

## The Middle Trail

Written for The Western Home Monthly By C. Lewis Rotherham

WHEN Jack Benson was ten years old his father moved West. He said the farming was better that way, but the truth was he was possessed with the spirit of unrest. This was largely accounted for by the fact that his wife had died six months before. It had broken up his world, and he had not been able to piece it together again, and never would, as it had been. So he sought relief in change. He would take up a farm in the West. Perhaps if he worked hard, in new surroundings, he would not feel the ache so much. But in this he was mistaken. Everything to do with farming seemed in some way connected with his loss. He had been in the habit of talking over farm matters with his wife, and her keen interest in all that was going on had, more than he knew, stimulated him to effort. He missed all that, as well as her presence in the house. He had everything to do for himself, except such things as Jack could assist in, and his very food tasted different. So after a while he threw up the farm, sold his implements and horses, and struck out further west and north, taking Jack with him for he was fond of the boy. From this time on he led a wandering life. When funds were low he would work in logging camps, or join prospecting parties, or hunt and trap as opportunity occurred. Then suddenly the end came. He was working with a logging crew skidding logs out from the bush to the skidway by the trail. His team, which was young and none too well broken, shied at an imaginary something in the undergrowth, and swerved sharply, and the butt end of the big log he was hauling struck one of the standing poplars, interspersed with the spruce, just above the roots. Although apparently sound it was at this point thoroughly rotten, with the action of the thawing of successive snows, and with the force of the impact it snapped as a man might snap a match between his fingers. It fell with lightning rapidity, and Benson, whose whole attention was centered on his team, was struck to the ground. The crash attracted the notice of a teamster at the skidway, who ran to his assistance, but when he had prized up the fallen tree and extricated the unfortunate man he found him unconscious, with a terrible wound on his head. Hastily he brought his sleigh as near as possible, laid some poles across the bunks and some spruce branches and his coat upon it, and half dragging, half carrying the helpless man lifted him on to this rough stretcher. Then he struck out for the camp, two miles distant, but barely had willing hands laid their burden on the blankets in the bunk house than the life so sorely troubled had ebbed away.

So, at fourteen, Jack was left an orphan, but in this calamity he found an unexpected friend. This was Rob MacDonald, the man who had brought his father into camp. Rob was a Scotchman, and an inveterate smoker. Seldom was he seen without his old black pipe in the corner of his mouth, often upside down. When twitted on one occasion on its being destitute of tobacco, he replied naively: "Eh! mon, it hae still the flavor," which, judging by its color, was no doubt true. He was for the most part reserved and taciturn, but under a rugged exterior was hidden a heart of gold. From the first he assumed the guardianship of Jack as a matter of course, and the boy was only too ready to look to him for assistance. So time went on. The logging camps broke up before the thaw, and Rob who had heard of a good trapping ground further north suggested that they try their luck with the traps. Jack was nothing loth, and together they journeyed by forest trails and across broad lakes in search of game, pushing always further and further away from civilization, for the further they went the better the trapping became. At last they found themselves in a country inhabited solely by Indians and a few half-breeds, but abounding in game. And here commenced a long sojourn, extending to months and years, till Jack was turned twenty. During this latter time he had hardly seen a white man. Occasionally, indeed, they had gone back to the Hudson's Bay Post to dispose of their furs, but more often they had dispatched them by a half-breed who brought back their

value in provisions. Is it to be wondered at, therefore, that Jack grew up quiet and reserved. Rob, though the best of friends, had little to say, and there was not much conversing with the few Indians or half-breeds they met. And Nature herself, in this vast wilderness of wood and water, seemed to impart her silence to those who dwelt with her. But whatever the elder may have felt, there was in the heart of the younger man a yearning for the society of his kind, and for a more intimate knowledge of the world they had left behind them. But his loyalty to Rob who had been so good to him, kept him from speech on the matter. Rob he felt was wedded to the woods, and he could not leave him. But at this juncture an unexpected thing happened. The "boss" of the logging camp had, at the time of his father's death, written to the only relative of whom Jack knew, an uncle in England, but whether because the letter had miscarried, or the address was incorrect, no answer had been re-

ceived. As time went on Jack ceased to think of the matter, but now, to his surprise, there came a much redirected letter, sent on from the Hudson's Bay Post, by the Half-breed who brought their supplies. On being opened it was found to contain two missives. One, on a sheet with the printed heading of a firm of solicitors in London, England, ran as follows:

"Sir:—We have the honor to inform you that under the provisions of the will of your late Uncle, Henry F. Benson, Esq., you are entitled to a legacy of one thousand pounds. Should you so desire we can transmit this amount to you through the London branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, and await your instructions in the matter."

