

A Man at Need

A Lumberjack Tale

By A. M. Chisolm

CHAPTER 1.

The lamplight, streaming through the open door of Adelard Savigny's bar, cut a great yellow gash in the soft darkness of the June night. Through the door streamed also strong alcoholic odors, a babel of French oath and song, pounding of glasses, and stamping of feet. Evidently business was brisk with Savigny, who kept a very tough house, and respectable citizens passing by gave the place a wide berth.

Not belonging to that class, Jimmy McPike and Bill Leamy stopped and listened. Both wore the short trousers, long stockings, and spiked boots of river men. In fact, they were just off the drive, their pay was intact in their pockets, their thirst was six months long, and they had no earthly objection to trouble of any kind.

Leamy would have attracted notice anywhere. He was a bull-necked, husky giant, standing six feet two in his stockings, straight in the back and broad in the shoulder.

Viewed from behind, he was a handsome man. But his features had been much mishandled. His head was small and covered with bristles, close cropped black hair. Fierce, cunning little eyes twinkled beneath a lowering brow. In some by-gone battle his nose had been smashed in, so that the bridge of it lay flush with the face. His upper incisors were missing, and his lower jaw protruded like a bulldog's. When he smiled, the unseasoned beholder shuddered. To crown all, his face was badly pitted with smallpox and scarred by the caulks of river boots. His entire expression was absolutely truculent, ferocious and brutal. Beneath his repellent exterior, his heart was as tender as a girl's. A man in hard luck could have his last cent. He feared nothing on earth. And, next to the memory of his mother, he loved his chum, Jimmy McPike.

McPike was a fighting man, known by repute in every lumber camp from Temiskaming to the St. Maurice. He stood a little above the average height, but it needed a second glance to realize just how beautifully he was built. His neck was set into his powerful, loose-swinging shoulders with the solidity of a pyramid's base. From his shoulders to his feet, he tapered gracefully, a lean, lithe, pliant, one-hundred-and-eighty-pound shanty lad, without an ounce of fat or a soft tissue. As he listened to the noise, a hunger grew in his deep-set, cold, blue eyes.

"Let's go in, Bill," he suggested.

Leamy demurred. "What's th' use?—unless ye want a scrap. Lave th' pea soups be themselves. An' Savigny's whisky w'u'd poison a dog. Come on to Kelly's where our crowd is."

The voices of both men carried the faint brogue that was theirs by inheritance. You will hear it lipping softly from half the shanty boys you meet; for in the back townships, settled long ago by disbanded Irish regiments of the fourth George, the tongue has never lost the twist of the old sod.

McPike raked the pine sidewalk with a spiked boot, stripping this, white slivers from the board. "It'll do no harm to luk in," he persisted; but his voice held exactly the tone of a child who makes an excuse which he knows is none.

"No harm!" Leamy repeated scornfully. "Ye know better. Like Le Gros Quebec an' that gang is in there, an' fightin' drunk."

McPike put forward an unanswerable argument at once.

"An' is it me an' you must go dry bekase Le Gros Quebec, or anny other peajammers this side iv hell, is in a bar? Le Gros Quebec, is it? Big an' beefy he is, an' I've heard say he wanted a chasht at me. Be hivins, here's where he gets it!"

Leamy grinned horribly in the darkness. "Let her go, then, Jimmy. Me an' you can take care of ourselves. But don't hunt trouble wid him."

"I never hunt it," said McPike. This was quite true. It was equally true that he never swerved a hair's breadth to avoid it. They crossed the street, and entered Savigny's.

A gust of alleged melody and the rank odor of split liquor met them at the door. The bar was crowded with shantymen, mostly of French

extraction. They were just off the drive, and were tanking up, after the time-honored custom. The babble of their voices was like a settling flock of wild geese. Half a dozen were singing "Sur le Vieux Castor Riviere," and the roomful roared the chorus, beating a thunderous accompaniment with the heavy-bottomed whisky glasses.

In the centre of the room, an artist was doing a step-dance, to the great detriment of the floor, the splinters flying from each slap of his steel-shod feet.

From time to time he threw up his head and howled appreciation of his own efforts, for the heat of the room and the rapid motion had fused with the "whisky blanc" which he had swallowed, and the effect was cumulative. From behind the bar, Savigny beheld the ruin of the floor, and cursed the dancer inwardly, but dared not interfere, tough though he was, for the crowd was quite capable of wrecking the place and breaking half the bones in his body if the whim seized them.

Back to the bar, a brimming glass in one hand and a pipe in the other, with which he beat time to the chorus, stood Le Gros Quebec, a burly hogshead of a man, evidently possessed of enormous strength. His name was Antoine Charette, but he was known mostly by his pseudonym—The Big Quebec—conferred on him by reason of his size and the place of his nativity.

