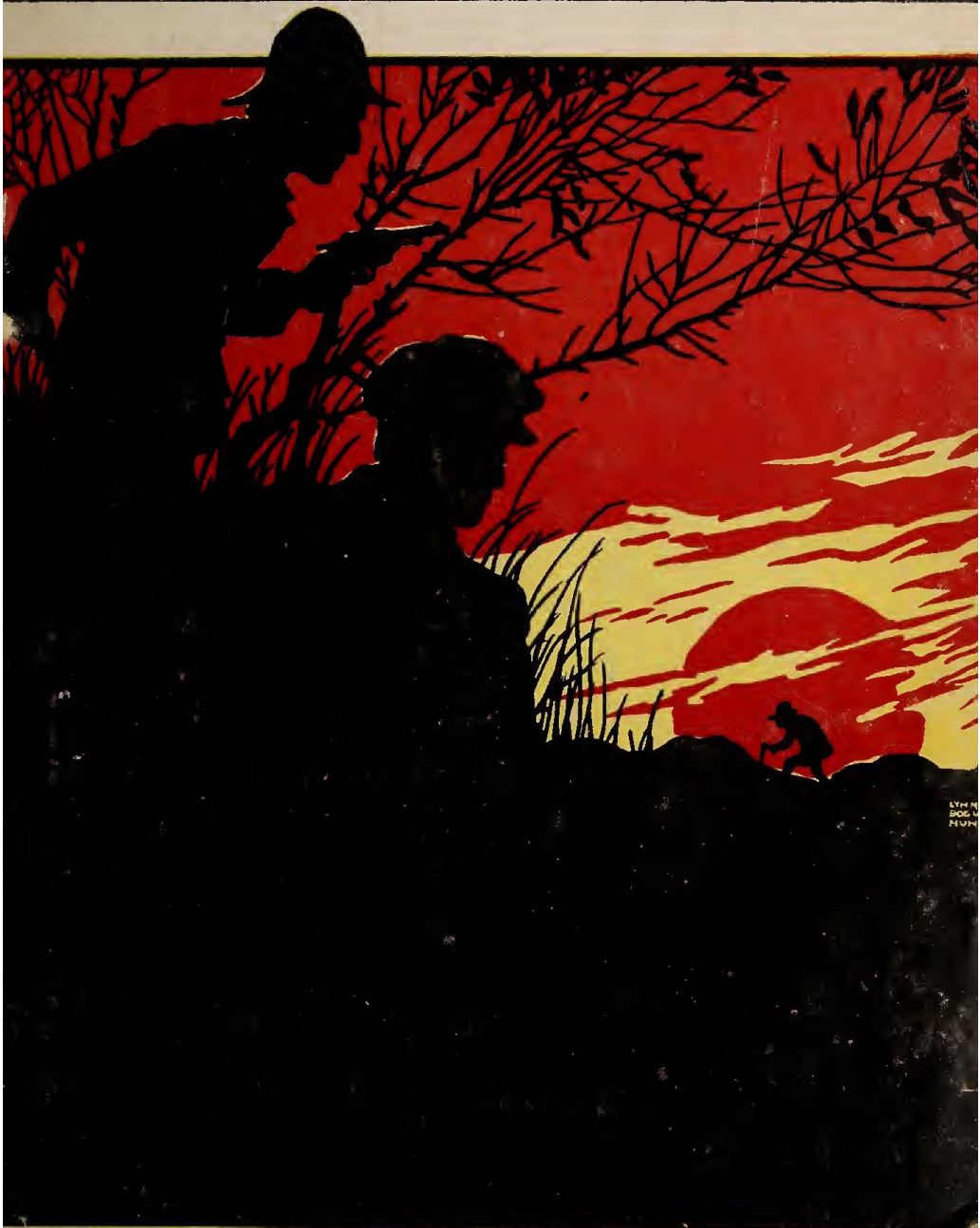
GREEN TIMBER THOROUGHBREDS

THEODORE · GOODRIDGE · ROBERTS



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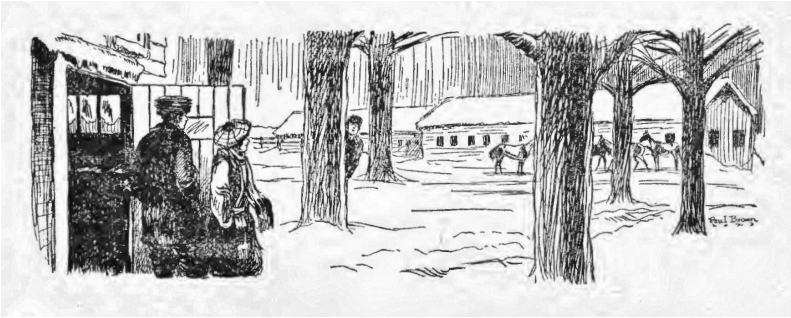

GREEN TIMBER THOROUGHBREDS

BY
THEODORE GOODRIDGE ROBERTS

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Green Timber Thoroughbreds

CHAPTER I

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Old Dave Hinch awoke with the bitter trickle of smoke in his nose; and his first idea was that he must have fallen asleep with his pipe in his mouth, lost his grip on it and set fire to his beard. That appendage, and the whiskers and mustache which mingled with it, were dear to him; and rightly so, for they covered everything of his face except his nose and eyes and receding strip of brow. So he clapped a hand to his beard even before he sat up, and opened his eyes. Beard and whiskers and mustache were all there, and all right. Reassured on this point, yet still distressingly conscious of the tang of smoke, he hoisted head and shoulders from the pillow and opened his eyes. The room was in utter darkness, for the blinds were down. With fumbling hands he struck a match, and lit the lamp which stood on the chair beside the bed. Then he saw something—the same thing that he had smelled—a thin, bluish haze in the close and chilly air.

Old Dave Hinch forgot all about his whiskers, and leapt out of bed with an agility which belied their venerable hoariness. He slid his legs into trousers and jammed his bare feet into boots and jumped to the door. He snatched it open, admitting a stifling roll of smoke which instantly enveloped him. He retreated, slithered across the bed and dived to the nearest window. He tore town the blind, threw up the lower sash, and thrust forth his head.

Smoke oozed out past his shoulders into the cold starshine. He yelled “Fire! Fire! Help! Help!” at the top of his voice until his throat ached. He got no response. All his neighbors were sound asleep, of course.

He withdrew from the open window and saw the draft between door and window had extinguished the narrow flame of the lamp. He stumbled and fumbled his way to the door, through choking swirls of heavy smoke. He sank to his hands and knees and looked down the narrow staircase with smarting eyes. He saw a lurid, pulsing glow away down, behind swirling depth of hot and acrid fumes, and whisperings and cracklings and a sound like the snoring of many sleepers came up to his stricken ears.

He crawled back to the window, and again set up his desperate outcry. But all the inhabitants of Forkville were sound asleep.

A stranger arrived at Forkville at 1:20 A.M., Tuesday, February the tenth. He carried a light pack on his shoulders, and his snowshoes atop the pack. The road was good. He topped a rise, rounded a sharp elbow of second growth spruce and fir, and saw the covered bridge, the village and the white fields laid out before him in the faint but enchanting light of frosty stars.

"It looks like an illustration for a fairy-story," he said; and just then he became aware of the fact that something seemed to be wrong with the charming picture. The fault lay with the nearest house of the village. Smoke arose from it, white as frosted breath, and lurid gleams and glows wavered and flickered about its lower windows. He paused for a few seconds, staring, strangely horrified by the sight and the thought of a dwelling blazing unheeded and unsuspected in that scene of peace and fairy beauty. Then he ran. He went flying down the short dip and through the tunnel of the barn-like bridge, and, as he slackened his pace on the rise beyond, he heard old Dave Hinch's frantic yells. He recognized the sound only as a human cry, for he did not know Hinch or the voice of Hinch. He responded with an extra burst of speed—ignoring the slope—and with a ringing shout.

The stranger soon spotted the window from which the yells issued. A minute later, by means of a ladder, he rescued the old man.

Just then three of the villagers arrived on the scene. They had been aroused from their slumber by the stranger's shouts. They looked at Dave, then at the stranger, then back at Dave.

"Where's Joe?" asked one of them.

The old man's lower jaw sagged. He pointed at a window, an upper window of the main house.

"Reckon Joe's still abed," he said.

The neighbors swore. The stranger ran to the ladder, flopped it across and along to the window indicated, cast off his pack, and ascended like a sailor or a professional fireman. Upon reaching the window, he smashed glass and thin wood with his double-clad fists. A thin reek of smoke came out. He wound his scarf about his throat, pulled his fur cap down over ears and eyes and went head first through the shattered window. Down at the foot of the ladder, Dave Hinch cried out at sight of that destruction, and one of his neighbors cursed him for a fool and worse.

The stranger picked himself up from the floor of the dark room into which he had plunged. He couldn't see anything, and the air was deadly with heat and smoke. He turned and kicked what little was left of the window sash clear out of the frame. Turning again, he dropped on his hands and knees, and went in search of the bed and the unfortunate Joe. The bare floor was warm. He found the bed almost immediately by bumping his head against the wooden side of it. He got to his feet, reached over and felt a human figure in the bed. He pulled it toward him, sheets, blankets, and all, clutched it to his laboring breast and made for the window. He was thankful that Joe was a lightweight. He found one of the natives at the top of the ladder and passed his unconscious burden out to him.

"Here he is," he shouted. "Dead, I shouldn't wonder. Asphyxiated for sure. Take him home. Get a doctor."

He leaned far out the window, gasping for clean air. As soon as the ladder was clear he slid to the snowy ground, recovered his pack and snowshoes, reeled and fell, then crawled dizzily away from the burning house in which he had lost all interest for the moment.

The stranger crawled to the high road, turned there and looked back at the scene of his humane and disinterested exploits. He saw that the house was fated. All the lower windows within his field of vision belched smoke and flames. The ell from which the old man had escaped was blazing to the eaves. There was no wind, and the smoke went straight up. A dozen or more people now ran aimlessly about in the glare, or stood in helpless groups. The old man's voice still rang above the roaring and snapping of the fire, cracked and raspy. No one paid any attention to the man who had performed the rescue.

The stranger moved up the road, glancing right or left at each house as he came to it. The village was of the simplest possible design—two lines of dwellings and stores and snow-drifted front yards facing one another across the white high road. Behind the houses and stores on both hands were barns and sheds, a few white-topped stacks of straw, and snowy fields climbing up to the edges of black forest.

The stranger had not gone more than halfway through the village when he spotted the thing he was looking for, and turned to his left off the road. This was a building two and a half stories high, square, hooded in front with a narrow veranda and an upper gallery, and flanked on the right with an impressive extent of attached sheds and stables—all in need of paint. By these physical features, and by its general aid of rakish unconcern of public

opinion, it proclaimed itself the village hotel. The stranger stepped up onto the worn flooring of the veranda, which snapped frostily to his tread. He saw, dimly, antlered heads of moose and caribou on his right and left, outthrust from the clapboarded walls, as if the monarchs of forest and barren had been imprisoned in the house and were now making their escape without wasting any time in looking for the door. He was not intimidated, for he had seen the same style of decoration in this province before. He crossed the veranda, and hammered on the door with his mittened fist. The door opened in half a minute, disclosing a tall man with a blanket draped about his shoulders, a lamp in his hand and a stoop in his back.

"What's all the row?" asked the man of the house. "I heared hollerin', didn't I? Or was I dreamin'?"

"You weren't dreaming," replied the stranger. "There's a house a-fire, down near the bridge. Have you a room for me?"

"You don't say so! Whose house?"

"I don't know. I'm a stranger here. Good-sized white house with an ell, first on your right heading this way from the bridge."

"Old Dave Hinch's!" cried the other exultantly. "Hope it catches Dave himself, darn his measly hide! But step inside, mister, an' shut the door. I'll go git into some pants an' things."

The man with the lamp went swiftly up a flight of uncarpeted stairs, with the stranger at his heels. He entered a bedroom; and the stranger was still with him. He dropped the blanket and dressed with amazing speed.

"You won't be in time to save it," said the stranger. "The whole ground floor is a-fire and roaring. A chemical engine couldn't save it now."

"Save it! I don't want to save nothin'. I want to watch it burn. But say—did you hear anything about Joe? Did Joe git out?"

"Yes, I got Joe out myself—unconscious. And the old man, too—but he was all right."

"The old man! You went an' got him out? Hell! Say, it's easy to see you're a stranger round these parts, mister. Well, I'm goin', anyhow. Maybe I'll git a chance to push him back into it."

"But what about a room for me?"

"A room? Sure you can have a room. You'll find plenty right on this floor. Help yerself. Here, you can have the lamp. See you later."

He thrust the lamp into the other's hand, fumbled his way down the dark stairs, and dashed from the house.

The first room into which the stranger looked, shading the lamp with his left hand, was already occupied by someone who snored in a high and rasping key; the second was occupied by someone who instantly inquired "Who's that?" in a feminine voice; but the third was empty. It was also cold and large and dreary. He examined it carefully by the feeble light of the smoky little lamp, and came to the conclusion that it was a room of state, a chamber of pride. There were white curtains looped at the windows, with dust in their chilly folds. There was a carpet on the floor with a design in yellow and red which seemed to jump up at you and wriggle. There were several chairs of several designs and shapes, all upholstered in wine-red plush. There was a small center-table with a marble top and walnut legs, and on it stood a tall vase full of dusty paper flowers. There were several framed pictures on the walls. There was a bed with a high headboard of glistening yellow wood. There was a little open-faced stove of iron and nickel. Its open face was filled by a large, dusty fan of pea-green paper. Beside it stood a dusty basket full of short, dusty sticks of rock-maple.

The stranger set the lamp on the center-table, lowered his pack and snowshoes to the carpet, cast off his mittens and muffler and cap and went over and gave the bed a second and closer inspection. He removed the lace-edged pillow sham, which was coated with dust. He shook up the pillows and turned them over, then opened up the bedding for inspection and airing. Returning to the stove, he started a fire with the help of the paper fan and paper flowers. The dry maple caught and flamed as if by magic. He discarded several outer articles of clothing, pulled one of the fat chairs up to the stove, and slumped into it; filled and lit his pipe. And thus the tall man with the stoop found him half an hour later.

"Here you be," said the man of the house, with a grin. "You chose a good one, that's sure."

"The first one I came to that wasn't already taken," replied the stranger. "How's the fire? Hope you didn't carry out your murderous intentions."

"Didn't carry out a danged thing. The roof's fell in. And say, if you want to see a man real mad you'd ought to see Dave Hinch. I'd of paid five dollars for the show if it wasn't free. But about this room, mister. To-night don't count, for I ain't such a hell of a business man as all that—but if you stop in it it'll set you back one dollar an' fifty cents a day, or nine dollars by the week."

“Pretty good rent for a room in the country, isn’t it?”

“Rent? Well, I throw in three or four meals a day.”

“In that case, consider me as a fixture for weeks and weeks.”

“That suits me, mister—but what’s your name?”

“Vane,” answered the stranger.

“Vane,” returned the other. “Then you’re not from hereabouts, mister?”

“I’m from New York—and other places.”

“That so? Well, I reckon I’ve read it in the newspaper. My name’s Jard Hassock, an’ I’m the proprietor of this here hotel, which is known far an’ wide as Moosehead House.” He pulled up a chair and sat down, then leaned over confidentially. “Maybe you’ve seen Strawberry Lightnin’?” he queried.

“No—but I have heard of her,” returned Vane.

“I bred her,” said Hassock with a rapt look in his eyes. “Bred her, owned her an’ trained her. And the Willy Horse! He was her sire—I owned him, too. His dam died when he was only four days old, an’ I got him cheap an’ raised him on a bottle. He was the best horse ever bred in this province, an’ then some! Sold for twenty thousand—but that wasn’t the time I sold him. Oh, no! Four hundred was the price I got. Can you beat it?”

“Sounds tough. I’ve heard of the Willy Horse, too.”

“He was a wonder! But I didn’t have the chance to try him out like I did the mare. She was good! Her mother was a little bit of speed I got in a trade up to Woodstock. She was sure a winner, that Strawberry Lightnin’! I raced her two years, an’ then I sold her for a thousand. Had to do it. It ain’t the money you make that counts in that game, but the money you spend. I’m content to live quiet enough here in Forkville, but when I’m racin’, an’ away from home an’ the like of that, mister, the Derby winner couldn’t keep my pockets full a week.”

Vane yawned and quickly apologized for it.

“Guess I’d best be goin’,” said Hassock, rising slowly to his feet.

“I’m sleepy, I must admit,” returned Vane. “Out all day in the fresh air, you know.”

CHAPTER II

JOE

After a deep and dreamless sleep of seven hours, Vane opened his eyes and beheld Jard Hassock standing beside his bed.

