along. Joe Smeaton jest went by with some of the boys.”

“Yes, I want to see Joe. I’ve got something to say to him.”

Avery looked at her for a moment, scratched his elbow, and mumbled, “M-m-um, ya-a-s, pussibly you have.”

He was toying carelessly with a bundle of dynamite sticks. He would unwrap one, punch a hole in it with his knife, insert a fuse, and wrap up the soapy-looking stuff again. He attached one stick to another until he had a very impressive-looking giant firecracker. This he tied to a long maple sapling, round which he wound the loose end of the black fuse. Swickey appreciated her father’s society, but not enough to tarry with him just then. Their ideas regarding Providence were dissimilar in a great many details.

Avery liked to tease her. “If you ain’t in a hurry to see Joe, you kin carry one of these here fireworks down to the jam fur me. I’ll take this one. You kin take the one you’re settin’ on.”

She heard her father guffawing as she walked away. Suddenly he choked and spluttered. “Swallowed his tobacco, and I’m glad of it.” With this unfilial expression she hurried toward the river.

The jam lay in an angle of the gorge like a heap of titanic jackstraws. Behind it the water was backing up and widening. Every few minutes the upper edge would start forward, crowding the mass ahead. The river, meeting stubborn resistance, would lift a fringe of logs up on the slant of the jam and then the whole fabric would settle down with a grinding heave and a groan. Once in a while a single log would shoot into the air and fall back with a thump. Up on the edges of the gorge the birches were twinkling in the sun, and vivid, quick pine warblers were flitting about. Below was chaos, and groups of little men—pygmies—tugged and strained at their peaveys, striving to rearrange things as they thought they should be. The choked river growled and vomited spurts of yellow water from the face of the jam. Gray-shirted men leaped from log to log, gained the centre beneath that tangled, sagging wall of destruction, and labored with a superb

unconsciousness of the all-too-evident danger. Some one shouted. The pygmies sprang away from the centre, each in a different direction like young quail running for cover. The mountain of timbers moved a few feet, settled, and locked again. Harrigan looked worried.

“Did you meet your Dad comin’ down?” he asked Swickey, who sat perched on a ledge overlooking the river.

“Yes. He asked me to help him carry his ‘fireworks’.”

“Here, Bill!” shouted Harrigan, “you go up and help Hoss. You know where he is.”

Meanwhile the men loafed round in little groups, joking and laughing, apparently unconscious of having done anything unusual. Their quarrel with the river was one of long-standing and regular recurrence. They were used to it. They leaned on their peaveys or squatted on the rocks, watching the river nonchalantly. Hardened by habit to any acute sense of danger, and keyed to a pitch of daring by pride in their physical ability, they more than defied destruction,—they ignored it. Yet each riverman knew when he stepped out on the logs beneath the face of the jam that the next moment might be his last. Undiluted courage raced in their veins and shone in their steady eyes.

“Here comes Hoss, fellers. Give him the stage. We’s only the awjence now;” and the boys, with much jesting and make-believe ceremony, made way for the old “giant-powder deacon,” as they called him. Hoss carried his grotesque skyrocket with the business end held before him. He walked out on the slippery logs easily, inspecting the conglomeration with an apparently casual eye. Presently he hitched one suspender, rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, and inserted the dynamite in a crevice between the logs, pushing it down slowly with the sapling. He fumbled with the fuse a minute, and then hastened to shore.

Swickey, kneeling, snapped the camera as the rock beneath her trembled, and up rose a geyser of brown foam and logs, pieces of logs, splinters, bark, and stones. The jam moved forward, hesitated, and locked again. A second and third shot produced no apparent effect.

“Three times and out,” said Harrigan. “Hey, Andy! Where’s Andy Slocum?”

“Over talkin’ to Hoss,” said a driver, as he went for a new peavey. His was at the bottom of the river, pinched from his hands by two herculean pine fingers.

“Thought that last shot would fetch her,” said Harrigan, as he came up to Slocum and Avery. “But she’s got her back up. Now, see if you can coax her along, my buck. She didn’t even smile when Hoss persented his bokay.”

Avery grinned. “Thet’s right. I was just tellin’ Andy mebby if he was to go out and *sing* to her, she might walk right along a’ter him like thet gal up in—”

But the rest of what promised to be of entertainment to the boys remained untold. Slocum skirmished among the men, quietly picking out six of them to go

with him and “loosen her up.”

They strode deliberately out on the logs, laughing and talking. Swickey noticed that Joe Smeaton was one of those chosen.

They tried timber after timber, working carefully. There was a directness and unity in their movements that showed they meant to “pick her or bust,” as Avery expressed it. Swickey, pale and trembling so that she could scarcely hold the camera steady enough to find the men, followed with glowing eyes the little band as they moved from spot to spot. Their evident peril reacted on her till even she, used to such things, felt like calling to them to come back. She felt rather than saw their danger. Presently Slocum and Joe Smeaton were working shoulder to shoulder. Smeaton paused to wipe his face on his sleeve. Evidently he said something, for Andy Slocum laughed.

“They’s goin’ to fetch her,” said Avery, as he came to where his daughter stood.

She questioned him with a look.

“I can’t jest explain, Swickey, but git your camera ready. They got a grip on her now.”

Then, amid shouts from the men on the bank there came a crack like a rifle-shot. The entire fabric bulged up and out. A long roar, a thundering and groaning of tons of liberated logs and water, and five of the seven men ran like squirrels from log to log toward shore. Where were the other two? Joe was coming—no, he was going back. Swickey raised her arms and shrieked to him. He turned as though he had heard and flung out one arm in an indescribable gesture of salutation and farewell to the blue-gowned figure on the rocks above him. Then he ran down a careening log and reached for something in the water. He caught an upraised arm and struggled to another log. He stooped to lift the inert something he had tried so fearlessly to save, but before he could straighten up, the loosened buttress of timbers charged down upon him and brushed him from sight. The crest of the jam sunk and dissolved in the leaping current.

“Gone, by God!” said Avery.

Men looked at each other and then turned away.

Above, the pine warblers darted back and forth across the chasm in the sun.

Swickey slid from the rock where she had been standing and grasped her father’s arm. “It was Joe, wasn’t it?” she gasped, although she knew.

“Yes—and Andy,” replied Avery. “Joe might of got out, but Andy slipped and Joe went back to git the leetle skunk. Thet was Joe all over—dam his ole hide.”

She dropped to her knees and crossed her arms before her face. With one accord the rivermen turned and walked away. Avery stooped and lifted her to her feet.

“Thar, thar, leetle gal—”

“Oh, father,” she sobbed, “I thought mean of Joe this morning—I didn’t understand—and I can’t tell him now.”

“If God-A’mighty’s what we think He be,” said Avery reverently, “He’ll make it up to Joe.”

CHAPTER XXVI—DAVID’S RETURN

Swickey climbed from the edge of the river to the woods above. Here she turned to look once more at the gorge, where the released waters, dotted here and there with stray logs, churned between the black boulders, and swept roaring round the bend below. Again she seemed to see Joe Smeaton’s lonely figure, drenched with spray, as he waved that gallantly grotesque farewell. Tears welled beneath her lids and she bit her lips to keep from sobbing. She longed to be at home, alone with Smoke. Listlessly she passed along the trail, blind to the afternoon sunshine that hung soft, radiant banners between the arches of the mast-high trees; banners that trailed and flickered from bole to bole, touching the gray-green lichens with wavering gold. Unconsciously she saw the stones in the roadway and the little streams that winked between the pebbles in the wagon ruts. So at one with her grief was she that she did not notice the two figures plodding ahead of her in the distance until one of them laughed as the other, endeavoring to jump across a muddy pool, slipped and fell with a splashing and scrambling to secure a footing.

She glanced up quickly. The taller of the two men was standing, arms akimbo, laughing at his companion, who scraped the slimy mud from his clothes with a deliberation that did not lack humor.

“It’s Dave!—and that Mr. Bascomb.”

The joy of seeing David again flashed across her lips in a quick smile, but faded in the gloom of the recent tragedy. She wanted to feel happy, if for nothing else than to make David’s welcome what it should be, but her heart quailed at the thought of meeting him now. She felt it would be disloyal to the memory of the men whom she had just seen swept away from the world and its sunshine, to allow herself the innocent happiness that David’s coming meant. She knew

she must meet him sooner or later, and some of her characteristic determination came to her as she quickened her pace.

David and his companion had gone on—were walking faster than she. Why not allow them to reach the camp before her? But the sight of David had awakened something of the Swickey of three years ago. She hesitated; then called.

Neither David nor Bascomb heard her. She hollowed her hands and called through them: “Dave, it’s Swickey.”

They stopped and turned. Neither of them seemed to know where the call came from until David recognized her figure and, with a word to Bascomb, left him and came to where she stood.

“Well, Swickey!”

He put out both hands and she took them. His eyes told her he had found another than the Swickey he used to know, and yet—

“What is it, Dave?” she asked simply.

“I’m looking for Swickey; this is Nanette.”

“Oh, Dave,” she cried, restraining a sob, “I’ll never be Swickey again. Andy Slocum and Joe—Joe Smeaton—have been killed—in the gorge—the logs—oh, it was horrible! Andy fell and Joe tried to get him out—and they’re both gone.”

She pulled her hands from his and covered her face.

“Great Heavens, Swickey! Killed? When? On the drive?”

“Just now,” she sobbed. “I just came from there and I want to go home.”

“Come,” he said quietly.

Silently they walked along. Bascomb had gone ahead of them, for which she felt a grateful relief. Presently David spoke.

“Was either of the men a—any one whom I knew?” he asked.

“Joe asked me to marry him, but—”

“I beg your pardon, Swickey. I didn’t mean to be inquisitive, but you seemed to feel so badly about it—”

“It was different—Andy—but Joe. Oh, I wish I could have told him—what I wanted to.”

David thought he understood and kept silent as they walked up the slope toward the camp. He could not help noticing the change in her: the neat, trim figure, lithely erect; the easy, natural stride; the maturing fullness of the softly rounded cheek and throat; the great, heavy braids of dusky hair that were caught up beneath her cap and showed so sharply against her present pallor; the firm, slender brown hands.... He drew a long breath and turned his eyes from her toward his cabin, where Bascomb sat, pack-sack beside him, wreathed in films of smoke that drifted from his pipe.

Even with his knowledge of the accident, and her grief, so manifest, a little pang of something akin to jealousy gripped him. So she was to have been mar-

ried.... When he had thought of her during his absence, it was of the girl who “wanted him—just him and no one else.” He had never dreamed of being anything more than a friend to her, even then. But now.... He brushed the thought aside with a touch of self-accusing anger.

“Wallie, this is Miss Avery.”

Bascomb, who had arisen as they approached, laid down his pipe and shook hands with her gravely. He noticed traces of her agitation and refrained from making one of his characteristic remarks, bowing as she excused herself and hastened toward the camp.

“Swickey’s all broken up about the accident. Two men just killed in the gorge—on the drive. I don’t know just how it happened.”

“Great Scott! Two of them killed? In the gorge? Why, we passed there less than an hour ago. Say, Davy, I’m going back and—”

“I wouldn’t, Wallie—not now.”

Bascomb hesitated; then he turned toward David.

“Your’re right, as usual, Davy,—I won’t.”

He picked up his pipe and relighted it.

“Davy, look!” Smoke was leaping straight up, as Swickey pointed toward them. Finally, he saw the figures in David’s doorway, and springing from her, flashed across the clearing and bounded against David, then crouched and rolled on his back, legs kicking wildly as he whined and barked in sheer happiness. “Well, Smoke!”

At the sound of Bascomb’s voice he stood up and shook himself. Then he marched to his old master, sniffed at him once or twice, and then jumped up, standing with his paws on Bascomb’s chest.

“I know you’d kiss me if I didn’t smoke, wouldn’t you, old chap? Horrid habit, isn’t it? My! but you’re looking fit. Killed anybody lately?”

