

while Bump was teaming in the fields.

Then I recollected how all winter long I had gone the roads from dawn until after dark, in cold and storm and hunger, often without dinner, and as yet without a dollar of pay, and I said to myself,

"Bump, you're just giving me a few weeks' easy time of it. The next thing I know you'll put it all over me."

SOME time about the middle of May the first batch was all run off, the leaches were dribbling lye about as weak as two per cent. beer, and Bump gave instructions to dry down and melt.

"Fire like hell!" was what he said first to me; and afterwards, "Keep a balin them kittles, specially that back fella," which was half full of crystalline black salts.

Very impressive. I understood. There was a power of black salts in those two huge caldrons, the quintessence of hundreds of bushels of ashes, from which Tom Bump calculated to get two large barrels of potash weighing each of them seven hundred lbs. without the barrel, and retailing at the station for seven cents a pound. That was quite three times a lb. what Bump's hogs were worth on the hoof. The net value of that potash gave me a very deep sense of regard for a man who, from such castaway things as ashes, costing him about one and a third cents a bushel, could extract such a commodity.

"Where does the potash go to, Mr. Bump?" I asked him.

"Oh—New York," said he. "That's where she's destined."

That was one of the big words Bump had picked up from being a shipper. I always looked upon him as something different from the common back-farmer. Once every three months he got a letter with a Yankee stamp and a New York postmark. That letter always lay on the cupboard for a month for the neighbours to notice before it was put away on the clock shelf, and it always gave me a feeling that to be on Bump's payroll was a very important connexion.

The smell of black salts all that forenoon made me feel like a he-witch as I rammed the old fireway with dry rails, baled the caldrons fore and aft and hopped about that ashery as though I was one of the greatest practical scientists in North America.

This part of the process was called the drying down, which meant boiling the last ounce of H₂O out of those kettles. When the last puff of steam was scorched out of them, would come the final stage of melting.

"Well, sir," I remarked to Bump at noon, as we gathered for a wash outside the kitchen door, "did yeh notice me raising any steam this morning?"

"Fair to middlin'," says he, cautiously.

Whereat I spit superciliously, saying, as I combed my soused hair, "Well, she's drying down all right."

He said nothing.

"How'd that back kittle behave?" he condescended later through a mouthful of hoecake.

"Humping," says I. "Never saw sich a blasted thing."

I FOLLOWED that with a lingo of description, being a bit excited over some of the scientific aspects of the case. The more I talked the faster Bump bolted his noonday meal. He was but half done his pie when he gobbled the other half and swung out of the house back to the ashery, I after him, wondering if the old party had gone crazy.

When I came to him on top of the kettle arch there was a look of judgment on his old face, and he was baling that aft caldron as though it were a leaky boat in a storm.

"Durn you and y'r scientizin' talk," grunts he, shortly.

"Why so?" says I, poking at the fire.

Down he comes to me as grim as a super-Hun.

"Dang good job I hustled my boots back here,"

was his able reply. "That kittle wuz on the swell. Five mennits previous she'd been clean over and out."