"Mister, you're a wonder!" exclaimed Jard. "I didn't get it all last night, we was that busy runnin' round pertendin' we was tryin' to put out the fire, jist to fool old Dave—but Tom McPhee's been here this mornin'. What d'ye say to ham an' aigs an' hot biscuits?"

"In ten minutes I'll show you," replied Vane, sitting up.

"Now you stop right where you are," returned the other. "I'm fetchin' it on a tray—an' proud to do it! Say, Tom's told me all about how you flopped that ladder over an' skun up an' div head first through that window! It was Tom McPhee you passed Joe out to. A cool head an' a cool hand, mister—an' them's things I admire. Tea or coffee?"

"It was easy," said Vane. "There was no danger. How's Joe?"

"Fine an' dandy this mornin', but ten minutes more of the smoke would of done the trick, the doctor says. Did you say coffee, or tea?"

"Coffee, if it's the same to you, thanks very much."

Hassock went, but was back in ten minutes with a large tray loaded to capacity. Later he even fetched a pail of hot water, then returned to the kitchen, leaving Vane to his own devices. He sat down in a splint-bottomed chair close to the kitchen stove, and lit his pipe.

"It's him," he said to his sister. "He's the very identical lad we heard about who stopped a week at Wilson's camp an' washed himself all over in the little rubber bathtub you could fold up an' put in your pocket. It's him. I kinder guessed it last night. His name's Vane."

"Well, there's no harm in a bath," replied Miss Hassock. "A good wash all over never hurt anyone, that I've ever heard tell of."

"But three in one week, Liza!"

"Well, what of it, so long's he had the time an' didn't catch cold? Now if it was only summer time an' the pump was workin' an' the pipes wasn't all froze up, he could use the bathroom."

"If he sees it he'll maybe stop till summer time jist to try it out."

"Maybe. What's brought him to Forkville, anyhow?"

"You ask him, Liza. I'd like fine to know. Whatever brought him, he come jist in time for Joe Hinch, that's a sure thing. He's a cool hand, whatever he's after; an' he knows how many beans makes five, I reckon."

"What was he doin' out to Wilson's camp?"

"Snoopin' 'round in the woods all day an' swappin' yarns with the boys at night, that's all, far's I ever heard. He paid for his grub."

Jard Hassock was a bachelor and Liza was a spinster. Liza was tall, large-boned and large-featured, square-shouldered, mannish looking and ten years Jard's senior—sixty years of age, if a day. She was straighter than Jard, who suffered from a chronic rheumatic crick in the back. She was level-headed, extraordinarily capable—and extraordinarily soft-hearted. She could do anything outdoors or in, from plowing sod to whipping cream, and do it right. Her hand was light and sure at the cooking, and light and sure on a horse's mouth. Her knowledge of horses was as great as Jard's, and her ways with them were as wise as his, but she never said so, and he never thought so. Jard didn't know that she was his guardian and his manager; he didn't realize that he would have been cheated out of his very boots years ago but for her; but other people knew these things and stood in awe of her.

Vane appeared in the kitchen a few minutes later. He bowed to Miss Hassock, and thanked her for the breakfast, making special mention of the coffee. Jard had his eyes on Liza, though she was not aware of it. That was the way with Jard. One either did not feel his glance or did not heed it, for it never suggested a search for anything more important than a humorous point of view or intention. A great joker was Jard Hassock in his own dry way; but the fact is that he looked at life and people for many things beside jokes and could see them as quickly and as far as the next man. And now he saw that Liza was pleased with the stranger.

"I'll go fetch my pipe, an' then I'll show you around outside," he said to the guest, and presently they were sauntering in the direction of the stables. Here were six open stalls on one side of the floor and two box stalls and a room devoted to harness and oat bins on the other. Only two open stalls and one box stall were occupied.

"There was a time when I had two work teams an' a roadster, an' a bit of speed in every box," said Jard. "But I've cut down the farmin' of late, an' I've quit breedin' an' racin' altogether. Twice stung, once shy—that's me."

Vane murmured something sympathetic, and examined the two medium-sized, elderly farm beasts in the stalls with polite interest, patting their noses, laying a finger here and there, shooting quick glances at their legs. Not a glance or movement of this escaped Jard, who watched him with a twinkle in one eye and a probe in the other.

"Very useful," was the stranger's comment.

Jard nodded and crossed the floor and opened the upper wing of the door of one of the boxes.

"Look a-heer at something different," he said. "Lady Firefly."

Vane joined him and looked into the roomy, well lighted box. A roan filly turned and thrust a silken muzzle into Jard's face, then into his hand.

"Some speed, there, I wouldn't wonder," continued Hassock.

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Vane. "How old is she?"

"Sixteen months. She's a granddaughter of the Willy Horse's sister—or maybe it was his half-sister. You can't get much information out of old Luke Dangler. You said you'd heard tell of the Willy Horse, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, this here's the same strain. There was an English mare come to this country a hundred years ago. Her name was Willoughby Girl. Ever hear of her?"

"Yes, I have heard of Willoughby Girl," said Vane quietly.

Jard Hassock leaned nearer to the stranger, shoulder to shoulder.

"There's her blood in this here filly," he whispered. "I'll tell you about it. It's a queer story, an' a bit of history—— Hark!" he said. "Was that Liza hollerin'?"

It was Liza, beyond a doubt; and Jard left the stable to see what she wanted of him. He was back in half a minute.

"It's Joe Hinch come over from McPhee's to thank you for the good work you done last night," he informed Vane.

"That was nothing," said Vane. "I just happened to be Johnny-on-the-spot, that's all."

"You best come along in with me, anyhow," returned Jard. "It'll be best for you an' best for me, mister—for Liza told me to fetch you."

Vane went. In the big kitchen they found Miss Hassock and a young woman. Vane doffed his cap and glanced around, but failed to see anything of the lad he had dragged out of bed. His glance returned inquiringly to the faces of Liza and the young woman.

"Joe, this is the gent who saved your precious life last night," said Jard. "Meet Mr. Vane."

The stranger was a man of breeding, and a man of the world to boot—but Jard's words threw him off his mental balance into a spiritual and mental fog, and left him there. Again he sent a searching glance into the corners of the room and even behind the stove in quest of Joe. He didn't move anything but his eyes. He didn't say a word. His baffled glance returned to the young woman. Again his eyes met hers, again she smiled faintly, and now she blushed. She was moving toward him; and this she continued to do until she was within two feet of him. She extended a hand, which he took and held, acting by instinct rather than by reason. She lowered her glance.

"I thank you—very, very much," she said somewhat breathlessly. "It was very—kind of you—and brave."

"I—don't mention it, but——"

"She's Joe," said Miss Hassock, suddenly enlightened.

"The one you drug out of bed," said Jard.

"Josephine," whispered the young woman, bowing her head yet lower and gently attempting to withdraw her hand.

Vane saw it. It dawned on him. The blood crawled up beyond his neck again and fed his brain, and the fog melted away.

"Ah!—of course," he said. "It was you. I am glad."

He bowed and gently released her hand. She murmured a few more words of gratitude, then slipped away.

"Why wouldn't she stop to dinner?" asked Jard of his sister. "I asked her to often enough and hearty enough; an' even if I hadn't, I guess she knows she's always welcome here."

"She's only twenty-three, that's why," returned Miss Hassock. "If she was my age she'd of stopped."

"Twenty-three? Well, reckon she is—but what's her age got to do with stoppin' here to dinner?" demanded Jard.

“All her own clothes got burnt up,” replied Liza. “They weren’t many nor much, but they fitted her to a wish, for she made every stitch herself, outside an’ inside. What she has on this mornin’ belongs to Susan McPhee, who’s near as tall as me an’ bigger round everywheres.”

“I get you,” said Jard. “That’s the woman of her! A queen in one skirt an’ a scart rabbit in another! But she looked all right to me. Didn’t she look all right, Mr. Vane?”

“Very charming, I thought,” replied Vane.

“Better’n you expected, hey?”

“Yes. I had no idea, no suspicion, of the truth.”

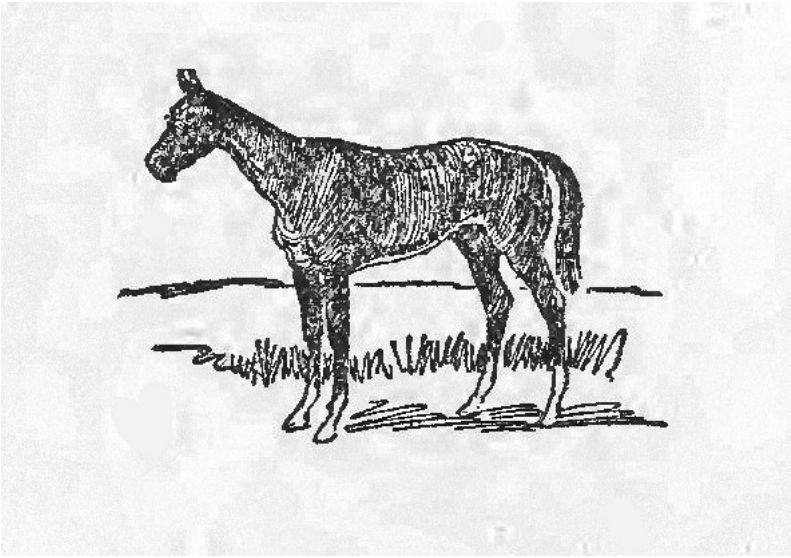
“What did you cal’late this Joe was, anyhow?”

“A stable-boy, or something of that sort. A quite natural mistake, under the circumstances.”

“It don’t sound to me like a mistake a gentleman would make. The prettiest girl on this river—the prettiest girl I ever see—that’s Joe Hinch; an’ you grab her out of bed an’ pass her through the window an’ think she’s a stable-boy!”

“What of it? I couldn’t see!” retorted Vane.

Jard wagged his head.



CHAPTER III

THROW-BACKS

"There's throw-backs in folks jist like in horses," said the proprietor of Moosehead House, seating himself close to the kitchen stove and waving his guest to a rocking chair. "An' that girl, Joe Hinch, is a throw-back—an' a long throw—clear beyond my memory, anyhow. She's got more than looks—more of some other things than she has of looks—an' you know what she looks like! That's sayin' somethin' would crack a stiff jaw, hey? Well, it's the truth! She's got brains, an' she's got speerit—and she's got honesty! The Lord only knows where she got that. That's where the long throw comes in. She's an orphant. But she's got the worst two old grandpas you could find if you hunted a week. I'll bet a dollar there ain't a worse pair of grandpas in the whole province, or maybe not in the whole country, when it comes to sheer downright cussedness an' crookedness. Ain't that right, Liza?"

"I guess so," replied Miss Hassock, but Vane saw and felt that she had given no consideration to her brother's question.

"Sure it's right!" continued Jard, with relish. "Old Dave Hinch an' old Luke Dangler! There's a pair of hellyuns you wouldn't have the heart to wish onto your worst enemy for grandpas. Dave's mean an' crooked an' a coward. Luke's mean an' crooked an crazy—but he ain't afeared of anything nor anybody. Now with horses an' horned cattle the top-crosses is the things to look at an' consider in their pedigrees; an' so it should be with humans, and usually is—but there's throw-backs in both, now an' then. There must surely be some fine strains in Joe's pedigree, but an all-fired long ways back. The Danglers have speerit an' looks, right enough, but I'm referrin' to honesty. Why, the biggest bit of thievery ever done in this province—the slickest an' coolest an' sassiest ever pulled off without benefit of lawyers—was done by her great-grandpa, old Luke's own pa, one hundred years ago. That fetches me right around to what I was tellin' you in the stable about how this strain of blood got into this country. Now that's queer—talkin' of throw-backs—for the Willy Horse was one jist as certain as Joe Hinch is one. He throwed clear back to that English mare, he did. He was the dead spit, the livin' image, of the English mare Luke Dangler's pa stole an' hid in the year eighteen hundred an' twenty-three. His name was Mark—Mark Dangler—but they tell how the Injuns named him Devil-kill-a-man-quick, an' he was most generally called Devil Dangler for short by whites an'

Injuns. That was Luke's own pa. He was a handy man with a knife. He could throw a knife that quick that——"

"Jard!" exclaimed Miss Hassock. "If that old Dangler ever threw knives half as fast as you wag your tongue he'd of killed off all the settlers on the river in half a day. That story will keep, Jard—though I don't say this gentleman won't be interested in it."

"You are right, I'm interested in it," replied Vane. "In fact, what I really came here for"—and here Jard looked up expectantly—"was in the hope of finding a good young horse of the Eclipse strain of blood. Willoughby Girl, that stolen mare—whose story I've known for a very long time—was a grandfather of the great Eclipse. She was a bay with white legs. Eclipse was also a bay with white legs. But her dam, Getaway, was a strawberry roan. So the color of your filly looks good—but bay is the true Eclipse color. The mare, Willoughby Girl, was ten years old when she was brought to this country.

"An Englishman named Willoughby was her owner. When he came out to this province with the intention of buying land and settling here, he brought Willoughby Girl with him, for she was the greatest mare in the world, in his opinion. The loss of her sickened him of the country. He spent thousands of pounds in searching for her. It was his belief that she had been run across the border, so it was in the states that he did all his searching."

Jard was staring in open-eyed amazement at all this knowledge—so much clearer even than his own—but Vane seemed to take it as a matter of course and went right on.

"I have always been interested in this story of Willoughby Girl, and then I came across the records of Strawberry Lightning and the Willy Horse. Later on I saw both of them at different tracks—you see I am keen on horses, anyway—and heard a vague story about a stolen English mare that was their ancestor. As you say, the Willy Horse was a direct throw-back. I discovered they both came originally from this neck of the woods, and I came to investigate.

"I planned to keep it quiet about what I wanted, because I am not a rich man, but I am determined to own a horse of that strain. I know I needn't worry about you and Miss Hassock, for I see that you are both sportsmen. But I must ask you to keep my mission to this part of the country under your hats. I want a horse, but I can't pay any fancy price for one."

Vane even fetched a leather portfolio from his room and showed Willoughby Girl's pedigree to his host and hostess, whose interest was only too manifest.

Jard Hassock gloated over it, breathing heavily through his nose.

"If I could see Luke Dangler's records—if Luke was halfway human—I could hitch my own little filly onto this here pedigree," he whispered at last. "Onto this here royal pedigree! Can you beat it!"

CHAPTER IV

THE DANGEROUS DANGLERS

Jard Hassock and Robert Vane talked horses. Jard now did most of the talking. The glorious pedigree of Willoughby Girl had affected him as the bray of trumpets affects old cavalry horses, as the piping of a high wind in tree tops reawakens life and longing in the arteries of retired mariners dozing in cottage gardens. His memory flashed pictures appealing and glamorous to his mind's eye, of cheering crowds and white-fenced tracks and satin-coated horses speeding with outstretched necks. His experiences had been entirely with harness racing—but the horses who trot and pace are of the same strains of blood as those who run. He remembered only the tingle and rush of victory. The dust of defeat was forgotten. He lamented Lady Firefly's extreme youth; and for a moment he considered the advisability of approaching old Luke Dangler in his stronghold on Goose Creek. But only for a moment. He knew Luke. Luke had some promising youngsters in his stable—all presumably of the old blood—but he knew by experience all the drawbacks to doing business with that violent and cunning old crook. He knew that Luke had something better than the little filly Lady Firefly. The fact that Luke had parted with the roan filly, even on the amazing terms which he had forced upon Jard, was proof enough for Jard that he held something better of the old blood in reserve.

Jard was not proud of the terms on which he had gained possession of the roan filly. He was heartily ashamed of them; and he had kept them strictly to himself until, in the excitement produced by the perusal of Willoughby Girl's pedigree, he showed his copy of the agreement to Robert Vane. He had paid four hundred dollars for Lady Firefly as a foal, and had pledged his word (written and witnessed) that he would not part with her without Luke Dangler's permission, that Luke was to have one-half of the price if a sale were made, and that if she were bred from while in Jard's possession Luke was to have a half-interest in all offspring.

"And you agreed to this?" queried Vane, in astonishment.

"It was my only way of gettin' her; an' I got to have a bit of speed comin' along in my stable—simply got to! It's the way I was made. Life ain't worth gettin' out of bed for without it. I've tried. An' I've tried other strains of blood, but I never won a race with anything but what I got from Luke Dangler."

“But what about the others, the Willy Horse and Strawberry Lightning? Did you own them on the same conditions?”

“No. I owned the Willy Horse hoof an’ hide, an’ I bred the mare myself. But I had to sell the horse to Luke Dangler for four hundred.”

“Had to?”