The dog dropped to the ground and ran from one to the other, uncertain as to which he owed more affection. Unwittingly Swickey solved the difficulty by bringing the key of David’s cabin. When she went back to her father’s camp, Smoke, after some serious hesitation, followed her slowly.

“Smoke seems to realize the situation is a bit complicated,” said Wallie, as the dog disappeared in the other cabin.

“I don’t know,” replied David, throwing open the door and entering his old familiar quarters. “But he seems to have made a pretty wise choice.”

“I don’t know how wise it is—but it’s a pretty one, anyway. Your little friend Swickey is simply stunning, Davy. My! what a complexion. No wonder you were in a ‘swesperation’ to get back to her. She’d make the niftiest show-girl in Boston look like the morning after.”

David, busily unpacking his knapsack, grumbled something about having

forgotten to bring extra blankets.

"Blankets? Don't you worry, Davy. Uncle Walt can bunk anywhere after that walk. Why, I'll brace the Cy—Avery for a pair if it's necessary."

"That reminds me, Walt. Remember that letter you wrote to me—the one in which you sent your regards to the Cyclops and the siren child?"

"Sure thing. What about it?"

"Nothing, except I lost it and Swickey found it."

"Whew!"

Bascomb's whistle expressed a realization of untold possibilities.

"She's keeping it for me," said David, smiling as he watched Wallie's expression. "I told her it wasn't important enough to forward."

"Well, you long-legged idiot, what did you do that for?"

"I didn't want it. You may claim it yourself if you want to."

"But *she* don't know what 'Cyclops' means, Davy. Great Cæsar! I'm a goner if she does."

"Swickey has been going to school for two years, Wallie, and she isn't slow. You can never tell."

"Oh, well, I've got to square myself with Avery anyway. He's had it in for me ever since I desecrated his Eden with survey-stakes. Speaking of stakes, did you notice the N. M. & Q. iron was laid up to the creek below Jim Cameron's?"

"No, I didn't. I was thinking of something else."

"Asbestos?"

"Yes. Livingstone and the committee will be up here in a few days and I was wondering what we—that is, where we could put them if they stay overnight."

"Oh, Livy's a good sort—about as good a mining expert as there is east of the Rockies, and that's going some. They're satisfied with his report (you know I had him up here the first year I was in—before you came), but I think they want an excuse to annex a private car and take a joy-ride. Say, can't I help you tidy up a bit, or something?"

"No, you sit still and talk. I'll get the bunks straightened out in a minute."

"All right, Mary. Don't forget to sweep under the bed."

"For that impertinence you may go over and get an armful of wood. I'm hungry—and you'll have to eat my cooking. That's my revenge."

"I'll annex the wood-pile—but your cooking—I don't know. Here, where are you going?"

"Over to the house to borrow a few groceries to feed you. Come on."

Wallie seemed in no hurry to be up and doing.

"No, I'll interview the wood-pile."

He glanced at his muddy clothes. David laughed.

"'Tis not alone my inky cloak—there are other reasons," said Bascomb, with

mock-seriousness. "And by heck! here comes one of them like Ulysses on the home stretch. Well, Davy, when you write, tell them I died a hero."

As Avery, coming up the slope, saw the figures near David's cabin, his grim features lightened.

"The boy's back ag'in," he exclaimed, quickening his pace. "And the surveyor feller, too, I take it."

They went to meet him as he hurried up the hill.

"Wal, how be you, Dave? I'm a'mighty glad to see you ag'in." His fist closed over David's fingers vigorously.

"First rate, Avery. You've met Mr. Bascomb?"

"Ya-a-s," replied the old man, shaking hands with Wallie, "I have. Dave's been tellin' me how you jined forces—goin' to dig asbestos t'gither. Wal, they's plenty of it to dig."

"And how have you been?" asked David.

"Oh, middlin'—fur a Cyclocks,"—he glanced shrewdly at Bascomb,— "whatever thet be."

Wallie flushed despite himself. He hesitated, and then, glancing at David, stepped up to Avery.

"See here, Mr. Avery, I know all about that letter having been lost and found by your daughter. I didn't suppose you would ever see it, and I beg your pardon."

"Ya-a-s," replied Avery noncommittally.

Bascomb, taken aback by Avery's cool acceptance of his apology, was tempted to let the matter drop right there; but the simple dignity of the old man, as he stood silently before them, awoke an impulse that he hastened to express.

"I want to apologize to your daughter also."

"Say nothin' more about it," interrupted Avery. "Mebby I be a Cyclocks, but seein' as I ain't eddicated up to knowin' it, it don't bother me none. Howcome I ain't speakin' fur Swickey. She's been goin' to school."

Avery's shoulders straightened perceptibly.

As they walked toward the camp, Avery asked them if Swickey had told them of the catastrophe in the gorge. "Swickey never said much, but I reckon she sot some store by Joe. He would 'a' crawled from here to Tramworth fur her—and he went down a'tween them hell-grindin' logs like a feller goin' to a dance. Wal, 't ain't the fust time I've seen 'em go.—You're comin' in to eat, ain't you?" he asked, as David said something about borrowing some bacon and flour.

"Thanks, but we'll have supper in my cabin to-night."

"Can't see no sense in thet. Swickey's got 'most everything ready. You jest come in and feel to home."

David glanced at Bascomb. "We'll manage to-night, anyway."

He caught the glance of quick approval in Swickey's eyes, and after some

joking about running two establishments to feed five people, he borrowed what he needed for supper and followed Bascomb to his own cabin, where they cooked and ate a meal that “escaped criticism merely because there wasn’t enough of it to criticize,” as Wallie remarked, with an omnivorous eye on the thirteenth and last biscuit.

CHAPTER XXVII—“I WANT DAVE”

The rear of the drive had passed, leaving in its wake the blackened circle of the wangan fire, a few empty tin cans, one or two broken pike-poles, an old pair of shoes with calks worn to blunt and useless stubs, discarded and gloomy socks, and a wrinkled and tattered oilskin; an agglomeration eloquent of the haste and waste of the drive, which was worming its tedious way through the deadwater of the thoroughfare some twelve miles below.

Walter Bascomb, thumbs in his belt, sauntered down to the river with David and stood idly looking at the pool below the dam. “I’ve just had breakfast, but that trout makes me hungry,” he said, pointing to a rippling circle that widened and smoothed out in the breadth of the brown water.

“Hungry?” said David.

“Not to eat ’em, but to catch ’em. Let’s go fishing, Davy. Now that Livy’s gone and the committee has fled, loaded to the scuppers with asbestos samples and Livy’s pow-wow (had to laugh when he told ’em there was enough Salamander’s wool in sight to ballast a four-track road from here to Ungava), it’s about time we had a little fun. Taking a lot of high-brows fishing isn’t fun, but that was a brilliant idea of yours, that fishing-party. Kept ’em happy. Asbestos! Huh! They spent just one day crawling over the rocks and looking wise while Livy mesmerized ’em, and four days catching trout. But that’s always the way. Take an ‘investigating committee’ into the woods and let some one say ‘fish’ and it’s all off except the sunburn. I’ve got a cramp in my intellect playing bridge and another in my elbow from pulling corks. *I* didn’t have time to fish, and now I’m going to.”

“All right, Walt. We’ll take a day off. You seem to be in Swickey’s good

graces these days—just run up to the camp and ask her to put up a lunch. It's half-past nine now, and I'll get the rods. Perhaps she'd like to come, too."

Bascomb raised an eyebrow.

"Why not?" said David. "We're not in Boston."

"Quite correct, Plato. I'll ask her."

David went to his cabin and rummaged among his things. "Walt is getting on with Swickey, and I'm glad. The old man seems to have taken a fancy to him, too;—where in the dickens did I put that reel? Oh, here it is!—and she's changed completely toward him. Talks and jokes—"

"Hello, D-a-v-y!"

He went out and found them waiting on the opposite porch. Bascomb had the wooden lunch-bucket in his hand, and Swickey was evidently cautioning him not to knock the cover off, for he pressed it down and went through a pantomime of carrying it carefully.

"Oh, I say, there you are. Here's the commissary. Got the 'rods and reels and traces'?"

"Yes," replied David. "How's your tobacco? Mine's about gone."

"Lots of it," answered Bascomb gayly. "Come, let's go a-Juneing, you old slow-poke. Amaryllis waits without—let's see," he said, looking at Swickey, "without what?"

"Without a hat—if I'm Amaryllis."

"Well, Ammy'll get her pretty nose sun-burned, sure."

"Don't care," replied Swickey, laughing.

"But I do," said Bascomb. "I like that nose just as it is."

They sauntered along in the June sun, Swickey walking ahead. She seemed particularly alluring that morning, in the neat flannel waist and trim skirt reaching to her moccasin-tops. The soft gray of her collar, rolled back from her full, round throat, enhanced her rich coloring unobtrusively. As she turned to speak to Bascomb, the naturalness of the motion, the unstudied grace and poise accompanying it, appealed directly to his sense of physical beauty.

"By Jove!" he muttered, "it isn't every girl could wear those clothes and make them becoming. Most girls need the clothes to help, but she makes 'em what they are—Diana's vestments—"

"Whose vest?" said Swickey, catching part of his soliloquy; "you're frowning fearfully, and you don't usually."

"Just dreaming, Miss Avery."

"Well, don't, now. This footboard is shaky and you *might* slip."

"Oh, Davy would fish me out. Wouldn't you, Davy?"

"Of course—fish what?"

"Nothing." Bascomb hastened to change the subject. "How far is it to this

mysterious fish-hatchery that you've discovered, anyway? From what you say, I should call it an aquarium—that is, if they bite as you say they do.”

“About three miles. Just wait till you've made a few casts. Nanette can tell you—”

“Nanette won't, but perhaps Swickey will,” she said, smiling at Bascomb. As she paused, he stepped beside her and David took the lead, striding up the slope at a pace that set Bascomb puffing.

“It's a desecration to call you Swickey,” said Bascomb, as he tramped along, swinging the lunch-bucket. “My! but our Davy's in a hurry—I don't think I could do it.”

“Yes, you can if you point your toes straight ahead when you walk, like this. You swing your foot sideways too much. Try it.”

“Thank you; but I referred to calling you by your nickname.”

“Well, I said 'try it,' and you don't usually miss a chance like that.”

“Well, Swickey,—there! I feel that's off my mind,—I think you're simply stunning in that costume.”

She laughed happily. “Oh, but you should have seen me when Dave first came to Lost Farm. I had a blue checkered gingham that was—*inches* too short. I was only fourteen then, and I cried because I didn't have a new dress. Did Dave ever tell you about the book and the 'specs' and the two new dresses he got for me?”

“Nary a word—the dour laddie—but I was in the shop when he got it—and I could just worship that gingham.”

“Really? Well, that's too bad. I used it for a mop-cloth only the other day. It's on the mop now.”

“*Touché!*” exclaimed Wallie, grinning. “I won't try *that* again.”

“What does '*touché*' mean, Mr. Bascomb?”

“Well, different things. One interpretation is 'touched,' but 'bumped' isn't stretching it under the circumstances.”

“We must hurry!” she exclaimed. “Dave's 'way ahead of us. No, there he is, waiting.”

“Here's where we begin to climb,” he said, as they caught up with him. “Walt, you'd better give me that lunch-bucket. It's pretty stiff going from now on.”

“Whew! If it's any stiffer than this,” replied Bascomb, indicating the main trail, “I'm thinking the van will have to wait for the commissary. But I'll tote the provender, Davy. I'm good for that much, and you've got the rods and paddles.”

“Here,” David gave him one of the paddles, “take this. Hang the bucket over your shoulder and you won't notice it.”

“Castle Garden,” said Bascomb, as he settled the bucket on his back. “Lead

on, Macduff!"

There was no visible footpath, simply the trees which David had "spotted" at intervals on the route, to guide them. A few rods from the Lost Farm trail the ground rose gradually, becoming rocky and uneven as they went on, clambering over logs and toiling up gullies, whose rugged, boulder-strewn banks, thickly timbered with spruce and hemlock, were replicas in miniature of the wooded hills and rocky valleys they had left behind, for as they entered deeper and deeper into the mysterious gloom of half-light that swam listlessly through the fans of spreading cedars, and flickered through the webs of shadowy firs, their surroundings grew more and more eerie, till the living sunlight of the outer world seemed a memory.

