FIRST CHAPTER OF

THE LITTLE VOICES

By

LEE WASMUTH

A Romance

Of

Tug Hill Country

Don't miss a single installment of "Little Voices." This richly imagined story of life on Tug Hill and in the valley below will appear in daily installments in The Times, the newspaper that has the true stories of Tug Hill and the Black River Valley first and most.

Author's Note

Tug Hill is geographically a relative term. It is actually, to many of us, a spacious domain where the sun seems somehow to shine a little brighter.

The chief of a certain Indian tribe, living near ruins of the Mound Builders, was once asked to explain who it was that had shaped the ancient Curios. He replied: "Men who were here before us."

It is a rather presumptive undertaking to write of Tug Hill for men who were here before my generation. I am not seeking encouragement in perversity, nor to turn serious folk from their serious way. My story is only the outgrowth of a desire to typify our own people, a desire probably shared by other doltish fellows who were here before me.

I am indebted in this work to Frank Bates, formerly of the Glenfield and Western railroad; to Mr. VanBrunt of the Keystone Chemical company; to Charles W. Nolan of Rome, now in Honolulu; to Peter McGovern of Lowville; to William D. Holden, Charles Ward, Milo Ward, Evan R. Pritchard, and T.D. Mackey of Turin; to the Feb. 9 issue of the Watertown Times for its "Secret Chapter of the World War;" to March's History of the World War; to many patient friends and acquaintances; and especially to former Lieutenant W. Taylor Barr of Pulaski and the 32nd Division, A.E.F.

Lee Wasmuth

Turin, N.Y., Sept. 4

Chapter One

The most pious fraud Old Frank ever invented was his story of the wildcat. It was a story with a moral, but I was too young then to comprehend.

The old man intended only to give me another version of The Good Samaritan and he meant well; but he caused me to fall into ridicule, and did not strengthen our neighbors' esteem for his narrative accuracy. Certainly, the Lamises were the first ones to question that story. I have long since ceased to wonder why.

On the morning of which I write, little Jackie Ferris went with me to their store.

Jacqueline was a snub-nosed little girl who lived in a shanty across the tracks. Sometimes she ran away from her grandmother to play with me.

Her dress, that morning, had been white, but she fell in the roadway and it was dirty – shamefully dirty – what there was of it. There was not much, for she was a little mite and her skirt barely reached her knees.

Grandmothers, when they try to perform the duties of motherhood, are hard pressed; and Grandmother Ferris was burdened when her daughter-in-law died, leaving her with the care of their house, the cooking, and sewing for Walter, herself, and the dubious blessing that was Jackie.

Jackie had not reached the trust-worthy age. She would often scoot away – up the tracks, over the ties, and across the bridge to our house. Sometimes when Jackie came, Mother would question her. I never inquired about her departures, for I ran away too when I thought I could escape a paddling. Running away was great sport; the paddling less delightful. While we were much alike in this respect, Jackie was given more freedom and I, surer retribution.

Her grandma walked with a limp, but was still strong enough to wield a lath. She seldom did, however, for she was a little lax in what our neighbors termed "moral responsibility."

But to get back to Frank's story of the wildcat.

Jackie stubbed along behind me as I crossed the foot-bridge and turned onto the tramroad. That tramroad is one of the last landmarks connecting old Michigan Mills with Page.

In 1903 Page was a bustling little hamlet in the Tug Hill Country – that section west of the Adirondacks where county and town lines are tangled in some two hundred thousand acres of evergreen swamps and hardwood ridges.

The old Michigan firm built their camps and tramroads and hauled out veneer wood with three-horse teams. Later, Page and Fairchild took these over, cut a railroad into the wilderness and planted the little settlement that bore the Page name.

The Gould interests came along later and in 1903 continued the onslaught for lumber and pulp wood which went into metropolitan newspapers.

Page is now only a memory and a ruins over which the forest creeps. The sounds of falling timber have ceased upon the hills and the woods stand much as they did before the axes came. The swamplands yet store their waters, which fill vast reservoirs, and spin turbines along their infant rivers.

But I knew nothing of these things. I believed the most important part of the world lay in the circle of that clearing. I had gathered from my elders that Glenfield was a small city and Lowville the great metropolis.

My father was general handyman for the Gould superintendent, and Dad loved the woods. Mother never seemed to crave the villages except when snow fell deep and sickness came; or the more vigorous element drank and swore and told bibulous experiences before us children.

There were many original characters around Page in those days. Not the least of these was a certain hunter "Old Frank" Dimons. He lived alone in the woods, fishing, hunting, and trapping. Occasionally he came to our house.

The backwoods had no corner delicatessen and housewives did their own baking. My mother baked bread for Old Frank while I listened to his marvelous stories, peered through his fascinating whiskers and fidgeted to handle his shiny guns. I finally ceased to marvel at his stories – the wildcat tale not excepted –but I am sure that I learned thereby a lesson.

I picked my way along the trail that morning, watching for slivers, pieces of glass, and thistles, while Jackie followed. Our feet were healthily tough, though; as healthy in appearance as in fact. We had been wading in the brook and kicking soft mud with our toes when we decided to get the mail. Or rather, I decided to go and Jackie insisted on tagging along. Nothing I could say or threaten seemed to dissuade her. I'd even mentioned snakes as a last hope, but she declared:

"I kin run fast if I see any."

So, I was obliged to let her follow.

I loved to visit that combination post office and store. The proprietor, George Lamis, was an extremely deliberate chap who seemed especially fond of old folks, every kind of dog, and sniffling children. To my mind, he was one of the greatest men of those backwoods, which opinion I retain.

"Good mawnin', kids;" He greeted us with a smile that showed a liberal investment in gold crowns.

"Good mornin', Mister Lamis!"

We chanted the words together as though they were an anthem.

I dawdled before his long board counter, wondering how I could manage to get a free chocolate, while Jackie started on a tour of inspection that ended before a case containing dolls.

What can I do for yuh, son?" Lamis leaned over the dry goods shelf good-naturedly.

"I kum for th' mail."

I did not wish to be hurried with my important errand. But my fears were groundless. Lamis, more at leisure than ever – if it were possible – leaned easily over the counter, a twinkle in his eye.

"Any hurry?" he inquired.

"Nope."

"Well how would you like a chocolate drop?"

He seemed to be reading my mind, for he sauntered around the merchandise rack and approached the pail. Jackie suddenly lost interest in dolls. Her eyes followed his as hopefully as my own.

Sammy, his black spaniel, lay asleep on the floor; but he opened a near eye, calmly expressing poise and contemptuously superior breeding.

Lamis returned with three chocolates. He laid one in my palm and one in Jackie's. Then he turned to Sammy.

"Speak, Sammy!" He held the candy high.

The dog, restraining himself like a true gentleman, sat back on his haunches, held up his black paws reverently, and spoke.

"Bow - woof!"

Lamis tossed the chocolate which he caught with a snap. Then the dog licked his jaw, stretched himself on the floor again, grunted contentedly, and closed his eyes.

"He likes 'em,too." Lamis nodded toward Sammy who unmindful of us, seemed to be wooing dreams.

"Children," Lamis turned to us, "Helen's home and she'd like to see you. I'll go and call her."

He started for the stair door that led to the superintendent's quarters.

I glanced at Jackie. She fidgeted with the tattered hem of her dress and I decided she did not want to see Helen. She edged toward the outer door, but Lamis did not notice. While he was calling upstairs, I stole over beside her.

"Hoo-hoo, Helen!"

"Yes, Dad!" we heard in answer from Mrs. Brandon's kitchen.

"Can you come down a minute, Helen?"

"What is it, Dad?"

"There's someone here to see you."

"All right; I'm coming."

I heard her hop down, probably from a chair.

I was well acquainted with Mrs. Brandon's kitchen. She gave me great juicy oranges from her tale or shiny dimes when I fetched her kindlings. I was a bit of a favorite there myself.

Once when the snows were deep and my mother had to go out to the doctor, Mrs. Brandon lent her fur coat. A warm silky thing it was and Mother was glad. There were polished diamonds there – even in that rude settlement.

We heard Helen coming down the stairs. Jackie nudged me and steered toward the outer door. I shook my head in disapproval, determined to see Helen. Besides, I had not received the mail.

Helen was Lamis's only child but more than that, his tenderest tie. Her health was like a delicate thread; it languished from babyhood. The best doctors in Lowville had had her under care, and it was rumored she was better. At any rate, she was home.

Humming to herself, she hopped off the last stair and closed the door.

Her father retreated to his seat behind the counter, settled himself expectantly and lit a cigar. As the blue curls of smoke hovered over his hand I caught the flash of a diamond, polished, acid-proof, full-carat like himself.

"Hello, Allan!" Helen greeted me soberly.

"Hello!" I returned her greeting, and suddenly was aware that my trousers were too short, that my shirt gaped, showing some intimate articles of underwear, and that my hair had been neither brushed nor combed. My bare feet seemed strangely out of place too, and I was ashamed.

"You don't seem very glad to see me back!" She had not noticed Jackie.

"Don't I?" I defended.

"No – you don't." She stared at me as if seeing some inconsistencies in my abbreviated trousers and gaping shirt.

Lamis sat motionless behind the counter, a look of perplexity upon his face.

"Sure we're glad, ain't we Jackie?" I turned to her for support.

"Um-hum," she mumbled reluctantly.

Helen stepped closer, "Oh, I didn't see you, Jackie!"

My small follower dropped her head, pouted, pulled down her little dress and tried to shove one dirty toe through a knot hole in the floor.

Helen bore traces of a recent sickness. Her delicate face was pale, an indoor white hardly less conspicuous than her dress. She wore a knitted yellow jacket with a white leather belt, amber stockings and shiny black shoes. Fluffy ale-gold ringlets of hair lay thickly on her shoulders and there were tiny evidences of refinement about her: a small gold ring on her hand, a dainty string of pearls at her throat.

She was, at first sight, the fairest little person that I had ever seen. And that memory lingers while more recent things slip away.

Jackie did not answer Helen's greeting. She looked up slowly, though, and inspected Helen's shoes, stockings, dress, jacket, belt, and hair as mature women do. Jackie herself was dirty – joyously, healthily dirty.

Helen turned to me again, now ignoring Jackie. "What have you been doing, Allan?"

"Me?" I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

"Of course I mean you! Who do you suppose?"

"Hel-en!" Lamis drawled reproachfully from behind the counter.

"What hev you been doin', Helen?" I shifted my defense.

"Oh, lots of things: I heard the band play; I went to the theatre; I rode in Dr. Bronson's phaeton – it had velvet cushions – cost more than anybody's in Lowville."

"Was that all you did, Helen?" Lamis asked.

"No, Aunt Katie took me to Duncan's store; bought me some new dresses and a book. That's all ain't it, Dad?" She bent down to inspect a mud splash on one shiny shoe.

"How do I know, Helen? Maybe Allan'll tell you what he's been up to."

I had been up to nothing, but I had something to say.

"Ye-es – we got a new playhouse – Jackie 'n' me. It's our ole hencoop. Some of the boys (the neighbors' boys) built a camp out'n the woods. Th' Norris boys (three hunters who lived back of Page killed a lynx, 'n' Ole Frank hez tamed a wildcat.

Jackie, now interested, offered encouragement.

"Tell 'em 'bout Frank's ole wil'cat, Allan." She turned to me eagerly.

"All right," I agreed. "Yuh prob'ly ain't heard it, hev yuh?

"No," Lamis replied, 'guess we haven't. I heard about Norrises' lynx, but the wildcat's a new one. Tell us about it."

I was glad to have an audience; and Jackie was glad to hear something that did not reveal her ignorance of the strange, fastidious world. Moreover, we were now on familiar ground and I wanted to make the most of our opportunity.

"He was an ole buster," I began impressively.

"Was he?" Lamis took the cigar from his lips to watch with courteous deference.

"Mm-ye-es. His hair was long n'fuzzy. He yowled – like this: 'Mrr-yow! Mrr-yow!" I illustrated the yowl as best I could.

Jackie's eyes were popping.

I glanced at Lamis. Upon his countenance there sat a look of calm composure and infinite belief. It reassured me. Then I caught a glimpse of Helen. She obviously was doubting.

"Who was it yowled?" she asked.

"Why, th' ole wildcat yowled. Who'd yuh think it was?" I was rightfully indignant at such disbelief.

She chuckled, "I thought prob'ly Old Frank yowled. His hair's long and fuzzy."

"Hel-en! Hel-en!" Lamis ordered, "let Allan finish his story."

I began again, all unaware that I had passed the borders of credulity.

Jackie interrupted. "You hadn't oughta tell her 'tall."

"Yes, yes! Let him tell us, Jackie. This sounds interesting. Helen, if you'll be quiet a minute! How'd it happen, anyway, Allan?"

"Well, yuh see, Mr. Lamis," (he nodded soberly) "twuz like this."

Lamis sat down on the counter, his fingers locked around one knee, and waited.

"Go on!" he prompted.

"Well, 'twuz getting' powerful dark. Frank was cuttin' it through the brush when all t'onct he heard a powerful yowl jes' like I said: 'Mrr-r-yow!' jes' like that."

"Yes, go on!"

"Well, he followed that noise till he come to a tree with a gnarly crotch."

"He did, eh?"

"Yes, 'N' what do yuh s'pose he see thar?"

"Probably found the wildcat."

"Yea, Yer right. Found him hangin' head down, kickin' 'n' yowlin': 'Mrr-r-yow! Mrr-r-yow!"

"Not ss' loud, Allan!" He pointed aloft. "You might scare Mrs. Brandon. A little lower."

Helen snickered, but her father's face was painfully serious, and I went on:

"What do yuh think that ole wildcat done then?"

"I could never guess, boy!"

I was about to spring a great point.

"Well," (I tried to speak convincingly) "He wuz so powerful grateful when Mr. Dimons yanked him out o' that crotch thet he followed him home 'n' used to sleep outside his cabin t'keep th' porkupines away!

"Is that so!" Mr. Lamis shook his head in solemn wonder.

" 'S th' truth – Frank sed 'twuz. Prob'ly I had'n oughta tell yuh Frank sed t'keep it dark, cuz sum folks might doubt it."

Lamis rose languidly from the counter. "That's a good story, all right, boy. I wouldn't question it."

Previously, I had been pleased with Old Frank's confidence, and was now exultant over having given them such convincing details.

Jackie stood beside me through the recital. When Helen turned away, Jackie, scowling, watched each move. At intervals Helen snickered as though she had heard something amusing. Whatever it could have been I did not know. My story was true. Had I not repeated it exactly as Frank told me – almost word for word?

"C'mon home, Allan," Jackie suggested.

"Wait a minute," Lamis commanded, and brought us each another chocolate. I remembered my manners and thanked him.

"Oh that's all right, boy," he said. "Your story certainly was worth it. Do you want your mail?"

"Yes."

"You, Jackie?"

"Not now. Pa'll get ours."

I took the mail from his hand and as we trudged out the door I caught a glimpse of him through a halo of smoke, smiling broadly, his belly shaking.

A little way down the trail Jackie called to me.

"Allan, wait a minnit!"

"Whut do yuh want?"

"Helen – uh- she thinks she's nicer'n we are. Do yuh know it?"

"Aw, keep still!"

I had caught a glimpse of Helen's loveliness which had I known it, I would long remember.

"All'n!"

"Don't keep hollerin' 't me!"

"She don't believe yer story atall. Do yuh know it?"

"I don't care! Her father does."

“Yuh know whut we oughta do?”

“What’d yuh mean?”

“We oughta ask her to come out to play with us ‘n’ then git her cloes all dirty. She thinks sh’s nicer’n –

“You leave her alone, Jackie Ferris!”

“She thinks she’s nicer’n we be!”

“She is nicer’n we be. She ain’t all dirty like we be, neither.”

That silenced her and we went along home.

“My, you children are late! Where have you been?” Mother asked from the dishpan.

“Been after th’ mail.”

“Does your grandma know where you are, Jacqueline?”

“Yep. She knows I’m playin’ with All’n.”

“Did she say you could stay for dinner?”

“She said, ‘Aw rite’. Kin I Mis’ Hargrave?”

Mother laughed. “Yes, you can stay; but you’ll both have to scrub well before you eat any dinner.”

So Jackie and I scrubbed ‘well’ and although we left unsightly streaks on Mother’s towel and tablecloth, we left little else on her table.

CHAPTER II

Several days passed before I saw Helen Lamis again.

The sunshine in the clearing, the screech of moving log trains, the whine of tearing band saws and the miracle of growing trillium, darting barn swallows, soughing spruces and a musical brook, so filled my days with wonder that I forgot the incident at the store.

But I had not forgotten the old hunter. One evening, perhaps a week after my persuasive recital, my father, mother, and I were seated on the veranda at home. Our house stood on the edge of the forest on the west side of the clearing. The shadows had fallen across the settlement and the old "Company" barn was just visible through the dusk. We had seen a light through the window of our neighbor on the right – a French Canadian.

Suddenly through the shadows, the strain of a mouth organ floated across to us. There were three things those Frenchmen excelled with: An axe, a saw, and a harmonica.

The harmonica sang:

Now the mo-on shines tonight

On Pretty Red Wing.

The winds are sigh-ing,

The night birds cry-ing,

And afar 'neath his star,

Her brave is sleeping

While Red Wing's weeping

Her heart a-way."

Then the player took up another strain and again the refrain.

"Now the moon shines tonight

How that harmonica throbbed! None of the music of today seems comparable with those homely strains played in the darkening forest so long ago.

There was something haunting in the melody. Something that hinted of dusk and starlight, of breezes of mystery, of slumbering red hunters of a forgotten time.

Then I remembered Frank. Remembered how he sat on the porch with us that last evening and smoked in the dim light, caressing his smooth old gun.

"Son," I heard Mother's voice, "don't you think it's bedtime?"

"Yeup!" I started toward the door.

"Good night, son! Don't forget your prayers."

"Nope. Good night!"

And in the darkness I went up the creaking stairs to bed. I made short work of that prayer, and whatever it was, it seems now to have been answered.

The architecture of my bedroom was the simplest. Rafters, roof boards, and shingles overhead; clapboards with nail stains for mural decoration, and a bare floor with a few rag rugs under foot. The stovepipe, a crippled auction washstand and my small half-bed completed the picture.

But I slept there. I heard lullabies from the forest. I dreamed dreams there – wondrous, everlasting.

This night I went through my regular ritual, but I had no eye single. In the darkness I was seeing Old Frank and remembering his promise to let me shoot his gun.

With about five motions I shed any meager clothes, yanked back the heavy covers and curled myself down.

I saw troops of hairy armed hobgoblins approaching in the darkness, but I commanded them away. Surely they dare not attack a good boy, a reverent boy who had just said his prayers.

So, I fell asleep, smothering out the voices of the night with the bed quilt. I floated airily away to a nobler field where valorous men carried shotguns and wore long whiskers which certainly, are the sign.

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The next morning, I had a pleasant surprise. I had not anticipated going anywhere. Drumming around the veranda after breakfast, Mother called to me.

"All-an, I want you to go over to the store!"

"All right," I agreed quickly.

"Go over and ask Mr. Lamis for a package of mincemeat. Get it charged, and get our mail. Your father didn't stop last night."

"All right," I repeated, part way down the path.

"Don't forget to come right straight back!" she called after me.

"No, I won't!" I assured her over my shoulder as I ran.

I found Helen Lamis at the store. She was evidently visiting with Mrs. Brandon, for she stood on a lower stair, talking with someone at the top.

I announced my wants.

Hearing me, she turned around.

"Oh, Allan!" she called.

"Yes. Whatcha want?" I went toward her.

She was no longer dressed in yellow and white, but wore a neat brown dress and a pair of high brown shoes.

"I'm going to LaRoque's camp with Mr. Brandon. Don't you want to go?"

"Sure! But I gotta go home first with th'mail."

"Hurry back, won't you? Mr. Brandon's about ready."

"Here's your mail, son, and your mincemeat."

Lamis gravely handed them over the counter.

I was not gone long; I was back in a few minutes, having twice promised that I would not annoy Mr. Brandon nor stray away from him.

LaRoque was a French-Canadian camp boss, engaged in cutting and hauling timber to the pond from the woods northwest of the mill. He was an illiterate fellow. Brandon had often to help him straighten out his books, but he was an experienced logger and forced a great deal of work from his men.

We set out. Mr. Brandon led the way, while Helen and I followed. We crossed the railroad track and headed through the lumber yard.

Mr. Brandon, the Gould superintendent, was a large, easy man of pleasant face, with a taste for gray woolens, 15-cent cigars, and beneficent custodianship.

The Gould purchase in 1901 comprised some 70,000 acres. Part of this lay in the old Boylston tract, and part in the tract purchased by J. Pierrepont White. To this day the White Tract has been scarcely touched by loggers.

On this morning the axes of VanPatten, LaRoque, Mackey, and O'Hara were ringing out the death knell of our uplands, or so it would have seemed to a casual observer who knew nothing of the immensity of their undertaking or of that perennial power which slumbers in the forest soil.

Since that day battalions of axes have come and gone; but the hills still lift their fingered sentinels triumphantly. These sob at times. Again, they whisper of a power that sleeps in the foundations of the earth, and mocks the intermittent assaults of men.

Turning where the trail entered the edge of the timber, I glanced back toward the store. Johnson, with his repair crew, had halted a pair of hand-cars on the shining rails. The road – Glenfield & Western – came up over the hills from Glenfield and crossed through the townships of Martinsburg, Turin, and Highmarket. In 1901 the road ended at Page; but was later pushed westward across Fish and Seven Mile, across Two and Three-Mile creeks, and farther to a corner of the Osceola township.

This railroad had been the only east to west intersection save for an old "Martinsburg to Osceola" trail which long before had grown up to brush.

Prior to 1860, the Lewis County seat was at Martinsburg. This old road through the woods was used only by jurymen and a few others who had business at Martinsburg. Cut through solid wilderness, it ran generally westward, across the town of Martinsburg, passed southwesterly through the upper corner of Highmarket, and on to the town of Osceola.

The trail lay through swampy marshes of tamarack and spruce, and over ridges of hardwood, in the most impassable section of Tug Hill. But it fell into disuse and few men, even at that day, could locate the trail.

Mr. Brandon plunged along, confident we could follow. Helen trod beside me, doing marvelously well for an invalid.

As we disappeared in the woods, I heard the whine of tearing saws grow fainter and fainter.

"Are you coming, children?" Mr. Brandon called.

"Yes, we're coming," Helen answered.

I was silent, watching Helen as she jogged beside me. With each step of her stout shoes her lovely dress clung and followed her – a picture, I thought, of infinite loveliness.

I had slipped into a pair of old shoes. I knew the hauling trail would be rough, even for my rugged feet. I was glad I was wearing shoes, for somehow there seemed to be less difference between us.

"Helen," I called. There was magic even in the word.

She looked at me inquiringly.

"Maybe we'll have t'stay in th' camp for dinner," I suggested.

"I don't care if we do. My mother knows I won't be back til Mr. Brandon comes."

Mr. Brandon was nearly 50 yards ahead, walking slowly with a calm pre-occupied air.

The trail ascended northwestward for a short way, leaving the evergreen swamps, and continued on over a beech ridge. At the top of this ridge Mr. Brandon looked back to see if we were following. He walked slowly, so I could see no need for haste.

High overhead, the opening through the trees showed patches of blue sky. A gray squirrel scolded at us and then scampered to safety up a large beech. From a dead stub a woodpecker tapped us his greeting. A partridge sprang up suddenly and whirred away to cover down the ridge.

"A ---uh---what do you think my dad promised me last night?" Helen's eyes questioned me again.

"Huh ---I dunno---couldn't guess."

"Oh, guess! Give you two guesses."

"Can't guess, Is 't a book?"

"A book? Hunh---no!

"Is 't---is 't---a---new dress?"

I saw a ready rebuke in her glance. I should have been wiser; new books and fine dresses were not uncommon things to her.

"Is 't---a---oh, I can't guess!"

"It's a pony.!"

"A real pony?"

"Of course!" A gleam came into her eyes. "Dad said he's nearly all black; but he's got a silver mane."

"Whew!" I all but whistled, "Kin I ride 'im?"

"Yes, if you'll help me harness him up."

"Kin Jackie ride 'im too?"

"Mm---she isn't very nice to me; I'm going to have a new cart too ---just like you see in pictures."

"Did you say Jackie could ride too?"

"I didn't say she could ---she isn't nice to me, anyway."

"Come along! Hurry up! Mr. Brandon's waiting!"

I started ahead. Jackie couldn't ride---Well, that was not so nice either!"

I walked faster down the far side of the ridge, passed a grassy clearing on my left, and entered a closely covered trail.

Mr. Brandon stood waiting.

"Where's Helen?" he asked.

"She's comin'."

"Oh yes, here she comes! Why didn't you stay back with her?

"I kep' in sight."

"If you're going to escort a lady, boy, you should be on the job."

"Um---hmmm. That's right."

Helen was coming slowly.

"Well," Mr. Brandon said, loudly enough to reach her, "we're almost there!"

"At La Roque's?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's just ahead. Tired, Helen?" He turned to question her. She had stopped behind me.

"No, I'm all right." But I noticed her face had lost its luster. She gave me a look of resentment. Perhaps she knew why I walked away, but she said nothing.

We came directly upon the camp. There was just a little widening of the trail and the forest spread away on either hand.

La Roque's, like most logging camps was simply constructed. It was a long low building with a tar paper roof. Through the center of the building was a driveway and space for storing wood. The cook's domain occupied the south end of the camp. In this was a large stove near the wall. Nearby was an old iron sink and a tin drain board. Some thirty men washed there and wiped on the same soggy towel. Two long dining tables stood near the center of the room and long benches surrounded each table.

In the north end were the men's bunks ---rough boards, three high, scratched and stained. A rusty pot-bellied stove stood in the middle of the floor. A sorry looking yeast box did duty as cuspidor. Burned matches lay thickly around it and the stained evidence of miscalculated distances.

Over our shoulder Mr. Brandon greeted someone.

"Is La Roque around?"

The chap was tall, wore a stained apron and carried a knife. Presumably he was the cook.

"No, left here 'n hour ago with th' saw filer. Said they was goin' up the trail a piece."

"What's La Roque doing?"

"Layin' out new skid piles, I guess. Anyway, they're skidding. That's all I know."

I noticed the cook had a sizeable bulge in one cheek that did not appear to be malignant. He spat frequently. He leaned against the door jamb, and his black hair showed a salved meticulous part.

"When'll they finish skidding?"

"Dunno. Heard La Roque say they couldn't finish this week. He wanted to find Old Dimons. Some'pn about the'line. Said Old Frank knew where 'twas."

"I supposed La Roque knew where the line is."

"Mebbe he does, but he wanted to see Old Frank, anyway."

I pricked up my ears. They were talking about my old friend. I listened.

"Maybe I ought to go up that way," Brandon suggested.

"Naw, set down a spell. They'll be back for dinner. It's mos' noon now."

"All right; I'll wait, then. I don't want to miss 'em."

"C'mon in and wait," the cook invited.

"No, but the children can if they want to. Cook, this is George Lamis's girl and John Hargrave's boy."

"George Lamis' girl, eh? C'mon in, kids, and make yourselves t'home."

I glanced at Brandon hesitantly.

"Yes, go on in, children. I'm going to look around outside."

And so, because Helen was George Lamis' girl and because our escort was none other than Superintendent Brandon, we were made welcome.

"Be sure and stay for dinner," the cook called after Brandon.

Indeed Mr. Brandon had most to do with our reception. But the cook was proper. The superintendency was a real claim for attention and besides, Brandon was an irresistible fellow.

Inside, the cook had tables set for dinner.

"Just make yourselves t'home, he reminded us and stepped off in a lively fashion to attend his cooking.

The dinner preparations smelled appetizing. Helen sat down at one of the tables and leaned her head wearily on one arm.

"Tired, Helen?" I asked.

"Let's go outside and sit on the' bench," I suggested.

"All right," Helen agreed, and out we went.

I kept a hopeful eye on the cook. But he was too busy to bother with us. Camp cooks feed all comers. It is the rule of the woods, but I did not know its ethics then, and my stomach made increasing demands.

Our conversation lagged while we say on the bench. After what seemed an hour, I was startled by the clang clang of a bell.

"Bet that's ringin' fer dinner," I predicted.

"Why don't he hurry up?" Helen demanded. "I'm hungry," and she laid one hand mournfully upon her region of emptiness.

The echoes of the bell had barely ceased when I saw a ponderous fellow coming down the trail. Following close behind was my old friend Frank.

I would have started toward him at once --- it seemed so good to see him---but there was this formidable stranger, and I waited.

The man ahead was a burly specimen! His hair was raven black. His lower jaw hung heavy. He appeared to be talking to Dimons and he emphasized his words with a menacing fist.

He wore a gray woolen shirt which was open at the sleeves and neck. A pair of checkered red and black trousers covered his thighs and were wound tightly into high leather shoes. As his feet swung forward I caught the glint of steel spikes. Neither trousers nor shirts could conceal his girth of biceps and thighs. The man was built like a battleship.

I guessed his name even before Brandon called.

"Hello, La Roque," he greeted as he came into sight from the far end of the camp---a real contrast in his pressed, cool gray. Beside Brandon's trimness, LaRoque was a rock indeed---a ponderous lichened boulder.

"Hello, Lew," LaRoque returned the greeting in a cavernous voice.

I sat quietly beside Helen, enjoying the spectacle, now that Brandon had come.

"Hello, Frank," Brandon greeted the other.

"Hello, yerself, Lew," Dimons returned in falsetto.

"Thought I'd come up and see how you're progressing." Brandon turned magnificently toward LaRoque.

The two went on in lower tones which we did not get. Old Frank spied us and came leisurely toward us.

His appearance would not have impressed a stranger. Frank's strength lay below the surface, and his only apparent claim to distinction was a rude poise that suggested long association with woodland trails, vast solitude, and the lecture hall of the stars.

He wore a dismal hat, a leather coat that had seen much service---its pockets ripped from stuffing---baggy trousers that had once been a clerical black, and high-top galosh that he never changed with the seasons.

Neither was Frank's hair modishly short, and it was gray above his collar. A winter's whiskers covered his face and low from his lips hung a habitual pipe, stained, chipped, overwhelming.

Seldom was he without his shiny barreled gun. Both gun and pipe were worn, but---I learned later---each had a remarkably penetrative power.

Few people of that day could understand Old Frank, nor tell why he lived in lonely cabins. In his earlier years he had carried a full share of the organized burden, but somehow he stumbled and his load slipped free. He was no burden to society and society was certainly none to him.

Frank loved Tug Hill, though he denied it often. A quiet peace came to him along its forest trails---a peace which comes only to those who have found a faith. He told me once--- when he had been unjustly accused of firing a cabin at Fish Creek---that he "oughta go back t' Maine, but 'twan't no use gon' back, th' folks wuz jus'th'same thar." But he longed for Maine and spoke of it often. Most of us have a Blessed Land somewhere.

"Hello, Allie!" he greeted me pleasantly as he came. "Who's this? Helen Lamis?"

"Sure!" I glanced at Helen. Her face wore the innocent detached sweetness that only youngsters can feign, and she seemed scarcely to see Old Frank. She had, even then, a full-blown gift of discriminative power, a fairy land of genteel people.

"Hello, Mr. Dimons!" I was on my feet before he reached us.

However little others saw to admire in Old Frank, I found a great deal. Even then we saluted across the years.

"Wal ---gee Crismus! Never'xpected to see you kids here!

Frank pulled the gun from his shoulder, leaned it against the bench and sat down beside me.

"What yuh been doin', Allie? He usually called me Allie and he slurred his speech like a true cosmopolite.

"Oh, nothing, only waitin'fer yuh t'lemme shoot yer gun," I was quite proficient myself in his peddler's grammar. "Helen's goin' t' hev a pony."

"A Shetland pony," Helen explained.

"Goin' t' hev a pony, eh?" Old Frank seemed lost in thought. "Wal, here they come." He indicated a string of men coming down the trail. "If we

don't git in now "twan't be no use. Them fellows that's comin' 'ud eat th' ile cloth rite off th' the table."

And without ceremony he seized his gun and hurried in, leaving us to follow.

I sat next to Dimons at the table. Helen followed, perhaps puzzled over our lack of grace, and seated herself on my left. Several fellows straggled along from the sink.

"Sauerkraut 'n' weiners," one of them observed as he looked at the board.

A few minutes later Brandon came with La Roque. They were still conversing.

"La Roque, we've got to have these logs by the first snow," Brandon was talking.

"Yeh, yeh, we skit 'em up ---effery stick---before she's snow." He brought his fist down on the table with a thump.

I had no doubt of that logger's ability, and was glad that his fist missed me.

They talked no more of logging. I ate ravenously and noticed that Helen did not let much food pass without taking a helping.

We filed out after the meal and Brandon stopped me.

"Allan, can you and Helen find your way home?"

"Bet a dollar he kin." I looked up to see Old Frank answering his question.

"Sure," I said aloud, "I kin find it easy."

I had some uncertainty, but since Frank had proclaimed his belief, there was nothing to do but agree.

"I've got to go farther back with Frank and La Roque," Mr. Brandon explained. "You youngsters stay on the trail. You can't get lost if you do that."

"We will," I agreed, although I did not need to look at Helen to confirm her doubts.

Helen said nothing, but her look of bewilderment seemed to indicate she was preparing for a leap in the dark. She was nervous and afraid---small wonder!

Had I been less anxious to play the role of escort, I would have feared to go down the trail myself.

"Bye, kids," Dimons slipped his gun over his shoulder.

"Bye," I answered, trying to look brave, although I fear I made a poor success of it.

He started off, then stopped. "Maybe I'll git over t'yer house tomorrow," he called.

"Will yuh?"

"Yep, if yuh ain't no objecshions."

He knew I would be pleased.

"Will yuh come 'fore night?"

"I'll come early, ef I come'tall."

"Hope yuh come early, then," I called, "Good-bye."

"Bye," he repeated and held up his hand to salute us as he turned to follow Brandon.

We started down the trail, Helen was very quiet. We passed slowly out through the heavy timber. The shadows were darkest there. Helen walked close beside me. The patch of sky widened ahead and we went out along the grassy clearing. A breeze stirred the dry marsh grass as we passed. At the top of the beech ridge Helen broke the silence.

"Did you know, Allan, that school starts a week from Monday?"

"I don't wanta go."

"You don't like school?"

"Course not! Only girls like schools; boys---"

"Well, I like school." I saw a trace of a smile gather on her lips and a prophetic light gleam…through her lids as she stopped. "I'm going to college some day---a good college, too. Dad's going to send me."

"Where yuh goin"?" I asked, breaking rudely into her thought.

"To Vassar, Are you going to college?"

"Prob'ly will." I tried to speak as though it were of no importance.

"Where are you going?"

"Don't know yet," I replied, although I had strong opinions that I'd go to Vassar.

As we passed into the clearing I saw below us the side of the store, the school house and the old water tank aglow with rays of a sinking sun. Spruce along the western edge were casting long shadows and the portals of the sunset were coral and gold when I left Helen to turn homeward.

CHAPTER III

Old Frank's promise "t' git over t' your house" was speedily kept. The following morning when I came down to breakfast he was there, hanging his heels off the north end of our porch ---waiting.

"Thought mebbe yuh waz goin' t'sleep all day, Allie."

"Why didn' yuh call me quicker" I asked, rubbing drowsy lids.

"Wal, yer ma'n I decided thet lots o' sleep wuz good fer a li'l man.' Old Frank chuckled softly.

His pipe had gone out and hung upside down from his lips. He had rested his shotgun against the door jamb absorbing the morning sunshine.

Inside the kitchen, mother was busily engaged with her morning's work.

I was not altogether pleased with Frank's implication that I was a "li'l man." It sounded too much like the oft-repeated statement of my father's, who, when I did not clean my plate at the table, would say, "Boy, your eyes are bigger than your stomach." Boys of that age never relish the assumption that their short comings spring from immaturity. I fully believed myself to be a competent man.

There was, I noticed, but one plate on mother's table.

"Mom, why dontcha ask Mr. Dimons in t' breakfast?"

"I did, son." She gave me an affectionate smile.

"I et hours ago, boy." The old hunter had heard my question.

"Go ahead 'n' eat, Allie, then c'mon out. I got somep'n t' tell ye."

I sat down to the table and began to bolt my cereal.

"Don't eat so fast, Allan! Mr. Dimons will not run away."

"He might, Mom." I had to catch my breath; my mouth was so full.

"Tee-hee, Allie, yer a good one."

I heard Old Frank slap his leg mirthfully. I could see no special reason for his tee-heeing, not for the smile with which mother went about her work. But Frank waited for me, as mother predicted.

I went out the door, gave it a hasty slam and wiped the final evidence of breakfast on my sleeve. The old man was sitting just as I left him, but in a cloud of smoke.

"Yuh said yuh had somep'n t' tell me," I began.

"I shouldn' hev tole yuh till after yu'd et. I"ll bet yuh didn't eat much."

"Yep, I et a big bredfus."

"Beg ez a banty rooster's prob'ly. Speakin' 'bout eatin' reminds me of a fella I fed onct. Now wuz thet man hungry? Gee Crismus!"

"What happened to 'im?"

"Wal, yer to small a boy t' know where Dead Man's Swamp is ---"

"Where is it?"

"Don' interrup' me Allie: it's somewheres'bout two miles, er three, southwest o' Cold Brook beaver meadows."

"Christopher's at! Yuh wouldn't know ef I tole yuh. It's up to'ards Montague. Don' keep interruptin'!"

"All right."

"Wal, Ole man Ramphere ---"

"Who was he?"

"He wuz a crazy ole galoot thet knew less'n half ez much ez a half-wit, which ain't nothin' t' brag on."

"What about 'im?"

"Ef yuh doan wiggle yer tongue s' fast, I'll tell yuh. Ramphere wuz a crazy ole cuss that thought he cud snare bears."

"Snare bears?"

"Ye-es, snare bears with a saplin' 'n' a wooden peg 'n' a hunk o' wire."

"Yes!"

"Tut-tut, keep cool fer a minnit, boy! Ez I wuz sayin', he strung a line o'them fancy snares way back into ther swamp."

"Is it a far ways?"

"S' far ye couldn' make it in a week, not with them legs o' yourn."

I looked at my means of locomotion. They were just as good as anybody's. I'd surprise him if he ever saw me run.

"Wal, ez I wuz sayin' when yuh interrupted, Ole Ramphere strung his snares inta Dead Man's Swamp."

"What'd he do then?"

"Methusulah's cat! He didn' do nothin' fet two er three days but wander eroun' like a mole."

"Why didn' he come home?"

"Cuz he wuz in Dead Man's Swamp, boy, an' his compass wouldn' work."

I knew what a compass was; my father had one.

"What'd he do then?"

"Wal, after two ir three days in thet swamp, it finally leaked through his moth-eatin' Thinkery thet his compass wuz hoodooed."

"Hoodooed?"

"Yes, actin' wild 'twas, needle spun eroun', pinted 'n every direkshun."

"Boy!" It was too terrible to express.

"Boys, is right! 'Twuz iron or somep'n in th' groun', but finally he throwed th' bloomin' thing away an' picks hisself a bee line back."

"Throwed what away?"

"The' compass, o'course! Wal, he come erlong t' my cabin 'bout dark. Cloes wuz half tore off, an' hungry ---say! He jus' grunts when he sees me an' pints to'ard m' bread can. Then he grabs it an' yanks off th' cover, commences tearin' a loaf apart by th' handful 'n'stuffin' it inta his mouth --- "

"Gee!" I was moved to keen sympathy.

"Gee Crismus! Eat! Why he et the hul loaf 'fore I cud flag 'im down. I calmed 'im down a speck, though, made a cup o' tea, fried 'im a hunk o' bacon, an' brought 'im sum beans. He et half a pan o'beans, too, 'fore he'd talk at all. Then he told his story."

"He didn' get any bears?"?

"Bears! Bears? All he got wuz a cramp in th' stummick frum too many beans! He shoveled 'em in faster'n you did breakfus."

