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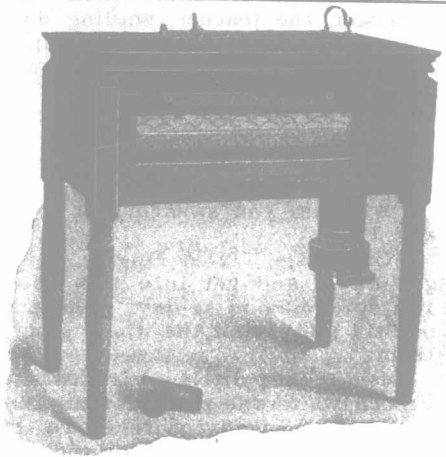
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bags, and lying prone upon the fragrant bed of pine needles strewn thickly upon the moss, they peered out through the balsam boughs at the house of their bondage with an exultant sense of freedom, and a feeling of pity, if not of contempt, for the unhappy and spiritless creatures who were content to be penned inside any house on such a day as this, and with such a world outside.

For some minutes they rolled about on the soft moss and balsam-needles and the brown leaves of last year, till their hearts were running over with a deep and satisfying delight. It is hard to resist the ministry of the woods. The sympathetic silence of the trees, the aromatic spaces, the soft mingling of the broken lights—these all combine to lay upon the spirit a soothing balm, and bring to the heart peace. And Hughie, sensitive at every pore, to that soothing ministry, before long forgot for a time even Foxy, with his fat, white face and smiling mouth, and, lying on the broad of his back, and looking up at the far-away blue sky through the interlacing branches and leaves, he began to feel again that it was good to be alive, and that with all his misery there were compensations.

But any lengthened period of peaceful calm is not for boys of the age and spirit of Hughie and his companions.

"What are you going to do?" asked Fusie, the man of adventure.

"Do nothing," said Hughie from his supine position. "This is good enough for me."

"Not me," said Fusie, starting to climb a tall, lithe birch, while Hughie lazily watched him. Soon Fusie was at the top of the birch, which began to sway dangerously.

"Try to fly into that balsam," cried Hughie.

"No, sir!"

"Yes, go on."

"Can't do it."

"Oh, pshaw! you can."

"No, nor you either. That's a mighty big jump."

"Come on down, then, and let me try," said Hughie, in scorn. His laziness was gone in the presence of a possible achievement.

In a few minutes he had taken Fusie's place at the top of the swaying birch. It did not look so easy from the top of the birch as from the ground to swing into the balsam tree. However, he could not go back now.

"Dinna try it, Hughie!" cried Davie to him. "Ye'll no mak' it, and ye'll come an awfu' cropper, as sure as deith."

But Hughie, swaying gently back and forth, was measuring the distance of his drop. It was not a feat so very difficult, but it called for good judgment and steady nerve. A moment too soon or a moment too late in letting go would mean a nasty fall of twenty feet or more upon the solid ground, and one never knew just how one would light.

"I wudna dae it, Hughie," urged Davie, anxiously.

But Hughie, swaying high in the birch, heeded not the warning, and suddenly swinging out from the slender trunk and holding by his hands, he described a parabola, and releasing the birch, dropped onto the balsam top. But balsam trees are of uncertain fiber, and not to be relied upon, and this particular balsam, breaking off short in Hughie's hands, allowed him to go crashing through the branches to the earth.

"Man! man!" cried Davie Scotch, bending over Hughie as he lay white and still upon the ground. "Are ye deid? Maircy me! he's deid."

sobbed Davie, wringing his hands. "Fusie, Fusie, ye gowk! where are ye gone?"

In a moment or two Fusie reappeared through the branches with a capful of water, and dashed it into Hughie's face, with the result that the lad opened his eyes, and after a gasp or two sat up and looked about him.

"Och, laddie, laddie, are ye no deid?" said Davie Scotch.

"What's the matter with you, Scottie?" asked Hughie, with a bewildered look about him. "And who's been throwing water all over me?" he added, wrathfully, as full consciousness returned.

"Man! I'm glad to see ye mad. Gang on wi' ye," shouted Davie, joyously. "Ye were deid the noo. Ay, clean deid. Was he no, Fusie?" Fusie nodded.

"I guess not," said Hughie. "It was that rotten balsam top," looking vengefully at the broken tree.

"Lie doon, man," said Davie, still anxiously hovering about him. "Dinna rise yet awhile."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Hughie, and he struggled to his feet; "I'm all right." But as he spoke he sank down upon the moss, saying, "I feel kind of queer, though."

"Lie still, then, will ye," said Davie, angrily. "Ye're fair obstinate."

"Get me some water, Fusie," said Hughie, rather weakly.

"Run, Fusie, ye gomeril, ye!" In a minute Fusie was back with a capful of water.

"That's better. I'm all right now," said Hughie, sitting up.

"Hear him!" said Davie. "Lie ye doon there, or I'll gie ye a crack that'll make ye glad tae keep still."

For half an hour the boys lay on the moss discussing the accident fully in all the varying aspects and possibilities, till the sound of wheels came up the road.

"Who's that, Fusie?" asked Hughie, lazily.

"Dunno me," said Fusie, peering through the trees.

"Do you, Scotty?"

"No, not I."

Hughie crawled over to the edge of the brush.

"Why, you idiots! it's Thomas Finch. Thomas!" he called, but Thomas drove straight on. In a moment Hughie sprang up, forgetting all about his weakness, and ran out to the roadside.

"Hello, Thomas!" he cried, waving his hand. Thomas saw him, stopped, and looked at him doubtfully. He, with all the Section, knew how the school was going, and he easily guessed what took Hughie there.

"I'm not going to school to-day," said Hughie, answering Thomas's look.

Thomas nodded, and sat silent, waiting. He was not a man to waste his words.

"I hate the whole thing!" exclaimed Hughie.

"Foxy, eh?" said Thomas, to whom, on other occasions, Hughie had confided his grievances, and especially those he suffered at the hands of Foxy.

"Yes, Foxy," cried Hughie, in sudden rage. "He's a fat-faced sneak! And the teacher just makes me sick!"

Thomas still waited.

"She just smiles and smiles at him, and he smiles at her. Ugh! I can't stand him."

"Not much harm in smiling," said Thomas, solemnly.

"Oh, Thomas, I hate the school. I'm not going to go any more."

Thomas looked gravely down upon Hughie's passionate face for a few moments, and then said, "You will do what your mother wants you, I guess."

Hughie said nothing in reply, while Thomas sat pondering.

Finally he said, with a sudden inspiration, "Hughie, come along with me, and help me with the potatoes."

"They won't let me," grumbled Hughie. "At least father won't. I don't like to ask mother."

Thomas's eyes opened in surprise. This was a new thing in Hughie.

"I'll ask your mother," he said, at length. "Get in with me here."

Still Hughie hesitated. To get away from school was joy enough.

To go with Thomas to the potato-planting was more than could be hoped for. But still he stood making pictures in the dust with his bare toes.

"There's Fusie," he said, "and Davie Scotch."

(To be continued.)