

A Forest Free Lance

A NOVELETTE

By ALBERT M. TREYNOR

Continued from Last Week

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.

The conductor came out, scowling. "No passengers goes this trip," he growled. "Them's the orders from Deems."

"Oh, come now, Jerry," remonstrated Chivington, "you surely have room for this young lady."

"Lots of room, but she don't ride!" shouted the conductor. He leaned out from the platform and signalled the engineer. "All right; let her go!" he called. Then he again faced Glendora. "Come on, now!" he exclaimed roughly, "get off of here!"

The engine jerked ahead with a whirring of drive-wheels. The light train gathered headway quickly, and Glendora, her face white but her eyes flashing defiantly, held her position on the platform.

"Didn't I tell you to get off?" yelled the conductor. "Now I've got to stop to put you off. If you was a man I'd do it without stoppin'."

He started to run thru the caboose, but Chivington reached out and seized him by the collar. He pulled the struggling man back to the platform and forced him down to the lower step. "Well, I guess we'll ride," he declared. "And we'll do it without your company. So-long, Jerry!"

The conductor soared off the step, propelled by a hearty shove from Chivington, struck a sawdust pile and rolled over and over. When he picked himself up he had been left far behind, and the engineer failed to hear his frantic shouts above the rumble of the train.

Chivington chuckled and turned to the girl.

"I'm glad I was fired!" he cried. "I've been aching to do that for two years. But it wouldn't have been right while I was on the pay-roll."

He drew her into the caboose and they made themselves comfortable on one of the benches by a window, watching the town fade into the distance.

"I wonder why they don't want us to ride?" asked Glendora uneasily as they passed into the first stretch of forest.

"They've heard, somehow, of your reason for wanting to go," answered Chivington. "They'll try to check-mate you at every turn now."

His features hardened in an expression of grimness which the girl could not read.

"Deems will be next," he observed. "He'll try to balk us in the woods. I'm not on the pay-roll, and I'll meet him more than half-way, let him go as far as he likes."

CHAPTER III.

The Fight in the Woods

When the train brought up in its yarding at Fifteen Mile Camp, Chivington and Glendora started along the track toward Deems' office, half a mile further up the line.

They were halted by Tom Masters, the camp superintendent, who came running from his shack near the machine shed.

"Here, you!" he shouted. "Deems said there were no passengers to come out this run. Oh, it's you, Chivington. Where's Jerry?"

Chivington smiled at the mention of the conductor's name.

"Oh, he didn't come all the way with us, Masters," he explained lightly. "I think he stopped to pick magnolia-blossoms by the track. Or maybe he had something else in mind—he didn't say. But he seemed in an awful hurry to get off the train."

"Darned funny what happened to him," muttered the superintendent, suspiciously. He hailed the engineer, who was standing in the back of the cab sluicing his face in a bucket of water.

"Didn't you bring Jerry along?" he shouted.

The engineer poked a dripping head out the window. "Ain't he along?" he demanded in astonishment. "He gave the go-ahead signal at Hattiesburg all right. I thought he was in the caboose."

The superintendent shook his head in a puzzled manner. Then he glanced doubtfully at Glendora. Chivington broke in before he could speak again.

"Do you know Kernan, Masters?" he asked.

"Sure I know him," replied Masters. "I saw him with Deems a few minutes ago. I—"

He paused and turned to a youth who came sprinting down the track



Deems flung himself down the steps to meet him

from the superintendent's shack. The newcomer drew him aside, and the pair whispered together for a minute.

Then Masters came back and confronted Chivington loweringly.

"Just got a telephone message from Deems," he snapped. "Jerry telegraphed how he happened to be left behind. Picking magnolia-blossoms, hey? Deems'll fix you for that. You been fired, too, ain't you? They wired that in from town. Well, I'll tell you now, young feller you can't put over any funny business on us out here."

"When you see me putting over any funny business, Masters, you stop me," invited Chivington. "Now tell me where Deems is."

The camp superintendent stared back shrewdly.

"Deems is up at the company's store in the north valley," he asserted.

