

UP IN THE CLOUDS WITH THE CROOKED STEEL

I think there were only three people who ever knew just what it was that came so near killing Jimmy Donnell. I was one of them, Rose MacIntyre was another, and Jimmy himself was the third. It happened the winter that I clerked in Bailey Curtis' camp, on the East Branch. To begin with, Jimmy was in great trouble, and he told me about it one Sunday afternoon as we sat on a skidway in the Great Taqumamoon Swamp. Just after dinner I was at my desk in the van, writing a letter, and, happening to glance out of the window, I saw Joe Lalonde go by on his way to the "men's camp." Joe was a big Canadian Frenchman, the best axman we had, tall and splendidly built, with black eyes, black hair and black beard. He had been to the Soo on one of his periodical sprints and was just getting back, and I couldn't help feeling a little uncomfortable about it and wishing that he had come when the men were out at work; for, though Joe was ordinarily as good-natured a Frenchman as there was in the woods, a four days' visit to the Soo in the middle of winter was apt to give him a prolonged headache. A half hour went by, and I sealed my letter and went over to the men's camp to see what was going on. Loud voices were coming from within, but they ceased the instant I opened the door. The big box stove was red-hot and going full blast, and the camp was like an oven. A strong odor greeted me, an odor made up of the fragrance of the balsam boughs in the bunks, and of—well, of humanity. That was to be expected, but I rather thought there was, but decided that it was not to be wondered at considering Joe. None of the usual Sunday afternoon occupations was in evidence. No one was playing cards, no one was reading or writing, no one was whittling, no one was even lying in his bunk and pretending to sleep. The men were sitting or standing idly about, and it seemed to me that there was a self-conscious look in every face as they glanced up at me. Yet, after all, there was nothing that could not be explained by the presence of the half-tipsy Frenchman who sat beside the stove with his eyes fixed moodily on the floor. Nothing, except the attitude and expression of Jimmy O'Donnell. Jimmy was sitting on the far end of the long bench that stood in front of the row of bunks, his back braced against the wall, his hands in his pockets and his face the very picture of trouble and woe—I had almost said fear. I had never seen him look like that before, for Jimmy, besides being the best top-loader we had on the job, was usually one of the jolliest and pleasantest men in camp. "Something made me say, 'Want to go for a walk, Jimmy?'" Rather to my surprise, he caught up his Mackinaw jacket and his cap and mittens and hurried me out of the camp. We tramped up and down the log road till nearly sunset, and then we sat down on a skidway to rest and have a smoke. We had said little, but somehow Jimmy's troubled mood had communicated itself to me, and I don't think I have ever felt much bluer or home-sick in my life than I did that afternoon as I took my seat on a big, fragrant pine log. We were in a little pocket in the woods, a place as still and silent as a grave. On either hand the road stretched away for a few rods and then bent to the right or left and was lost to sight. Behind us loomed up the great heap of logs. In front, just across the narrow sleigh-track, was the dense cedar swamp, so thick that the eye could not penetrate it half a dozen feet. Overhead was an unbroken blanket of gray clouds, and underneath was the new snow that had fallen the night before. It was all so clean, clean, clean—so perfectly pure and spotless and sinless. Here, surely, if anywhere in all the world, a man might be at peace and free from temptation. But, oh! it was quiet and lonesome; and the whiteness and silence, not on your nerves, and all the wild longing for human companionship came surging up within you till you felt as if you would give your very soul to see the lights of the city and hear its roar—or to have a talk with your girl. It was Jimmy who spoke first. "Did I ever tell you about my girl?" "Did I?" "No," said I, and Jimmy began. It was his duty to talk, and he did talk, as I am sure, he had never talked before and never did again. He had known her ever since they were children, it seemed, and they had been engaged for about a year. She was so beautiful, with her black hair, and her clear white skin, and her big blue eyes; and she was so good and so true and honest and loyal—a girl who would stand by a man through thick and thin, and do her level best for him at all times—provided he did his level best for her. There was the trouble. Jimmy was afraid that he wasn't going to do his best, or that the best he could do would still be a failure. That was his seventh winter in the woods, and every spring, when the camps broke up, he had gone with the rest of the boys to Newbery or the Soo and frolic that in all his earnings in a year was gone. He had lasted till the last spring, since he had become engaged to Rose; and she had broken with him, but had finally agreed to give him another trial. She was waiting for him now, down in Sanilac, to see what he would do. Wages were high in the woods that winter, and his stake would be a large one—enough, with her good management, to start them in house-keeping. But whether he could ever get