“Had to is right, mister. Them Danglers an’ old Dave Hinch work together. Dave’s a money-lender—one of the real old-fashioned kind—and a note-shaver. He got hold of some of my paper once. ’Nough said! An’ the Danglers! Say, mister, any man who gets in dead wrong with a Dangler of Goose Crick had best clear out of this section of woods, or he’ll find himself dead in it some day. Yes, mister, they squoze the Willy Horse out of me an’ sold him down in Maryland for three thousand; an’ he was sold in New Orleans a year after that for twenty thousand; an’ when Luke an’ Dave seen that on the sportin’ pages they was mad enough to bite horseshoes. An’ it was for fear of them two old crooks I sold Strawberry Lightnin’. As soon as she won a few races they got after me; an’ they’d of got her, too—or me—if I hadn’t sold her quick acrost the line.”

“Where’s this Goose Creek?” asked Vane.

“What d’you want to know for?” countered Jard.

“I’m going there to-morrow to have a look at this old ruffian Dangler and his horses.”

“Take a few days to think it over,” advised Jard. “If you walk right up to old Luke’s house an’ say you want to look over his horses with the intention of buyin’ one, he’ll size you up for a millionaire an’ act accordin’. So far, except for the few deals he’s made with me, he’s done all his business down in the States. The farther away from home he sells a horse of the old blood the better he’s pleased. Maybe he’s still scart of the law gettin’ him somehow for what his pa did ninety-nine years ago, or maybe it’s nothin’ but the plain hoggishness of his nature, but he keeps mighty quiet an’ secret about his business in this province. He loses money by it, for you can bet he don’t get what he asks down there among them lads, with three or four days of railroadin’ behind him, but ends in takin’ what he can get. Away from his own stampin’ ground, an’ among men maybe as crooked as himself, but with more brains an’ better manners, I guess he gets the light end of the deal every time. So I reckon he’s scart. If he wasn’t he’d show a certified pedigree for the horses he sells, with Willoughby Girl played up big in it—but nothin’ of the kind! If you was to mention that stolen mare to him he’d

pertend he didn't know what you was talkin' about—but you'd want to get a long ways off from Goose Crick before dark jist the same."

"But what would happen if I saw his horses and made him an offer for one of them?"

"I reckon you'd get the horse—if you offered twenty thousand for it, or maybe if you offered ten."

"No chance! But what if I made a reasonable offer?"

"He'd be sore as a boil; an' he'd cal-late you'd come all the way from New York jist to spy on him—an' you'd be lucky if you got out alive."

"But that's absurd! Isn't there any law in this country?"

"Plenty of it. Game laws an' all sorts. There's the law old Dave Hinch uses when he gets hold of a bit of paper with your name on it, even if you never saw the danged thing before, or have maybe paid it twice already. But there ain't no law ag'in a man losin' himself in the woods. That's the Dangler way, but don't tell them I said so."

"Do you really know something, or are you only talking?"

"I know what I'm talkin' about, an' I'm talkin' for your good, Mr. Vane. I got a pretty clear memory more'n forty years long; an' I can remember quite a slew of folks who've fell out with the Danglers one way an' another; an' some of them cleared out, an' four was lost in the woods—five, countin' poor Pete Sledge. Pete's the only man I know of who ever defied the Danglers and refused to run away, an' is still alive right here in Forkville. But you'd ought to see Pete. He'd be a lesson to you."

"What's the matter with him?"

Jard tapped his brow significantly with a finger-tip.

"Lost an' found ag'in," he said. "But he was half-witted when they found him, an' he's been that way ever since—an' that was nigh onto twenty years ago."

"What happened to him?"

"He tells a queer story—but you can't pin it on any Dangler, even if you believe it. Pete an' one of the Dangler men fell out about a girl. Pete wiped up Gus Johnson's chipyard with that Dangler. There was good trappin' country way up Squaw Brook in them days, an' Pete used to work it. He had a little shack up there, an' that's where he'd spend most of the winter, tendin' his traps. It was along in the fall of the year he knocked Dangler

down an' drug him around; an' it was along in the first week of January he woke up in his bunk on Squaw Brook one night jist in the nick of time to bust his way out an' take a roll in the snow. He had most of his clothes on, for he'd been sleepin' in them; an' he had his top blanket, an' his mackinaw with mitts in the pockets, which he had grabbed up an' brought out with him.

"The roof fell in before he could figure on how to save anything else but his snowshoes, which stood jist inside the door. His rifle an' pelts an' grub were all burned—all except a ham, which was roasted to a turn when he raked it out with a long pole. His axe was in the choppin'-block. He cut the blanket an' tied up his feet in strips of it, wonderin' all the time how the shack come to catch fire. So he took a look around, by the light of a half-moon, an' he found tracks leadin' right up to the smokin' mess that had been his shack an' right away ag'in. But they were bear tracks. So he cal'lated it must of been the stovepipe, for how could a bear set a fire? Where would he get the matches? But he took another think; an' then he put on his snowshoes an' shouldered the ham an' the axe an' lit out after the bear. It was a big bear, to judge by its paws; an' he was mad enough to kill it with the axe. He reckoned that would serve it right for not bein' asleep in a hole like a decent bear should of been, even if it hadn't set fire to his camp.

"For the best part of a mile he followed along jist as fast as he could lift his webs an' spat 'em down ag'in, until he had to stop an' tie up one of his blanket socks; an' that give him a close-up view of the tracks which he hadn't taken since his first examination of them, an' he seen that the old varmint wasn't usin' his forepaws now but was travelin' on his hind legs only. Well, sir, that made him madder yet an' kinder pleased with the way things were shapin', too; so he tore off enough of the roasted ham to fill his pockets an' throwed away the rest of it an' lit out on the tracks of that queer bear ag'in like he was runnin' a race with the champeen snowshoer of Montreal.

"Dawn came up red, an' still the bear wasn't in sight. Pete kept right on, but not quite so fast, chawin' ham as he traveled. He cal-lated he was makin' better time than any bear could run on its hind legs, an' would overhaul it in another hour at the outside. Pretty soon he picked up a burnt match. Then he *knew* he wouldn't have much trouble skinnin' that bear when once he'd caught it. But he wished harder'n ever he had his rifle—for a bear that carries matches is jist as like as not to tote a gun, too. The ham an' the runnin' give him a plagued thrist, an' he went an' et some snow instead of

waitin' till he come to a brook an' choppin' a waterhole. He et some more snow, an' that kinder took the heart out of him.

"He was jist on the p'int of quittin' an' turnin' off to shape a bee-line for the nearest clearance, when his nose caught a whiff of cold tobacco smoke on the air. That told him Mister Bear wasn't far ahead, an' he broke into runnin' ag'in jist as tight as he could flop his webs. But he didn't get far that time. What with thirst an' bellyache an' the bum riggin' he had on his feet instead of moccasins, he tripped an' took a hell of a tumble. An' when he got himself right-end-up an' sorted out he found a pain in his right ankle like a knife an' one of his snowshoes busted an' the sun all grayed over. He was in a nasty fix. He tried travelin' on one foot, but that soon bested him. His ankle was real bad. Atop all that, he was in a bit of country he didn't recognize an' couldn't get a glimpse of the sun.

"He got together some dry stuff for a fire—an' then he remembered how careful he'd been to take his matchbox out of his pocket an' put it on the table the night before—so's he'd be sure to fill it chock-a-block in the mornin'. But he found one loose match. He fumbled that the first try, an' at the second try the head come off it. Can you beat it? Well, sir, he kinder lost his grip then an' spent quite a while feelin' through his pockets over an' over ag'in for another match. Then he tried hoppin' ag'in. Then he tried crawlin'—but the snow was too deep for that game. He let some more snow melt in his mouth, but his throat was so sore already it was all he could do to swaller it. All of a sudden he heard a kinder devilish laugh, an' that started him rarin' round ag'in on one foot, though he didn't see nothin', till he fell down.

"After that he dug a hole in the snow an' cut some fir boughs an' snugged down. He heard that laugh plenty of times ag'in, an' for the first few times he crawled out after it; but pretty soon it scart him so he couldn't move. He says he don't remember what he did after that, but when Noel an' Gabe Sabattis found him next day he had ten big spruces felled an' was whirlin' into the eleventh an' tellin' the world he had the devil treed at last. Crazy as a coot! He ain't recovered yet, though he's quiet enough an' talks sane now an' then. He knows who set his shack a-fire, anyhow."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Vane. "And do you believe it?"

"I don't believe he had the devil up a tree."

"That someone set fire to his camp?"

"Sure I do, an' that Amos Dangler's the man who done it, with the paws of a bear on his feet an' hands. But don't tell anybody I said so, for the love of Mike!"

After a brief but thoughtful silence Vane said, "If I should happen to get in wrong with that bunch, I promise you I won't run away."

"I guess you want a horse real bad?"

"I do now—but it was more a sentimental whim than anything else that brought me here. Your Danglers don't scare me worth a cent, Jard. They make me hot behind the ears. Now I'll have the best animal they've got of the old strain, if it takes me a year."

"Maybe my filly's as good as anything Luke Dangler's got."

"If that proves to be the case I'll take her, too, if you'll sell. But I tell you frankly that it's a Dangler horse I want now."

Jard wagged his head.

Tom McPhee came in that evening with a face of concern.

"Joe's gone," he said. "Steve Dangler come for her, an' took her out to her grandpa's. Goose Crick's no place for a girl like Joe."

"What the hell did you let her go for?" cried Jard.

"Wouldn't you of let her go?" returned McPhee pointedly.

Jard sighed, and scratched his nose.

"Well, I wouldn't of!" exclaimed Miss Hassock. "I wouldn't of let all the Danglers on the crick budge her an inch out of my house—and you men can put that in your pipes and see how it smokes."

Hassock and McPhee exchanged expressive glances and uneasy smiles.

"Did old Dave go, too?" asked Jard.

"He did not," replied McPhee. "He's comin' here to-morrow. He says he'll take Joe back to keep house for him when he rebuilds next summer, but he won't pay her board to live in idleness."

"That's what you pulled out of the fire," said Jard, turning accusingly to Vane. Then, "What's he comin' here for?" he asked McPhee.

"To live till he rebuilds, that's all. He says Molly's biscuits ain't fit to eat."

“He will find mine worse,” said Miss Hassock grimly. “But that ain’t the point. It’s Joe I’m worryin’ about. Them Danglers is all rough an’ tough, men an’ women alike. It was a bad day for Joe old Dave Hinch’s house burnt down. If I was a man I’d bust up that bunch on Goose Crick if I was killed for it.”

“It’s been there nigh onto a hundred years; an’ I reckon there’s as good men hereabouts as anywhere,” objected McPhee. “If the law can’t fasten nothin’ onto them, what can us fellers do?”

“The law!” exclaimed Liza derisively. “An’ what about the officers of the law? The law’s no more than printed words if it ain’t worked by human hands.”

Vane gave Jard Hassock the slip next morning and went for a walk. He halted at the top of the hill above the upper end of the village and lit his pipe and looked around. He saw black woods and white clearings up hill and down dale, a few scattered farmhouses with azure smoke ascending to a blue sky washed with sunshine, the roofs of the village crawling down to the low black ruins that had been old Dave Hinch’s house, and to the covered bridge across the white stream, and the twisting road and climbing hills beyond the bridge. He saw the fork in the river, above the bridge, after which the village had been named. He thought of the queer chance that had brought him to this place just in time to save the great-granddaughter of Mark Dangler from death by fire. He saw a man issue from the back door of the nearest house, run to the road and ascend the hill toward him at a brisk jog. He waited, under the impression that he was the man’s objective. He was right. The countryman came up to him, grinning apologetically.

“Can you spare me a few matches, stranger?” he asked.

Vane was surprised at the question, but instantly produced a dozen or more loose matches and handed them over. They were gratefully received and carefully tucked away in an inner pocket.

“I always carry a-plenty now, an’ pick up more ever’ chance I get, for once I was caught with only one,” explained the villager. “An’ that one was bad.” He smiled knowingly. “I reckon it ain’t likely I’ll ever be caught with only one match ag’in.”

Vane saw something unusual about the fellow’s eyes. They were bright, they were gentle, though intent in their glance, and yet in their expression something expected was lacking, and something unlooked for was present.

The effect was disconcerting. Otherwise the man looked normal enough. His full beard and heavy mustache were dark brown streaked with gray.

"Can you point me the way to Goose Creek?" asked Vane.

The other faced the north, and pointed with his hand.

"It lays five mile upstream, but there ain't no settlement at the mouth," he said. "They're all Danglers on that crick, but some of 'em has other names. It's about seven mile by road straight through to their main settlement from here. But if ye're lookin' for Amos Dangler ye're too late."

"Is that the road?" asked Vane, pointing.

"That's it, but if ye're lookin' for Amos you won't find him. He come snoopin' 'round my girl—Kate Johnson's her name—an' I chased him into the top of a big spruce an' chopped him down an' fixed him for keeps."

"How long ago did that happen?"

"Quite a spell back. Maybe a month—maybe a year. It was winter time, anyhow—an' Kate an' me figger to get married in the spring. Do you happen to have a few matches on you more'n you need?"

Again a few matches changed pockets.

"I always make a p'int of pickin' 'em up," explained the collector. "Good things for to keep handy, matches. When you do need 'em, you need 'em bad."

"I believe you," returned Vane. "A match is like a gun."

"Somethin' like, but not altogether. You can't light a fire with an axe—but sometimes you can make an axe do instead of a gun."

"Yes, that's so. You are Pete Sledge, aren't you?"

"That's me. How did you know?"

After a moment's hesitation, Vane replied, "Jard Hassock spoke of you as the smartest hunter and trapper in these parts. I put two and two together."

The other nodded, evidently quite satisfied,

"I suppose you know all this country for miles around as well as you know this village," added Vane.

Again Sledge nodded. "Like that," he said, extending his left hand and opening it palm upward.

“I’m interested in the country,” said Vane. “I wish you would take me out sometimes. I can travel on snowshoes.”

“Any night you say, stranger. But no shootin’, mind you! It’s close season.”

“I don’t want to shoot anything. But why night?”

“Night? I don’t run the woods in the daytime now, nor ain’t for quite a spell—for a year, maybe—or maybe two. There’s a reason, but I can’t jist agsactly recollect it. Maybe it’s because I stop to home an’ sleep all day.”

“What about to-night?”

“Suits me fine.”

“Good! I’ll meet you here at eleven o’clock to-night.”

“No, you best give me a call. That there’s my window. You give a knock on it with yer knuckles, an’ I’ll be right there.”

They retraced their steps as far as Pete Sledge’s little house in company. Then Vane returned directly to Moosehead House. He heard from Miss Hassock that old Dave had not yet put in an appearance.

CHAPTER V

THE GUARDED ROAD

Vane told Jard Hassock of his meeting with poor Pete Sledge but not a word about their engagement for eleven o'clock that night. He spoke of Pete's illusion to the effect that he killed Amos Dangler with an axe.

"Sure, that's his crazy idee," said Jard. "An' Amos Dangler keeps out of his way. That ain't hard to do, for Pete sticks pretty close 'round home. He's crazy—but he's still got a heap of ordinary horse-sense left, has Pete Sledge."

"What's become of the girl they fought about?"

"Kate Johnson? She married Amos Dangler eighteen years ago an' is still alive an' hearty up Goose Crick, far's I know."

"Pete thinks she is going to marry him in the spring. It seems that he has not kept a very close watch on the flight of time."

"He's crazy. Sometimes he talks as if his shack on Squaw Brook was burned down only a week ago. An' he's everlasting'ly beggin' matches. Keeps every pocket of every coat he owns full of matches. But he's still got streaks of sanity. He has brains enough, but some of them's got twisted, that's all. Nobody can best him at a game of checkers nor at raisin' chickens an' gettin' aigs. It's a queer case. Now what do you reckon would happen if the truth that he didn't ever kill Amos Dangler was to pop into his head some day?"

"I was wondering the same thing. What do you think?"

"I guess he'd rectify his mistake without loss of time—an' that he'd do it with an axe. Maybe he'd even chase Amos up a tree first an' then chop him down, jist so's to have everything right. Folks who've been demented, crazy, lunatic as long as Pete has ain't always practical. They like to do things their own way, but they sure like to do 'em. How do you cal'late to set about gettin' a horse out of old Luke?"

"Speaking of lunatics, what?"

"Well, sir, you got to use the best part of valor, that's a sure thing."

"I agree with you. One or the other of us should think of a way in a few days. There's no particular hurry."

The hotel had only two guests at this time, Vane and the person whom he had heard snoring on the night of his spectacular arrival. The snorer was the manager of the "Grange" store, an elderly, anxious looking man who always returned to the store immediately after dinner and retired to his room immediately after supper.