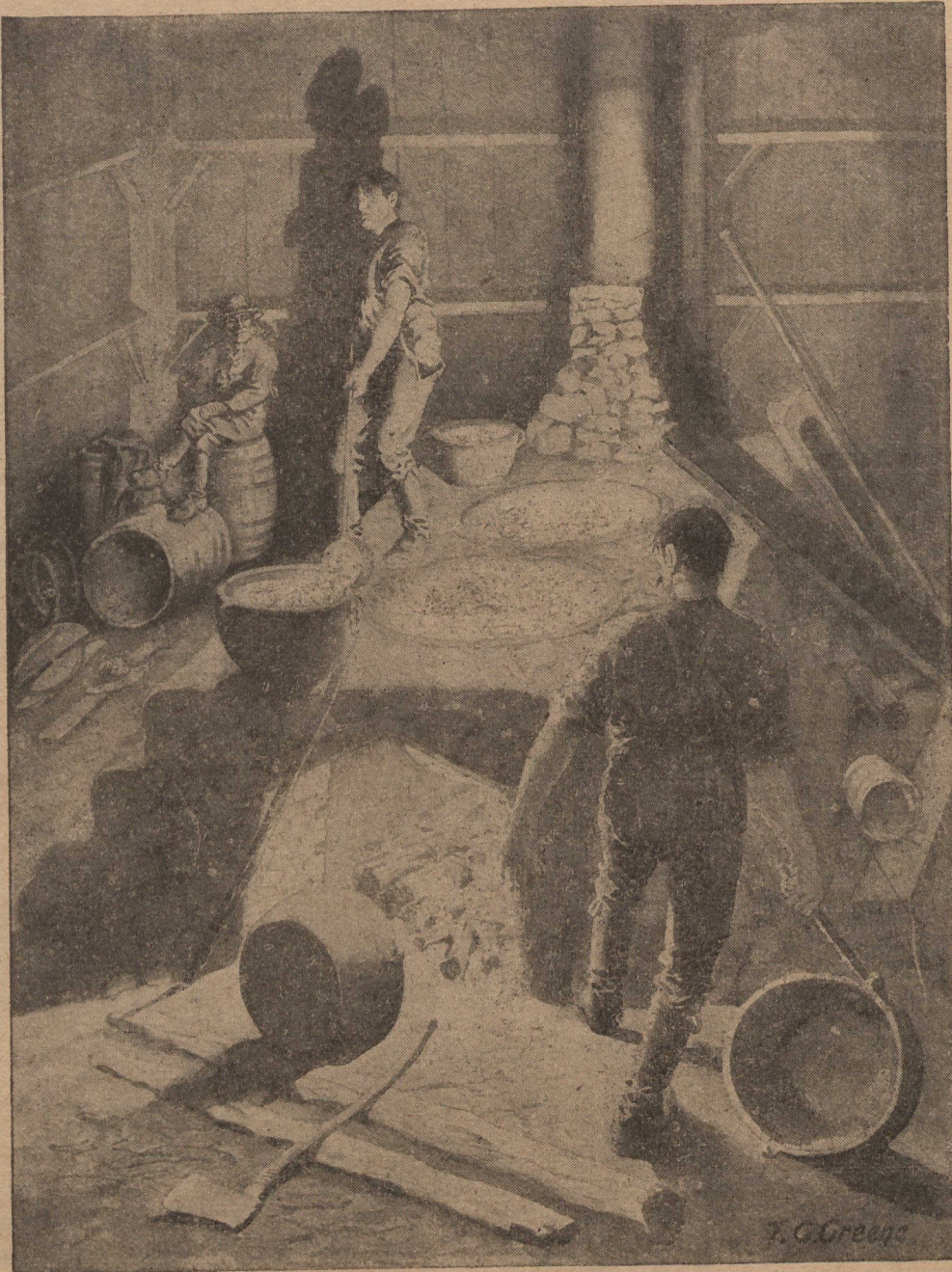
I gulped at my gizzard.

"Any galoot 'ud knowed that," he added.

Cold creeps at my hair.

"We'd a lost seven dollars anyhow," he rammed home to my convicted conscience. "Never should a' left 'er not fer a holy mennit, certainly not fer a hungry belly. I never seen me hike to the house fer dinner days I dried down. No siree. Why the tarnation didn't yeh fetch back a hunk with yeh if yeh had to eat? But that's you every trip—keep y'r mouth mum and never say ay, yes er no to ast anybody that's been through the mill. Greenhorn!"

I now began to realize that for the first time in my acquaintance with him I was beholding Tom Bump mad. His tone was exceedingly ungracious, quite



I knew Bump was bulldozing me over that potash, but I hoped to get even.

lacking in suavity and by no means decorated with those unctuous amiabilities that distinguish the diplomat—so I reflected at High School in after years when writing compositions.