It was a long time before I entirely lost my fear of wandering into Dead Man's Swamp, but since I never heard of anyone else doing so, that fear finally departed.

"Yuh said yuh wanted to talk with me," I began again hopefully. It hardly seemed he'd come so far just to tell me about Old Ramphere.

"Oh yes, by Crismus, I'm getting'fergetfl! He-hee!" He chuckled softly.

I was growing too impatient to stand still.

"Well," I began, "whatdja want? Did you 'n' La Roque find yer rope yesterday?"

"Rope? What yuh givin' me, boy?" He looked at me suspiciously.

"Well," I replied, "I heard the cook tell Mr. Brandon that yuh went out t'help LaRogue find his line."

"Oh, thet's where ye got the rope frum! Wal, a line, boy, is a trail through the woods thet shows whar yer timber is, 'n' a rope's a thing to hitch a hoss on. He-hee!" Old Frank rocked back and forth with mirth.

"Well," I defended, "a trail ain't the only kind of line there is." I sat down, ashamed of my blunder. I did not relish having Frank laugh at me.

"Who sez so?"

"Harry Maxwell's mother sed so. Sed you wan't on their line. What'd she mean?"

"She wasn't s'mean, boy, but she tole th' truth." He raised his shaggy head and gazed vacantly into the forest. All mirth had gone from his face.

"Lissen, Allie," he turned on me suddenly. "Whatcha think I come out here fer?"

"I dunno."

"I come t' take ye back t' camp fer couple days; thet is, ef yur ma's willin' 'n' yuh wanta go."

Did I want to go! I jumped up and ran hastily into the kitchen.

"Mom, Mr. Dimons ast me to go back to his camp fer a couple days, Kin I?"

"Not unless your father says so; you'll have to ask him."

I was suddenly despairing.

"That's whatcha always say! Yuh don't never let me go anywhere!"

"Now, Allan, don't begin that, or you can't go!"

"Kin I go, Mom?" Her words suggested a ray of promise.

"Yes, if your father says so."

"I'll go an' ask him." I started for the door.

"Where'd yer father be, Allie, 'bout this time o'day??" Old Frank arose and took up his gun.

"You'll find him over at the barn or at Brandon's, Mr. Dimons," Mother answered from the doorway.

"Then I'll go ''n'ask him, Mis' Hargrave. Allie's pretty anxious t'go, 'n' I'll take good keer o'him."

"Yes, he's anxious to go, all right." Mother surveyed me with a faint smile.

"I'll be back jes' ez qick ez yer pa sez yes," and Frank started down the path.

"Kin I go too?" I called after him.

"Nope, yuh might spile m'argument ---anyway, you'd better be gittin' ready." He shambled down the path.

"Kin I git ready, Mom?"

"Well, your father will probably let you go. You might be getting ready."

She brought me woolen stockings, my heavy shoes, a woolen shirt and coat.

"Now, Allan, don't touch Mr. Dimon's guns, will you?"

"Nope."

"And don't wander away from him, son."

"Course I won't!"

"Be sure you don't. You'd get lost in the woods. We never could find you."

"I'll stay right by 'im." I was ready to promise anything.

"You'll be a good boy and you won't get into mischief?"

"Nope."

"All right, son, if your father is willing, then you can go."

I waited impatiently, watching for the old man. He was gone for what seemed a long time. When he did turn across the path, I ran to meet him.

"Kin I go?" I burst out.

"He-he! Yes, ye can go, Allie! Yer pa sez f I kin manage yuh t'tote yuh 'long."

We were soon ready. Mother started me off with a last reminder.

"You'll remember what you've promised, son?"

"Yep, I won't fergit."

She stood watching as we went down the foot-path and crossed the brook.

"Gotta stop fer a li'l grubstak'n," Old Frank commented as we neared the store. He turned off the tramroad and I followed.

Frank made a few purchases: A sack of salt, a bag of buckwheat flour, some salt pork, a dozen cookies, and a package of Warnick & Brown tobacco.

I climbed onto the counter to watch the transaction.

"Git down, boy! Can't yuh read that sign?"

"What sign?" Of course I couldn't read, nor could he.

"Why, thet one, right thar." He pointed to a cardboard tacked over the shelf.

"Thet sign sez t' keep yer boots on th' floor. Don't it, George?" He turned soberly to Lamis.

"Yes." Lamis grinned till I saw his gold crowns. "I can't have men sitting on my counter."

He walked leisurely around the counter and raised the cover from the chocolate pail. "Here, Allan, try one of these." He dropped another black chocolate in my palm.

"This yere mascot o'mine can't read nothin'," Dimons complained.

"Well, mabe he didn't see the sign," Lamis suggested.

"He seen the chocolate awful quick!"

When I came, several years later, to work in that store, I did read his sign. It read: "Please keep off the counter." So Old Frank's admonition to "keep yer boots on th' floor" was nearly correct.

But I was not worrying about signs that morning. I was hurrying to keep close behind Frank's rubber bluchers. He walked steadily along and I had nothing to carry, while he had the gun and pack.

We soon passed beyond the sound of saws and along the grassy clearing. The sun climbed higher and I began to sweat. From the woods on our right I heard a welcome song.

"Chickadee-dee-dee-dee!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"He's a chickadee, jes'like he sez."

"Where is he?"

"Dunno, mebbe down in thet spruce thar." Frank pointed to a half grown evergreen near the top of the koll.

"Why don't he come out?"

"Cuz he's too busy whistlin'. Great li'l whistler, that boy. C'mon Allie."

I followed across the grassy trail where the road climbed higher. I recognized the beech ridge where the day before Brandon had waited for us. I panted along behind Frank and we were soon at La Roque's camp.

"Gotta git a drink, boy; I'm powerful dry," and he pumped a tin dipper full from the well beside the drive.

"Want one, Allie?" He handed over the dipper and I drank.

As we started away I heard a strange sound. I stopped. "Lissen, Mr. Dimons, what's that?"

He listened.

A voice with more volume than control was singing. I had heard the song before.

"Many days you have lingered A-round my cab-in door;
Oh, Ha-rd Times,
come ag-ain no more."

"'S nothin' but th' fool cook; he's havin' a hard time, all right, tryin' t'sing."

But I waited; I thought it was wonderful!

"C'mon, boy! Can't waste time lissenin' to the yodler." He started up the trail and there was nothing to do but follow.

The trail beyond the camp lay over higher ground, and then plunged downward past alder thickets. We came out at length upon an open beaver meadow.

"This, boy, is clost t' th'end o' our trail. Are ye tired?"

"Nope, not yit," but my legs ached.

The trail was damp across the boggy meadow. We went slowly. Under our feet the marsh grass and turf sank elastically and then sprang back as we passed.

This meadow lay near the bank of Fish Creek. It was open swale then; but now alder thickets have sprung up and filled it.

We went some distance across the swale. Frank's rubbers sucked with every step. Suddenly he stopped.

"There she is, Allie."

I was all curiosity and looked where he pointed.

Near the bend of the creek I saw a plain log cabin. A rusty stovepipe perched above it at a rakish angle. There was a little rise from marsh to cabin, and several beech trees grew nearby. Farther back the evergreens made a protecting circle. The cabin faced south and the creek flowed along its right.

"Tain't very purty, but she's home."

Old Frank had grown more talkative as he neared home. He might have preferred a cabin full of company, but I knew he was pleased just to have

me. Few indeed were his callers, and the neighbors at the settlement were as Mrs. Maxwell said: “not on his line.”

“There’s m’ole beech tree. You kin stan’ in m’door’n’ almos’spit’n’th’crick. There’s trout along th’ alder bank –big ones. Gee Crismus! I seen th’ time yuh cud fill a dishpan thar, ‘n’ not stir out o’sight. I ust t’ be able t’ git a deer with m’ ole lad ‘n’ not step out o’ th’ clearin’.”

“Who’s th’ ole lady?” I asked.

“Why, thet’s m’ ole rifle. She’s a 45-70.”

“Kin I shoot ‘er?” I had already forgotten my morning’s promise.

“Not thet gun, o --- not the’ ole lady, ye can’t. ‘Twould spile yer chances fer life.”

A few years later I shot his old lady and then I understood.

“Ye kin tattoo m’ ole beech, bye and bye, with Susie.’

He had an affectionate name for each gun. His worn shotgun he called “th’ sprinklin’ pot” and he certainly could sprinkle with it.

“I gotta git us a bite, Allie. I can’t starve m’ comp’ny, yuh know.”

He fished a key from his pocket and turned the rusty lock. He swung the pack from his shoulder and we went in.

There was a table and two straight-back chairs, a rocker with a ragged cushion, a rusty stove, a bunk in the northwest corner, a packing box, a cupboard, a hanging lamp, a gun rack, a string of rusty traps and on one wall two pairs of snowshoes.

I looked around wonderingly.

“How d’yuh like it?” Old Frank beamed.

“Gee! Ain’t it great!”

“S good nuff for a Tug Hill gentylmun--- here!”

He indicated a bag of potatoes. “You peel off about eight ‘murphies’ whilst I build th’ fire, ‘n’ we’ll hev dinner ‘n jig time.”

We did. He built the fire, put over his tea pot, fried some salt pork and sliced some bread.

“Out o’ butter t’day. Fergot I wuz havin’ comp’ny.” But he beat up a gravy in his spider.

Although I was weak from our walk, my appetite was strong. When we had finished, he opened his new paper of tobacco and stuffed his pipe.

“Yuh bin teasin’ me t’ shoot, boy, ‘n’ I’m goin’ t’let yuh do it.”

“How meny times kin I shoot?”

"Wal, that depends. Ef yuh can't hit nothin' tain't no use t'waste m' bullets --- but yuh kin try."

And so I tried. He brought out "Susie," a '76 model of 32-20 caliber. He slipped in four or five shells and caressed the gun.

"Looks kinda small, but she'll do a powerful sight o' damage. C'mon, Allie!" He picked up an empty tin can and went out. "Always keep yer gun pinted t'oards th'groun'. Don't yuh ever pint it t'oards nobody, ner be fool nuff to look inta it. Keep er' han's off'n th' trigger 'n' don't pump 'er till yer ready t' shoot."

He set the can on the stump.

"Kin uh blow thet off?"

I yanked the lever as I had seen him do, and leveled the gun, Bang! It went off so suddenly I jumped.

"Yuh didn' come within a mile. Lemme show ye."

He took the gun and hardly seemed to bring it to his eye before the can jumped --- shot through the center.

"I'll make yuh a better target." He pulled a large jack-knife from his pocket. "See here, boy!" the old man commanded and walked to the largest beech. He shaved off a circle of bark, leaving a round white spot. "Now g'wan back a ways 'n' blaze et that."

Frank followed. Within half an hour he had taught me how to hold the gun; how to shoot from a standing position, and from one knee. I liked that best – my aim was steadier.

After a bit I learned to estimate distances, but I never have entirely mastered that right and left wave of the rifle.

The lessons of that day came most useful to me one time in France, and his counsels I remember through the years.

"Keep yer sight on th' target, Alie, 'n' don' min' ef yer aim duz waver jest a speck – everybody's duz. Don't spile yer chances by getting' 'in too much u a yank. Wait till yer sight waves inta line with what ye wat, then, boy, squeeze yer trigger!"

Deep words of wisdom those! Never yet --- and I speak now in a larger sense --- have I been able to keep my aim from wavering "jest a speck."

The afternoon sped away, and the shadows came before we had supper. He washed dishes by the light of his smoky lamp, and I dried them.

When he had finished, we sat down on a bench before the door. Frank puffed away at his powerful pipe. The darkness crept in upon us and from the meadow came curious sounds. There were sounds from the woods, the steady ripple of the stream and the snapping of embers inside his cabin stove.

I had never been afraid in the dark before, but it was a strange place and I was a long way from home. My courage began to shrink. I moved closer to Frank.

"Are ye scairt, boy?"

"Nope --- course not!" I waited a moment, listening, then I asked:

"Whuts them noises out there?" I pointed across the meadow.

"Them's peepers, boy. Hear thet whistler? He's a hermit thrush; 'n' th' hooters, them's owls. Do yuh like 'em? I'd ruther hear them li'l oices than a consurt 'n symphony hall. When yer happy, 'pears t' me they warble; when yer down 'n th' mough, the'll chir yuh up, ef ye'll stop 'n' lissen."

That night in Old Frank's bunk I listened to the voices until I fell asleep. It seemed I was hopelessly lost in the depths of Dead Man's Swamp, but morning finally came and rescued me.

CHAPTER IV

Looking backward across the years, the happenings that morning on the meadow stand out clearly.

There are naturalists who might well have envied this old man. There are experienced guides and hunters whose knowledge he would have put to shame. Of book learning Frank had little, but he did possess a measure of that living earth-sense which will be treasured so long as the forests whisper or the rivers run.

"'Tain't s'muh havin' eyes er ears ez 'tis havin' heart, Allie.'

We had finished our flapjacks, coffee and bacon and he was instructing me in woodcraft.

"'Tain't no trouble t'git yuh t'eat pancakes when yuh got 'n appetite. 'Tain't no trouble t'see things 'n th'woods ef yuh only got th' appetite. 'Tain't no good tryin' though, when yuh ain't."

"What kin yuh see," I asked, "if yuh do have th' appetite?"

"Plenty o'things, boy---plenty!"

"Could yuh tell me how yuh see 'em?"

"Gee Crismus! Course I could! I cud tell yuh things till yer eyes bunged out 'n' yuh's never see 'em. Yuh gotta look aroun' fer yerself t' see things."

"Will you tell me somep'n you've seen?"

"Wal, I moight tell yuh sum things, boy, ef you'll keep quiet, but yuh'd oughta try t' see somep'.
n for yerself. That's th' ony way t' git genuine."

"Tell me somep'n yuh see round here."

"Wal, I moight."

"Tell me now, will yuh?"

"Won't be no blood-curdlers, though. Yer too li'l."

"Naw, I ain't."

"Yuh be! Don' argue! I'll tell ye a few things I seed here. Evybody cud see 'em too ef they really looked."

I waited expectantly.

"C'mon with me, Allie; I'll show you somep'n." He started toward the creek and I followed.

At the bend in the creek he bent low to pass through an alder thicket and then kicked his way through a mass of ferns. I hesitated an instant and then plunged boldly in behind him. We did not go far. On a rise of ground, southwest of the camp, he stopped suddenly and raised his arm.

"Do yuh see thet little branch o' th'crick?"

"Yes."

"C'mon then, thet's whar we're goin'."

We went down stream a hundred yards. I noticed the channel deepening.

"Look ahead o'yuh, boy, 'n' tell me what yuh see."

"Don't see nothin' but a pile o'sticks in the water."

"'S about what I 'xpeted. Do yuh know how they got them sticks thar?"

"Maybe you piled 'em up."

"Gee Crismus, boy! Do you think I ain't got nuthin' t' do but pile sticks. Them's beavers!"

"Beavers?"

"Sure! Don't yuh know what a beaver is?"

"I've heard of 'em," I stated hopefully."

"Wal, set down here a minnit 'n' be quiet!"

I obeyed, not knowing what might jump out from under the sticks.

"Sh-h-h! Watch!" He stood erect and clapped his hands.

The animal in the water gave one sudden lunge as though to stand on his head, slapped the water loudly with a broad tail and disappeared.

"Thar, boy," he chuckled, "you've seed a beaver."

"Wuz that a beaver?"

"Sure wuz! There's a heap of 'em under thet pile. Ef yuh'd set still long nuff, yuh'd see 'em all."

"Let's sit here then," I volunteered. I had never before seen such an animal.

"Let's not, boy! They all look alike."

"Do they?"

"Yep! All yuh got t' do t' see things 'n th' woods is t' sit still long nuff 'n' watch. Yuh'll see some of the most ree-markable things!"

"Why, I set here one day 'n' see 'em start thet pile o'sticks. All I did wuz sit 'n' watch. One ole beaver stayed on the' bank t'watch, t'other beavers worked like sin. Fust they chawed off poppies big ez yer leg. Limbed 'em out 'n' cut 'em in two."

"Cut 'em in two?"

“Yep, chawed ‘em in two jes’ like yuh’d saw ‘em. Chawed ‘em off ez big ez they cud handle ‘n’ floated ‘em down t’ th’ bend whar they wedged ‘em ‘cross th’ channel. Then they floats smaller ones down ‘n’ wedges ‘em, ‘n piles th’ hull thing over with sticks.”

“Do they live in there?”

“Sure!” Th’ beavers lay sod ‘n’ stone fust t’ build it up, then they git thur logs ‘n’ sticks. Inside they got a roost ---high ‘n’ dry out o’ th’ water. When they want t’ take leave, they dive down ‘n’ swim off.”

“Do they carry sticks with their tails?”

“Naw! They carry sticks ‘n’ stones by huggin’ ‘em agin their stummick ---jus’ like a man. Hold ‘em next t’ their stummick ‘n’ swim with their hin’ legs. Beavers use their tail t’ steer with ---like a rudder---‘n’ t’ spank mud.”

“They spank with their tails?”

“Spank mud ‘n’ spank warnin’s. Dunno ez they spank th’ youngsters. Whilst they’s workin’ they left one ole beaver t’watch. I seen his spank. I moved a speck ‘n’ he slapped th’ mud with hiz tail. Soundin’ a warnin’, he wuz, t’ git.”

“Huh!” I watched Frank, my eyes wide with wonder.

“Yuh look ez ef yuh didn’ b’leve me, boy. There ‘tiz rite ‘fore yer eyes.” He pointed toward the beaver house.

“Yes.”

“Why, Allie, yuh wouldn’ see no more’n a city man! Might think yuh come frum Fifth Avenoo ‘stead o’ Tug Hill! Yuh got t’ werk yer eyes ‘n’ ears more, ‘n’ yer tongue less.”

“Yeap, I know.”

“Wisht yuh did know, boy. Ef I could teach ye whut I’ve learned ‘n’th’ woods, ‘twud be wuth somep’n t’ yuh Do yuh see thet pile o’ sticks down thar ‘cross th’ crick?”

“Yeup.”

“Wal, thet’s a beaver dam. ‘S built jes’ like th’ house. They leave a ole grandpa there t’ watch ‘n’ they all start out ‘n’ hunt up ‘nother place. Flood back a piece. Th’further they kin flood, th’ better it suits ‘em. Do yuh see thet stud there?” He pointed to a cobblestone large as a watermelon, which was wedged atop the dam.

“Yeup.” I was watching him closely.

“Allie, doncha ever say ez I sed so, er folks’d say I wuz crazy, but them beavers hissted thet up thar.”

"They did?"

"Yes, siree!" couldn't hev got there no other way. I walked 'cross thar one day 'n' 'n a few days I seed thet stone."

"Whut'd they hist it up there for?"."

"Yer guess 's good ez mine, Allie; but I'd say they put it thar t' keep me off'n their property."

"Huh!"

"Don't ast me how they got it thar. I didn' see it, ut thar 'tiz, I didn' do it."

"They must be awful strong."

"Gee Crismus, yes! But yuh'd better not say nothin'. Don't care t'git 'stablished ez th' chapeen liar yet."

"Nope, I won't tell it t' nobody."

"Wal, boy, you've seed somep'n auready. C'mon back now!"

We trailed back to where the stream turned northward. The old man stopped suddenly.

"I seed somep'n here one day thet wuz a regular show." He squatted down near the bank and it appeared that he had another story. It is doubtful if he ever had a more admiring listener.

"What'd yuh see?" I asked.

"Set here quiet one aft-noon 'n' see a minny jumped, a kingfisher whizzin' by done a fancy dive 'n' come up with the minny."

"Gee!" I began.

"Now be quiet, boy," he waved a commanding gesture with his pipe stem. "I ain't begun yit."

He paused an instant, staring blankly as though he himself doubted, and then pointed with his pipe again to a limb overhead.

"Wal, thet kingfisher lit on th' limb 'n' begun swallerin' th' minny. 'Bout thet time a chicken hawk tears out of' th' hemlock thar 'n' makes a jump fer th' kingfisher. Kingfisher 'n' hawk both lights on th' groun' 'cross th' crick. Had'n no more'n lit before out pops a ole mink, longer'n m' arm 'n' quick! Gee-rusalem! Ole mink makes one pass et them scrappers. Kingfisher goes one way 'n' th' hawk tother. Neither knowed jes' whut happened; both wuz scairt."

"What'd th' mink do?"

“Spits out th’ feathers ‘n’ snarls t’ hisself, ‘n’ crawls back inta a hole in th’ bank. Purty close shave fer them birds, ef Mister Mink had ever got a hol’ o’ their win’pipe!”

“Gee!” My eyes were popping. I could feel them.

‘Yuh ain’t got t’ mention whut I’m tellin’ yuh. Jes’ want t’ show yuh thet t’ see anything in th’ woods yuh gotta keep quiet.”

“Why didn’ yuh shoot th’ mink?”

“Didn’ hev nothin’ but th’ ole lady ‘n’ didn’ want t’ make ‘nother fresh channel down the crick.”

“Didja ever see a panther” I didn’t know what they were, but I had heard some queer tales and distrusted dark thickets, the woodshed and our back yard after sundown.

“Never seed a panther on Tug Hill. Seen ‘em up ‘n Maine, though. I’ve seed his cousin.”

“Who’s his cousin?”

“ A wil-cat. But I ain’t goin’ t’ talk no more ‘bout ‘em. When yuh git bigger, mebbe. Ain’t many roun’ here anyway.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. There were no panthers on Tug Hill. I wouldn’t have to be afraid any more. Of course there were wildcats and bears. Wildcats were all right; they kept porcupines away, but bears…

“Tell me’bout a bear.”

“Boy, yuh’ll be askin’ me next ef I seen ellafunts.”

“Have yuh?”

“ A long time ago I seen pink ones, but they ain’t none in these woods. I did shoot a b’ar onct they wuz ‘n ole socker”

“Gee Crismus!” I appropriated his superlative unconsciously.

“Yuh see, ‘twuz this way: I seen ‘im ‘n th’ bresh, ‘n’ got a shot. ‘Lowed I musta hit ‘im ‘cause I fetched blood. I trails ‘im more’n a mile ---sneakin’ along careful, I wuz ---till I spied ‘im at th’ foot of a gully. ‘Twuz over west o’Fish Crick.

“Wal, I sits m’self down careful ‘n’ aims th’ ole lady et Mister B’ar’s shoulders purty putickler. He never smells me, cuz th’ scent wuz blowin’ t’other way. Esides, he wuz too tarnal busy pluggin’ mud whar m’firs’ bullet hit ‘im.”

“Wel, ez I sed before, I levels m’ole lady in torches ‘er off. Misterr B’ar riz straight up when thet ill hit ‘im, ‘n’ smashed hiz claws clean through a

rotten log beside ‘em. I wuz tickeld nuff t’ be a quarter uv a mile off, ‘bout then.

“An’ wuz he hit! I seen ‘im wobble like drunk, so I hikes m’self down th’ bank, a-huggin’ th’ ole lady. Ole b’ar jerks hisself up agin on hiz hin’ legs ‘n’ loks hiz teeth inta a maple sapplin’. When I got thar, thar he wuz teeth locked inta th’ maple ---deader’n a hammer!”

“Whe-ew! Wuz he a big one?”

“Bigges’ b’ar I ever shot!”

“Huh!” Tell me ‘nother.”

Frank gave me a queer look.

“All right boy; but this is m’last one. We gotta go t’dinner.”

“What’s this about?”

“He-hee!” Squirrel ‘n’ a cat.”

“Oh, tell me somep’n bigger’n that!”

“Bigges’ li’l thing yuh ever see.”

“What’d they do?”

“ Wal ---Gee Crismus, I’m hungry! ---I chops over ‘n ole dead stub up th’ crick one mawnin’ ‘n’out tumbles a ole mother squirrel ‘n’ three babies. Ole Mis’ Squirrel ‘n’ one th’ babies wuz dead when I picks ‘em up, t’other two babies wan’t. I puts ‘em In m’ pocket. Cunnin’ little cusses. Didn’ have much hair on ‘em neither.”

“Did they live?”

“Tut, tut, Allie, don’ git in a hurry!” I had ‘n ole gray tabby cat thet fetched kittens under m’bresh pile. Whilst th’ ole cat’s away, I sneaks th’ li’l cusses inta her nest. Watches when ole Mis’ Cat comes home ‘n’ seen ‘er carry ‘em in. I figgers they wuz duly ‘dopted.”

“Whut’d she do?”

“Tried hard to nuss ‘em, but ‘pears they didn’t thrive on cat milk. Couple mornin’s later I picks up one outside th’ bresh pile --- dead!” ‘Fore night I found t’other same way. Ole Tabby Cat done her bes’ t’ raise ‘em.”

“Huh!”

Old Frank got up, stretched his legs and yawned lazily.

“C’mon, Curiousity, git a stir on yuh! We’re goin’ up t’ dinner, so don’ ast me fer no more stories.”

And so I followed along to dinner, although his graphic recitals had but strengthened my hunger for more stories.”

And so I followed along to dinner, although his graphic recitals had but strengthened my hunger for more stories. When we had again washed dishes, Dimons picked up his 32-20.

"Want t' try 'er agin, boy?"

"Um-hm. Sure, I do!"

"Wall, be keerful 'n' handle 'er easy --- every gun's loaded til yuh see tain't," and with that he started toward the beech tree. I tagged along. Over his shoulder he called:

"G'wan back, Allie, 'n' fetch me th' salt shaker off th' table."

I was back at the tree almost instantly.

He took the shaker in one hand, produced a nail from his pocket and marked a circle upon the blaze he had cut the day before. Turning the shaker, he scratched a small circle within the larger one.

"Bout a minnit now' I'll show yuh a fancy target."

Producing several matches he lit each and with the charred sticks proceeded to mark the circles he had made. Against the white blaze the black smudges made discernible spheres.

When he had done, he backed against the tree and then paced away toward the marsh. I watched him, wondering. At a short distance he turned and called:

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When he had done, he backed against the tree and then paced away toward the marsh. I watched him, wondering. At a short distance he turned and called:

"Seventy-fi' paces. Step away from th' tree, Allie, m'lead might spatter!"

"Whatcha goin' do?" I called.

"Wal, first I'm goin' t' cut th' outside circle, then I'm goin' t' shave th' bull's eye. Mebbe las one'll lan' inside."

He fired three shots while I watched from a safe distance. When he finished, he came toward me.

"Look'n see how they landed."

I obeyed. The rim of the outer circle was punctured, and in the inner, a black dot showed where his lead had scored a bull's eye.

"Boy, that's shooting!" I pointed to each mark.

"Bout ez I figgered, Allie, but that ain't really shootin' Ef yuh sight a deer'n th' bresh 'n' plug his heart cold --- that's shootin'. Yer deer, boy's likely t' be movin!"

When in later days at Spartansburg and Brest, I saw the crack shots of our division equipped with shoulder pads, telescope sights and steel rests, I wondered if they could shoot. Of course I had not then seen Captain Mooney shoot across the Juvigny Plain.

I tried again that day and wasted fewer of Frank's bullets. Finally I was able to shoot well within those difficult circles, but I longed for a moving target.

Late in the afternoon we caught four fair-sized trout and Frank fried them for supper. While we ate, he talked to me.

"C'mon back, some day, Allie. I'll show yuh how t'' git a deer. We'll string a few traps. Ef uh wan't s' cussed small ye could pick a li'l gum --- mebbe," he finished, "ye'll grow."

I grew that very afternoon had he but known. I grew inwardly and the image of his rude cabin hedged all about by forest, pressed deeper into me than Frank's bullets did upon the old beech.

Moreover, a tree grows new bark that covers its scars, but what bark can a man grow that will efface memory?

At dust, purple shadows like a great canopy settled down. The hermit thrush whistled a few notes of trilling exquisite sweetness and then was still.

As it grew darker, the chorus began again along the marshes, but I did not sit to listen. I curled myself down in old Frank's bunk and voices that floated in through his open door softened and then finally faded away.

CHAPTER V

The morning school opened I saw white frost upon the marsh grass and cat tails along our brook. The maples had put forth splashes of canary and scarlet against darker evergreens, and the encircling forest took on colors of a great canvas.

I stopped at the store that morning to fortify myself with tablet and pencil.

"Thanks, Allan," Lamis drawled as I paid him. "I suppose you're glad to be back in school?"

"Oh … I don' care."

"Well, get all the schooling you can, boy." And then, with his good advice sounding in my ears, I trudged along.

The opening day was an important event. Always on this first day there were new faces, new lessons, and fresh investigations of familiar things.

Through the summer months the path to the school had grown over with grass and the forest border seemed creeping in. The roughly hacked boards of the entrance revealed the janitor's labors of other years and past preparations of many fires.

Within the school room I found the same rusty box stove and desks callously stained, heroically carved. I picked my desk beneath the southwest window. Its top was cut and showed accidents with ink bottles, but from there I could see most of the room.

The bell rang presently, and Miss Henrietta peered over her book.

"Well, children," she gave us a bleached smile, "I am glad to see you all again; I hope you have had a pleasant summer and are ready to buckle into study."

Miss Henrietta Holley was forever bidding us to "buckle into studies." No soldier, whatever his post, fought more valiantly than Miss Henrietta. Nothing seemed to escape her eye. Vigilance was her ideal.

However, she did have an interest in each and every pupil that did not end at the schoolhouse door. And the patience! The struggles of that woman within those somber walls!

"Now, children," she would say, "the Romans did not build Rome in a day. Be patient, work, and wait." With such faith she sowed the seeds of certain harvest.

Several classes were called. I went forward to one. Arithmetic was extremely difficult and I sat through the class with a fear lest she would call on me, but happily I was not questioned.

Helen went to the board once and I watched her with admiration. After class, Miss Holley tapped her bell for recess and we filed out of doors. Helen moved away from the credulous youngsters to question me.

"Father says you've been back in the woods again with that Old Frank."

I spied Jackie, listening near-by. She was no longer barefoot and her dress was almost spotless.

"Yes, I wuz there two days," I admitted.

"I looked for you to come and drive my pony."

"Oh, I wuz havin' a good time with Mr. Dimons. I shot his ole gun."

"'Well, it's nicer to drive a pony than 'tis to traipse around shooting old guns." She elevated her nose.

I was not too tactful, but the wonderous experiences with my old friend were still freshly in mind. Besides, Jackie was listening and I felt that I ought to confess the miracles I had seen.

"Maybe drivin' 'round iz nice, but so's Mister Dimons' cabin. I seen some beavers. I shot his ole rifle." I thought that ought to convince her, but she walked off and Jackie came to take her place.

"Didn't you jus' tell Helen you shooted ole Mister Dimons' gun?" she pouted.

"I didn' shoot his big gun," I explained, "I on'y shot his li'l gun."

"Does yer ma know it?"

"Naw, my ma don' know it, 'n' yuh needn' tell her, Jackie Ferris."

"Why not?"

"Cuz ef yuh do I won't never tell yuh nothin' no more. Tain't none o' yer bizness."

I was beginning to see a possible danger looming behind her suspicion.

"I won't say noth'n, but you be careful, All'n Hargrave, shootin' guns."

Jackie was certainly concerned with my welfare, but I doubted that she could keep her promise not to tell.

When the bell rang, I went in resentfully. I had told the truth about my shooting, but it had failed to impress either of them.

The last class finally ended and we were dismissed for dinner. Once outside, I started toward home. Looking back, I spied Helen walking yards ahead of Jackie. Each seemed cool enough toward the other.

I swallowed dinner hastily and as I left the house, saw heat waves dancing over the deserted roadway. Back at the edge of the forest, cool shadows lurked beneath dark spruce trees.

The silence in the clearing was broken only by occasional triumphant cackles from our neighbor's hen coops and the distant barking of an excited dog. The barking died suddenly, so I did not loiter to investigate.

The opening of school provided fresh interests for me, not the least of which was a certain diminutive lady with sleek shining curls.

From my seat that afternoon I caught many glimpses of the radiant Helen. Hours sped away; classes came and went, and when I was not reciting, my eyes followed her unconsciously or wandered outward through the open window.

I could see men working around the mill, a gleam of shimmering sunlight playing upon the mill pond, and beyond it the dark mysterious circle of evergreens.

The class before recess was more arithmetic. I heard Miss Holley's voice questioning. "Now, Frank, if your father gave you $20 and you spent $4 for shoes, $1.50 for two school books, and $ .75 for a cap, how much would you have left?"

"Mm-m---$14.50!" he piped hopefully.

"No, you're wrong! Johnny Foster!"

"I," he rose to his feet, "I don't know, ma'am." A flush came into his cheeks.

"Anybody!" She turned to us in the back seats. No one responded Perhaps she saw me staring out the window, for she called my name.

"Allan Hargrave!"

"Mm- m ---yes, ma'am." I arose, vaguely comprehending that she had asked a question.

"Did you hear me, Allan?"

"No."

"Where were you? You're not studying."

The whole room tittered. I felt a flush rising to my own face.

"My question, Allan, was this: If your father gave you $20 and you spent $4 for shoes, and $1.50 for school books, and $ .75 for a cap, how much money would you have?

I stood a moment, waiting or the crimson to settle from my cheeks and tried desperately not to see smiles that were passing around.

"Don't you know, Allan?"

I shook my head, too confused to reply. She turned to another boy, Harry Maxwell, who had been snapping his fingers.

"How much would Allan have, Harry?"

"He wouldn't have anything," he glanced my way; "he'd spend the whole caboodle for a shotgun like Old Frank Dimons'."

I heard a roar of laughter drown out the teacher's voice and my face flushed again, this time with anger. I might say here that I never had a high opinion of Harry. His generosity began early in helping other youngsters spend their lollypop pennies and he was forever giving boxing instructions to smaller boys by smacking them boldly.

Above the din I heard Miss Henrietta's voice.

"That will do from you, Harry Maxwell! Sit down!" The way she clipped her words put an end to their laughing.

As the mirth ceased, I scowled around the room. Jackie Ferris's little face alone was sober.

"Helen Lamis," I heard the teacher's voice. "Tell us how much money Allan would have after buying those things."

Helen gave a collected little laugh as she stood by her seat.

"Thirteen dollars and seventy-five cents." She spoke musically as though it were obviously a foolish question.

I was belittled, disgraced. Helen, too, had laughed at my clumsy response but nevertheless, I admired her cool poise. It was a thing I lacked.

When we filed out for recess Harry Maxwell laughed again in the hall.

"How much money would yuh have, Hargrave?

I muttered a foul word under my breath.

It was not entirely a new word and perhaps the girls who were following had heard it, but I listened to one of them catch her breath.

"Why-y—y, Allan Hargrave! Don't you let Miss Holley hear you talking like that."

I was more than ever resentful of their infallible femininity.

Out in the yard, Helen Lamis approached me again.

"Why didn't you answer that question?" She gave a little laugh and looked searchingly from my shamed face down to her own slim ankles. Then she tamped the toe of one faultless shoe into the grass.

"You were daydreaming," she chided.

I could not deny it, but it was most embarrassing to hear her accusation.

" I wasn't listening; I didn' hear what she said."

She gave another musical laugh. "Allan, you are funny."

For the first time, I decided it must be so.

"Can't you come home with me tonight and drive my pony?" She hesitated as if expecting me to refuse.

"Y-Yes---I'll go---with you." I had hoped she would ask.

When school closed she tripped down the path before me. Together we hopped across the little stream which outlets the pond---and which is head-water of Big Alder---and climbed the bank to their house.

I waited outside till Helen joined me. Then she led the way to a box stall in the barn and came out leading a black pony with a silvery mane and sweeping switch.

I watched Helen throw the harness on and buckle it. In a jiffy she had the pony ready for the shafts. I held them as she backed the pony. "Back, Billy. Back---back up," and with her graceful little fist she urged him backward.

I was delighted. I had never seen such girlish skill. She harnessed and hitched that Shetland with all the ease of a stableman. She buckled the lines and turned smiling.

"Now I guess we're ready."

"Kin I help you?" I stretched her my hand in clumsy quixotry.

"You take this one." She changed hands with the reins. Then I took her left and helped her in.

This was the longest moment I had ever held her hand and it thrilled me intensely. What a little "mit" it was! Dainty and strong with perfectly shaped fingers till she pulled them away; then I climbed in shamelessly.

"Giddap, Billy." She drew up the reins and we started. He walked across the drive and Helen pulled him onto the old tramroad.

"We'll drive this way," she explained.

When we had passed over the knoll and turned from sight, she offered the lines.

"Do you want to drive?"

I seized the reins with a mounting sense of importance. If Harry Maxwell could see me now! But I thought I was being proper. They might laugh at my fondness for Old Frank and his gun, but I belonged beside her ---truly. Moreover, I could drive that pony and I wanted her to know it.

We went a half-mile along the wood road, then at Alguire's clearing I turned the rascal homeward.

Helen was silent most of the way, but I stole admiring glances at her happy face, bobbing curls, confidently folded hands, sheer silk stockings and shiny patent leathers. I wanted approval, too, for my horsemanship.

On the return she laid her hand on my arm.

"What do you suppose dad said this noon?"

"I couldn' guess. What'd 'e say?"

"Told mamma he was going to hire a boy to run errands for him."

"Hm-m! Who do yuh think 'ell git?"

Couldn't you run them, Alan?"

"Sure, I could," I tried to convince her, but it was like proving that I could find our way out of the woods. There was no Frank though, to "bet a dollar."

I drove Billy up and down before their house. I backed and turned him around as masterfully---so I thought---as a boss horse wrangler.

That afternoon marked a change in me. It seems clear now, that my ambition to "keep store" dates from that hour. I would surely have a store, a big house, plenty of money, and someday a golden-haired wife who would always wear silks, who would be, in fact, that little lady grown tall. Even now when I look back to that day, I smile to myself.

Once as I turned the pony, I caught a glimpse of Jackie watching from the bank across the track. She wore a faded apron with one fist jambed in the pocket.

"Le's give Jackie a ride," I suggested.

"Not now. She can ride some other time."

I started the pony down the road again and handed over the lines. Behind us I saw Jackie stubbing back barefooted toward their house. Grandma Ferris sat on their tiny porch, sewing and rocking. I caught one final glimpse of Jackie hitching herself onto a chair beside her grandmother to watch us. I could easily believe that Jackie wore her most expressive pout---for the little mite wanted to ride.

"What are you watching her for?" Helen asked.

"Aw I jus' wan t' see whut she's doin'."

"Maybe you'd rather play over there than with me."

"Naw," I denied.

Anything Helen could say would have made little difference. She was too wonderful to be questioned. Besides, was I not to be a storekeeper and Helen the reason?"

I have never entirely forgotten that glimpse I caught of Jackie watching, but I was aware of little that day beside Helen and a hope that I might be their errand boy.

CHAPTER VI

My resolve to be peerless shopkeeper persisted, and for months I waited around that backwoods store for my opening role. It seems humorous enough now, but it was serious then.

The third summer had come and gone since the day I swore at Harry Maxwell. Mr. Lamis never mentioned hiring me and I dared not suggest it.

I saw Jackie and Helen several times each week. They were grown taller, better looking. Helen a bit commanding, and Jackie had added a trifle of wistfulness to winsomeness.

Old Frank had not come often nor had I ever accepted his invitation to c'mon back agin', partly because of a change of outlook. I was going to be a storekeeper, and following him would not further that plan. It was not that I had lost any admiration for him I was simply being loyal to Helen's point of view. I knew the Lamises - mother and daughter especially -- thought Old Frank was a morbid creature.

Around the store Lamis treated the old man kindly —it was part of his fibre. I had not learned that Lamis ever failed to concur with the family's notions of propriety, and I feared to show too great fondness for Frank's indolent and unseemly ways. Down deep, however I was firm and it took but one chance visit to set aside the shadowy barrier.

"Allie," he reproved, one morning of that third autumn, "it's been a long time since yuh ben back t'm'cabin. Wha' come over uh, boy? Don' yuh want t' shoot m'ole gun no more?"

And so, of course, I went with him. In his loneliness he turned to me and I rejoice now that I did not fail him.