The afternoon passed without sight or further word of old Dave Hinch; but Tom McPhee appeared after supper with a budget of intelligence that was well received by the Hassocks. Old Hinch was ill—so ill that he had sent Tom down to Rattles for the doctor—so ill that his conscience was troubling him for having parted with his granddaughter.

"If he don't feel better by mornin' he'll send for her," said McPhee. "And a good thing, too. That young skunk Steve Dangler's sweet on the girl; an' Dave knows it. Now that he's feelin' real sick he don't like it. He ain't a bad sort of old man when he's scart he may die any minute."

"Maybe Luke Dangler won't sent Joe back ag'in. He's as much her grandpa as Dave Hinch himself," said Jard.

"But Dave's her guardeen, which Luke ain't," returned McPhee.

At eleven o'clock that night Robert Vane rattled his fingernails on the glass of Pete Sledge's dark window. Nothing happened. He tapped again, louder this time, and waited expectantly for the sudden flare of a match behind the black panes. Nothing flared; and he was about to rap a yet louder summons on the window when a slight sound behind him caused him to jump and turn in his tracks. There stood Pete Sledge a few paces off, with an axe on his shoulder.

"Reckon I give you a start," said Pete in a pleased tone.

"You did," returned Vane. "I was looking for you in front."

"I stopped inside long's I could after ma went to bed, an' then I come out an' waited behind the woodpile."

"Why behind the woodpile?"

"No harm intended, but yer a stranger to me. But I reckon yer all right. Which way d'ye want to go?"

"What about Goose Creek?"

Pete Sledge stepped close to Vane at that and peered keenly into his face for a moment.

"Friend of them Danglers?" he asked.

"I've never set my eyes on a Dangler in my life, but I've heard of them from Jard Hassock and I'm curious about them," replied Vane.

"Why don't you go over to Goose Crick with Jard?"

"He won't go. He seems to be afraid of the place—and the people."

"And you ain't?"

"Not worth a cent!"

Sledge showed signs of embarrassment. "I ain't what you would properly call scart, but I don't jist hanker after that there section of country," he said. "Oh, no, I ain't scart! Ain't I fell out with them Danglers an' bested 'em? But Goose Crick don't interest me none. But what is it you want of them folks?"

"I feel a curiosity concerning them which I think is quite natural. I want to see where they live—the people who have thrown a scare into the whole countryside. If you won't come along, I'll go alone. They must be very remarkable people."

Pete Sledge said nothing to that, did nothing. Vane went out to the road and up the hill. He had expected better of Pete Sledge in the way of courage—though why, considering the fact that the poor fellow had already been frightened half out of his wits, it is difficult to say. At the top of the rise above Forkville he turned into the side road which Pete had indicated to him that morning. It was a well pounded track which cut through snowdrifts at some points, and humped itself over them at others. For a mile or two it passed through white clearings broken by groups of farm buildings and scattered groves, and beyond that it slipped into obscurity between black walls of second-growth spruce and fir.

Vane walked alone, to the best of his knowledge and belief; and he felt lonely. He felt uneasy. Rifts in the marching ranks of the forest admitted pale glimmers of starshine to the road here and there, discovering the depths of the darkness and queer lumps of shadow and weird blotches of pallor right and left to his exploring glances. He wondered just why he had come, not to mention what he would do when he arrived. He remembered that it is recorded somewhere that curiosity killed the cat. It is doubtful if he would have felt any better if he had known that Pete Sledge was behind him, within fifty paces of him. He didn't know it, but it was so.

Here and there a narrow clearing widened the outlook slightly without enlivening it. At the edge of one of these crouched a little deserted lath mill, its fallen tin smokestack and sagging roof eloquent of failure, disillusion, the

death of a petty ambition. This was at least six miles from Forkville, at a rough guess; and as soon as he was past it Vane began looking eagerly into the gloom ahead for a glimpse of the clearings of the Dangler settlement; but before he had gone two hundred yards beyond the deserted mill he heard a piercing whistle behind him. He jumped to the side of the road and crouched there, every sense alert and straining. There had been no possibility of mistaking the significant character of the shrill sound. It had been a warning and a signal. And within ten seconds it was answered, repeated, at a point in the darkness two hundred yards or so farther along in the direction of the Goose Creek settlement.

Vane realized that, with an alert sentry behind him and another in front of him, now was the time for quick action. He didn't even pause to wonder what the sinister Danglers could be about to make the posting of sentries on the road worth their while. Noiselessly and swiftly he shifted his snowshoes from his shoulders to his feet; and then, after a moment given to sensing his position in relation to the river and Forkville, and the lay of the land, he slipped noiselessly into the thick and elastic underbrush.

The second sentry, the man who had repeated the shrill warning of Vane's approach was Hen Dangler, one of the middle-aged members of the gang, a nephew of old Luke. Having passed along the signal and heard it answered from the nearest house, he grasped a sled-stake of rock maple firmly in his right hand and closed swiftly upon the point on the road from which the first whistle had sounded. This was according to plan. He ran silently, listening for sounds of a struggle or of flight and pursuit. He heard nothing; and he encountered nothing until he found the first sentry, the original alarmist, flat on his face in the middle of the road and blissfully unconscious of his position.

The unconscious sentry was Steve Dangler, Hen's son, the very same Steve who was "sweet on" his second cousin, Joe Hinch. After a face massage with snow and a gulp from Hen's flask, he opened his eyes and sat up.

"What happened?" asked Hen. "Why the hell didn't you leave him pass you an' git between us, like we planned? You must of blowed yer whistle right in his face."

"Face, nothin'. He passed me, all right. Then I whistled—an' got yer answer—an' started after him—an' then—good night!"

"Hell! Say, there must be two of 'em."

“Wouldn’t wonder, onless I kicked up behind an’ beaned meself with me own foot.”

“Who was it—the one you seen go past you?”

“Dunno. Stranger to me. Rigged out like a sport, far’s I could see—blast ’im! Last time he’ll ever git past this baby!”

“Maybe so. If you feel up to steppin’ out we’d best be headin’ along for home. Take a holt on my arm.”

They made what speed they could toward the clearings and habitations of Goose Creek, probing the shadows about them with apprehensive eyes, and questioning the silence with anxious ears. Clear of the wood at last, they drew deep breaths of relief. They felt better, but only for a brace of seconds. Fear of immediate physical attack was gone, only to be replaced by anxiety for the future.

“Don’t it beat damnation!” lamented the father. “Here we been layin’ out ’most every night for two months an’ nothin’ happened an’ then the very first time there’s any need for it you go an’ git fooled an’ beaned into the bargain! Say, I wisht I’d been where you was.”

“Same here.”

“Zat so? Keep in mind that ye’re talkin’ to yer pa, Steve Dangler. It wouldn’t of happened like that if I’d been there. My wits wouldn’t of been wool-pickin’ after no danged girl. I’d been watchin’ out behind.”

“All right, pa. You tell old Luke all about it.”

After a long journey on a curved course, and much thrusting through tough underbrush and climbing up and plunging down, Robert Vane came out on the highroad at the top of the hill above the village. He halted there to remove his webs, and was there confronted by poor Pete Sledge who appeared out of the vague starshine as if by magic.

“How d’you like them Danglers?” asked Pete.

“I haven’t met any of them yet,” replied Vane.

“Nor you don’t want to. Leave ’em lay, stranger, leave ’em lay. Run home quick an’ go to bed, an’ don’t tell a word of what happened to-night to Jard Hassock nor nobody.”

“What do you mean by what happened to-night?”

“Well, you got a scare, didn’t you? You didn’t come home the same way you went.”

“I’m not afraid of them.”

“But you took to the woods. You was scart enough for that—an’ smart enough. Leave ’em lay, stranger; an’ if I was you I’d get out of this here Forkville to-morrow an’ try somewheres else.”

“Try what somewhere else?”

Pete winked and asked for a match. He tucked the match away in his pocket.

“What is it you want of Goose Crick?” he asked. “Whatever you want, it’s nothin’ only trouble you’ll get—but jist tell me, an’ I’ll tell if you’re lyin’ or not.”

“That’s very good of you. I’ll think it over. Now I’m off for bed.”

“Hold yer hosses a minute! You can trust me. I love a Dangler like a lad goin’ a-courtin’ loves to meet a skunk.”

“So you say, but I’m not so sure of it as I was a while ago. To be quite frank with you, there was someone behind me to-night—and whoever he was, he was in league with the Danglers.”

“There was two behind you to-night. Two. An’ I was only one of ’em. T’other was young Steve Dangler. But Steve didn’t know I was there, which was a pity for him, but a good thing for me an’ you. I didn’t reckon you’d have sense enough to take to the woods, so I up an’ beaned Steve so’s to clear the road behind you.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It sure is. But come along away from here. Come with me.”

Pete led Vane to his own little barn behind his little house and up a ladder into a little hay loft. From this loft, through a crack between two weather-warped boards, one could watch the road from the top of the hill all the way down through the village to the covered bridge. Vane kept in close touch with his guide, ready for anything. They sat down on fragrant hay; and Pete kept his eye on the crack and Vane kept an eye on Pete.

“What was you expectin’ to find on Goose Crick?” asked Pete.

“A horse,” replied Vane, after a moment’s pause. “You are welcome to the information—and so is old Luke Dangler. Now what about it?”

"A horse?"

"That's what I said—and it's exactly what I mean."

"A horse? Is that all?"

"That's all—but it seems to be plenty—more than enough—to judge from the way Jard Hassock talks. Well, what about it?"

"You want to steal a horse? You figgered out to steal a horse from old Luke Dangler to-night? Say, stranger, that sounds jist about crazy enough to be true! Jumpin' cats! Stranger, Jard Hassock's right. It can't be done."

"I want to buy a horse, if he has one that suits me."

"Buy a horse. Say, that's different. That's easy. All you need's a million dollars—or maybe ten thousand—or maybe only five."

"No fear! I'll offer a fair price and not a dollar more."

"Then you won't get no horse—not of the trottin' stock, anyhow—but trouble a-plenty. A horse? You must want one real bad. Now if it was a woman it would be different, but any man who'd go git himself mixed up with them Danglers for a horse—for the best durned horse in the world—ain't got all his brains workin', to my way of thinkin'."

"You may be right. They seem to be difficult people to deal with, that's a fact. I had no idea that they went so far as to post sentries on the road. Have many attempts been made to steal their horses?"

Pete turned his glance from the crack in the wall to Vane's face. Vane could see the glimmer of the eyes and feel the searching of them.

"You don't look like a liar," said Pete.

"Thank you again," said Vane.

"Nor like a fool," went on the native in a puzzled tone. "But you must be one or t'other—or both."

"But I don't know why you should think so," protested Vane.

"You ask Jard Hassock. Maybe he will tell you. I would, only I'm kinder side-steppin' trouble with them Danglers these days. A man figgerin' on fixin' up with a wife come spring can't be too careful."

Vane returned to Moosehead House, entered the kitchen window and gained his room and his bed without detection. In spite of the hour, sleep did not come to him immediately.

He was excited and puzzled. The fact of the sentries on the road in to Goose Creek puzzled and excited him, and so did the talk and behavior of Pete Sledge. Why the sentries? Why the signals? Surely a man could breed a few horses without such precautions as these. And what would have happened to him if the Danglers had caught him? And what was Pete Sledge's game—if any? The fellow talked about marriage to a woman who was already married, and about having killed a man who was still alive and hearty within a few miles of him, and made a point of begging matches and tucking them away like precious things—but was he as crazy as these things suggested? He doubted it.

CHAPTER VI

THE WARNING

Vane slept until Jard Hassock awoke him by pulling his toes. It was then close upon nine o'clock of a fine morning.

"Say, what ails you?" asked Jard. "You act like you'd been up an' roustin' round all night."

"It's your fine fresh air," replied Vane, sliding reluctantly out of bed.

He breakfasted in the kitchen, but not a word did he say of the night's activities. He was told that McPhee had already called to say that young Steve Dangler had already been in from Goose Creek with a message from old Luke Dangler to old Dave Hinch. The gist of the message was that Granddaughter Joe should remain where she was for as long as Grandpa Dangler chose to keep her and if Grandpa Hinch didn't like it the only thing left for him to do was to lump it.

"It wasn't eight o'clock, but Steve was slewed already," concluded Jard.

"It's a cruel, cryin' shame and disgrace!" exclaimed Miss Hassock. "Dave Hinch is a crooked old sinner and mean company for a girl like Joe—but those Danglers are downright low. They'll marry her to that swillin', bullyin' rapscallion Steve, you see if they don't; and not a man hereabouts man enough to raise a hand!"

"What's his tipple?" asked Vane. "I thought this country was dry. Surely he is not drinking lemon extract—and alive to show it? You used the word swilling."

"He's a hog, that's why—whatever the stuff in his trough may be," retorted Liza.

Jard winked at Vane. "You don't have to drink lemon extract round here nowadays, nor ain't for nigh onto two years," he said. "There's real liquor—so I hear—to be had for eight dollars a bottle, an' somethin' that acts a darn sight more real for half the price. All you need's the money an' the high sign."

"And the law?"

"Law!" exclaimed Miss Hassock in a voice of angry derision. "Law! With Danglers to bust it an' a bunch of cowards an' live-an'-let-livers to

look on, what's the good of a law?"

Jard nodded at Vane. "If Liza had been born a man she'd of been dead quite a spell now," he said.

"But I guess there'd been a few other funerals about the same time as mine," said Miss Hassock, smiling grimly.

"Bootleggers?—moonshiners?" queried Vane.

This, he felt, explained the sentinels and the signals.

"You said it that time, Mr. Vane—and it's a treat to hear a man with grit enough in his crop to say it out loud, even if he is only askin'," returned Liza. "Bootleggers and moonshiners is right. The Danglers take the lead in every low devilment."

"Liza's maybe right an' maybe wrong," said Jard. "I ain't sayin' anythin' about it, whatever I'm thinkin'; an' I hope you won't, neither—not while you live in Moosehead House, anyhow. Liza's mighty free with her mean names, talkin' about cowards an' the like—but—well, her an' my property is all right here—this hotel an' the land an' the barns. So we got to stop right here, an' I'd sooner stop here alive than dead. I can't afford to be so gosh darned brave—like Liza."

The fire went out of the big woman's eyes and the derision left her lips. She strode over to her brother, stooped and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Please forgive me, Jard," she said. "You are right and I am all wrong."

Steve Dangler had not come to Forkville that morning for the sole purpose of delivering old Luke's defiant message to old Dave. He had been instructed to hunt out and look over and size up the stranger who was rigged out like a sport, and who had passed him and yet escaped him the night before. There was no doubt in either Steve's or old Luke's mind that this person was a police officer or law officer spying around on behalf of the nearest Prohibition Enforcement Inspector. But even so, it would be wise to make sure, and to size him up and get a line on his character and methods, before deciding on the safest and surest way of dealing with him. To date, the usual methods of lulling official suspicion, combined with the long-established terror of the Dangler name, had suffered to keep inviolate the secret activities of Goose Creek.

When Steve reached the front door of Moosehead House, Jard Hassock was gossiping at the village smithy, Miss Hassock was in the kitchen and Robert Vane was up in his room writing a letter to a friend whose father

owned a town house in New York, a country home on Long Island and a winter place in Florida. He was writing to the Florida address. Steve opened the hotel door, entered, glanced into the empty office on the right, and the empty "settin'-room" on the left, cocked his ear for sounds of Miss Hassock, whom he feared, then ascended the stairs swiftly and silently. After looking into three unoccupied bedrooms, he halted and struck a casual attitude on Vane's threshold.

"Where's Simmons?" he asked. "He ain't at the store."

This was a lie, but Steve would rather tell a lie than the truth even when no advantage was to be derived from it.

Vane looked up from his letter, which was progressing very slowly and dully, and regarded the questioner from beneath slightly raised eyebrows.

"Not here," he said, and stared down at the half-written letter again and crossed out the last line.

"He lives here, don't he?"

"Not in this room."

"He hangs out in this hotel, I guess."

"He snores here, and eats here."

"Guess I'll go try the store ag'in."

"Not a bad idea."

Vane turned his eyes and attention back to his letter, and Steve shifted his weight uneasily from foot to foot. Vane made no headway. He realized that he was not in the least interested in the task under his pen and suddenly wondered, with a disconcerting feeling of futility, if he had ever been sincerely interested in the person for whom this letter was intended. Or was it all part of a game—this unfinished letter and other completed letters?

"Have a seegar, mister," suggested the man on the threshold, digging fingers into a pocket.

"I'll smoke a pipe, if it's all the same to you," returned Vane. "Come in and sit down, won't you—if you're not too busy?"

The other accepted the invitation, selected a comfortable chair, dropped his cap on the floor, lit a cigar and spat neatly into the fire. Vane laid aside his pen, turned an elbow upon ink and paper and lit his pipe.

