

## POWER LOT

### A Story of "Down East."

BY SARAH McLEAN GREENE.

[Rights of publication secured by The Wm. Wold Co., Limited, London, Ont.]

#### CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"Oh, I think I know the ropes now all right, thank you, Mrs. Stafford," said Rob, again lifting his hat; "these beasts never go out of a walk, you know."

Rob did not hear it, but a stifled murmur went down the sylvan shades of the Joggins road: "He's turned in to Joggins. He's in sight. Daisy's comin'. Daisy Lee's a-comin'. He's ridin', too, cock-sure, the ridick'lous ass."

As for Daisy herself, he sat on the rough plank laid casually overlapping the sideboards of the cart; and all his study was, by constant maneuvering, to keep the plank—which was constantly changing its position by reason of the roughness of the road—from upsetting, and at the same time to maintain something like a self-respecting equilibrium. Absorbed in this pursuit, he went rattling and pommeling down Joggins, using the butt-end of his whip for a personal bracer, his clay pipe clenched between his teeth; and so agilely, more and more, did he conduct himself that his pride expanded with each athletic avoidance of overthrow and destruction, his eyes shone with the exercise, his cheeks were braw with color, and, though riding only in a miserable oxcart, to be sure, yet Rob began actually to glow with the sensation of being a big, skillful, devil-may-care, masterful wildman.

Then it was that a domestic cat, having either through some malign human persuasion, or else through some sullen grief and purpose of her own, deserted the affiliations of her proper home for a flight into the woods, sprang pointedly, and with a swiftness as though she had been winged, across the road right in the faces of the oxen.

From no former movement that Rob had ever discerned in them could he have anticipated the panther-like celerity of the elliptic which they now performed in the upper circles of the atmosphere. The ponderous climax of their descent he observed from a sitting posture in the perturbed and indignant center of a mountain spring; the plank which had so recently been his insecure support had hurtled harmlessly over his head, giving him in its fall a no more dignified attack than the throwing of a jocosely splinter to tickle his left ear; while the oxen continued down Joggins on a run, not now so swift as it was deafeningly celebrant with noise.

Bate, with an improvised whip, sprang out from the bushes and stayed this unbecoming spectacle of ponderous levity. Another figure emerged with the deceptive manner as of having paused for diversion on its legitimate way to important affairs. Captain Belcher leaned against a tree, not weeping in spirit, though his appearance was certainly that of an hysterical mourner. He mopped his eyes and cheeks with a handkerchief of unutterable hue.

"That circus you giv' me t'other day wan't complete without a chariot race," he moaned, "was it, Mr. Lee? I knew the chariot race 'ud have ter come, and, by Tunk, it has come."

Other apparitions hailed from the covert of the wood, other evidences of lively entertainment greeted poor Rob's wounded ear ere yet he had had time to rise from his sitting posture in the pool by the wayside. Devoutly then he even wished that he might discover a broken bone to shame this heartless ribaldry; but he found, on rising, that he was entirely whole, nay, even limbered by his abrupt descent into the ditch.

Whether to turn and go home—and meet Mary Stingaree, and Mrs. Byjo, who had become a factor serious to cope with—no; Rob braced himself.

His head was clear, and humiliation at a certain depth suffers a rebound. He advanced with squared shoulders to the group surrounding the oxen.

"I'm downright sorry, Bate," he said. "I had an impression, somehow, that oxen never got frightened. If you hadn't been in the woods, my carelessness might have done lots of damage to your team. I ought to have been on my guard."

"I knew somethin' 'd happen to ye," replied Bate, ungraciously, examining the yoke straps.

"Well, may I go on with the oxen?" said Rob. "I'll walk along at their heads this time."

"Oh, g'wan," said Bate; "ye may as well make a day of it."

Rob tramped on almost clingingly close to the horned beasts who had betrayed him; though he was now apparently alone, he was skeptical; the air was somehow rife with mischief, and the tinkling bells on the oxen's necks seemed to mock his sad, defeated heart. Even in Power Lot, God Help Us, he was already a jest and a byword, and now at Bear River he had become a byword and a hissing. By the shores of the great Basin there were some neat houses where retired sea captains and moderately-prosperous farmers dwelt—a society away beyond his reach; so felt Mr. Robert Hilton, late millionaire.

So judged he implicitly in his really modest, even childlike, heart, however great his outward bravado, that only the lowest of the low would tolerate him, and they, perchance, but condescendingly.