Neither Mother nor Father objected this time. Some gift of understanding had come to them, some glimmering of a timeless truth. Besides, my father gloried – though he'd not confess it – in the deeds of out-door men. He kept a well-thumbed copy of Conquering the Wilderness, and told me over and over of Davy Crockett and the Alamo; Jim Bridger's Blackfoot Squaw; Brady's astounding hop, and Custer's fight at Buffalo Gap in the Little Big Horn Mountains, for Dad had crossed the plains! Like all men who crossed the plains, he carried to the last a love for the far-flung spaces.

"Yes, go on, boy," he agreed when I asked him. "Maybe Old Frank will teach you something."

I found Frank at the store, waiting.

"LaRoque's gone, Allie. S'pose yuh know," he remarked as we climbed the trail.

"Yeup, I knew it."

" 'Spect 'twon't be s'long now fer me, boy. I'm gittin' old. I'll go out too someday, but a different way than th' Frenchman.

"Pshaw, Mr. Dimons, you're young yet! You ain't over fifty, are yuh?"

"Wisht I wan't, Allie, but I be. Might ez well make the mos' of it, though. You'll git thar too, someday."

We stopped again at LaRoque's abandoned camp. The doors had been gnawed through by porcupines, and the driveway was growing over with brush.

"Allie, yuh 'member th' singin' we heard here?"

"Yeah. Th'cook, wasn't it?"

"Yep, strain'n hiz throat, Thought he cud sing!"

"I thought it was pretty good."

"Good? Huh! Boy, yuh ain't ben 'roun' this ole world much er yuh'd never call thet singin'. He cud cook, though. Meny's th' good meal he set me."

We chatted along the trail and arrived at the cabin at one. There were few changes; the cabin too had aged; the roof showed more tarred patches; his stove was rustier; the floor more worn, but that was all.

While we were eating dinner, I asked about his plans.

"Nothin' much t' do. We'll string a few traps 'fore dark. Don' care ef we don' string too many. We'll jus' enjoy ourselves."

When he had piled away the dishes, he selected six traps from a rusty string that hung in one corner. I watched while he thrust each ring over his bony forefinger and when he swung them to his shoulder, I followed.

"Where we goin'?" I asked.

"Jus' down th' crick a piece. C'mon!" I followed him eagerly.

"When a feller lays a trap line, he should lay 'long a valley 'n' over a ridge t'some other valley 'n' then wind back where he starts frum."
"What do yuh set for along here?"

"Rats 'n' mink. Once 'n a while 'n otter. They genrully live 'long a bank. Otter 'n' mink eats fish 'n' mice. Otters 'casionally catch a rabbit."

“How do you catch ‘em?”

“ ‘S mostly luck ef yuh catch ‘n otter. But they got rubbin’ posts.”

“Whut’s a rubbin’ post?”

“Wal, take a b’ar. He picks out a tree er high stub t’mark hiz territory. Crismus, it smells like thunder. He rubs hisself against it, ‘n’ hiz smell keeps others off.”

“Keeps other bears away?”

“Yeup. Beavers have a trail o’ mud dabs, but b’ars hav rubbin’ posts. I’ve foun’ ‘em all scratched up an’- smell! Take it long I’ th’ matin ’season, ole Lady B’ar comes by ‘n smells o’ hiz post. Decides then if she wants to keep his company. T’other b’ars read th’ signs n’ keep away.

“When they don’, they’s a fight. Foxes ‘n’ otters ‘n’ t’other animals does ‘bout th’ same.”

“Could you show me one?”

“Gee Crismus, boy. Ef yuh’ll use yer nose ‘ron’ a swamp yuh don’t need t’ be showed none.”

We had gone down stream and left the main creek to walk along a smaller branch. Frank stopped at a little cascade to point out a small hole under a log.

“Here’s our first one!”

“Whut kin yuh catch there?” I asked.

“Might git mos’ anything thar,” he explained. “Prob’ly’ll git a muskrat, but yuh can’t never tell I caught ‘n otter ‘n a place like this onc‘t. Only o’ course the hole ‘n th’ trap wuz bigger.”

“Otters is bigger, ain’t they?”

“Gee, yes! Yu’d think so ef yuh ever had one tackle yuh.”

“Could they hurt yuh?”

“Ole Mother Otter tried t’ nip me onc’t way down on Fish crick.”

Frank had started to secure a trap to the log, but became so enthused over his tale that he dropped the trap and its jaws snapped.

“Chrismus Allie, I’ll be ketchin’ m’self ef I ain’t keerful!” I stood and laughed at him. “Wal, boy,” he cackled, “it mighta been funnier with me ef a spruce hadn’t been ‘tween me ‘n’ Missus Otter! And – big! Say, I seen a pelt et McKeever onc’t thet wuz jus’ ez big, but I never see a ‘nother.”

“They must be pretty scarce.”

“Wal, they air scare. Mighty few men ‘n’ this country ever see ‘em – mighty few!”

“Whut wuz th’ funniest sight yuh ever saw in th’ woods?” I asked.

“Wal, dunno ‘zactly whether ‘twuz Bill Stark’s dog chasin’ a porkie, er somep’n else.”

What about the dog?”

“Th’ on’y thing thet kin kill a porkie with eny degree o’ skill’s a fisher.”

“What’s a fisher?”

“Wal,” Frank pulled out his pipe, struck it two or three times on the palm of his hand, and began to stuff in tobacco, “a fisher, Allie’s sort of a big weasel – quicker then th’ Ole Nick! They’ll grab a porkie by th’ snout, flop ‘im onta hiz back ‘r’rip hiz belly open ‘n a wink.”

“Can’t a dog do it?”

“Never seen one. Bill Stark’s dog tried. Ole porkie jus’ stuck his head under a log ‘n flops hiz tail needles. Th’ dog wuz s’ full o’ barbs he looked like a pincushion. Had t’ soak ‘em off with vinegar.”

Frank smiled reminiscently through a cloud of pungent smoke. “What’d yuh do ef yuh eer git quills in yer leg?” I asked.

“Ha, ha! B’lieve ‘n preparidess, don’t yuh? Wal,’a all right, on’y yuh remin’ me o’ jabberin’ Jabe Winkler” – a neighbor who stuttered considerably – he b’lieved in bein’ ready, too. I met ‘im ‘n th’ woods one fall carryin’ a shotgun ‘n’ a rifle. ‘Whut yuh got both them guns fer?” I sez t’Jabe. He begins t’ blink n’ wiggle hiz mouth ‘n’ gasp like he wuz getting’ ready t’ say somep’n.”

“I-I-I-I-c-c-c—t-tote ‘em s-s-s-so’st if I-I s-s-see a-a deer I-I k-kin s-s-s-shoot’im”

“Wht ‘un yuh use, Jabe ef yuh seed a porcupine?” I siz.

“’I-I-I’d p-p-probab’ly ru-ru-run,’ stutters Jabe. ‘G-g-gooday!’”

“Y-y-you s-started to tell me about them quills,” I reminded.

“Oh yeah. Inegar ‘n’ salt. Soften ‘em up with good stout vinegar, ‘n’ then rub on salt brine. Thet’s good fer eny bite when yuh ain’t got ladine.”

“Whut wuz th’ funny story yuh mentioned?” I asked.

“Allie, we ain’t gittin’ no traps strung. Th’ queerest thing ‘n th’ woods ‘s a beaver lyin’ top ‘n ant hill.”

“Whut they do that for?”

“So’s th’ ats’ll eat their vermin off.”

“Really?”

“Couldn’t never figger nother reason.”

“Huh!”

"Say, boy, we ai't gonna string no traps t'day."

"Why not?"

"Gittin' late. We ca't talk 'n' trap too We better go back."

He leaned over and picked up the trap that had fallen to the ground.

"C'mon, Allie, we'll go t' camp. Ain't no rush 'bout this job enyway."

The rest of the afternoon I spent before the door of his cabin, watching him work. He swept the floor, oiled his guns and began preparations for supper.

"Know whut we'll do t'morrow, Allie?"

"What?"

"Goin' t' git ye a shot et a deer."

"Can yuh?" It was something I had dreamed about.

"Sure, I kin."

That evening when, supper was cleared away, he lighted his pipe, tilted his chair back and braced his feet against the stove.

"Allie, yer growin' up. Whut air yuh plannin' t' do with yerself?"

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe I'll have a store somewhere."

"A store?"

"Yeup."

"Ain't got yer wife picked out yit, hev yuh, Allie?" He smiled.

"N-not yet," I returned the smile.

"No prospects?"

"Nope."

"Wal, 'tain't none o' my bizness but yuh know whut I ben thinkin?"

"What?"

"I wuz jus' thinkin' whut a powerful purty gal Jackie Ferris is fer a kid."

"Yeap, she's all right." I began to wonder what lay behind his question.

"D'ye 'member, Allie, three-four years back? Li' midget she wuz barefoot, wore li'l apron. Cuter'n a chipmunk?"

I said nothing, waiting for him to continue. Of course I remembered.

"Allie, I kep comp'ny onct with a gal that looked jus' like Jackie's goin' t' someday."

"Wuz she pretty??"

"Wuz she purty?" He repeated the question and stared away vacantly.

"Wuz she nice?" I asked again.

"Hm'm 's time t' be goin' t' bed, boy. We gotta git up 'n doin' 'n th' mornin'." Soon after, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

In the gray daybreak I saw the old hunter leaning over me.

"We gotta git goin', boy, ef yuh wanta shoot a deer t'day."

I lay in luxurious comfort under the covers, nor did I wish to move. It was ambition's zero hour; but I climbed out stiffly. Flapjacks, coffee, and bacon never tasted better than that morning.

"Eat a plenty, Allie," he smiled from the stove as he scraped the last bit of batter on the griddle. "Yuh'll be empty under yer belt lon 'fore yuh eat agin."

So I followed his advice and was glad before afternoon.

When he had eaten, we set the camp to rights and he selected two guns from the rack.

"Here's yer gun, Allie." He handed me the light rifle and kept the old lady for himself. Then he took two boxes of ammunition from his cupboard and selected eight or ten of the larger shells which he dropped in his coat pocket.

"Take a dozen, Allie," he ordered, "but don' yuh shoot et no chipmunks while yer sittin' on watch."

"Where we goin?" I asked.

"Over here a piece," He waved his arm vaguely toward the East.

I followed him across the meadow and down the same trail we came over. After we had walked about fifteen minutes, he stopped me.

"Now, boy, we're goin' t' git meat t'day ef yuh don' git buck fever. Yuh go 'long th' trail toward th' ridge. Jus' north o' LaRoque's, turn noth. Pick th' hightes spot yuh kin find on the' big ridge, then set down 'n' be quiet. I'll wait a half-hourf till yuh git located; then I'll shoot onct 'fore I start, t' let yuh know I'm comin'. After thet, keep yer eyes open! Ef yuh see horns, shoot, 'n' shoot low---behin' th' for'd shoulder. Don't git jumpy 'n' blaze et chipmunks; be sure it's a deer 'fore yuh shoot. Might be me."

"All right."

"Yuh got everything straight?'

"Yeup. I turn 'n' go north at LaRoque's, find the top of the ridge, an' sit down."

"Thet's right! Now yuh better be movin'. We may not git one fust time; may hev t' try agin."

"All right," I assured him and started up the trail, fully satisfied that I was a match for anything that roamed the woods.

I walked proudly along, rifle under my arm, with all the dangerous conceit of the greenhorn possessed of his first gun. Dry leaves rustled under foot as a south wind stirred through the woods. Overhead the sky was blue with the bright freshness of morning.

I found the bend in the trail and turned toward higher ground. It seemed that every step I made was noisier than an elephant's.
Ascending the slope, I felt like an old, experienced hunter, and wished that Helen and my other schoolmates could see me.

Up the slope I went, over snapping sticks and rattling leaves. I came at last to the top of the ridge, found a silent moss-grown log, and sat down.

I had not long to wait. Over in the southwest—perhaps a mile away—I heard the boom of his old lady.

"There'll be somep'n doing now," I said to myself and crouched noiselessly in such a position that I could watch the West.

Perhaps five minutes went by. High overhead a pair of belated chipping sparrows danced from limb to limb and chip-chipped their uneasy greeting or scolding.

Suddenly I heard the thud of running feet, and held my breath as I pulled back the hammer. Over the ridge, leaping straight toward me, came a bounding streak of tan and gray. Something within me swelled till I trembled!

The bouncing bundle cleared the last mound that separated us and stopped, feet bunched, listening. The deer must have heard or seen me crouching there, for he paused but the fraction of a second, swerved, and braced himself for flight.

In that brief second I saw a flash of horns and aimed toward his shoulder. I caught the outline in my front sight through the rear one and pulled the trigger.

The animal went up as if on springs and with a single bound, turned and vanished down the ridge. As he leaped I sent one speeding bullet; but the deer itself traveled as though shot from a gun.

I had “buck fever’ indeed, and little hope that my shot had reached its mark. I ran from the log where I had been sitting to the spot where the deer had stood. I searched the leaves. There was a spot of blood, and another, and another! I hurried down the slope, marking the trail with ease. Each bound of flying hoofs had sunk through the leaves, leaving an easy trail. Blood showed in the tracks and was sprinkled along the way. Letting out a whoop of joy I ran on down the slope. I knew the deer could not go far, and I found it across a brook at the foot of the ridge, panting and bleeding.

Coming to the spot, a pang of pity swept me. I hated to snuff out the life of that wild thing, long though I had waited. But I raised my rifle and finished it with a shot through the head.

“Hoo-hoooo!” I called to my “driver.”

“Comin’! he answered from a little distance and then:

“Fine work, boy,” he complimented, an ’we got meat now. Six points, eh? Prob’ly go a hunder ‘n’ sixty.”

I watched Frank rip open the belly, clean out the entrails, heart and liver, and tie the legs to a couple of poles.

“Are yuh stout, boy? ‘S quite a stip t’ camp.”

I was not, I found, as mighty a hunter as I had supposed, and was obliged to rest my load after stumbling some 300 feet. Then my rests came oftener and lasted longer.

Finally Dimons cut the feet loose from the poles; tied them again, front to back; stepped into this circle; hoisted the dead weight and staggered on. He stumbled often and though he did not fall, I knew he was tiring. Once he lay the deer down and with a pole, between us we dragged it on. Sometime in mid-afternoon we reached the camp, aching and ravenous, he swung a rope above a limb of the beech tree, and with what help I could lend, hoisted the deer high from the ground.

“Gee-rusalem!” Allie, I’m tuckered out! Yuh li’ cuss yuh! Yuh kin shoot, can’t yuh?”

I thought that was high praise indeed, and for a long time after was offensively proud of my kill.

“Twan’t no picnic, Allie, gittin’ this deer hun, ef, yuh ask me.”

We went in and washed off the stains of our bloody encounter. Frank hurried another meal and I ate greedily.

"'S 'bout th' same size deer ez I dragged in onc't from Cannan's ridge, on'y I wuz younger then 'n' stouter."

"Mr. Dimon dontcha ever git lonesome here all by yerself?"

He set down his coffee cup and scratched his grizzled chin.

"Reckon I do, Allie, 'en spells. Thet's why I brung you in; but ez fer as bein' lonesome 'n mumpish they ain't nobody kin keep yuh 'n tears ef yuh don't wanta be. Folks ain't no happier'n towns. They live s'clost they git 'n one 'nother's way.

"When I gits lonesome, I jus' go out, se'down 'n be quiet. Bye 'n' bye somep'n kinda loosens up inside. I ain't got a hull lot o'r'ligion, mebbe, but it 'pears t' me th' Lor' on'y wants a fella t'do whuts right 'n' be quiet by spells. Everything'll be all right someday."

"Do yuh think th' Lord ever brings yuh whut yuh want, but mebbe yuh git whut's good fer yuh, I dunno."

"Whut raises all th' hell, Allie is them thet ain't got nothin's too dam bizy tryin' t' git everything; 'n' them's got everything's worried sick fer fear they's somep'n they'll miss. 'N they git wuss of the two. Chasin' after money! Ef ole Peter don' let a man past th' gate 'thout a roll, he'll never have to squeak it fer me."

"Th' woods ain't no lonesome place, boy, when yuh git a-quainted . Take me. I kin tell when I been away jus' 'bout who's been here - man or animal. I kin tell by th' track whether it's a ole skunk er a young un - whether it's a gent er a lady. Dispositions by th' heel tracks 'n th' mud. They's some'n goin' on ever minnit. Somep'n thet makes a feller think mebbe things is all right."

From the distance of these years, how I wish I could hear him again!

He stuffed his battered pipe again and fell silent, staring through the doorway, seeing something far beyond the clearing. Somehow in the stillness of that cabin he had heard the little voices become a great voice and he had grown tranquil as a boulder by the stream.

A few days later, at recess hour, I was telling Helen Lamis of my hunt.

“Mr. Dimons sez to me: ‘Yuh li’l cuss. Yuh kin shoot, can’t yuh!

I wanted Helen to know the thrill that came to me back on the ridge. She looked at me curiously, sympathetically.

“Harry Maxwell don’t waste his time with such people as that.” She walked away.

CHAPTER VIII

Still another winter passed and summer fled before I realized my ambition to work at the store. I am more convinced now than then that the things one most desires come to pass. My opportunity, like most, came unexpectedly.

School had re-opened, and I moved into a higher grade, where gradually I began to lose some of my ruddiness of speech. Whether this was caused by my advance in school, or because I had left off association with Old Frank, I cannot say; but I believe it was from observing the better language of Helen and the teacher. At any rate, I talked with a less exceptional tongue.

One afternoon when school had closed, I stopped at the store with Helen. I had been carrying her books in gentlemanly fashion, had given them to her at the door, and turned down the path toward the tramroad when I heard someone call.

"All-an, can you stop a minute?"

I turned and saw George Lamis beckoning from the platform. I answered and went back to see what he wanted.

"Allan," he began, "how would you like to work here in the store?"

"Great! I'd like it." Here was the opportunity I'd sought since the afternoon Helen suggested it, down on the old tramroad.

"Well, I'll give you four dollars a week, but you'll have to sweep dust, run errands, and do lots of other work. Do you want to try it?"

I began that same afternoon and my first task was to deliver a package to Alguire's saloon, half a mile down the railroad track.

When I returned, Mr. Lamis was sorting the mail. He turned from the letter rack and eyed me with an easy smile.

"Did Alguire pay you?

"Yes, here it is." I handed him the money.

"Son," Lamis drawled as he dropped the coins in a drawer, "You're in for it now!" He stared at me reflectively.

"What do you mean, Mr. Lamis?" Why am I 'in for it' now?

"I mean storekeeping. It's not what most folks think."

"Why? I asked.

"Well, you see," he tilted his hat back on his forehead and turned the uneven end of his cigar over in his mouth, "you see, Allan, most people think store

keeping's a cinch. It's a long way from it." He stared out the door as though he were thinking or remembering, then turned on his heel and continued his mail sorting.

"Look around, Allan; pull out the drawers; look over the shelves. That's the best way to learn where things are."

I took him at his word, and began a tour of inspection.

Such an array of merchandise; There were piles of woolen work trousers, flannel shirts, red, green and black lumberman's jackets, hats, caps, mittens, stockings, boots and shoes. There were a few plain dresses for lumberjack's wives and inexpensive women's shoes. He had children's clothing and shoes, alongside a variety of canned meats and vegetables, tobacco, candles, peeve handles, brooms, saws, axes, some jewelry, a few guns and shells, a small assortment of fishing tackle and a shelf full of children's and adults' books. These and many other necessities of rustic and sophisticated man were kept as discriminately as possible, side by side.

As Mr. Lamis said, I found storekeeping was no cinch. There was the responsibility of opening each morning in time for workmen to purchase their necessary tobacco on the way to work; ceaseless sweeping and dusting, uncrating and checking, the matter of straightening stocks, washing windows and floor, cases, and filling lamps. I grew skilled in the art of splitting wood to feed his hungry stove.

Almost the hardest task was keeping a record of "low" stocks to order before we were out. There were books to keep and change to account for. The store and postal money had a disconcerting way of getting mixed. It required not a little of our time to keep them separated.

One morning as I swept he questioned me about a certain check which had been in the cash drawer but had disappeared. I thought he did not trust me and I worried. What if the check should not show up and he suspected me? That would hurt me with Helen.

The same morning at recess, Jackie Ferris stopped me.

"How do you like the store, Allan?"

"Oh, all right." I replied.

"You don't sound very happy about it," she observed and went in.

My spirit was sinking that morning and I made no effort to revive it. I would be dismissed from the store and disgraced before Helen when I had just begun. A pretty piece of business!

Jacqueline, I noticed, was growing tall, moving toward the door of womanhood, and the crown of her dark head shone with the radiance of ravens. Her eyes had taken on the mysterious color of dark pools, lustrous, and shadowed.

Several times when Jackie had shown her loyalty I was urged to forget Helen; but the impressions of our first meeting persisted. It is given some women to wear purple, and to certain men to see that they do. The memories of the day I rode behind her pony had also indelibly left their mark.

I did not confess my worry to Jacqueline, but at noon I confided in mother.

"Never mind, so. Of course you had nothing to do with the check. Just do your work the best you can. It will turn up, some day."

Mr. Lamis never mentioned it until one day in late November I asked if he had ever found the missing check.

"Oh yes, I must have mislaid it somehow. I found it in a drawer in the safe."

As the months passed and the snows returned, I grew more familiar with the work. Oh, those old days in that forest-fringed store. Endless cycle of Time!

Except for the long hours, I enjoyed the job. I came gradually to have a little confidence in my own ability, and outgrow my earlier embarrassments, even feeling some sense of mastery and pride when Helen was about.

Lamis possessed a deep understanding. When he owed a work of praise, he gave it freely and it pleased me to hear him mention some – doubtless crude effort of mine - to my father or Campbell or Brandon.

Whenever Lamis corrected me, he did it kindly and privately. Besides my four dollars, he gave me little gifts: a book, a pair of shoes and one Christmas a .22 rifle with which I loved to wander through the woods, but the debt I owe him is larger than these.

Finally, after I had learned to locate the merchandise and handout mail, he would start out with his gun and dog. I was most proud to be left alone in the store.

One afternoon in mid-winter he left me and went down to the tramroad to hunt rabbits. Helen came shortly after he left and asked a few questions. I answered as best I could, not forgetting the influence she had with her father, nor to whom I was happily obliged, for she had procured me my job.

She had no more than gone when Old Frank came in. He had come directly from his cabin, and his feet were covered with snow despite the snowshoes which he left outside the door.

"Gee Crismus, boy!" he exclaimed. "I heard ye wuz here. Never thought, though, yuh'd make a storekeeper."

"Why not?" I asked. "Ain't it all right?"

"Yeah, s'pose 'tis. All right ef 'tis."

"What do you mean: all right if it is?"

" 'S all right, boy; but George's spilin' a good woodser by lettin' yuh keep store."

"Well," I argued, though I was proud of the compliment, "you can't make a living now unless you have a trade."

"Nope, thet's right; least yuh can't hev money, livin' like I be."

"I'd like to earn some money," I declared.

"Sure yuh would, Allie'; but it'll never do yuh no harm ef yuh know how t' shoot jackrabbits. Ef yer wise, yuh'll never stay in th' store s'much yuh'll fergit everything but countin' pennies."

Had he known me better, he might have forseen that that could never be.

Helen came one afternoon with her skates and asked her father to let me go skating.

"Allan can go if he wants to," Mr. Lamis agreed, so we went skating. The ice could not have been smoother.

Helen sat down and held up each foot while I buckled the straps upon her slender ankle.

We skated in circles; struck north across the pond and came back again to the overflow. When her ankles grew tired from the strain, she gave me her hand to steady her. With an arm about her waist and one hand holding hers, we managed a rhythmic stride.

What a clean joyous burden she was! She laughed at me often in a low musical way and I was glad.

The afternoon fled and a blazing sun went down in radiance behind the spruces. Lamis had lighted his lamps at the store, and they shone out across the clearing to us like starry beacons.

We lingered till past his supper hour, but he excused us with a knowing smile when we returned, red-cheeked and cold.

Later, when I returned that evening, I found his pot-bellied stove red with a dull radiance, but the frost lingered thick on his windows. Coming up the tramroad, I had noticed the straight ascending smoke from chimneys of our

neighbors: Macbeth and Lambert and Brothers, and over at the boarding house, Eastman's steaming flues. It was cold!

A group of men had gathered at the store: Brandon and Campbell and Macbeth, Brothers and Eastman and Ferris, Dimons, my father and three lumberjacks I did not know.

Our store, like others of the time, was the neighborhood court of opinion. There the gossip of local happenings and the appearance of national events were discussed with inspired fervor. The storekeepers of the time were not burdened with trade magazines propounding the finer ethics of business and under the coal oil lamps men sometimes spoke the truth, however inelegant it may have sounded.

I cannot remember a great deal of their talk. Men and memories fade, but I do recall some of that evening's conversation.

In 1906, a young man who came up through the governorship of New York had risen to prominence on the national horizon. In a day when statecraft has turned its priceless ear to listening for majorities, it is refreshing to recall that we have had men who did not lose their faith – despite majorities – in the indestructability of the Everlasting Truth.

The young man I have mentioned had behind him a record for openness and probity that left no one in doubt. He sensed the atmosphere, squared it against the eternal account, and acted - Theodore Roosevelt!_

Men at Page, through the newspapers that came to us, had followed his rise to prominence with an ever increasing interest. From Lowville, Brandon had the Journal; from New York, The Herald, and from Watertown, the Times. Macbeth, Eastman, and Campbell each took a Democratic paper, and Lamis subscribed to the Journal and Times. My mother liked Rome news, so Dad ordered the Sentinel, but he preferred the Saturday Globe – I think I have mentioned that Dad had crossed the plains – with its glowing accounts of the pugilistic hopes and glamorous pictures of Princess Whoozit's latest hat. Whatever the Globe may have lacked in literary exactitude, it more than compensated in vigor. I think my father's zest for the Globe should be forgiven now. We had no radios nor moving pictures and a man should be allowed some levity in strictly personal matters.

That evening Campbell started the discussion. The men were seated idly around the stove – in easy range of the sawdust box – on overturned nail kegs or leaned against the counter. Lamis was endeavoring to post his books and I

pretended to busy myself with arranging the contents of the candy case, casually sampling certain varieties, for candy was still more important than politics.

"Boys," Campell began as he folded his newspaper and pressed it across his knee. "How's this admission of the Oklahoma territory goin' to affect lumberin'?

"Twon't," Brandon predicted. "It's too far from the markets." Brandon, as superintendent, could claim the point with ease, an ease fostered by polished Cordovans, faultless tailoring, emphatic cadence and a capable smile. He creased his own copy of the Times and leaned heavily in his chair while the others slumped forward to listen.

"Yes," Campbell challenged, "I suppose 'Teddy' Roosevelt'll fix everything for us!"

Campbell, though under orders, did not share his superior's politics.

"What do yuh want?" Brandon demanded. "Ain't he done things? Finished McKinley' term all right, built the canal; beat the railroads; fixed the Russians and Japs up, and don't forget. Roosevelt beat Parker in a walk."

"Just a minute! Just a min-it!" the tall assistant held up his hand. "You say he trimmed Parker, but how'd he do it? Opposed the trusts with one hand and got campaign funds from 'em with th' other. How's that?"

My father, who sat on a near-by nail keg answered him.

"Apple sauce! Dad chuckled. "apple sauce!"

"That's right," Frank Ferris cut in. "Right you are; nothing to it." He had sat quietly behind the stove, but brought his chair down with a bang of approval.

"Campbell might be right," Jim Macbeth drawled.

The other Democrat, Eastman, with his elbows on his knees looked up moodily from is nail keg.

"Sure, Lou," – meaning Campbell - "you an' Jim are right - no question about it."

So it was settled, as far as Eastman was concerned, but Brandon had by no means finished. He sat unmoved, chair tilted back, feet on the stove and clung to his smile.

"Boys," he addressed them soothingly, "Hargrave's right! That talk about campaign funds is all apple sauce and nothing but campaign talk. As I was saying, he fixed up the Russians 'n' Japs ---

I saw Lamis rise leisurely from his desk and walk around the counter to hear better the argument. The atmosphere had grown as calm as an Irish picnic.

It seemed Brandon intended to continue.

"You Democrats, Campbell, are always kicking! Right now Roosevelt's trying to get a pure food law through and what are the Democrats doing?"

"Food law, food law! Who in th' name of Saint Peter wants a food law? Potatoes are 60 pounds to the bushel n' salt port has t'come from dead hogs. That's the food law."

Only good it would do t'd be to make fat hogs," Macbeth agreed amiably. "Fat jobs – fat hogs!"

My father snorted and I saw a pleased smile steal over my employer's face. Lamis, though a Republican, had not favored further interference in the already exhausting details of his business.

"Of course the law would do good," Brandon went on, unruffled. "Won't bother nobody but storekeepers. They'll have to get some stuff relabeled, but personally," he smiled broader than ever, "I like to know how much red lead I'm getting in my catsup, anyway. This new law would make 'em tell. How about it, George?"

"Mine is all red lead," Lamis drawled, a laugh passed around the store, bearing testimony to his own skill in easing charged atmospheres.

"Oughta conform to Lon's food law then, George. Be good stuff with potatoes 'n' salt pork." Brandon eased his chair down to the floor.

"Now seriously, boys, a blind man could see this Roosevelt's got guts. He told the Europeans to keep their hands off over here. Ain't that all right?

"Yeah," Campbell suggested. "Got his picture in the papers, too, carrying' a club! Them high – handed policies – "

"High-handed - nothing! Sticking up for our rights, that's all. What do you want for a president? We need a he-man to run this country."

"Yer right!" Dimons suddenly spoke out. He had been watching and listening. His pipe had grown cold and he took it from his mouth as he continued in his high-pitched voice.

"Thet Teddy Roosevelt's tryin' t' look out fer everybody."

"Whose rights did you say he was lookin' out for?" Campbell questioned.

"For everybody that amounts to anything," Brandon defended and seeing Campbell squirm started another attack. Lamis observing the sign gave me a hopeless smile and went back to his deck.

"Now see here, Campbell," the affability had passed from the superintendent's face. "Roosevelt's even lettin' niggers hold office; givin' 'em a chance. He's lookin' out for everybody - even the damn Democrats."

“Well,” Campbell insisted, that’s just what he’d better do if he expects to be president of this country. Old Andy Jackson did in his day, ‘n’ so did Thomas Jefferson. He was the smartest man that this country will probably - .”

‘Aw forget the Democrats for a minute, will you!” Brandon taunted. “There are a few good Republicans.”

“A dang few is right,” Campbell chuckled, “but,” he admitted ungrudgingly, “that Roosevelt has got the makin’s of a man.”

Most of them nodded, even to Macbeth and Eastman.

“He ain’t a’tall afeared t’ speak his piece when it’s necessary, ‘n’ he throws bricks on’y when he orates,” my old friend summarized.

Both Campbell and Brandon laughed and that evening’s discussion was over. However, that store remained the great tribunal of the backwoods for the weighing of opinion.

The more important celebrations took place at the schoolhouse, but it was around Lamis’ old stove that the real issues were argued. There too, when sickness came, when death or destitution stalked, the lumbermen came and left contributions for the stricken.

From that store went calls to the doctors: to Lowville, Port Leyden, Constableville, and even to Watertown. Those calls were answered, too, by fleet horses, determined and often snowshoed men.

Beside that stove I heard the most astounding bear stories and fishermen’s recitations, listened to the tales of some classic fights and witnessed the struggles, the failures, the miseries, the happiness, and the triumphs of an ever marching, never yielding people.

CHAPTER IX

The months slipped by and summer came again with days so hot that barefoot children shunned our cinder path and ran hastily when crossing the platform before our door. Then strangely, at evening when a murmuring silence fell among the spruces, a coolness came into the air, a coolness of higher altitude shaded woodlands and boggy marshes.

On the platform before the store we could hear the rising, falling chorus of the peepers, a deep low strum of bullfrogs, the hoot of an owl and the strange call of some unknown night bird.

Customers came and went and slowly gradually fall came, laying her flaming color upon the hardwoods that skirted the mill pond.

I stood outside the store one day, watching the gray mists sift across the pond and saw a wedge of ducks southward bound, forerunners of the snow. I heard the crack of a light rifle beyond the pond and away to the southwest the boom of some heavier gun, declaring the hunting season.

"Allan," I heard Lamis call and went inside.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing much. Why?"

"Sit down a minute; I want to talk with you."

I sat down and watched him light his inevitable cigar with a dilatory hand.

"What are you planning to do next summer when school's out?"

"Don't know," I replied. "I would like to stay here if you want me."

"Well, you'll be finishing school in the spring. Helen's going away to high school next fall and I might move. What would you like to do?"

He took the cigar carefully from his mouth and questioned me with sober eyes.

"Well, I don't know. I'd like to go to school, but I'd like to keep on working in the store too."

"You like the store work, don't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, Allan, I could make a pretty fair storekeeper out of you I believe." He rubbed one index finger over the glittering stone in his ring.

"Do you think so?" I asked.

"I think I could," he smiled.

"I'm going to send you to a friend of mine, next fall. He runs a good shop and he'll treat you well. Probably you could work and go to school. That is, if he'll take you."

"Sounds good. Who is he? Where's his store?"

"In Boonville. Name's Herman Sile."

"Do you think he'd take me?"

"Think he would. He's had a lot of boys, and he always uses 'em right."

"Hm-m-m," I jammed my hands into my pockets thoughtfully. How would it affect me? Of course I'd have to say good-bye to the Lamises then.

"You said, Mr. Lamis, that you might move away. Where do you think you'd go?"

"Dunno yet. Maybe Lowille or Watertown. Might go to Oswego. I got to go somewhere where Helen can attend a good school."

"What'd you do?"

"Don't know that. It's too far ahead to figure. I'd have to sell first."

"That ought to be easy. You're making money."

"Yes, some."

I fell to thinking. I'd hate to leave the woods. After all my planning, I would not like to leave my folks, nor Old Frank nor Jackie. Of course I'd keep track of Helen.

Lamis' voice aroused me from my dreaming.

"I won't be selling for a while. I want you to stay as long as I'm here. When you want to go outside to school, let me know. I'll get in touch with Sile."

"Thanks, Mr. Lamis."

He spoke no more of the matter for months, but the idea that I could continue to keep store persisted.

The winter snows drifted in again and the clearing took on the aspects of an Alaskan outpost.

One Saturday morning in February, Lamis called me to his desk.

"I'd like to have you go back to Old Frank's cabin today. I've got an order for some gum."

I was delighted. Jackie Ferris who had happened in overheard his remark and waited outside the door. When I went out, she followed me.

"Allan," she looked at me with dancing eyes, "are you going now?"

"Going where?"

"Back to Dimon's cabin."

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing, only I'd like to go along."

"It's too far for a girl to walk."

"Oh fiddle! Of course it isn't; I could wear snowshoes and we'd be back before night, wouldn't we? I want to see his cabin."

"Well, all right, if the boss says so, you can go."

"Will you ask him?"

"Yeah, I'll ask him."

And Lamis agreed.

"Sure, take Jackie along if she wants to. Maybe Helen would go too."

"Shall I go and ask her?"

"Yes, go on over and ask her. The walk would do her good."

When I informed Jackie, she protested immediately.

"What's she got to go for? Frank don't like her anyway."

"That's none of our business." I reminded her. She gave me a questioning look, but followed along. When I stopped at Lamis's, Jackie turned toward home.

"Will you come and get me when she's ready?"

"Yes."

"I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"All right, hurry up."

Mrs. Lamis met me at the door and called Helen. I saw a swish of curls as she came in from the kitchen.

There was grace in her every motion; something hard to describe, an unconscious splendor wherein words fail.

"Hello, Allan! What are you doing here?"

"Your father," I was uneasy enough, "your father wants me to go back to Dimons' cabin, and Jackie Ferris is going along. He sent me to see if you wanted to go too."

"What, with you and Jackie Ferris back to that dirty old place!"

I, naturally, was embarrassed.

"Helen Lamis! How dare you be so rude!"

"I didn't intend to offend Allan, mother, but you know - "

Mrs. Lamis appraised her daughter silently while I stood confusedly, hat in hand.

I had wanted Helen to go in spite of Jackie's self-invited presence; but I also had considered Helen's apparent dislike for the old man. I thought I might yet persuade her to a different point of view, but that hope was dwindling.

"Well," I concluded, "I've got to go. Wish you would go along."

"Sorry, Allan, and thank you, but I guess I won't."

"Good-bye, then," I opened the door.

"Good-bye, Allan; come again," Mrs. Lamis called after me.

I did not remember enough manners to thank her, and hurried away.

Over at Ferris's Grandma answered my knock.

"Come in, Allan, Jacqueline's getting ready. Take a chair."

I took the one she offered and as I sat down, noticed a chubby-faced baby of three or four years in an adjoining room that served as a combination kitchen, dining room and living chamber. The little room where I sat was evidently reception hall and parlor. A wheezy little organ and a plaster of Paris bust, representing one of the desirable graces, were almost the only ornaments.

From the kitchen the youngster spied me and pointed a chubby finger.

"Gramma, who's 'at?"

"Allan Hargrave, honey; he's going back in the woods with Jackie."

"Kin I go, Gramma?"

"No, 'course you can't, Sissie! Your little legs is too short. You'd get lost in a snow bank. Jackie'll be back this afternoon."

The little face stopped its stuffing of buttered crackers and gave me a disappointed stare, as if indignant at my taking Jackie away. Then mumbling something to herself she turned and began dabbling her spoon in the butter.

"Whose youngster is that, Mrs. Ferris?"

"That's little Louise Berry. You know her father" (she spoke lower) was killed in the woods last fall?"

"Yes, I heard about it."

"Well, her mother asked me to keep her for a few days. She's gone out to Lowville to look for a job, but she'll be back in a few days now. I didn't have the heart to refuse her."

The old lady folded her arms wearily across her calico bosom as her voice finished in broken cadence.

The thing touched me, earlier in the fall I had seen lumbermen draining their pockets to make a fund for Berry's burial. Lamis had kept a record at the store of their contributions.

As we talked, I noticed the youngster pointing at her face and mumbling something.

"She's happy enough, Mrs. Ferris."

"She's a honey! Happy? Yes." Grandma Ferris forced a smile. "Do you hear what she's saying?"

"No, I don't get it."

"Well," she pointed to her forehead, cheek bones and chin. "Watch her close and listen. It's a little jingle Jackie taught her."

Louise repeated the rhyme, apparently much delighted with herself.

"Heah sets zuh Wawd Mayor." She touched her forehead. "Heah sets zuh two me." She pointed to her eyebrows. "Heah sets zuh ole Wooster, 'n' heah sets zuh ole hen." She touched each buttered cheek. "Tin-topper - tin-topper - tin-topper - - tin!" She patted her greasy little mouth with a fat hand and laughed aloud.

"That's good, Louise!" the old woman applauded. "Did you understand the last, Allan?"

"Yes, 'Chin-chopper, chin-chopper."

Grandma chuckled and I laughed.

Jackie came down stairs wearing a pair of her father's old trousers which were stuffed into heavy leggings.

"Where's Helen?" she asked.

"She's not going."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"Well, how do you like me?" She turned for my inspection and gave me an eloquent look that apparently, was not lost to grandma.

"Oh, you'll do - get through the drifts, all right." I didn't want to make too indefinite a statement, especially before the old lady because I was still unaware that young folks succeed oftenest in fooling only themselves.

Jacqueling went into the kitchen and I heard the baby say something that I did not understand.

"Be a good girl, Weezie."

"Es, Weezie goo' girl." She proved it too, by describing a greasy arc with her spoon upon the table cover."

"Weezie, you're a little pig." But Jackie searched for an unbuttered spot and kissed he cheek. Then she came back in the parlor shod in high shoes, wearing a heavy jacket and carrying a pair of snowshoes.

"I guess we're ready, Allan." She took hold of the door-knob and turned around.

"Bye, Weezie." She waved to the baby. "We'll be back before night, Grandmother.