"Sportin'?" queried Steve, in his best society manner.

"Not as you mean," replied Vane. "I'm not lookin' for anything to shoot. Close season, for that matter. But my visit is certainly connected with sport."

"Zat so," returned Steve, with honest curiosity and ill-hid suspicion conflicting in his hot brown eyes. "Sport, hey?"

"Yes. I came here to find a horse."

"A horse? Did you lose one?"

"No. But I have heard of good horses coming from this part of the country, and I hope to be able to buy a young one of the good strain—of the Strawberry Lightning strain. I've seen Hassock's roan filly, but I hear that the real breeder is an old man named Luke Dangler who lives up on Goose Creek. You know him, I suppose. Do you know if he has any young bays of that strain? Bay is the right color—the Willy Horse color. I have a few hundreds that are ready and eager to talk horse."

"Sure I know old Luke Dangler. My own name's Dangler, an' I come from Goose Crick myself. He's got a couple of young uns of the right color, an' the right lines. Say, I guess ye're the gent who drug old Dave Hinch an' Joe out of the fire?"

"Yes, I happened along just in time."

"I'll say so. But why ain't you been out to see Luke Dangler before this? It ain't far to his place."

"I was thinking of calling on him to-morrow."

"D'ye know the way to Goose Crick?"

"I'll find it, don't worry. Hassock will start me right."

"Sure he'll start you right, an' it's a straight road once you git started; an' you'll find the old man all ready to talk horse. I'll tell him ye're comin'."

Steve Dangler went away, puzzled, but still suspicious. Vane was not exactly what he had expected to find. The only thing in which the stranger had met expectations was the matter of lying. He had lied concerning his knowledge of the road to Goose Creek, but in everything else he had proved unexpected. His manner was not that of any enforcement officer known to or imagined by Steve. It was the manner of the best type of "sport" known to Steve, of the two-guides sportsman. And the talk about wanting to buy a horse! That was clever. He'd picked up the dope from Jard Hassock, of course—but it was smart. But it didn't fool Steve. If the stranger had wanted

to see old Luke's horses, why had he tried to sneak into the settlement in the middle of the night—unless he'd figured on stealing one? No, even Steve could not seriously suspect him of being a horse-thief. He was some sort of damn detective looking for something he knew they wouldn't show to him, that's what he was.

Steve went home and made his report and as many comments on the subject of the same as old Luke had patience to listen to. Then Steve was dismissed, Amos and Hen called in by the old man, and many methods of eliminating the dangerous stranger from the existing scheme of things on Goose Creek were discussed. Amos was a crafty plotter. He had a strong imagination of the crafty and destructive sort, and a genius for detail. No man had ever escaped from a plot of his planning except by chance.

Vane was at a loss to know what to do next. His curiosity concerning the Danglers of Goose Creek was now quite as keen as his distaste for them, and both his distaste and curiosity were keener than his original purpose in visiting Forkville. It was still his intention to obtain a young animal of the Willoughby Girl strain, a bay with white legs, for choice; but to deal these Danglers a blow of some sort seemed to him now a more worthy and more intriguing ambition. Something of the kind was due them. Something of the nature of a nasty set-back had been due them for years and years. He decided to have another session with Pete Sledge.

It was eleven o'clock before Jard left him. Jard had talked of Eclipse blood for two hours without a break, but he had not suggested a way of commencing negotiations with Luke Dangler for the purchase of a horse. Vane extinguished the lamp and replenished the fire upon Jard's departure. An hour passed, and he was about to venture forth and down the stairs and out of the house in search of Pete when he was startled by a sharp rap on one of his windows. He jumped to his feet and faced the window. On the instant it sounded again, like the impact of a sliver of ice or fragment of snow-crust on the thin glass. He jumped to the window and raised the sash, and was about to stoop and thrust out his head when something hit him smartly on the ribs and dropped to the floor. It was a small white handkerchief weighted and knotted into a ball. He undid the knots in a few seconds, and found inside a small stone and a folded scrap of paper.

> *Don't go to Goose Creek to-morrow or ever. Please go away. You are in great danger. I warn you in gratitude. Please destroy this and go away to-morrow morning.*

He read it, then stooped again and looked out and down from the window. In the vague starshine he could see nothing of the secretive messenger. He closed the window swiftly but silently, tossed the scrap of paper into the fire, pocketed the stone and little handkerchief, slipped into his outer coat, snatched up cap and mittens and left the room. He had been fully dressed, with his moccasins on and everything ready for a quick exit; and this fact was the very thing that upset the calculations of the thrower of the warning.

Vane made a clean getaway from the window of the kitchen, and overtook the running figure before him just short of the top of the hill. It was Joe Hinch, carrying her snowshoes under an arm. She halted and turned at the touch of his hand, breathing quickly. She glanced at him, then down, without a word.

"I hope I haven't frightened you," he said hurriedly. "But I had to know if it was you—or a trick. How did you come? How did you get away? Why are you going back?"

"It is not a trick," she replied. "You are in danger."

"Now? Immediate danger?"

"To-morrow—and after. If you go, or if you don't."

"Who came with you? And why did you come?"

"Nobody. I slipped out easily, and took a long way through the woods. And now I must hurry back. And you will promise to go away to-morrow. Please promise me that."

"But why do you go back to that place? You have a grandfather here, and plenty of friends."

"I'm as safe there as here. I'm not in any danger. You are in danger. You must go away. To-morrow! Promise me that—please!"

"But why? What are they afraid of? I came only to buy a horse."

"They don't believe that."

"What do they think I'm after?"

"I can't tell you. But don't you believe me? Don't you know that I am telling the truth—that you are in danger? Do you think I'd came all that way alone through the woods at night for—for fun?"

“I believe you, of course. But I think you must have an exaggerated idea of the danger.”

“Exaggerated! Do you think I’m a fool? You are in danger of—of—death!”

“Death? Then it is not for the first time; and why should it be the first time for me to run away?”

“You must go!”

“I’m sorry, but it can’t be done. Even if the danger is as actual as you say—and not for a moment do I doubt the sincerity of your belief in it—I can’t allow my plans to be altered by people of that—by a few suspicious countrymen.”

“They are—my people. Their leader—the oldest and worst of them—is my grandfather. I know them better than you do.”

“I’m sorry, really I am; and I think you are a brick for coming out to warn me. You have more than squared our little account, for what I did at the fire required very little effort, and no courage whatever. I promise not to venture alone into their headquarters to-morrow, but it is absolutely impossible for me to run away from them just because they happen to suspect me of being something I am not. If I were to do a thing like that, I shouldn’t be able to live with myself afterward.”

“You won’t go?”

“My dear girl, how can I go? My mission is peaceful and lawful. I’m not looking for trouble. I am sorry, but you can see how absolutely impossible it is for me to run away just to humor a gang of—a violent and suspicious old man and that ignorant young lout.”

And then he realized that she was weeping.

“Miss Hinch! Please—ah, you mustn’t, really! You are tired—the tramp through the woods. Come, be a good girl, let me take you to Miss Hassock, or to the McPhees. You have friends in this village—plenty of them, the entire population, I’m sure. Come, you need a good rest. I’m quite safe, and I’ll not make trouble. There’s really nothing to cry about. Come to Miss Hassock, there’s a good girl. Why should you go back to that place, anyway—against your guardian’s wishes?”

She shook her head. “I—have to—go—for the safety—of my—friends.”

“Then I shall go with you.”

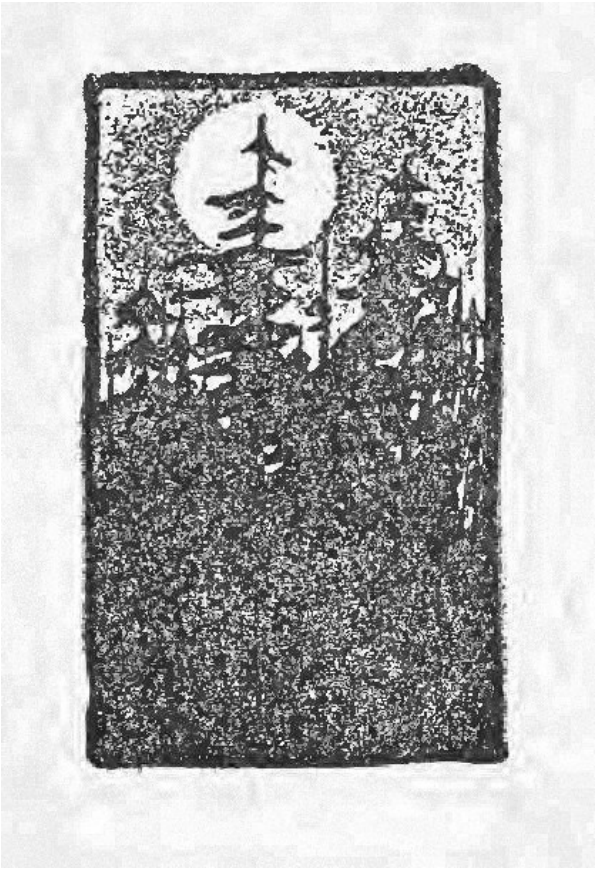
“No! No!”

“Only through the woods. Only to within sight of the house.”

“The road is guarded.”

“Yes, I know that. I’ll get my snowshoes. Half a minute. You wait here. I’ll be back in two ticks.”

He turned and ran. His rackets were in the woodshed; and he was soon back with them. But the young woman was not where he had left her. He went forward, studying the edges of the road. He turned into the Goose Creek road; and then it wasn’t long before he found where she had jumped off into a clump of brush. He tightened and tied the thongs of his snowshoes with eager fingers and followed eagerly on her tracks.



CHAPTER VII

THE KNOCKOUT

Vane came up with her within a mile of the jump-off—and this was closer than he had hoped for. She neither welcomed nor reproved him, but only remarked in a noncommittal voice that he had not been long. He passed ahead of her, to break trail, and saw that she was back-tracking on her outward course. He tramped in silence, glancing frequently over his shoulder. Presently he found himself hanging on his stride for her; and at last she called, "I must rest a minute."

He found her a seat among the raking boughs of a deep-drifted blow-down. Neither of them spoke during the brief rest; and in the forest gloom the face of each was no more than a blurred mask to the other's eyes. She soon stood up and moved on, and again he passed her and led the way. In places the gloom shut down in absolute dark, with the vague glimmer of rifts of faint starshine far behind and far ahead. It was in such a place that he became suddenly aware that she was no longer moving close after the dragging tails of his rackets. He halted and stood for a few seconds, listening. He moved back slowly; and soon he came upon her crouched, sobbing, in the snow.

"It is my foot, my ankle," she said in broken and contrite tones. "I fell and hurt it—before you overtook me."

He knelt before her. This was his fault. She had fallen and hurt herself in trying to escape from him. It would have been kinder of him to have minded his own business.

"And you've walked all this distance on it!" he exclaimed. "I am a fool! Which is it? Sprained, do you think, or only a bit of a twist? May I feel? Let me bandage it or something."

"The right," she said. "I don't think it's seriously injured—but it hurts like anything—and I have to get home before—dawn."

"Does that hurt?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I'm sorry. But it doesn't seem to be swollen. Slightly, perhaps. A strain—I think that's all. I'll tie it tight. I have a simply huge handkerchief here.

Just the thing. How does that feel?"

"Better—much better—thank you. I can go on now—slowly—a little way at a time."

"No, you can't. The weight of the snowshoe, the lift of it at every step, would play the mischief with it. I must take your snowshoes off and carry you."

"You must not! It would kill you."

"You are not heavy. And this is all my fault. You made this trip to warn me; and you hurt your ankle running away from me. All my fault—and I shall be glad to carry you, really."

She protested; but he went ahead gently but firmly, removed her snowshoes from her feet and hung them on her shoulder and then crouched and hoisted and jolted her into that ancient and practical position for carrying known as pig-a-back. Doubtless it is more romantic to carry a lady in distress in your arms, and more dignified to pull her along on a sled, and even trundling her in a wheelbarrow (wind and weather permitting) may seem a more conventional way to some people—but every woodsman and soldier knows that pig-a-back is the style when a job of this sort has to be done for its own sake. Take the weight, be it dead-weight or live-weight, on and above the shoulders. Keep under it. Don't let it get behind you, dragging your shoulders down and back and throwing your feet up and forward. This was old stuff to Vane—yes, and to the girl; so he hitched her as high as he could without the loss of a steadying back-handed hold on her, stooped forward slightly and went ahead at a fair pace.

He didn't talk; and evidently the young woman had nothing to say. After a silent mile he halted, and let his load slide gently to the snow at his heels. They rested side by side. He lit a cigarette.

"It's easy," he said. "We'll make it handily."

"You are very strong," she said. "And the stronger a man is, the kinder he should be. You are strong enough, and you should be kind enough, to let kindness overrule your pride."

"Pride? I don't know what you mean by that, upon my word!"

"You are not proud?"

"Certainly not. What of?"

"I'm glad. Then you'll go away to-morrow, back to New York."

“But I explained all that!”

“Nothing is keeping you here but your silly pride. You are too proud to allow people like the Danglers, or a little thing like a threat of death, to change your plans.”

“You are wrong. I don’t want to go away, that’s all. I want a horse, and I’m interested in—in the country. And I can’t believe that the Danglers would dare to go as far as that even if they were able.”

“They will think of a way—a safe way. I mean it. I beg you to go away to-morrow! Think of what life means to you—and those who love you! This isn’t a war. There would be nothing glorious in death here.”

“I believe you.”

“And think of your wife!”

“I haven’t any—but it would be rough on my mother, I’ll admit.”

“Rough on her? It would break her heart! And the woman you love—who loves you—who is waiting for you. Consider her feelings. Doesn’t her happiness mean anything to you? As much as your pride?”

Van scratched his chin.

“I believe there’s a great deal in what you say, but what about your ankle?”

“Please don’t be silly. I—this is serious—so serious that—I want to cry.”

“Not that, for heaven’s sake! I’ll be sensible. I’ll go away to-morrow. I’ll eat my pride and all that sort of thing and beat it.”

“Thank God!”

“Yes, I see that it is the best thing for me to do—from the point of view of the people who love me so distractedly. I’ll run away to-morrow—on one condition. You must promise to keep me in touch with your ankle.”

“That is—mean—unworthy of a—man—like you. Making fun. Cheating. I’m not—joking. I want to—save you—and you think—I’m a fool.”

“No, no! I’m the fool. I’m not joking. I’ll go away and save my life if you will promise to let me know about your ankle. How it’s recovering day by day and that sort of thing. That’s not asking a great deal—in return for my eating my pride and permitting you to save my life. Now I am serious. I mean that.”

“Will you give me your word of honor to go to-morrow if I promise to—to put your anxiety at rest about my ankle?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have my promise.”

“Good! Please accept my word of honor that I’ll skip out to-morrow. Now we had better be toddling on our way again. Climb on.”

“But this isn’t fair—making you carry me. No, it isn’t! It is cheating. I have your promise—so I’ll keep my promise now. I—my—there isn’t anything wrong with it.”

“With what? Your promise? Of course not. Mine is all right too.”

“I mean—I mean my ankle. There isn’t anything—the matter with my ankle. I was—only pretending.”

“Ah! Pretending? I see. At least that is to say I hope to get an eye on it in a minute. I seem to be unusually dull to-night—this morning. You didn’t hurt your ankle. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes. I didn’t hurt it. I didn’t even fall down.”

“It’s exceedingly amusing—as far as I can see. You got a free ride; and if you don’t mind, I don’t. But it seems hardly enough to be so amazingly clever and deep about. The ride is all you gained by it, so far as I can see.”

“And your promise.”

“But what had that to do with—well——”

“We must hurry.”

He fastened on her snowshoes and led the way. She kept up with him easily. He turned his head now and again, as if to speak, only to face front again in silence. At last she came up beside him and touched his elbow and asked if he were angry.

“No,” he answered. “I am doing my best, but I don’t believe you have done anything for me to be angry about.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t be. I played a trick on you—but it was for your own good.”

“To get me to make you a promise?”

“Yes.”

“So tricking me into toting you on my back was part of that scheme?”

“Yes. I—knew I had to—interest you in myself—so that you would pay attention to my arguments. I thought that the more trouble I was to you—well, I *had* to do something—to——”

“You did it. I am not angry, but pleased. Do you mind if I ask if you have always lived in the country around here?”

“I was away at school for a few years.”

She dropped behind and silence was resumed. It was maintained for nearly half an hour; and then she came abreast of him again and halted him with a hand on his arm.

“Here we are,” she whispered. “Just through there. Not thirty yards away. Good night. And you will go to-morrow. So it is good-by.”

He took both her mittened hands in his and stared hard at her upturned face, trying to find something there for the discernment of which the light was insufficient.