Suddenly Bascomb, consistently acting his part as the commissariat, in that he kept well to the rear, stepped on the moss-covered slant of a boulder. The soggy moss gave way and he shot down the hillside, the lunch-bucket catapulting in wide gyrations ahead of him. It brought up against a tree with a splintering crash.

"Hey, Walt! What are you doing?" shouted David, peering over the edge of the gully.

"Just went back for the lunch," called Bascomb, as he got up and gathered the widely dispersed fragments of the "commissary" together.

"I've busted my bifocals," he said, as he scrambled up the slope; "so if there is any grub missing, you'll know why."

"That's too bad," said Swickey, trying not to laugh. "Where's the bucket?"

"Here!" said Bascomb, displaying the handle and two staves; "that is, it's the only part of it that was big enough to recover."

He laid the remnants of the lunch on a rock, and gazed about him with the peculiar expression of one suddenly deprived of glasses.

"My!" he exclaimed, "but that was a fine biscuit-shower while it lasted. Talk about manna descending from the skies— We'll have to catch fish now, or go hungry."

David stripped a piece of bark from a birch and fashioned it into a rude box in which the lunch was stowed.

"I'll take it," he said. "We haven't much farther to go."

"Magnanimous, that—we haven't much farther to go. Well, I'm glad some one had sense enough to make a noise. This 'gloomy woods astray' business was getting on my nerves. It did me good to hear you laugh, Swickey."

"I'm glad it did you good," she replied. "But I am sorry you broke your glasses. You did look funny, though. I saw you start."

"Huh! That wasn't anything. You ought to have seen me finish! But I'd do it again to hear you laugh like that. There goes Davy through those bushes like

a full-back through a bunch of subs. It's getting lighter, too. We must be coming to something."

Presently they stood on the shore of the pond, gazing silently at the unbroken phalanx of green that swept round its placid length and breadth.

"It looks good, Davy. I can almost smell 'em."

"They're here—lots of them; and big fellows, too. We might as well have a bite to eat. Can't catch anything now, it's too near noon."

Bascomb surveyed the fragments of the lunch. "By the way, what's the diminutive for dinner, Davy?—Dinnerette?"

"Oh, there'll be enough. That reminds me of the good dean. Remember him, Walt? He used to talk about taking a 'perpendicular lunch,' and he hardly had time to get even that."

"Remember him? Bless his heart. Remember him? Why, there was more character, real good old earthy character in his old brown hat than in half the faces of the faculty. Well, I guess!"

Unclouded the noon sun lay miles deep in the centre of the pond, radiating a dazzling brilliancy. Swickey shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed across the pond.

"There's a deer!" she whispered, "just under those cedars, in the water. I wonder what it's doing here this time of day?"

"Can't see it," said Bascomb. "Couldn't if he was sitting on this log eating lunch with us."

"It isn't a he, it's a doe, and she has a little fawn near her. I can just see him on the edge of the bank."

David stood up and brushed the crumbs from his clothes. "I'll get the canoe and paddle up there. It's down the shore a bit."

"I'd give anything to have your eyes," said Bascomb, as David departed. "But seriously, I'd prefer your hand."

"Is that the way you talk to other girls—in Boston, I mean," replied Swickey.

"Sometimes. Depends on—well, the girl, you know."

"Or how well you know the girl? Isn't that it, Mr. Bascomb?"

"Not always," said Bascomb uneasily.

Swickey's direct gaze was disconcerting. She had reproved him without a word of reproof.

"You haven't known me very long, have you?" she asked.

"Long enough to want to know you better," he replied, smiling.

"Dave never says such things," she remarked, half to herself.

"Oh, Davy's a clam—a nice clam," he added hastily, as a storm gathered in Swickey's eyes. "He can say things when it's necessary, but he usually does things first, you know, and then it takes dynamite or delirium to get him to talk

of them. Now, look at that! He just meandered down and dug up that canoe as though it grew there. Never said a word—”

“Oh, yes, he did. You were looking at me and didn’t hear him.”

“Well, that lets me out, but I’ll bet a strawberry you didn’t know he had a canoe hidden up here.”

“You’ll have to find a strawberry, a nice, ripe, wild one, for it’s my canoe. Dave and I hid it there, before the—the—accident. We used to come in here and fish all day. I hope the porcupines haven’t chewed it to pieces.”

As they embarked, David spoke to Swickey, recalling a former day’s fishing on the pond. Bascomb noticed her quick change of manner. “She don’t chirrup like that when I talk to her,” he thought. They paddled across the pond and down the opposite shore, enjoying the absolute silence of the place, broken only by the soft swish and drip of the paddle-blades. Finally they ceased paddling and sat watching the long shore-line that swam inverted in the clear depths of a placid underworld, where the tree-tops disappeared in a fathomless sky beneath them.

Bascomb accepted cheerfully the limitations imposed by the breaking of his glasses, and as the canoe shot ahead again he watched Swickey, her moccasined feet tucked beneath the seat, swinging to the dip and lift of the paddles, all unconscious that her every movement was a pleasure to him. Gradually the intensity of noon drew back into the far shadows of the forest, and a light ripple ran scurrying over the water and vanished in the distance.

“I smell air,” said Bascomb. “Guess the atmosphere is awake again.”

“The trout will be jumping in an hour. What time do you think it is?” said David.

“About two o’clock.”

“Just three forty-five.”

“What!” Bascomb turned an incredulous face toward David. “Well, we’ve all been asleep. It’s a caution how the ‘forest primeval’ can swallow up a couple of hours without a murmur. Let’s try a cast or two.”

“There’s only one place in this lake—for it is really a lake—where you can catch trout. That’s a secret, but we’ll show you where it is,” said Swickey, as she took her rod, drew out a length of line, and reached forward in the bow and pulled a wisp of grass from a tin can.

“Shades of William Black if it isn’t a squirm, and an adult at that! Won’t they take a fly?” asked Bascomb, as Swickey crocheted the hook through a fat angleworm.

“Sometimes,” replied David. “Here’s the fly-book.”

“Well, catch me assassinating angleworms when I can use one of these little bedizened bugs,” he said, selecting a silver doctor from the fly-book. “I’m a sportsman. No squirms for mine.”

David urged the canoe to a spot touched by the shadows of the overhanging trees. "Here's the place, Walt. Cast over there, just this side of those weeds."

Swickey had already made a cast, and she sat watching Bascomb as he whipped the fly here and there, finally letting it settle a few feet from where her line cut the water.

"Nothing doing. I'll try over here." The fly soared across the surface of the pool and dropped gently over the weeds.

"Not at home! Well, we'll call again. Hey! Swickey, look at your rod!"

Swickey's hand was on the reel, and she thrust the butt of the rod toward the flash of silver and red that shot from the water and swirled down again with a splash that spattered her arms with flying drops.

"You've got him!" shouted Bascomb. "He's a bird!"

The tense line whipped singing back and forth. The trout whirled up again and shook himself. Then he shot for deeper water, taking the line out with a *bur-r-r* from the spinning reel. Swickey recovered the line slowly until he was close to the canoe. "He's only pretending," she said. "He'll fight some more."

Suddenly the line swung toward the boat as the trout made a final play for freedom. Her quick fingers flashing, Swickey reeled in, stopping the fish almost under the canoe. "If he gets under, I'll lose him. But he's getting tired. I can feel it."

With cautious deliberation she worked the fish upward and slowly slid her hand down the line. With a quick twist she flopped the trout into the canoe and held him while she extracted the hook.

"Say, he's a whopper! Three pounds if he's a fish. And you did handle him well."

"Now, kill him," said Swickey. "Dave always does—right away."

Bascomb managed, with directions from Swickey, to break the trout's neck by putting his thumb under the upper jaw and bending the head back with a quick snap. Then he reeled in his fly. "I've a favor to ask, Swickey."

She turned toward him, deceived by the gravity of his tone.

"It's a great favor."

"What is it?"

"I can't assume the proper attitude of supplication, owing to the skittish disposition of this craft, but will you please pass the worms?"

Bascomb quickly duplicated Swickey's success. Sportsmanship was forgotten in the wild joy of playing and landing big trout that fought every inch of the way to their final and somewhat ignominious handling from the water to the canoe. Flies, landing-nets, and fussiness might do for story-books and catalogues: they were catching fish.

David sat quietly watching them and smoking. Now and then he swung

the canoe back into position as it drifted from the pool. The rocks gleamed gray-white on the opposite shore as the sun touched the western end of the woods and the air became refreshingly cooler.

"I don't want to end the fun," he said finally, "but it gets dark soon after six."

"Why, Dave!" Swickey reeled in her line swiftly, "you haven't caught a fish!"

"Say, old man, why didn't you shout?"

"I enjoyed every minute of it," replied David, as Swickey caught up her paddle and swung into stroke with him. "The best part of fishing is just the opportunity to get away from one's self a while, isn't it?"

"I don't know," replied Bascomb. "I never was much of a dreamer, anyway."

"Dreamer?" said Swickey, pausing to turn half round. "Dave isn't a dreamer—are you, Dave?"

"He's apt to be most anything, Swickey. He'll bear watching," said Bascomb. "You don't know him as I do."

The canoe slid swiftly over the darkening surface of the water till they came to the place where they had embarked. They stepped ashore and carried the canoe to the bushes.

"Now we'll have to travel, Wallie. I'm sorry your glasses are broken, but you keep close to Swickey and we'll make it all right. I'll go ahead."

"I'm agreeable," said Bascomb, "but I feel like a hen with glass eyes."

He blinked helplessly in the sudden gloom as they entered the forest.

"This way," said Swickey. "It will be all right when you get used to it. I don't believe it ever gets much darker or lighter in here."

Bascomb stumbled along, doing his best to keep up with David's pace, that seemed unnecessarily fast, but was in reality much slower than usual. As they came to a gully which they had crossed on a fallen tree when they came in, Swickey took Bascomb's hand, and, walking sideways, led him across carefully.

"It's muskeg down there, so be careful."

"Sure. I wish this log was a mile long. I like muskegs, don't you?"

"No, I don't," said Swickey, releasing his hand as they came to securer footing.

"Of course it's a matter of taste, Miss Avery. When blindness is bliss, 'tis folly to wear glasses, you know."

"Perhaps it won't be bliss all the way," she replied. "There's another stretch of swamp—you remember that place just after we left the old trail?—and it's black mud, and deep each side of the hummocks."

"Yes, I know—that you're absolutely bewitching—although I can't see as much of you as I should like to in this—wait a minute till I crawl under this log—neck of the woods."

“We won’t be able to keep up if you stop to say such things,” replied Swickey.

“I’m really in no hurry, even if I seem to be. I’m only trying to keep up with you. There! Hang it! I wish the chap that put that rock there had a little more sense of proportion. It’s altogether too big a chunk to be lying around loose on the avenue. Hey, Davy, are you there?”

“Hello! Here I am,” called David.

“Thought you were lost. This route has got the N. M. & Q. frapped to suds. I’ve got a half-nelson on a friendly sapling and Swickey has deserted me, and it’s mud from here to China.”

Swickey turned back and laughingly helped Bascomb to the trail again. “It’s your own fault—you will say things whenever I help you.”

“That’s me,” he replied, squeezing her hand. “It’s my nature to be gracious, you know.”

“Well, here we are, on the old trail again,” she said, as they came up to David.

They walked along in single file until the trail widened near the river, across which they could see the lighted windows of the camp.

“Father’s home,” said Swickey. “I wonder how Jim Cameron is? Pop’s been to see him—Jim has been sick.”

“Yes. Your father told me,” said David. “Pneumonia, isn’t it?”

“Yes; I hope he is better. Pop went down to tell Jim you were here. He said Jim would get well right away when he heard Mr. Bascomb was with you.”

“There, Davy! Talk about ‘angels with healing in their wings.’ I feel so sanctimonious it hurts.”

