

"BELA"

"Let them curse," said Bela. "Curse 'em! They can't catch us. Already they row in half an hour. Get 'em soon!"

"They've got a spare man to change to," Sam reminded her. He was now as keen to give them the slip as Bela. The mainland ahead promised freedom; not only freedom from his late masters, but freedom from her, too.

Looking over their shoulders, they saw the steersman change to one of the oars. Thereafter the rowboat came on with renewed speed, but the dugout seemed to draw steadily ahead.

Sam's heart rose. Bela, however, searching the wide sky and the water for weather signs, began to look anxious.

"What is it?" asked Sam.

"Wind goin' down," she replied, grimly.

Sure enough, presently the heavy sail began to sag, and they could feel the dugout lose way under them. They dugout involuntarily. At the same moment their pursuers perceived the slackening of the wind and shouted in a different key.

The wind freshened again, and once more died away. Now the dugout forged ahead; now the rowboat began to overhaul them. It was nip and tuck down the lake between sail and oars.

The shore they were making for began to loom nearer, but the puffs of wind were coming at longer and longer intervals, and finally they ran into a glassy calm, though they could see slants of wind all about them, a situation to drive pursued steers frantic.

Bela paddled manfully, but her single blade was no match for two long oars. The sail was a handicap now, and they could not take it down without capsizing the dug-out. The oarsmen came up rapidly with derisive shouts in anticipation of a speedy triumph.

"You've got your gun," muttered Sam. "You're a better shot than any of them. Use it while you have the advantage."

She shook her head. "No shoot. Too much trouble make already."

"Plug their boat, then," said Sam. She still refused. "They die in cold water if boat sink."

"We might as well jump overboard, then," he said, bitterly.

"Look!" she cried, suddenly. "Wind comin'!"

Behind the rowboat a dark blue streak was creeping over the surface of the lake.

"Ah, wind, come quick! Come quick!" Bela murmured involuntarily. "A candle for the altar! My rabbit-skin robe to Pere Lacombe!"

At the same time she did not cease paddling.

The rowers saw the breeze coming, too, and bending their backs, sent the water flying from their oars. They managed to keep ahead of it. Both boats were now within a furlong of the river-head. The race seemed over. The rowboat drew even with the dug-out, and they looked into their pursuers' faces, red with exertion and distorted in cruel triumph.

The steersman was Joe. "Don't stop," he yelled to the heaving oarsmen, "or she'll give us the slip yet! Get ahead and cut her off! You damned dish-washer, we've got you now!" he added, for Sam's benefit.

With a sharp crack, Big Jack's car broke off short. He capsized backward into Shand knocking him off his seat as well. At the same instant the whispering breeze came up and the blanket belled out.

Shand and Jack were for the moment inextricably entangled in the bottom of the boat. Emotional Joe cursed and stamped and tore at his hair like a lunatic. Loud laughter broke from Sam and Bela as they sailed away.

Joe, beside himself, snatched up his gun and opened fire. A bullet went through the blanket. Bela and Sam instinctively ducked. Perhaps they prayed; more likely they did not realize their danger until it was over. Other shots followed, but Joe was shooting wild. He could not aim directly at Sam, because Bela was between. He emptied his magazine without doing any damage.

In the reaction that followed Bela and Sam laughed. In that moment they were one.

"Feels funny to have a fellow sling lead at you, eh?" said Sam.

"Muscleosis say after a man hear bullet whistle he is grown," answered Bela.

A few minutes later the river received them. There was a straight reach of a third of a mile, followed by impassable, bewildering corkerew bends all the way to the head of the rapids, thirty miles or more. Out in the lake behind them, their pursuers

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were struggling forward, sculling with the remaining oar.

Bela watched anxiously to see what they would do when they got in the river. If they knew enough to go ashore and take to the land trail, it was possible that even on foot they might cut her off at a point below where the trail touched the river.

Apparently, however, they meant to follow by water. And the last sight she had of them before rounding the first bend they were still sculling.