“Good night,” he said in guarded tones. “And good morning; and, as I must go away to-morrow, to-day, good-by.”

“Good-by.”

“But I shall soon be back—for that horse. I promised a horse of that strain—to a girl. That’s the only thing I’ve ever offered her that she has accepted—so I can’t fall down on that. But I’ll take precautions.”

“Please go, and stay away. They won’t sell you a horse. They will kill you. Good-by.”

“I’ll chance it—in the hope that you will save my life again.”

“But I won’t, if you do anything so crazy. Don’t be a fool!”

She snatched her hands out of his and turned and vanished in the blackness of crowded firs.

Vane looked straight up between the black spires of the forest and saw that the stars were misty. He saw this, but he gave no heed to it. He wasn’t worrying about the stars. He turned and stepped along on the track which Joe’s webs had already beaten twice and his once. It was deep enough to follow easily, heedlessly, despite the gloom. He felt exalted and exultant. Even his anxiety, which was entirely for the girl, thrilled him deliciously—such was his faith in himself, and his scorn of the Danglers. The thought of going away on the morrow did not depress him. He would soon be back.

In this high and somewhat muddled mood he might easily have passed an elephant in the blackness of the wood without sensing it. As it was, he passed nothing more alarming or unusual than poor Pete Sledge. Pete did nothing to attract the other's notice, and took to the shadows behind him with no more sound than the padded paws of a hunting lynx.

This was a little game that had grown dear to Pete's heart of late years. Natural talent and much practice had made him amazingly proficient at it. What he did not know of the bodily activities of Robert Vane and Joe Hinch during the past few hours was not much; and it may be that he suspected something of what was going on in their heads and hearts. He had wanted to chuckle, had been on the very verge of it, at the sight of the stranger carrying the artful young woman on his back—for he had known that there was nothing wrong with her ankle.

Vane had covered more than half of the homeward journey at a moderate rate of speed when he became conscious of the light touch of a snowflake on his face. He was not particularly interested, but for lack of something better to do he halted and looked straight up again. The high stars were veiled. Large, moist flakes fell slowly. He produced a cigarette and lit it, considering the effect of a heavy snowfall on his plans for the immediate future. The effect was nil, so far as he could see. Which shows how little he knew about his immediate future.

He resumed his journey at a slightly better pace, planning the morrow's departure to the nearest town and the best manner of his quickest possible return. He would take precautions of the Danglers, as he had promised, but he must avoid involving the law if he could think of a way. Why not bring a bodyguard back with him, and thus supported, beard the—! Hell! * * * He pitched forward at the blow, fumbling for an inner pocket even as he fell. But he hadn't a chance. He was jumped, pounded deep in the snow, bound at wrists and ankles, gagged and blindfolded. He was yanked out roughly and turned over; and that was all for a few minutes. He heard a shrill whistle from close at hand, and the softened answer; and then, for a little while, he was left undisturbed on his back. His nose and chin were exposed, and on these he felt the snowflakes falling faster and faster. He was slightly dizzy and slightly nauseated, but his mind was clear. His thick fur cap had saved him from a knockout. He was not in pain, though his discomfort was considerable; and he was angry enough to bite. The Danglers had him, he knew—and here was just and sufficient cause for rage. The Danglers had tricked him—and here was cause for shame. He had been guilty of military

error as old as warfare: he had underrated the enemy. He was a fool! No wonder the girl had been afraid for him.

Presently he felt a fumbling at the thongs of his snowshoes. The snowshoes were removed. He felt a pair of hands under his shoulders, another pair at his knees, and he was lifted and carried. He strained his ears to catch a voice, but in vain. He was roughly handled—bumped and dragged. It was quite evident to him that his captors were in a hurry to get him to some particular spot, but it seemed that they were utterly indifferent as to his condition upon arrival. They carried him feet first; and frequently the leader got completely away from the other and his head and shoulders were dropped with a smothering thump.

Brief rests were frequent. Where the underbrush was awkwardly dense, he was simply dragged along by the feet. Now and then he caught a whiff of strong tobacco smoke; and later he caught a whiff of ardent spirits. After many minutes of this, or perhaps an hour—for with so many bumps and thumps he found it useless to attempt the reckoning of the passage of time—and after a less brief halt than usual, his webs were replaced and his ankles were freed, and he was stood upon his feet. For a moment he contemplated the advisability of delivering a few blind kicks—but before he had arrived at a decision he was pushed from the rear and flanks. He staggered forward to save himself from falling on his face; and before that initial stagger was completed another well-timed and well-placed thrust sent him staggering again; and then another—and thus the journey was continued.

Vane found walking, even with tied hands and bandaged eyes, pleasanter than being carried like a sack of oats. But this did not improve his temper. The gag hurt him, and that nerve-racking experience of advancing blindly against underbrush without any protection for the face maddened him more and more desperately at every step. And to be forced to it! To be thumped and thrust along from behind! An unusually violent poke with something exceedingly hard—the butt of a rifle, most likely—put the last straw on the over-strained back of his discretion. He turned with his right leg drawn up and shot out his right foot with every ounce that was in him, snowshoe and all. The blind blow landed. A yowl went up and someone went down. He jumped and landed on his mark, stamped twice with all his weight, then turned and jumped away. He missed his objective, the other Dangler, by a few inches that time, and received a bang on the ear for his trouble. But he tried again—and again—and once more. He fought furiously. He was blindfolded and his hands were tied behind him, but he came within an ace

of victory. Despite the odds against him, four minutes transpired between his first jump and his last.

When he recovered consciousness he was again being carried and dragged. After a long time and many drops he was stood on his feet again and hustled along. After as much of that as he could stand up to, he fell and refused to arise. From that to the finish he was dragged, with an occasional lift over a blow-down or some other natural obstruction too high to take in an straight pull. He lost consciousness again before the end of that desperate and humiliating journey.

When he came to himself the second time it was to find the gag gone from his mouth, the bandage gone from his eyes, and his hands tied before him instead of behind him. He was on a floor of poles beneath a broken roof of poles and bark. Flashing snowflakes and a flood of desolate gray light fell through the hole in the roof. There was a hillock of snow beneath the rent, and there were little drifts of it elsewhere blown under and past the warped door. The door was shut; and nothing was to be seen of the men who had brought him here, and he could catch no sound of them from without, and there was no sign of them within except the tracks of rackets on the snowy floor. He wondered dully at the meaning of these things. He was dizzy, faint, and parched with thirst. He sat up painfully and rested his shoulders against the wall.

The door opened and a snow-whitened figure entered on snow-weighted rackets. He halted and peered around at the gloomy corners of the hut. It was Joe Hinch, but Vane didn't believe his eyes. So he closed his eyes and made an effort of will toward the clearing and steadying of his brain, and wrenched desperately at the cords with which his wrists were bound. The cords loosened easily. His right hand came free and then his left. But still he kept his eyes closed.

His idea was that what he had seen was either a vision created by his own battered head or a reality transformed by his aching eyes. If it were nothing but a vision, well and good. If it should prove to be a reality, then the chances were that it was one of his enemies, in which case he would sit perfectly motionless until the last moment, and then—well, his hands were free now! He didn't feel up to a fight—but, by the Lord, he would put up a fight! So he kept his eyes closed and his ears open.

He heard a low cry, a sob, a quick pad and clatter of rackets on the snow-streaked floor, a movement close beside him and quick, half-choked breathing. He felt a hand on his face, light and searching and tender. It was a

small hand. An arm slipped behind him and his head was drawn to the hollow of a snowy shoulder. But it was a soft shoulder. Then he opened his eyes. His eyes had been right the first time. He could not see her face now, for it was pressed against his cheek. He could see only a strand of dark, snow-powdered hair like a veil close across his vision. He no longer doubted.

She was praying—whispering a prayer against his cheek.

"Don't die," she whispered. "Dear God, don't let him die! Don't let him die!"

He trembled slightly. His arms were free though benumbed. He slipped one around her. He attempted to speak, but could not articulate a single word. He managed nothing better than a faint sigh. She drew gently back from him, still crouched and kneeling and not quite out of the embrace of his numbed arm, and looked into his face. She looked into his eyes. There were tears on her cheeks—tears and melted snowflakes.

"Thank God!" she whispered; and then she moved back from him and stood up and turned away. She raised both hands to her face.

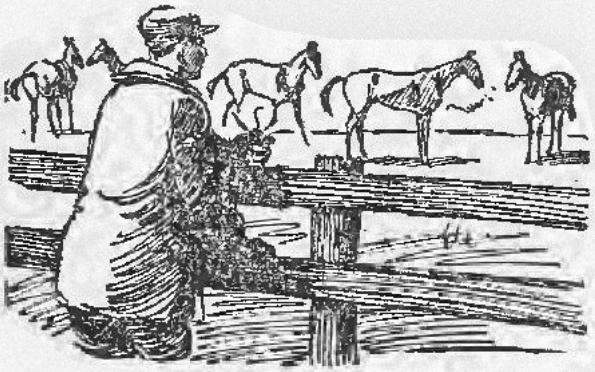
Vane moistened his dry lips.

"They bagged me," he said. "But what's their game? And where are we? And how did you get here?"

She came back to him and knelt again, smiling tremulously and dabbing at her eyes with wet fingers.

"I tried to overtake you," she said. "I didn't go home—only to the door—and then I turned back. I felt that—I had been—rude. And I was afraid. But I couldn't catch up to you before—you were attacked. They were carrying you when I got near. I followed them all the way, and hid until they went away from here. I knew they wouldn't kill you. I knew they would leave you to die—lost—helpless—starved. See these!"

She lifted his snowshoes from the floor for his inspection. The tough webbing was torn hopelessly from both frames.



CHAPTER VIII

THE RAID

The sun was up when Pete Sledge knocked on the kitchen door of Moosehead House. The door was locked. He knocked with his knuckles, then with a stick of stove-wood. It was Jard who at last unlocked and yanked open the door, but Miss Hassock wasn't far behind him.

"What the devil?" cried Jard; and then, in milder tones, "So it's yourself, Pete! Glad to see you, but what's your hurry so early in the mornin'?"

"They got 'im!" exclaimed Pete. "They've got the stranger—them Danglers. I seen it, so I come a-jumpin'."

"What's that? Who? What stranger? Come along in here an' set down an' tell it right."

"The sport. The lad with the trick pants. The feller who drug Joe Hinch out of bed the night of the fire. That's who. I seen it."

"Vane? Yer crazy! He's in bed in this house, or if he ain't he'd ought to be."

"You'd better go see," said Miss Hassock, turning to the stove and setting a match to the kindlings.

Jard ran. Pete sat down. Jard returned at top speed.

"He ain't there!" he cried. "What was that you said, Pete? When did it happen? What did they do with him?"

"They picked him up, but I didn't wait. Reckon they're totin' him back to Goose Crick this very minute. That's where they'll hide him—till they think up some slick way of losin' him in the woods."

"Say, Pete, you got this all straight now, have you? You ain't been dreamin' or nothin' like that?"

"Don't be a fool, Jard Hassock!" exclaimed Liza. "You got to do something now—simply got to—you and every man in this village. If you don't, there'll be murder done. Go tell the McPhees, and the Joneses and the Browns and the Wickets and the Haywards and the McKims and old man Pike—the whole bunch. Get your guns and pistols and light out for the Crick with a couple of teams quick's the Lord'll let you! But send Charlie

McPhee, or some other lad with a fast horse, to Jim Bell's to fetch him along too—and tell him to tell Jim to telephone over to Lover's Glen for the deputy-sheriff. I'll have coffee ready when you get back, Pete, you go too and help Jard stir 'em up. It's got to be done this time, Jard—done and done for good and all—so it's no use you scratchin' your nose about it."

"Reckon ye're right, Liza," admitted Jard reluctantly, "if Pete ain't mistaken. But durn that Vane! Out runnin' the woods all night, hey! Couldn't he wait? Couldn't he keep still till I'd thought out a way? Why the hell couldn't he've let sleepin' dogs lay?"

"Get out!" cried Liza. "Tell us that to-night. I'll load your gun while you're gone to scare up the men. Scare's right."

Half an hour later, Charlie McPhee set out in a red pung, behind a sorrel mare, for Jim Bell's place a few miles below the village. Mr. Bell was the nearest constable. Half an hour after that again, two sleds set out for the Dangler settlement on Goose Creek. Each sled was drawn by a pair of horses, and crowded with men armed with many kinds and patterns of explosive weapons in their pockets and their hands. Snow was falling thick and soft and steady. There was not a breath of wind. The bells had been removed from the harness of both teams. The men whispered together, and peered nervously ahead and around into the glimmering, blinding veils of the snow. They spoke with lowered voices before the top of the hill was reached, as if those dangerous Danglers could hear their usual conversational tone across a distance of seven miles. They were not keen on their errand, not even the most daring and independent of them—but Liza Hassock had driven them to it. Liza had talked of murder, disgrace, and cowardice. She had threatened the most reluctant with ridicule, the law and even physical violence. She had sneered and jeered.

"I know your reasons for hanging back," she had cried. "I know what's at the bottom of all this 'live and let live' slush you've been handing out. One's a reason of the heart—and that's saying you're afraid of the Danglers, that you're cowards! An t'other is a reason of the gullet. Oh, I know! Now I'll tell you men straight what's going to happen if you don't all crowd up to Goose Crick and save Mr. Vane. I'll go to Fredricton, and if that's not far enough I'll go to Ottawa, and I'll put such a crimp into that gin-mill up to Goose Crick that you'll all be back to drinking lemon extract again, including Deacon Wicket. That's what will happen! That will fix the moonshining Danglers, and then you'll have to go farther and pay more for your liquor. That'll fix 'em!—the whole b'ilin' of them; murderers and moonshiners and bootleggers and all!"

Liza had won. Even Deacon Wicket had joined the rescue party with a double-barrelled shotgun.

Jard Hassock drove the leading team. The big, mild horses jogged along without a suspicion of the significance of their errand. Perhaps they wondered mildly why so numerous a company rode each ample sled—but it isn't likely. Certain it is that they did not so much as guess that they were taking part in an historic event, lending their slow muscles and big feet to the breaking of a century-old tyranny, bumping forward through the obscuring snow to the tragedy that was to flash the modest names of Forkville and Goose Creek before the eyes of the world. Well, what they didn't know, or even suspect, didn't hurt them. Perhaps they missed the cheery jangle of their bells, and so sensed something unusual in their morning's task—but if so they showed no sign of it.

The leading team drew up at the nearest Dangler farmhouse and the second team passed on silently toward the second house. Jard opened the kitchen door, and beheld Jerry Dangler and his wife and children at table eating buckwheat pancakes.

"Seen anything of a stranger round here named Vane?" asked Jard.

"Nope," replied Jerry. "Never heard tell of him. What's he done?"

"He's got himself in a nasty mess, an' there's a bunch of us out a-lookin' for him. He's been hit on the head an' drug away somewheres. We got to hunt through your house an' barn, Jerry."

"Go to it. You won't find no stranger here. I'll show you round the barns."

"You set right there an' go ahead with your breakfast, Jerry. Sammy, you keep an eye on him, and see that he don't disturb himself. Hold your gun like this. That's right. But don't shoot onless you got to. Hunt around, boys. Four of you out to the barn. Upstairs, some of you."

Pete Sledge was not in evidence among the searchers. He had slipped from the sled and vanished into the murk of snowfall, all unnoticed, just before the house had been reached.

The first farmstead was searched without success. The men of the second team drew a blank at the second house. Jard and his crew drove on to the third house of the settlement. There he found a Dangler with two grownup sons and a hang-over; and but for his firmness there would have been a fight.

“We got you cold, boys,” said Jard. “We mean business. Set still an’ be good or there’ll maybe be a funeral you ain’t figgerin’ on.”

The retort of the householders sounded bad, but there was nothing else to it. Young McPhee and the constable drove up at about this time. The snow was still spinning down moist and thick through the windless air. The searchers went from house to house, appearing suddenly out of the blind gray and white weather at the very door, as unexpected as unwelcome. No warning passed ahead of them. Even old Luke Dangler was caught in his sock-feet, smoking beside the kitchen stove, all unbraced and unready. When he realized the nature of Jard’s visit and the futility of physical resistance, the swift darkening of his eyes and the graying pucker of his mouth were daunting things to behold. He denied all knowledge of the whereabouts or fate of the stranger. He denied it with curses which caused profound uneasiness to the spirits of several of Forkville’s substantial citizens. Doubts assailed them as to the soundness of Miss Hassock’s judgment and the wisdom of their course. They wondered if the life of any one stranger could possibly be worth the risk they were taking. They and their fathers had put up with the habits and customs of the Danglers of Goose Creek for over one hundred years. This attitude had acquired the dignity of a tradition. Was it wise to break with tradition now on the question of whether or not a stranger in trick pants and a fancy mackinaw were dead or alive?

