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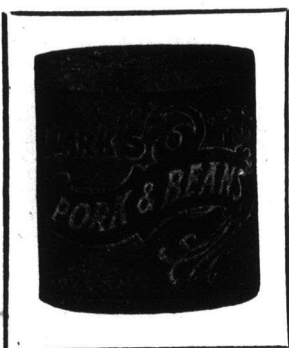
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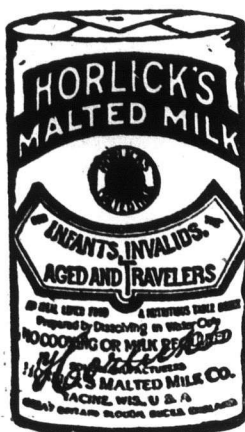
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2519

The Secret of Saddle Gap

By Edith G. Bayne

Contd. from page 8

like a tub—that I think belongs to you, perhaps. Nobody was round and I was in a hurry."

Old Comox was silent but his eyes had narrowed. The stranger smiled winningly, pushed his chair back and drew cigars from his pocket, offering the case to the old man who clutched eagerly at it and extracted three.

"You come to a poor place for fish. This water's fished out," said Old Comox, gruffly.

"I didn't catch a half-portion minnow, even. Where must I go?"

They talked fish for half an hour. At the end of that period the stranger rose.

"I'm boarding over at Mark Menary's," he remarked. "Queer fish, Menary."

Old Comox was non-committal. He merely grunted.

"Seems to have secrets. Or shall I say a secret?"

Old Comox cocked a wary eye up.

"Might as well try to skin an eel with a wooden spoon," the newcomer went on, "as endeavor to get anything out of Menary that he doesn't feel like telling."

"What," asked the old man bluntly, "was you tryin' to find out?"

The other assumed a wise expression. His eye met the keen watchful orb of Old Comox a moment in a calm, steady glance. Then puffing smoke upward he said reservedly:

"Various things."

Old Comox stirred restlessly. He ran his gnarled hand over his beard and shot curious, penetrating glances at the cool stranger of which the latter seemed blissfully unaware.

"Seems to me," he croaked at last, "that you're a queer sort o' fisherman."

The other smiled obliquely down at the old man and threw his cigar butt away.

"There are fishermen and fishermen," he said and bade him good-bye for the present.

Old Comox had said he was going up beyond the Fork to be gone two days, so after a hurried mid-day meal at Menary's, Bestwood, scornful of the unwieldy punt searched for and finally discovered a point on the river where shallows made wading possible and taking advantage of the owner's absence he made a fairly thorough investigation of Saddle Gap and its vicinity.

He explored the caves and the many narrow clefts between boulders and looked for the barest hint anywhere of mining operations on a small scale.

Having little knowledge of metallurgy or the kindred sciences he was at a loss sometimes in following veins in the rocks but he knew that he would recognize gold quartz if he came upon it. At length, after the sun had dropped below the Ramparts, he sat down on a flat rock overlooking the rapids and pulled out, not the silver cigar case of the morning, but a trusty, battered old pipe. He smoked and ruminated until the twelve Rainbow Peaks stood shadowy against the pale rose light in the western sky.

"Well, I'll be—jiggered!" he said at last, and got up and took his slow, puzzled way back to the other side where his faithful pinto waited.

Miss Menary was alone. The family had eaten supper and gone down to the flats for berries. They were probably heading homeward she said, and her father hadn't returned from Eagle Lake yet but she expected him at any moment.

"Do you know I sort of expected your dad to hang round and be interested in—my negotiations," Bestwood observed as he partook of fried pickerel, scalloped potatoes and cherry pie.

The girl sat down and fanned her heated face with the end of her crisp apron. It was a warm evening.

"Why should he get excited over something that he's seen a dozen times already?" she asked with a slow whimsical smile. "You may be interesting personally, but—"

"Thanks for the few kind words," he interjected with much the same sort of smile.

"You didn't get a chance at noon with the children round, to tell me anything about this morning. Did you see Old Comox and was he terribly mad?"

"Now, what makes you assume that I was going to tell you anything, Miss Gail? Yes, more spuds, if you please."

"Well, you might, I'm aching with curiosity."

"Oh, so I have one interested friend here!"

"Rather."

Whereupon he told her a little of what had transpired in the morning.

"I thought if I could just discover the old fellow's weak spot I could play on it, as it were. I thought I'd hit it with tobacco but—I don't know. I ascertained one thing."

"What was that?"

"He's very miserly."

"I could have told you that. He's got money in the bank at Fort George and he denies himself the very necessities of life up here. I've heard dad say that some men take to miserliness in old age just as others take to drink."

"I watched for an oatmeal accent but there aren't any 'burrs' about him whatever. So we can't lay it to the Scotch."

Gail shook her head decidedly.

"No, he hailed originally from the States. Both he and Charlie Frear were Yankees."

"Charlie Frear?"

"The other partner," said Gail, pouring more tea.

Bestwood leaned back. He laid his fork down.

"So it was a triple alliance!"

"Yes. But Charlie's dead."

"Oh! Now it's a wonder your father didn't speak of—"

"He thought a lot of Charlie Frear. It makes him feel badly even to mention his name," she explained.

"I see."

"Dad's late. I've a notion to wash up the dishes and leave his supper in the oven."

"Do. And I'm going to help you wash up, if I may."

"I couldn't think of such a thing!"

"Don't. No necessity for thinking at all. Where do you keep the dish towels?"

he demanded. "And give me an apron to tie round my neck, please."

Very much later when Bestwood, having waited about on the chance of seeing Menary who didn't return at all, was picking his cayuse and about to turn in for the night he caught the sound of a boat grounding on the stones below his camp and going down to investigate he found Old Comox climbing the path.

There was a splendid full moon and he recognized the old chap while he was still many yards away. A little smile played round Bestwood's close-lipped mouth.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "You like my brand of cigars, Mr. Comox, don't you? Now, don't," he went on in a playful tone, "pretend it's my pleasant company that brings you over the river at this hour!"

"Young feller, I come over to have a leetle talk," said the old man. "I ain't carin' 'bout the 'baccy, but if you happen to have a leetle mite handy, why—"

Bestwood disappeared into his tent for a moment. When he came out he had a box of cigars and a sack of choice tobacco. They sat down together on a log. For five minutes no words were spoken. Bestwood waited for the old man to open up.

"This camp o' yours is almost acrost from mine," said Old Comox finally.

"Yes. I chose the spot because I like the view across the Gap."

"H'm."

"Listen!" said Bestwood suddenly.

"That was the bugle of a big bull elk, stranger."

"Last night I heard a wolf. A spine-chilling sound! I could never become used to a wolf howl. To a man with an evil past, with some sordid secret weighing on his soul I can well imagine that the wolf howl would—sound very unpleasant," he added lamely.

The evening stillness was broken by the occasional tremor of a coyote, too. Up above the timber line where snow clung in great patches, big-horn rams, black-tail does and fawns, Rocky Mountain goats and others of the antlered tribes were pausing in their grazing on the lush mountain meadows nosing the wind for the dread wolf scent. Old Comox returned no immediate remark to Bestwood's observation. Then, puffing his old pipe full of the tobacco in preparation for his row back, he said:

"I've got you sized up for a detective."

"I rather guessed you had," said Bestwood, comfortably.

"At first," went on the old man, "I took you for one o' these here railroad fellers."

"You flatter me."

"But I see now I was wrong. I guess you're a purty smart feller, eh?"

(Continued on page 22)