it across the Straits of Mackinac without spending it, he didn't know, and he was fairly sick with fear. He paused a moment, with his eyes fixed on the ground, and I thought he was probably wondering if I could understand, or if I had already set him down for a weakling and a fool. I did understand. I, too, had spent winters in the camps, and had felt the deadly enmity of a life that feeds a man's physical nature till he is as full of health and strength and vigor as a spring maple is of sap, but gives him nothing to think about, and starves his soul and his emotions till he is ready to sacrifice his whole future for the sake of making things interesting. I didn't wonder that Jimmy was afraid. But I tried to cheer him up, and told him that he must take a brace and not think about it. This time, with so much to look forward to, he would surely keep straight. He shook his head. "Every year," he said, "I've made up my mind that I wouldn't drink a drop, and then, when the break-up comes, all the boys are going to town and somehow or other I always get a whiff of it, or a taste, and it's all up with me. And this afternoon." He stopped short, but I thought I knew what he meant. The odor of alcohol that Joe Lalonde had brought into the men's camp had awakened the old craving, and it threatened to sweep him off his feet and carry him away to town to do as Joe had done, and go down to Sanilac in triumph with his winter's stake, and marry his girl, and settle down to the enjoyment of domestic happiness with the finest wife in Michigan, were enough, it seemed to me, to put heart into any man. But it wouldn't do. Jimmy refused to be comforted. His face grew ever darker and more sombre, and when at last I reminded him that it was after supper-time and he must go back to camp, he rose reluctantly and walked slowly and heavily, as if he were being dragged against his will. It was dark when we reached the men's camp, but the door stood open, and the lamplight was streaming out across the little clearing. And then, all of a sudden, I knew what Jimmy's danger had been, and knew, too, that it was over for that time. The fragments of a big black whiskey bottle lay beside a stump in front of the camp, and there was a yellow stain on the snow. Jimmy saw it as soon as I did, and his face lit up with a glad relief. We went in and found Joe Lalonde lying on the floor with his hands tied behind him and his ankles strapped together. Not content with breaking the strictest rule of the camp by bringing liquor with him when he came back from the Soo, he had picked a quarrel with Ole Erickson, one of the swamplers, and had tried to stick a knife in him. The next day he went over the tote-road—we were sorry to lose him, too, for he was a corking good woodsman—and Jimmy received a very fat letter from Sanilac and was happy again. But as the weeks went by I could see that at times he was still afraid. There were days when he was in the highest spirits, and days when he was in the very lowest. I remember one night when several of us sat up late, swapping stories across the box stove in the van—late, that is, for camp; I don't suppose it was really after nine or ten o'clock. Jimmy had never been better company than he was that evening. At last Bob Wilson swore he didn't know no more antidotes, and we rose and went out into the night. There was no moon, but over the dark circle of tree tops the stars were shining wondrously, and the snow crust was gleaming in the pale light. The air was like needles, but it thrilled one to the very heart with life and strength, and Jimmy threw up his arms and shouted in the sheer physical delight of living. "I'm going to make it! I'm going to make it!" he said, as we separated for the night. On other occasions he was moody and silent, and there were times, es-