"All right, Jacqueline. Allan knows the way?"

"Yes," I assured her. "I could find it in the dark"

"You'll be back before it's dark, won't you?"

"Will unless we get snowed in."

"Don't worry, Grandmother," Jackie consoled her.

"Be a good girl, Jacqueline."

She watched us go down the steps and down the path to the track.

As we went up the roadbed a few flakes of snow were sifting down and the sky was growing dark in the west.

We did not stop at the store. There was no one in sight there and we went up the path toward the mill. Skirting that, we reached the edge of the timber and the snow-filled trail.

"Here's where we put on snowshoes." I began strapping mine on.

Jacqueline dropped her shoes and soon had her feet fast in the harnesses.

"Is it very far, Allan?"

"Good two miles."

"That won't take long."

"NO," I replied, "we'll be there'n less'n an hour."

We plodded along, climbed the ridge, passed LaRoque's camp which lay under a thick blanket of snow, and then turned westward at the crest of the hill.

"T'was just over the second ridge that I shot that deer."

"Not many around is there?"

"No, Dimons says there used to be plenty, then they were gone for a time; but they're coming back."

"Where do they come from?" Jackie asked.

"Frank says they cross over from the Adirondacks."

"I saw one cross the town road a week ago."

"Buck or doe?"

"I don't know." She eyed me curiously. "It had horns."

"Must have been a buck, then. They're bolder now than they are in the hunting season."

"Dad says they are shy then." She spoke without looking up or ceased the "crunch crunching" stride she had fallen into. By no means was she difficult to look upon. Her lashes were long and lithe and alive with an inexhaustible love of life running through it, a smoldering contribution from some old French grandsire.

"Sure! The bucks are shot at in the fall; it makes 'em wild, but the does are safe unless someone cracks them off accidentally and otherwise."

"Who would do that?"

"Nobody knows. You never can tell who does it."

"They don't tell of it, do they?"

"Pretty apt to cost 'em money if it leaked out, but Frank's found plenty of carcasses."

We went on slowly down the trail between small poplars, beech and birch trees and came at last to the snow-filled beaver meadow.

"Tired?" I asked her.

"Well, just a little," Jackie admitted. She walked slower.

"Look," I pointed to the northwest where I could see Frank's cabin. A blanket of snow lay on the roof and a faint wisp of blue smoke coiled sluggishly upward.

"Is that Mr. Dimons' camp?"

"Yes, that's it."

As we started across the marsh the flakes began to fall again.

"Let's go quietly and surprise him," I suggested.

"That'll be fun." She agreed and we made a wide circle to keep from sight of his window.

"Shh!" I held up my hand to Jacqueline. From inside, Frank's pathetic tenor voice quavered and strained in solo:

"Be good, be good, my faw-ther sed,
"Though th' roads be ruff 'n storm-ee;
"Someday yuh'll be th' pres-uh-dent,
'R a corpul in th' arm-ee."

"Is he – is he – uh – all right?" Jackie questioned soberly.

I could scarcely control an explosive snicker and held up my hand for silence. I banged on the door with my fists.

"Hey! Help – help! Hey."

From inside I heard a sound as of someone falling, and the door swung violently inward and Frank stood there, glaring at us, shotgun in hand.

"Ho-ly Mike, boy! What 'o yuh mean – scarin' a man inta fits?"

Although I had yet to see one he looked to me like a wildcat ready to pounce, but the cloud passed as swiftly as it came and he smiled a bit ruefully.

"Who'z that – Jackie Ferris? How'n tunket did you kids git here?"

"Come on th' roof," I said soberly, "and th' road is ruff ' stormy… Go on in Jackie."

"Gee Crismus, yes! C'mon in Jackie. Don't pay no attenshun t' 'n old fella's nerves. Gee-rusalem yo kids scairt me."

Jackie gasped, held her sides and leaned backward with laughter.

"C'mon in, Jackie," I repeated as I passed her. "Do you want to freeze Frank completely?"

Then she pulled her gloves off her fingers, tugged out of the icy harnesses and wearily set her snow-shoes against the wood pile.

"Crismus, how it snows! Good thing it didn't snow like this whilst ye wuz comin." The old man backed himself toward the stove and held his hands behind him to warm them.

I glanced at his fly-specked clock. One o'clock. I was hungry as a bear in March.

"Have yuh got anything to eat around this place?" I asked.

"Ha – ha! Ain't hngry, be yuh, Allan?"

"Sure, I am. I didn't have any dinner and neither did Jackie."

"You hungry too, Jackie?" he asked.

"I'm starved." She laughed and stamped the snow from her feet as she slid out of her jacket and dropped it over his Boston rocker.

“Thet’s right, Jackie – mean Mis’ Ferris. Make yerself t’ hum whilst I git yuh a snack.”

Frank’s snack proved to be fried potatoes, fried steak, bread without butter, and coffee that would float the spoon.

“This here beef tastes wild,” I observed, packing my mouth with the second huge slice.

“Tut, tut, Allie, yer bringin’ up’s begun t’ show.”

“I told Jackie while we were comin’ in that the deer wasn’t so plentiful.”

“Nope! One less’n thar wuz.”

Jacqueline regarded Old Frank with wide-eyed wonder. He stood calmly, one foot on the hearth watching his spider with a fork in hand.

“Mr. Dimons, is this venison?”

“ ‘Tain’t nothin’ else,” he grinned, showing some scattered and discolored teeth.

“My, this is good.” I saw that presumably she had forgotten the finer points of etiquette and like a cannibal was gnawing a bone between her fingers.

“Don’t swallow thet bone. Mis’ Ferris. Here’s another hunk.” Frank speared it from his spider and dropped it on her plate.

Jacqueline laughed. “Thank you, and call me ‘Jackie’, please.”

“My mistake, mis’ Jackie. Wat’re yuh smilin’ bout, Allie? Yuh needn’t watch Jackie s’close. You kin have s’more too.”

I had smiled to myself to see Jacqueline unconsciously leave off the etiquette of the clearing folk.

“It’s past hunting season, Mr. Dimons. How do you manage to keep your venison?” Jackie asked.

“ ‘S ginrully gone ‘fore it spiles. Anyhow,” he gave me an eloquent look. “I got a refrigyrater out’n th’ bresh.”

I had seen a woodsman’s refrigerator – a stout limb, hidden from view, among the evergreens.

“Gee Crismus, how it snows!” Frank shuffled to the window and stared out into the falling blanket.

“Glad we’re not on the trail now,” I observed,

“We’d be snowed under!” Jacqueline exclaimed. “I hope it lets up soon.”

“ ‘Tain’t likely to. Looks like you kids is here fer the’ night,” Frank predicted.

“We couldn’t do that, could we?” Jackie asked, “My grandmother would worry.”

"She'd reely hev some' t' worry fer ef yuh started out 'n this storm."

"But what'll I do?" Jackie was anxious.

"Yuh kin jus' sleep'n m' bunk t'night.. Th' floor's good 'nuff fer Allie 'n' me."

"Sure. Frank and I can roll up in blankets on the floor, and you'll be all right. Your folks won't worry. They'll know where you are."

"Well, what about your mother?"

"Oh, Mr. Lamis will tell my folks where I am. He knows we had time to get in here, all right, and we couldn't go out now."

"Well, why'n tunket did you kids ever pick sech a day's this fer?"

Then for the first time I remembered the letter in my pocket.

"I guess I'd forget what m' name was – here." I handed him the letter.

"What's thet?" he asked and turned it over in his lean fingers.

"A letter for you from George."

"What's 'e want?"

"Oh, I don't know. Gum, I guess. Read it."

For an instant a perplexed look came to his face and then he handed back the letter.

"You read it t' me, Allie," he begged. "m'eyes is sorta bad."

Then I remembered how ludicrously he had read George's sign that day in the store and how later he had driven a bullet from 75 paces into the tiny circle on the beech tree.

"Eyes sorta bad, eh? All right." I took the letter, ran my thumb under the flap and pulled out the sheet. It read:

Dear Frank:

Got a buyer for some gum. Can pay 30 cents. Bring out what you can next week if the price is satisfactory.

George L.

"Wal," Frank said when I finished reading. "It's a dum poor snow thet don't help sumbudy's haulin'. I'm gittin' powerful short o' cash."

We stacked our dishes, for Frank said there was no need to wash them now.

"Gotta eat agin 'fore long. We'll wash 'em all t'onct."

"I won't want to eat again today," I protested.

"Won't nobody make yuh," Old Frank observed. "I'm goin' t' eat, anyway – bye 'n' bye."

We shoved his two straight-backed chairs toward the fireside and sat down. As we talked, the wind came stronger, swirling great blankets of snow over the cabin and against the window frames.

"I'm tickled yuh kids ain't out'n this," the old man pointed to the whitened window.

"Sh-h – what's that?" I asked. A low moaning note began to climb in the wind.

" 'S- jus' th' win' 'n th' chimbly." Frank pointed, "It's blowin' some now."

And indeed it was. It whined in the pipe and whistled around the ridge pole throwing a spray against the window panes like wave rests breaking on the bow of a ship.

The fire crackled cheerily, bringing me a delicious sense of warm comfort and security. Frank replenished it at intervals. That afternoon was all too short as we sat listening to how things were done in Maine. I caught Jacqueline's eye occasionally and saw her stare at Frank when he told how his "ole cat tried t' nuss th' squirrel babies, and of the great bear he "kilt thet was taller'n a man 'n' had teeth thet cud snap yer arm like a sliver."

One less familiar with Frank might have considered his stories skeptically but not I. He was an enthusiastic story teller, but I had seen wonders there myself, beyond all doubting.

It was a stirring thing to watch him. With both hands, a long bony finger, his pipestem and both feet he painted Maine for our young imaginations.

"She's th' ole Pine Tree State,'n'pines – Lord help us. Out thar th' stars seem t' hang down jus' like lanterns on top th' hills. Yuh oughta hear th' loons cry. T' see th' trout jump fer a gnat – boy! They's fish thar. Gee, ef yuh could see th' deer come down out'n th' woods 'n th' moonlight, t' eat up some farmer's garden whilst he's a – sleepin 'r pick th' huckle berries on th' barrens, or th' raspberries 'long sum ole woods road, 'r stand at sundown 'n width th' light flicker out over a lake, 'r hear th' surf 'long th' seashore - Crismus!"

"How'd you ever drift up in this neck of the woods, Mr. Dimons?" I asked.

" 'S too long a story t' tell yuh now, Allie," and then for a time he was silent.

Before 5 o'clock, darkness began to steal into the corners of the cabin and shortly after I lit his smoky lamp. At six we began preparations for supper and, much to my surprise, I was hungry when it was ready.

"Yuh don' haf t' eat, Allie, "he reminded me again.

"Thanks, but I guess I will, though," I replied.

I observed that Jacqueline's appetite had not diminished.

Supper over, she washed the dishes while I dried them and Frank sat and smoked. What a strange sight we were: a light complexioned boy, a dark-haired girl, and the gray old man, watching us through half closed eyelids from his chair beside the fire.

When we had stacked the last dish, Jackie and I sat down beside him again.

"Allie," Frank demanded, "are yuh still determined t' be a counter -jumper?"

"Counter-jumper? What do you mean?"

"Counter-jumper? A storekeeper, o'course,"

"Huh," I laughed. "Yes, I guess I'm going to be a storekeeper."

"Helen Lamis decide it for yuh?" he asked blankly.

"Helen! Gosh no! I'm workin' because I want to."

"Wal, tell me 'bout it, Allie."

And so I told him many things, while Jacqueline stared silently into the fire. I told him of the rifle Lamis had given me and how he promised to help me get located at Boonville.

" 'S all right t'go t' skool, Allie; but thet ain't all they is t' life – skool! Pshaw! I've learnt lots o' things yuh can't learn 'n a skool! Take, fer instance, how t' pack a fifty poun' basket while yer back's breakin', 'n' yer knees wobble every step. Skools can't teach yuh thet! 'T' keep goin' when yer guts iz 'bout gone, 'n' ---scuse me, Mis' Ferris – when yer guts git weak 'n' yer gizzard's give out – when you'd rather lay down 'n' quit, but yuh stand up'n take it 'thout whinin'. When yuh wander off'n a snow trail 'n th' winter time 'n' yer tosies freeze 'n' yer fingers freeze 'n' yer ready t' cry but yuh bite yer tongue instead. When yuh slave 'n' suffer 'n' wait year after year'n silence 'n' face forwards, on yer feet like a Indian. When yuh git so yuh ain't 'fraid o' nothin' in this world 'r th'' one t' come, 'n' kin keep hopin' ---then m' boy, you've earnt a diploma, but they won't be nobody round t' hand it t' yuh."

His voice, which had droned higher and higher, stopped short. He leaned forward on the edge of his chair and his old eyes gleamed as he looked at me.

I nodded silently numbly, but he said no more.

Jackie too was silent, with eyes wide and staring.

That night I rolled beside Frank, in some blankets and a bear skin on the floor. Jackie had his bunk

Ere long I could hear her regular breathing and I knew she slept. Frank's nasal oscillations made a disturbing lullaby, but I felt warm and comfortable as I

slipped off, fully confident that I could “stand up ‘n’ take it – face forwards – like an Indian.”

CHAPTER X

By the natural order of things, I quarreled with Helen Lamis.

It was April again and everything under foot seemed to turn liquid with each day's sun. We had water and mud and more water which nightly took on a thin scale of ice.

I had not forgotten my trip back to the cabin with Jackie, but its full significance had somehow missed me. At the store, our work increased. I had sweeping and dusting to do; there was still wood to be split, and the usual run of goods to unpack and display. I changed merchandise on the counters, distributed mail, waited on customers, and attended to innumerable other jobs which required both speedy and accurate dispatch.

Some skill came to me and it was a considerable source of pride to know I was helping Mr. Lamis make money. He was making money, for the hill people came in numbers and he supplied all their necessities.

There were the camp bosses, the rough lumberjacks, the log jobbers and their teamsters, the mill hands and their wives, the school teacher, the wandering camp parson, people from the boarding house, the train crews, and even the farmers from the edge of the woods.

Lamis drew them all for toothpicks and peavey handles, for mincemeat and mackinaws, for shotguns and salt pork, and if ever a man was fitted by nature to be of service to others, it was George Lamis, and he profited, which was right.

He raised my wages four dollars, and as a backwoods schoolboy, I might have been contented, but I had a vision of the long road and of more wondrous things in the purple distance.

One Saturday morning Lamis stopped me. I was washing windows.

"Allan," busy though he was, he always drawled it, "how'd you like go to a party this afternoon?"

"What – today?" Saturday was our busy day and I contrived to do things that I could not do while school was in session.

"Yes, today. Helen's having a birthday party this afternoon. We didn't get out invitations, but I expect she'll be glad to have you there." He weighed the effect of his words, smiling a little. I thought he could read my mind.

That afternoon I attended Helen's party, dressed in a new salt and pepper suit that her father and I had carefully selected from a ready-to-wear catalogue. It had long trousers, too, which made me feel like an heir apparent. At noon I informed Mother of my invitation.

"I've noticed, Allan," she said, "that you seem mighty concerned about your appearance of late." She did not say what her suspicions were, but I caught her smiling several times when she found me examining myself carefully before the mirror.

Over at Lamis's I found quite a number of young folks making merry. We played most of the foolish old games which still delight young folks. We even went so far as to play 'wink' and – this is confidential – 'post office'. We tried the quadrille and a number of waltzes, played a few hands of rummy and finished the afternoon around a colorful table of delicacies crowned by Helen's cake of 16 candles.

Harry Maxwell, much to my discomfort, had most of her waltzes and sat next to Helen, telling stories, which, although they did not please me, seemed to delight Helen. The others laughed too, including Jackie Ferris, but I could see only the well-salved part which lay in a faultless line across his scalp and the disgusting color of his tie. He leaned close to Helen with his stories and – Frank would have said "Gee-rusalem!"

However, it was not my party. I tried to look happy as possible, but Harry was too much in evidence and he was one of the last to leave.

I thanked Mrs. Lamis for my good time and was gathering my hat and coat to go when Helen stopped me.

"Allan, can you stay half an hour?"

"I ought to be back at the store."

"Oh, I'll fix that with Dad. I want you to help me drive the pony a little before dark. It's pretty muddy down in the woods."

"Y-yes, if you want me to."

"I wish you would. The roads are so bad I don't want to go alone."

Something in her request made me bolder, and when we harnessed the little horse and turned him down the muddy road it came out. She had given me her hand again to help her into the cart. Looking backward from this far day, I think I might have been forgiven.

"Helen," I said – her hand lay close to me as she held herself on the seat – "we are both going away this fall."

My tongue seemed thick, my voice sounded hollow and mocked me as I spoke.

"Yes, we are." She looked at me, "Why?"

Perhaps I looked a little sick, but I wanted to go on – I had to go on – now.

"Helen, will – will you write to me when you go?"

She laughed a strangely unnatural laugh as though I were asking something perfectly ridiculous.

"Why, Allen! You sound so silly!"

Then something gave way. "Maybe you think it's silly! I flung the words at her – "Maybe you wouldn't think it was so silly if Harry Maxwell asked you." A wall of color was blotting out sense.

"Well, what if he did? What is that to you?"

"Just this, Helen Lamis!" I jerked the pony to a halt and pulled her toward me. A brave and foolish act. I wanted a word of assurance, not knowing that the most costly mistake sometimes is to ask.

"You – you beast." She bit off the words and jerked herself free.

"He-l-e-n." I reproached her.

"You get out of this cart, Allen Hargrave! Are you deaf? Get out of this cart!"

I sat like a statue of repentance.

"Allan Hargrave." There was anger in her voice. She seized her whip and gave me a cut with the lash.

"All right! All right, if you'll stop your crying." I climbed heavily off over the wheel.

She turned to me in one last flare of indignation.

"Harry Maxwell's a gentleman beside you. Don't you ever come near me again." She jerked the pony – who seemed as dazed as I – around and started back, sobbing as she went.

A numbness stole over me. What had I done? All the confidences I had won since that day I told them of the wildcat had blown away – so foolishly away. What could I do? Nothing.

I gripped a maple sapling beside the road and sat down on my heels.

Nor was that all. What would George Lamis say to me? I had insulted his daughter – not intentionally – but he would know. There would be no chance to explain. I couldn't go back to the store now. The store would be a good place to avoid.

What would Lamis do when we met? What would he say? There was nothing I could do for I couldn't tell him.

After a long time I stumbled up the road in the darkness. I crossed to the railroad to avoid Lamis's house. There was no one in sight within.

Half way up the track I saw a figure coming toward me. I stepped down the bank and knelt low until it passed. I did not want to be seen. More than all else now I wanted to see Frank. I could confide in him.

I passed the store noiselessly and turned home. Father and Mother were having supper in the kitchen.

"Why, Allan, you're late. Did the party last as late as this? She asked.

"No."

It was well after seven.

"Where have you been?" You weren't at the store at six-thirty. Mr. Lamis told your father he'd have to lock up."

Dad looked at me silently.

"I don't care. I' not going to work there anymore."

"Why not? Did you have some trouble?"

"No."

Dad was still silent.

"Then why do you talk like that?"

"Because I'm not going to work there anymore."

My father stared at me.

I ran up the stairs to bed and lay awake a long time. Finally I fell asleep in helpless weariness.

"Allan," I heard mother's voice, "it's time to get up."

A light was shining in the room, and then, I realized it was Sunday morning.

"I'm not going over to the store this morning," I called. It was customary to keep the place open a few hours on Sunday mornings.

"Do you want to lose your job, son?"

"I guess I've already lost it."

"What do you mean? I know something's happened that you haven't told us."

"What'd he say?" I heard my father's voice faintly.

"Said he'd already lost it," mother answered in a lower tone.

"Well," I called to her again, "I'm not going to the store." I made a final declaration.

Then I heard dad's voice again: "Leave the kid alone, Mother. He's upset about something. He'll feel better tomorrow."

Good old Dad. I rolled over drowsily and remained until mother threatened to put away the breakfast.

Monday morning I walked hurriedly past the store to the schoolhouse.

Helen was there, but she somehow did not see me, nor give any sign. I felt a growing resentment. I guessed I'd give up storekeeping. I'd stay in the woods with Old Frank. What did these people know about the woods, anyway? There was something more to the life of a woodsman than they could understand.

That afternoon on my way home from school George Lamis called to me as I passed.

"Allan, come here a minute."

I went, unwillingly enough. I would rather have been whipped and I was not sure but I might be.

Lamis soberly led the way into the store and motioned me to a chair by the stove." Allan," he began – he seemed not so dangerous as I feared – did you tell me a while ago that you liked storekeeping?"

"Well, maybe I did." I was not admitting more than was necessary.

"Well, I thought you did, but what's come over you? You didn't show up at supper-time Saturday, nor come to get your pay. This morning you marched right by and tonight the same again. If you wanted to quit, why didn't you hand over your key?"

"I'm sorry," I replied, "I forgot it. Here it is." I pulled it out of my pocket. He eyed me thoughtfully, but did not reach for his key.

"Allan," he said slowly, the trace of a smile on his lips, "it looks as though Helen's party sort of went against you." He flicked the ashes from his cigar.

I didn't know if he was trying to have fun with me. I colored and contrived a very lame apology.

"Well, I – I didn't feel very well."

He gazed at me another moment and then he chuckled. "I guess you'll feel better directly." And then, "Now, Allan," he sobered, "you've made a good start here and I want you to go on. You may keep the key if you want to. What do you say?"

I clutched the arm of my chair in indecision. Of course I wanted to continue, but I had lost all standing with Helen. From now on she'd be out of the picture for me.

"Here's your last week's pay." He handed it to me. "The dusting hasn't been done today."

He was letting me down easy. He wanted me to go back to work. I found the dust cloth and set about dusting.

Neither mother nor father seemed at all surprised when I asked to be called in time to open the store Tuesday morning, but I never told them what had happened.

May came, with the softening colors of green things as each morning I swept and dusted the store. Helen ran in almost every day, but the month had nearly gone before she spoke to me again.

One morning she came in, looking for her father. We were alone.

"Is Dad around, Allan?"

"He said he was going over to the mill and would be right back."

"Tell him I brought this package. Mother sent it," I watched her lay it on his desk, cast me a hasty glance, and start for the door.

"Helen" I called.

She turned her head cooly.

"I'll tell him," I began, thinking to coax a smile from her, but she turned on her heel and went out.

On the first Saturday in June, I heard an echo of my quarrel with Helen. It came, of course, from Harry Maxwell.

It was early evening and getting dark. I stepped outside the door for a moment. A little knot of men were seated on the platform talking or idly smoking.

Harry, with three other boys was holding up the west end of the store front – at least they were leaning heavily against it. I sauntered across the platform and spoke to some of the men. One of them raised a hand and nodded. It was Frank. Then, I heard the boys.

"Here comes our hero now." It came to me like a flash.

"Great lady-killer, ain't he?" It was Maxwell's voice. The other boys laughed.

I walked directly in front of them and spoke to Harry.

"Are you doing the calling off?"

"Well," he straightened and I saw his arms stiffen as he pulled his hands from his pockets, "what difference does it make to yuh?"

"Some, if you're talking about me."

"Well – I was."

"I thought so. You're generally talking behind some one's back, but I heard you. Now, to me, you don't look like any hero yourself."

He had previously boasted how easily he could trounce me, and I had a mind to see.

"Say," he said, "I don't pick on women."

"Did anybody say I did?"

"Yes, I'm saying so now."

"And you're a liar." I saw red; stood on my toes and stepped back for what I knew was coming.

The men congregated on the platform had risen and were making a circle around us. It might have been the darkness or the speed with which I moved, but his blow missed me. As he stepped forward I slapped him with a flat hand and that started things.

"You – "

I felt a stinging left swing to the pit of my stomach. I sagged a little and as my chin went out, I just missed being slapped myself. Then, unmindful of the consequences, I stepped in close with a left feint and a right across to his chin that dazed him, but he turned again. We fell into a clinch. He locked strong arms around my ribs, endeavoring to crush them in, but his feet gave way and I had him horizontal in the air. My lungs seemed at the bursting point, but I'd fall on him now – drop him heavily on the platform.

I leaned forward to do it, and then felt a pair of strong arms pulling at us.

"Calm down 'ere. Calm down, you two, this's gone fur 'nuff!" It was the shrill voice of Old Frank behind me.

Some of the other men were holding Harry and it seemed to require more than one of them to do it.

"I'll get you yet, Allan Hargrave." He seemed to be a trifle peeved himself for some reason.

"Any time you say," I called back.

Frank pulled me toward the door.

"Ain't goin' t' help George's trade none, this, be yuh, boy?"

I couldn't speak, for exhaustion and shortness of breath. Someone had informed Lamis, for awhile I stood panting and wiping sweat from my face, he appeared in the lighted doorway, smoking and calm.

"Heard there was a fight out here."

"No, no fight," I gasped. "We were just getting ready."

“Sorry I wasn’t around to bet,” he smiled. “I might have made a dollar.”

The whole platform tittered.

“Better come in, Allan,” he observed, “we’re too busy to fight on Saturday nights.” The men laughed.

With that mild reproof, he went inside.

The following morning, instead of attending services at the schoolhouse, I hit the trail for Frank’s cabin.

I found him sprawled out in his arm-chair, feet on the bench, sunning himself and smoking contentedly. He did not stir as I approached.

“Hello,” I greeted him.

“H – lo, John L! Be safe settin’ ‘ere with you loose? His face wore a solemn mournful pain.

I snorted. ‘What do yuh think I’d do – stand around like a lamb an’ let that whelp lie about me?

Frank studied me carefully with one uplifted eyebrow.

“No, Allie, I don’t reckon you would.”

“He lied, and he wanted to start something, besides.”

“Objekshuns ov’ruled,” he replied. “Ye shouldn’t hev fit.”

“Don’t yuh think a nice girl’s worth fighting for?” I demanded.

“Mm –m – wait, a spek. Yer gittin’ off th’ track. What girl was yuh fightin’ ‘bout?”

“Well, I had a little trouble with Helen – “

“Trouble with Helen, eh?

“Yes, and he heard about it – “

“He took it up, eh?”

“Yes.”

“What’d ‘e say?”

“Said I was a lady-killer.”

“Hunh! Well, Allie, some gals is wuth fightin’ fer, but ‘tain’t never wise to fight. Whilst two fellas fight, the gal’ll go off with somebody elst.”

“What’d yuh think we was fightin’ about?”

“Jackie Ferris.”

“No – not her. I suppose you’d say she was worth fighting for.”

“Mm – wal – she’s diffrunt.”

“What do you mean?”

“Th’ bare facts is, Allie, yuh wouldn’t have t’ fight fer her.”

“No?”

“No. She don’t favor on’y one boy, ‘n’ thet one’s you.”

“What makes you think so?” I was trying to deny what I already knew.

“I got eyes, boy, ‘n’ ef ye wuz askin’ m advice I’d say: don’t make a fool o’ yeself! Santy Claus’z dead!”

Monday afternoon Helen came to the store. Her father was out again. She looked around silently, started toward the door, hesitated and then turned on me.

“I heard,” she flung it out, “how you started some more trouble with Harry Maxwell.”

But it was not that summer nor the next, when I realized the full significance of Santa Claus’s passing.

CHAPTER XI

Looking backward, the struggles of that slower life in the forest seem insignificant now. Our life was not all struggle, happily, and the joys that came to us, the sights and sounds and memories of that time were deep, quiet, and enduring.

Alguire's saloon had a brand of joy, but it brought violent headaches. Down there their card games ran far into the night and peddlers, log-jobbers, and lumberjacks alike took their turn at liquidating themselves, his mortgage, and the failure of their bid.

Around private firesides, however, there were different games which ranged from pinochle, authors, and Old Maid, to cribbage, euchre, Pedro, and stud poker. Checkers was a game that old men played and young ones attempted. While most of these contests moved leisurely enough, they were played with considerable skill and zest. There were good players and a few excellent ones.

Frank Dimons and George Lamis were of the best. Their lack of speed was no reflection on their skill, and when they matched, men lingered to see.

The evening of June 16th found Frank Ferris and the old hunter gossiping as we made ready to lock the store.

I had turned out one lamp and Lamis was extinguishing the small one over his desk when Old Frank challenged him.

"Reckon 'tain't s' late but what I could skunk yuh at checkers."

Lamis pulled out his watch.

"Time I corked up." He protested.

"Yuh ain't too sleepy t' watch me, be yuh?"

Lamis gazed at the old fellow affectionately. Then I saw a gleam in his eye.

"Well," he replied, "if you think you can skunk me, you gotta go some! … Allan, get the checker board."

Frank Ferris leaned on the counter and smiled as he watched me bring the warped board. Under the center lamp they took their places and lined up their men. Old Frank was expressionless, but I could see something in Lamis' eye that rivaled the sparkle of his diamond. I knew a real contest had begun, and late as it was, I wanted to stay.

"Six o'clock comes early," Lamis hinted, glancing at me.

"I won't stay long," I promised.

"He won't hev t'," Frank suggested as he pocketed his pipe. Ferris grinned at me as we leaned over them to watch the battle.

"Mr. Ferris, how's the baby getting on?" I asked.

"You mean Louise?" Mrs. Berry took her out to Lowville last week."

"Bet you miss her."

"Yeah, she sure is a cute kid."

"Jacqueline teach her any more Mother Goose rhymes?"

"Hunh!" he laughed, "she kin do more tricks than a pet monkey."

"What'll we use – twelve men?" Old Frank inquired.

"Sure! Unless you want to use ten," Lamis replied. "We'll bet, if you say."

"What'll we bet?"

"Bet you a box of number 4's against a catch of fish," George eyed him questioningly.

"'S a bet," Dimons agreed and shoved his first man to the right.

"Be sure and bring them legal length, though, Frank." Lamis gazed hard at the board and pushed his own checker to support the back space toward which the old hunter was maneuvering.

"Never keep nothin' else," Frank growled.

"No, you eat 'em." Lamis looked up soberly at Ferris and me.

Ferris laughed, but I did not join him. My sympathies were strangely divided.

Frank with a thoughtful forefinger shoved up another checker and Lamis brought support. With his next move the old man lost one checker, but succeeded in opening George's king-row.

George moved straight toward Frank's king-row and Dimons picked up one.

"My mistake," Lamis apologized. "I didn't see it."

Then he studied the board intently. His suggestion that Old Frank would be "going some" to beat him did not imply speed. Often times those men took moments of deliberation.

Nowhere, unless at Spartanburg, where later my companions played checkers for socks, did I ever see a match for their skill.

George moved into diagonal support.

The older man again opened George's ranks on the right. His claw-fingered assault was beginning to tell.

Lamis jumped and picked a man. Dimons came back with a jump to the right that took two checkers and placed his own in strategic position, one move from king-row.

Lamis whistled softly, gripping the board as he stared. The sparkle of his ring shone cold over his white knuckles.

From behind the counter I heard only the ticking of the clock.

I once witnessed our university chess players in action – owl-eyed professors, calculating doctors of the 'ologies - who played with all the skill of ancient Egyptians, but neither their game nor their stakes thrilled me as those two chaps – the storekeeper and old Frank, gambling for a string of speckled trout and a box of shotgun shells.

Lamis, after some deliberating, jumped two more men.

"What's your game, Frank?" he asked pleasantly.

"Checkers," the old man cackled and shoved up another.

I pulled the lamp lower. I had never seen my superior quite so intent. He hung back a moment and then pushed a solitary chip directly before Frank's king-row.

Frank, on his own side of the board, jumped a man and lost one, but laid open my boss's back row.

George moved his king and Frank shoved in between. Nothing now to stop him from stealing another wooden man. But George brought support too, and Dimons' king fell back.

The board was about divided now between number 4's and legal fish.

George moved another king for support. Frank's solitary monarch sat enthroned. The old man moved a single checker behind one of Lamis' that stood alone. George brought support.

Frank backed the monarch into his own king-row, taking two of George's men and compelling him to jump. Lamis jumped, but lost his king and one other.

Jacqueline's father touched my shoulder. "This is a checker game, boy!" I nodded.

Lamis moved one chip still farther toward Frank's king-row and the old man's king came out of the corner to prevent further assault.

I stood up suddenly, having forgotten the lamp.

"Don't knock out th' glimmer yit, Allie. I gotta see here fer jest a minnit."

I chuckled excitedly.

From the opposite corner of the board George's diamond gleamed over a circle of wood as he thrust it forward. Frank was forced to jump again and Lamis took that checker along with two others from the fisherman's front rank.

"Kin ye' pull that lamp down a speck thar, Allie? Georgie seems t' hev eyes like a cat, t'night."

It's down as low as it can go."

"Turn it up a little, then," Lamis ordered. "It'll stand it."

I gave the wick a turn till the flames nearly touched the glass. It was hot.

"That's better," the old man approved. He gathered up a groper toward his king-row.

There were four men each on the board now, with Frank's advantage of one king. The old man's backfield lay open too, with a single checker in each corner.

George moved from center, driving two men toward the opening. Dimons moved in. Lamis turned aside.

Something missfired then in my old friend's calculation, for he jumped and lost his king, with George headed free for a crown.

I glanced at the clock behind the counter; it was ten-twenty-eight. There was not another sound.

Lamis then brought his king before Frank's two uncrowned men. Then he slipped. He might have had one, but reckoning the loss of a lone checker in an outer square, he shoved backward.

The old hunter went into Lamis' back row for still another crown and came back beside Lamis' king. George now had but two.

Lamis shoved one king behind Frank's two unguarded men with the idea of getting one of those last three. The old man moved a lone one before this king that had not stirred from George's king-row. George jumped it, and Frank took the winner.

Four men lay on the board – two kings apiece. Lamis wedged in his rear king.

"Darn yer pitcher, George," the old man piped up.

" I ain't too sleepy t' watch yuh skink me," George mocked. "I've got a strong hankering for trout."

"Git yer mind off'n th' fish, Georgie, 'er I'll gaffle yuh yit."

Lamis laughed.

"Wait." Frank's dark fist hovered over his king. He hesitated, then he moved.

I smiled at Ferris. Frank was plainly not himself, and Lamis was playing for his life. He saw the chance and his right fist came down with a sparkle.

Dimons blurted, “D’…fool. My eyes hez got crossed.”

“Ooo—ooo-ooooo,” From across the track a screaming whistle pierced the still night air.

“What’s that?” Ferris ran toward the door. “It’s over at the mill.”

I glanced up nervously as the whistle rent the air again. “Ooo-oooo-ooooo-oo-oo.” Then it rose to a long ear-splitting screech.

“There’s a fire at the mill!” Ferris yelled from the door and disappeared into the darkness.

“Wait!” Lamis’ cold stone shone for an instant over the circle of wood he thrust before Frank’s kings.

The old man started to rise.

“Wait!” Lamis called. “Allan! Frank! Do yuh see here? I got ‘im, all but one.”

“Hells bells! And Gee-rusalem! Besides. I ain’t beat. I got one left. I’ll cram yuh s’ full o’ fish yer belly’l stick out. Where’s m’ gun? I’m goin’ t’ th’ fire!”

With that he jumped up, knocked the board and checkers a-rolling, grabbed his gun and trotted toward the door.

Outside in the darkness I heard sounds of running feet on the cinder path, and the call of excited voices.

Lamis gathered up the board wearily, apparently disgusted at Frank’s sudden departure.

“Ain’t yuh going over? I was nearly as excited as Frank.

“Help me find these checkers, Allen. Didn’t I do that neat?”

“Checkers?”

“Yes, we gotta pick ‘em up – somebody’ll want to use ‘em again.”

I all but jumped up and down from excitement and exasperation.

“I made a mad scramble for those I could see.

“Here!” I thrust them into his hand.

“Didn’t I do that neat, boy?”

“Yeah, ain’t yuh going?”

“Pretty soon, maybe. We got to get those checkers. Knocked ‘em all over the devil – but you’re witness, boy. I trimmed him.

“Yeup,” I all but jumped up and down from excitement and exasperation.

“You know what this means, don’t yuh, Allan?”

“What what means?”

“My winning this checker game and Bill Connors blowing that whistle.”

“It means the mill’s going up in smoke.” I all but yelled it.

“It means I’m the best checker player there was in Page, for Page goes with that mill. They can’t put out that fire trap in God’s world, and when it’s gone – good night.”

He threw the checkers into a box and dropped it under the counter.

“Allan,” he drew a cigar slowly from his pocket and thrust it into his mouth. “you know, boy, this fire will put a lot of men out of work?”

I was half way to the door.

“Might as well sell now,” he mused, then added as an afterthought, “I’ll see about that job in Boonville for yuh.”

“I’m going to the fire,” I called, one hand on the door-post.

“I’ll lock up and be right over, Allan – oh, Allen!”

Angrily I ran back three steps and looked inside. He had lighted his cigar and was leisurely buttoning his coat as though he were going out for a walk.

“What do yuh want?” I gasped.

“Well,” he pointed the butt of his cigar at me, “you’re my witness, boy – you saw them kings.”

But I was half way across the platform, running blindly through the darkness, dumbfounded at the constitutional coolness – I wondered if it ran in the family – of a certain George Lamis and seeing ahead of me the blazing light of flames that were growing hotter than the inner hinges of Hades.

The mill stood on a rise of ground northwest of the store. A spur of track ran in from the railroad to the lumber piles. Saw logs came directly from the pond and were rolled onto the log chute which carried them into the mill.

When I first saw the blaze, it had broken through the roof of the boiler room. A southwesterly breeze was fanning the flames across the roof. Lamis was right: there was not a chance of saving the mill.

By the light from mounting flames I saw 25 or 30 neighbors running excitedly about. The watchman, Bill Connors, ran by and I heard him shouting to Brandon, “Ferris phoned the roundhouse. Hymes is coming in on ’75 with some more hose.”

“ ’Fraid it’s too late, Bill,” And then Brandon called after him, “Connors!”

Connors came back, wiping sweaty black smudges from his face. “Yeah?” he inquired.

“Get out what stuff yuh can. Get some of the boys to help yuh – an’ be careful.”

"All right!" Connors was running toward the men. Twelve or 15 of them followed him into the mill room. A few stragglers tracked along after them.

I ran toward the entrance and several men passed me, carrying belting and saws, axes, peaves, machine tools, and one man came rolling an empty oil barrel – fully determined to save something.

Another group of men were making frenzied efforts to get a hose line into the mill pond, but there seemed to be too many bosses and not enough hose.

West of the mill a long conveyor carried refuse and sawdust out from the saws. There, larger slabs were returned to the engine-room to be burned, while sawdust and smaller debris were burned in a pit.

From the pump in the engine-room the hose line usually ran along this conveyor. The hose line supplied a stream of water ordinarily sufficient to quench a large blaze, but the fire had outgrown a single hose defense even if the pump had been running. It could not be started.

Half the west wall of the engine room had toppled outward. Part of the roof had fallen in onto the boilers. A group of men outside the saw room were working feverishly with pails and buckets. But it seemed hopeless from the start, for water was pitifully inadequate.

A man named Mackey passed me and as he went I called out to him, "This is tough luck, Tom."

"Beats hell," he grunted. And I've just lost a good set of tools down there."

"Where?" I asked.

"Down ther'n the boiler room." He moved away.

The tools were lost, sure enough – the roof had now collapsed. It was but a matter of minutes before the fire would eat away the mill room and the flaming fury would win.

Like grimy Trojans those men contested every foot of licking flame, but they were losing. Lamis in his own calm way had predicted rightly.

The blaze crept deeper into the mill with crackling roar and dense clouds of smoke. It was eating into payrolls, dinner pails and contented homes. I could see it clearly.

Faintly I heard a bell clanging in the distance and two or three minutes later the pride of the Glenfield and Western, "75", its new locomotive, roared around the curve and raced toward the spur like a living thing. Someone jumped off, flung the switch, and they roared up the spur.

That engine seems tiny enough now, but that night it seemed like a monster come out of the darkness. There were no cars behind her and as she came to a grinding halt, the heavy bearded Hymes sprang off and two others followed, Amos Levis and Johnny Macullen. Behind them two strangers tugged and pulled at a heavy coil of hose.

