

THE STRANGER

The Effect of an Old Song on a Man's Spirit of Revenge

By LLOYD ROBERTS

THREE men dropped from an empty box-car as the morning freight turned its back on Cross Creek settlement. Two of them immediately slunk into the encroaching underbrush, while the third, a tall, angular man with shifty eyes, ambled lazily toward the saw-mill on the lip of the bank. A freckle-faced lad, who was stacking the freshly-cut boards before the door, paused to wipe his brow as the stranger approached.

"Ain't the drive in yet?" inquired the latter, sharply.

"Most of it. The last o' the cut will be in the booms erlong erbout dark, I guess. Lookin' for someone?"

"You bet I am!"

The fierce tone in which this was uttered stirred the youngster's curiosity. What interest could this tough-looking character have in the return of the loggers? If he were a friend or relative of one of them it was strange he hadn't heard of his coming.

"Maybe you're a stranger hereabouts?" he suggested.

"Maybe I am," was the unsatisfactory retort as the other walked off.

All day the mill-hands saw the tramp—as they quite agreed he was—pottering about the saw-dust piles, the spurting dam and the crowding logs above it. Once he ventured out on the floating timbers and the foreman yelled for him to "git back out of that," but the way he kept his footing and cleared the gaps implied a knowledge of spiked boots and pike-poles that caused the natives to wonder. When the whistle blew for the mid-day meal he presented his sinister face at the cook-house door and accepted the cook's invitation to dinner in a surly, matter-of-course manner that did not include thanks, nor afterwards encourage questioning. During the afternoon his eagerness or impatience seemed to increase, and when the men finally knocked off work for the day and scattered to their distant homes he was still haunting the dump and the board-piles with aimless persistence.

The shrieks of the tortured saws had long been stilled; the new moon was glimmering palely through the budding poplars and birches, when McKnight's loggers finally came slouching up from the dam for their last meal of the drive. By the smoky glare of the lamps they might have been a crew of pirates ashore for a spree. Few chins had felt the razor for a month; their shapeless black hats were tilted at rakish angles; their trousers were sawn off at the knee or stuffed into their great calked boots, and more than one wore a gaudy bandana about his tanned neck. Shouting uproarious greetings to the fat-faced cook, they crashed their peavies and pike-poles upon the floor and tumbled onto the benches that lined the long deal tables. Hunger is never kept in suspense in the lumber-camps, and the steam was already rising from hills of potatoes and pork, flats of Johnny-cake and lakes of black coffee. There commenced a clattering din of steel on tinware and conversation was confined to such gruff commands as chuck the bread, Sam—rush the sow this way, Bobby—and don't hog all the beans, yer dern alligator.

After ten minutes of strenuous exertion, however, forks and jaws began to ease their pace and brains to stray from mugs and platters to more trivial objects, including the stranger hunched on a biscuit-box against the farther wall.

"Who's yer sporty acquaintance, Bobby?" grinned Reddy Jones.

"He don't belong to me. Blew in on the mornin' freight an' has been snookin' 'round here ever since. The mill fellers said he was waitin' for someone on the drive."

"Here we be then. Ask him what he wants."

"No, thank yer. Ask him yerself if yer so mighty curious. He ain't been exactly sociable like an' he can go ter blazes fer all I care."

"Come now, Bobby, is that the way for a fine, self-respectin' hash-slinger ter talk? I'll tell yer ma if yer ain't careful," and Sam Sloat raised a chiding fork capped with a hunk of potato.

"We'll say nothin' erbout it, though, if yer'll un-

hitch your old fog-horn and give us a little music 'fore we bust up," promised Reddy.

"I don't care, seein' yer goin' away for good. What'll it be?"

"Something lively."

"Bobby's phonograph was the pride of his heart. It was supposed to be his one line of dissipation—for he neither smoked, chewed, drank nor fell in love—and indulged in it at every opportunity and on all occasions. Presently the feet of the loggers began to mark time to a rollicking backwoods chantey as a fiddle and a metallic voice struck up with:

"Jack has got a scarlet rag strung around his hat. Bill has lost his dollar watch in the Devil's Vat. Squint-eye Murphy bust the jam—jumpin' like a cat. Sunday 'll see us eatin' off a table."