Nothing of Vane was discovered on or about old Luke’s premises. Then the deputy sheriff of the county appeared suddenly in the midst of the searchers. He drew Jard Hassock aside and asked for a description of the missing stranger. Jard complied; and the official nodded his head alertly.

“That’s him, for sure,” he said. “The gent from Ottawa. I’ve been kinder expectin’ him down this way a long time. Big man. One of the biggest. We got to find him, Jard—an’ what he come lookin’ for, too. This is serious. Old Luke Dangler guessed right.”

“Not on your life he didn’t! I know Vane. He’s half New York an’ half London. He come to buy a horse of the old Eclipse strain of blood.”

“Say, you’re easy! You don’t know the big fellers, Jard. Maybe’s he’s from New York and London, but that don’t say he ain’t from Ottawa, too. This outfit’s been picked to be made a horrible example of, that’s what—so I reckon it’s about time for me to start in doin’ my duty.”

So the deputy sheriff, fired with professional zeal which burned all the more fiercely now for having so long lain dormant, searched for more than

the missing stranger, while the constable and the men of Forkville stood guard over the men of Goose Creek. The hog-house had only one chimney —but the deputy sheriff discovered a secret door, and a second lead running into that chimney, and a distillery at the foot of the second lead. Not content with that, he went ahead and found whisky from Quebec in the haymows.

Old Luke Dangler was handcuffed. His tough old heart came within an ace of clicking off with rage at the indignity of it. The firearms from all the houses of the settlement were confiscated. The men were counted and the tally was found to be two short. Henry Dangler and his son Steve were missing. Everyone denied all knowledge of their whereabouts. More than this, the young woman called Joe could not be found. When old Luke was questioned about her, he answered with inarticulate snarls of his gray lips and a flicker of derision and hate from his darkened eyes.

The leaders were in old Luke's house, and the crowd stood in front of it, with sentries posted all around it. Amos Dangler stood in the door, jeering. Snow continued to spin down from the low gray clouds.

"We got to find Vane," said Jard Hassock. "They've drug him back somewhere—to lose him. That's your old game, Amos. I don't give a damn about this rum, but we got to find the stranger."

"My game!" sneered Amos. "You say so now, do you—an' scart to open yer mouth for nigh onto twenty years!"

"And what about Joe," queried one of the McPhees. "I reckon she's the one we're worryin' about."

"She's run back to old Dave Hinch, that's what she's done," said Jard. "Nobody's tryin' to lose her. But it's good night to Vane if we don't find him before dark. We'd best scatter an' hunt the woods. I know their dirty, sneakin' tricks."

"What do you know, Jard Hassock?" asked Amos, stepping from the doorway and advancing slowly upon the proprietor of Moosehead House. "You've found yer tongue all of a suddent, hey? Well, it's a dirty tongue—an' I don't like it—an' I'm a-goin' to knock it down yer dirty throat, along with yer teeth."

"Now that's fightin' talk," said Jard.

"There'll be no fightin' here, Amos Dangler!" exclaimed the constable. "You git back there into the house, Amos—an' you keep quiet, Jard. The law'll do all the fightin' that's got to be done."

Men closed in upon the angry voices, hoping that Amos and Jard might clash with fists and teeth despite the professional attitude of the constable. They wanted to see a fight. They saw more than enough of that sort of thing to last them a lifetime.

Pete Sledge appeared from the obscurity of the weaving snow. He had been forgotten by all. He jumped in between Jard Hassock and Amos Dangler. He had an axe in his hands. Amos retreated a step.

"My God! Didn't I kill you once, long ago?" cried Pete.

"In yer eye," sneered Amos, fumbling at the front of his coat with an unmittened hand. "It's daytime, you poor nut! Run home to bed."

"But I killed you!"

"Maybe—in yer mind."

Pete's arms twitched even as Amos Dangler's right hand came away from the front of his coat. The axe flew even as the automatic pistol spat a red jab of flame. The axe struck and the pistol spat again in the same instant of time. Dangler staggered backward and screamed before he fell, but poor Pete Sledge dropped without a sound. That was the end of that old trouble—unless it has been continued elsewhere, beyond the field of vision of Forkville and Goose Creek.

CHAPTER IX

THE WAY OUT

Far away in the broken hut in the snow-blinded forest, Robert Vane gazed in perplexity at the useless webs which Joe held up for his inspection.

"How did I do that?" he asked. "I don't remember anything of that sort."

"You didn't do it," she answered. "It was done by the Danglers—my relatives."

"But I don't understand. And why did they leave me here—with the cord at my wrists so loose that I slipped my hands free? Why didn't they do me in for keeps, if they feel that way about me?"

The girl let her snowshoes fall with a clatter.

"They did for you," she said. "They knew nothing about me. When they tore the webbing they killed you as surely as if they had cut your throat—as far as they knew. You have no compass, no food, no matches, no blankets, no snowshoes—nothing. You are weak—for they have hurt you. You are lost—and the snow is deep and still falling. You are lost. They lost you."

"I see. You have saved my life."

"I know the way out; and I have matches, but nothing to eat—and nothing to mend your rackets with."

"How far is it?"

"About seven miles to the nearest clearing—by the right way. By any other way—hundreds of miles! But I know the right one."

"Seven miles. That's not far. Two hours—or so. When shall we start? But you must be tired out. Of course you are!"

"I don't believe I'd know the marks in this storm. It will thin up in a few hours, I think. Are you feeling better?"

"Right as rain," he said, scrambling to his feet. He staggered a step, stood swaying and propped an arm to the nearest wall for support. He misjudged the distance, or the length of his arm, and would have fallen but for her. She sprang to him, embraced him and eased him to the floor. "But still a trifle dizzy," he added.

She crouched beside him, with a shoulder to steady him, but with her face averted.

"Any chance of their returning to see how I am doing?" he asked.

She shook her head. "They are too clever for that," she replied. "They will go to the village, and then home. People will see them and talk to them. They have traveled away from here as fast as they could, and left everything to—to nature."

"But a man doesn't starve to death in a few hours, nor in a few days. Suppose I simply sat here until a search-party found me?"

"Alone? As they intended. Without fire? You would freeze to death before a search-party was thought of."

He felt in all his pockets. "That's right," he said. "All my matches are gone, and my pistol and ammunition—but they've left my cigarettes. Without a single match, confound them! But what if I had struck right out and happened on the right way? That would have upset their calculations, I imagine."

"The snow is deep; to your hips, in places—and deeper. Even if you happened on the right way, and happened to keep it in this storm—which could not be—you would have no chance. Weak, and without help, and without a fire to rest by! You could not travel half of seven miles. But I have matches; and I know the way. I can help you."

"I need help, heaven knows!" he said. "And I'm glad it is you."

After a silence of several seconds she replied, "I'm glad, too."

She left him, gathered some old boughs from a bunk, tore strips of bark from the logs of the wall and made a fire on the rough hearth. She tore poles from the fallen patch of roof, broke the smaller of them, and fed them to the fire. She helped him over to a corner near the hearth and gave him a match for his cigarette. She had plenty of matches, a large jack-knife and hairpins in her pockets.

"I can stand a lot of this," said Vane. "The men who thought they could kill me this way are fools."

Joe searched about the hut, found a rusty tin kettle at last and went out into the spinning snow. Vane felt a chill, whether physical or spiritual he did not know, the moment the warped door closed between them. He got to his feet, moved unsteadily and painfully to the door and pulled it open. He saw her through the veils of the snow descending the cleared slope before the hut

and watched the slender figure until it melted into a dark screen of alders. His legs and arms ached; his ribs and head were sore; and his throat ached and his lips were parched; but his heart was elated.

She returned with the kettle full of chips of ice which she had hacked from the surface of the brook with her knife. She melted this at the fire and cooled it in the heap of snow under the break in the roof. They drank it together, turn and turn about. Vane felt much better for it.

"It's queer to think that you wasted all that game with your ankle," he said. "All that effort to make me promise to run away—all that successful effort—thrown away!"

"And worse than thrown away," she answered. "If I hadn't done that perhaps you would not have been ambushed."

"I am glad you tricked me into carrying you on my back," he returned gravely. "I don't regret the ambush, the bump on the head, the thumps and kicks—anything. The fact is——"

"I wonder if you promised a horse to that young lady?" she interrupted.

"I did. How did you guess? And her brother bet a thousand dollars I wouldn't find anything of the blood of Eclipse in these woods. But all that doesn't matter. It all seems rather idiotic to me now. The real meaning of all this—of my coming to this country—is—well, I struck town just in time to pull you out of a fire, didn't? And I didn't even stop to take a look at what I had saved! Good Lord! And now you are saving my life; and even horses of the blood of Eclipse don't seem so important to me now. It can't be just chance that——"

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"No fear! I haven't forgotten a word you have said, nor a single——"

"But your mother—and the woman you promised the horse to!"

"I shall give her the horse, if I get it. But it doesn't matter much, either way."

"You asked her to be your wife."

"Twice, I believe—but she said she wouldn't."

"She wouldn't! Why?"

"Why should she? I'm poor."

“Poor? And yet you wagered one thousand dollars that you’d find a horse of a certain strain of blood up here in these woods!”

“A sporting bet; and I have a thousand.”

“But you love her.”

“You are wrong. I thought I did, once or twice—or thought I thought I did. It was all a matter of thinking, as I see it now. But it doesn’t matter. Do you—are you—do you love someone?”

“What?”

“Do you love somebody?”

“I think—yes.”

“Think? Don’t you know?”

“Yes—I know.”

“Are you happy about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it wise?”

“I—I don’t think so. I’m sure it is not.”

“Good God! That fellow who came to see me! That—that——”

“What do you mean?”

“Steve Dangler.”

“Do you mean that? Do you think I love Steve Dangler?”

“But haven’t you just said so?”

She shook her head and turned her face away.

“Forgive me, please,” he whispered. “It’s your duty to forgive me, don’t you know—for I saved your life and you are saving mine. Joe, please look at me. It is your own fault that I—well, why did you pretend to hurt your ankle? Is it fair to walk miles and miles after a man in the woods at night, to save his life, and then to be angry with him for—for telling you the truth?”

“What truth have you told me?” she asked unsteadily, still with averted face.

“You are the dearest person in the world! You are the——”

She got swiftly and lightly to her feet, crossed to the door and opened it, then stood looking out. Vane sighed. Presently the girl turned, but she did not look at him.

"It is thinning," she said. "I think we had better make a start now. It is clear enough for me to see the landmarks."

She fastened on her rackets, and picked up the rusty kettle. Vane buttoned his outer coat, drew on his mittens, pulled his cap down about his ears and hoisted himself to his feet. "I'm ready," he said.

The girl stepped out into the thinning snowfall, glanced back, glanced around, then moved off slowly. Vane followed. He stepped from the threshold and sank to his knees. His next step sank deeper. He plunged ahead, conscious of a protest from every bone in his body. But that did not dismay him. He had lifted his feet before against protests. His head felt clear now, and that was a great thing; and his heart felt like a strong engine in perfect running order. As for his bones, he was sure that none of them was broken. So he plowed forward in the tracks of the girl's narrow webs.

They descended the little clearing, and entered the screen of alders along the brook. The snow took him to the hips there, and deeper. He plunged, stuck, plunged again and plowed through. The girl turned and watched his efforts for a few seconds with veiled eyes, then turned to her front again, and passed across the brook. Vane staggered in the shallower snow of the brook, fell to his hands and knees and came up again in a flash. He set his teeth and struggled forward. Halfway up the opposite bank he stuck fast. He struggled without a word. It was no use; so he rested, without a word. Joe came back to him and, without looking at him, took his hands and pulled him forward. He seconded her efforts ably, and was soon through that drift. She withdrew one hand from his grasp, but he kept hold of the other.

"I was afraid you had changed your mind," he said.

"So I have," she answered coolly.

"Surely not! You came back and pulled me out. You still mean to save my life, evidently."

"Oh, that! Yes, I'll save your life"—and she snatched her hand away.

Vane followed again. His heart didn't feel so high now. In fact, it felt far worse than his knees and shoulders and ribs. He thought back and wondered at his dear companion of the hut as if at some beautiful experience of his childhood. He made one hundred yards, two hundred, two-fifty, before

striking another drift. He struggled with the drift in a desperate silence. He got halfway through. She turned and came back to him.

"I'm all right," he said. "With you in two ticks."

She searched for his hands, but his were not extended in response. She came closer and pulled at his shoulders.

"I can manage it, thanks all the same," he said.

"But you know you can't!" she cried.

He squirmed free of her hands and clear of the drift, leaving her behind him. But her tracks were still in front for a distance of twenty yards or more; so he plowed his way onward without a backward glance. She ran past him and again led the way. He followed—but he fell at last, all in. He felt her arms, her hands. She was trying to raise him from the smothering snow. He pulled himself to his knees.

"I can do it—thanks," he said. "I must rest—a minute."

He didn't look at her.

"Now take my hands," she said, after a few minutes of silence and inaction.

"I can manage it, thanks all the same," he said.

"But you can't! You must let me help you!"

"No, thanks."

"But—what else can you do?"

"The other thing—whatever it is."

"Don't be a fool!"

"Why not?"

"Then I shall light a fire."

"I'm warm enough, thank you, but if you'll give me a few of your matches I'll be tremendously obliged."

She gave him matches without a glance, and then went away. He lit a cigarette. Presently she reappeared, carrying bark and dry brush. She dug a hole in the snow and lit a fire at the bottom of it. Using a racket for a shovel, she enlarged the hole around the fire into a considerable hollow.

“It is turning colder,” she said. “You must come in here until you are rested.”

He obeyed slowly, painfully. She placed a few green fir boughs for him to sit on, and a few beside him for herself.

“It has almost stopped snowing,” she said. “If a wind comes up it will drift frightfully, and that will be worse than the snowfall.”

“How far have we come?” he asked.

“Nearly a mile,” she answered.

“I wish you would go on alone,” he said. “Without me you’d do it before the wind rises; and then, if you should happen to see Jard Hassock or someone who wouldn’t mind coming back for me, he’d find me waiting right here—if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“Trouble!” she cried, turning a stricken, outraged look at him; and then she hid her face in her hands and shook with sobs.

He slipped an arm around her.

“Why did you turn on me?” he asked. “In the hut you were—very kind. Why did you change—and treat me like a dog?”

She continued to hide her face and sob. His arm tightened.

“I said you were the dearest person in the world,” he continued. “You are—to me. You are the dearest person in the world.”

“You—have no right—to say that.”

“Then whoever has a right to stop me had better make haste. I love you, Joe! Make the worst of that. I love you! Now run away and leave me sticking here in the snow.”

“But—the woman who sent you—after a horse?”

“Bless her for that! She was kinder to me than she intended to be. Look at me, Joe.”

She looked at him.

CHAPTER X

DEEP TRAILS

They put a mile and a half between that fire and the next. Vane was no longer weakening. He was strengthening in heart, muscles and spirit gradually but steadily, despite the drag of the snow on his legs and a decided sense of neglect under his belt. He was working back to the pink of condition, throwing off at every forward step something of the effects of his difficult journey with the Danglers. He was recovering by those very efforts which his enemies had reckoned on to work his undoing. But the young woman was tiring. It was Vane who gathered fuel and cleared away the snow and built the third fire. They rested there for twenty minutes, seated close together. She snuggled her head against his shoulder and slept a little.

The snowfall had ceased by that time, the close gray blanket of cloud had thinned everywhere, had been lifted from the horizon at one corner, and now a desolate and subdued illumination seeped across the white and black world. The air, still motionless, was now dry and bitterly cold.

During the third stage of their homeward journey, Joe dragged her snowshoes heavily, and her pulls on Vane's hands became feebler at every drift. She was sleepy, bone-tired and weak with hunger. Backwoods girl though she was, she was not seasoned to hardship as was her companion. But she continued to recognize the landmarks of the right way.

Their halts and little fires fell more and more frequently and closer and closer together. At last a bitter lash of wind struck and sent a thin wisp of snow glinting and running like spray. They came upon a narrow wood road well beaten by hoofs and bob-sled shoes beneath the four-inch skim of new snow.

"Which way?" asked Vane.

She pointed. "Straight to Larry Dent's place," she said.

Then he removed her webs, crouched and hitched her up on his back. She made no protest. "This is how I save your life," she said, and instantly closed her eyes in sleep. Her arms were about his neck. They clung tight even in her sleep. Her cheek was against his ear. He staggered several times, but he hadn't far to go. As he reached the kitchen door—the only door—of Larry Dent's little gray habitation, an icy wind swooped down from the

shuddering treetops and filled the whole world with a white suffocation of snow. He pushed open the door, staggered across the threshold, and stumbled to his knees at the large feet of the dumbfounded Mrs. Dent, with his precious burden still secure and asleep on his back.