"That isn't true, Masters," declared Chivington; "there's only one telephone in camp besides the one in your shack. The second one is at Deems' office, so he couldn't very well have telephoned you just now from the company's store. I'll take a chance of finding him at his office."

Without waiting for further words with the discomfited superintendent,

Chivington and Glendora started again to walk up the track.

"We'll have to hurry," Chivington urged the girl. "Masters will phone Deems we are coming, and they'll manage to get Kernan away before we see him, under some pretext."

He looked over his shoulder. "There! what did I tell you?" he exclaimed. "Masters is running for his telephone. I'll sprint ahead; it'll only take me about ten minutes to reach Deems' office, and maybe I'll be in time."

He started forward at a brisk trot, but the girl kept at his side without effort.

"Don't worry about me," she laughed; "I went in for athletics at school, and I can keep up this pace for a few minutes."

Chivington watched her picking her way over the uneven ties, and smiled approvingly.

"We'll work this thing out together," he exulted. "Why, I don't know of anything I couldn't do if you were always along to encourage me."

They were passing thru the temporary yards where the company's rolling stock was kept in the woods. There was a low shed of rough planks where three Shay engines were quartered nights. Just beyond was a glowing forge and a roughly-constructed

blue-prints and pencilled memoranda scattered about. He dropped his papers with a sharp exclamation when he saw the man and girl, and stood up, facing them.

"Well, what do you want?" he snarled.

"I want to see Kernan," answered Chivington. Both he and the girl were panting from their long run.

"Kernan!" he sneered. "You don't stand much chance of seeing Kernan tonight."

"Is Kernan in your office?" demanded Chivington, advancing a step.

"Think I'd let you see him if he was?" His lips twisted into an expression of coarse sarcasm. "So you've hooked up with the Peytons, eh? Didn't take you long to turn against the company after they kicked you off the pay-roll. Well, you'll see what good it'll do you."

"I asked a question," flashed Chivington. "I want an answer quick!"

"Even if you found Kernan," parleyed Deems, "you'd get nothing by it. I know what you want out of him. Well, I fixed him this afternoon. He promised that seventy-five thousand acres to Grimes when the Peyton option runs out tomorrow at 6 a.m."

Chivington laughed comfortably. "For a bluff that's pretty feeble," he declared. "If Kernan had made you any promises you wouldn't be so anxious to keep us from seeing him."

"You'll get out of this camp right now!" shouted Deems.

"Oh, I guess not!" said Chivington, easily. "Not till I've seen my man."

He started toward the house, and Deems flung himself down the steps to meet him. They came together with a thud and grappled.

As Chivington felt his opponent's muscular arm circle his neck he called to the girl, who had been standing unflinchingly by:

"Go into the house and see if Kernan's there. I'll take care of Deems."

Without waiting to see her answering nod he twisted from the grasp of the woods boss and caught him around the shoulders. Deems was noted thru many miles of forest country as a man of great fighting prowess. But he had never before tackled the active, broad-shouldered Chivington, and he was unprepared for the muscular agility of his antagonist.

The pair struggled silently for a moment, and Chivington finally succeeded in forcing his grip downward until he had pinioned the other man's arms to his side. Then he jammed his knee behind Deems and slowly drove him to the ground. In another second he held the woodsman, helpless and panting, in his embrace.

Chivington retained his advantage until he saw Glendora come out of the bungalow with a look of disappointment in her face.

"He's not there?" inquired Chivington, releasing Deems and springing to his feet.

She shook her head. The house is empty."

Deems staggered from the ground, his face distorted with rage.

"I'll fix you for this!" he threatened, mopping his face; "I'll fix you—you hear?"

Chivington paid no attention. He was looking at Glendora anxiously.

A woman came around the corner of the bungalow. She wore a faded blue Mother Hubbard dress, and her pinched, weatherbeaten face was half concealed in a drooping sunbonnet.

"Here's your wash, Mr. Deems," she said, dropping a large bundle on the front stoop.

Chivington looked at her. "Why, how do you do, Mrs. Potter?" he greeted. "Where's your husband?" he inquired.

"Oh, it's Mr. Chivington!" the woman smiled. "Well, Mr. Potter he

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