The river pursued its incredibly circuitous course between cut banks fringed with willows. All the country above, invisible to them in the dugout, smooth current carried them on.

On the outside of each bend the bank was steep to the point of overhanging; on the inside there was invariably a mud flat made gay with water flowers. So crooked was the river that Jack-Knife Mountain, the only object they could see above the willows, was now on their right hand, now on their left.

On the turns they sometimes got a current of wind in their faces and came to a dead stop. Now that they no longer required it, the wind was momentarily strengthening.

"Wouldn't it be better to take the sail down?" Sam suggested.

"Can't take it down without land on shore," Bela answered sullenly.

Sam comprehending what was the matter, chuckled inwardly. On the next bend, seeing her struggles with the baffling air-currents, he asked teasingly: "Well, why don't you go ashore and take it down?"

"If I land, you promise not run away?" she said.

Sam laughed from a light heart. "Not on your life!" he said. "I'm my own master now."

Bela had no more to say. "Where are you bound for?" Sam presently asked.

"Down river," she answered. "I'll have to be leaving you," said

Sam, mockingly. "I'm going the other way. To the head of the lake."

"If you gack they catch you."

"I'll lie low till they're thrown off the scent. I'll walk around the north shore."

"If you stay with me little while, pretty soon we meet police comin' up," she suggested. "Then they can't touch you."

"Much obliged," replied Sam. "I've no fancy to be jumped on at night again and tied up like a roasting fowl."

"I promise I not do that again," said Bela.

"Sure!" retorted Sam. "No doubt you've got plenty other tricks just as good."

"If you look at me you see I speak truth," she murmured. "I your friend, Sam."

The threatened break in her voice brought all his old disquiet surging up again. As he put it, he suspected her of "trying to put one over on him again." "I don't want to look at you!" he returned, with a harsh laugh.

An adverse puff of wind blew them into an overhanging willow-bush, which became entangled with the sail and the stay-bope. Sam saw his chance. Seizing the branches, he aged to swing ashore at the cost only of wet ankles.

A sharp cry was wrung from Bela. "Sam, don't go!"

Gaining a sure footing on the bank, he faced her, laughing. "Well, how about it now?"

There was nothing inscrutable about her face then. It worked with emotion like any woman's.

"Don't go by yourself," she pleaded. "You not know this country. You got nothin'. No grub! No gun! No blanket!"

"I can walk it in two days or three," he said. "I'll build a fire to sleep by. You can give me a little grub if you want. I'll trade my pocket-knife for it. It's all I've got. You got me into this, anyhow."

"No sell grub," she answered, sullenly. "Give all you want if you come with me."

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"No sell grub," she answered, sullenly. "Give all you want if you come with me."

"Very well, keep it then," he snapped, turning away.

Her face broke up again. "No, no! I not mad at you!" she cried, hurriedly. "I give you food. But wait; we got talk." She drove the canoe on a mud-bank beyond the willows and scrambled out.

Sam, scowling and hardening at her approach, was careful to keep his distance. He suspected her of a design to detain him by force.

"There's been too much talk," he growled. "You'd better hustle on down. They'll be here soon."

"Sam, don't go!" she begged. "What you do at head of lake? Not get no job but cook. Stay w' me. We got boat and gun and blankets. We need no more. I show you all w'at to do. I show you fishin' and huntin'. When winter come I show you how to trap good fur. You will be rich with me. I not bot'er you no more. I do everything you want."

In her distress Sam's angry eyes chose to see only chagrin at the prospect of his escaping her. At the same time her beseeching face filled him with a wild emotion that he would not recognize. His only recourse lay in instant flight.

"Cut it out! What good does it do?" he cried, harshly. "I tell you I'm going to the head of the lake."

"All right, I tak you there," she said eagerly. "More quick as you can walk, too. Half a mile down the river there is little backwater to hide. We let those men go by and then come

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back. I do w'at you want, Sam."

"Will you give me a little grub, or won't you?" he insisted. "I'd rather starve than go with you!"