Judging by the Tee-bo cabin, down the River, they, too, were the lowest of the low. Would Cuby have arrived and be waiting to meet him on the beach, as she had promised? No, she was not there, he found; nor did she come. The tide was low, it chanced, and he was saved that much ridicule. He had made no reckoning concerning it, and it was only by luck that he had not come down, so perilously and ignominiously, with the oxen to gather rockweed at high tide.

He halted his oxen successfully at the place where Cuby had admonished him to gather in those spoils of the sea, but he had forgotten to bring rake, pitchfork or sheath-knife. Some sparse, ragged kelp had been drifted up on the beach, however, and to save himself from the shame of complete futility, he began gathering it up in his hands and carrying it to the cart. Though he toiled arduously, the accumulated product was startlingly insignificant. He looked not much about him, so grievously conscious was he of unseen existences in the atmosphere peering derisively down upon his toils.

On the contrary, the voice that did actually assail him was mild, feeling, almost timid:

"What in Tamarack be you a-doin'?" it said.

Rob looked up and found that he was alone with the sea, the boulders, and an old man in a fur cap, red woollen stockings, and short trousers of sacking. But it was the old man's face that held Rob's attention, framed as it was in white hair blowing in the wind, and with eyes like large, young, sinless violets looking out from the sod and seam of weather-beaten features.

"What—tamarack what?" said poor Rob, inquisitively, in his confusion.

"Wal', what in tarnation thunder, then, be you a-doin'?"

"Why, I was going to take a little rockweed up to dress my land."

"Le' me see, you're the feller what's come from New York up to Power Lot, ain't ye? God help us." This instant recognition of him through his dilemma did not seem flattering to Rob.

"I am," he replied, coldly. "Robert Hilton. Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

"Skipper. Skipper 'll do. I ain't heard no other name so long. I 'most forgot I got another name." Pride, tinged with vanity, dwelt peacefully on the old man's lips as he uttered this term.

Rob melted. "I am delighted," he said, stepping forward, "to make your acquaintance, Skipper."

"Oh, wal', I don't know as we c'd call it gittin' acquainted yit," said the old man, conscientiously, "tho' it may come to that ef we keep on. Ye got a h'ist, didn't ye?"

"What?"

"Yer clo's, to aft o' ye thar, look as though ye'd had a h'ist."

"Yes—oh, yes—I had a h'ist all right. The oxen shied at a cat."

"Slewed and upstot ye, eh?"

"Yes."

"Hurt ye?"

"No," said Rob, bitterly, "I almost wish it had."

"Sho, don't you go wigglin' yer finger at Providence temptin' Him to heave aches and pains on ye. I know, for I'm a victim o' rheumatiz; it's ache and pain, pain and ache, throb and beat, beat and throb, and, some nights, roll and toss, toss and roll—roll and toss, toss and roll."

"As it is out yonder," said Rob, the vivid restlessness of Skipper's phrase turning him to the poetry of the sea.

"I use' ter be the very toughest devil 'long shore here," Skipper confided, looking out wistfully to sea.

"It doesn't seem possible."

"It's down in black and white in the Books ag'in' me," affirmed the old man, with a reminiscent sigh of satisfaction. "I was the streakin'-est, ontamable dog 't ever made out on the Bay o' Fundy—but rheumatiz has tamed me."

Rob's own actual physical sufferings returned to his recollection, and he yearned as to a kindred soul.

"I was a gre't drinker, too," boasted Skipper, placidly, "an' Gosh A'mighty, the perfanity I use' ter use!"

He was preaching, perhaps. Rob bridled. "I suppose you've heard some sort of meddlin', unkind stories about me," he suggested, reddening.

"Never seen ye nor hearn tell of ye, afore, 'cept ye was somebody comin' ter Power Lot, f'r yer health, God help us." There was no curiosity and little interest in the strangely undimmed, deep-set eyes of the old man. Those pained eyes gave to his face an expression of womanly tenderness, rendered only more wistful by his professed hankering after past wildness.

"Yes, sir; I was a devil-screacher, I was. I was a roarer."

"I've been something of a roarer, too," Rob confided in turn, all his suspicions allayed.

"Was ye?" said Skipper, wakening. "Master or mate?"

"Master," blurted out Rob, with tears of regret and desolation in his eyes, "and a d-d poor one, too."

"Run her on the ledges, mebbey, an' wrecked her?"

"Yes."