"Well," says I, hurching over to the doorway, "if you don't beat the Dutch!"

Thereupon he glowered at me as though I had been some sort of new beast he had got into his menagerie and informed me,

"By the jumpin' geeswax, young spoopendyke, you don't wanta think you c'n melt potash an' think up po'try at the same time."

This was a further insult. Quite obviously Bump was taking a stab at my odd ideas about chemistry, just because once in a while I used a few co-ordinating phrases.

"All right, Mr. Bump," I answered him. "I ain't so grass-coloured as you think I be"—as a matter of fact, Bump was down the road when I said this or I should have said it much differently. "You're an old stick-in-the-mud. And you ain't got enough gumption in your whole carcass to limber up in the spring. Kind o' weather you oughta be living in every day is slush and a drizzling rain. All you know is black salts. By——"

I forget what I said after that. I was violently busy slamming wood under those kettles. Bump should find out that I was ready for the baling-out of that potash half an hour earlier than he had ever been. From what I could see it was only a matter of a couple of hours before I should be on the fence yelping to Bump to come back and help me dish up this liquid fire that was now beginning to blister and smoke in the kettles. The steam was pretty well gone. The back kettle had ceased to rise. The front one was beginning to swirl towards the centre, a sure sign of Bump that it was dried down, the stage when in former years he used to dip it out as black salts.

I NOW began to observe that my wood was low. Bump had not cautioned me as to the amount it would take. By middle of the afternoon I found it

necessary to betake myself to the cow-lot and snake in dry limbs which I had to chop off the old logs. This was hard work. That furnace was a hungry belly if ever there was one. Of course that was all I had to do now, except spud the bottoms of the kettles to remove the encrustations. I am sorry yet that I did not know this ponderous phrase at that time so as to try it on Bump.

So, as Hamlet used to say, I found it necessary to "grunt and sweat under a weary load" time and again that afternoon. The joy of the morning was gone. I began to hate the fumes of that hot hole, and the everlasting sputter of the kettles—all the diabolical business of melting potash. Hour after hour those caldrons spluttered with scum on the top. Hour after hour I slaved and sweat and spudded to get the black and brown stuff that looked like soft soap and smelled like all underground to turn red like blood. From all I had heard Bump say, the stuff was to come out just the colour and temperature of melted iron. The vision of that excited me at first. By suppertime it made me mad. I noticed Bump unhitch rather late and go up to the barn. He went to supper. I slaved away. Hungry as a horse, I realized that to finish that batch of potash I must now traipse out with redoubled energy and snake in heaps of fresh wood. It never would do to ask Bump for the team. It would take a waggon load of truck yet to melt that potash. The sound of my axe echoed far into the woods. The frogs piped up. The sun went down. Dusk stole over the chopping. I flung myself at the wood-dragging like a madman. I was now so angry that even melting potash was no hotter.

By dark I had perhaps enough wood to finish. Out of breath and perspiring in every stitch of clothes, even my socks, I sat on the door-sill to cool off. Bump came booting back. I didn't even rise to receive him.

"How all is she doin'?" he wanted to know.

"All right," said I. "Have a look."

He did. He spat into the kettles and said it was a slow job.

"That any reflection on me?" I asked.

"Keep y'r shirt on," he growled.

After which we exchanged no further language. He took over the management, not even intimating that I might go up and have supper. I watched him. He growled about the low supply of wood.

"Lots o' logs in the pond," said I.

The satire rolled off him like water on a duck's back.

THE recollection of those hungry hours prompts me to curtail the story. For the rest of that evening until midnight that ashery was a small inferno, with Bump as the little old devil in charge. I watched him hard. Along about ten he said there were symptoms of melting. He got the iron coolers down to the fire to heat them.

"So's the potash'll drop out of 'm easy when it gits cool," he condescended to explain, wanting, as (Continued on page 23.)