Waiting men ran to assist them and they disappeared swiftly into the mill, leaving "75" to snort herself out, under a glare that lighted the whole clearing.

Someone passing touched me on the arm. I jumped.

"What are you doing here, Allan?' It was Jackie Ferris and close beside her was Helen Lamis.

"What are YOU doing here?" I was astonished to see them together.

"Why, we came to see the bonfire of course," Jacqueline retorted.

"Where'd you find Helen?"

"What is that to you, Allan Hargrave?"

"Oh, n n n nothing, I guess."

Helen was calm as usual, and I, as ever, embarrassed.

"I hope we have your permission?" Helen turned a mocking face.

I could not answer. Then Helen urged Jackie, "Come on, Jacqueline, let's go."

The dark-haired girl gave me a hesitant look and then followed after Helen. I watched them climb nearer to the blazing timbers.

The engine room was all down. The flames ran so fast it was but a matter of minutes before the whole structure would tumble.

The heat scorched my face. I turned away toward the darkness and the cool breeze. It was hard to believe such a flaming Gehenna[1] could burst forth in that clearing.

Every night beside the pond, the summer breezes had been damp and cool. Every summer of my memory I had heard the trill of peepers and the chorus of the frogs. Beyond the glare of the flaming light the darkness lay deep upon the spruces. Somehow I felt a darkness closing down around me. A long span into the past was flaming and the end would be a deserted clearing, the dirge of the peepers and the silent stars.

How long I sat there, I cannot say. Suddenly someone jabbed my ribs and I jumped from surprise and anger.

"Whatcha jumpin' fer, boy? Anybody'd think ye waz subjeck t' fits."

"Hunh!" I snorted. "Anybody would think you was an Indian's spook – you walk like one."

“Spooks don’t have such big feet,” a voice piped up beside him.

Then I saw Jacqueline again.

“Oh, that you, Jackie? What became of Helen?”

“What’s that to you, Allan Hargrave?” She repeated Helen’s greeting.

“Nothing, only I wondered if you two had fallen into the fire.”

She laughed, “No, Helen went home half an hour ago with her father.”

“I’ll ‘scort this lady, Mr. Hargrave. Don’t need no a’tenshun frum you.”

Jacqueline laughed again, “Mr. Dimons is going to stay at our house tonight, Allan.”

“Good thing you’re taking him home; nobody else would.” I thought that would enliven Frank.

“Thank yuh jes’ th’ same, Allie. I’ll stay with yuh sum other night.”

“I didn’t ask yuh to,” I bantered.

“I’d a come ‘thout askin’ ef I didn’t have this engagemint.”

“Nice little bonfire, anyway,” I summarized. I had no idea of the hour, but I needed some rest. Mother would be calling me again all too soon.

“They won’t be nothin’ left ‘n th’ mornin’ but scrap iron,” Frank said soberly. Then he took a last look toward the ruins.

“Got pretty hot here tonight.” I stepped down the path.

Jacqueline and the old man started away.

“Let this be a warnin’ to yuh then, Allie.”

“Warning? What do you mean?”

“T’ keep on th’ straight ‘n’ narrer path.”

In the dying light I heard Jackie call.

“Good night, Allan.”

Then Frank growled something that sounded like curfew. I answered both of them and that night when I closed my eyes, I could still see falling timbers and blazing walls.

1 Gehenna - the valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem, where refuse was burned in Biblical times

CHAPTER XII

The evening of the checker game proved two things. First, that Page depended on the mill, for within a week the exodus began. Several mill hands went with their families and one of the camps ceased cutting.

The other fact I learned was that George Lamis did not run to fires.

One morning, about a week after the blaze, he laid down his work at the desk and called me. I had been telling how certain other families had threatened to go. He pulled the black weed from his lips, blew a ring of smoke thoughtfully, and began:

"Allan, things look bad, there's no denying, but we've got to do something."

"What can we do?" I asked. The disaster and the moving families had filled my mind.

"Well, for one thing, boy, we can't let down. Don't think we're licked – don't talk it."

"That's all right," I agreed, "but what can we do about it?"

He stared at me a moment and then smiled.

"I'm glad to hear you ask that. You've allowed we can do something, and that's a start."

I was flattered, but still saw no light.

"One of the most important things to remember is that you can change results."

He read incredulity in my face but went on:

"The first thing, Allan is, give 'em what they want. If some fellow asks you for a pair of woolen pants in an odd size, show him what we have. Then if he is not interested, take his order for them. We can get 'most anything he wants in four days. Tell him when he can get them. Collect his money, if you can, and don't let him go out to Glenfield or Lowville to buy what he wants."

"That would help," I agreed.

"Then," he continued, "take a little notebook and set down the names of occasional customers. We'll make a point of asking them to come often. We'll try to make chance customers regular ones."

"Yes," I nodded, "I know… some of those farmers who live out at the edge of the woods. They come only occasionally when they haven't time to go elsewhere."

He flicked the ashes from his cigar. "That's right. That's what we've got to do. There's no 'phones, we can't call 'em up; but we can put some advertising in every package that goes out."

"Say," I exclaimed, "those are good ideas."

"And that's not all we can do. Every Saturday night I'll take my bills over to the office and get our money."

"Can you?"

"Certainly," he nodded; "Brandon says so."

"He ought to know."

Lamis laughed and rubbed his diamond briskly across his knee.

"Another thing, Allan, this is your fight as well as mine. When you see something that ought to be done, do it. Don't stop to ask me."

That morning I grew several inches in mercantile comprehension. By mid-afternoon I had quite a list of occasional customers that I hoped we could make regular ones.

Lamis called to me shortly after three.

"I'm going over to Tom Wallace's across the ridge. I want to get some money on his bill. Be back, probably in an hour."

He had scarcely gone when Helen tripped in, head high, and resplendent in white: dress, stockings, and shoes.

"How do you do, Miss Lamis!" I bowed very gravely to her. "Is there anything I might do for you?"

My attempt to make her laugh was unsuccessful.

"Don't be silly," she countered.

"My approach is the proper way to greet a lady," I defended. If there is anything to which I might assist you, it is my fondest – "

"Your approach is quite becoming to you. It is what I would expect of an – "

"Idiot?" I suggested.

"Yes, a real dumb-bell." She regarded me with a very cold blue eye. "Is my father around?"

"I am sorry, Miss Lamis; he is absent."

"I judged so by your conduct."

"Then you think I'm bold?"

"Bold and impudent."

"Oh is that so?" I saw I was not getting far with the banter. It seemed she just couldn't smile.

"Well, what of it?" I asked.

"I wish you wouldn't be so silly. I only asked you a civil question."

"And I merely gave you a civil answer." The ice was getting thin.

She sat down on the arm of a chair, braced her feet and gripped her balance with a firm hand.

"Allan."

"Yes?"

"When will you learn to leave me alone?" Why must you show off? Every time I come here you make a nuisance of yourself."

"I'm so sorry."

"I wish my dad would – would fire you."

"And hire Harry Maxwell, I suppose?"

"Well, Harry's got some sense."

"Probably has. Why don't you suggest it to your father? You're the one who got me in here."

"I'm sorry I ever said a decent word for you."

"I know it, and I'll tell you what. I won't leave till I am fired."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to learn this business, and I'm going to learn it right."

"Huhh," she mocked, "you'll never be able to conduct a peanut stand."

"Oh, yeah?" the dark shadow was returning. "You'll be interested in my peanut stand," I said doggedly.

"What makes you think so?"

"Because I'll be running it for you."

She pushed herself bolt upright and started toward the door.

"You're minus all sense." She turned and gave me a contemptuous stare.

I walked toward her. She retreated.

"Helen," I begged, "don't be angry. Can I help it because you don't like me? I'm probably a little foolish when you're around, but I'd walk clear to California bare-foot, if you said the word."

She answered with a peal of laughter from the doorway.

"You'd better start, then, because I'm going to tell my father."

When she had gone, I paced the floor. Lamis had given me one more chance and I had disgraced myself again. This would probably be the last.

I was sitting with my chair tilted back and my feet on the stove when he returned.

"Did you make out that list of names?" he inquired.

"Yes, it's there on your desk. Did you get anything on Wallace's bill?"

"Yes, he paid me $10. Guess I'd better go to supper now."

He sauntered toward the door, hat in hand, and then he turned and saw me perched aimlessly on the counter.

"Allan, aren't you feeling well again?" There was a twinkle in his eye.

"Why – I – yes, I guess so – I –"

"Somethin' happen while I was gone?"

"Helen will tell you all about it." I didn't look up. I heard him scrape his feet on the floor and then clear his throat.

"Ooh! So that's it! Hmmm.."

He went out, whistling softly to himself.

I sat around the store in a daze. The hour dragged. When he returned, I was still alone. He came toward me, pulled up a chair and sat down. I fancied I knew what was coming.

"Allan," He began, "I'm sending Helen to Carthage to school this fall."

"Are you?"

"Yes, in September. I told you once I'd get you a job in Boonville with Herman Sile."

"Yeah, I know you did."

"Do you still want to go there?"

"Why yes, I guess so –if you still think you can – recommend me."

My tongue seemed thick.

"Of course I'll recommend you. Why shouldn't I? But I think you ought to go now, instead of waiting. You know my sales have fallen off. I really can't afford to keep help."

I knew there was something he said that wasn't quite true. I looked him straight in the eye. Only the clock made any sound.

"Mr. Lamis, you needn't recommend me to Herman Sile if you don't want to. I don't have to go there."

He rubbed the back of one hand with the palm of the other and a quizzical look crept over his face. Behind the mask he was weighing me. I sensed it.

"Don't you want to go there, boy?"

"I don't care now. I did want to go, but – not now, under the circumstances."

He raised one eyebrow to a philosophic angle.

I knew I had tipped the balance.

"Listen, son," he continued, "you've got to learn to stay on the rails and not jump the tracks in spite of – of circumstances."

I weighed his words carefully before I answered.

Mr. Lamis, you know the reason I didn't come back the night of Helen's party. You know what happened this afternoon.

He nodded silently.

"Of course," I continued, "I want to go to Boonville, but more than that I want you to know that – that I had no intentions of insulting Helen. It's the last thing I'd do."

Lamis was not meeting my glance. He seemed to be seeing something through the window – something beyond the ruins and the fringe of spruce.

"Allan, you go next week. Sile said 'any time.' You'll make good; I know it. Come back and see us when you can. It's the women folks. As far as I'm concerned, I was a young fellow once and I know."

He went to the safe, pulled out the wallet, took out $20, laid it in my palm and held out his hand.

"Good-bye, boy," he said, and good luck."
Somehow that handshake stays with me through the years.

At home, I informed the folks, but did not tell them all. I was going to Boonville next Monday. I showed them the $20.

After I was sure the store had closed, I wandered back and sat along time on the old platform. In the darkness I heard the night chorus from the marsh and the pond. Then I heard the crunch of a man's feet coming up the track.

At the coal shed, the footsteps ceased.

Whoever it was, had taken up conversation with himself. My first impulse was to leave, but I waited. Some one's Scotch blood had been fired by a – stronger than is now legal – exuberance, and his song came to me with melodious effect.

" Sand-ee McPherson 'n' Sand-ee Mc-Phee,

Angus Mc-Lain, and ees brother-r 'n' Me,
We were companions, in bonnie Dundee.
Now we're residin' 'n Lun-dun.
We ha' a bonnie wee flat 'n th 'West,
And their ery nicht we feed on th' best;
Thair ery nicht a-fore we retire,
We pull a' air stoos oop' n' sing
roon th' fir;
It's nice when ye lov' a wee lassie,
It's nice when th' lassie is troo,
It's nice when ye ken that yur bo-nie wee hen.
Is in lov, an' that lo'oer is you"

The voice was fairly clear and the spirit must have been strong, for he sang as only an elevated Scot can sing

I laughed to myself, recognizing the voice. I waited, but heard nothing more.

Then I picked my way slowly back along the path. At the tram road, I stopped to hear the voices from the marsh and found myself humming the chorus.

"It's nice when ye lov' a wee lassie…it's nice when the lassie is troo – "

I stopped. The sentiment was fine, but I was not so sure of the wee hen.

CHAPTER XIII

The remainder of the week dragged along slowly. Every day I pondered for hours over my bungled efforts and the ruins of my dreams. I wondered what my future would be; what luck would bring in Boonville, that place where the log teams coming from White Lake stopped overnight. Several log jobbers lived there and I judged from lumberman's reports that it was a front-rank town. Frank had once taken a pair of bear cubs out to the Boonville fair.

In a few days I would be there - a Tug Hiller no longer. I foresaw how Helen might even be proud of me, a young gentleman, soon far removed from the homely existence of Page and Fish Creek.

I would go to college; not to Vassar, perhaps, but I would be a college man and finally would come, somehow, to my square mansion on the hill, where a blue-eyed girl in silks would regulate my conduct. Fluffy-haired cherubs, too, resembling Helen, would make our days eventful and our evenings interesting. Oh, the timelessness of dreams!

Sunday, while my head was full of these reveries, Jackie Ferris came to dinner. I suspected mother, for Jackie had come for our last visit.

"I came, Allan, because you won't be here after tomorrow." She hesitated apologetically at the door and turned to glance across the clearing.

"I'm glad you came, Jackie; I wish Frank could be here, too."

She gave me studied glace and I followed her into the house.

At dinner, by Mother's unerring calculation, Jacqueline sat next to me. According to custom, Mother asked the blessing.

"Heavenly Father, we thank thee for Thy goodness, sustain us in all ways and lead us at all times to Thy glory. Amen."

I stared absent-mindedly at her graying bowed head and when she had done, she looked up at me.

"Did I say it right, son?"

"Yes," I winked at Dad, "you could say it in your sleep."

"I wish you could," she chided.

After a moment, Jacqueline changed the subject.

"Allan, I thought you weren't going to Boonville till September."

I was embarrassed. My father and mother knew only that Lamis had advised me to go. They did not know anything more. At least, if Dad had heard, he had not spoken of it. But I was not sure about Jacqueline. Perhaps it had leaked out.

"I'm going now, because Mr. Sile wants me to get familiar with the stock before school begins." I hoped I had made at least a graceful departure from the truth.

"Oh, that's the reason!" she said,

"Mm- m –hm-m", I grunted, and looked away where my '22' hung back of the stove.

When we had finished dinner, we sat for a time on the veranda. It was quiet there and a murmuring trickle came up from the brook. Down there, years before, Jackie had run barefoot after me, a dimpled little tease who was all eyes and many questions. A strange chord stirred me.

As though reading my thoughts, Jackie went on, "I'll bet you're going to miss Frank."

My father laughed. "Be a good thing if he does," Dad suggested, "or he'll grow up with a backwoodsman's ambition."

I said nothing. He had spoken harshly, but truly. The golden day of the forest dweller had gone and my father knew better than I the pace of this 20th century.

We talked of Boonville. Dad had been there often with Brandon, and his memories fanned the spark.

When it began to grow dark, Jackie rose to leave.

"Wait, Jacqueline, we'll have a bite to eat and then Allan will go home with you." Mother was arranging it well, and I was entirely willing.

Under the lamp light the witchery of Jackie's face was provoking.

Going down the trail, she took my arm, and we crossed the foot-bridge. It was not an unpleasant sensation. We went up the tramroad side by side and save for the memory of Helen, I would have rejoiced. My people, Jacqueline, Frank and the forest would be difficult to leave, but tomorrow could not cut them away.

I wanted to make a pact with Jackie, as she had suggested long before, not to pay any attention to nicer folks than we were, but no words would come.

As we passed the store, I saw Harry Maxwell in the shadows. He recognized us and laughed.

"My how popular you have become."

I turned from Jacqueline toward him. "What's that you say?" I had heard well enough, and the demon was astir.

"I said, Jackie's not very particular about her company."

He was a bitter pill. I started for him with clenched fists. Jackie yanked on my arm and stepped into my path.

"Allan Hargrave, you stop. You boys have had enough trouble."

"He'll have some more trouble in a minute," Harry challenged.

"Allan Hargrave, you promised to take me home. Now you're starting another fight."

"Stick around till I get back if you're still game." I flung it at him.

He laughed as I turned away and Jackie locked her arm in mine. When we passed the coal shed, she began to scold. "The idea of you boys having another fight, your last night at home!"

"I'd give him something to remember me by."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You're going to stay with me till he's gone home."

I laughed.

"You're a good bodyguard, Jackie."

"Ain't I always getting you out of trouble?"

"Yeah, and you get yourself in."

She was silent.

At Ferris's the house was dark. Jackie motioned me to an old settee on the porch and plumped herself down beside me.

Far down the old tramroad the moon was climbing into sight. The peepers were at it, and over in the black woods some kind of song bird was warming up.

"This is a good night for murder," I said impressively.

"Allan, you're awful." Jackie shook her head but smiled. "Let's talk about something else."

"All right. I wonder how Frank's getting along?"

"Frank? Tell me when you're coming back again."

"I don't know."

"You'll come the first chance you get, won't you?"

"Yeah. Where'll you be?"

"We'll be here for a while. Dad won't be leaving this summer."

"They're going, one by one. Everybody'll be gone pretty soon."

"Do your folks talk of moving?"

"No, my dad'll stay as long as Brandon does. Where'd your father go, Jackie, if he moved?"

"Lowville, probably."

"If he does, I'll run up sometime."

"Will you, Allan?"

"Sure! Why wouldn't I?"

"I – I thought maybe you'd forget me."

She seemed such a moody little armful, and I wanted to comfort her. Something held me back.

"Jackie, I wouldn't forget you anymore than I would Frank or – "

"Helen Lamis?"

I stopped. She seemed to know everything. I nodded.

"Helen wouldn't let me call on her, anyway."

She leaned closer to study my face. “Do you want to, Allan?”

“Why - I don’t know. Why do you ask me that?”

“Well, I knew. Probably she’s nicer than I am, anyway.”

It is what I had willed to deny, but I was on the defensive now.

“Nonsense, Jackie, you’re talking foolish.”

She turned away, her chin fell and I heard her catch her breath.

I did not know what to say. I started to push myself up. “I guess I’d better beat it.”

“Will you – you’ll write to me?” Her voice was uneven.

“Of course I will. Will you do the same?”

“Yes. Good–bye.”

“Good–bye.”

She watched me go down the path to the track.

“By.” I waved back. She held up her arm in farewell, then turned and went into the house.

I had nearly forgotten Maxwell, but going up the ties, I remembered.

He was there, too, for I could see a form sitting in the shadow of the building.

An honorable retreat was impossible. I’d asked him to stay and have it out. He had evidently accepted.

I did not want to fight. I wished only to be alone, but there was no other way. I pulled up my trousers and tightened my belt. Jackie had made me forget.

It was with deep disgust that I approached Maxwell. I had had trouble enough and felt mean. I was in a particularly good mood to fight. As I jumped on the platform I saw him rise.

“Well, I’m back,” I snapped. “Come on now and show your stuff.”

“So I notice, boy. Where do yuh want me t’come? Are yuh getting’ crazy?”

It was harmless old Frank.

“Well, how did you get here?” It nearly floored me.

“Walked – come afoot. Yer ma said yuh went home with Jackie. I thought I’d sit a little spell ‘n’ wait fer ye.”

“What happened? What do you want to see me for?”

“W’y, Gee Crismus. Would ye go off ‘thout sayin’ g’-bye t’ me?”

“Hunh! I most forgot.” I had had several swift rushes that night which nearly toppled me over. But I fell into his mood.

“I been pretty busy,” I apologized.

“I heard yuh bin fired.”

“Well, not exactly,” I hesitated. “I’m going to Boonville, though, on ‘75’ tomorrow.”

“You’ve had s’more trouble ain’t yuh?”

“No, who said I did?”

"George Lamis tole me. Sed not t'mention it t' nobody. On'y tole me cuz I'm yer fren'."

"Well, I admitted, "I did have a little spat with Helen. Didn't amount to anything, though."

"Nuff so he let yuh out, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but that's nobody's business," I protested.

The old man laughed.

"S'pose 'tain't boy, but he tole me of it n' I come over t' talk with yuh."

"About that?"

"Yea' n t' say g'-bye."

"Well, what about it?" I asked. I had no mind to let even Frank pry into my private affairs.

"Allie, I'm a older man than yuh be."

"Yes," I admitted.

"Wal, Allie, I had a li'l tiff with a gal years ago – mos' 40 years ago 'twas – mos'ly my fault, probably. Sometimes I kin see 'er yit when I'm hikin' long th' trail, smilin' in m' camp fire –"

What he told me no one else had known, but I had guessed it.

"Yes," I encouraged him.

"Wal, Allie, yer settin' out' t'morrow. Now jus' fergit all 'bout it. Don' plug 'n'moon over 'er all yer life. Ef yu git kicked off'n one step, go 'n' try a-nother."

"Sure, I will," I nodded. He had touched a vital spot.

"Sure yuh will, Allie. You'll use some sense, not be a old fool like me – wastin' yer life."

"No, Frank, come on over and stay tonight. We got a spare bed."

"No, I gotta meet a fella at Fish Crick 'n th' mornin'. Don' fergit me, will yuh, Allie?"

I made a poor attempt to laugh.

"Hunh! As if I could. Good-bye."

"G- bye, 'n 'luck, boy." He gave me a clumsy wave and started up the trail. I watched him till his dark form entered the spruces along the westward path.

CHAPTER XIV

The next morning I arrived in Boonville, and it seemed to me a vast city sprawled out along the canal.

Mr. Lamis had neglected to tell me what kind of shop Herman Sile conducted, and a sharp surprise awaited me. I looked for a general store like the one I had known.

I inquired of a drayman and farther down the street asked an idler smoking lazily before a barber shop.

"Right down there." He waved one hand dreamily and shrank back in his trance.

Sile's store was just ahead but I passed it by. There seemed to be no such place on the street and I inquired a third time of a lady.

"Three doors up, sir."

I retraced my steps in the cautious manner of a countryman. The third door had a gilt mortar and pestle above it, but at that time I did not know what it was. I gazed at the gilded bowl a moment and then I saw his name on the door: Herman M. Sile. This was the place.

In the window I saw a pair of odd bottles filled with some blue and yellow fluid and a pile of facial cream which the card said was used by the better half of all the crowned heads in Europe.

A nausea came over me as I stared for my training had been in axe heads and long underwear and not in facial aesthetics.

I wanted to go back to Page. Lamis had a large wooden platform before his store which would hold up half the settlement. And we sold the stuff people wanted. What a strange place this was.

But my courage ebbed back. I tightened my belt, arranged my tie, and stepped in.

A peculiar odor met my nostrils. I was still scared. Just why I could not tell, but I had set out to build my castle, stone and timber. I'd not go back. Little did I know what I was approaching.

If I had known the pitfalls of that profession which reaches beyond the days of Moses and Jethro; if I had foreseen the difficulties which attend the disciples of Galen or visioned the next decade with its endless hours, countless regulations, intense competition, quick lunches, penny sales and midnight oil, I would probably have turned back.

A serious-faced chap of the cocksure 20's started toward me the instant I closed the door. He was tall, dark, wore impressive horn spectacles and spotless clothing.

"How do you do," he bowed, is there something I can do for you?"

His approach was quite correct as I had informed Helen that tragic afternoon when she consented that I take a long walk toward California.

"Is Mr. Sile in?" I asked.

"Yes, just a minute," he retreated briskly along the aisle and spoke to someone in the alcove.

"Some young fellow here to see you."

I heard the spring of a chair, the scrape of feet on the floor and the brisk stride of a heavy man. As he came forward I saw he was well knit and sturdy with a bald intellectual brow and a gladiator's chin. He strode past piles of face cream and rubbing alcohol, and I caught the glint of thick glasses perched high on a prominent nose. I had seen pictures of such chaps, executives of far-flung affairs, men the fibre of Damascus blades.

"Hello," he greeted me and stepped the counter between us. "how do you do?" His high tenor contrasted his burly figure.

I approached the counter. "I'm Allan Hargrave," I explained. "George Lamis sent me down here."

He studied me and as our eyes met I felt he was estimating my worth in milligrams. Probably he was seeing through my mail-order clothes with some uncanny ability. I wondered how much Lamis had told him; to what extent I had been recommended; if my past blunders were known and how much he knew about my fondness for Frank. Surely the chap before me could have nothing in common with my old friend.

"Glad you came, Hargrave." He came around the counter to shake hands and I winced when he did. Then he added, "Anybody George Lamis sent ought to be all right."

I knew in a flash that what Lamis said was true. He was a strongman, undoubtedly a kind one; no fellow who stopped with clothes. He would demand good work and would know a good job when he saw one.

Mumbling a feeble acknowledgement, I shifted from one foot to the other.

"Come back and sit down, Hargrave. We might as well talk business right now. Maybe you won't want to stay after we've talked."

I followed down the aisle, knowing well that "business" meant wages. Turning into the alcove he spied the assistant.

"Lehar, this is Allan Hargrave. He wants to be a pharmacist."

"Well," the dark-haired Lehar gripped my hand, "it's a commendable ambition. Where do you live?"

I started to make apology for having come from the woods.

"He came from Tug Hill," Sile explained, "Page, back on the Gee Wiz railroad."

Lehar laughed, thrust his hands in his pockets and appraised me with a friendly glance.

"You know," he turned a sober face to his employer, "you know," he repeated, "what they say about the best timber?"

"No," Mr. Sile grinned, "I guess not."

Presumably they were having a good time.

"Well," Lehar looked directly at me, "they say the best timber grows only in the deepest woods."

I laughed. "That's a new one to me, but I appreciate the compliment."

Both men joined in a smile and I knew I had not lost the first tilt.

"Franz, put up Douglas's prescription, if you will. I must have a little talk with Allan and catch the train." He glanced at his watch.

"Right away." Lehar agreed and stepped to a rear shelf covered with bottles. As he went I read in his stride what I had felt in his handshake – that here was a very scrupulous young man.

"Take my chair, Hargrave," Sile nodded toward the desk.

"Don't you want to sit there?"

"No, I've been sitting for hours."

I took the seat and he paced the floor nearby.

"Now, boy, I understand you want to go to school here."

"Yes, I want to finish high school."

He hesitated in his stride to peer at me through his thick spectacles.

"Do you know what my boys usually get to begin?"

"No," I replied. "Anything will do if it pays my board."

'Twelve dollars a week," Sile announced.

"Suits me."

"Pay you more soon's you learn."

"All right."

"Then I guess that's all," he concluded. "You'll work with Franz till I get back."

"You're going away?"

"Yeah, I'm going north for a few days. My mother's ailing. We'll talk this over again, later. I've got to catch the train."

He spoke in a lower tone to Lehar, little of which I heard, and then, pulling his hat tightly down, he hurried out.

The remainder of that morning I washed bottles – dirty bottles that were to be used at the counter. In the afternoon I washed more bottles and before night, Lehar had me shining stock bottles on an upper shelf.

Before I had finished, I caught Lehar watching me. I kept scrubbing grimly and asked no questions. I did not know then that Franz was conducting a little experiment and I was being analyzed.

At closing time, when the electrics were turned off, Lehar asked, "Have you found a place to stay?"

"No, not yet. I haven't had time to find one."

"Come on up to the house with me, then. We've got plenty of room. Maybe my mother would keep you."

So I found myself going up the street with Franz who carried one of my bags. As we walked along several people greeted us. He towered head and shoulders above me – a chap that drew women to turn and look – and then turn to look again. My admiration for Lehar was growing.

His father's house was so large that Franz's small room seemed like a cell. There was not a light on in the house. Snapping a cord on the chandelier he set down my bag and motioned me toward a closet where I might hang my clothes."

The room smelled like a hospital. Samples of roots and barks, coloring fluids and vials of pills were everywhere. Over his bed was a Greek letter scroll and a Philadelphia banner.

"You're a Philadelphia man?" I asked.

"Philadelphia College of Science – one of the best in this country."

As he wound his clock he talked to me. "I've been with Sile six years – counting my time in Philadelphia. Sile's a gruff customer, but he means well. Always used me fine."

"He looks all right to me."

"He is, now there's one thing you'd better remember. He wants the work done right – no misses and no slips. The best you possibly can, and you'll get on with him."

"Is he fussy?"

"Not fussy, but particular and methodical. Try to do thing his way. He knows his stuff, all right, and he appreciates backbone."

"Thanks. Glad you've told me."

"You'll meet a 'bird' tomorrow. Name's Mollinson. Utterly useless around the store, too lazy to draw a full lung. Don't copy him."

"Is he lazy or just not interested?"

"Both. He's hazy and lazy. He thinks life's a joke. Likes to have things brought to him on a platter, hangs around some dance hall two-thirds of the night and is half asleep on the job every day."

"He works here steady?"

"Yes and no. He draws his pay steady, but he doesn't work that way."

"Why doesn't Stile fire him?"

"Sile's short-handed – patient besides. I'm going to Honolulu. Starting for the West Coast Drug Company. That's why Sile took you on. Mollinson's supposed to take my place."

"Honolulu! Whee-ew!" I whistled.

"It is quite aways from home, but $4,000 a year's too much for me to pass up. I want to go where I can make some jack."

"You're lucky, I should say."

"Well, maybe. Time will tell. The same job may hold for you if you'll go to college and get a license."

"You mean I could go to Honolulu?"

"Probably, if you'd stick it through. I may be able to pull the wires some."

"Great," I exclaimed. "How'll we do it?"

"Go to college and get your degree. Learn everything you can around the store."

"Sounds good." I agreed. "Here's hoping."

That night I was in far Hawaii. Helen was there. Frank and a tall dark chap who wanted me to wash a carload of bottles. It seemed that I objected, preferring strangely to wander off under the palm trees with Helen.

Before the alarm sounded the next morning, my new friend was astir.

Lehar's mother had breakfast waiting for me. A little gray-haired lady she was, who worshipped Franz and who could cook excellent meals.

"You can have Franz's room when he goes," she told me. I saw her staring vacantly out the window through a neighbor's garden. Franz whistled a tune to cheer her as he refilled his cup at the stove.

'Will you have more coffee?" he invited.

"Just a splash." I poured it down hastily and when we arrived at the store a stranger was sweeping out.

"Ed, here's Allan Hargrave, our new assistant."

The fellow chuckled with good nature and held out his hand to me.

"You're a very fortunate young man," he said.

"How's that?"

"Fortunate in being privileged to forgather with such distinguished scientific men as F. Lehar, Mr. Sile, and your servant."

"Banana oil. "Lehar jammed his hat savagely on a hook and began polishing his glasses.

Mollinson, for it was he, was hugging his stomach at his own wit and I realized the need for a splash of rose water.

"I'm here for scientific purposes, too." I suggested. "Have you got another broom?"

"No, but you can have this one," Mollinson offered it.

Lehar grunted something in disgust that sounded dangerously like profanity.

I took the broom and went on sweeping as though grateful for the favor.

Mollinson tapped a fresh cigaret from his pack, struck it once or twice on the back of his hand and lit it, inhaling great drafts of smoke.

I rather liked the fellow. His humor was certainly original and while his lankiness and yellow pompadour were suggestive of a dance-hall heroism, I knew we would get along. I was freshly from the back woods myself, and none too sure of my own scientific aptitude, to quarrel with his.

He stood a moment, inhaling his cigaret, watching my efforts with the broom.

"Where did you learn the art?" he inquired.

"Why?" I laughed.

"Well, chemically speaking, you stir up too much of the residue, as it were." He cast a hasty malevolent glance toward Lehar who was engaged with some papers on Sile's desk.

"Leave the kid alone, you dimwit." Lehar had been listening but did not look up as he cast his remarks at Mollinson.

"I got to give him some good training - just like you gave me," Mollinson defended.

"Better set him an example with the dust cloth."

"Yes," I agreed. "I've stirred up a lot of the residue. It needs cleaning up."

"I'll just sit here and rest till you're finished," the lanky one declared. And sit down he did in a near-by chair.

The conversation lagged and shortly our first customer waddled in, a fat puffy little man with a red face, a white drooping moustache and a multi-colored bulldog.

He shuffled toward the cigar counter and Mollinson arose wearily to wait on him.

"I see the boss is out," the fat man remarked. "I really hate to disturb you."

"Good morning, Jerry." Lehar called from the desk.

"Oh, good morning, Franz." he replied. "I thought this cyclone was operating alone here today."

Lehar laughed, "You underestimate my boss's judgement."

Mollinson's laugh gurgled upward from the soles of his feet as he thrust the coin in the cash drawer.

"You'd better take four more cigars, Jerry." Mollinson advised. Business is bad today and we're not giving back any change."

"Give me my 20 cents," the fat man growled.

"Sorry, but help yourself to the cigars, Jerry. Four more will make five for a quarter."

"All right," Jerry agreed as he turned back toward the cigar box. "I'll just take five more. That'll make it six for a quarter."

As he turned toward the door, his underslung escort following. I saw that he had taken six.

"Business will be bad just so long as Sile keeps that jazz hound around here." Jerry growled and the pair went out, the platter faced protector at his heels.

When he had gone, Lehar went to the till and threw in a nickel from his own pocket.

"One more crack like the one you just made to Jerry, and your folks will be celebrating a home-coming." Lehar's temper was rising.

Mollinson smiled toward me, but he said nothing and began to dust the cases.

That afternoon I took a short cut to the post office for mail. My way led up an alley behind the store. Gathering the mail, I started back through the alley, my attention on the headlines of a newspaper.

Suddenly I heard a growl and saw Jerry's mascot coming for me, feet stretched out and mouth open. I cut for it and reached the roof of a shed behind the store just in time. The mail was strung along the road. The dog seized a magazine and ripped it viciously as a demonstration and proof of his esteem.

I heaved a sigh of relief for my pursuit had been spirited and fast. Possibly the dog was sharing his master's resentment at Mollinson and it had spread to the rest of our force.

The brute sat down, seemingly determined to remain, and I was obliged to call for help.

Franz and Ed appeared, smiling.

"What are you doing up there? Can't we trust you to bring home the mail?" Mollinson taunted.

Whatever reply I made should be omitted here. Both men seemed actually to enjoy my discomfort, but Lehar finally drove the mongrel away and Mollinson with two or three rather inconsiderate remarks helped me to get down.

The next day in the mail I discovered a package addressed to me. I went down the street, avoiding the alley, and opened my package as I went.

It was postmarked in Boonville and the handwriting was strange. I tore open the paper and lifted the cover of the box. Inside was a ponderous leather watch fob of dimensions suitable for Paul Bunyan, set with huge brass studs and the head of an English bulldog. On a small card was written: "For unprecedented bravery."

There was no signature, so I pocketed the thing and preserved it with other priceless treasures.

I looked inside Sile's day book and decided I had identified the donor. Then I began to plan.

Mollinson had the complement of ballroom prowess in very weak arches and he changed his shoes at least twice a day. There were always two pairs of shoes on Sile's stair – generally a good pair and another more comfortable, less slightly.

Two days after receiving the decoration. Lehar advised me that we would work alone that evening "Ed's off to Hawkinsville tonight to another dance."

I inspected the good shoes on the stairs. New Cordovans – the best he could buy.

"Franz," I asked, "what is the rottenest smelling thing in this drug store?"

He lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "Why?"

"You said Ed was going to Hawkinsville to the dance." I held up the shining Oxfords."

"Powdered valerian (*smells like carrion*) is the most personal odor we have."

"Would you get me a little?"

"Sure." He brought the valerian bottle soberly.

The following morning I made great ceremony of showing my brass studded fob.

"It's a real durable masterpiece," I said to Mollinson. "It will last a long time. By the way, how was he dance?"

"I came home early."

"Arch trouble or something?"

"Bad smelling feet, and hereafter you needn't go after the mail. I'll get it myself."

That day our rivalry ended. Later he played his guitar for me. Nothing breathtaking about his technique, yet I guessed he was good enough for the Hawkinsville dance emporium.

At Buffalo in the years that followed, he did me some favors: knew who and why and when, both on the campus and off; lent me some of his books; told me how to lessen the usual hazing; and gave such advice as how to avoid trouble with the faculty; at which professor's jokes it was policy to laugh; what I might expect of, and how to prepare for, the periodical quiz; where the best meals could be had for the least money; which drug stores compensated their help best; and many other small matters which in that stage of my existence were invaluable.

The following week Sile returned. He was patient and kindly, exact an unyielding. He taught me many things. What debt I owe him I have since tried to pay to others, for life is an endless succession.

Once Sile told me his early beginning had been a hard struggle. From a little village in Franklin County he had gone to Philadelphia, studied, did relief work at night, saved, slaved, and fought.

He was forever helping boys, lending money, holding them to the line, encouraging them on. He would doubtless have helped me more had I required or permitted it. But I was doubtful blessed by the un-reasoning, all sufficient independence of the Yankee which, more often than otherwise, is a costly heritage.

Our friendship grew rapidly, those last few days with Franz. I clearly remember the afternoon he left.

"I'll be back in four years, Allan. I expect to see you in our senior year at Philadelphia. You'll make it if you try. We'll go back to Hawaii together."

He shook hands in full truce with Mollinson, advised him to be cautious about foot odors, held Sile's hand a long time, then returned and gave me one last slap on the back.

"I'm going to count on you." He crushed my fingers and gathered his heavy grips.

Out in the square he paused – Sile, Ed, and I were watching – took an affectionate lingering look up and down the street, and strode briskly away to his train.

That night in the parlor at Lehars', I sat down on the piano stool and opened the sheet of his favorite song. But I couldn't play. And that old pal of mine was undoubtedly sleeping, somewhere between Buffalo and Chicago.

Fair time came and crowds thronged to Boonville. From four counties they came to ride on the merry-go-round; to see the snake charmer; to buy a 50-cent thimble-sized box of matchless silver polish; to see how high they could drive the weight toward the bell; and if they were men of the proper age and unattached, to appraise the feminine charms.

The fair week was a busy one in the store. I was glad Lamis had given me the extended vacation when he did, and thankful I had learned the location of some merchandise before the rush came.

We worked that week, too busy to grow tired, and Saturday night rolled around at last.

The band was playing out on the square and we bustled around, attending the wants of many customers. The mob of people was a new thing to me. I loved the sight of a crowd swarming in and out; the sound of laughter and voices; the tread of many feet.

The evening was half over and I was ringing the cash register for a wealthy tune. I glanced up to select the next customer.

Sile was visiting with some friend and stood where he could see my face. Mollinson brushed by – up and down the aisle – hurrying, hurrying, responding perfectly. The night, the music and the crowd had stirred even him.

I glanced toward the door and saw something. My arm stopped on the handle of the register, and Sile stared at me questioningly.

"She did come – she did come."

Perhaps I spoke aloud.

There in the doorway, fresh as the clover fields on a June morning, swathed in blue and silver, was the girl. Her father stood smiling behind her, eternal Havana between his lips.

CHAPTER XV

I will never forget the night Helen came to Boonville. Lamis and his daughter were the last persons I expected to see.

Herman Sile, talking with his friend, must have read my face, for he came down the aisle and asked in a very low voice, "Your girl?"

My countenance had concealed nothing, so I smiled and shrugged. What could I say? He gave me a knowing look and stepped out to meet them.

"Hello, George Lamis! What on earth are you doing here?"

Lamis removed his cigar casually.

"Oh, Helen and I thought we'd take in the fair."

"Hello, Mr. Lamis!" I called, "glad to see you here." Inwardly I hoped my past blunders had been forgiven.

" I thought you would be," Lamis returned, casting his eye at his daughter.

I walked closer.

"Hello Allan! Why don't you say something to me?"

"Well, - hu- hullo, Helen," I stammered.

"Are you in a hurry, George?" Sile inquired.

" No, not especially, why?"

"Come on back and sit down, then."

" Aren't you pretty busy?"

" No, Sile replied. "Crowd's thinning out. Mollinson can handle most of 'em. We can talk while I work."

"Well, I'll stay then, till Lew Brandon gets back. Come on, Helen." Lamis took a chair in the alcove.

"Helen," Sile smiled at each of us. “here’s an escort if you want to listen to the band.” He winked at her father.