"Nev' mind. Nev' mind; ye're young; y'll fitten out a new vessel an' gallop 'er over seas, yit, you will. What's the next cruise ye're callatin' on?"

"New York City."

"Sho! You strike f'r different orders, you 'ply f'r another berth. Sho, down among them 'trusts'; ef I was you I'd make f'r some Christian port, or innercent heathen one, I would. Trusts, blame durn 'em, my las' Sunday roast cost me thirty-four cents, an' she didn't weigh quite on to six pounds, neither; an' them trusts is to the bottom of it, durn blast 'em."

"What kind of meat was it?"

"Sirline. Lo'ette an' me ain't got our 'riginal God-bestowed grinders no longer; sirline 's tough 's we're able to chaw up at our time o' the day."

"What did you use to pay for your Sunday roast?"

"Twenty cents," sighed Skipper.

"It's becoming an iniquitous imposition on you," said Rob, sympathetically.

"Don't say a word. Look at medicines and doctors—they've got on to the dicker, too. Had a little friction in my throat; rheumatiz left my legs one time, 'long about first o' May, an' hived up in my

throat. Sent the descriptions o' my case to a young doctor the' was then down to Bear River, an', by Tamarack, I sent ten cents, too, along o' the descriptions. He sent me back a leetle box o' pills."

"Did they help you?"

"They purty nigh done fer me. I lay so low the case was took out o' my hands, an' the critter came up thar twice a day in 'tendance on me, till I got my mortality up as whar' I could shout ag'in—then says I, 'You go home an' make out yer bill; I ain't goin' to continue the treatment no longer.'"

"How much was the bill?" Rob ventured.

"Fifty cents, by Kresis. I paid the bill, but I got my opinions o' that doctor. Sick er well, I'll anchor up by Peruny the rest o' my days."

"Is Peruny cheap?" Rob questioned, with childlike faith.

"She ain't so cheap," said Skipper, with intonations of savory reminiscence, "as she is toothsome. Water's all right, but a man 't 's been the dog I been wants to tie up once in a while to somethin' 't 's got a wasp in it. Now, look at them gulls! Jest look!"

Rob looked.

"They got a blame trust o' their own," said Skipper. "I come down here to smelt a bit."

"To what?"

"Wal', not so much to smelt as to herrin'. I reckon to git a few off the boys; but jest look thar'. Soon as a few herrin' pokes in, the gulls comes an' picks 'em up. See 'em, huverin' an' watchin'—ain't that a 'trust'? New York—you make f'r some decent port, young man. Wal', I got ter scramble up the bluffs to'ds home."

Skipper turned unceremoniously.

"Good-bye," said Rob, holding out his hands. Rob had a lonesome look. "I'd like to come up and see you and Mrs. Skipper some time," he almost pleaded.

"God-in-heaven," said the old man, with frank surprise at the craving look and tone; "why in Tamarack don't ye come, then? Lo'ette ain't much ter look at, but she's a good woman, my woman is; one o' these 'ere flower-raisin', Bible-readin', meetin'-goin' kind. It's a good kind ter have. I'm more 'n satisfied. Phew, thar' it is, pain an' ache, ache an' pain, beat an' throb, throb an' beat, an' sometimes roll an' toss, toss an' roll; roll an' toss, toss an'—"

Rob gathered the dying cadences of Skipper's apostrophe to rheumatism as he watched him climb the bluffs to the comfortable white house in the distance. Rob, who had been very rich, who had been assiduously courted, before his downward course became too foolish and rapid—Rob looked with awe to that ordinary white house and the coveted privilege of calling on that sad dog, the skipper, and his old wife Lo'ette. He was comforted, though, by his communion with a fellow-creature. The tide had crept in and regathered the rockweed from the beach; so he started the oxen pensively homeward with a scarcely perceptible amount of sea-spoil, lying withered and puny on the cart-bottom.

He felt that bright Cuby Tee-bo, with the others, had given him over to ridicule, and he tramped on automatically, with his eyes on the ground, and with the intention of getting up the Joggins road in time to saw enough wood to pay for his supper. He was taking in this new life stupidly, but, now that his head was clear, with a sort of dogged faithfulness.

"Daisy! Hallo!"

An imperative voice, subdued to confidence, certified him of an engaging presence near; at the same time he caught the starlight and sunlight of brown eyes peering out at him, all the more luminous for the contrast they made with the dark firs skirting the Joggins road.

"Why, Cuby. Hello, Cuby. How do you do?" Rob, the forsaken, could hardly believe his good luck.