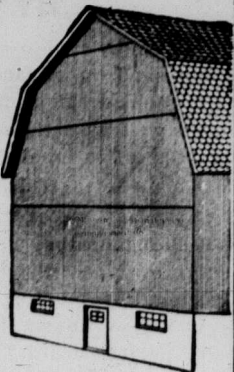


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A Forest Free Lance

A NOVELETTE

By ALBERT M. TREYNOR

Synopsis of Previous Chapters

Gerald Peyton, a lumberman, has an option on 75,000 acres of timber land and has invested all his capital in a mill and logging road. The bank has promised to lend him the money which he requires to take up the option, but at the last minute, thru the influence of Grimes and Gottschalk, otherwise the lumber trust, the loan is held up for a few days. Peyton's only hope is to get the option extended and wires his daughter Glendora to find James Kernan, the owner of the land, and arrange the extension. Kernan, however, has been taken into the woods by Grimes, but Glendora falls in with Caldwell Chivington, a surveyor, who has just been discharged by Grimes and Gottschalk because he refused to swear to a false survey, and together they board a workmen's train for the camp. They are given a hostile reception, and after a desperate fight between Chivington and Deems, the woods boss, they discover that Kernan and Grimes have left the camp by wagon. To prevent Glendora and Chivington following Kernan to town they are locked in the roundhouse by Grimes and his men. They escape by taking possession of a locomotive and breaking thru the doors with the engine.

CHAPTER VII.

Blindly Into the Night

"God bless Bessie!" breathed Chivington thankfully, as he let the engine race down the track toward Hattiesburg.

"Father will see that she never, never regrets this night," murmured Glendora in a shaking voice. "She couldn't have had more than half a minute to turn the switch. Oh, I pray she got away safely!"

"Don't you worry about Bessie, miss," Potter comforted her. "She can take care of herself."

With Potter acting as volunteer fireman and Chivington at the throttle, the engine was sweeping ahead swiftly, and Hattiesburg was only ten miles away.

They had covered more than a mile

of the distance when Chivington suddenly shut off the steam and set the brakes.

"What the matter?" asked Glendora anxiously.

"The telegraph wire," he explained briefly. "We'll be much safer if we prevent their sending any more messages."

The engine came to a standstill on the lonely road, and Chivington, snatching an ax from the tender, jumped to the ground.

"I'll be only a minute," he called, making his way across the track.

He groped thru a patch of underbrush and finally came to the rough pine pole which carried the telegraph wires. Quickly working his way to the top, he clung to the swaying support with his legs and began hacking at the wires.

"We're all right now," he called cheerily as he rejoined Glendora and Potter a little later. "I've cut both the telephone and telegraph wires. No chance of their sending any word to Hattiesburg. I guess we've got Deems helpless at last."

"We've got to be awfully careful, tho," Potter reminded him. "For the last few nights they've been running a train of empties out to Twenty-Mile Camp. They haven't any regular schedule, and she's liable to come thru any minute."

"Lord!" ejaculated Chivington. "They'll not be able to stop her now that I've cut the wires, and a head-on collision would be a nice finish for our little jaunt! There's a siding near here, isn't there, Potter?"

"About two miles ahead."

"We'll have to run for it then," declared Chivington.

He opened the throttle and for five minutes the engine fairly danced over the rails. At his orders Glendora and Potter stationed themselves in the rear of the cab, ready to jump at an instant's notice.

Chivington crouched forward in his seat with one hand on the brakes, glaring nervously ahead and with every sense alert. When they finally reached the siding his forehead was damp and cold, and his fingers trembled as he shut off the steam.

"There's nothing quite as hair-raising as running wild on a schedule of chance!" he muttered, as they clattered over the switch, leaving the way clear for the Twenty-Mile logging-train. "Please the powers now, we won't have to wait long!"

"I'm beginning to feel we'll never see Hattiesburg!" lamented Glendora. "What a night this has been!"

The train of flat cars was much later than they had expected. They might have run to Hattiesburg twice had they dared take the chance before the headlight of the on-coming locomotive finally gleamed out of the darkness.

Chivington's engine was without a light, save the glow from the firebox, and that, from the main line, could not be seen. The extra rumbled past the siding without a stop.

When they once more resumed their trip to Hattiesburg, Chivington's watch showed it was nearly midnight.

They finished the rest of the journey without interruption, and left the engine standing on a siding at the outskirts of town.

"Miss Peyton and I are going to hunt Kernan," Chivington told Potter. "Do you mind waiting with the engine until we come back?"

"Of course not," answered Potter. "Good luck to you!"

"Good-bye, Mr. Potter; we'll be back soon," called Glendora as she took Chivington's arm.

They left the yards and hurried thru the silent streets.

"If we fail now," whispered the girl, "it will be only because fate is against us. But, whether we fail or not, I want to tell you that you are the bravest and truest man I have ever known."

Chivington did not trust himself to reply, and they walked on in a silence.

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