

The Sealed Valley

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "Jack Cheney"

(Continued in Saturday's Daily.)
"I have a map of North Carolina that Father Ambrose, the missionary made," said Stack. "Do you know it?"

"I have a copy," said Ralph. "I was looking at it last night." Stack went on. "I found Gisborne Portage and Hat Lake. That little lake seems to be one of the sources of the great Spirit River. I wonder if it's possible to follow all those little lakes and rivers to the main stream?"

"You'll have to ask somebody more experienced than I," said Ralph.

He was an indifferent dissembler. The note of evasion was not lost on the little man. He passed to something else.

Later they were talking about rapids. "A fellow in town told me that the worst rapids in the North were in the Rice River," said Stack. "He said it was white water all the way from the mouth of the Pony to the forks of the Spirit."

Ralph was caught off his guard. "A lot he knew about it!" he said. "It's smooth going all the way."

He had no sooner said it than he regretted the slip. Looking sideways at the little man he was reassured by the innocence of his expression. Stack started to talk about other things.

Thus during the four days of the stage trip, and the day and a half on the steamboat, Stack collected his tiny scraps of information and stored them away without arousing Ralph's suspicions.

Thrown upon each other as they were during the whole time, Stack managed to create and maintain a certain fiction of intimacy between them. But as they drew close to Fort Edward he was disappointed with the net results.

Of real intimacy there was none. It was clear to any one who watched him that Ralph had a secret. When he was off his guard he could not keep his eyes from turning north, nor keep the shine of his hidden fire from showing in them.

Stack naturally thought it was gold that induced the shine.

In his own way the little man was clever, but hardly clever enough to distinguish between the dazzle of gold and the dazzle of love in a young man's eyes. He laid himself out to win Ralph's confidence seeking to tempt him with more or less apocryphal confidences of his own.

Ralph was never moved to open his heart in return. A resentful look began to show in the mouse-colored eyes when Ralph's head was turned away.

Ralph was a little surprised to find Fort Edward unchanged. The raw packing-case still rose from among the little soap-boxes; the mud was still undried; the stumps undrawn; and the little Tressbury lay with her nose tucked in the bank. True, he had been gone only a month, but such changes had taken place in him that it seemed unreasonable to find everything going on as before.

The "boys" were all waiting on the bank, of course. Ralph a little dreaded the ordeal that awaited him. It is difficult to guard a secret in the wide and empty North where men have a little to talk about. When he was seen from the shore shouts of surprise and welcome were raised.

The mere fact that he was returning from the south when he had gone north betrayed the length of the journey he had taken. Stack, hearing the welcome, brightened somewhat. It would not be difficult to learn something about one who was so well known, he thought.

Ralph was carried off to Maroney's, Little Stack, clinging to him like a burr. There, all lined up before the pine shelf, the questions began.

"Well, Doc, give an account of yourself!" "Gentlemen!" began Ralph with an air of portentous gravity. "An astonishing adventure happened to me! I woke up in Joe Mixer's shack that morning with a dark brown one's whiskey, and I went for a walk up the river to cool my head."

"As I was standing there admiring the view I heard a buzzing like a sixty horse power dumble-bee over my head, and I'm darned if one of those aeroplanes that you've all heard about didn't come down and light in the grass beside me like a crane. 'Surprised!"

"You could have laid me out with a rabbit's foot!" The fellow aboard it, he was nervous too. Seems he had only a quart of gasoline left, and he'd far from home. He asked me where he could get some more country. 'Maroney buys it all up,' said I, to put in his whiskey."

Ralph paused to let the laughter spend itself.

"The fellow was in a great taking then," he went on. "Didn't know what to do. Suddenly I remembered about Tar Island up the river. I said, 'There's a place ten miles from here where they say that petroleum oozes right out on the ground.' 'Couldn't we gather it up and refine some gasoline?' 'You're on, rat-foe,' said he; 'climb aboard.' Say, we made Tar Island in five minutes, but I was deaf the rest of the day with the wind in my ears."