I glanced at Lamis. His face was inscrutable, so I asked Helen.

"Would you go?"

She gave a little laugh.

"Of course I would, you goose, but where will we go?"

"Just come with me; we'll do the town."

"Don't stay too long," Lamis cautioned.

"No, we won't."

I thought I saw - perhaps I imagined it - an eagerness in Helen's eyes.

We went across the square to an ice cream parlor and later picked our way toward Post Street. I knew a secluded spot on the steps of the library where she could listen to the band and I could really see her.

We sat on the cold stone steps, I in the shadows. The rays from an arc light fell upon her and I stared hungrily.

The miracle had happened. I could scarcely believe that she was real. As I looked up at her, enthroned on the top step, I remembered how fondly I had once buckled skates on her trim ankles.

And she was wearing sheer hose now and she did have a straight, shapely limb. Odd memories flooded back to me.

Over in the park the band was swinging into a bewitching strain, The Waltz You Saved for Me. Clear liquid notes, perfectly timed and the sobbing refrain. I wanted to waltz with her.

"The boys are grinding out music tonight," I observed.

"Um-hmm. It's fine. We couldn't hear that back in Page."

"No, we never did."

How rhythmic it was! How the saxes sobbed it out! Had I been wiser, I would have asked her to dance.

"Next week I'm going where I can hear a band, too."

"Where?" I feared she might be going far.

"Harry Maxwell and I are going to Carthage to school, Monday."

"You are?"

"Yes. Aren't you glad?"

"Glad you're going, Helen. I wish I was going there, too."

"Why? Don't you like it here?"

"Of course! But I can see you, can't I?"

"Not unless you come to Carthage."

"Is that an invitation?"

She gave an inviting little laugh that might have meant anything.

"Yes, if you make it one, " she replied.

My heart turned over with joy.

"Then I can come, Helen?" I hardly dared believe my ears.

"Yes, once in a while, if - if you'll behave yourself," she finished with a chuckle.

"I'll be there! You must save some evenings for me."

"You say I must? I was going to tell you when you could come."

"Well, tell me then." I was willing to start the next evening.

"You may come some Thursday night. I'll be going home Friday afternoons till the snow gets deep."

"Then I'll come the first Thursday I get a chance."

"I suppose so, but you must keep your agreement."

"You mean - n - "

"I mean that you mustn't get sentimental, - try to kiss me - or anything like that."

"Have I got to promise?"

"Positively."

"Well, all right then," diplomatically, "I promise to try."

"Promise to try what?"

"I promise to try not to kiss you."

"All right, then."

But that promise was an erroneous compromise. It was extremely difficult not to violate her stipulations on the spot, for no Grecian Helen was ever so alluring as that little Miss with the golden curls and sheer hose, seated in the arc light on the cold stone steps. Her slight body swathed in blue and silver was one of statuesque loveliness, and I watched her reverently.

"I'm getting cold, Allan. Let's go now."

"Oh, wait a few minutes until they finish this piece."

Over in the park the band was playing The Star Spangled Banner. I pulled off my coat and offered it.

"Sit on this if you're cold Helen."

She took the coat and sat down. "Br-r-r, I'm cold. I left my coat in Mr. Brandon's rig."

"You'll drive back, tonight?"

"As far as Lyons Falls. It'll be late when we get back there, too."

"And from there?"

"We'll go up on his gasoline speeder."

"Not tonight?"

"Oh, no, in the morning."

"How are things at Page, Helen? How's Jack, Old Frank, and my folks?"

"Jackie is all right, if you meant to ask. Old Frank's whiskers are just as long as ever, and our folks seem well. Doesn't your mother write to you?"

"Yes, she writes; she doesn't say much about herself though."

"Well, half the people at Page are moving out."

"A lot of them must have gone since I left there."

"Several families have moved: the Joynts and Eastmans and others I don't know. Dad is trying to sell out."

"I thought he'd sell before now."

"No, there's a new firm coming in west of Fish Creek."

"Who are they?"

"Some company from Dexter. They're bidding for timber next to the White tract."

"Really?"

"Yes, they're talking of a new sawmill somewhere. Of course they'll take out pulp wood, too."

"Wouldn't that help your father's business?"

"Oh, he don't get enough to pay him to stay. We might leave the store and move to Carthage in the spring, even if he can't sell."

"Too bad he can't get more business."

"You like it up there, don't you?"

"Sure! I like the folks, especially while you - "

"Me and that old Frank person, I suppose."

"He's been a good friend to me."

"Friend, hunh! A lot of good he's done you! Taught you all his lazy ways. Make a nice fellow out of you, he would. I should think you'd be so glad to get away from that horrid place."

I stared at her as though at a stranger. This feeling was not a new one.

"Helen," I protested, "Frank has done a lot for me and I liked those people up there."

"Nonsense! They're mostly French Canadians and lumberjacks and dirty old hunters and - let's go back now."

I offered my hand as she started to rise, but she declined it and I picked up the coat.

"Throw it over your shoulders, Helen, if you're cold."

"No, we'll be at the store in three minutes. What would people think? And besides, you need it yourself."

Going down the street I felt that Helen had unjustly assailed our hill people, Old Frank most of all, but I said nothing. I had hungered with all the hunger of a homesick boy for them. They had colored the very light of that early morning time.

"It's a wonder you didn't stay all night, Allan!" Sile reproached.

"We got to talking and forgot all about the time."

George Lamis gave me a sharp look but did not speak.

"I'll get the horses," Brandon called as he went out the door.

In a few minutes he was back holding a pair of tight reins over a pair of spirited blacks.

"All aboard for Lyons Falls!" Brandon sang out as he pulled up to the curb.

"Hop in Helen," her father ordered.

I stepped closer to the carriage. "Thursdays, Helen?" I asked.

She nodded, apparently not deceiving either her father or Mr. Brandon.

"What are you doing boy? Trying to make another date with my daughter?"

"Well?" I tried to force a laugh.

"Dad, where's my coat?" Helen wanted to change the subject.

"Right on the seat beside you Miss." Brandon informed her.

"It beats the devil," Lamis shook his head perplexedly and climbed into the carriage.

"Giddap!" Brandon loosened his grasp on the reins and the blacks pranced forward.

"Night, boys!" Lamis held up his cigar in a slow gesture of farewell.

"Good-bye," Helen called back.

I answered her, but my voice was drowned out by the clatter of four pairs of hoofs.

"Hargrave," Sile touched my shoulder, " You shouldn't have kept this Brandon waiting so long. Do you know he's Gould's superintendent?"

"Sure I know it."

"Where did you find out?"

"Why, I known him as long ago as I can remember."

"Hm-m! Well maybe he didn't mind a little waiting. He seems like a nice chap."

"He is, and he's waited for me before."

"What about the Lamis girl? He inquired. "Did she ever wait for you before?"

"Helen? Hunh! I've known her almost since I learned to walk."

"I figured so. Well, I got to count up. It's most midnight." He went inside.

I watched the carriage roll up the pavement. It turned at the bend in the street and went north, carrying a cargo more precious than all the businesses in Boonville.

CHAPTER XVI

Sile's store was a place of service in Boonville. "Brother Sile," as he was blandly called by certain envious traders, had the bank balance and the ascendency of one triumphant ideal, and that ideal was Business.

Sunday, there, was much like other days, and the morning after my visit with Helen, I was back at the store. The memories of the previous evening were with me as I worked. At no time in all the weeks, months or years before, would I have believed that Helen would actually come of her own will to visit me.

My tasks that morning seemed light enough and I viewed the store in the light of a new importance I would go through with the task that Lehar had set, and at the end would have my castle, or square house, on the hill.

It was well I did not know the hill.

I had pleasant reveries that evening before I slipped off, and when the school hour came on Monday morning I was still seeing through tinctured light.

Taking my seat in the study hall, I mapped out my program. I would take as many subjects as permitted.

"But Mr. Hargrave," the blonde counselor warned, "you cannot manage Latin! You have five subjects now, and two years of English to catch up besides."

I took the subjects and the Latin teacher and I managed a fair average in the months that followed.

It was hard enough to concentrate that first day. I wondered what Helen would be doing in Carthage and how often she would meet Harry Maxwell. Through open windows came a soft September breeze and a trill of singing birds.

The principal came to question me. He was middle-aged with dark silver tinged hair and a vanilla aroma about his clothes.

"Your name is Allan Hargrave?"

"Yes."

"Where are you from, Hargrave?"

That was one question I hesitated to answer.

"L - L- Lewis County," I replied, guessing that he would not know the location of Page. Moreover I did not want to be rated a backwoodsman.

After four days' acquaintance, that fear had worn away. No one knew, nor cared, where I came from and I rejoiced.

I had for four days been unable to banish the thought of Helen's invitation. On Thursday noon I asked Mr. Sile, and when school closed that afternoon I caught the north - bound train.

At Carthage, on an upper street, I found Helen.

"Yes, Miss Lamis is in," the lady at the door replied. "I'll call her."

It was getting dusk when she came down to meet me. She was even more beautiful in white than in her silvered blue, and the long curls she had knotted into a crown of stateliness.

We talked of schools and studies. She spoke of a coming ball and mentioned Harry Maxwell. In turn I told her of Boonville and Lehar, of what I knew of his work in the west, his plans and mine.

At intervals she questioned me and I watched her sitting in her willow rocker with quiet dignity.

Sometime passed. Helen showed no disposition to retire and when I did look at my watch, it was 11:30.

"I've missed the train and kept you up besides."

"I don't mind that, but where will you sleep?" she laughed.

"Hunh! I'll find a bed down town somewhere."

"You'll be late for classes tomorrow. The train doesn't leave till 8:30 in the morning."

"That won't matter. I'll have a good alibi. Good night, Helen."

"Good night. You may come again."

"I will. G'bye."

"Bye."

The quiet of the evening and the perfume of her presence had been wonderful. Nothing else seemed to matter.

When I saw the last of her disappearing into the dark house I started to find a bed. The hotels were closed. There was nothing to do but wait somewhere outdoors until morning.

That night I slept finally on the hard board freighthouse platform, and nothing disturbed my dreams.

"I kept my promise! I kept my promise!" was my last seraphic thought

CHAPTER XVII

Fall came to Boonville, bringing daily deepening tints to shade rows of maple and elm. The days grew gradually cooler until the only warmth was at mid-day, and the square, with the falling of leaves, began to take on a leaden appearance.

I often labored with my studies far into the night, sometimes accompanied by one or another of my classmates.

My two years of English went well, and by much burning of Sile's electric, I absorbed some chemistry and Latin, discovering that all Gaul was divided in three parts, which Caesar came and conquered thereby incurring not only the enmity of all the Gauls, but of many a schoolboy besides. In the more scientific field of chemistry, I learned the inevitable chemical and economic reactions which follow the overturning of tripods, supporting the receptacles of acid, the wisdom to refrain from dropping phosphorous sticks on the floor and which substances stirred into a mortar would cause the teachers to rush toward the laboratory.

I often stood by the window at the store, looking out across the street and saw Franz Lehar again taking his last look around Boonville.

Besides writing to his mother, I received two or three letters from Lehar. Usually his envelope came with a little print in the upper left corner, showing a cloud-kissed volcano peak, a pair of palm trees, and the greeting "Aloha from Hawaii." Here is one of them.

2400 N. King Street, Honolulu, T.H.
Dear Allan,
Greetings! To all in Boonville.

I am writing just a line to let you know things are all right down here, except it's too hot.

Have been trying to learn the native lingo and working hard for a promotion. An elderly German has been in charge of our laboratory and he wants to get

back to the States. I think there is a possibility of getting his job. If I land it, there's six thousand in it.

Clothing, food and quarters are cheap. I am supplied all but clothing, even to boys - native servants - who press my clothes, shine my shoes and serve us tea at the laboratory each afternoon. The firm has furnished an automobile to run about the city.

The only fly in the ointment is the politics. There are so many bosses and it's hard to keep them all happy.

We grow and manufacture all our own drugs and these have been prepared by Spanish and native formulas. I am working for more U.S. standards and getting some.

The native remedies will, of course, persist, amid the more common patents you sell back home. In our principal store it is common for the Hawaiians to request a remedy they cannot name by a strange process of 'reasoning.'

Many of them will say "Whiskers - whiskers when they want Sloan's liniment. As you know, the package shows the face of old Dr. Sloan, of the abundant moustaches.

This island, Oahu, is but one of the group, is a gorgeously beautiful place, and the temperature varies little. It remains from 75 to 85 degrees in the shade and there is little of that.

I want to go wild hog hunting in a few days. There are plenty of deer down here, but the principal big game is wild hogs and mountain sheep. For smaller game the natives hunt the mongoose, a small animal the size of a ferret.

It is time to go back to work again. They work leisurely here.

Remember me to Sile and Mollinson, and don't forget I am counting on you. Write me the news when you can.

Aloha Nui, (which is the Hawaiian 'Good-bye' and 'good luck'

Franz Lehar

As the winter passed I gained something of the artistry of motion. I learned how to arrange windows and wrap packages with a minimum of material and time, how to fill prescriptions and dispense medications the doctors ordered with an eye toward accuracy and the knowledge that tragedy lurked in a false measurement or the slip of my hand.

It fascinated me to see the miracles Sile could perform with his fingers. I watched them tying bundles, weighing and measuring, tabulating stocks, keeping

records, and writing directions on a label. With the jab of a single finger, I have seen him locate a hernia, hold down a spurting artery which had been severed and the doctor was trying to tie, or remove a cinder from the eye of some man who tried to see more than he should when the wind blew briskly across the square.

In January, our boss went North for a few days. Before he left he threw his billfold from which to cash checks. I tucked the thing in my pocket and carried it to school. When Mollinson tallied the register that evening, he counted the pennies with meticulous care, and carried home the day's proceeds to tuck under his mattress. After Lehar left, Ed grew increasingly cautious and he did not propose to accept responsibility for money left in the safe. I could see him growing scrupulous to duty, although he joked with his former abandon.

In Franz's tiny bedroom that night, I opened the wallet curiously and counted the bills to the sum of five hundred and seventy-five dollars, plus a check for a hundred and twenty-five. I tucked that under my pillow, and the next day it went properly into the safe.

Late in March I went home. The Glenfield and Western had cut through the drifts in the hills and there were occasional patches of bare ground in sight. The little engine snorted and tugged tenaciously up the gulf, and the old caboose rolled and pitched like a ship in the wind. Their track hardly competed with the Central's shining ribbons.

It was a triumphant return for me. I swung off the caboose, displaying impeccable creased trousers. As I went into the store, I passed Mrs. Lamis coming out, and I tipped my four-dollar hat with gallant deference.

Inside the store, Lamis was sitting with his feet braced against the heater and his head in a blue cloud, visiting with Frank.

"Gee-rusalem, Allie! This is so sudden an' yuh look like the Duke o' York!"

I tried to conceal my embarrassment realizing I had blundered. Lamis looked me over with a trace of a smile as he shook my hand.

"George and I ben figgerin' t' do a l'il shootin' t'morra, Allie. He's comin' back t' t' cab'n in t'morn'n. I wish't ye'd come along unless yuh feel too swell."

I laughed, "Nothing would suit me better unless you fellows aren't too particular about your company."

"Come along." Lamis invited. "We'll be glad to have you."

"How's the folks?" I asked.

"Just the same. Mrs. Lamis is just the same and Helen, too, except she's beginning to scintillate some since she went to Carthage."

I looked at Dimons. His face was as expressive as a gravestone.

"Helen like it there, Mr. Lamis?" I feigned ignorance.

"She doesn't seem to want to come home. Talks all the time about a big dance that's coming off. Doesn't she ever write to you?" Lamis inquired slyly.

"It's been quite a while," I said tactfully.

"You ought to appeal to the feminine eye," Lamis observed.

"He looks like Dapper Dan, don't he, George?"

"Something like Dan, I guess."

"He remin' me of a fella I knew up in Monson, Maine."

"Sorry to interrupt you," I winked at George, "but what time do you expect us, Frank?"

"Whenever ye can git thar, I'll hev m' finger bowl set out," the old man cackled.

"You'd better polish up 'Suzi' for me. Never mind the finger bowl."

" All right, Allie. What time do yuh think you kin git thar, George?"

"Young Campbell said he'd stay here tomorrow. I guess we can leave soon after seven."

"Suits me. I'll be over then." I turned toward the door. "See you in the morning."

"Bye," Frank eyed me soberly.

"G'bye."

Lamis waved his cigar in a silent gesture of resignation and I went out.

Mother seemed not to notice my Duke of York appearance, and gave me possessive kiss. "You've grown inches, son." She looked at me proudly.

"He needn't grow feet," Dad observed, casting his eye at them.

I told them of my plans for the following morning. Mother seemed disappointed, but said nothing.

"How are things in the city?" Dad asked.

"Hustling, hustling. Page seems to be going the other way, though."

Dad scratched his grizzled chin, and sat down to recall the familiar tale of boom days at Fort Meade on the North Fork of the Cheyenne.

Mother interrupted us at intervals to ask about my supply of underwear, my new suit, and Mrs. Lehar's hospitable and culinary graces.

I was at last beginning to appreciate Dad's stories of the plains. He had ceased to be just the man who paid the bills and mediated on my going and coming.

But events in Boonville were all important, and I turned the conversation to school, Mr. Sile, Lehar, and Mollinson.

"And you want to go way off to Honolulu?" Mother fretted.

"That's not so far. I'd be home in three or four years."

"Well, you won't be starting right away," Dad dismissed the argument in his practical way.

The rest of the day we talked of happenings on the hill; the departure of neighbors, and the gap they left behind. The Dexter people had taken the Monteola section, and it might save Page for a time. Some 18,000 acres of lumber would bring back the saws and perhaps occupants for the empty houses.

Jacqueline, as mother said, inquired for me often. Why hadn't I written them? I could not say.

That night I slept under the eaves again and heard the soughing of the wind through the spruce trees. It took me backward. There were days that would never come again - days with Frank and Jackie.

Mother was early astir. With Dad she reluctantly watched me go down the path after breakfast.

Lamis was waiting at the store, and in half an hour we were at Frank's cabin.

"Did yuh eat, Allie?" Frank asked as I kicked the snow from my feet.

"Wouldn't come unless I had."

"Didn' know ez y'ed be up n' time t' eat,"

"Probably wouldn't sleep so late if I went to bed at sundown." I defended.

"What shells did yuh bring, George?"

"Sixes - rabbit shot. Why?" Lamis looked at Dimons.

"How am I going to hunt?" I demanded. Can I shoot rabbits with a rifle?"

"Thet's so, Gee-rusalem! I never thought o' thet."

"You might be able to hit 'em," Lamis suggested.

"Jus' ez you say, Allie. "ye can take m' rifle, ef yuh like."

"You got some shells?"

"Plenty of 'em."

"Well, I guess I'll just stick around camp then and polish up my marksmanship.

"Too bad Allan," Lamis added. We could have borrowed a shotgun if I'd thought. I supposed Frank had an old single barrel here."

"Some cuss swiped it outta th' camp. I left the place open onc't when I was out on m' trap line."

"Do you know who took it?" I asked.

"Got m' suspicion. Trailed th' galoot almos' t' Scalpintown but los' hiz track." Scalpingtown was a clearing and six or eight houses that lay to the southeast.

"Most anybody from that way would stand watching." Lamis declared.

"I'll borry it back some dark night b'fore long," Frank threatened, " 'n' mebbe somep'n to boot."

After some bantering about what he would borrow to boot, the two buckled on their snowshoes and disappeared down the creek bank.

Outside the cabin the sun was melting the snow. I stepped off Frank's path and my feet sank deep. I found his splitting axe, well hammered and worn, and I split for a time at his woodpile. Then I carried in enough to last for the day.

I pulled the battered rocker in front of the south window and rested my feet on his stove. Through the smoky panes the sun shone with a comfortable warmth.

Down at Boonville I learned another art, or supposed I had. Evenings in a room over the store, I had tried to smoke. Mr. Sile made a custom of giving cigars to his help, and I thought when I could smoke a "Philadelphia," that I had reached manly maturity.

I had nothing to burn, but felt the urge and searched the cabin for something to assuage the craving. I found Frank's paper of "Warnick and Brown" and after fumbling through the table drawers without success, I discovered a vile corncob (pipe) which had been tossed on a shelf.

It was not an appealing trinket. Nicotine, oozing through the bowl had given it the color of old mahogany. Half the bowl had been chipped off by repeated knockings, and the bit was badly chewed. The smell alone should have warned me, but I packed in rank tobacco, applied the match, and sat down to forget the ponderous cares of my burdened serious youth. The seat was comfortable enough. The sunshine was restful, too, and it was quiet in the cabin.

After the first dozen puffs, my appetite for tobacco was gone. I took the odorous thing from my lips and held it in my hand. It seemed to have a strength that far surpassed my own. I thrust it back heroically, but after a few more drags, the stove pipe appeared as a pair and my muscles failed to coordinate.

Gulps arose in my throat. My head seemed in a series of convulsions, and there was no use denying the urge. I dropped his pipe on the hearth, brushed both sides of the door case, and did more than merely expectorate.

I finally found the chair again and sank back weakly. I had no more desire to shoot nor hunger for food, and I finally fell asleep, wishing I was back in Boonville, accessible to Bromo-Seltzer.

Perhaps I slept an hour and awoke to the touch of someone's hand on my shoulder.

"Regular sleepin' beauty, ain't he, George?"

I started in my chair and looked up into Frank's face.

"Allie," he commanded, "look at that."

I looked to where his blood-stained fingers pointed and saw a large slice of meat that he had thrown on the table.

"What is it?" I asked.

" 'Taint possum, boy. Take a look outside th' door."

I glanced at Lamis, and the pupils of his eyes were dilated and staring. I jerked open the door and there in the snow, like the horror of a ghastly dream, lay the bloody head and pelt of a large black bear.

"Nice little fellow, aint 'e?"

"Sufferin cats," I gasped. "Where'd you get him?"

"Down 'n the big swamp." Dimons grinned, "an he mighty nigh got us."

"What did you shoot him with, for the love of Pete?"

Dimons held up a shell of number sixes between blood-stained thumb and finger. Then I realized the cause of Lamis' widened pupils.

"You didn't shoot him with those, did you?" I asked incredulously.

Dimons laughed a queer laugh of tremulous agitation.

"Jus' take a look at thet boy's head," Dimons suggested. "Mebbe you'll b'lieve me."

I went outside and knelt beside the ferocious head. A charge of something no larger than a quarter had torn into the skull leaving a powder ring on the hair.

"How'd you do it?" I asked after seeing it was a charge of shot. I looked at Lamis and he nodded toward Dimons.

"You tell 'im, Frank."

The old man plumped himself down in the chair where I had been sitting, filled his pipe from a stained tobacco pouch, lit the pipe, and began.

"Wal, we wuz trailin' 'long down crick, and broke over th' ridge. George spies ole b'ar's track headin' towards th' swamp. From th' track we see he wuz heavy an' sinkin' bad. Th' track wuz fresh, too, so we took after 'im."

"Didn't you know better than to open fire on a bear with number sixes? I don't believe I'd do it."

"You stick t' yer belief,boy, 'Tain't none too healthy, is it, George?"

"Hunh!" Lamis with an eloquent grunt sat down wearily beside the stove.

"We trails Mister bar down inta th' swamp n' found 'im on a mound under a clump o' hemlock. Wal, I wuz ahead n' I motions t' George t' circle 'im. While George was circlin', I opens fire. I should a ben clos'r."

"How far were you?"

Lamis laughed and Frank went on:

"When I peppers th' ole boy he starts fir me, swearin' t' hisself. He seen George closin' in an' thar wan't no gitten on' t'thout a fight, besides m' firs' tickle raises his dander."

"What'd you do?"

"Wal," Frank rubbed the tips of his stained fingers reflectively and sucked on his pipe. "Wal, as I wus sayin', hiz dander riz. Didn' seem t' stop 'm none when I give 'im t'other bar'l. He sunk 'n th' snow bad 'n' had hard goin'. With m' snowshoes I could I could travel faster, so I started t' retreat, loadin' m' gun."

"Where was George?"

"Comin' but none too fast. I snaps m'gun shut 'n' gives 'im one bar'l quick - over m' shoulder. When I turns, I steps on t'other shoe 'n' down I went. Thought e'd swalla me certain, only one shell in m' bar'l.

" I rolls outa m' side t' face 'im with m' las' charge, 'n' then George tickles 'm from behin'. Ole Grampa didn' like that neither, so e swung on 'im."

I looked at Lamis. He was staring absently into the hearth.

"What'd George do?" I asked.

"He done some'n I wouldn' tackle 'fore breakfast."

"What?"

He waited 'til th' ole b'ar come 't' muzzle 'tip, then 'e pulls. B'ar went down, none too soon. I wuz good fifteen yards when 'e done it."

"He waited 'till the bear was on top of him?"

"Yeap. Sight I'll remember, George waitin' thar, gun over one knee, waitin' es cool as a cucumber."

I glanced at Lamis. He was rubbing his cheeks wearily between his hands and I saw the flash of slumbering fire in his ring.

" Well," Lamis said with finality, " we got steak for supper."

That afternoon Dimons salted the pelt and at dusk we were eating a tough steak.

" Takes good teeth," Frank complained as he tried to chew a generous portion of the bear between his scattered molars.

"To tell the truth," Lamis confessed, " that was the tightest moment I've seen in 30 years."

"Nuff t' make yer hair stan' all right."

"Frank," George considered the face of the other, " what was the tightest spot you were ever in?"

Dimons repeated the question.

"Th' tightes' spot? Hunh! Thet's easy."

“What was it?" I asked. From other days I knew he had stories worth telling.

"Wal, t'wan't no bar, nor a man neither. "'Twas up 'n our country - m' people lived in Maine, yuh know. I wuz mebbe twenty-five then, workin' fer a loggin' outfit 'bout forty miles back in th' mountins."

We had a good one coming, if Frank would tell us of the most frightful moment in his career. I noticed that Lamis was not missing a word.

"Back 'long the timber trail they wuz a half-way camp. A fella and his wife done th' cookin' and put up anybody that come 'long thar at night. Durin the loggin' season they stayed thar. Lumber company paid 'em.

"Behin' this cabin - mebbe a half mile 'n th' woods - lived a ole hermit. R'ligion t’was with 'im. Had scriptur verses tacked all over th' place. Th' cabin had an ell in it.

"Wal, I was back on th' main job cuttin' one day 'n' th' boss sends word m' sister's very sick 'n' th' folks wanted me home. So I started out . Reckoned I cud make th' ole fella's cabin by dark. He always lef' it unlocked and usually had grub. Th' half way camp wuz closed."

A weird feeling came over me as I listened. Lamis was watching with intense absorption. A strange chill began to ascend my spine.

"T'wuz a good 20 mile, 'n' dark long fore I got thar. I pushes open th' door an' goes in. I lit a smudge 'n' hiz ole fireplace 'n' begins t' cast aroun' fer some grub.

" I had a couple san'wiches. I foun' th' ole codger's lantern an' lit that. I throwed more wood on th' fire 'n' wuz jus' 'bout t' bile some tea when I looks out inta th' ell."

A creeping sensation stole up my neck. Lamis was watching from eyes that were narrowed to slits. I wanted to speak but feared the sound of my voice.

Frank himself seemed but a voice.

"Back in the shadow of the' lower bunk I spies th' figger of a man. Somep'n tole me the minnit I opens the door thet I wa'nt alone. Wal, I sneaks over quiet with m' lantern 'n' shakes the chap under the blanket. Yuh see his back was turned towards me.

He felt kinda queer and didn't rouse up, so I rolls 'im over. His eyes wuz starin', hiz face was cold n' he wuz stiffer 'n a hammer.

"Hmm-m!" Lamis let out a sigh.

"Wal, I did'n know how long he'd been thar, 'n' I did'n dast t' thaw 'im out. So I puts out m' fire 'n' eats a cold bite."

"What did you do then?" I asked. My voice was coming back to normal.

"Wal, I covers 'im up, crawls inta th' top bunk, an' slep' sound. Nex' mornin', I went ot 'n' notified the coroner."

"That was an odd one," Lamis said softly.

"Wait now. Hol' on, I ain't through yet! I come 'long t' same camp one night couple months later. Built m' fire, stewed up some tea, 'n' set down t' eat. Outside th' win' wuz moanin' Spooky feelin' it gave me. Anyway, yuh know how yuh'd feel.

"Wal, I set thar lissenin' 'n' all t'onct I heard a groan, 'Mmm-m' like thet.

"Wal, I couldn' set still thar. I had t' fin' out what wuz in thet cabin, so I takes th' ole lantern 'n' starts. I looks out'n th' ell. Nothin' 'n th' bunks, nothin' under 'em."

Lamis' eyes were slits again as he stared at Frank. I do not know how my own appeared.

"Over'n th' corner o' th' main cabin wuz a hole up inta th' loft. Th' groans seems t' come from up thar, so I stuck m' lantern up an' looked. Bare floor, bare walls.

"A low door wuz cut through th' wall out over th' ell. I went out - feet sounden' like they weighed a ton.

"Down 'n t' cubbyhole t'wuz all cobwebs, empty kegs, an ole han' sled, 'n' a pile of boards. I lissens again. I looks eroun' 'n' th' cobwebs, m' eyeballs crawlin'.

"I hears it: ' Mmm - m', this time outside. I seems on th' groun' now. I opens th' window, stuck out m' lantern, 'n' lissens.

"Thar 'twuz agin, right close t' m' ear. 'Twuz on'y th' end of a loose clapboard, rubbin' agin th' roof. When the win' blowed it sagged out 'n' groaned when it slid back. Did'n take me long t' yank off thet board."

"Hunh", Lamis grinned at me. Frank, don't yuh want us to sleep tonight?"

"Wal, yuh ast me about m' tightest moment 'n' I tole yuh."

I laughed.

"I had a few sick moments myself, this afternoon."

"What wuz yuh doin'?"

"I smoked your old corncob. Found it up on the shelf."

Both men smiled.

"Thought yuh looked sorta wan in yer sleep when we come in."

Lamis sat silently before the hearth, rubbing his finger tips, staring motionless into the firelight.

That night I slept well enough, but before drifting away I decided there were still strange things on our hills, weird stories, and strange men.

CHAPTER XVIII

I returned to Boonville with an infected loneliness. My trip somehow had not been all I had planned, and it seemed more difficult now to leave home.

Mother, as so often before, watched from the doorway until I turned the corner. The snow was melting when I crossed the flat. I heard the musical trickle of the brook and read in the slush underfoot the earliest promise of spring.

The forest lay quiet under the morning sun. I looked back toward our corner of the clearing and a host of memories trooped from out the past. The years had been fleetly passing, carrying me farther and farther from that quiet beginning into more turbulent waters. Some of my friends had gone somewhere outside the forest. God only knew where.

Helen Lamis, it seemed, had become but a haunting dream. Much as I hungered to see her, I could read in my few short visits to Carthage only a passive welcome and the inevitable severance of time and change.

Even the Ferrises had moved away to Lowville, and I realized for the first time how much I missed Jacqueline. I had counted on a visit with her. There had been no barricades between us - there never had been.

I waved to Mother before I finally turned from sight. Back on our veranda the sunlight blazed on the window panes. It seemed so quiet there beside the spruces. My eyes filled weakly, but I brushed away the tears, passed along the cinder path, and climbed aboard the caboose.

Coming down the gulf, I spied across the valley the clear sparkle of three tiny lakes. The Adirondacks under the March sun lay in soft deep shade of amethyst and far below us in the valley, Black River coiled its lazy way northward like a silvery ribbon.

The store seemed dark after three days in the sun and air.

"Well," Mollinson grinned, "how's the old lumberjack?"

"Oh, so - so," I did not altogether appreciate that point of view.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, never better." Then I told him of the rabbit hunt that brought in the bear steak.

He appraised me thoughtfully when I had ended.

"Bear's oil," he retorted. "Bear's oil! Do you expect me to believe -

"You needn't look so grieved," I interrupted. "Some of you farmers from Potato Hill would probably die of fright back there."

I knew he had once lived on Potato Hill, a short distance from Boonville.

"Yeah - heart failure - if we'd ever see the bear you killed with birdshot." His face seemed pained.

"Oh no, but you could, though." Mollinson raised his voice so Sile could hear; "A man who can tame bulldogs wouldn't stop with a measly bear."

In the alcove I heard Sile chuckle.

"I suppose I should have pickled him in alcohol and brought him down here to prove it to you guys."

"Yeah," He lit a cigaret and eyed me earnestly. "now let me tell one."

I cleared out, not caring to hear the promising details.

School dragged and a full week passed before I took much interest either in study or work, but I gradually lapsed into store routine, selling things that were old - old in the Middle Ages: turpentine, castor oil and gentian, peppermint, aloes and cassia, juniper, linseed and myrrh.

Customers, in the days that followed began to ask me about remedies for their ills. I remember one youngster with a foreign accent.

"Gimme some stuff fer me mudder," he pleaded.

" What's the matter with her?"

"She coughs. She's got short wint."

There are mysteries which have yet escaped medical thesis. Perhaps that is the reason I could not find a remedy for short wind.

So the spring passed and summer returned.

One afternoon in early June, Mr. Sile tossed me a letter written in a familiar hand. I tore it open eagerly. It was a formal invitation to Helen's sorority ball.

When my first excited glow had passed, I began to consider my scanty wardrobe. I feared to disgrace her in a plain suit and did not possess a tuxedo.

There was the rub!

For several days I deliberated, and then, not wanting to delay a reply longer, spoke of it to Mollinson.

He looked at me thoughtfully.

" I'll fix you up."

"But I couldn't wear yours." I looked at his long shanks.

"Never mind, Nathan, I'll get you one."

To this day I don't know the owner of the suit, but it fitted me well.

I must not neglect to add that his term 'Nathan' referred to the heroic Hale, and that this sobriquet and his medal were but small fractions of his thoughtfulness.

To answer Helen, I wrote a grateful note and mailed it. I had indeed been favored.

A week went by and time dragged, but the day did come. About ten that morning, Mr. Sile donned his hat without ceremony and informed us he was catching the eleven-fifteen for Franklin County to be gone several days.

Despairing, I telephoned Helen. I heard her voice. Could I speak a little louder?

In tones that were none too steady, I tried to explain.

"Then you're not coming?" There was a note of finality there.

"No. Sorry, Helen; I can't tell how sorry, but Mr. Sile went home this morning."

"I had some new clothes made, too."

"Gee, that's too bad," I could think of nothing more to say. Leaving Mollinson was impossible. I scraped my toes on the floor of the booth to assist mental process, but the words to satisfactorily express myself failed. I had counted on it, too.

"I'll be up just as soon as the boss gets back." I suggested.

"Oh, you needn't bother. Harry Maxwell will be glad to go."

And that was that.

After lunch I returned the borrowed suit.

"I can't go," I said, "now that Sile's gone."

Mollinson turned from the depths of the boss's chair.

"You needn't look so glum. You'll probably see her again."

"Oh yeah?"

"Sure. Who is this dame - the one that carried you off fair night last fall?"

"Yes, you guessed it."

"Hmm- mm. Nice lookin' kid." He mused thoughtfully. "If I remember right, she did have some class."

"Class? Of course she's got class. She's a lady."

Mollinson laughed and tilted back lazily. "Lady or not, lemme give you a little bit of advice." He raised his arms and locked fingers behind his head.

"What is it?" I asked defiantly.

"Well, I'll tell you; you're scared pink of this dame. You're too much of a gentleman."

"What do you mean? What's biting you?"

"I mean that you're too much of a gentleman to her, just like I said. You've got to cut it out, or you won't get to first base - not with her. Ignore 'em's my motto, and it works."

"Where do yuh get all your information? She's the one that does the ignoring."

He laughed lazily.

"You didn't know, did you, that I've been married twice?"

"No." I was surprised.

"Well, I have. Lost my second wife and kid with scarlet fever three years ago."

"You did?"

"Sure. I've had a little experience myself. Don't let this girl know you think too much of her. Lay off'n her a while; treat her wors'n' she'll treat you better."

"Bunk."

"Well, maybe you'll know more when you're older. Take Lehar, he had a steady down on South Street. He used to be down there three nights out of the week."

"What of it?"

"He had it bad. Now I'm tellin' you. But he didn't have it so bad, though, but he left when a good job came along."

"You're kidding me."

"Of course I ain't. I know what I'm talkin' about. I see a carload of chickens at every dance. They're all alike."

I knew that he did see a lot of girls at the dances, but I rather questioned the sagacity of his conclusions.

That same night, in Franz's bedroom, I chanced upon an astounding story of an ardent poor boy who wooed a rich man's daughter. After many heart-breaking rejections, the persevering hero won.

I was decidedly that poor boy. I tossed on my pillow with haunting visions of Maxwell guiding Helen around that ballroom. There would be soft lights, dazzling white gowns, a well waxed floor, and intoxicating music.

Three evenings later, I turned a familiar street corner in Carthage, my head filled with a riotous combination of suddenly acquired wisdom, much patience, and some disgust. I went up the steps, and Helen's hostess answered my knock.

"Is Miss Helen Lamis here?" I asked boldly.

"I'm sorry but she's out."

I fumbled the hat in my hand and turned down the steps.

"Shall I tell her who called?"

"Please. Allan Hargrave, from Boonville. Thank you."

"Oh, all right, sir. I will. Good night, Mr. Hargrave."

The following day my lodestar flickered, and my recently discovered patience waned, but I went back the next week.

"Miss Lamis is out again, Mr. Hargrave." in response to my now none too bold query.

I wandered across the street in a daze and sat down in the shadows on someone's lawn. How long I sat there, I do not know. It was a long time. Finally, as I was about to rise, I heard footsteps and a pair of merry voices. Some young couple was coming up the street. I gazed at them dully.

The pair passed under a near- by street light, and I caught my breath. It was Maxwell and Helen. They sat for a few moments conversing on the porch rail, and then Helen went into the house. Harry tripped down the steps to the walk and disappeared down the street. I pushed myself to my feet and trailed along.

The boards of that freight house platform were hard that night. They pressed my back painfully.

I wrote again to Helen, but it was a week before she replied. Then I wrote again, and no reply came.

My work suffered, along with my study, but the end of the school year was near, and I held on. If Sile or Mollinson noticed any peculiarities in my conduct, they said nothing. I grew morose, but the story of persistence was real to me, and my determination, at least, persisted.

I decided to make one more try. If I could have one chance, I had no doubt that I would win her. The years in that backwoods store could not be erased and I had entirely forgotten Frank's reference to Santa Claus.

The memory comes humorously to me now. I have a recollection of standing before Helen on the porch of that house in Carthage. Something affected my knees - probably terror. Mollinson's precious advice had somehow failed me and

I made no attempt to disguise my feelings. It was too late now for any caveman appeal.

"Helen," I said. " I heard that you greatly enjoyed the ball with Harry."

"Well?" she smiled quietly.

"Well, I'm glad you did, but you didn't answer my letter. I've been here twice and both times you were out."

"Well?" she was still smiling.

"Well," my tongue seemed thick. "I only wanted to say, Helen, that this is the last time."

"Yes?"

"Yes, until you send for me."

"Well?"

"Well, I'm going, but if you ever want me, or if there is ever anything I can do for you, let me know, I'll come." I started down the step.

"Good-bye," she called with finality.

"Good-night," I replied, not looking back.

I stopped on the bridge that spans Black River. Far down the channel, the dark waters sucked and swirled.

There was no reason for going on. I was coming to the end of the hopeful road. Yet something stayed me.

That morning I was back in Boonville, and the same week, I finished school.

CHAPTER XIX

Early in September, I discarded Lehar's choice of schools and took the train for Buffalo.

The forces that had been with me since the day I decided upon Vassar were directing, and the impetus I received from the story of the persevering hero was pushing me on. My faith in the final winning of Helen had all but died, yet I had hours of hope, for neither the hopes nor the habits of years can end in a day. Perseverance would win - so the story went.