“I wouldn’t let it get too painful, Wallie. You know they call Cameron ‘Curious Jim’—”

“There you go—blasting my fair illusions in the bud. For an out-and-out, cold-blooded vivisectionist of ideals, you’re the heavy-weight champion of the scalpel, Davy—and you used to write poetry. Oh, Pegasus and autos!”

“Poetry!” exclaimed Swickey.

“Steeped in guilt,” replied Bascomb, nodding toward David. “He wrote the blankest kind of blank verse, and the most solemnly salubrious sonnets, and the loveliest lyrics! Remember that Eugene Fielder you did about the little boy and his pup?”

“If you had your glasses on, Walt, I’d—” David made a playfully threatening gesture.

“No, you wouldn’t, Davy dear, for I could see you coming—and I’d run. Besides, you’d have to drop that string of trout first.”

After supper David went to his cabin to write some letters. Bascomb stayed

behind to chat with Avery about certain details of the work that was soon to be begun in the Timberland Valley.

"I reckon," said Avery, seating himself on the edge of the porch, "I reckon they's no sense in hirin' men fur the job till the new railrud gets to runnin'. Howcome they's some swampin' to be did—cuttin' a road from the creek to the sidin', and we kin git Jim, and a couple of men from Tramworth, and me, and go at it most any time now. Jim's comin' around all right, and I calc'late to git him to do the teamin' later on. 'Course you and Dave'll boss the job. Now, about one thing: Dave says we won't make nothin' the fust year. Now, I ain't worryin' about thet. What I'm thinkin' of is who's goin' to look after things at the other end. Somebody's got to do the sellin' and take care of the money when it do git to comin' in, and—"

"Davy and I talked it over," interrupted Bascomb. "He thinks I'd better be back in town when things get to running here. He will probably speak to you about it."

"I was jest a-goin' to say suthin' about it m'self, to Dave. Guess I'll go over and see him now. Comin' over?"

"No," replied Bascomb, leaning back against the side of the cabin. "This is feathers for me after that tramp to-day. I'll loaf here awhile."

"Thet's right. You kin keep Swickey comp'ny." Avery arose and stretched himself. "I'm gettin' a mite stiff settin' here."

As the old man strode toward the light of David's doorway, Bascomb called to Swickey.

"Did you hear that?"

"About Pop getting stiff in the night air?"

"Of course. I don't need night air to make me stiff, though. I bear the loving marks of the trail all over me. Won't you come out and ease my departing spirit with a little friendly conversation?"

"If you'll promise not to be silly like you were to-day." She stepped softly to the door and peered at Bascomb.

"I'll promise."

She came out and sat on the edge of the porch, her back against one of the posts.

"That's it," said Bascomb. "'Just as you are,' as the picture-man says. Your profile against the summer night sky is—There, you've spoiled it! Please turn your head again. Diana and the moon—"

Swickey faced him. "Diana the huntress?"

"Yes, a mythical creature as illusive—as you are. She's very lovely, too."

"Does she wash dishes and mop floors and—"

"Tantalize mortals?" he interrupted. "Yes, she does, just the same as she

used to forty-seven hundred years ago.”

“I’m not going to ask any more questions,” said Swickey, “but you can talk if you want to. I’ll listen.”

“Thanks awfully. If you’ll sit, just as you are, I’ll answer all those questions you’re not going to ask—every one of them.”

Swickey resumed her position and sat gazing into the gloom. She could hear the murmur of voices from the doorway opposite. Presently she heard David say: “That’s right, Avery.”

“You bet it is, if Davy says so,” murmured Bascomb.

Swickey turned toward him again. “Did Dave really write poetry once, Mr. Bascomb?”

“Really, truly, cross my—pocketbook,” he replied, “only it’s in my other clothes.”

“He doesn’t look like a poet, does he? I mean their pictures.”

“No. Davy looks more like a man. Now I’d make a good understudy to Shakespeare; don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, drawing up her knees and clasping her hands about them. “You’re almost too fat. Besides, I haven’t read Shakespeare, and only one letter that you wrote, and that wasn’t poetry.”

“You’ll forgive me for that, won’t you?” said Bascomb.

“Perhaps. I looked up ‘Cyclops,’ but I didn’t tell father what it meant.”

“Well, you’re the frankest creature! Great Scott! I feel like a worm.”

“I didn’t want to make you feel like that,” said Swickey. “I just said what was so.”

“And therein lies your bright particular charm, mademoiselle,” replied Bascomb, knocking the ashes from his pipe. “Don’t you want to walk down to the river and hear it gargle?”

“No—not the river—”

“I forgot, Swickey.”

She arose and went in, without her usual cheery “good-night.”

Bascomb filled his pipe, blinking in the flare of the match. He puffed meditatively for a while.

“Wallie,” he said to himself, “you’re a chump. Come out of it. She’s not your kind, my boy.” And then, as he realized the snobbishness of his thought, he added, “No, she’s a blamed sight better.”

The moon, drifting toward the western tree-tops, flickered on the moss-edged shingles of the camp; glimmered on the sagging eaves and crept down till the shadowy lattice of the window-frame lay aslant the floor of Swickey’s bedroom, where she stood, slowly undressing. The coat David had given her hung in the glow of the moonlight. She took it down and pressed the soft fabric

to her face and throat. "David!" she whispered. "David!" She rocked to and fro, then suddenly flung the coat from her. "It burns!" she exclaimed.

She sat on the edge of the bed, gazing wistfully out of the window. Presently she seemed to see the river; the tangle of logs, the dashing spray, and then a figure standing erect for a moment to wave to her, and disappear forever....

She knelt by the bed, pressing her face in the cool white coverlet, the heavy masses of her dark hair falling across her arms and shoulders. She lifted her hands imploringly toward the soft radiance that poured through the window.

"I never prayed," she whispered. "I'm wicked—I'm wicked, but, O God, I want Dave."

CHAPTER XXVIII—COMPLICATIONS

Foot by foot the N. M. & Q. crowded through the summer forest, heralded by the roar of derrick engines, the clink and thud of spike-driving, the rattling crash of rock ballast dumped from the flat-cars, the rasp of shovels as the ballast was distributed, and the shouts of foremen as the sweating crews lugged the long ninety-pound rails from rain-rusted piles to the unballasted ties ahead. The abutments of the bridge across the Branch stood naked-gray in the sun. Finally the heavy steel girders and trusses were hoisted and swung into place, and the din of riveting echoed above the sombre cadence of the river. Day after day Avery, Bascomb, and David, with their small crew of axemen, felled and cleared away the trees and underbrush between the Timberland survey line for the road and the creek-bed above it. Finally, Cameron came with his team and handled the heavier timbers, which were corded and piled for winter fuel.

In the meantime the three cabins became a sort of headquarters for the N. M. & Q. division engineer and foremen, who invented daily excuses for stopping at the camp to talk with Swickey. She held a rustic court, in which each overalled gallant vied with his neighbor in keeping the wood-box and water-pails filled. Smoke paid indifferent attention to their coming and going, but Avery's halloo as he returned at night, always brought the dog bounding down the slope to the river, where he stood excitedly waiting for his triumvirate to cross the dam.

Smoke's boundary was the riverside, and in vain had Avery, Wallie, and David endeavored to coax him farther from Swickey.

The summer sun held a tyrannous hand on the dead, still heat of the woods, only lifted at night or when the clouds, loafing round the encircling hills, drew together grumbling, and, bursting, shot ragged flashes through the heavy air aslant the downright volley of the welcome rain. August saw the dull parallels of steel gaining length after length on the open right-of-way, which swung round the base of Timberland Mountain and ran north, vanishing in the distant haze of skyline.

One evening when the sounds of the railroad camps had died away in the sultriness preceding a thunderstorm which flickered its silent warnings across the western horizon, Bascomb, who had been silently listening to a somewhat heated discussion between David and Avery, proposed to Swickey that they stroll down to the edge of the woods.

"Just to cool off," he said, "and get out of the zone of danger," indicating David and Avery with a shrug.

Swickey, with a quiet glance at David, who was expounding a theory as to the rights of corporations in general and the N. M. & Q. especially, listlessly arose and walked down the hill with the young surveyor.

"Well," he said, "they've fired me."

"Fired you?" Swickey's tone was incredulousness itself.

"Back to Boston. Been enjoying myself too much here. Besides, we need more money."

"Oh, then Dave's going to stay?" She was only partially successful in hiding her eagerness.

"Yes, Davy draws the long straw. Anyway, he's worth two of me, here."

"I don't think so," replied Swickey.

Bascomb's astonishment quickened his naturally eager pulses.

"That was nice of you, Swickey,—in a way. Do you really mean it?"

"Don't I usually mean what I say?" she asked, laughing.

"Yes, I think you do—to my sorrow."

"Always?" she said, with a touch of unexpected coquetry.

"There's one exception—just now. Let's sit down on this log and watch the heat-lightning. The sky over there is just like a big purple Easter egg turned inside out, with little red cracks coming and going."

"It's not going to rain here," she replied, with naïve assurance. "That storm will go south of us. They always do when they commence over there."

"You're a regular little Delphian Oracle when it comes to forecasting weather. Can you tell fortunes?"

"I wish I could," she sighed. "Can you?"

“When I can see ’em—certified and payable to bearer.”

“What does that mean?”

“If you’ll sit down—no, within easy speaking distance,”—he said, as she sat on the log a few feet from him,—“I’ll explain. This is ‘strictly confidential,’ as they say, so I’ll really have to sit a little nearer.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she replied, “only it’s so warm.”

“I’ll fan you, and we’ll make this *tête-à-tête* quite swagger.”

“It’s nice—but don’t hit my nose with your hat. And I’m not going to fall off this log, Wallie.”

“I only put my arm there—to—lean on,” he replied. “Now about the fortune. If I were to ask you—of course, this is—ah, imaginary, you know. If I were to propose to you—”

“Propose what?”

“Well, that is, ask you to marry me—”

“Oh, but you won’t!”

“And you should say ‘Yes’—just quick, like that, before you could change your mind,—why, then we’d be engaged. Whew! but it is hot!” he exclaimed, fanning himself with his hat. “Well, then, I’d have a fortune in prospect.”

“But—”

“Now wait, Swickey.—Then if we should get married and I saw my ring on your finger, and—and they were Mendelssohning us out of church, with two little pink toodles carrying your train and the bunch at the door plugging celestial cereal at us, as we honk-honked for the two-thirty train to—to heaven, then I’d have a fortune—you. Certified and payable to bearer, so to speak.”

Swickey stared at him unsmilingly. Presently she said, “Wouldn’t it mean any more to you than that?”

“Well, wouldn’t that be enough?” he replied earnestly.

“But you always seem to be making fun of everything and everybody, even when you try to be serious.”

“I know it. Can’t help it, Swickey dear. But I wasn’t entirely fooling then.”

“But you’d never ask *me* to marry you,” she said calmly.

“Ask you?” he said, with sudden vehemence. “Ask you? Why, can’t you see? I’ve wanted to ask you a hundred times this summer. If I hadn’t thought Davy was—”

“Dave? I hate Dave!”

Bascomb, misinterpreting the passion that lay behind her words, took them literally, blindly following the current of his desire.

“Don’t say that, Swickey. Davy’s true blue, but I’m glad there’s nothing—like that—between you.”

She bent her head and he heard her sobbing.

"There, little girl, I'm sorry I made you feel badly. Come, don't cry. I love you, Swickey." He leaned toward her and she allowed him to take her in his arms. "Listen, dear, you don't belong up here in this ungodly country. It's good to come to, but not to stay. I want you to come home with me."

The soft roar of the distant river pulsed faintly in her ears. She was worn with an unsatisfied yearning that seemed almost fulfilled as she found a momentary content in his arms. With a passiveness that in her was pitiful, she let him kiss her unresponsive lips. The hunger of his desire burned her unanswering passiveness to life as she shuddered and drew back, her hands against him, thrusting him from her.

"No! No! Not that!"