"It was a slow job, you understand, because we hadn't anything

but a tin pail and a whiskey-bottle and a strip of birch-bark to make a distillery out of. We were there three weeks, and then we had him tacked up, and he flew South and dropped me off at Kimowin. That's all."

This tale, which was in the style of humor most admired at Maroney's, made a decided hit. Maroney himself conceded that the next found was on him. In every gathering of men it is tacitly understood that a man has a right to keep his affairs to himself—provided he can also keep his temper. When they saw that Ralph did not mean to tell where he had been they let him alone.

Little Stack bit his lip in his disappointment. Stack had not been in the bar five minutes before the batteries of wit were turned on him. The stiff tangle of his mouse-colored hair procured him the name of "Haystack" and "Jack-Straw."

Later Dan Keach carried Ralph away to his office. This was more difficult for Ralph because Dan as his friend had a claim on his confidence. Ralph had a story ready to tell him, but first he had to find out how far it would coincide with the Port gossip.

Joe Mixer knew where he had gone; Joe had probably told the steamboat men, who would bring it back with them. Still, to his surprise and relief, no one in the bar had offered to chat him about any half-breed girl.

"What do they say about me?" he asked Dan.

"Nothing," said Dan. "You simply disappeared from Gisborne portages. They say Joe Mixer knows where you went, but he won't tell."

Ralph's conscience reproached him for the story he was about to tell, but there was no help for it. "There's no secret about it," he said carelessly. "I met some Indians going up the Campbell, and they took me along with them. I staked out a point on the river, a beautiful place, and just off the proposed line of the railway. I went on up the river to Cheval Noir Pass, and went over the new line. While I was outside I filed my claim, and now I have to go back and clear a part of the land and build a shack to fulfill the conditions."

"Is that the story you want to have circulated?" Dan asked, with the suspicion of a whimsical twinkle.

"Just as you like," said Ralph stiffly.

They returned to Maroney's for supper. Entering the dining-room they saw that there were only two vacant places remaining at the general table.

As Ralph put his hand on his chair to draw it out the fat back on his left was turned, and he found himself looking into the leering, swollen face of Joe Mixer. He waited, stiffening.

Joe sprang up. "Hellow, doc!" he cried joyfully. "Welcome home! Just dropped down on a rat myself. They tell me you been having grand adventures. 'Sit down and tell us!'"

Ralph was obliged to shake the detestable hand or precipitate a conflict on the spot.

The meal proceeded without further incident. It was not an observant crowd, and only one pair of sharp eyes across the table marked Ralph's stiffness, and perceived the painful glitter in Joe's little eyes when he thought himself unobserved.

Stack patiently bided his time. Later in the evening Ralph and Dan went away together to Ralph's shack. Stack maneuvered until he succeeded in getting Joe a little way from the others.

"I got a bottle of outside whiskey up in my room," Stack whispered. "Come on up and have a touch."

"Outside whiskey" was worth five dollars a bottle at Fort Edward. "Sure!" said Joe brightening, and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand in anticipation. "Keep it quiet," he said. "There ain't enough in one bottle for the crowd."

They sat with the bottle between them. Stack played the role of the humble seeker after information about the country until he thought Joe had had enough to render him incautious.

Finally he said carelessly: "Seems to be something more in this trip of the doctor's than he wants to let on."

It had an electrical effect on Joe. His breath hissed through his teeth. His face purpled.

"You're right, there's something more!" he cried savagely, with an oath. "There's a woman behind it!"

"So," said Stack, remembering the emerald pendant. "He took her from me by a low trick!" Joe went on. "By playing the snivelling preacher, blast him! They went away together a month ago. I'll pay him out if it takes the rest of my life!"

"I've got a boat in his baggage," said Stack softly, tilting both glasses again. "Maybe he's on his way back to her now."

"Sure he's going back to her!" said Joe—adding with drunken mystification: "I'm just waiting for him to start!"

Stack bethought himself how he could learn more.

(Continued in Tuesday's Issue.)

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