

The Sovereign Placer.

By Charles Dorian, Algoma, Ont., Canada. Specially Written for W.H.M.



WY Cerdic Barth chose Ryderbank out of a score of good camps predestination. He admitted that he was first attracted by the romantic sound of the name after which the desire to spend his short vacation there became fantastically insistent.

Night had set in when he arrived. It seemed to him the blackest night he had ever known—the frowning mountain cutting off the last glimmer of twilight and casting inky shadows on the lake, obliterating all objects in that direction.

The only place where the pall of darkness was effectually banished turned out to be an hotel—so high up on that same frowning mountain that he began to inscribe it upon his memory with certain famous lighthouses and aviators' havens he had seen.

A yank of the thumb from the hotel clerk indicated the lounging-room where he found two rough, weathered men of the camp-habitue type, chaffing drolly and yarning. Cloud under cloud of rank tobacco smoke floated on the fresh air which came through the half-open windows. He retired modestly to a quiet corner. The laugh which followed a story related by one of the loungers caught him smiling reciprocally. Encouraged by the frankness of Cerdic's face a conciliation was effected in customary camp style:

"Tell you, pard, old Jim. Madmus ain't never stuck fer a yarn. He's the cheerfulest cuss in camp." This information was imparted with a tight wink of the "off" eye.

"That's all right, Joe," said 'Old Jim,' soberly. "The lad ain't lookin' fer no yarns sech as you an' me swaps occasional—likes somethin' more genteel er I lose me shake. Never mind, Cap'n—turning to Cerdic, we takes queer observations sometimes and maybe my stories is wuth listenin' to, but they ain't allus acceptable to the gentry that comes after the Ryders arrive from town. You're the very fust and we'll sure see more of you. Joe, here, an' me allus gits a bid to the festivitables—ahem! You'll find us the pure red rock, Cap'n, ready an' obligin' towards them as is willin' to shake up on the level—don't give a cuss whether they's related to Colonel Ryder or jest strangers."

"I haven't the honor of Colonel Ryder's acquaintance," confessed Cerdic. "Perhaps I shall meet him in the course of events. You, of course, know him intimately?"

"Know him intimately!" Why, Joe, here and me's spendin' his money fer twenty years."

Cerdic smiled and "old Jim" resumed; "Nobody comes to Ryderbank without fust askin' about Colonel Ryder, 'case Colonel Ryder's all there is to this here burg, and if his family don't stay here all winter it ain't none of our business the Colonel stays. Joe, here and me done the fust work fer the Colonel after the rush to Cobalt—and the old boy ain't conquered all there is in this here silver zone yet. Why, ain't he off on another purshuit of the elusive only this mornin'! Yes, sir, and gone is his tracks, too. Three men in a boat with Colonel Ryder as boss of the outfit headed fer the open lake bright and early. No use askin' where, young man, 'case there ain't no where. Can't tell where he'll land up—nobody bothers him till he's out lookin' fer machinery. He's on a new trail this trip and if ye feel inclined to know him intimately, you might find him among the 30,000 islands lyin' round about here.

"Talkin' about islands, Cap'n, did ye ever hear of the Reef o' Bones twenty miles from here?"

Cerdic admitted his ignorance of the spooky spot.

"Well, there's a story that I kin tell ye kin make your own additions when ye git a chance to relate it at the—club, ahem! The bare facts is theses: Two years ago old Jake Hilder comes up from Spragge or thereabouts to show the

boys his stake. Twenty-thousand hard wuz his pile an' he jest dug down into his turkey and picked out a handful of them King Edward sovereigns whenever funds wuz low around. Jake wuz the pay that day. Sold his claim down yonder. No cheques fer Jake—preferred the real mint. There wuz sovereigns clinkin' all day but Jake had the uncommon good luck to git away with enough to run a bank. There wuz one measly cuss snoopin' round fer a partnership but we got Jake off in his canoe before the articles wuz signed.

"Nobody ever heard of Jake after. Last spring, Joe, here, and me takes a cruise around them Islands, and countin' from Snake, two miles straight out from here, it was the twenty-second island down that cast up an uncanny sight to us. We all believe to this day that all the mortal remains of Jake Hilder lays on that reef. Got adrift, we reckoned, and frogged fer rit—to give the crows their pickin'. Joe, here, and me combs round fer driftwood and constructs a rough coffin fer the poor fella, and its there yet—a crude monamint to a cumrade, the bestour skill waz ekal to, standin' high an' dry with the bones fitted in snug.

"Joe, here and me has often seen Jake's ghost sence then an' it seems to whisper that a placer deposit of them there sovereigns lies on a sandy beach on one of the islands near the 'Reef o' Bones!' 'Twas us give it the name.

"Taint a long story, Cap'n, but Joe, here, an' me allus tries to make the stranger feel at home. A fella sleeps better when he knows more of the place he comes to visit. I aint askin' what yer here fer—but seein' that ye don't know the Colonel I'd take ye fer a reporter. Joe here an' me'll be glad to favor ye with the history of the place any time but the mean-time—which happens to be jest our bed-time. Pleasant dreams, Cap'n. Wake up, Joe! That's him, allus."

Joe responded with a grunt, and the twain, stiff-legged from long sitting, dragged themselves off.

Cerdic yawned and shivered synchronously. He was sensible of two hauntings of which Jake Hilder was the less tangible. When, a few minutes later his senses gave up to slumber in the front main bedroom of the "Lake-view," the ashy spectre of a form unknown was guiding him about island shores, bending now and then to pick up something round and yellow in the sand.

He had had his pleasant dreams and awoke to look upon a gorgeous sunrise. He breakfasted early and hastened to obey a quickly-formed purpose. This was nothing less than to look around for a catboat in which to take a trip to the fateful "Reef o' Bones."

Of course it was "Old Jim" Madmus who pointed out the catboat and good-naturedly offered him the use of it indefinitely.

That evening "Old Jim" collected a ten-dollar wager from his partner, Joe.

Cerdic found the moorage easily where a score or more of small craft lay at anchor in the creek. He picked out the one indicated by "Old Jim," and as he struggled to release it from the others he was startled to hear a feminine voice of remarkably sweet quality lilting an Indian song just then popular. The neat coil of halyards become a tangle while he sought to loosen them and gaze about at the same time in search for the source of the melody. A gleam of sunlight just then glanced over the tree-tops and lighted the line of boats on the opposite shore. He was attracted by the name, "Helen Ryder," at the prow of the very pretty yacht. Sizing up the details of its elegance, his gaze was checked sharply at the cabin entrance. The charming possessor of the voice emerged from it and the full gleam of sunlight fell upon her auburn hair.

The song broke off into a peal of merry laughter and Cerdic saw two mischievous eyes regarding him with unfeigned amusement—and he realized

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