As he gazed stupidly at her, a dim outline took shape behind her bowed shoulders. Then the sound of footsteps as she turned, and the figure of David passed across the strip of light paving the grass in front of Avery's doorway.

"But, Swickey!" His voice trembled, and he held out his arms imploringly.

"No, Wallie. I must go now. It was wrong. You shouldn't have made me," she continued, with a feminine inconsistency that almost made him smile. "I like you, Wallie, but not that way. Oh, if you knew, you'd understand. But you can't. I dreamed—I made myself dream it was—" she hesitated.

"David," said Bascomb. "Now I understand."

With a gracious inclination of his head and a touch of his former lightness he bade her good-night. "I'm short-sighted, you know," he said, in humorous mockery of himself.

The next morning, while Bascomb was sorting over his things with a great deal of unnecessary packing and repacking, David came to him.

"See here, Wallie," he said brusquely, "you don't have to dig out at the drop of the hat, you know. I only spoke of your going in a general way. There's no great hurry—and you'll miss the fall hunting."

"It's time I left," replied Bascomb, glancing up from his task. "If I stayed here much longer I'd qualify for the booby-hatch sure. I asked Swickey to marry me last night."

"Swickey? To marry you?"

"Yes, Solomon,—why not? Don't get fussed up—she isn't going to."

"I didn't imagine you were hit that hard, although—"

"Go ahead, Davy. I'm bomb-proof now."

"Although I saw you two by the river last night. I didn't intend to intrude. I came upon you in the dark before—"

"No, Davy, it was just after. I don't understand her exactly. Perhaps she is a 'siren child,' after all."

"You mean that she'd lead a chap on and then drop him?" David's brows tightened to a frown.

"I don't know," replied Bascomb listlessly. "Perhaps I took too much for granted. She's not like other girls."

"Well, Walt, I think I understand. It's one of the men that went under in the rapids that time. Swickey hasn't been the same since. She will hardly speak to me now. I don't know why. She used to be the greatest youngster for fun—"

"Well," interrupted Bascomb, "she isn't a youngster any more, Davy. I can tell you that much. I'm the kid—or goat—it's all the same."

"When you get back home you'll feel differently about it," said David. "When you get among your own kind again."

"Oh, damn that song about 'my own kind.'" His face flamed and paled again. "This caste business makes me sick. Why, Swickey's worth any six Back Bay dollies in Boston. There's more real woman about her than a whole paddock of them."

"Well, that's going some for you, Walt, but you're pretty nearly right."

"You, too?" said Bascomb, with a quick smile.

David bit his lip and a slow tide of color crept under his tan, but Bascomb, bending again over his packing, did not see. Finally he arose, and, swinging the pack to his shoulders, stepped out and across to Avery's camp.

Swickey saw him coming, and, shaking the dish-water from her fingers, she wiped her hands on her apron and came to the door.

"Good-morning, Swickey."

"Good-morning," she murmured, stooping to pat Smoke.

"I'm going out—'where duty calls,' you know. Came to say good-bye." He extended his hand and she took it nervously. "Good-bye, Swickey. I'll be up again some day. By the way, I want to make you a present. Keep Smoke. He's yours anyway, by preference, but I want to give him to you."

"Thanks, Wallie. I understand. Pop's gone over to Timberland, but I'll say good-bye for you. He didn't expect that you'd be going so soon."

"Neither did I," he replied. "Davy's going to jog down the road a piece with me—as far as the work-train. Special car for mine—little red one with green flags—to Tramworth. Good-bye."

She watched him as he joined David and turned with him down the tracks toward the south. Smoke stood in the doorway watching the retreating figures. Then he came into the room, sniffed sonorously at Beelzebub as he passed him, and threw himself down beneath the table with a grunt.

"Smoke," said Swickey, as she returned to the dishes, "you're getting fat

and lazy. I wonder if you know whom you really belong to now. But you always belonged to me, didn't you?"

As though he understood, the dog got up and came to her, looking up with an expression that said plainly, "Do you doubt it?"

CHAPTER LAST STAND

XXIX—SMOKE'S

As each morning brought a crisper edge to the air and a crisper outline to the margin of the forest against sunrise and sunset, the Lost Farm folk grew restless, and this restlessness was manifested in different ways. Avery, returning from Timberland in the afternoons, busied himself in cleaning and oiling his already well-cared-for traps and rifle. He also prepared malodorous bait from fish, which he cut in strips, bottled, and hung in the sun. Swickey took long walks with Smoke, never asking her father nor David to accompany her. The railroad camps had moved north, following the progress of the road toward the Canadian boundary. David, naturally prone to a healthy serenity, and although satisfied with the progress of the work, grew unnaturally gruff and short-spoken. Night after night he walked and smoked alone, till even Avery's equanimity was disturbed by his partner's irritable silence.

"A good huntin' trip'll fix him up, and September's crawlin' along to where they ought to be good moose-huntin'," he remarked one evening. "He's been workin' like the old scotch, and he needs a leetle spell of play. A man what don't play and holler onct in a while ain't actin' nacheral."

"Why don't he go?" said Swickey.

"I dunno. I tole him the moose 'ud be gettin' frisky purty quick, and he wants to git a head fur Wallie. But he didn't say nothin'. What's wrong atween you and Dave, anyhow?"

"Me and Dave?" exclaimed Swickey, reverting to a favorite expression of her earlier days; "why, nothing."

"Wal, Swickey, mebby they's nothin' jest *wrong*, but they's suthin' as ain't jest *right*, or else I be gettin' pow'ful fussy in my head."

"Don't worry about Dave, or me," she replied, going to her father and sitting

Indian fashion at his feet. "You need a rest, Pop; you're older than Dave—and a hunting trip would be fine. I'd like to get a moose, too."

"Wal, a huntin' trip ain't sech a snoozer of a *rest*, howcome it's mighty nigh time I got shet of that eye-waterin' railrud. I reckoned when we fust come to Lost Farm, we come to stay. It was purty then. Now it looks like the back yard of Beelzebub's rightful home, with them piles of ties and rails and thet bridge up thar in the gorge, grinnin' like a set of store teeth. Huntin'! Ya-s-s! I feel like huntin' fur a new place to live, 'stead of killin' moose what's doin' the same 'count of this here railrud."

The old man arose and walked back and forth uneasily.

"Wal," he said finally, "I'll see what Dave says. You kin git your things ready 'nless you'd ruther go with jest me."

"I don't care," replied Swickey.

"All right." Avery stepped out and closed the door. "She says she don't care, and thet's a woman's way of sayin' she do care, sometimes. Funny how young folks gits to thinkin' their fathers warn't young folks onct."

"Dave," he said, as he approached the open door of the other's cabin, "how do you feel 'bout packin' up and goin' fur a moose up Squawpan way?"

"Bully! Wouldn't like anything better."

"Swickey's goin' likewise. We kin camp on the pond and take Smoke and the whole outfit. Got to take him anyway, seein' as we're like to be out three-four days."

"I'll get ready. When do you start?"

"In the mornin'—early. We kin paddle up as fur as the head of the lake, and then tote over to Squawpan, and I reckon we kin make the pond by night. They's a shack I built over on the pond and we kin take thet leetle tent of your'n."

"Will the canoe carry three of us—and Smoke?"

"We'll take the twenty-footer, jest in case we git a head. Reckon she'll float thet much, howcome we kin go back a'ter the meat—if you want it."

"Why shouldn't we want it?" asked David.

"Wal, bull-moose in ruttin' time ain't jest the best eatin' they is, howcome I've et it—when I had to. I reckon you'll be wantin' to turn in. We'll start 'bout five in the mornin'."

"Dave going?" said Swickey, as her father returned.

"Sure certain," he replied, but she made no comment.

Next morning, before the sun had smoothed the gray frost from the weathered timbers of the dam, Avery slid the big canoe into the water, and David and Swickey loaded in the various bags and bundles.

"She's goin' to be a fine day," said Avery, as Swickey stepped in and sat amidships, with Smoke curled up and shivering in the bow. David and the old

man swung briskly to the paddles, as the canoe rode the lazy swell of the lake. The jutting points in the distance seemed like long, beckoning fingers that withdrew as they neared them. The pines marched round in a widening circle as the canoe slid past in the murmur of waves over the rounded boulders. The smoke from Avery's pipe twirled behind in little wisps that vanished in the sunshine. With the rhythmic, *hush-click! hush-click!* of the paddles and the sibilant thin rush of tiny ripples from the bow, mile after mile of shore line wove in and out, now drawing back until the trees were but inch-high at the far apex of some wide, blind cove, now towering above them as the lake narrowed to its western boundary.

In the mild warmth of the noon sun they ran the canoe up a narrow opening where a clump of white birches marked the Squawpan Carry. Here they disembarked.

"Hungry ain't a big enough word fur it," said Avery, stripping a piece of birch bark and lighting the small heap of driftwood David had gathered. "See thar!" he exclaimed, pointing to some great, heart-shaped tracks in the mud bordering the stream. "He's gone up to Squawpan. Like enough is waitin' up thar, stompin' around and feelin' mad 'cause he ain't got no lady friend to keep him comp'ny."

"Seems too bad to put one of those big fellows down just to get his head," said David, gazing at the tracks.

"We ain't got him down yit," replied Avery. "Wal, the tea's a-bilin'—Guess we'll eat."

After dinner, Swickey insisted on toting her share of the equipment, taking one of the lighter packs, as she followed David and her father, who tramped along with the partially laden canoe on their shoulders. At the farther end of the trail they again embarked and crossed the pond. Again they disembarked, David and Swickey walking while Avery poled the canoe up the shallows of the headwaters, and through the rapids below the falls. Here they made another short carry, and evening found them in camp on the shore of a rush-edged pond, round which were many tracks of moose and deer.

"We'll limber up and poke round a bit in the mornin';" said Avery. "If we don't see nothin' we'll try callin' 'em to-morrow night. Have to shet Smoke up in the shack; howcome Swickey kin explain it to him so 'st he won't have bad feelin's."

Despite Avery's knowledge of the surrounding country and his not inconsiderable woodcraft, they failed to get a shot at a moose, although they saw several on the distant borders of the pond. Two evenings he had "called," but without success. Swickey's disappointment was more than offset by the companionship of David. Gradually something of their old familiar friendship, with its pleasant banter, was established again. On the last morning of the hunt she regretted

more the necessity for their return than the fact that they were to return empty-handed.

As they carried round the falls on their way down Squawpan stream, she asked her father if they could not run the "rips" below.

"Ya-as, you kin run 'em all right, but not with three of us in the boat. If you and Dave'd like to drop down through, I'll take the trail. Mebby I might run into a moose at thet. If you hear me shoot, jest pull in at the first eddy and wait."

She questioned David with wide, bright eyes.

"I'll go, if you'll take the risk, Swickey."

"They ain't nothin' to do except keep clus to the left bank," said Avery, turning toward the woods. "Let the rocks stay whar they be and they won't bother ye none. They's only a short piece of white water, and then another, and then it's jest as quiet as a Sunday a'fternoon in a muskeg."

As Swickey stepped into the canoe, Smoke followed nimbly over the gunwale, and curled at her feet. She threw her mackinaw over him, for the afternoon was none too warm, and he would have to be still for an hour or more in the cramped quarters of the bow.

They swung from the eddy below the falls and shot into the backwash of the river as it swept converging toward the first grim rocks that shouldered the current to a rippling wedge of white. They dashed through, Swickey's paddle flashing as she fended off, now to the left, now to the right, and before they realized it they were in the listless drift of the somnolent dead waters below.

"That was great!" shouted David. "Is there any more of it?"

"Yes, in a minute or two," replied Swickey.

Each turn in the river seemed to open on a vista more varied and beautiful than the last. Gray rocks alongshore; banks of brush and frost-nipped fern that straggled up the easy slope to the forest and lost themselves in the deeper green of the shady woodside; moss-crested boulders in midstream, some of them of Olympian dimensions, past which they slipped on the noiseless current that floated wisps of moss and river-grass out from the lower edges of these granite islands. The regular nod of an upright branch suggested some living thing marking time to the march of the shimmering brown waters. Midway in the stream an island appeared, fringed with low cedars and crowned with an almost symmetrical ring of spruce-tops, etched on the far background of blue sky like fairy spires in some enchanted land. Swiftly they drew nearer it. The long grass in the river bottom twisted and turned in the shallowing current.