I found a striking difference between the rumbling noises of that city and the ripple of Fish Creek waters. The city lay coiled along the lake, spreading its arms down the Niagara, screeching and throbbing by day, and belching flame like a many-eyed monster at night.

Out on the waters of Erie, lake vessels churned their white path below the horizon, and Niagara sweeping northward with the glory and force of the inland seas behind her, plunged white in one last headlong leap oceanward.

Unlike Boonville, I had found its Main Street more than seven miles long, and our school somewhere near the center.

That medical school is a three-story weathered brick building which faces High Street, flanked at either end with rectangular facades and decorated with Gothic arches. The gallipot division tucked away in that edifice was exposed to an inquisitional hall on either flank, a third story aroma of dissection, the caustic diatribes of would-be chemists and the painful operations of young oral surgeons whose rattling drills resounded from across the court.

A university is a democratic institution. Men come there from city and from hamlet, from the social fortresses of Delaware Avenue, from cross road villages and cabins in the hills. A few of them were allowance boys whose parents considered the course a tactful compromise with productive exertion, and two or three bicycled telegrams from seven until midnight.

I was a trifle more favored than the latter and sat many a late pipe with men who preferred details of chess, oratory, stud poker and campus politics to the

drier fact that asafetida is a gum resin from the rhizome of Ferula foetida which grows in the Arabian desert, and that camphor is really a dextro-rotary ketone.

I had my first sight of that great game which inspires so many of our small chaps to emulate Yost, Rockne, Zupke, or Warner. (One black eye, a naturally reticent disposition and a glimpse of the 180 pounders settled my conviction to assist them from the bleachers.)

Yet football is worth all it costs. Our Buffalo boys were never truly Buffalonians until some challengers drove the team back over Rotary field - back under their own goal post. Then they were one.

A calm faced chap named Pearson held the chemistry of all the schools in the palm of his hand. Often, often I have heard him say:

"What is it? - That's chemistry."
and
"I never try to carry in my head
what I can find in a book."
and
"Shake hands with yourself; you
are your only rival."
and
"The most important thing in Life
is to know what is important."
and
"If you haven't learned you don't know much,
and your education is a failure."

To this day, I can see that man - a smooth-running dynamo of inexhaustible curiosity - "Whad'tis it?" his field. Together with our white-haired dean they joked and bluffed and drove us constantly on.

I found another friend in the chemistry school. Having then a budding urge toward journalism I represented my school on the monthly Bison.

At these conferences, I met Kenefick Wendle. Raw-boned, he was, of body, a stalwart football tackle whose tenacity and flat-footedness surpassed his German cousins overseas. He was my editor-in-chief, as yielding as an anvil.

I met him once in the dusk of twilight near Chateau Thierry. He was dirty, blood-soaked and faint, but grimly leading the tattered remnant of his company back for reserves - but this comes later.

I walked the streets of Buffalo, assisting Wendle in the sale of advertising. We sold enough to finance the publication, but we walked holes in our shoes and I learned the Niagara frontier better than the streets of Boonville.

At the close of the second semester, he remarked to me: “Hargrave, my other associates want a key for their priceless services."

"What's a key?" I asked.

"Key?" He held up this tiny golden football on his watch chain. “A key's like this or like a frat key - for extraordinary services, you know."

"Well, what about it?"

He tapped me on the shoulder and smiled at my hopeless ignorance.

"Jeez, Hargrave, those birds have got their nerve. If they get a key, I'll see that you do."

Looking through our old periodical, I can now safely laugh at his editorials, but I saw him crash the football line, the opposition of advertising men and the critics born to bedevil fledging publications. In addition, Buffalo has the Bison, and I the memory of a fearless American who staggered back with the tattered remnant of a company touched by an unquenchable fire.

I was no campus politician and had no desire to curry the Council for special favors. I have met fellows though, shabby enough they were - who would rent a Tuxedo, court the dean's daughter, hold him up for tuition, operate some campus racket and still receive the honorary memberships. Yet, long ago I ceased to envy. Each man to his call.

And so, through the maze of that year, I stumbled on waiting and hoping.

At Christmas time, Mollinson went home to Lowville, but I had no mind to go. Perhaps if I kept away from Helen she would one day send for me.

Jackie wrote and somehow I was glad. The Dexter people were shipping spruce out regularly over the Glenwood and Western. Page had crumbled. They were living in Lowville. She had seen Frank. He was the same, but some folks complained that he caught all the fish and killed all the game. (There were some who would say that.) One of his camps had been fired, the cabin on the creek remained. The Lamises had moved to Carthage. Helen had gone to Vassar. Did I know?

Of course I knew. Had I heard from Franz Lehar? I had not written that Franz was the head now of his laboratory.

So I walked down the road, a purple blackness in the shadow. I wrote to Jacqueline, glad indeed to be remembered. Yet why? She knew that I did not care for her. I had confessed as much that night on the old settee. We had listened to the peepers and watched the moon coming up over the old woods road. There had been voices astir then, soft radiant moonlight over the marshes; a white streak down the road and a purple blackness in the shadows of the spruces.

Letters from home came frequently. Dad and Mother had moved out to Glenfield. He had worked there in a mill, but rheumatism was bothering him now.

Frank had been out twice to inquire; more tattered yet faithful. Had I forgotten 'im now I was a gintilmun?

Mother promised to tell Frank anything I might write, so several times thereafter I enclosed a note for him. She would do the rest. I knew there was no objection now to my fondness for the old man. She remembered only how he had humored me when I was a little chap.

I wrote home oftener and to Jackie Ferris, as homesick boys will do in that most impressionable hour when manhood is knocking at the door.

No word came from Helen, but school would end, some day. Surely she would remain my lodestar to the end. When I finished she would go westward to me, to that magic Aloha land. There was really no doubt; there couldn't be.

And so the year passed. Those men of the campus are boys to me now. Yet I have never learned what education is nor where to seek for the abode of wisdom.

CHAPTER XX

My senior year came at last. Day after day I sat on the top floor of that old medical building looking up High Street, listening to the whine of an ambulance bound for the hospital or to fire trucks whistling northward.

In the classroom, the professor's voice would often come to me as from a vast distance, rising and falling at intervals with the noises from the street. Floating before my eyes was that mysterious, obscure island set down in fathomless waters, an alabaster city shrouded in the mist, and indistinctly. Frank Lehar. How I managed to maintain an average, I cannot say, but when finals came, I passed.

A shadowy foreboding hung with me all year.

One day, at the close of the semester, I met Mollinson on the street. Missing the previous year, he had been invited to join our classmates in the annual trip to Detroit. The last senior celebration was this water party - the annual guests of a great pharmaceutical firm.

Mollinson flipped open his cigaret case and offered me one.

"Got your bottle of bromides?"

"Bromides? What do you mean?"

"You'll need em. Might be rough on the boat."

I laid my hand on his spare shoulder.

"Sorry old man, but I'm leaving tomorrow myself."

"Boonville?"

"Yes, and then some. You remember Lehar?"

"Yes, I remember him about as much as he remembers me. Why?"

"Well, I'm going to Honululu. Frank Lehar wrote me to catch the boat from 'Frisco the 20th."

"No."

"Yes, and I'm leaving for Boonville, Ed. You'll have to go without me."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"I wish I was going with yuh," he said soberly.

"I wish you were, Ed; but I'm not going alone."

He stared at me with a flare of curiosity.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Do you remember the time in Boonville when I returned that tuxedo?

"Is it that girl?"

"Yes."

He held out his hand, "Congratulations, then."

"No," I took his hand, "she hasn't agreed yet but I'm hoping. Good bye Ed."

"Just a minute!" he called.

I had started to go but turned back.

"Allen, do you remember the advice I gave yuh back in Boonville?

"What?"

"About the girl?"

I laughed.

"Oh yes, you said to get barbaric; that I was too much of a gentleman."

"That's it, pal. Now remember what Ed Molinson's telling you."

"All right, have your own way, Ed. Good luck to you anyway."

"Same to you, Hargrave."

Farther down the street I turned and saw his tall figure striding northward.

Late that afternoon I took my last look around the city. I hopped off a Niagara car and strolled over to a bench on the green at Fort Porter. Forty or fifty soldiers were doing a close order drill upon the green. I heard the commanding officer's quick bark: "A-tten-tion – Forward – March!"

I watched them for a time. Since the war broke out in April, Professor Pearson had continually warned us we would soon be under arms; our real foes would be trinitro toluene (T.N.T.), mustard gas, chlorine, and yet another more terrible than all which was yet a jealous secret which he dare not name (phosgene). We did not take him seriously.

My mind, that afternoon, was on the western horizon and shores far beyond it. Would Helen go now? I had not seen her since that night in Carthage and I had come a long way. It was more than three years now – three years of emptiness, with only a few memories.

Over in the west, where lake met sky, I saw a fleecy cloud no larger than my hand. I heard a close disturbing footstep and looked up. One of the condemned professions stood there. Overdressed she was, proclaiming in her very tawdriness the sign.

In the space of a second it flashed through my mind that I had seen such before.

She sat down, unabashed, and lay one arm on my shoulder over the back of the seat.

"Snap out of it, boy!" Her tone was harsh.

"Oh yeah?"

She leaned against me.

"Ain't you a little lonesome, buddy?"

Perhaps she had been watching me from a distance. I looked at her sorrowful figure resentfully.

"Aw, beat it." I waved my hand in front of her face and shoved over to the end of the bench.

She arose wearily and scornfully.

"You're too high hat, Oscar," she taunted. I watched her go cooly defiant.

Over in the west the cloud had grown larger. In its face I seemed to see a smiling face with smiley lips, pearly teeth, and a radiant crown of curls that were amber and gold.

Day after day, week after week, year after year that face had followed me, plainly as one that Frank saw in the spruce woods, lifting shadowy arms to him from this camp fires.

I did not stop in Glenfield. I had waited long to see Helen. Having said I would not return until she asked me, I was breaking that promise. But through all the months at Buffalo, I was constantly hoping and planning. Graduation and Lehar had I had forced me to action. In ten days I was to be in San Francisco.

I could not believe that Helen had ceased to care. It couldn't be. She must.

With Helen's promise obtained, I could go home for a day or two. Mother and Dad would rejoice, too, after the first pains of departure.

I knew the street number. I had not subscribed to their hometown paper without a purpose.

An older woman than I remembered answered my knock.

"And who did you say you were?" she asked.

"I'm Allan Hargrave. I just came in from Buffalo. Is Helen homes?"

"No," She measured me in the dusk. "Won't you come in, Allan? Mr. Lamis is here."

On a divan Lamis sat, apparently enjoying a black cigar. He arose as I entered.

"Well, Allan, Dog my cats if it isn't you." He squeezed my hand.

"Can you stay for supper?" Mrs. Lamis asked.

"Thanks, no. I haven't been home yet."

"Not home?" Lamis drawled the query. "You must have something mighty urgent to bring you here."

"Allan wanted to see Helen." Mrs. Lamis and her husband exchanged glances.

"Oh, that's it." Lamis appraised my face again. "You seem to like my daughter, Hargrave."

"Why should I deny it?" I would not be ignored neither would I abandon the effort.

"Do you still think Helen likes you?" Mrs. Lamis could speak plainly.

"I have hoped she does. I've tried to be worthy, Mrs. Lamis." I stated my case bluntly not daring to look at either of them.

"I – don't – know." Mrs. Lamis shook her head dubiously.

I saw Lamis through the eternal cloud, measuring me of old, with one arched eyebrow.

"What have you been doing, Allan?"

"Do you remember that chap who was at Sile's - Franz Lehar?

Lamis nodded.

"Well, I finished my course at Buffalo this week. I'm sailing for 'Frisco on the 20th to join him in Honolulu."

"And your salary?"

"I begin at $3,000."

Lamis nodded approval. "You'll stand a chance at promotion?"

"I don't know any reason for thinking otherwise. Lehar's in charge there now."

Lamis nodded again and was silent for a time.

I waited, feeling the thump of my own heart, hearing the tick of my own watch. Possibly my case had still some promise. I had told them plainly for no one had a better right to know.

Lamis eased back on the cushions thinking, while I waited. Mrs. Lamis rocked, eloquently silent. Finally, he spoke.

"Allan, Helen isn't here."

"No? Can you tell me where she is?" I looked directly at him, not terrified now at what I saw.

"Yes," he replied," she's in New York."

"New York? Hmmm. . ." I pulled out my watch and looked at it.

"You aren't going to New York, are you Allan?" Lamis flecked his ash cooly into a tray.

"Of course I'm going!"

"When?"

"I'll catch the next train – that is if you'll tell me where she is. If not, I must take a chance on finding her."

"Allan," Lamis pointed to the cushion beside him. "sit down here just a moment.

I got up from my chair, walked over to where he was sitting and sat down, all the while feeling Mrs. Lamis' eyes drilling me.

Lamis laid his arm over my shoulder.

"Listen boy, get me straight now. I have always liked you."

"Thanks George." I smiled at him. I had seldom called him that before.

"But Allan – "

"Yes?"

"Allan, I hate to say so, but I don't think she'll go with you."

"You don't think she'd go?"

"I don't like to have to tell you, Hargrave. You've made a man of yourself. Back there in my store, I wished more than once that you and Helen – "

"But you don't think she'd go with me?"

"I don't think so, boy, but go and ask her yourself. Mother, give him Helen's address."

Mrs. Lamis rose from her chair, wrote on a slip of paper, and handed it to me soberly.

"Here, Allan," she said simply and went back to her rocker.

"One more word," Lamis concluded. "I can't say that I'd like my daughter in Honolulu, but if she wants to go, we won't stand in her way, will we Mother?"

"We've never stood in Helen's way with any decent boy".

But there seemed little enough encouragement in that.

"I'm going tonight," I declared.

Before I left, Lamis again extended his hand, and held it a long moment, staring gravely into my face.

I can recall very little of that trip to New York. It was night and an inky black night it was.

On a siding at Lowville, was a north-bound coach in which I counted a half dozen army uniforms – recruiting officers undoubtedly or young lieutenants from Sacketts Harbor or Pines Plains.

The break had come in April, and back in Buffalo, the lower city was hung with the flags of four nations. An enlistment officer was on every square, but I

took no great interest. There were plenty of men who wanted to fight; I had another purpose.

The train barely halted at Glenfield. I would be back again, in two days, at least. In Utica I changed for a sleeper, but I slept little enough.

I heard some stations called: Albany. and then after a time, Kingston. The time would be short now.

All the way to Kingston I wondered why Lamis had doubted. Had Helen expressed a dislike for me? She was proud but I never really doubted that I would win her.

Who had cared as I had cared? Who else had struggled so to come out of that backwoods life for her? Not Harry Maxwell, surely. He was one of those parasites who fattened on Providence, who reaped what other men had sown.

My case with Helen was certainly absurd. Perserverence must win. In the story, the girl at the end, admitted her fears that her lover might turn back. I had no intention of turning back.

I found Helen Lamis in one of those multiple brownstone houses in upper Manhattan. I had not asked how she came to be there. Lamis would have told, but I did not inquire. Fortunately, I found her alone. When I rang the bell at the number on my slip, Helen answered.

Of course, I would have known her – anywhere. The years had not changed her, yet she was fuller, maturer. Her curls had become coils of beauty, her ankles were as beautiful as ever, her hands as exquisite. But I had left a girl and had found a woman.

She stared at me questioningly. I was older and taller, too.

"Well, what do you wish sir?"

"Nothing and everything. I came for you."

"Oh, Allan Hargrave."

"One time at your service." I hoped to find my footing as cautiously as possible. She gave a peal of laughter.

"Come in, that is if you aren't in too great a hurry."

"Would you expect me to be in a hurry after waiting this long?"

I offered her that as an opening while I followed her down the hall.

She laughed again.

"Are you trying to be funny, Allan Hargrave? Lay your hat on that table."

"You always said I was funny." I dropped the skypiece atop the hall furniture and went in.

She motioned me to a piece of upholstery, pulled up a buttonback and plumped herself down close beside me, ignoring my retort.

Every article of furniture was punctiliously placed. I looked at her vaguely, sensing more than seeing.

By the light of the Greeks, she was beautiful! What a beautiful lamp she would be to any man's pathway!

"How on earth did you know I was here?"

"I have letters from the mayor of Buffalo. I went to the city hall and engaged two plainclothesmen."

"Now, Allan, you haven't changed a bit, have you?"

"I have one habit that will never change."

I saw the trace of a smile. No true woman should resent it.

"Come now, Mr. Flatterer, tell me why are you here; how you came, and where you found out about me."

"I'll tell you, but I'm not a flatterer." I looked at her hungrily and laid my hand on hers where it lay on the chair arm. She did not pull it away, but a shadow crossed her face.

"Helen," I pleaded, "you know why I've come. You don't know, though, of the dark days I've passed through."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. There isn't anyone but you; there never has been anyone but you."

"You are a very interesting man. Go on." She pulled her hand from mine.

I bit my lip. "Helen, I'm through with Buffalo, and I'm taking the train the 20th at San Francisco for Honolulu."

"I congratulate you."

"Thanks again. You may also congratulate yourself." I tried to catch her eyes but could not.

"Why am I to congratulate myself?"

"Because you're going along."

"With you?"

"Certainly. I've waited a long time for this."

"Well, you've answered one question. Now - how did you get here?"

"By rail."

"But who gave you my address?"

"You wouldn't ever guess."

"Did you meet Harry Maxwell?"

"Maxwell? Decidedly not. I haven't seen him in three years. You seem to like Harry, don't you?"

"Hunh! I've every reason to, don't I?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm sorry but I can't join anyone's enthusiasm for him."

"Then you don't join mine?"

"Hardly, Helen. Are you really fond of Harry Maxwell?"

"I may marry him."

"Helen Lamis! Do you mean that?"

"I expect to marry him."

I still believed she might be joking. I leaned against the end of the matchless upholstery and stretched my arm behind her upon the velour chair.

"Helen, the last answer is: your dad told me."

"Dad?"

"Yes, your mother wrote the address." I showed her the small slip on which Mrs. Lamis had written the street and number.

"Mother?" There was resentment in her eyes.

"Well, why not Helen?"

"And Mother told you to come here?"

Something was hammering in my head.

"Why not, Helen? Why won't you go with me? We could be happy there, I know."

I seized both sets of shapely fingers and raised them to my lips.

"Allan, you must stop." She pulled her hands away. "I had hoped you'd be a gentleman! A flash of color came into her face.

I dropped my head in my hands. I heard sharp footsteps. She had gone into the hall. Then the footsteps returned. I glanced up at her. She was handing me my hat.

"I have appreciated your call, Allan, but I hope this one will be the last."

I pushed myself slowly upright, her suggestion clear at last. Then with ease I pulled her, resisting into my arms.

"Helen Lamis, look at me."

She looked, a very terrified look it was, and under her breath she sobbed, "You brute!"

I pulled her closer with one encircling arm, so I could see her eyes.

"I am a brute, Helen, but don't you ever say you haven't been kissed."

I held her lips to mine – blessed agony – for three short seconds.

She was trembling violently when I released her. I stood for five seconds more and looked at her. Had she not been overcome with anger, I believed she would have phoned for police and possibly been justified.

“Good-bye, Helen.” I called, but she did not answer. She lay coiled on the cushions, sobbing aloud as though she had been bereft of soul.

I was not generally a coward, neither insulted women nor feared the police, but that afternoon I did - and became all those things.

I stopped a moment on the high step and looked up and down the street. I’d catch a car to the station and the first north-bound train for the hills. There was tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and nothing left to hope for.

CHAPTER XXI

On the 14th of June, I wrote to Franz Lehar, hoping that the letter explaining my delay would reach San Franciso in time for the boat. It pained me to write and the job seemed impossible. Mother watched me deliberating over it from the tiny kitchen in our new home in Glenfield.

Even while I wrote it, it seemed that we were out of place there. The old house at the edge of the forest had been our home for so long. There were no avenues of spruce trees now, no purple shadows in late afternoon, no evening chorus from the marshes, and none of the bright splendor of morning blazing back from the morning wall. I was hungry for the hills and the quiet in which to think. For my oldest dream had suddenly ended, and the mainstream had snapped.

For a young man fresh from college, I must have made a sorry figure. I caught my mother and dad watching me, for my replies had been brief and unexplaining. All I had said was that I had changed my mind about Honolulu. Perhaps I should have gone to 'Frisco, but what man wishes to travel while his heart is a stranger? I had left something on the steps of that old house in upper Manhattan, something which I could not bring back. Every morning I hated the day, and it irked me just to put on my clothes.

There was war talk everywhere, but I listened with unconcern. The president's conscription bill had come while I was yet in Buffalo, and that week's papers had announced a registration day for the new draft. Still, I had no interest. Spearing men with bayonets did not promise to be a pleasing diversion, although I myself would not have minded being dispatched.

Professor Pearson had repeatedly predicted that it would be liquid fire, shrapnel, and gas; chemistry would win the war.

One of my freshmen classmates had been called back to Canada where, with that "Princess Pat" regiment, he joined those who slept in Flanders.

I did not relish the thought of war, and Hawaii was fading away. But I did long for the hills and the remembrances of older, happier days. I wanted only to go off into the wilderness and lie on the banks of some trickling stream, to listen to summer breezes, and look long into blue sky. I thought I could forget as Frank had done in that beaver meadow cabin.

And so, I went. I hopped off the caboose at Page and hiked over the ridge to the creek.

There was no one around when I got there. I sat on Frank's bench for an hour, ate some lunch from my pack, and finally lay down in the sun. If he did not return by late afternoon, I would sleep by the door, for the nights were warm.

I carried a revolver, food enough for several days, and a hunger for a place that was nearly as old as memory. I stretched out comfortably in the sun and gave up to listening to marsh voices and the chatter of birds. Then I fell asleep.

Sometime in midafternoon, I heard footsteps. I sprang up seizing my gun, not wanting to be at anyone's advantage.

"Heavenly day, Allie. I thought I was seein' spirits."

It was Frank. Grayer he was since the last time I had seen him. The same baggy coat hung on him and he walked slowly now.

"Glad you got here; I began to think I'd have to sleep in the brush."

"When'd yuh git here?"

"This morning. Came on the train to Page. Where've you been?"

"Back on Seven Mile fishin'"

"Any luck?"

"Naw, sun's too bright."

"Let me see."

"Here look; measly, ain't they?"

He lifted the lid of the basket and I saw perhaps a dozen speckled trout, ranging from six to ten inches. He had stuffed in green leaves to keep them cool.

"Allie!

"Yes?"

"Thought you'd be in Honolluy now."

" No, changed my mind."

" Yuh soun' kind o' sensible now. Ain't goin' to war, be yuh?"

" Do I look like a belligerent?"

" A whut?"

" Like somebody looking for trouble?"

"No, can't say's yuh do. And if yuh take an ole man's advice, ye'll stay away from it."

"I will; don't worry."

"Gee, boy," he looked me over carefully. Ye've filled out some since I've seen yuh. How long is it?"

"Three years last March."

"Chrismus! how th' time goes! Why didn' yuh go to Honalluly? Yer ma sed ye' was."

"I changed my mind," I told him again.

"Wacha goin' t' do now?"

"I'm goin' to stay with you until you kick me out."

"Gee Crismus, boy. I'm glad. Been hankerin' t' see yuh ever since yuh went."

"Nonsense!"

" s's a fact, Allie. You been m' junior partner, seems like, ever sense yuh was big 'nuff t' tote m' gun."

That evening, when the darkness fell, I realized that I *was* Frank's partner. I had no place now in the civilized world; I was a true denizen of the backwoods. Frank himself was no nearer a savage than I.

We smoked our pipes in the twilight, dwelling on the old days, conjecturing the outcome of the war and what boys we knew would go. I smoked until I had knocked cold ashes three times from my pipe, and unconsciously a sense of peace had come. Whatever was right or true in this world was true there. There were no sounds of screaming traffic, no glaring lights, no bewildered human insects flitting aimlessly - only the quiet murmur of peace.

The next day I fished beside Frank. Once I dropped off to sleep and awoke to find the lazy blue sky over me. Frank too was dozing, and his pipe had fallen from his lips.

I stretched myself luxuriously, and thrust my fingers deeply through the mulch of grass and leaves. I could almost feel the pulse beat of the earth. Perhaps the earth did have some throbbing purpose which it shrouded from feeble visions. My heart seemed to take on a steadier, stronger rhythm of ease.

Just before dark, we saw a figure coming across the meadow. The outline was indistinct, but he came directly toward the cabin. As he approached I noticed something familiar, but did not recognize him.

"Evening Frank," the newcomer called.

It was George Lamis.

"Huh, Gee-rusalem, George. Whar be yuh bound for?"

"Somebody said you knew where there's fish."

Lamis apparently did not recognize me in the gloom.

"I caught a few fingerlin's yesterday - hate to promise I kin git many more."

I saw Lamis stare at me.

"Who's the stranger, Frank?"

" 'Cuse me George, this is yer gintulman's Hargrave - Mister Alin Hargrave o' Page, Boonville, n' Buffalo."

I laughed.

"I didn't recognize you, Allan," he began; "it's getting so dark."

" Yeah, and yuh mus' be tired. Here." Frank moved over toward me. "Come on 'n' se' down, George."

I was disturbed again. Suppose Lamis did know how I had conducted myself with Helen.

"Nice warm evenin' Allan," he offered.

"Yeah, been a nice day."

" I thought you'd be on your way to 'Frisco by now."

" No, I decided I wouldn't go."

"That so? Hmmm - I didn't hear anything about it from Helen, but I supposed you'd go anyway."

" Helen have somepin' to do with it?" inquired Frank.

Lamis did not reply, so I felt that I must.

" I just wanted to see her before I left, but I changed my mind and came back." I tried to speak casually. It was well that Lamis had not heard from Helen.

The three of us sat silently for a moment, and then Lamis asked:

"Where's your residence, Allan?"

"Well Glenfield, I suppose. I've called it that ever since Dad moved. Why?"

"Mmm, I was wondering about the draft. I suppose you've registered?"

"No, do I have to?"

"Understand you do. You're past twenty-one?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess you will then, and the sooner you do it, the better probably."

I said nothing. Frank was quiet, too, puffing at his pipe.

"I heard from Helen, yesterday." I sat up suddenly. "She writes that Harry Maxwell enlisted and has gone to Camp Dix."

"Where'd he enlist?" I asked.

"New York, I assume. He's been down there all summer."

"He has?"

"Yes." Lamis tried to read my face, but in the darkness, he could not.

This was news indeed. Helen had said she expected to marry Harry Maxwell. He had been hanging around her all summer, then? Events were happening.

I gripped the bench with both hands and stood up.

"Did Helen write anything else?"

I was treading dangerous ground.

"M-mm, no. Said it was awfully hot down there. Said the streets are lined with soldiers now."

"Was that all she said?"

"Yes, but why do you ask me? Didn't you see her last week?"

"Yes, but I was there only for a few minutes." The darkness was pure luck.

"And you decided not to go to Honolulu?"

"Not now."

"Well, you're in for service now, unless I miss my guess."

"Hez a man got t' fight, George?" the old man queried.

"Guess he has. The government can't make you fight, maybe, but it can take you to where the fighting is. Then a man has to use his own judgement."

Here was a new angle. I might be compelled to go. There was no peace anywhere. Trouble seemed to follow me.

Lamis said no more about Helen or the war, and sometime later we crawled into the bunks. For the first time, the orchestra of voices from the marsh and the meadow offered little comfort.

What a pity man had to be born into a world that was in constant struggle against such overwhelming odds. Why must the world have war? Why snatch a man from a peace he loved and cast him into the hell breath of hatred? What damned foolishness.

The next day we fished down East Branch to the railroad. I waded along behind the pair over slippery shale and around boulders. Fallen logs lay across the stream and below them I whipped out several beauties, eight inches, ten inches. The trout ran.

I suspected the others had done better. Somehow, I did not enjoy the trip as I had planned. In the swirling waters I saw a still larger current that was pulling men away from their moorings, from their business, from society, perhaps even from life somewhere beyond the sea. That thought was with me through the day, but as we turned toward the cabin, I decided.

"Frank," I opened my basket and gave him the catch, "Frank, I'm going out tonight."

"What?"

"Yes, going as soon as I can get picked up."

"No, not now."

"Yes, I am. I'm going to enlist. Might as well as to get drafted."

"Allie."

"Can't help it, Frank. The war dogs will howl for every able-bodied man. If I stay here, they'll come after me."

"I suppose so." He thrust a bony forefinger into his pipe and stared vacantly out the door into lengthening shadows.

Lamis dropped off his basket, set down his pole and began to strip off his coat in silence. I started to rummage around, assembling my pack.

"I'll go a piece with yuh," Frank declared.

A mistiness rimmed my eyes while I gathered my outfit. The cabin was all blurry now, and it seemed the last straw had broken.

"Better wait until you've eaten," Lamis counseled.

"I'll take a bite in my hand. I want to get as far down the track as I can before dark."

" 'S quite a step t' Glenfield, Allen."

" I know, Frank, but I'll be all right. Come on, are you ready?"

" Yeup, I'll git yuh a lantern."

"I won't need it. Come on."

I turned to Lamis.

"Well, I guess it's good-bye."

" God be with you, boy." He did not offer his hand nor did I mine."

Across the meadow we went and over the ridge. The shadows went darker and darker until I could scarcely see the old man beside me. When we came out at the edge of the woods, I looked down across the clearing where Page had stood. Only a memory it was now. Three deserted houses, some scrap iron and ashes - like life.

Frank plodded after me until we came to the coal shed.

"Guess I can't go no futher with yuh, boy."

"No, you've come too far now Frank. How'll you get back?"

"Me? I'll be all right. I'll take m' time."

I hesitated a moment and laid my arm on his shoulder where he leaned against the building.

"Frank," I said, "I've got to go."

"Jus' a minnit, Allie. Ye've seen Helen?"

"Yes, in New York."

"I've thought so. An' she wouldn't go west with yuh?"

"No."

"Allie."

"What?"

"Better go out t' Lowville an' see Jackie."

"I will, I'm going there to enlist."

"Allie."

"Yes, Frank."

"Mebbe, 'fore yuh git back, boy, I'll b' in Maine."

"Will you send Dad your address?"

"Sure I will. 'An' don't fergit m', Allie. Yuh bin m' partner 'n' m' fren'."

I mumbled feebly and squeezed his old shoulders, glad it was dark and he could not see the tears that trickled down my face.

"Bye, boy."

"Good bye." I started down the track, stumbling a little. I looked back. A shadow was standing there, watching me go.

I got out - somehow - to Glenfield. The next morning, when I announced my intention, a bleak sorrow stole over Mother's face.

"You haven't got to go, do you Allan?"

"Yes, Mother," I looked at Dad. His face was inscrutable as the trail across the plains. "I might as well enlist as to be drafted. Maybe I'll get a better break."

"What would you enlist as?"

"Rear rank private of infantry."

"Couldn't you enlist in a less dangerous branch, son?" Mother's lips trembled as she toyed with her fork.

"No, Mother." I tried to laugh. “The infantry is as safe as any branch. Remember the Irishman's story?"

"No." She was not greatly interested in it. I could see that but I told her of the argument between Pat who favored the army, and Mike who preferred the navy, and Pat's contention that if a man was killed on the field, "well, there y' are; but if a man be killed in the navy, where be ye"?

Mother tried to laugh, but it ended in a sob, and Dad got up from the table and sat in his armchair by the window.

I left in mid-afternoon, promising to write often, not to catch cold, and not to volunteer for hazardous duty, to call on Jackie Ferris before I left, and again, to write often.

At the door, Mother put her arms around me and dropped her head on my shoulder. "Be a good boy, Allan. Ask God to keep you."

"Be a good soldier, son. and remember that coward's die first." was Dad's last counsel.

That evening I found Jackie Ferris in their small white house on upper Dayan Street. Grandma Ferris was there, whiter, feebler, yet anxious to know what I was doing, and anxious to get news from old neighbors. Ferris himself said little. He had never seemed much more than a stranger to me, a slender, dark-eyed, silent man to whom Jacqueline was all.

But Jackie certainly questioned me.

"And you're going to enlist now Allan?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Where?'

"Here in Lowville."

"I heard Harry Maxwell's in Fort Dix."

"Yes, I know."

"Who told you?"

"Oh, George Lamis told me."

"Where did you see him?"

"Back at Fish Creek. He came back there to fish with Dimons."

"And you've been back there all this time? Why didn't you come to see me?"

"Oh, I don't know. I wanted to go back to the old place and look around first."

"Why didn't you go to Honolulu?"

"I changed my mind." That excuse was growing threadbare.

"How did you hear about Harry Maxwell?"

"You'll excuse us Grandmother; I want to talk to Allan outside."

Ferris nodded to his mother, and the older woman's eyes followed us to the door.

"Sit down, Allan." Jacqueline steered me to a hanging seat and perched herself beside me.

"You didn't answer my question, I began. "You didn't say how you learned about Harry."

"Helen Lamis told me?"

"Is she in town?"

"She stopped here a few minutes yesterday. She was on her way home. She said you were in New York."

"Did she tell you that, or did you ask her?"

"I asked her."

"You seem to know all about me, Jacqueline, and about Helen and Harry?"

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"Why should you? Are you so interested in Harry and me?"

"In Harry? Why should anyone be interested in him?"

"Helen is."

"Yes, I suppose so. She twists the two of you around her finger."

"Well, you seem to know everything. Did Helen tell you anything more about me?"

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"A little. I wondered because you seem to keep good account of me."

"Better than you do of me. Conceited."

I leaned against her and thrust my arm around her.

"Jackie, do you want me to keep track of you?"

She studied me silently.

"Would it do me any good to want?" Her dark staring eyes told much.

"To want what?" I feigned ignorance.

"Would it do me any good to want you?"

I pulled her dark head against my shoulder. Her hair was lustrous.

"Jackie." Her eyes were pools of light. "Jackie, I'm going tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Do you care, Jacqueline?"

"I wish you'd write to me. It's been seven months now."

She lay against my shoulder like a child.

"Jackie,"

"Yes, Allan."

"If you do care, Jackie." I bent over her, but she covered her lips with her finger tips.

"You don't love me, Allan; you love Helen Lamis."

I straightened up in my seat. If she already knew, then why deny it? I released her and she stared silently at the tips of her shoes, not moving away.

"Jacqueline."

"Yes?" She turned haunting eyes toward me again. It was hard to hurt a girl like Jackie. There were none better. What a mess life was.

"I've got to go now." I said half hesitating.

"So early?"

"Yes, I must get some rest. It will be a long day tomorrow."

She laughed.

"Wouldn't you stay with a girl later than – ," she glanced at her wrist, "than 10:30?"

"Not if you keep twitting me of Helen."

"Oh, so that's it."

What a spasm it all was. Even though I tried and she promised, we both knew - we would always know.

"I've got to go, Jackie." I stood up and jammed on my hat.

"Will you write to me, Allan - when you're gone?"

"Yeah, if you want me to."

"I want you to."

"No kisses now?"

"No, not until you get back."

"I might not come back."

"Allan, - I - don't - you think - I ought'n."

"Good night, then." I growled.

"Oh - Allan!"

"Good-bye!"

She did not answer.

Probably no one was to blame, neither Jacqueline nor Helen. I just did not fit. Nevertheless, I went down the street with thoughts that were neither philosophic nor rapturous.

CHAPTER XXII

I enlisted at Lowville on the morning of June 20, 1917.

At the corner of Dayan and State streets, I saw a group of men assembled. I listened for a moment from the outer circle. They were talking war. Pershing had sailed from England to command our expeditionary forces.

A recklessness was in the air. Young men rejoiced. The war could not last when Uncle Sam's boys arrived. It would be a grand holiday. Our guns would immediately blast the way into Germany.

Everywhere people gathered I heard the song:

"Smile while you kiss me sad adieu;
When the clouds roll by, I'll come to you. . .
So wait and pray each night for me,
Till we meet again."

I was not so sure as that crowd on the corner that we would meet again. I had heard of guns that spat 1200 rounds a minute and waves of men went down like grass before the reaper.

Given a choice, I would choose the national guard. I would get there soon enough then.

Our first assignment was at Taylorville and Eiffle Falls, guarding a pipeline for a power company. I was an acting corporal in less than a fortnight, and was sent back to Lowville with a squad to guard the railroad bridge. I warned the squad that if anyone was caught napping on duty, he'd be sent back to Eiffel Falls. Not a man wanted to go back there.

We had a little shanty down under the span, and it happened one night, that a chap from the squad went uptown to celebrate. He came back in the darkness for his sentry duty, and while we slept, a friend stole out upon the bridge. "Slim", for we called him that, was not one to pass up an opportunity for fun. He leaned over

the rail and called to the guard below. Receiving no answer, he guessed the reason, and armed himself with a boulder. Then he leaned out and dropped it.

The slumbering sentry heard the crash, and sprang to his feet, firing his gun and calling loudly.

Three or four of our boys, thinking that crash was the German advance, sprang up in their nightclothes.

Slim's rock and the terrified picket threw the entire neighborhood into an uproar, and it was an hour before quiet returned. For a week, Slim and the sentry peeled potatoes and washed dishes. They preferred this to a return to sand mountains and picket duty at Eiffle Falls.

Early in July, orders came from Colonel Boyer to go to Ogdensburg. There is a state hospital there for the feeble-minded, and I thought possibly the story of our bombardment had leaked out; but instead of being confined there, we were ordered to Spartanburg, N.C., where we would receive training.

On the way, we stopped at VanCortlandt Park, above New York. Then, for the good of the cause, we were paraded with fixed bayonets down 5th Avenue. General John F. O'Ryan stood in the reviewing stand, and I had my first glimpse of a general's insignia - the silver shoulder stars.

We had our first casualty going down the Avenue. From far above us, through open windows of towering buildings, came a rain of torn newspapers, directories, pieces of magazines. New York was cheering us on. The air was filled with the hail. Tobacco, cigarets, and candy were tossed to us while the band led on with that stirring favorite, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. In the squad ahead, one soldier jumped for a package of cigarets that had been dropped, and brought his arm down on a bristling bayonet, for a first casualty in Company D.

The following day, we left in day-coaches for Spartanburg, singing, playing cards, and swearing like old campaigners.

On the way down the seaboard, I had a chance to think over events that had followed my enlistment. I might have called on Jackie Ferris again, while guarding the bridge at Lowville, but what good would come of it?

Whatever the training at Spartanburg might be, I could not imagine. I had no notion we were on a picnic, nor did I expect we would be welcomed by the celebrities of that "Tar Heel State." I did, however, have visions of a tented city, the Great Smokey mountains, and vast tobacco factories, but I was disappointed.

We landed at the edge of a wood, in a soil that was red sand and clay. We searched in the dusk for a place to pitch our tents, and the next day we hauled out stumps with long ropes and much tugging.

For one, I wished I were home. My appetite increased steadily but for the first several days I had to content myself with canned tomatoes and "bully beef", for the commissary had not yet begun, and some of the boys, for the first time, realized that they were in the army now.

I had, some time before, come to understand what Frank meant when he informed me about Santa Claus.

At Lowville, I had joined D Company of the First New York Guards, but after a few days at Spartanburg, I was transferred to a permanent Company D of the 27th Infantry. In this company, I met a number of men from Hoboken, Columbia Heights and the Bowery. To them, we up-staters were all "apple-knockers."

Down by the latrines, we "apple-knockers" staged a major offensive with those "pink pajama" boys, and I carried a morbid looking eye for about ten days.

I finally was promoted to a sergeant and added another chevron. My captain, Fiske, summoned me to his tent and ordered me to give the second platoon 15 minutes of bayonet drill.

"I've had no instructions!" I protested.

"What?" he roared, "You don't know anything about bayonet drill? Take your post and come back here after the drill."

I went back to drill - close order drill it was: "Squad right," and "Squad left."

After the drill I reported to Captain Fiske and he ordered me to attend the bayonet school conducted by English and American officers. Sergeant-Major Technor, a British instructor, was in charge. Non-coms, ex-colonels, and ex-majors were there too, training for active services.

