

On The Edge of The Diocese

(continued from Page 14)

squat chimney, for it was turning colder outside; but the place was making no outward display of warmth and welcome.

The host sat with his feet stretched out to the fire, toasting his moccasins and drawing steadily on his pipe. The room was blue with tobacco smoke—so blue that the man on the bench farthest from the fire was a dim, lanky outline. It was only when the door opened cautiously to admit some fresh arrival that Herrick looked up. The men sat around, smoking silently, and any speaking that was done was in low tones.

"Reckon the boys is a here now, huh?" "Smale," grunted Herrick, and the silence was resumed.

But not for long. Off toward the bay, sharp and clear, came the jingle of approaching sleigh bells. The men exchanged swift glances; somebody was in a hurry that night. The sound swelled rapidly nearer, till it was quite apparent that the driver was making straight for the shanty.

"Lights!" Herrick jumped from his chair.

The light went suddenly out and the place was silent and dark with the shadowy bulk of its owner looming in the doorway. He could see the approaching sleigh now, the horses plunging in the snow and the man lashing them on.

They came to a stop in a smother of snow, the breath blowing in white streams from their nostrils, their flanks steaming white against the dark background of the forest.

Dropping the lines, the driver leaped to the ground and ran towards the door.

"Hullo! Where yuh goin' so fast?"

"Bob! Thank heaven ye're here, man! Let me in. Fer God's sake don't shet me out! I know all about it."

Herrick stepped back and as the man stumbled inside he was adroitly tripped up and fell to the floor beneath a tangle of legs and arms.

"Wicker up, somebody!" called Herrick out of the darkness. "We'll hev a look at this party as knows so much about IT."

The light shone on the agitated features of Benjamin Jakes. Five minutes later he was standing on a box, talking as he had never talked before in his life.

"It's true, men, every word I'm tellin' ye. Johnny White, as looks after the church, seen him hide the money behind some shelves in the vestry. I reckon he was in too big a hurry to come back fer it an' there it is—seventy-three dollars an' fifty cents!" He tossed a canvas bag onto the table.

"He was all packed up, ready to vamoose when I got to the shack an' I found the rest o' the Building Fund tucked into a kettle tied to his toboggan!"

A murmur went round the room at this. "When I seen that, men, I jest b'iled right over an' laid into him an' horsewhipped him till he couldn't stand. Ef ye look clost enough ye'll see blood on it an' it's the blood of a coyote on two legs named Smale!"

The church warden flung his whip to the floor and a growl of delight broke from the circle of his audience.

"Fore I go any further," he went on, "I wanten 'pologize to you, Bob Herrick. Awhile ago this here Smale come sneakin' round my place, blamin' you Lost River fellers fer startin' this here gab 'bout the preacher stealin' this money, an' I said some things as I'm sorry fer now. I said you was a thoroughbred skunk, Herrick, which same I take back here an' now good an' plenty. 'Twas the lie 'bout the preacher made me mad. I didn't know I was talkin' to Judas Iscariot; fer when a feller pertends to be church like he done it takes a spell to find out he done it fer spite an' thirty pieces o' silver. Smale's one o' these here fellers as'd make ye a present, then turn round an' steal same from ye."

"But speakin' o' the preacher, boys—" The church warden lowered his voice; his words were earnest, appealing, and every man heard. "There ain't nothin' to be said 'bout him in this here theft. He ain't mush. He's white. That's all. There ain't none o' us don't have a hard 'nough time livin' up in these parts, the Lord knows; but I tell ye there ain't a one o' us knows

what that preacher comes through. He's eddicated fer better things an' he feels things worse accordin'."

"I reckon ef we had a leetle girl shiverin' round in a rag o' calico at this time o' year, we wouldn't be likin' it over much. An' I reckon ef we had a leetle lame feller an' the Doc said a rigout to strap him to might fix him up, I reckon we'd be wantin' that there rig-out almighty bad."

"There ain't a man here don't know

how the preacher's worked, gettin' that there fund money together for a new church. It's come almighty nigh to bein' lost tonight, same as you fellers come nigh to lettin' fire to the church an' havin' everybody blame you fer sneakin' the money. When I got Smale's hul measly scheme out o' him I hiked cut-strut fer here, an' now, by way o' thanksgivin', I'm goin' to perpose we takes up a collection to buy them support straps an' riggin's fer the preacher's leetle lame feller. If there's anythin' left over, we'll get some warm clo'es an' some decent grub an' I'll eat snow fer my Christmas dinner if there ain't enough left over still to

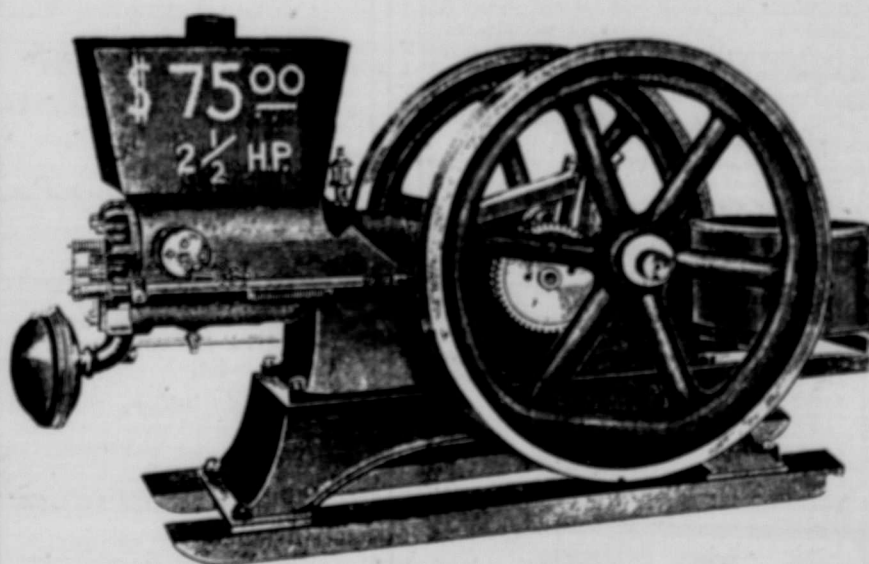
throw in some candies an' nuts an' oranges fer the kids. An' there's fifty dollars to start an' to say there's more o' God than the devil in Lost River!"

"Three cheers for the parson's kid!" Bob Herrick was out in the corner of the floor, flourishing a bunch of bills over his head as he yelled it. It was the signal for a roar of enthusiasm such as those men had seldom known in their wildest moments.

That night there was a fire of some kind over across the bay. It seemed to be on Wolverine Point, not far from the mouth of Squatter's Creek, and for a long time it cast a rosy reflection on the snow.

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