From below them came the murmur of heavy waters, lunging between the rocks, and above its diapason rang a note of eerie laughter as the river spread again to pebbly shallows and hurried to charge at the rocks still farther downstream.

They rounded the lower end of the island and plunged at the next stretch of quick water. In they went and struck a submerged boulder quartering.

“To the left!” called Swickey, as David, catching her gesture, threw his shoulders into the stroke and swung the canoe toward the shore.

Swickey’s paddle shot forward as the bow sagged in a cross-current that split and spread from the knife-edge of a sunken rock. They whipped past it, ground over the shingle in a shallow, and darted through a stretch of chattering waves that slipped along the gunwale and fell behind. The canoe lurched over the rounded pitch of a submerged ledge and settled to a steady keel in the lower Squawpan deadwater.

“That’s better than the trail,” said David.

Swickey glanced back at the snoring rips and brushed a spatter of water from her face.

“We’ll drift and wait for Pop,” she replied, shaking the water from her paddle and laying it in the bow. “Dave, look! Get your rifle—it’s a young bull!”

Smoke raised his head and twitched his homely nose. “Down, Smoke!” whispered Swickey.

Two or three hundred yards ahead of them was something that looked to David like a tangle of branches on a drifting log. Had it been following the current, Swickey would probably have paid no attention to it, but it was forging steadily across the stream.

“He’s yours,” said David. “Here, take the .45. That carbine’s not so certain on moose.”

“No, Dave, I want you to get him. Please!” she whispered, as he shook his head.

“Couldn’t think of it, Swickey. Besides, you’re in the bow.”

“He’ll land in a minute. Paddle, Dave! And please shoot him. I want you to have him. I’ll shoot if you miss.”

“You’ll get him then,” replied David. “I have never tried for a moose before. I’ll take a crack at him to please you, but he’s your moose just the same.”

Swickey sat with carbine across her knees, as steady as an old hand at the game. David was more excited than she.

“He’s turning back!” she cried. “Paddle for the other side and take him when he comes out of the water.”

The moose was making good time toward the bank and David jumped the canoe ahead, every atom of his strength in each stroke.

As they touched the bank, Swickey stepped out. Smoke lay cowering in the bow, hooded like a monk in her coat. As David leaped to shore he grinned at the dog. Smoke trembled, but lay crouched in his place. He knew it was not expected of him to do anything else just then. The young bull found bottom

and waded to the bank leisurely, facing them as he landed. He seemed to have come a long way, for he was puffing hard. He swung his head from side to side and the hair bristled along his neck and shoulders. David did not understand his unnecessarily belligerent attitude, for he could have gained cover in two leaps.

“Now, Dave! Let him have it—just in that spot above his forelegs.”

She was watching the bull, and just as she expected to hear the rifle boom Smoke growled. She turned to threaten him; there was a rattling crash of underbrush above them, and a second bull, coming apparently from nowhere, charged right on top of them.

She saw the first moose plunge into the bushes downstream as she shrieked, “My God, Dave! Drop!”

Her cry pierced the numbness of his bewilderment and he stooped, instinctively throwing up his arm. Smoke shot from the canoe, a streak of white, and leaped for the bull. He caught the moose by the throat as the big brown shape reared to drive those terrible hoofs down on the crouching David.

Swickey’s carbine jumped to her shoulder and she fired point-blank at the rearing blur of brown and white. Down it came with a clatter of antlers on the rocky shore.

David straightened up, his eyes expressing helplessness and horror. A few yards away the bull lay with his head twisted to one side. David stood stupidly watching a little red stream trickle down through the pebbles. Swickey stepped forward, glanced at the moose, and then her fingers relaxed, and the carbine clattered to the rocks as she sank down, her head drooping forward to her knees. David was shaking as he picked up a piece of driftwood and pried the fore-shoulders of the moose off Smoke. He got the dog’s hind legs and pulled him out. The bullet, with terrific energy at that short range, had ripped through the dog and into the moose, killing them both.

Smoke lay, a crushed and bloody mass, his teeth still fixed in the throat of the moose. “Smoke, old boy,” whispered David, as he knelt by him and patted his head, “you stood to your guns when I was a tottering idiot.”

He thought of the many times he had teased the dog, telling him he was “no good” and “a bother,” which Smoke had seemed to understand and accept with a cheerful wagging of his tail as if trying to say, “I know you are only joking.”

Finally he arose and went to Swickey. “Come, girl, get in the canoe. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked. “Don’t touch that moose! Oh, Dave, Dave—”

“Damn the moose. I’m going to bury Smoke—your dog.”

Swickey was crying, but the sound of digging, as David scraped a shallow hole in the shingle, brought her to her feet.

“Oh, Dave, he’s dead, and I killed him.”

She knelt and drew the mangled body to her knees.

“Swickey, don’t!” He grasped her arm roughly.

She shook it off and bent over the dog.

“Here, stop it! I can’t stand that,” he said more gently.

“I’ll do what you say, Dave,” she said, a new light coming to her eyes. David had never commanded her before. “I loved Smoke,” she sobbed. “Now he’s gone, and there’s no one—”

“Swickey!” His hand went out to her to help her up. She drew toward him, clinging to his arm, her head thrown back, her lips quivering. His arms went round her and his head bent slowly to hers. “I didn’t know, Swickey—I thought—there was some one else.”

His lips found hers gently, and the color ran to her face again. Her arms slipped round his neck and she reached up and caressed his cheek, her fingers creeping up to his hair. She touched the scar near his temple, and shuddered. Then her eyes filled again.

“Oh, Dave, *he* didn’t know, and you didn’t—but I knew when I fired. I had to shoot, Dave,—and I saw white—”

She broke down and sobbed passionately, her grief and her love so commingled that it shook her to the very soul.

“I know,” he said, drawing her hot face up to him. He kissed her eyes and mouth, as her lips parted and the hunger of her girl-heart passed from her in the wonderment and sweet content of womanhood that gives and gives, and asks no other happiness.

[image]

*“I DIDN’T KNOW, SWICKEY—I THOUGHT—THERE WAS SOME-
ONE ELSE”*

Avery, hurrying down the river-trail, stopped abruptly. “Heard ’em shoot! Huh!” he muttered, as he saw them. “Reckon they was just celebratin’. This ain’t no place fur me. Guess I’ll go down the river a piece and then holler.”

CHAPTER XXX—JUST FUN

For weeks after the Lost Farm folk returned from the hunting that had ended so disastrously, Beelzebub wandered about the camp and the stable, poking his broad, sleek fighting-face into odd corners, and mewing plaintively as each nook disclosed an emptiness that he could not understand. Finally, he gave up looking for his vanished friend. When the snow came he resumed his old place beside the kitchen stove, philosophically dozing away the long winter days in luxurious content.

One December afternoon, as Avery sat weaving the mesh of a snowshoe, Beelzebub stretched himself, yawned, and sidled over to the old man. He crouched and sprang to his lap, rubbing a black nose ingratiatingly against his sleeve.

“Wal, Beelzebub, what’s ailin’ you now? Lonesome with jest me here? Wal, Dave and Swickey’s comin’ back afore long.” He glanced at the clock. “Int’rested in this here snowshoe? No. Don’t like the smell of it, hey? What be you askin’ fur? Smoke? Wal, Smoke’s gone huntin’—up a long trail where huntin’ ’s easy and they’s lots of it. Now I reckon you better hop down ag’in so ’s I kin finish this here job. Thar!”

The big cat rubbed sinuously against a table leg, circled the room, and crouched beside the stove again.

“Wouldn’t mind bein’ a cat myself,” soliloquized Avery. “Nothin’ to do but eat and sleep and feel plumb sat’sfied with everything. ’Specially a he cat what ain’t got no young ones to raise and nuss. But it’s diff’runt with me. Now, there’s my Swickey—but what’s the good of talkin’! Young folks is goin’ to do jest the same as their pas and mas done, if they don’t do no wuss.”

The old man bent busily over the racquette, which was nearly completed. Finally, he tossed it to the floor and stood up, pushing back his spectacles and yawning sonorously.

“Wal, it do beat the old scotch how things keeps a-proddin’ a man to keep him movin’. A’ter suthin’ happens and he ain’t got nuthin’ to do but jest live and wait fur—wal, gits settled kind of easy and comf’table a’ter one shakin’ up, long comes suthin’ unexpected-like and says, ‘Here, you’re takin’ it too all-fired easy’; and then, like enough, he gits over thet, and gits settled ag’in, and afore he’s got his feet on the stove and his pipe lit, long comes, wal, mebbly a railrud and runs slam-bang through a feller’s barn. Now, he’s either got to hire a man to open and shet the doors every time a train comes rippety-clickin’ through or sell out and move on like a Injun. And if the hired man happened to fergit to open the door—suthin’ ’ud git busted, so I reckon we’ll sell out and move over to Timberland, hey, Beelzebub?”

“Yas,” he continued, moving to the window, “young folks likes new things and ole folks likes ole things and both on ’em likes to live as long as they kin, even

if they be some one over yonder, back of them clouds up thar on the mountain, callin' and callin' like as if they'd been expectin' a feller fur a long time. Wal, I reckon it ain't a-goin' to be a long time afore Swickey comes blushin' up to her Pop and says she's a-goin' away fur a spell—with Dave. Things are pintin' thet way, howcome they ain't *said* nothin' yit. Shucks! but I be gettin' as fussy as a hen sca'd offen eggs. God-A'mighty never set out to make a better man than Dave, or a healthier gal than my Swickey, and come so clus to finishin' the job. 'Course, Dave come from the city—thet's the only thing ag'in' him marryin' my gal, fur she ain't never goin' to be like them city kind; howcome he says he ain't a-goin' back ag'in to stay, and he never bruk his word yit. Wal, they'll git married and raise half a dozen strappin' fine young ones, like as not, and they's things wuss than thet happenin' every day. Reckon I ought to be as happy as a pockapine in a bar'l of apples, but I ain't. Feel like as if I was losin' suthin' I was never goin' to git back ag'in.

"Used to calc'late if I had a lot of money, they'd be nothin' to fuss about. Now I got money and more a-comin' in and it's jest good for buyin' vittles and buildin' houses and sech, and gettin' things ready to be comf'table in, but thar's jest where it lays back and folds its hands and says, 'Now go ahead and *be* comf'table'—and thet's diff'runt."

The big iron kettle on the stove simmered contentedly. Avery rammed a stick of wood into the fire and poked the door shut with another. The short winter afternoon crept into the sombre cavern of the forest, and each pallid star took on a keener edge as twilight swiftly lost itself in the dusk of a December night. Over the silence came the sound of voices—a laugh—and Avery was at the door.

"Here they be, Beelzebub!" he exclaimed, "racin' fur the camp like a couple of young ones thet's killed a snake."

"That's not fair!" cried Swickey, as she stumbled, and David passed her, a cloud of silvery dust swirling up from his snowshoes.

He turned back, laughing, and helped her from the drift. "Now, we'll start again. Are you ready—one—two—three!"

He allowed her a generous start and she beat him to the doorway.

"Hello, Pop!" she panted, as she stooped to unlace the snowshoes. "My! but that was fun. We raced from the edge of the woods all the way up here, and I beat Dave."

"Yes, she got ahead of me," said David, as with a lift of his foot and a twist of his ankle he freed himself from his snowshoes.

"You must teach me that hitch, Dave. I always have to unfasten mine."

"That's the Micmac hitch. My old guide Tommy showed me that," replied David, picking up the racquettes and entering the house with Swickey.

“What was you racin’ fur?—Supper?” queried Avery, winking at David.

Swickey glanced at David and laughed. “He will tell you, Pop. He lost.”

“I think the winner should treat, don’t you, Avery?”

“Sure certain!”

