

The Luck of Dead-End Camp

A tale of '98—written for The Western Home Monthly by Edith G. Bayne

from his point of vantage a full view of the impending tragedy. The biggest boy—all foolish grin and a thatch of straw-colored hair—picked up the puppy, "hefted" him professionally, and remarked that a two-pound stone would do it. The puppy barked at this—his absurd baby bark—as if he flouted their judgment of his weight. He was game despite his tender years, and when they handled him roughly he warned them—in his high treble—and slapped at them with clumsy paws. He had no claims whatever to birth, proletariat was written all over him, but he was so brave a soldier of fortune—making the best of his last desperate chances—that Robert wondered at their hardness of heart, even considering their advanced age. If this had happened before his own humiliating experiences of the morning, it is not improbable that the self-confidence he had always enjoyed in such full measure would have prompted him to appeal to them. But so deeply had his chagrin taken root that he felt the puppy would have no chance whatever with such a social pariah as himself for a champion.

If only Judge Wolcott had not come, perhaps his mother would have given him ten cents and he could have acquired the puppy by lawful purchase. The biggest boy now pulled a piece of gunny sacking from his pocket, put a stone in the middle of it, sprawled the puppy on the stone, and began bunching the ends. The impudent treble bark had turned now into a whine, a terrified whine, as this wail from the underworld of dogs saw it was all up with him. Robert had experienced some moments himself that morning that made him feel very close to the little dog, and something in his breast swelled and made him feel like fighting, even with such odds against him. There they were, three great brutes of boys almost as big as men, and here he was "no bigger'n a pint cup," as Mammy Lucy always said—but he couldn't stay in the grass a minute longer. "Say, whatcher fellows doin' to that dog?"

The boys looked up; then they laughed at the little figure with matted hair and eyes red from crying.

"We're drownin' a pup, little Johnny-jump-up," the boy with the shock of hair said, and the two others laughed with glee.

"Won't you give him to me? I ain't got er dog."

"We ain't givin' away dawgs to-day. We're drownin' 'em."

Now all the Little Defenders had been duly grounded in arguments to deal with such atrocity as this, but to save his life Robert couldn't remember one. He could only stand there, as the boy said, like a Johnny-jump-up, and plead his own dogless condition as a reason why the drowning should not proceed.

"Oh, pitch the pup in, an' stop talkin'," sung out next to the biggest boy. "Here, gimme him." And he made a grab at the whining bundle.

David minus sling or stone desperately pulled himself together and began to harangue the triple measure of Goliath on the opposite bank—one of the arguments had begun to come back to him.

"Now how'd you feel if a great big giant you'd no chance against was to come along an' pick you up an' drown you?"

This proposition was apparently one of the most amusing that the trio had ever heard advanced. They doubled up, they hooted, they shouted. In language far from polite they advised David to run home to his mother, and when a great big giant caught and drowned them, they'd let him know how it felt.

But Robert stood his ground. "Well, he ain't done anything to you—if you're drownin' things, why don't you get something of your own size?"

The older boy, the one who held the whining bundle, made a playful move as though to cross the creek and grab the Little Defender. In doing this he stumbled, dropped the gunny sack, and out rolled the cause of all the trouble, blinking joyously at again seeing the daylight. But his joy was short lived, for the second biggest boy stooped, picked up the puppy and flung him down the stream as far as he could throw.

Robert saw the black ball go whirling by. His fighting blood still up, without a moment's hesitation he plunged after it. This was more than the trio had bargained for—the special pleader had worn an immaculate sailor suit and shiny ties, and these things on the part of a very young gentleman bespeak watchful feminine

eyes. They had no wish for a possible encounter with an irate mother or nurse. But the water was not deep enough to do him any harm, and consoling themselves with this thought, they ran as fast as they could.

The water in which Robert floundered was cold, though not very deep—but there was nothing to be seen of the black ball with beady eyes. The creek bottom was soft and muddy. Robert scrambled around for a more substantial foothold, stepping into a hole and went under, and water filled his mouth and nose. He choked and spluttered; then, with a mighty effort, he got up, feeling more drowned than when he was under. He grabbed a bunch of lush grass, and a couple of yards ahead saw a wet black head and two little paws working manfully. Robert did not dare risk another hole; he scrambled along the bank till he was opposite the puppy, and again plunged after him.

And for once the Fates proved generous—even lavish—for after their scurvy treatment of the morning this was the moment they chose for the now thoroughly repentant Picnic to discover the missing president. They had been searching for him through the grove. At the red farmhouse they inquired, but the farmer could tell them nothing of a little boy in a blue



Hudson Bay Mt. and Glacier in B.C. G.T.P. Railway

sailor suit. The friend of Robert's mother who had promised to be personally responsible for him was nearly distracted; she had told Molly Renshaw some awful truths about her manners, the campfire was out, the chocolate grew cold untasted, the ants alone enjoyed the picnic.

Then some one had proposed searching along the creek, and though every one knew that the water was not deep, the ladies had shuddered and the minister had hurried forward! "Robbie!" "Robbie!" "Robburt!" they had called, but Robert had not heard. The minister saw him first, and started forward; but Robert, triumphantly holding the puppy—now his puppy—was already scrambling toward the bank. The minister did not mind getting himself dirty a bit, but pulled the president right up to his black coat, puppy and all; the lady who had promised to be responsible cried; the boys rushed forward to greet the former pariah; the puppy cuddled to its protector—it was a magnificent moment for Robert, Little Defender!