She burst into tears. "All right, I give you food," she said. She turned back to the dugout, and, throwing back the cover of the grub-box, put what bread and smoked fish she had left into a cotton bag.

Sam awaited her, raging with that intolerable bitterness that a tender and obstinate man feels at the sight of a woman's tears.

She offered him the little package of food, and a blanket at well. "Tak my o'er blanket," she said, humbly. "I can get more."

He impatiently shook his head, refusing to meet the lovely, imploring eyes. "Here," he said, offering the pocket-knife. "For the food."

With a fresh burst of weeping she knocked it out of his hand, and covered her face with her arm. Sam strode away, blinded and deafened by the confusion of his feelings. His face was as stubborn as stone.

CHAPTER XIII.

When Sam had passed out of sight around the willows, Bela, still shaken by sobs, went down on her hands and knees to search for the penknife she had spurned. Finding it, she kissed it and thrust it inside her dress.

Going to the dugout, she stretched out in it, and gave herself up to grief. Not for very long, however. Gradually the sobs stilled, and finally she sat up with the look of one who has something to do. For a long time thereafter she sat, chin in hand, thinking hard with tight lips and inward-looking eyes.

Sounds from around the bend above aroused her. She heard the working of an oar in its socket and the cautious voices of men. An alert look came into her face.

She glanced over the gunwale at her face in the water and disarranged hair a little. Flushing herself down, she commenced to weep again, but with an altered note; this was self-conscious grief addressed to the ears of others.

The three men finding her thus, gaped in boundless astonishment. It was anything but what they expected to find. They peered into the bushes for a sign of Sam.

"What the devil is the matter?" demanded Big Jack.

"Where is Sam?" cried Joe.

Bela answered both questions at once. "He leave me," she sobbed, with heart-breaking effect.

"Left you?" they echoed, stupidly.

"Gone away," wailed Bela. "Say he done with me for good!"

Black Shand and Jack were genuinely decomposed at the sight of her tears. Joe, with more hardihood, laughed.

"Serve you well right!" said he.

Big Jack had the oar. He drove the boat on the bank alongside the dug-out, and they climbed out. Jack and Shand went up the bank.

"He can't have got far," said the former.

A wide sea of grass was revealed to them, stretching to pine ridges on the horizon. In all the expanse there was no sign of any figure, but the dense willows marking the tortuous course of the river provided plenty of cover both up and down stream.

"Which way did he go?" Jack called down.

"I don't know," said Bela. "Down river, I think."

Below, Joe, full of bitter jealousy, was still upbraiding Bela. Jack returned, scowling.

"Cut it out!" he said, peremptorily. "I will get to the bottom of this." To Bela he said, harshly: "What do you expect us to do for you, girl? You promised us a fair answer yesterday morning, and in the night you skipped with the cook."

Bela raised an innocent-seeming face.

"What you mean, skip?" she asked. "Lit out, cloped, ran away," said Jack, grimly.

"I never did!" she cried, indignantly. "Wite carry me off."

They stared at her open-mouthed again.

"What I want w'it a cook?" she went on, quickly. "I want marry a man w'it something. He is a bad man. He tak' me away. Now he say he done w'it me! Tears threatened again. They were only half convinced.

"How did it happen?" Jack demanded.

"In the afternoon he find my cache where I stay by the little creek," she said. "Talk to me like a friend. I think all right. But in the night he come back when I sleep, and tie my hands and my feet and my mouth, and throw me in my boat and tak' away! I here him!"

"Then it was you we heard cry out?" exclaimed Joe.

"Sure!" she asserted, readily. "The handkerchief come loose. But soon he stop em."

"He did it just to spite us!" cried Joe furiously. "He didn't want her himself! I always said he had too proud a stomach for a cook. Worked against us at night like a rat! I wonee you often enough!"

"Hold on!" said Big Jack, scowling. "There's more to this." He turned to Bela, accusingly. "You were paddling the dugout when you came to the river yesterday. I saw you plain!"

"Soon as the wind begin to blow he cut me loose," she said. "He can't make boat go. He tak' my gun and point to me and mak' me paddle."