For practice we charged wooden dummies suspended from a scaffold. Once, while I was harpooning the "enemy," my foot slipped and my thrust went wild.

"You silly ass," Technor scowled in disgust.

But I persisted and came out of that school with a gold bar and the red and white cord of the second lieutenant.

At Christmas time I wanted a furlough.

The 105th and 107th were to stage a mock combat with wooden bayonets, on the parade ground. I was selected along with 29 others from the 107th from our regiment. It was an elimination contest. Each man was to parry until touched by his opponent - then he was out.

I thrust back and forth across that parade ground with a wooden bayonet until sweat ran into my eyes and but one opponent was left on the field. Lieutenant Taylor, the referee, did not see the fellow slide off of my stick, so he was given the reward - a furlough home. I received an extra plate of soup.

I had been getting no letters save those from home, but in March, Jackie wrote. An uncertain note it was. Old Frank had been in Lowville and had inquired about me. Would I write them? (She did not mention herself.) Back in Lowville they were knitting wool socks for soldiers. Would I like a pair?

I did not need wool socks under that Carolina sun, and socks were plentiful. My comrades played poker for socks when their money ran short. I intended to write to thank her, but orders came to move, and I failed to answer. Somehow, the wires crossed and while I had been planned for a bayonet instructor, I was sent, late in March, to Newport News for embarkation.

Then scarlet fever came into camp and we were tied up two weeks further. A melancholy two weeks it was, and while we chafed at delay, we heard the Russian Bolcheviki had abandoned the Eastern Front and the Germans were shelling Paris.

But finally, one night we were towed out aboard the President Lincoln. There was not a light on deck. We were packed into the berths, 1400 of us, and the portholes closed.

By morning, there was only a strip of land rolling behind us on the horizon. We were now in the enemy's territory where torpedo nets went down and the lookout held post with exceeding care.

The third day we ran into a storm. The men were sick, and by night, my own stomach had an up, down and crosswise motion. Fiske looked in and asked if there were anything wrong with me.

"No," I choked, "I seem to be heaving as well just as far as anyone."

"Well, cheer up, you guys, the moon will soon be up."

"My God," one fellow groaned, "has that gotta come up too?"

We landed at Brest in April. Loaded into scows we were, and marched up a long winding road outside the city. A band of urchins in black dresses followed us - three to ten years old, they were grabbing at us, asking for a sou or cigaret. I thought as I plodded upward, they were orphans, whose fathers had fallen asleep at the Marne, at the Neuve, Chappelle, or Verdun.

I was beginning to see that glorious spectacle of princely ambition that upset kingdoms and brought breadlines in countries half the world away.

That night we pitched puptents on a hill three miles from the city. Cold it was - a damp cold that chilled through to the marrow. When morning came, I thought we surely would march away to billets, but we went to the railroad. Funny little cars they were and lettered: "Quarante hommes et huite chevaux" -forty men and eight horses.

We piled into those cars along with stacks of canned goods, and some of the singing ceased as we crawled across France. The tension settled down with the knowledge that we were moving up. Once when the cars stopped, I heard, far to the south, a rumble on the breeze, a rumble of man-made origin.

We halted at a base hospital at Abbeville. Here we pitched our tents beside a wood and there on the third night, we saw our first "Jerrys" come over. In the twilight they circled the hospital, dropping rockets and heavy bombs. Happily for those bed-ridden boys, there were no direct hits and the searchlights and anti-warcraft guns drove them away.

The following day, Captain Fiske notified me of my commission. I was to leave the 27th and join the 32nd division outside of Chateau-Thierry. Given a 24-hour leave, I started for Paris. All roads went that way so I started out with confidence, and all that day, I heard the roar of a thunder that appalled me.

I had no money for uniforms, but in Paris I borrowed 300 francs from the Red Cross.

The following afternoon, with Lieutenant Bell, I set out to take my commission. Down a muddy road we went, while the cannonading grew more intense. By mid-afternoon, the breeze was wafting us a stench of dead corpses.

Professor Pierson had predicted alright.

I do not know all that passed through Bell's mind, but I confess, I did consider a retreat. It was easy: there was no one with us. But that was rank cowardice, and Dad had said, "Cowards die first."

Late in May, the Jerrys in their "Victory Drive" had beaten back our allies for a ten-mile gain that captured Soissons, took 25,000 prisoners, and threatened Rheims. I had heard back at Abbeville and still the Boches were moving up.

Nevertheless, there was different talk in the air, now. We were informed that our boys had gained at Cantigny, and encouraged by that success, for our allies doubted their abilities, they cheered them on to Chateau-Thierry.

Those were dark days before the Americans came. General Neville, the French commander, had lost some 300,000 men with little gains.

Inadequate support on the field and in the air had harassed their spirit and Painleve himself had declared there was a moment when but one resisting division stood between Paris and Soissons.

On Saturday, June 1st, our troops were rushed to the Thierry front for the Germans were within 40 miles of Paris. Rapidly as they arrived, they swung into line and went forward, not reasoning where - they went forward - dripping ambulance wagons rolled back, but along all the French divisions the word was passed: "Les Americans! Les Americans!"

These things passed through my mind as we strode along. Away in the distance the white road, passing through rows of tall poplars, reached the blue skies.

As we passed along the whole countryside, hobbling old men, bent women, and full blown cheries in peasant dress and staring girls and boys, waved to us and not a few of them cheered, for they knew our divisions, that day, July 15th, had gone into action again on the banks of the Marne.

It urged us on, and I began to rejoice that I was one of them. At Fresnes, we stopped for sandwiches and wine, and while we waited, we heard from in the northeast a hammering of artillery as I had never known.

We passed through Courmont in late afternoon and learned our artillery was firing hub to hub field guns, 75's and one-pounders.

They were shelling the retreating line, and no thunder storms ever compared with the sounds that rolled back. A stronger stench wafted across the wind.

My destination was the 32nd divisional quarters outside Chateau-Thierry. I left Bell there where the railroad ended and set out for the regimental post.

It was dusk when I saw them coming. Away in the distance a line of troops was filing out - dirty, bloody, triumphant.

"America's best," I said to myself, nor did I grossly exaggerate.

I met the coming line and inquired of a raw-boned fellow of Company H. Around the bicep of one arm was a dirty bandage. His face was dark, even in the dusk, with dirt and grease and blood. He stood unsteadily as he stared.

"Can you tell me where I'll find the captain of Company H?"

He thrust his face close, like one contentiously drunk. "Right here Hargrave - that's me."

It was my turn to stare.

"Kenefick Wendle! What the hell!" I seized his sound arm.

"What're you doing here, Hargrave - looking for a medal?"

"Medal? Hell no! I was sent here to take my commission."

He glanced at the gold bar on my sleeve.

"Jeez, Hargrave, you're my lieutenant."

I shook him again, forgetting his superior rank, and repeated his shibboleth of his football days.

"Let's go - Buffalo!"

"Let's go - hell!" he responded. "We fried the guts out of em t'day but we're all shot up. Ain't got an officer left in the company."

"You've got one," I declared.

"Well, c'mon, we gotta get back t' the post." He seemed weak as from lost blood.

"Where we bound for?"

"Goin back for reserves. I tell you, we're all shot up."

I fell into the weary line and we filed back.

CHAPTER XXIII

When I returned to the post with Wendle, he assumed we were going back for a rest and to fill out our ranks with fresh troops.

Within a few days, our ranks were filled but with green men from the states who could scarcely tell their right hand from their left. But it didn't matter; they could be trained for we were going into reserve. Then Wendle was transferred to officer's training school and I was left for a time in charge of Company H.

Instead of being with Helen on that dreamy Oahu Isle, I found myself alone on the field with a company subject to immediate call.

Late in August, we were ordered to join the Tenth French Army under General Mangin. We piled into tiny cars again and began our ride toward tiny Soissons. I knew there was heavy fighting ahead.

We halted the evening of the 27th, and the following afternoon at 4, we received orders from regimental headquarters. We were to go out again at 6, our positions to be the front line.

The Germans had formed a pocket outside of Soissons and my orders were to go due north along the Tournie Sournie Road, to the crest of the slope of the Juvigny Plane. We would have support from the left and right.

Our regimental headquarters was a dugout, thirty feet down. That night, officers from the adjoining companies thronged the place, and maps of the field lay everywhere.

Soon after dark it began to rain, a cold damp rain it was. To cheer us further, we heard all night the whine of a menacing cross fire. The Jerry's planned to prevent any night movement of our troops.

Sometime in early evening, my new superior, Mooney, handed me a letter. It was postmarked at Lowville, in April, and had gone to Spartanburg and Newport News.

I tore it open and read:

Lowville N.Y.
April 22, 1918

Dear Allen,

Why haven't you written to me? I am sorry to have let you go as I did. When you come back, I'll prove it.

Sincerely,
Jacqueline
P.S. Did you get my package and when do you sail?

I lay back on some blankets in a corner of the dugout and closed my eyes. April! She did not know where I was. And the package, I had had none. She was sorry I'd gone away as I did. That meant - and when I came back, she would prove it.

Funny. Life was funny. What I had desired was to be given me only after long time, vast distance, hope, and dimming memory had separated us.

When I came back! The odds were not even. I was going out at six. There was no time to write now, and probably I would not come through. There was nothing I could write her.

But I folded the letter and stuffed it into my shirt. It was sweet to be remembered. The afternoon I went to Paris, I considered myself forgotten.

"When you come back," she would prove it. Prove what? I had tried to make love to her.

And where was Helen? No matter now. I would not look back.

Before I dozed off, I vowed I would write to Jacqueline, if I lived to write. I mumbled a few words of prayer, locked my fingers on the letter in my pocket and finally slept.

At 4:45 the officers were astir. Out through the rain they filed to the guns. At 5 o'clock they opened fire on the slope. All night long the Jerrys had been raking that plain with cross fire from machine guns to prevent our moving up.

Our dugout was a mess. Some brother infantry officers had passed the night there, along with the artillery command, and empty bottles, scraps of paper, cigar and cigarette stubs, and mud was everywhere.

I visited with the officers as best I could. Each man, shouting above the din seemed trying to reassure the other - Mooney, Bell, Wilkins, Heath, and two sergeants from adjoining companies.

Then I sat down with my watch in hand. The roar of the 75's was terrible. I held my hands over my ears. They were giving them "the works," and there would be no cooling of guns. When the hand reached six, we would start toward Heaven, or the lower vestibule of Hell.

Six o'clock came, and I took position before the guns ceased firing. The moment they stopped, I passed my order along, waved to a grimy gunner and we started.

There was mud and rain and more mud everywhere. We were in a killing frame of mind and determined to get whatever crossed out path. A hundred yards from our start, I heard a bullet whine and the sound of two stones tapping under water. One little fellow beside me went down, holding his head. "Give em hell, Lieuten –

I bent over him. He was gone. Then I hurried to breast my companions. We passed out over a ridge. The rain had ceased and the sky was clearing, but the fire was terrible. Men were dropping, dead or wounded, to left and right.

We crawled forward. Some of the company tossed packages of cigarets from their pockets in order to crawl closer to earth. The enemy had our range accurately.

I looked to the right and saw a runner. He picked me out as he came and saluted.

"Company D can't advance through machine gun fire." He swayed and fell, hit through the hips.

Captain Mooney crawled alongside.

"Where're they snipin' us from, Hargrave?"

I indicated the distant hill. He adjusted his binoculars.

"I see it. Gimme a gun." He snatched a Lee-Enfield from a private.

"How far is it?"

"Seventeen hundred yards." the private answered instantly.

"We'll see." Mooney pulled up the sight and adjusted the telescope. I watched him intently. He drew a long breath, relaxed a little, and then pulled the trigger.

Away on the hillside the figure behind the gun waved frantic arms against the sky. Then the staccato ceased.

Mooney sent another runner back to Company D.

"Report we've cleaned up the nest," my superior barked, and the runner was gone.

We lay three or four minutes, he searching the slope through his lenses. Behind us a Ford ambulance came bouncing up the road. Then suddenly from the farther hill, came a puff of smoke, another, and another. Someone was trying to get the fellow in the Ford. Dust puffs appeared in the meadow before him. Hurriedly he swung the ambulance around and started back, bouncing in and out

of ruts, and narrowly missing holes, looking like the driver believed he could even dodge bullets.

"That guy knows where he's well off," Mooney smiled.

"Look at that." I pointed overhead to a trio of planes that were sailing toward us. Straight along the line they came - flying low.

"Jerrys," the captain grunted.

"What they up to?"

"Watch."

We did not, however, have a single support plane. Then one of the trio dropped a rocket.

"Signaling our position." Mooney commented. He had previously been under fire, so I did not question.

Sure enough, far back of the hill I saw an outline of a giant sausage in the sky. Then the shells crept closer and closer.

"Let's go, Mooney counseled. It was certainly no time to be lying there. We'd pass out of range if we went along. They were making it devilishly hot.

We went about 100 yards, then an open trench yawned before my eyes and a horde of well-armed Germans.

"Boys", Mooney gasped, "it's the cold knife now."

I looked down the line, every man had drawn bayonets. I shuddered. Well, thanks to Technor, this is what I trained for. No man likes to face steel, but there was no going back now.

I selected one well fed officer. I would brighten my "harpoon" if he did not get me first. I drew back my bayonet for the stroke.

"Kamerad!" His hands went aloft and all down the line, his followers did the same.

"Kamerad! Kamerad!" Their accents were heavy but they were smiling. I wanted to prick him anyway, but I lowered the knife.

I had never before wanted to kill anything, but men go beside themselves when in battle.

"Here Kenyon, take these birds back to headquarters!" commanded a corporal.

"Wait a minute!" He stopped my corpulent officer along with some forty subordinates.

"They'll help us dig in if we need 'em," Mooney explained.

I could not speak German, but my captain could. He learned they were reinforcing the ridge, trying to hold the hill.

Behind us the Jerrys filed back – about 600 of them singing.

We were elated. If it were all like this. But it was not, and half way up the slope we found use for the new assistants.

From the rear, our guns chattered support. The top of the hill was our objective, and the other companies, or the remnants of them, joined with us on the right and on the left. One more "stoss" and we'd be up there.

We paid for that advance, though. Boys from Buffalo and the Bowery, "apple knockers" and "pajama" boys from the farms and New York, looked for the last time on that Juvigny Plain, unless they see now from some farther, quieter field. I did not think of it then, though some of the men believed, and I have since given it credence, that the White Comrade was there that morning.

Company K went over first, and they should have stopped there. It was nothing new, however. Again and again, men crossed their objective to run into the fire from their own guns.

When my company reached the top, I saw a remnant of Company K dead, dying, crawling back. They had gone too far. Why did Bell do it? The top of the ridge was our objective; he surely had heard.

Out ahead, I saw a still familiar figure. I had loved him that day we had waved to the native women beyond Fresnes and Courmount.

"I'm going out, Captain."

"Don't go, Hargrave."

"Bell's out there, Tom."

"Bell? Hunh. Well, be careful."

I looked ahead, Tangled wire, shell holes, a trench, mud and blood and destruction.

The silent ones behind us were being carried in.

"Better wait till tomorrow, Hargrave."

"Maybe he's just wounded. I'll fetch him in."

"Go get 'im then."

I started to crawl. Halfway there, the Jerrys jolted me. Something hot ripped through my shoulder, burned down my leg which was lifted as I crawled and throbbed in my ankle.

I lay a few minutes till the firing ceased, then crawled on with one hand. I wrenched myself out of a gathering darkness and reached Bell.

His hands were cold. I turned his head. A jagged hole through his jaw marked the path of something that had torn out through the back of his head.

I fell down on his body and sobbed. Good old Bell. Gone with the best of them – with those best that slept and begged back on that slope.

I was getting faint. Part way back, I saw two boys coming to help me. Then a darkness settled down.

CHAPTER XXIV

I awoke in a first aid hospital on the field. They were giving me a shot of something in my arm, possibly anti-tetanus.

"Did they get 'em?" I asked.

Memory of Bell and the suffering men on the slope came to me.

"Go to sleep, boy. You'll be all right."

"Did they get 'em?" I insisted.

"Got who?"

"Those boys on the hill. Some of 'em were alive - some were groanin."

"Sure we got 'em, buddy – every last man. G'wan to sleep"

I closed my eyes with a delicious sense of peace. I was going back now, for a long rest.

Dimly I knew when I was loaded into an ambulance along with three or four others. One groaned more than the rest, but I was very drowsy. Probably it was morphine instead of tetanus, for I fell asleep.

When I was able to understand, I discovered I was in Base Hospital 7, at Tours.

Men were recovering there for line duty. "A" classification went back to the front; "B" went behind the lines, and "C's" was the incurables. Thank God I escaped them.

One day, in the second day at Tours, I saw, across the line of cots, sitting bolt upright, a familiar chap, his head swathed in bandages.

"Helen – Helen," he mumbled, holding out his arms as if calling to someone.

An orderly came in, followed by a nurse, and they gave him a sedative.

I called to the nurse.

"Who is this fellow?" I asked.

"I don't know but I'll find out for you."

That evening she came to my bed.

"His name," she indicated the slumbering man across the aisle, "is Maxwell."

"I thought so."

"Was he in your Company?"

"No, but I know him. We lived in the same town back home."

"Well, it sometimes happens." Her dark eyes twinkled. Lie down now before you start a hemorrhage."

November came while I was still in the hospital, but I was strong enough to sit in a wheelchair when the Armistice was signed. Late in the month I was given a two weeks' sick leave and went down to Nice on the Mediterranean.

The day before I left, Maxwell sat up and stared at me.

"Well, Hargrave, you here too?"

"Yeah. Delighted ain't you?"

"I suppose I ought to be." He passed his hand carefully over his head. "Where'd you get yours?"

"Outside of Soissons. Where did you?"

"There was a big fight at Chateau-Thierry."

"Yeah, I heard there was. I got there just too late."

"You were damned lucky, I'd say."

"I guess you're right."

"How long you here for?"

"I'm going down to Nice tomorrow."

"For how long?"

"I get two weeks."

"You're a fool for luck."

"Maybe. You'll be getting out of here yourself, one of these days."

"I hope so, been off my nut since July."

"You're all right now, Harry?"

"Things seem a little clearer now. I been in a muddle."

"Have you heard from home?"

"I've got some letters here, but nobody's read 'em."

"I'll read 'em for you." I wheeled myself around his bed and stood up carefully."

"Pretty spry, Ain't you?" He was pale and weak but pulled three letters from under his pillow.

"Sure. I'll be all right in two weeks." I took the letters.

"Mmm, let's see. This is th-e -uh- oldest one." I looked at the handwriting as I tore it open. I had seen it many times.

I spread out the letter. Across the upper corner I read: Carthage, June 30th. Dear Harry.

I turned it over. Of course, it was from Helen.

"Who's it from?" he asked. Of course, he had seen me pause strangely.

"It's from - uh - Helen." I looked up. That nurse was coming down the aisle.

"Here – you boys, don't read to him, please."

“I’m sorry, Harry.” I handed him the letters. It was an easy way out.

“C’mon, let him read ‘em nurse.”

“No - positively. Not today.” She gathered them up and thrust them inside her uniform.

“When will you read ‘em to me, nurse?”

“Harry was sick but still insistent.

“Maybe tomorrow – maybe the next day. Lie down now.”

She turned on me. “Can’t you leave a sick man alone?”

“I’m sorry, nurse; I didn’t know. We came from the same town.”

“Don’t mind her, Har – Hargrave. She – she talks like that to - to everybody.”

“Does she? “I exchanged smiles with the nurse.

“Alan!” he burst out, and then began pulling covers around his ears.

“Yes. What?”

The nurse was motioning me away.

“Hargrave, you’ve been, you’ve been a devil to me - but if yuh – get home first, will yuh tell Helen I’m all right?”

“Yes, you bet I will.”

“At’s the boy Allan. Nurse?”

“Yes, you go to sleep now.”

“Goo night, Nurse.” His voice was growing fainter.

“Good night.” She answered, though the sun was shining brightly.

The following day, I went down to Nice. I basked in the sun, studied the throngs of tourists, and gazed dreamily off across the blue waters.

CHAPTER XXV

And now those dark hours have passed away. Whether men will again take up the sword and set at naught the past sufferings of mankind we can but speculate.

Our own divisions under Bullard, Liggett, Summerall, Dickman and Hines, joining that concerted thrust with Rawlinson, Humbert, Demeny, Mankin and Byng, rolled that Western Front forward until they had wiped out the St. Mihiel salient and recaptured Chemin des Dames. On Nov.11 the Canadians were in Mons.

Before noon of that day, the new German government had signed an armistice dictated by Marshall Fuchs, and the Titan was at last cast down.

In these later days I had come to think fondly of France, endeavoring to forget those long waving lines of trenches that wound through meadows and villages; the stench that came most strongly at daylight when a fog lay over the land and the spears of flame when the artillery ripped open the heavens and dropped showering sparks to earth.

There was nothing glamourous in those nights when men crawled and dived through barbed wire entanglements, or were blown through and their flesh stripped from their bones.

The France I love to remember has long rows of white cobblestones with tall poplars along the way, singing birds, and crickets in the grass, poppies in the field, lacy black shadows along the roadway at evensong, comfortable old hay lofts where exhausted men could rest and a harvest not of death and decay but of continuously recurring life, blossoming amidst the ruins.

There is something I must not forget – those women of France. I have seen them straggling back to ruined homes to rescue an old chair, a few rugs or some other household necessity, and I heard tales of how, before the Americans came, they would wade through mud fields halfway to their knees to carry hot soup and food to their men behind the lines.

At Le Mons, they were running railway and trolley lines. Some of these mechanics were exceedingly fair to look upon.

From Nice I went to Le Mons, and remember seeing the villagers scratching over our dumpage piles for food when the guard had gone.

I thought then that I was coming home, but was assigned then as adjutant to the major. All that winter I worked through an endless array of transport papers and it was spring again before I started home.

While at Le Mons I received a letter from Lieutenant Bell's mother. She had heard he was wounded or missing. I wrote her that when I reached New York, I would explain.

We returned to Jacksonville, Fla., and I asked at once for a furlough, but was given my discharge. I started north immediately.

At New York, I stopped to call on Bell's mother. Perhaps I resembled him, for she stood in the of the center of small flat and rubbed her eyes. Then she came and threw her arms around me. I would not go through that harrowing hour again for anything. She made me stay for lunch, showed me his room, and how she had draped his bed with Old Glory.

Finally, I convinced her that he had gone, but I want no more such tasks. I told her she would receive official notification, and I learned afterward that she did.

I must pass over my reception at home. It is sufficient to say that I was spared the word I had to carry to Mrs. Bell.

The Glenfield & Western was still running two trains a day and the Monteola company had completed its mill in Glenfield. Dad was working for them when his rheumatism did not bother.

"And that fight at Chateau-Thierry, boy, the papers said 'twas awful."

"It was some fight, Dad."

"And you missed it."

"Yes, thank God."

"It must have been bloodier than Custer's battle in Buffalo Gap."

The second day after my arrival I received a letter from Lehar. It had gone to Le Mons, followed by my division to Jacksonville, and then was forwarded to me. Lehar had heard of my trip across through a letter I wrote to Sile.

2400 North King Street,
Honolulu, T.H.
April 14, 1919
Dear Allan,

I am sending this letter to Le Mons in care of the A.E.F. I trust you are there but if not, that you will receive it.

Mr. Sile wrote of you being wounded and convalescing at Tours. I hope you are home now and have pleasanter things to think about other than slaughter, convalescent wards, and sick men.

A number of changes have taken place here. New capital has come into the firm, and we are now jobbing the major portions of medical supplies used in these islands.

Three additional men are needed and, since I'm in charge of the main office, I have spoken for you.

I told my boss, Vice President Johnson, that you'd come. He said we could not hold it open for you after July 15. If you still want to come, do not fail to send word or appear before that date.

The salary will be the same.

I believe I told you to come by bus or train to 'Frisco and there catch a boat in the Matteson Line.

You will have no trouble finding us, once in the city. Do not fail to come if you can.

Cordially yours,
Franz Lehar

I folded the letter and laid it away. It was thoughtful of Franz – downright decent – but lying in that hospital bed I had determined first of all, to see Tug Hill and Frank. Perhaps I would go then. There was nearly a month to decide. For the present I would go back to the creek and stay with my old friend.

I told Mother of my plans, saying that I might be gone for a week.

"Allan, you've hardly arrived and now you want to start off."

"I know, but I want to see Frank."

She looked at me sadly. "Then you haven't heard, son."

"Heard what?"

"Frank died last winter. He was found frozen, there in the cabin."

"Mother!"

She watched me go out the door silently. I wandered out behind the house and sat down by her garden.

Long shadows were stealing down from Tug Hill and filling the notches. I sat there until the stars came out, but finally went in and packed.

At breakfast the next morning, Mother asked me something that had been troubling her.

"Allan, did you hear about Jacqueline?"

"Jacqueline? No."

"She came here several times to inquire, when you first went to France. Then after a time, she stopped coming. Why didn't you write to her? I heard last week she was married."

"Hunh, married!"

"Son, I'm almost ashamed of you - the way you used that girl. She was the wife for you."

There was nothing to say. I went upstairs to my bedroom, hauled out the army clothes, and found Jacqueline's letter. When I came back, she would prove it. Hunh?

Nice stuff, this affection business. All the way it was dark – dark. And there was nobody – unless God.

But whose fault was it? Not Jackie's. She had grown tired of waiting for me then? Small wonder.

I folded the letter, went downstairs and dropped it into the stove.

Mother stood, inspecting my pack.

"Did you hear from Helen while you were overseas?"

"No, not a word."

"Well, don't stay too long in the woods, will you son?"

Back at Page, I climbed off the caboose. Ruins, ruins everywhere. Only a watchman, now living in the old ticket office.

I wandered over the old path to the schoolhouse and sat down on the step.

Over in the northwest, a few fleecy clouds floated above the pond. Dead hemlocks stood at the water's edge – silent sentinels of a day that had gone – gone beyond recall.

Down in our corner of the clearing, my father's house was but a mass of fallen timbers. The path across the brook had grown over in grass. Tag-alder beds had sprung up. The forest was again claiming its own.

Men came, cleared land, built houses and passed on. Women cooked and sang to babies at twilight; watched over their toddling footsteps and they too followed after. Only Time and the forest remained.

I fell to thinking of that first morning when Old Frank came to our house and I followed him westward across the ridge. I had come down for breakfast and I found him sitting there, soaking in the morning sun.

There were those days in the old store; twilight down the Old Road; the night I tried to kiss Helen; moonlight and peepers down that same trail when I sat on the settee with Jackie.

Not a stone nor a timber could be found to show where Ferris's house had been. Only a rusted, broken cook stove remained after the lumber had been carried away.

I turned westward. The old trail through the woods had turned difficult to follow. On the ridge young maple shoots were climbing where La Roques' camp had been.

A young woodpecker, its bill thrust outward from a hole in a rotten birch tree, calling impatiently for a boring worm luncheon, and a long-legged marsh heron

that sprang up and startled me on the boggy meadow were the only signs of life that I passed on the trail.

I found the rotting cabin and aired it out. One end of the roof had fallen in. I removed some of the boards, patching and bracing them up.

Frank's knives and forks were badly rusted. I cleaned them in sand by the creek.

I loaded and hung up my rifle. It was no 30-06 but years before I had considered it a great gun. There were no other guns now. Someone had taken them.

I lost track of the days. I braced up the old bench by the door, and mornings I sat in the sun. I slept in the afternoons or wandered around the clearing.

When the sun crept behind the spruces, I tried my luck in the stream. I was usually abed at dusk – lay in the bed and listened to the hoot of owls, the drum of the partridge, the trickling, rippling waters and the chorus from the meadow.

I began finally to live again. Of course I had failed. I had lost Helen, and bob that I was, Jacqueline also. There was a pretty French girl at Le Mons, but she knew it, all too well.

Frank had gone into the shadows, presumably to Maine, yet I could almost see him smoking his pipe before the door and listening to the voices. And Page had gone – almost the traces of where it stood had vanished.

But did it matter? I lived. I would live and fight. Only life mattered. I would live and go my way, and forget.

One morning of that second week, I went down the creek to fish. I sat for a long time. Then the old trouble returned.

Why had Helen stood me off always, persistently? Why had Jacqueline shadowed me? Was there any solution, or was a man just driftwood on a shore of circumstances?

I stared into the water and saw nothing. Perhaps my worm drowned. The pole slipped from my grasp. A strange idea had come to me. I could use Maxwell's request as an excuse for another visit with Helen. There was one chance.

Neither Offenbach, Strauss, nor the living symphonies of the forest could have lifted me up to that moment. There was still one chance – one chance. It left me a little bit drunk.

Why had I not reasoned so before? Surely, she had always been worthy of another try. Through all the years every thought of Helen had stirred deep waters. Nor would time make any change.

If she had not married Maxwell, and if I could keep my cowardly heart subdued, I might yet win her. She would be with me anyway. What use to try to forget?

But I must use care. It was a task that would summon every faculty. One slip and –

There are those who will smile at such sentiment because they keep a locked room in the house of their existence, believing it better not to feel at all than to experience that pain that Life demands as the exact complement to happiness.

I cleaned up the cabin as neatly as possible; did what I could with my personal experience; shouldered my pack; closed the door, and started.

Mother was much surprised when I returned to Glenfield. She watched my transformation from whiskers and khaki with silence. I dressed carefully and consulted the mirror. I would be playing my last card now, and I needed to play well.

Since I offered no explanation to mother, she must have guessed.

"Going north, son?"

"Will you see Helen?"

"Maybe."

"You'll be back soon?"

"Tomorrow, I guess."

She smiled with apparent understanding and watched me go coolly down the steps.

"Good luck, to you, son," she called after me

"Thanks." And to myself, "I guess I'll need it."

Going down on the train, I fought the impulse to turn back. She intended to marry Harry Maxwell, anyway. She had said so. But I had never heard of their marriage. I surely had a right to know, and at any rate, my hour of agony would be short.

By the time I reached Carthage, I was more composed. The thing would have to be done most impersonally. If I failed, I failed.

I had gone to the front at Soissons hopelessly, and I still lived. I might survive this. Cowards die first.

Some ancient wisdom was with me that afternoon. Something wiser than all the Mollinsons – something more patient. Or was it plain madness?

Their porch furniture seemed familiar. With all the coolness of an English marquis I rang the bell. Soissons was far away now and insignificant.

The lady herself answered.

"How d' – What are you doing here?"

"I was asked to deliver a message if I may."

There was the same silver radiance, the same silvery gold hair, questioning blue eyes, and the poise – only a trace of fright or anger or deep emotion in her face now.

"And what is your message?"

I helped myself to a chair as calmly as a Lansdowne.

"Well," I tapped a cigaret carelessly from my pack and lit it. "I might have been spared this, but I met Harry Maxwell in a base hospital at Tours, and – "

"You did?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was two months in the same ward. As you know, he was in that first drive at Chateau-Thierry. I was with the 32nd division at Soissons."

"Well, what of that?" Her blue eyes were raking me again.

"Nothing. Now please don't interrupt me, for I haven't much time. I started to say that Harry was a sick man - not too sick, though, to pay his usual respects to me - and he asked me to tell you he was getting better. I've been home nearly two weeks now. I forgot to tell you sooner."

I wondered if she would believe that. A little inaccuracy should be justified when a man plays for the highest stake of all. And I must hold out. War was nothing compared with this.

I glanced at her. Her features, somehow, had softened.

"He did or I wouldn't be here." I arose casually to play my last card.

"And that's the story. Now I'll be on my way." I reached for my hat and shook my cigaret ash at a tray.

"Won't you come in."

I glanced at my watch and scowled. I was not beaten yet.

"Well, I don't know. I ought to be back in Glenfield. Maybe I could stay a few minutes."

"What's the big rush?" She smiled inquisitively, swing the door, and stood aside for me to enter.

"Oh, I have a few last-minute matters to attend to. I suppose they can wait, though, a few hours."

I lied boldly, heroically, desperately. Since Adam came out of the Garden, what woman's heart was ever enraptured by a brotherly, timid, clumsy man?

Helen followed me in, took my hat, and followed me to the davenport.

"Take that seat, Allan."

"OK, are the folks around?"

"Mother's asleep upstairs. Dad's around somewhere – over to the neighbors, I guess. Do you want to see them?"

"Sure."

"All right. I'll go and call them."

She stepped to the stair. "Oh, Mother, somebody you know is here."

From the depths of an upper room, I heard a drowsy answer.

Helen turned, then flashed me a look that would easily upset a marquis or probably a duke. Then she went to call her father.

I heard a rear door open, voices, and the door closed again. Lamis was coming to meet me – same inscrutable chap, his face like the Delphic oracle. No wonder Helen had it.

I held out my hand to him.

"I never expected to see you here, boy."

"I never expected that you would." I was telling the truth now. "I came with a message for Helen."

"A message for Helen?"

Mrs. Lamis came directly to me. "It's good to see you, Allan."

"That is mutual, Mrs. Lamis."

She cast a glance at Helen who had seated herself opposite me and was stitching some fancy work. It flashed through my mind that she would not be knitting any socks for Harry, that is unless – but there was no ring on her hand.

"Allan came with a message for Helen, Mother," Lamis explained.

"Did he?"

I was not missing anything now not even that fine inflection.

Lamis sat down comfortably now, puffed contentedly on his cigar, stroked his ring to remove any imaginary film and laid his arm behind me on the rest.

"How are things on Tug Hill?"

"Fine, last night."

"You were there last night?"

"I've been in Frank's old cabin for ten days."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"What you doing?"

"Haven't done a thing since I've come home."

Mrs. Lamis came and sat down on her husband's right. Helen moved uneasily but did not look up from her stitching of pink and green do-dads on the hoop arrangement.

"What are you planning to do, Allan, now that the war is over?" Lamis was long-headed, and though he moved slowly, his mind was instantaneous.

"I'm going to forget about the war, for one thing. I'm going to the coast in a few days." I was dealing my last card now.

"What'll you do out there?"

"Go on to Honolulu."

"Honolulu."

"Yes, with Franz Lehar."

"Thought you gave that up before the war."

"I did then, but I'm going to go now."

Across the room, Helen raised her head, took one quick glance at me, and bowed her head. Her thread caught. She jerked it. It snapped.

Neither Offenbach nor Wagner! But of course, I might be wrong. Women are the mystery of the ages.

"And you had a message for Helen?" Mrs. Lamis began.

"Yes, Mother; he came to say – he came to tell me he was at Tours with Harry."

"In the hospital?" Lamis inquired.

"Yes," I nodded.

"And you were wounded?"

"At Soisson, I saw Harry in the hospital at Tours. This was last fall. He was pretty sick – his head was all bandaged up, but he wanted me to tell Helen he was better and was coming home. I worked all winter making out transport paper, and didn't know but that he was back. I didn't hear anything."

"Well, my stars, boy." It was the same old tone I had heard in his store. "It's pretty decent of you to come back to tell us."

Mrs. Lamis nodded silently.

Helen was endeavoring to thread her needle. Somehow it did not seem so easy.

"I shouldn't stay," I protested. "I've missed my train, now."

"Sit down, boy, sit down. You're going to stay to dinner with us. You can go back on the 10 o'clock tonight."

I glanced at my watch again.

"Yes, the train's gone. If it won't put you folks out, I'll stay."

I glanced at Helen. If my acceptance annoyed her, I could not see it.

Mrs. Lamis arose from her seat. "Can you help me in the kitchen, Helen?"

"Just a minute, Mother." Then when her father turned to knock ashes from his cigar, she gave me an assuring smile. But I assumed nothing. I had lived too long, been defeated too often, to be foolishly optimistic.

Helen finally went to the kitchen, after giving me a pair of quizzical looks. Had I known her less well, my heart would have doubled its rhythm. But I sat calmly, visiting judiciously with her father, and waiting.

At dinner, while Lamis was doing the honors, he remarked with a twinkle in his eye, "Seems just like you're one of the family, boy." He did not look at me; he glanced at Helen, but she was deeply engrossed in a tea leaf that somehow had missed the strainer.

I was very grave - outwardly – and Mrs. Lamis smiled sweetly at her husband over her cup.

When the time came to go, Helen came into the living room, dressed in a street coat. My unruly heart began to pound against my ribs.

"Mom, I'm going to walk down to the train with Allan."

"All right, Helen."

Lamis smiled and held out his hand to me.

"Come again, Allan, now that you know the way."

"Thanks", I replied. "Perhaps I can, sometime. It's a three-year trip I'm taking."

"Three years, eh?"

"Yes."

"How do you go?"

"I guess I'll go by train to 'Frisco."

"I'd like to see you again before you go."

"Maybe, if I have time. Good-bye." I spoke with not too much enthusiasm.

"Good-bye, Allan. Good luck." Mrs. Lamis called after us.

I chose the defender's side of the walk and below the second arc light, Helen drew the tangent.

"Are you going alone, Allan?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, going west alone."

"Sure. Who do you think would go with me?"

"Jacqueline Ferris might."

"No, her husband might object."

"Her husband?"

"Yes, she's married."

"When was she married?"

"I don't know, exactly; my mother told me the day after I came home."

"You don't know who it was?"

"I don't know a thing about it, except that."

“Well, that’s funny.”

“Perhaps. At any rate, she’s not going with me.”

“Isn’t there anyone else?”

“No, not a soul.”

“Well, you asked me once. Do you remember?”

“It seems as though I do, but you wouldn’t go.”

She gave me a half serious look, but her eyes were shining, even in the dim light.

“Would you – uh – ask me again?”

My heart’s blood hammered in my ears.

“What – uh – good would that do me?”

“Well, ask me and see, but maybe you don’t care.”

“How about Harry Maxwell?”

She stopped, laid her hand on my arm, and looked soberly into my face.

“And don’t you know about Harry?”

“Know about him? Nothing, since I left him at Tours.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart. I haven’t heard a word from him since I talked with him there. What makes you think I - ?”

“Well, you acted rather queerly today.”

“Queerly?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter. Harry didn’t come back.”

“You mean - ?

She nodded and her blue eyes clouded.

“His father received and official notice from Washington, last December.”

I stared at her face as through a mist, and the walk where I stood seemed wavy. There was sorrow in her face – genuine sorrow.

Do you mean, Helen, that - that you would like to go with me now?”

“It was like this, Allan.” She laid her hand on my arm again. “You were gone three years, and you never wrote – you never came.”

“I did come. I was in New York two years ago.”

“I know but it was too late then. I promised Harry before he went to camp.”

“And then I came along?”

“Yes, then you came along – after three years.”

“But I asked you to send for me - right here in Carthage.”

“I know Allan, but are women supposed to chase after men?”

“No, I suppose not. You certainly didn’t.”

“Of course it was silly. I wanted to make you suffer, but I wanted to be sure.”

"Well, you did that. And were you satisfied?"

"No, I suffered, too – when you and Harry had gone. I watched – I read the papers."

"But you wouldn't write to me."

"How could I? I had promised Harry. Besides, you were rude to me."

"I am very sorry."

"Allan," she pulled my arm, "come over here a moment. This is a conspicuous place." We went into the shadow of two evergreens. There was, however, a radiant shimmer from in the recesses of my soul.

"You haven't promised me yet." She ran her arm around my waist, and it made me a little drunk.

"What do you want me to promise?"

"I mean about going west with you."

"I'll promise - on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you'll go back on Tug Hill with me; that you'll stay a few days in that horrid old hunter's cabin, that you'll wash your face in the frying pan and cook in it too; that you won't snore and scare me in the night, and you won't tease to come home to your mother for a whole week.

"When will we go?"

"Hunh! You're good. Maybe we ought to see a justice of the peace or a minister first."

"A minister. Bring one up to the house tomorrow at 2."

"But I'd have to go home. I couldn't get ready so quick."

"The day after then, Allan."

"Yes. What?" I was looking at her – really looking at her – not the least bit afraid.

"Allan could you – uh – kiss me like you did in New York?"

Neither Donizetti's Di Lammermoor; Wagner's Parsifal, or Offenbach's Hoffman! - Aw, what's the use?

THE END

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