

# THE WILDCATTERS

A Tale of the Cobalt Country.

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## BOOK TWO.

### CHAPTER VII.

FOR weeks, up beyond the camps on the Montreal River, Bland and Halycon searched for the lone prospector whom they believed to be Carl. They followed the miners' advice as to what lakes and rivers to ascend for these men had a general knowledge of the geological formation of the land-surface, and were possessed of some idea as to what parts a prospector would be likely to visit. Lewis had written to his partner asking the name of the man, but the partner could not remember, so the two, full of the hope that the solitary man could be no other than Carl, went on their quest without it. Bland, naturally sanguine of spirit, thought it was only a question of days when they should find him, but as two weeks slipped away his high expectations subsided as quickly as they had risen. He could, in any event, spend but a little longer in the search, for his father would need his presence shortly for the autumn business-trips at home. The time came for him to go and they retraced the arduous route back to the camps on Montreal River. From there Jerry went down again to join his father for home.

Clive did not go. He took a fresh supply of provisions which they had caused to be sent in with the miners' shipments, and turned northward again in a last attempt to find the lone prospector. This wild, secluded environment made him forget the pang of his own unfulfillment. Perhaps that was the reason he had not given up the search when Bland did. To wander and rove at the will of the wander-lust made him forget. The nature-love filled his being and eased in a measure the yearning that cried out for the one person in the world who had ever stirred his heart.

Thus Clive Halycon, enduring hardship and labour, which sat lightly on him because of his strength and hunting experience, sought for some sign of the way Carl—if it were Carl—had taken, but he saw not a sign, not even a deserted bough-tent or dead campfire.

When the first brilliant tint of autumn flamed in the leaves Clive gave it up and began to work southward. In a few days he left behind the thickest rock-chasms and hardest portages, coming at last to Lake Scouron, whose outlet was the River Slade. From this the way wound by lakes and rivers, which were quicker of passage, but dangerous at many points. It was late afternoon of a week-end day when Halycon reached Lake Scouron, and scintillating sunset arrows flew down and splintered on its glassy surface, turning the right side of his canoe to gold and merging into a crimson glow where it crept up over his hunting-shirt to the bare, muscled neck. Water, shore and sky made one panoramic range of iridescent blending of amethyst and white fire, mauve and grey, saffron, magenta and dun, woven in unspeakable harmony from the ripple-points to the sheening autumn leaf, from the leaf and reed to the glorious, blazing empyrean above.

The wondrous beauty of it all checked the man's thought as he slowly paddled the length of the lake, and with a sigh he left it for the river current which had its source at the southern end. The paddler would have given much to pitch his night's camp on the margin of this heavenly lake, but a mile ahead, on the River Slade, lay Love's Rapid, a swift, bouldered channel difficult to run on calm days and deadly in foul weather. Halycon was well versed in woodcraft and no woodman would have trusted this calm too far. A change might come in an hour or in a night, and he would rather have the Rapid behind him at sunrise. How the passage got its ironical name no one knows, and though many a hunter or trader has called it Death's Rapid, still the old name clings.

The chasm was not wind-tossed, but yet man-hungry, and Clive Halycon steeled his fingers on the paddle grip when he let the craft slide gently into the head-swirls.

It hung a moment and then shot downward with meteor speed. In the rushing chute the waters showed white fangs between the black rock jaws grasping at the tossing bow. Halycon, with arm, eye and brain alert, plied his paddle in lightning passes, avoiding the granite crags and the tumbling waves.

Brr-o-o-o-m—s-s-wash-h-h! the torrent roared on both sides, striking the perpendicular side walls with foaming

white-caps. The first gulch was cleared with a leap, and he struck the middle eddy. Shaking and lurching the bark its giant clutch drew and tore, but Halycon's great shoulder-strength edged the frail canoe out. Then the full force of mid-stream swept it downward like a cork.

Flying spray went over him in sheets. Flip! Flip! he used the paddle. Boom-m-m! the cauldron boiled. A fierce, wild joy thrilled him through and through. It was the glorying human emotion in battle with the elements.

Flip! Flip! Flip! he skimmed by the last knife-edged reef and, hugging the shore from the whirling surge beneath, shot out in safety through the noisy, bubbling underflow.

"Ha!" he laughed in exultation, wiping the spray from his face. Something tapped the side of his canoe. He scooped his hand out and caught it. It was the blade of a paddle broken near the shoulder.

Halycon gave a quick look about. On the other bank the land ran out in a point and the surly current was buffeting a smashed canoe where it had tossed it on the edge.

"Jove! Someone has run through and been swamped!" Clive exclaimed. With a face of concern he forced his way across. Leaping out and pulling his own canoe out of reach of blows from the surf, he examined the battered craft. It was a total wreck, with a dozen gaps in bow and bottom. There was nothing in it.

"Poor duffer!" was his ejaculation. Turning to go on, a dim foot-scar caught his eye. The ledge of shore was hard but in the hollows earth, mast, and moss had accumulated and in one of these the sprawling mark of a toe was visible. It seemed to have been made by a tapped sole.

Halycon went down on his knees and searched intently. Here was another and another, leading away from the ledge toward the undergrowth. Ah! there the branches were bent aside and the brush was crushed and broken as if something had been dragged through. Halycon strode in. The crackling of boughs underfoot was answered with a groan from the brake to his right.

"This way, friend!" came a feeble voice following on the groan. "I crawled out of that burning sun!"

Clive forced the fern away and saw the man. His face was bloody and drawn; the hair was matted and the limbs all limp. Even through the partly dry and crumpled garments the twisted knots of swelling indicated breaks. He lay on a bed of moss and tufted reeds.

"I'm done, friend!" he said again before the other could speak. "I am hurt inside as well."

"My poor fellow, you must have hit the rocks hard." "Just like a cork in that gap! It's a terrible channel. You didn't come down?" he asked.

"Yes, I came down," answered Clive. The wounded man half rose, but sank back with a face full of pain. "You're a good one!" he groaned.

"Come!" Halycon said. "I must fix you up." He lifted the prostrate form.

"Don't!" the feeble voice expostulated. "That awful sun!"

"It has gone down," Clive said softly. He was a big man, but Clive carried him out into the open.

In a few moments, under his quick action, a fire was burning briskly.

"It's no use, stranger!" the poor fellow said as he watched him. "I've only an hour or so."

"You'll drink some coffee," Halycon observed. "Then I'll doctor your bruises."

"No, partner, you will not. You know I'm done as well as I do. Own up now!"

He looked Clive in the eye. "Well," the latter reluctantly declared, "I guess you are. I would like to have cheered you up though."

"That's all right, friend! It's good to have you with me. I rather feel that you're a man. Then that rapid proves it. Say!"—looking at Halycon's bronzed features. "Say! You've been wandering some yourself?"

"The best part of the summer!"

"Just like me! Women beat the dickens! Don't they?" Clive drew a sharp breath and bent over the coffee pot to hide his confusion.

"Some do," he admitted.

"Beat the dickens!" repeated the weak voice. "Say! is that sun gone?"

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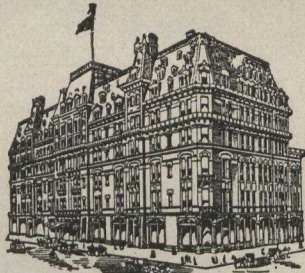
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