"The damned blackguard!" muttered Shand.

Jack was still unconvinced. "But

to-day," he said. "When my oar busted you laughed. I was lookin' at you."

Bela hung her head. "He tak' me away," she murmured. "I think he marry me then. I good girl. I think got marry him."

"No marry!" cried Bela, with a fine assumption of anger. "He throw me down. Speak bad to me! I hate him! I want punish!"

"Sounds fishy somehow," muttered Jack, hesitating.

"You come w'it me," she said, shrugging. "See all I do."

"Maybe the idea is to get us away for the boat so he can sneak back and swipe it," suggested Joe.

"You foolish!" said Bela, with a glance of scorn. "You can walk to Johany Gagnon's and get your horses. Let me may stay here to watch the boats."

"Come on!" cried Shand, from the top of the bank. "Catch him first and decide what we'll do to him after."

"Go on," said Bela, sullenly. "I not track him w'it you give him me for punish."

"You swear you'll hand him over to the police," demanded Jack, sternly.

"I swear it!" she replied instantly looking him in the eye and holding up her hand.

"All right. Come on, I'm satisfied," assented Jack.

"Wait!" she said. "You promise to me you not hurt him. Give me your hand."

She forced all three to shake hands on it, Joe submitting with an ill grace.

"Now, come on," said Shand, impatiently.

"Leave your guns," commanded Bela. "Maybe he run. You get mad and shoot. I want no blood."

Jack acceded at her with reawakened suspicion. "I keep my gun with me," he growled.

"He got no gun," sneered Bela, scornfully. "You afraid catch him w'it hands?"

"You said he had your gun," said Big Jack.

"He give it back," said Bela. "He is bad man; but no steal. My big gun, my little gun—see?" She exhibited them.

Jack knew that Sam owned no gun; still he was suspicious. "If you had your gun why you didn't pug him when he left you?" he demanded.

Bela paused for an instant. This was a poser, because in her heart she knew, supposing her story to be true, that she would have shot Sam. She had to think quickly. "I not want no blood," she murmured. "I afraid Pere Lacombe."

It was well done. Big Jack nodded. "You leave your guns, too," he stipulated.

"Sure!" she said, willingly putting them in the dugout. "Leave one man to watch the boats and the guns. Two men and a woman enough to catch a cook, I guess."

The laughed.

Bela was playing for high stakes and her faculties were sharpened to a sword-edge. Every look suggested the wronged woman thirsting for justice. She ostentatiously searched in her baggage, and drawing out a piece of mousseline, cut it into thongs for bonds. Cleverer men than Big Jack and his pals might have been taken in.

"Boys, she's right!" cried Jack. "We don't want no blood on our hands to start off with, if we can see him punished proper. Shand, you stay here. Leg'd off, girl!"

Shand surrogued with a sour look, and came down the bank. It was always tacitly understood between him and Jack that young Joe was not to be trusted alone, so he submitted.

(To be continued.)

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In the above picture are shown the members of the milk committee, organized by the food controller, which has made a careful study of the milk situation in this country, considering such questions as supply, costs of production, utilization, etc. P. B. Tustin, of Winnipeg, the chairman of the committee, is one of the foremost experts on dairy and farm matters in Canada. He is honorary secretary for Western Canada of the Royal Sanitary Institute. He is also a member of the Institute's examining board for Western Canada. Mr. Tustin is chief of the food and dairy division of the city of Winnipeg and manager of the child welfare bureau of that city. W. A. Wilson, of Regina, is dairy commissioner of Saskatchewan, and has done much for the dairy industry in the prairie provinces. Dr. Boucher and Dr. Wigmore are medical health officers of Montreal and Halifax, respectively. Commissioner Hamilton, of St. John, N.B., and Aid. Hamilton, of Vancouver, have both given much time to a study of the milk problem. E. H. Stonehouse, of Toronto, and John Bingham, manager of the Ottawa Dairy, represent the milk producers and the milk distributors, respectively.