"Robert, laughter is often an expression of the unthinking," the minister said, and the Picnic hung its head like those brutal boys, for they, too, had laughed at a small weakness of this gallant Defender. "I am proud to shake hands with you." And the minister not only shook hands, but patted Robert's muddy shoulder.

"Hurrah fo' th' pwethideth! Hurrah fo' th' pwethideth!" It was actually that little minx, Molly Renshaw, who had started all the trouble in the first place, that was now leading the applause. The hurrahing proved as contagious as hurrahing usually is, and while it was at its very height, Robert and "Picnic"—they had decided on that name for the puppy—were led in triumph back to the grove and the deserted baskets.

It lay in Devil Valley, between two mountain spurs and you could see it for twenty miles and more as you mushed up the trail, because of Watch-tower Rock that kept guard over the pass. This was a tall, top-heavy mass of stone crested with a lump of rock that had been roughly hewn in the earth's upheaval to resemble a giant human head, and that seemed to cling there only by luck or the merest neck of shale.

None of us had ever climbed Watch-tower Rock. We were all too busy panning the streams below for the bright yellow metal, and the old campaigners who had been halfway up and there had balked, told tales of the rough and uninviting ascent where they had had to cling by fingers and toes to the crevices in the sheer sides and where boulders were loosened at a breath and came hurtling down in great bounds, sending showers of sand and pebbles in their wake. Then, gold was not usually found at such altitudes and it was gold we were all looking for—not beautiful scenery.

"Yust wait," said Olson ominously "someone sure goin' to git Saw-Ridge. He ain't got no friends in Yukon." This was true. Several of our wilder spirits had registered a vow to "get" that individual whom we knew only by the appellation of Saw-Ridge, by reason of his claim being situated on a ridge of rock that was regularly serrated like a mammoth saw. Only that he was always armed to the teeth and was not slow in drawing a gun, and was besides the ugliest fighter in the gold region, he would have bitten the dust—or rather the snow—months back.

"Tenderfoot yust come in," remarked Jakey, presently, as he shovelled mulligan into his mouth with a huge clasp-knife.

"Sol!" observed Bellamy, with a yawn.

The rest of us either smiled grimly or swore roundly at this intelligence. Another fool come in to starve!

"A bloomin' cockney?" asked Dick, patiently.

"Naw—he ban Canuck."

Silence fell for the space of a few moments. Then Dick Delaney rose from amidst the cloud of shag-tobacco smoke, stretched himself and yawned.

"Well, g'nite—I'm off to bunk," he said, sourly.

"Batter go ofer to Cook's, boys," here spoke up Jakey, as he climbed down from his stool, having partaken of a very satisfactory supper, which was his first meal that day. We did not eat, any of us, three times a day, then.

"What's goin' on over there?" demanded Dick.

"A raffles."

"Tuh! Poor old Cook! What's he raffin' now?" asked Bellamy.

"A dog."

"A dog! Once thet general store of his was rakin' in potfuls of money. Look at it now! So he's raffin' one of his dogs!" Bellamy sighed and then spat vociferously.

"Come on, boys," cried Dick, "if there's goin' to be a show of any sort we wanta be right in at the front!"

"Yes, come along," subjoined another.

So we all swung out into the April twilight and took our noisy way along the rough road-path where the winter snow was fast melting into the gumbo, towards the General Store, the dim coal oil lamps of which were casting a dull patch of light across the road.

"One hundred—going—going at one hundred!" sang Cook himself who wielded the hammer.

We heard his voice even before we crowded in at the door. Quite a crowd had collected about a handsome malemute dog, that looked around him with great ox-like brown eyes, and wagged a friendly tail whenever someone patted his head.

"Who bids one hundred and five?" demanded the Hammer, in crisp business-like tones.

"I bid," returned a little gray-haired prospector, a noted dog-fancier.

"One hundred and ten!" croaked a large coarse-lipped man in leather overalls and sombrero.

He swung a thonged whip idly in one hand and smiled in sardonic triumph at his competitor.

"Going!—Going to Saw-Ridge at one hundred and ten!" chanted Cook.

The little prospector looked regretfully at the dog. He hesitated. Then with one last determined effort of self-sacrifice he bid one hundred and fifteen, and looked fearfully at his counter-bidder.

"One hundred and twenty!" retorted Saw-Ridge.

There was a half-minute's silence. It seemed as though even the callous Cook were loth to give the beautiful canine into the keeping of a notorious horse-beater.

"Who bids higher?"

No one spoke.

"Going at one hundred and twenty!"

Going—going—g—

"Hold on!" cried a new voice.

The crowd turned. Standing a head taller than the tallest was a newcomer who had just pushed his way in. Saw-Ridge looked around in surly surprise and beheld a man, with a clean-cut brown face, wearing a sheepskin-lined corduroy coat and a shabby wideawake.

"Who the devil are you?" he inquired, looking the stranger up and down with undisguised scorn.