“All right,” said Swickey, unbuttoning her coat and tossing it to a chair. She ran to her father and kissed him.

“Huh! You didn’t race *goin’* to Jim’s, did you?” said the old man, holding her at arm’s length and admiring her deepening color. Her eyes brimmed with mischief.

“If you will let me go, I’ll tell,” she replied, assuming a childish seriousness that made him laugh. She slipped from him and ran to her room. In the doorway she turned and, putting her finger on her lips, cast an absurdly penitential glance toward the floor. “Yes, we did race going down, and Dave won.”

“Did the winner treat—?” began Avery.

“Mrs. Cameron was home,” replied Swickey evasively. “Jim had gone to Tramworth. The sheriff sent for him. But I’m going to change my stockings. Ask Dave.” And she closed the door.

“Jest like ole times—Swickey cuttin’ up and actin’ like the leetle Swickey ag’in.”

“Better than that,” said David absent-mindedly. Then, aware of Avery’s twinkling eye, he added, “That is—Swickey—you know Smoke—she felt badly—”

“Ya-a-s,” drawled Avery. “I reckon I know, and I’m pow’ful glad things is as they be.”

After supper Swickey lay stretched lazily on a camp-blanket near the stove, with Beelzebub purring a satisfied monotone as he lay curled in the hollow of her arm. Avery questioned David as to Cameron’s absence from home.

“I don’t know,” replied David. “Mrs. Cameron said the sheriff sent for him. Must be something important or he would have come up to see Jim himself.”

“Thet Curious Jim’s a queer cuss, always interestin’ hisself in other folkses business—howcome they ain’t nothin’ mean about Jim.”

“Maybe it’s about Fisty Harrigan,” said Swickey. “Mrs. Cameron said Fisty had been laying around Tramworth, drinking and making threats against—Dave.” She glanced up at him, and he smiled reassuringly. “And Jim knows more about—that time—than any one else.”

“Mrs. Cameron didn’t favor me with her confidence,” said David, as Avery’s eyes questioned him.

“Oh, well, you’re only a man,” said Swickey. “We talked about lots of things.”

“Didn’t talk about racin’ on snowshoes with Dave, did you?”

“Now, Pop, that’s mean—after my telling you—before supper—”

Avery laughed in huge good-humor.

Swickey's head nodded and drooped to her arm. Beelzebub, disturbed, stood up and arched his back, yawned, sat on his tail and, stretching his sleek neck, licked her chin with a quick dab of his little red tongue.

"Now—Dave—" murmured Swickey sleepily.

In the Homeric roar of laughter that made the cat jump over her and flatten himself beneath the stove, she wakened, gazed about her, and finally got up with considerable dignity and marched to her bedroom.

CHAPTER XXXI—THE BLUFF

The ruddy face of the sheriff was wreathed in benignant smiles as he sat in the office of the Tramworth House. Cameron was standing by the stove, his hands spread to the warmth. He had just come in from the Knoll in answer to a message from the sheriff.

"Whew! but it's howlin' cold. Three foot of snow and more comin'. What you doin'—keepin' house?"

"Yes," replied the sheriff. "Bill's gone over to Hike's for a minute."

Cameron rubbed his ear gingerly, then lapsed into frowning silence as the sheriff told him why he had sent for him.

"That's *one* way of lookin' at it, Scotty," he said presently, "but it ain't accordin' to law."

"What is the law in such a case, Jim?"

Cameron's frown deepened. "To my thinkin'—it's jail."

"That's all right—but how would you go at it to prove to a Tramworth jury that he put Injun Pete up to it?"

"There's them three ca'tridges—and me."

"Do you think there's a jury up here would send Fisty down on that evidence?"

"I dunno—why not?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Jim. They'd be afraid of Fisty's friends, for one thing. Ross is an outsider, and there's always a bunch glad to see an outsider get the worst of it. Besides, Fisty isn't worth spending the money on to convict. He's all

in, and I'm going to prove it to you. But here comes Bill," he said, as the clerk entered. "We'll go up to my room."

"Now," continued the sheriff, as he closed the door of his sanctum-sanctorum above, "I'm going to hand it to you straight."

Cameron, astride a chair, tilted back and forth expectantly.

"In the first place, Jim, you haven't got anything against Fisty but the shooting, have you?"

"Nope—ain't got no scrap with him aside of that."

"All you're itching for is to see justice administered, isn't it?" The sheriff's eyes twinkled in a preternaturally grave face.

"That's it!" Cameron's chair thumped to the floor.

"And now that Barney Axel's over in Canada, you'd be the chief witness for the State?"

"That's me."

"And that's why you want to see Fisty on trial." Cameron's hand was raised in expostulation, but the sheriff continued hurriedly. "I thought so. Now, Jim, there's more ways than one of straightening a man out, and the law isn't always the best or surest way. I've found out that."

"What you goin' to do?" asked Cameron, forgetting for the moment his explanation that the other had interrupted.

"Well," said the sheriff, glancing at his watch, "if you can stand it for about ten minutes I think I can show you. How's Ross getting on at Lost Farm?"

"Great! Got the sidin' in to the asbestuff, and everything snug fur winter. He's trappin' with Hoss now. Say! and he's done more than that,"—Cameron paused that his news might have due effect,—"he's a-goin' to marry Swickey Avery—him! as learned her her readin' and writin'. That's what me and the missus has figured, from the way Swickey's actin' of late."

"Why not? Swickey's a mighty fine girl and mighty pretty, too."

"Yes. But what I jest told you was privit calc'latin'—but seein' as you're a officer of the law, I guess it's O.K."

"Well, I'm glad of it. We need men like Ross up here. When are they going to get married?"

"I dunno. In the spring, I reckon, if Fisty Harrigan don't—"

The sheriff held up his hand. "Fisty won't," he said. "I'll take care of that."

The sound of feet blundering up the stairway held Cameron's eyes fixed on the door. "Some one comin', Scotty."

"Yes; I expected a visit. Sit still—you needn't go."

A short rap and the door swung open as Harrigan, breathing heavily, paused on the threshold.

"Come in, Denny. Sit down; I want to have a little talk with you."

“Is he in it?” asked Harrigan, closing the door and indicating Cameron with a nod.

“Yes, incidentally. I’m glad you came, Denny—makes it easier for me.”

“Easier?” queried Harrigan. “Now what you drivin’ at?”

“Denny,” replied the sheriff, “I hear you’re out of a job.”

“What’s that to you?”

“Not so much as it is to you, perhaps. I hear they need men up St. John way. There’s a new company up there—started in last year.”

“Anxious to git me a job?” growled Harrigan.

“Not anxious, but willing to give you a chance.”

“Chanct? Well, I dunno as I’m askin’ any favors or lookin’ fur jobs. What you got to do about givin’ me a chanct anyhow?”

“Nothing, officially. Personally, a little more than that.” The sheriff’s tone was altogether unruffled and pleasant. “See here, Denny, you ought to know me by this time. I’ve given you a chance to catch on, but you won’t take it.” His manner changed as he whirled toward Fisty. “How many shots did Pete fire at Ross?”

“How in hell do I know?” replied Harrigan, backing away.

“Maybe you don’t, but I’ll tell you.”

The little man stepped to his trunk, unlocked it, and laid three empty cartridges on the table.

Harrigan glanced at them and his eye shifted to the wall.

“Three, Denny; three. Do you think Pete took Ross for a deer more than once?”

“So that’s what you and Mr. Curious Jim is drivin’ at, hey? Well, you jest git to work and prove that I told Pete—”

“Hold on, Denny,—don’t convict yourself yet. I’d have locked you up first if that was what I wanted. I’m showing you the easy way out of it.”

“So Ross is after my scalp, hey? And he’s scared to come out—got to git behind you to do it.”

“No. Ross hasn’t said a word to me since the shooting. And from what I hear of him, I don’t think he’s scared either. This is my affair—and yours.”

“Yes, damn him. He druv me out of the asbestos, and now he’s tryin’ to drive me out of the country.”

“Suit yourself about that,” replied the sheriff suavely. “If Ross had come to me, perhaps you wouldn’t have had a chance to leave the country. Here are the facts. You bought the rifle and gave it to Pete. I traced it by the factory number. You sent Pete back after the—deer. I’ve got Axel’s word for that and his word is good. Cameron, here, picked up the three shells after you found the Injun in the road. Ross gave you the licking of your life at Lost Farm. He kept Avery

from selling to Bascomb and you were the man that gave Bascomb the tip about the asbestos, and your indorsement is on the check Bascomb gave you—for the information. Besides, you blamed near gave yourself away just a minute ago. Now, do you want to stay and stand trial or do you want to look for a job up North? It's up to you. Take it or leave it."

The sturdy little sheriff bristled like a terrier facing an ox. He took his hat from the table. "I'm going to the station, Denny. I'll wait there for the three forty-five going north. She'll probably be late—but I'll wait."

"Hell!" said Harrigan, endeavoring to maintain a bluff front; "I'll go—but I'm broke."

"That's all right. I expected that. You meet me over there and I'll fix that up for you; but, just remember, this is strictly unofficial—and confidential," he added, facing Cameron.

They descended the stairs and Harrigan, with a surly farewell, left them.

"Well, Jim," said the sheriff, once more the rotund and smiling individual, "was it all right?"

"Well, I should smile. But say, Scotty, I'd jest like to know why you ast *me* to come up to the room and listen?"

"Oh, there are two or three reasons. One of them was that I wanted a witness in case—"

"I was watchin' his pocket," interrupted Jim. "I could 'a' jumped on him afore he got his gun out."

"Yes," replied the sheriff, smiling, "and my deputy was in the clothes-press, in case of a row. You might run up and tell him the coast's clear. Bet he's about frozen."

"Now, that's one on me, Scotty—"

"Oh, it was a bluff, and Fisty didn't have the nerve to call it."

"I wasn't meaning that." Curious Jim drew himself up impressively. "I ain't no constable or sheriff or detective, and I reckon I'm sort of a joke to some folks, but Dave Ross is a friend of mine. Reckon you know 'most everything what's goin' on, but you don't know Dave Ross paid fur my doctorin' when I had the ammonia,—advancin' the money out of my pay as is comin' fur next year,—and I reckon you're thinkin' I'd be proud-like to be the hull works at Fisty's trial,—but thar's where you're wrong. All I want to do is to git Fisty where he can't do no more shootin', and if Fisty had 'a' come at Ross a'ter he was married to Swickey Avery, by God! Scotty, I'd have plugged him m'self!"

"Shake!" said the sheriff, extending his hand.

A slow smile came to Cameron's lean features as he pump-handled the extended "arm of the law" vigorously.

Then he turned and climbed the hotel steps, whistling like a schoolboy.

CHAPTER XXXII—HOSS AVERY'S TRIBUTE

Flitting whitethroats and chewinks shot in and out of the sun-patches of the May woods, and a hen-partridge stood stiffly on the end of a log, clucking to the young brood that scurried through the ferns, as David, pausing frequently as though looking for some one, came down the trail from the three cabins.

The hen-partridge, unruffled and tense, stretched her neck straighter, but gave no sign of departing. Farther on, a noisy squirrel filled the woods with his running-down-clock-works diminuendo as the intruder passed him. A rabbit hopped leisurely along the shady path, stopping at intervals to sit up. His left oblique into the bushes, as David came nearer, was a flashing epitome of startled agility, and as the dab of cotton on the rear end of the epitome disappeared, David laughed.

“Feelin’ purty good this mornin’, Dave?”

David stopped and gazed about him.

“Here I be,” called Avery, striding toward him David was amused to see that the old man had been picking wild-flowers.

“Looks kind of queer to ye, don’t it—me a-pickin’ posies, though it do be a Sunday mornin’?” Hoss rubbed his hand down his forehead, along his nose, and so on, to the end of his beard, which he wound round one finger and released slowly. It seemed as though he had drawn off the harlequin mask worn on work-days. Despite the all-but-sealed and watery orifice where his “off eye,” as he called it, used to be, and the blink and twinkle of his good eye, the old man looked dignified, almost majestic. Perhaps the fact that he was not chewing tobacco lent him a certain impressive unreality. He usually plunged into a narrative like a bull going through a snake-fence, head down and tail whisking. Now he seemed to be mentally letting down the bars, one by one, that he might carry himself with dignity into unfrequented fields of reminiscence.