"See what's blew in," said Larry, who was seated beside the stove smoking his pipe. "Shet the door," he added.

Joe awoke and slipped from Vane's shoulders. Vane remained on hands and knees, breathing deep. Mrs. Dent pulled herself together, went over, and shut the door against the flying drift. Larry shook the ashes from his pipe, and said. "Glad to see you, Miss Hinch; an' also yer friend—or is he a hoss?"

Then Joe began to laugh and cry; and, still laughing and crying, she ran to Vane and helped him into a rocking chair, and kissed him again and again right there in front of the Dents.

Having left the stranger in the hut with the broken roof, bruised and unconscious and fatigued, without food or water or blankets or matches or snowshoes, in complete ignorance of the one right way of a hundred wrong ones of escape from that place, Henry Dangler and his big son Steve made straight for Forkville. The snow blotted out their tracks behind them. They visited half a dozen places in the village, including two stores, the forge and the hotel, and were puzzled to encounter only women and children. They asked where the men had gone to, and were puzzled by the answers of the women and children.

"There's somethin' wrong," said Hen.

"It sure looks like it," agreed Steve. "That dang old Hassock woman had a mean slant to her eye."

They headed for the settlement on Goose Creek with a growing uneasiness in their tough breasts. They took the road, for it was the shortest way. The new snow had filled up the tracks of the sleds and also of the pung in which young McPhee had brought the constable. They hadn't gone far before they were startled by a jangle of silvery bells close behind them, sounding suddenly out of the muffling now. They leapt aside into the underbrush and crouched and turned. They saw a large man, white as wool, slip by in a pung behind a long-gaited nag. He was there and past in a dozen seconds. He had sat hunched forward as if bowed by the weight of snow on him. He had not looked to the right or the left.

"The deputy sheriff," whispered Henry to his son.

“Hell!” whispered Steve.

“Guess we were too late.”

“Guess so. What’ll we do now?”

“Reckon I’ll go along an’ see what’s happened. Maybe the old man will trick ’em yet.”

“You best come back with me, pa. I jist thought of somethin’ that’ll maybe work out all right.”

“Back where to? What you thought of, Steve?”

“Back to where we left that feller, an’ save his blasted life! He ain’t seen us, nor heard our voices. He don’t know who beaned ’im and drug ’im around. Let’s go back an’ save his damn life and git in right with him.”

“No use, Steve! He’d be lost an’ froze dead before we could git there—even if we could find him. He’s the kind will bust right out of the hut the minute he gits his wits back—right out into the storm on his busted rackets—an’ git to runnin’ around in a circle inside ten minutes. That’s his kind. Mind how he jumped us, an’ him tied an’ blindfolded? A fightin’ fool! When he sticks in a drift he’ll tear the woods to pieces—an’ himself. We’d be too late, Steve. Reckon we best forgit all about that business. Reckon we’re in for trouble enough without goin’ back an’ foolin’ around that section of the woods.”

“I guess he won’t—I guess he’s tougher’n you figger on. I’m goin’ back, anyhow.”

So Steve headed back for the hut with the broken roof by the shortest way through the blinding curtains of moist snow. Steve was a smart woodsman under normal conditions—but now the conditions were not normal. Never before had he traveled far in so thick a fall of snow. Never before had he undertaken a journey alone with panic in his heart and doubt in his mind. He had gone a mile before being conscious of the panic and the doubt. After that, they grew with devilish rapidity.

Steve didn’t find the hut wherein he and his father had left the stranger. He didn’t come within miles of it. At last the snow ceased to fall; and soon after that—or was it an hour after?—he came upon a hole in the snow and the ashes and black sticks of a spent fire in the bottom of the hole. The ashes were still warm. These things puzzled and frightened him. He gave up all thought of finding the hut. He walked for a long time, walked meaningless

miles, beneath a clearing sky, looking for familiar landmarks. Suddenly a bitter wind swooped down and filled earth and sky with flying snow.

Mrs. Dent put Joe to bed. The girl fell into a deep sleep—but she woke up a little later for long enough to drink and eat from a bountiful tray and answer a few of Mrs. Dent's eager and illuminating questions. Robert Vane took a few snatches of sleep in the rocking chair, and talked and smoked and drank tea between naps. He answered questions as they came, without thought or care. He felt fine. He loved the whole world, but this part of it more than the rest of it. And when supper was ready he pulled his chair up to the table, and drank coffee as if he had never heard of tea, and ate buckwheat pancakes and fried pork and hot biscuits and doughtnuts and Washington pie. There was nothing the matter with Robert Vane. Everything was right with him.

The wind swished around the corners of the little house, harsh and heavy with its burdens of dry snow. It slashed the roof and lashed the blinded windows and shouldered the door. It whistled in the chimney and under the eaves; and from the surrounding forest came the muffled roar of it like surf along a reef.

"Hark!" exclaimed Mrs. Dent. "What was that?"

"The wind," said Larry. "Did you expect a brass band?"

The old dog got onto his feet and cocked an ear.

"Rover heard it. There it is again! Hark! Like someone yellin'."

Larry went to the door and pulled it open. Wind and snow leapt in, the fire roared in the stove, the flame of the lamp jumped high and vanished and the old dog cowered back under the table and howled.

"Shut that door!" screamed Mrs. Dent; and Larry shut it.

Vane struck a match, and lit the lamp.

"I didn't hear anything but the wind," he said.

"I guess that's what it was, all right—but it sure did sound like someone hollerin', once or twice," said the woman.

CHAPTER XI

THE PURCHASE

The luck of the Danglers went wrong all at once. They got what was due them and overdue them suddenly and swiftly, no mistake about that! Old Luke and two others were caught in the coils of the law with enough loops over them to hold them for years, and the still and the stock were confiscated. Old Luke had money, but it availed him nothing now. And Amos was dead—and none the less so because poor Pete Sledge's queer life had also suffered a violent and sudden conclusion. And young Steve Dangler was missing. Steve had been last seen by his father, on the day of the raid, on the road between Forkville and Goose Creek. Days passed without further sign of him or any word of him. Even Miss Hassock was sorry for the Danglers. Though she believed that nothing was too bad for them, she felt that this deluge of disaster might better have been thinned over a period of several years, thus offering opportunities for remorse and perhaps for reform.

Robert Vane, the engine which had been selected by fate for the undoing of the Danglers, did not permit pity for the men who had plotted his death to halt his activities. The obstacles to his inspection of old Luke's stables having been removed with the removal of the old breeder, Vane went ahead in that matter, advised by Jard. They did business with an elderly spinster, a daughter of Luke's, who had the old ruffian's power-of-attorney, but none of his pride in, and jealousy of, the horses of the ancient strain. They found several bays with white legs among the fast ones, and selected a colt going on three, after a searching examination. The price was four hundred dollars, which Vane paid with banknotes.

"An' what about the pedigree?" asked Jard. "The old man kept a stud-book, for I've seen it."

"He took it away with him," said Miss Dangler. "If you want that colt's pedigree you gotter go to jail for it." She scowled at Vane defiantly, then turned suddenly and burst into tears.

Vane was sorry for her, but he couldn't think of a word of comfort to say to her. He was embarrassed. He looked to Jard for help.

"Now don't take on about that," said Jard in a soothing voice. "There's worse places than jail, Miss Nancy, an' there's been better men in jail than

Luke Dangler."

For some reason which was not clear to Vane, these words quieted the woman. She dried her eyes with the back of a large hand.

"I reckon ye're right, Jard Hassock," she said.

"If the colt turns out half as well as I expect him to, he's worth more than four hundred," said Vane; and, before Jard could stop his hand, he slipped another bill to her.

"Maybe he'll show you the book," she said, yet more softened. "But what's the use of a pedigree, young man? Why d'you want somethin' with a colt you don't ask for with a human? They tell me you be lookin' to marry Joe Hinch—my own niece, an' own blood granddaughter to old Luke Dangler an' old Dave Hinch! Now what kinder pedigree d'ye call that, mister?"

"She hasn't asked for mine, and I don't give a damn if all her grandparents are devils!" exclaimed Vane. "I know her—and she's what I want!"

Miss Dangler smiled for the first time. "I reckon ye're right," she said.

On the day of the great adventure in the snowstorm, Joe had promised to marry Robert Vane in two weeks' time.

Joe lived at the McPhees now, with her Grandfather Hinch; and Vane, still the occupant of the state chamber of Moosehead House, spent charmed hours of every day and evening with her. She had dropped the last shred of doubt of his sincerity during the last few hours of their battle toward Larry Dent's sheltering roof. They argued sometimes as to which had saved the other's life that day, only to agree that neither could have won through alive without the heroic devotion of the other. The days and nights slipped along like enchantment toward the great day. Vane lived in a world as new as dawn to him, a world which he had sometimes in the past vaguely suspected and vaguely longed for, a world unlike anything he had ever known.

One midnight, having returned from the McPhees' at ten o'clock and yarned with Jard for an hour and then smoked alone by his fire for another hour, Vane was startled from his reveries by the slow and silent opening of his door. He got lightly to his feet. A man entered, and cautiously shut the door. It was an old man, bent a trifle at knees and neck, broad-shouldered and white-bearded, wearing an old felt hat pulled low over the forehead. He was a stranger to Vane. He laid a finger on his lip and advanced.

“What do you want?” asked Vane. “And who are you?”

“Not so loud!” cautioned the other in a horse whisper. “I ain’t come for any harm—but there’s no call to wake up Liza Hassock. ’Scuse me if I set down. I’m Luke Dangler.”

Vane pointed him to a chair, and resumed his own seat.

“I thought you were in jail in Fredericton,” he said, in guarded tones.

“So I was, but I got out an’ run for it. I been home to Goose Crick. Now look-a-here, mister, was one of my horses what you come onto this country after? Tell me that now, straight!”

“I came to try to buy a horse of that strain you breed.”

“What d’you know about that strain?”

“Plenty. I know all about Willoughby Girl, that English mare that was stolen from an Englishman ninety-nine years ago. She was a granddaughter of Eclipse.”

“Was she now? Where’d you l’arn all that?”

“I learned all that from my father, when I was a small boy. I’m the grandson of the man who brought Willoughby Girl to this country, and lost her by theft. He hunted for her over half the world—almost everywhere but on Goose Creek.”

“Sufferin’ cats! An’ you come lookin’ for a bit of the old strain of blood! Why the hell didn’t you say so first off? If you’d told me who you was I’d believed you an’ sold you a horse. But you be from the States, an’ the gent who owned the English mare was an Englishman! My pa told me so many’s the time.”

“It was your mistake—all your own fault! As to my grandfather being an Englishman—why not? We are all Americans now.”

“Hell! Maybe a Dangler done yer gran’pa a dirty turn a hundred years ago, but you’ve squared that account with enough left over and to spare to settle for twenty stolen mares. There’s Amos dead—an’ where’s young Steve? Here’s me in jail—or leastwise had oughter be—an’ penitentiary awaitin’ me; an’ the same for Ned an’ Benjamin an’ maybe for two-three more. An’ there’s the business shot to hell! An’ all because you come onto this country to buy a horse, an’ didn’t have courage enough to come an’ tell me the truth!”

"If it amuses you to say so, go ahead. It was my fault that two of your dirty cowards ambushed me and knocked me senseless a couple of times, and left me to die in the woods, I suppose? Don't be a fool!"

"Sure it was yer fault! If you hadn't been drug off, that damn saphead Jard Hassock wouldn't have raised the village ag'in us, an' the deputy sheriff—damn his eyes!—wouldn't have spied out the still an' what not, an' Amos would be alive now, an' so would young Steve, an' I'd be settin' safe in my own house instead of here tryin' to make a deal."

"A deal? What's the idea?"

"Nancy says you want my pedigree book. All right—an' I want some money. She give me a couple hundreds of what you paid her for the colt—an' a mean price that was paid, mister! I need moren't two hundred for to make a gitaway, but I can't touch a doller of all my money, for it's in the bank down to Frederickton, an' that's where they cal'late I'm in jail at. I'll give you the pedigree book for five hundred dollars. You couldn't git it for thousands, if it wasn't that the police is after me to put me back in jail, an' I need the money the worst way."

"Dangler, you are hard-boiled. And you're a fool! Why do you imagine for a moment that I'll supply you with money to escape with? Anything the law may hand to you will be less than you deserve. If you were to receive your deserts you'd be hanged for a murderer. Hasn't it occurred to you that I'm much more likely to hand you back to the police than to buy your stud-book?"

The old man smiled. "That would be a hell of a way to treat Joe's gran'pa!" he said. "Wouldn't it read rotten in the newspapers? I could tell them reporter lads quite a lot about pedigrees they don't know yet, 'Robert Vane, New York sport, weds the great-granddaughter of the thief who stole a horse from his gran'pa. Mr. Vane of New York weds Miss Hinch of Goose Crick. The bride's gran'pa an' uncles wasn't to the weddin', bein' in jail for moonshinin' an' bootleggin' an' murder.' Say, wouldn't it read great in the newspapers?"

"Go to it, Dangler! You haven't got me right."

The old man eyed him keenly, then produced a notebook bound in oilcloth from an inner pocket. He handed it to Vane. "There's the record back to the English mare of every foal an' filly me an' my pa ever bred of that old strain of blood."

Vane glanced through the book, and saw that this was probably so.

“It’s yer own,” said Luke Dangler. “But I tell you ag’in you give Nancy a mean price for the bay colt. Do I go back to jail, or don’t I?”

“You may go to hell, for all I care,” replied Vane, calmly.

“Thanky, gran’son-in-law. Well, I’ll be startin’.”

“One moment.” Vane dug into an inner pocket, fingered crisp papers and passed four hundred dollars to the old man.

“I think the colt is worth every cent of it,” he said. “You know your way out. Good morning.”

“Say! You’re a real sport! Thank God you didn’t git lost in the woods that day? Shake on it.”

Old Luke Dangler extended his hand. Vane overlooked it.

“Shut the window after you,” said Vane.

So the old rogue went. There was nothing else for him to do.

CHAPTER XII

NO CHANCES

A bunch of belated letters arrived next morning for Vane. They had been hung up at the little town on the big river, where the postmaster had mislaid the address for forwarding which Vane had left with him. Three letters were from his mother, three from the lady whose indifference to and skepticism concerning the backwoods descendants of Willoughby Girl had stung him into making the journey to Forkville—and who had never before addressed so much as a scratch of a pen to him—and several from several firms of solicitors and attorneys. He read them all before he went to see Joe. He found Joe waiting for him, all ready for the morning walk.

"Let's go out the Glen Road this morning," she suggested.

"No, I think we had better get married this morning," he said gravely.

"But that's for Thursday—day after to-morrow. Had you forgotten? What's the matter, Rob?"

"I do believe I'm afraid. I got some letters to-day—and rather startling news. My uncle and cousin are dead—killed in a railway accident. It has put my wind up, I must admit. And when I think of what you have gone through even since I came to this place—that fire, and the night and day in the woods—without a scratch, I'm afraid our luck may change any minute now. Why not to-day instead of Thursday—and take no chances?"

"You afraid, Robert? No, it is only the shock of the bad news. We have nothing to fear. Were you very fond of your uncle and cousin?"

"But life's a chancy thing. Yes, I liked them. They were good fellows—both old soldiers and all that sort of thing—and gone like that, like nothing! Why wait until the day after to-morrow, dear? Why drive my luck? We'll catch the parson at home, and I have the license in my pocket."

"Are you serious, dear?"

"Dead serious. I'm afraid to take a chance—for the first time in my life. I never realized before what a risky thing this is—this being happy. My cousin was to be married, you know. They were on their way to his wedding."

The girl's eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she cried. And then, “All right, I’m ready,” she whispered.

They returned to the McPhees’ house three hours later, man and wife. They found the McPhees full of excitement.

“The deputy sheriff jist drove through here with old Luke Dangler,” said Tom McPhee to Vane. “The old lad bust out of jail; an’ the deputy caught him up on the Glen Road, layin’ for someone with a gun. He’s cracked. I reckon what done it was the sight of Amos stoppin’ Pete Sledge’s axe with his face that day. They won’t put him back into jail anyhow, the deputy says. It’s the lunatic asylum for him.”

“Who was he gunning for on the Glen Road?” asked Vane.

“That’s what the deputy couldn’t make out. The old lad was cussin’ about some feller who’d busted up the whole works jist because he didn’t have courage enough to tell who he was an’ what he wanted.”

“He has no right to feel that way about it,” returned Vane gravely. “It was coming to him.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Green Timber Thoroughbreds* by Theodore Goodridge Roberts]