pecially on Sundays, when he evidently did not know what to do with himself. Once he came to me and asked me to lend him something to read, and I very gladly did so. But Jimmy was not cut out for reading man, and though he tried faithfully to interest himself in the novels I gave him, I fear they did not help him much. Sometimes he and I took a tramp together, but there is little enjoyment in a Sunday afternoon walk over the same road on which you have been working all the week. Several of Joe Lalonde's countrymen went out on a midwinter frolic in the course of the next month, and one of them came in to get his time. A weary, troubled look came into his face, and he went out and did not come back that evening. At another time I saw a man who was about to leave the camp talking earnestly to him, while Jimmy listened with a hunted expression in his eyes. "Coming to the van, Jimmy?" I asked. "Yes," said he, eagerly, and he followed me in and sat down beside the stove, where he stayed till bedtime. He was growing thinner, and his laugh and joke were heard less frequently than in the early winter. "I'd be willing to die," he said to me once, in a tired, discouraged voice, "if it would do Rose any good, but I don't know whether I can ever live the way she wants me to or not." When Jimmy was at work he was all right. As I have said, he was the best top-loader we had in camp, and never had he seemed to take as much pride in building fancy skidways as he did now. The piles of logs that he put up during those few weeks were miracles of evenness, with sides almost as smooth as the wall of a house. But he couldn't be at work all the time, and at last the catastrophe came. One day Jimmy did not go out to the skidways with the other men; after supper I went to see what the matter with him. I found him lying in his bunk with a slight fever, questioning him a little I decided that he had a very hard headache; but all his trouble was nothing that could not be cured by a day or two of rest and a good heavy dose of quinine, as so reported to the push. Unfortunately the push was not in good humor. The old man had just come up from Saginaw to see how things were going, and had not been very well satisfied. We had had a prolonged thaw, and the skidding had been delayed. "Has Jimmy got a hospital ticket?" he asked. Jimmy had told me that he had a ticket on a hospital at the Soo. "Then he'll have to go there," said the push. "We can't have any sick men in camp." I said nothing in reply, for I had Jimmy would be better in the morning, but when I went over before breakfast I found no change in him; I told him what the push had said and he grew very much excited. I declared that he would not go to the Soo for anybody. "You know what'll happen to me if I do," he said, "and I'd rather stay here and die." So I went back to the push and told him that I was sure Jimmy would be all right if only he could keep still for a day or two. But the push was obdurate. We had a ready-made two cases of typhoid in camp that winter, and there was smallpox at Graham's, only twenty miles away. "If he can't go to work he'll have to go to the Soo." That was the ultimatum. Jimmy was silent for a moment when I told him. Then he said quietly, "All right, I'll go to work, and sitting up on the edge of my bunk, he began to fumble with his socks. I liked his nerve, but I was troubled when I saw how his hands shook and how flushed his face was. "I'm afraid you'll be worse if you try it," I said; "and, besides, Jimmy, you aren't in any shape to handle a canthook. You're likely to be killed if you go up on the skidway this morning." "Don't care," he replied; and as he pulled on his Mackinaw he added, with a bit of lumberman's slang and an attempt at his old-time gait, "I'll go up in the clouds with the crooked steel again. That's the only place for me." And half an hour later, with his

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canthook in his hands, he was up on the top of the highest skidway in the Great Taqumamoon Swamp. It was to be the last skidway of the season, and the last logs were to go up that morning. The heap stood in a little space that had been cleared for it beside the main road. Behind it the logs were being dragged in, one or two at a time, from the places where the trees had fallen and laid across skids, ready to be rolled up to the top. In front across the road was a beaten path where a team of horses walked back and forth, alternately pulling and slackening the decking-chain, which, passing up over it, around the stick to be drawn up, the top of the heap, ran down behind and up again to the top of the skidway, where it ended in a stout steel hook driven firmly into a log. When the horses started the stick began to roll up the back of the pile, guided by two men, with cant-hooks, who turned