“Mebby you have often been wonderin’ how I come to have the name of ‘Hoss.’ Like as not you have thought of it. A city feller ast me thet once, but he

didn't find out; howcome I did tell him it mought possibly be fur the same reason he oughter be called a Jassax. He didn't ast me no distickly pussonel questions a'ter thet.

"Mebby likewise you're wonderin' how I come to lose this here blinker. Another feller ast me thet onct. I didn't do nothin' to him. I jest said, says I, 'I overworked it tryin' to see too fur into other folkses business.' And he quit astin' me pussonel questions, likewise. Now, you ain't never ast me nothin' like thet; howcome I reckon you be goin' to ast me *suthin'*, from the way you be lookin' at me. And you kin, and I'll tell you."

"I did want to see you," replied David. "Of course, you know Swickey and I are going to be married, but I thought I'd come and ask you for her just the same."

"Wal, thet's what I call mighty ginerous of you; howcome I don't see as you be worryin' what the answer'll be."

"We intend to go for a trip," continued David. "I want my Aunt Elizabeth to know Swickey,—I know they will like each other,—and I want Swickey to see something of the country before we settle down here to stay. We want you to come with us."

"Say, Dave, thet's as near to tellin' a lie as I ever knowed you to come. Do you reckon I'd spile your trip and Swickey's trip by ridin' on them trains and hangin' around hotels in store-clothes and feelin' mis'erable?"

"But we want you—Swickey says she won't go unless you come."

"No," replied the old man. "Swickey thinks she wants me and she says she won't go 'less I come, hey?" He chuckled at David's seriousness. "My whiskers ain't gray jest because I like 'em thet way. I was young onct—and mebbly you mought figure out thet Swickey had a ma onct, likewise."

"Of course—I know that, but—"

"And seein' as I'm givin' you my gal,—howcome I reckon she's guv herself on the resk I'd say 'yes,'—you jest let me enj'y it my way, and stay to home. When you thinkin' of leavin'?" he asked, after a pause.

"We haven't just decided on the *day*, but we should like to go some time this month. It's May—"

"Uhuh, it's May ... May," he muttered. "Think you kin leave Swickey up at the house fur a spell? I got *suthin'* to say 'bout her ma, and I ain't never felt like sayin' it to you afore this."

David came and sat on the log beside him.

"It's kind of good," said Avery, "to empty out a feller's insides,—meanin' the place where he keeps storin' up feelin's 'bout what are done and can't be did over ag'in,—and take a fresh start so'st he kin fill up ag'in 'thout crowdin'. 'Long about this time of year when growin' things is takin' a new holt on the ground, birds singin' and flies and skeeters jest commencin' to feel their oats, I allus come

up here and gits some of these”—pointing to the trilliums he had gathered—“fur a friend. I allus gits white uns, howcome the red uns is purty.” And he took a single stalk and turned it round and round meditatively.

“When I was consid’able older than you be, I was called ‘Bud.’ ‘Bud Avery,’ they called me. Hosses was my failin’ and my luck. Nex’ to a good woman, I reckon a hoss is ’bout the best thing they is. I was a purty frisky young blue-jay them days, goin’ to all the raisin-bees, dancin’, trappin’ at times, drinkin’ licker, fightin’ and bein’ fit. The feller what got this here eye, he never tole no pusson ’bout it, so no pusson knows, aside of him, jest how it come to not be thar. He were a French-Canady man. He come over the line—in a hurry, too, I reckon—and brung his sister along. He built a cabin on the p’int at the head of the lake, near where I was livin’ then, and went into the woods workin’ fur the Great Western, what was cuttin’ *timber* them days. I was haulin’ fur the Comp’ny at the time and he was workin’ with the crew swampin’ out roads. He never said much to no one and some said he had a good reason fur keepin’ still. And he had. Seems he knifed a breed over in Canady, fur gettin’ sassy to his sister when he had licker in him. No, the breed—Jules—warn’t the drinkin’ sort. Jules Marbeau was his name. Anyhow, he had to light out, and he brung his sister along. She stuck to him, seein’ as the row was about her. She reckoned to keep him stiddy; howcome the knifin’ business warn’t none of her fault. Her name was Nanette.”

The trillium ceased its twirling in Avery’s fingers, and nodded at the pause as if saying daintily, “Nanette, Nanette.”

“I were drivin’ a team of big grays then. Feet on ’em as big as your hat and built accordin’ to their feet. They was as likely a team as they was in the woods. They used their heads workin’ as well as their feet. Long’s they was mine nobody never laid a hame or a britchin’ over ’em but me. I worked them hosses—Gray Billy and Gray Tom—by feelin’ ’em through the lines and lettin’ ’em feel what I wanted through the lines. You understand?”

David nodded.

“My cabin and stable was a few rods from Marbeau’s cabin, and sometimes Jules and Nanette would come over to see ‘Mo’sieur Avere’e’s beeg hosses.’ She would talk to ’em and pat ’em and she were special fond of Gray Billy and he were special fond of her. Thet hoss knowed her step and used to whinner afore he seed her comin’. She ’most allus had a piece of maple sugar for ’em. I reckon thet helped ’em remember, likewise. I used to go over their way some, too, in the evenin’ s. Jules he never said much, but smoked. Me and Nanette done most of the talkin’, sech as we could, seein’ I warn’t no Frencher, but nex’ to a hoss a woman kin understand some things ’thout talkin’ ’most as good as a hoss kin.

“Wal, it was goin’ on three year I’d been comin’ in the evenin’ s, sayin’ to myself I’d ast her nex’ time, but nex’ time I come I’d set and figure how to go at

it, bein' short on the French words, to make a good job of it, and one night—wal, anyhow—I ast her and she promised. Said she'd take me along with the hosses so 'st to keep us all t'gither. Said she liked Gray Billy more'n she done me,—jokin', fur sure,—but she warn't jokin' when she put her hands out and said, quiet-like, jest as I was leavin' her thar in the moonlight, 'Bud, I know you good to Gray Billy and Gray Tom and I know you be good to me.'

"It warn't jest what I calc'lated she'd say, if I done any calc'latin' jest then, but it sounded like it was so. And it was.

"Wal, we went to keepin' house, and was as happy as plain folks got any right to be. Then the baby come, my Swickey—and then we was as happy as God A'mighty calc'lates to let any kind of folks git, whatsoever. For two years we jest lived right clus to thet baby, and then—

"Wal, Gray Billy was a onlucky hoss. Settin' aside bein' a prime fav'rite with Nanette and seein' as I'd never laid a gad to him in his life, Billy were onlucky—fur us.

"Nanette's brother Jules were 'fraid of thet team,—bad sign, I take it, when a man's sca'd of hosses,—and one day he come over at noon to talk about the foller we was goin' to work t'gither in the spring. It was winter then and he were jest a-goin' back to his work in the woods, when Billy, what was standin' steamin' in the cold from a big mornin's haulin', shook hisself, makin' a sharp rattlin' noise with the trace-hooks. Jules he had hair-trigger nerves and he throwed up one arm like as if some one was comin' from behint, and stepped back a'most under Gray Billy's nose. Thet hoss didn't jerk up his head like I seen some. No, sir! He brung his head down slantin' and quick, and he bit. He was a big hoss and pow'ful. Then I knowed Jules was bad clean through, howcome I kin sca'cely say *how* I knowed.

"Jules he screamed, and afore I could wink he had thet quick knife of his 'n into Gray Billy twict. You won't think I'm jokin' when I tell you I felt thet knife like as if it was in me. And I'd ruther it had of been.

"Billy riz up and a'most fell back, but I didn't wait to see what come of him. I quit feelin' like a human. I commenced to feel big and strong and quiet inside, like God A'mighty. I walked over to Jules, takin' off my mackinaw as I went. He didn't move. Jest stood thar holdin' thet knife as was drip, drip, drippin', makin' leetle red holes in the snow.

"'Keep the knife,' I says. 'You are a-goin' to need it'; and then I only recollect suthin' hot across this here eye and I had a holt of him. I could lift a bar'l of flour by the chimes, them days.... When I had stomped what I reckoned to be all the life outen him, I took Gray Billy by the forelock—his bridle bein' off so 'st he could eat—and led him up to the thing on the snow. 'Billy,' I says, 'I can't see good—suthin' queer in my eyes, but I kin see a black suthin' on the snow what

mebby was a man onct and mebby not. Thet man stuck a knife into you, but he won't stick no hosses no more.'

"Then I led Billy acrost the thing on the snow, twict, but thet hoss stepped over it, instid of on it as I were wishful. Then I kind of slumped down ag'in' a tree and went to sleep. The boys come back on the road a'ter the noon spell, and found me settin' ag'in' the tree, and *it* layin' on the snow, and Gray Billy a-shiverin' whenever anybody come a-nigh him. The hoss got along purty good, but was always a bit tetchy a'ter thet knifin' business. He never feared me none, though. Jules warn't dead, which were no fault of mine, but Gray Billy's.

"I recollec' layin' in the cabin thet night, listenin' to the kettle bilin' and the baby chirrupin' and Nanette movin' round. She come in whar I was and see I was some easier than when they fetched me home. 'Bud,' she says, 'you almos' keel Jule.' 'Reckon I have,' says I. 'Ain't he dead yit?' She didn't say nothin' to thet. 'You seen Billy's shoulder?' says I. 'Oui, Bud,' she says. Thet was all. A woman kin understand some things without talkin' 'most as good as a hoss kin. But Billy were onlucky. Jules he pulled through—them kind allus does—and went up into Canady ag'in—Northwest Territ'ry this time. Spring come and I got so 'st I could see outen my good eye. One evenin' Nanette she fetched in a bunch of them flowers, the white uns, and fixed 'em up on the table. I reckoned thet was sign thet Jule hed got well. It came along to rain about sundown, and I started to go and see to the hosses. Then she says, 'No, Bud, not yet. You take cold.' And she reached down one of Jule's ole coats and says, 'I go.' And why she kissed me and laughed and then kissed leetle Swickey, and said 'Good-bye, Bud,—jokin' fur sure.—I ain't never understood yit. I was pretendin' to play with the baby when I heard a goin's-on in the stable, and when Nanette didn't come back I went out to see."

As Avery paused David noticed that his big-knuckled hands were folded on his knee in unconscious finality. He was treading very softly toward the end of his journey.

"Thet coat done it! Gray Billy smelt thet coat of Jule's, and from what I could see, he lashed out jest as she come behint him. I carried her in and laid her on the bed. When she spoke, I could sca'c'ly hear,—her side was crushed in suthin' turrible.

"'Bud,' she says, 'Gray Billy didn't know it was me. He thought—it—was—' and then she said suthin' in French, what, I couldn't ketch. I reckon she prayed.

"Then she kep' astin' me suthin' with her eyes. I brung Swickey to her and she tetchted the baby's dress. I seed she was goin'. Then I stooped down and she whispered, drawin' in her breath and holdin' it fur every word, 'Good-bye, Bud. Be good to Billy.' Then she tetchted the baby ag'in. 'Take—care—of—her—.' She lifted herself up and then fell back.... I don't recollec' clear...."

Avery had long passed the point where David's interest in the story meant anything to him. He was regathering old memories, and he spoke, not of them but through them, with a simplicity and forgetfulness of his present self that showed the giant behind the genial mask, albeit battered by age and perilous toil. Presently he remembered David and continued:

"Wal, I sold Gray Billy and Gray Tom. Hain't never tetched a hoss since. But a'ter that the name of 'Hoss' sorter crawled along ahead of me from camp to camp. Then I took to handlin' the dinnimite."

He gathered the trilliums together and arose.

"Nanette's posies," he said, half to himself. Turning to David he handed him the flowers. "Here, Dave, take 'em to Swickey, and tell her her Pa says she kin go."

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LOST FARM CAMP ***

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