The audience joined in the chorus with a roar and a thumping of toes that shook the tins and sent the dust into the air to mingle with the smoke. "Birl a log, birl a log, birl a log, boys. Ram a log, cram a log, slam a log, boys."



Drawn by George Butlet.

He was upon them before they could fire again.

There's lots of time for loafin' when the saws begin their noise,

And the g'als come troopin' down beside the mill."

The stranger leaned back with folded arms and half-closed eyes. All day the sights, sounds and smells of a past existence had been struggling to awaken some response in his inflexible soul—blotting out the unclean memories of his exile and telescoping time until it seemed as though he had never been absent from the settlements. And now he was back with his old comrades of woods and rivers—Reddy Jones, Polite Williams, Big John Nevers and many more—including his boyhood chum, Hugh McKnight.

But things had changed considerably in five years. From the most popular man on the river he had become an outcast of civilization, hounded by the law, unrecognizable to his old associates and the sworn enemy of the burly woodsman opposite him who so complacently sucked on his black cigar.

Well, he was glad that McKnight appeared so

prosperous and content. Evidently life meant something worth while to him—something worth clinging to to the last—just as his would have been if Madge had forgiven. Robbing him of it would be even more satisfactory than he had imagined; and now that vengeance was so sure and imminent he could afford to gloat a few minutes longer before he gave it rein.

"Sandy's hoppin' lively for he's left a kid at home.

Davey's heart is achin' for a pesky grammyphone, For it ain't in human nature for a man to live alone—

When the drive is lyin' idle Sunday mornin'."

And once more the camp vibrated with the roar of the chorus.

There was no music in the bitter heart of Angus North, and yet one foot was involuntarily beating out the measure. His mind was concerned only with the deed that had brought him back. It had been well arranged. He had only to throw open the door and let events take their course. Lefty and Bud would spring in with cocked pistols and endeavor to hold up the camp. They had been promised an easy rake-off from a crew of rustic farmers with a month of high wages in their jeans, and though anxious to lie low until certain escapades across the border had been forgotten, they had been easily lured to lend a hand. North smiled grimly at his deception. At the best lumber-jacks were dangerous things to take liberties with, and Hugh McKnight had a reputation for nerve and

recklessness won in tighter holes than this would be. At the first word he would be up and at them and then—Lefty was never slow on the trigger.

What was that blasted tune they were playing? It had been knocking upon his ear-drums with a persistence that had forced him to give heed. Mulvorney. Another association of his dead life. He hadn't heard it since that terrible occasion when she had turned him adrift to founder upon the rocks. As vividly as a scene of yesterday it flared before his closed lids. It was such a night as this; he had just returned from the drive, as they were doing now. But then it had been the Upper Nashwaak—not Cross Creek—and they had stopped to celebrate their freedom at Stanley. Of course he had sworn to let the bottle alone, and in those days his word was as good as his bond. But what if he had been a d—n fool and his intractable enemy had got the better of him? Hadn't a man a right to kick over the traces once in a while without being called to account? Still, he shouldn't have gone to Madge in that condition—he knew that. But he had only meant to catch a glimpse of her through the window, until he saw that she had company. Even then he might have restrained his jealous rage if McKnight hadn't looked at her the way he did and she hadn't played and sung those very songs she always sang for him. Everyone knew that McKnight was after her, too, though he had never let that fact worry him before. It had ended with his entering and creating a scene that no self-respecting girl could overlook. He could see the expression of pain and pity in her eyes now, hear Hugh's quiet words of reason, see himself fumble for his clasp-knife and have it jerked from his shaking fingers. Then as he was leaving he had sworn to "get even."

That at least was an oath he had never forgotten. As he sank lower and lower it had become more and more of an obsession—become the one ambition of his bestial existence. What was he waiting for? D—n the music! It was vengeance, not regret he wished to dwell on.

The song came to an end and he slowly rose to his feet. Bud and Lefty would be cowering in the shadows, cursing his delay. Before he had taken three steps, however, a singer's sweet voice held him again. Of all the dear songs that Madge had sung to him *The Banks of Lock Lomond* was the dearest, the one most pregnant with his passion; and with a stifled curse he leaned against the wall and surrendered himself to its spell.

"You take the high road and I'll take the low road. . . ."

She seemed to be there in person pleading with his warped soul as she had pleaded in the past, reminding him of all those shattered promises and the love he had forfeited. And slowly, one by one,

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