

THE WAY OUT

A STORY OF A LUCKY FIND IN MUSKOKA

By WALTER CORNISH

THE man slowly rubbed his chin, and stared reflectively across the desk at the skeleton hand. Its unpleasant forefinger pointed to a small oval of cardboard tacked below, on which was engrossed in old English text the trenchant warning "Get to Work."

It was excellent advice, he felt, and had done valiant service in the old medical days when moral suasion was needed to overcome the allurements of graduate life. But in the present extremity it was a mockery—a wire-jointed anachronism—a piece of grisly impertinence. What he really wanted was the Omnipotent Dollar—and quickly. That was his problem.

The decree had come with the weekly mail, that only by rapid finance could he realise a cent on the infinite labours of the past four months. There was no mistake about it. He read the ultimatum seven times, and each time saw that it was clear and final. It was typed on commercial linen, and bore the embossed heading of a Toronto firm of publishers:

Dear Mr. Hind,—We beg to inform you that, after a long and careful consideration of your manuscript entitled "White Caps," we are prepared to publish. But this is solely on condition that you assume total responsibility for all the heavy expenses of production.

We are aware that this decision will seem somewhat arbitrary, but if you will consider the peculiar nature of your story—the overloaded condition of the market—and the financial issues dependent on what, after all, is a totally radical departure from the accepted canons of public taste, you will concur that our stipulation is reasonable.

Your story is told brilliantly, and it seems a pity that you should have built it round so strange an idea.

We may say that, in view of the peculiar nature of your story, we took counsel with the friendly head of a leading house in the States, and he agrees with us that no members of the publishing world would care to touch your book, except on the terms we have defined.

Pending your decision herein, we retain your parcel of MSS.

We are, Yours faithfully,

Mr. Hind's face showed no surprise. He accepted his fate with philosophical calm. The state of mind which coolly refuses to bluster at the whims of Fortune, had happily come into his possession. It was the only thing his family had left him. It was the only thing that could lend him assistance now. It hinted that everything was very droll.

He was half amused to recall that his whole life had been just such a tilting at impossible targets. Clean from the moment when the death of his only relative had cut short his apprenticeship of medicine, to the time when the cup of journalistic opportunity was rudely dashed from his lips by the Powers who arrange cycle accidents and brain fevers, he had lost in every game. And now it was on the cards that his last and pluckiest plunge for a competence was doomed to failure. And a failure that was just a single step lower than success. Really, it was most annoying. Mr. Hind mildly thought that his literary genius had found its genesis in a very frosty Garden of Eden. The white stretches of ice, the black, circling hills, the rocky knoll underneath the silent house in whose upper chamber he sat—all suggested it. That letter lying on the desk seemed to prove it.

Yet his lips pursed tight and dogged at the memory of a face which had floated through his sleepless dreams.

For Mr. Hind had his Eve, after the manner of men. In his case, alas! a long way after. In fact his prospect of a connubial paradise was but a dim and beautiful imagination; and his sole excuse for surveying it night and morning was, that it helped him to do more than sentimental musings. It helped him to be businesslike and cheerful. It was a daily stimulant.

Therefore, his alert brain was hard at work grappling with the problem of financial deadlock, when he heard voices sounding from the clearing below. For a moment he was more than a trifle astonished.

The narrow trail which joined the Government road two miles away, plunged through a second growth of bush. This fringed a steep shore uninviting to either

trapper or casual wanderer, and during his entire residence in the deserted farmhouse, no single visitor had disturbed him. His work had been forged in solitude.

As he looked curiously down at the two intruders, he felt a thrill of pride as he thought of his fierce, silent battle with the Fates.

Both men were dressed in the rough costume peculiar to shantymen. The younger man was tall, wiry and of swarthy feature. The elder was short, somewhat florid, and inclined to perspiration. In addition to a superabundant quantity of fat, the latter carried a large valise, and frequently found it necessary to readjust a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

Plainly these were amateur woodsmen who had tired of their experiment, and got themselves lost in the bush in the vain attempt to strike a beeline for the railway.

Mr. Hind's face wore an amused smile as he descended the stairs and opened the door to the unfortunates. In spite of their half-frozen condition they were extremely polite, even suave. In the accent of education they wondered how far it was to the nearest railway station, in what direction did the road lead, whether there were many trains from Buntsville to Toronto during the day, and where could they expect to get a good meal?

The replies they got were perfectly satisfactory. So was the ingenious dinner, served piping hot, which followed. So were the cigars. So was the warmth of the glowing stove. And when, to crown everything, their host went upstairs to hunt out another bottle of Moselle, their delight, expressed by sundry winks and nods, was unlimited. A gorgeous time became inevitable. Epigrams popped like champagne corks, and the little party revelled in its own unsuspected brilliance.

The younger man was a profitable and interesting study. His philosophy smelt in New York. His knowledge of Canadian botany and social custom was positively perfect. Only his appetite was ungentlemanly.

His companion was a born thinker, with a tongue of butter, and a taste for metaphor a la Lytton. The single subject he did not relish was "the widening opportunity of the North West." Somehow it seemed to jar on his nervous system.

Yet, altogether, it was an hour for kings; and these three merry souls waxed fat and jolly.

From the beginning it was obvious that the two lumbermen possessed (for Mr. Hind) some distinct fascination. His keen gaze would, every little while, rest on them with an almost uncourteous stare, as if some hidden train of memory had been fired in his mind. His eyelids often drooped to hide the merry light gleaming through the lashes. He was immensely tickled by some private thought.

His generosity increased with his good humour. Why should they not stay with him for the night? If argument was needed, well, the day was wearing on. And it was quite a seven-mile walk to town. It would surely be far better for them to wait till the morning, when he himself had business in Buntsville, and could personally conduct them thither.

Alas, the gentlemen were very firm.

"No, sir; we are highly indebted to you, but we would not dream of further burdening—"

"No burden. No burden."

The tone of Mr. Hind was pressingly gracious. But the strangers were obdurate. Ah, they must go. It was a pity of course. It was a great pity. But their plans were imperative. Would their good host, however, describe the perplexing route to Buntsville.

"Certainly." Their good host jumped at the chance. In fact, he would even go one better. He would himself conduct them to-day.

Their anxious protests he waved aside with an hospitable smile. Upstairs he sprang for his pea-jacket.

It was surely some clot of insanity that caused Mr. Hind to be so strangely erratic in his treatment of his guests. No sooner had he entered his untidy den when he dropped into the chair by the window, and gazed abstractedly at the rocky shore below. For quite five minutes he intently watched a huge boulder of Laurentian rock which, for uncounted years, had always been on the point of falling into the lake, but had never done so.

Finally, he picked up and idly scanned the pages of an