"We also enclose a letter found among the papers of your late uncle, and addressed to you. It would appear to have been gathered up with some documents and placed in the drawer where it was found. The deceased gentleman was doubtless under the impression that it had been posted to you."

"We are, your obedient servants,

"Jones & Jenkins."

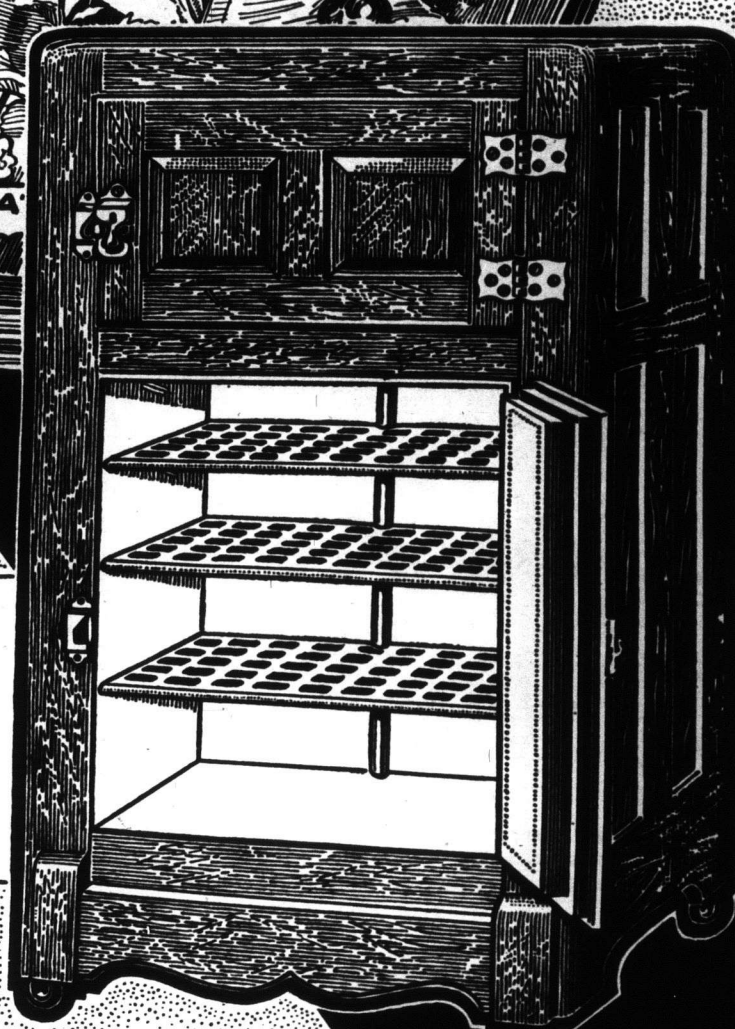
The other letter was one of condolence written to Jack on receipt of the news of his father's death and expressing his uncle's desire to assist him. It concluded with the following sentence:

"Should you be without funds I would advise that you go to an old neighbor of mine, Richard Prentiss, who is farming at Barton, northwest of Edmonton, who, I am sure will be pleased to see you as he also knew your father."

When Jack had read the letters over a second time he passed them without comment to Rob. He felt as if a door had been opened, and he had but to step out into another and larger world, that now it would be necessary to return once more. Should he not also see these friends of his father and uncle to whom he had at least this introduction, and who would doubtless have heard of him. But at this point Rob broke in:

"A' weel, laddie, and so you're a rich mon th' nco. You'll be wantin' to gang to the bank I ken, and mebbe to see they freens o' ye fayther. Weel I hae bin thinkin' I maun gang back sometime mesel'. I hae a marrit sister wi' husband and daughter i' Edmonton as'll be glad to see me, I dinna doot."

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