Though much above the average height of man, he did not appear tall because of his great girth. His chest arched forward like the curve of a sail. His back and shoulders were almost



A Group of Canadians Recently Returned From Germany in the Exchange of Prisoners

deformed with bunched muscles. He himself did not know the limit of his strength—gift of hardy voyageurs, developed to its utmost by a life of the hardest open-air exercise. And with the weight and apparent unwieldiness of a grizzly bear, he owned all that great plantigrade's leopard-like quickness on occasion, as well as his ferocity when aroused.

Just then he was in a jovial mood. His sloe-black eyes gleamed beneath bushy brows, his thick lips were parted in a smile, revealing two solid rows of yellow ivory, whose strength he sometimes exemplified by lifting with them a barrel full of pork, and he bellowed encouragement to the dancer in a voice tuned to carry above the roar of white water pent in rocky walls.

Into this festive gathering McPike and Leamy adventured. Their entrance was the signal for a sudden pause in the racket. They were known by sight to many of the men, and by reputation to more of them. From time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, there has been bad blood between the Irish and French of the logging camps, and sanguinary battles innumerable have been fought between them, for no reason other than hereditary and traditional dislike. Therefore, the coming of the two men to a resort patronized almost exclusively by French-Canadian shantymen was in itself a bid for trouble.

The two shouldered their way to the bar, and demanded drink. Being served, they invited the house to step up.

"Here's till ye, Quebec," smiled McPike, nodding across his glass to the big man. "May ye live by white water an' d'e in yer bed, an' clear current an' a fast chute for yer soul afterward."

"She's blame' good wish, dat," returned Quebec, grinning amiably at the flag of truce. "Salu ma frien! How you mak' heem go, hey? ain't seen you since two year, I t'ink."

"She goes bon," said McPike. "Two year is. A man can do a lot of talkin' in two year Kebec."

The French-Canadian shrugged his enormous shoulders. "Plaintee feller talk too moche wi hees mout, anyhow," he announced. "What you mean by dat, hey?"

"I hear you've been shootin' off your fac about me," said McPike, with directness. "Yo claim to be boss of th' Coulonge, th' best man on th' river. You may be. I dunno. I ain got no kick at that, s'long's I don't work ther meself. But I'm told you say I dodge you o the drives an' in town. I dodge no man, an never did, an' you know it. So, if ye said tha Kebec, I'll show ye which is the best one of two."

The big man glared at him, his ferocious temper plainly astir. "Whoever say I say d she's one beeg liar," he announced flatly, without a certain dignity. "Cre nom! I don go talk wit' my mout lak dat. Dey call you boss of de Bonnechere Reeve. All right. M I'll be boss of dat Coulonge. S'pose I pass m self on dat Bonnechere—mebbe I'm boss of da too. S'pose you pass yourself on dat Coulonge mebbe you get to be boss of heem. All right I don' ron away from you; you don't ron aw from me. Any tam you lake for fight heem hou I go you, for sure. But I ain't talk 'bout yo for because I'll t'ink you'll be good mans wi yourself."

The two, standing face face, looked each other and down, and in the gaze each there was a respect a keen sizing up of points. "Then that's all right," said McPike. "W'u'd ye lik to take a birl out of n now?"

Le Gros Quebec shrugged again indifferently. He was not at all afraid of McPike but he was simply not fighting humor.

"For what I fight yo hey?" he queried. "For for Ba' gosh, non: I get plat tee fight when I can't he heem. But if you lak f pick de row—" Another expressive shrug signified his entire willingness oblige.

"I never picked a re in me life," said McPike proudly. It was a point honor with him. In numberless rough-and-tumble battles he had fought

the other man had always been the aggressor to a certain point, not always well defined. "M the matter of that," he added candidly. "I noways sure I'd get any fun out of a turn with you, an' I might draw a father iv a lick! An' now we'll have another drink, for luck."

Quebec grinned mirthlessly, for his temper had been ruffled, though not stirred to action. He accepted the offer, and filled his glass with Savigny's colorless poison. The men who clustered around expectantly, listened to the conversation which their practiced ears interpreted as a certain fore-runner of hostilities, turn away in disappointment, and the racket broke again.

The dancer, bereft of an audience, had paused but leaped again into activity. Almost instant the scarcely diluted alcohol he had swallowed seized him in its grip, and he dropped to the floor, unconscious. He was dragged into a corner, and another took his place. Everything was lovely, and the prospect of trouble seemed very remote, indeed.

It came like a bolt from a clear sky. A young man, a newcomer whom nobody had noticed slipped through the crowd until he stood before Le Gros Quebec. Entirely without warning, less a curse simultaneously delivered might so considered, he struck the giant in the face.

So utterly unexpected was the blow that Quebec reeled back against the bar, as much from surprise as from physical shock. The other at him like a wild cat, striking with both hands, his teeth bared in a wolf-like snarl, the embodiment of crazed, malevolent fury.

With a backward bound, as light as float
Continued on Page 26