"He'll be down in a minute anyhow. That's the last log, just going up," said I. We stood and watched. The team walked off with the decking-chain, and the log began to climb the pile. In the very peak was a notch which Jimmy evidently meant to fill. More than once I thought there would be another cannon, for the log was a large, heavy butt, with one end nearly twice as big as the other, and it kept turning sideways in a very troublesome manner. But Jimmy was working carefully, knowing that the old man's eye was on him, and he got it up at last till it was poised on the tip-top of the skidway, and in another moment would have dropped into its niche. "Hold on!" he cried. It was a little out of line. "Whoa!" said the driver, and the horses stood motionless with their weight on the collars, holding the chain tight that the log might not roll back. Jimmy struck his steel into the little end and tried to draw it forward, but it proved too heavy for him, so he planted the cant-hook stock against the butt, like a lever, and braced himself firmly, meaning to hold it back till the small end was even with the big.

"If anything goes wrong he'll have to be mighty sly or he'll be caught," muttered the old man. "Once up," called Jimmy, and the driver chirruped to his horses. Now, these horses knew their business almost as perfectly as Jimmy did, and the driver was in the habit of boasting that they could deck logs just as well without him as with him. When they heard that chirrup they knew that their business was to lean just a trifle harder against the collars and start the log with a slow, steady pull. They would have done it, too; but, as bad luck would have it, a tree stood just beside their path, and on the tree was a dead branch. There was no wind that morning, and why that dead limb should have chosen that particular moment to fall is one of the things that no one knows, or ever will know. But it did fall, and the startled horses lunged forward with a jerk that carried the log clean over. Jimmy dropped his canthook and made a jump, but the butt was too big for him to clear it, and he landed on it on his hands and knees. If he had been as lively as usual, he might still have escaped. As it was, he struggled desperately to get over and on to the safe side, but he couldn't quite make it, and in another instant he and the log were rolling over and over each other down the steep face of the skidway.

We thought he was dead when we picked him up, but his heart was still beating, and by the old man's orders we took him out to the nearest railway station and got a freight locomotive and a flat car—the only train to be had—to take him to the hospital. He was going to the Soo, after all, but in the way he had dreaded. I sat beside him as he lay on the blankets, and held his hands, and by and by the blankets stirred and I thought I saw a look of consciousness in his face. Then his eyes opened, he glanced up at me for a moment, gravely and wearily, and the lids dropped again. His face was drawn and very white, and his mouth twitched a little, then he set in firm, sad lines. I could not tell whether he was in pain or not, but I was sure he knew that death was the end of all his hopes and his struggles. Forcely an hour we rode, the engine roaring like a demon, the car leaping and bounding over the rails, and the black tree tops dancing past against a curtain of gray-white clouds. Then a narrow cloud line stretched itself across the right-of-way, and slowly grew and lifted and spread until it covered half the sky, and suddenly we shot out into the bright sunlight. The warmth and radiance fell full on Jimmy's face, and perhaps it served to rouse him. At all events, his tense look relaxed, as if he had just thought of something that comforted him a little. His eyes opened again, and he spoke for the first time since the log passed over him. "I've been thinking," he said, in a weak whisper, "that maybe Rose would like it if she knew why I went to work this morning. Will you write to her and tell her all about it? There's nobody knows but you." "Of course I will, Jimmy," said I, and before he could answer, the car gave a lurch, and he cried out in sudden pain and fainted away. As I sat beside him and watched his face, thinking that he was dying, it came to me that if ever a man gave his life for love and the desire to do right, this man had done it. We got him to the Soo and the hospital, and I went to the telegraph office and sent the longest despatch I ever wrote. In an hour the answer came, and I went with it to Jimmy. The doctors had just finished their examination, and they looked grave when I asked them how he was. I went into his room and up to his bed. "Jimmy," said I, "I've telegraphed to Rose, and I've just got an answer from her. She'll be here tomorrow." Jimmy jumped so that the nurse caught him by the shoulder and held him down.

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This beautiful group, "The Nativity," was executed by the late Thomas Mowbray. It is carved in one block of pine wood, and painted. It is the property of the artist's son, C. F. Mowbray, 141 Adelaide St. East, Toronto.