

THE ACE OF SPADES

I.—THE PROPHECY.



It was Sunday evening. The lumbermen were sprawling over bunks and benches, mending, reading and smoking. A group about the stove were joining in the chorus of a rough backwoods chanty that was famous throughout the lumber camps for its lilt and indecency, and a half dozen

more were deep in a game of high-low jack.

A swarthy French-Canadian dropped a coverless magazine of ancient date and sauntered down to the end of the long deal table to peer over the shoulders of the players.

After a while a tall blonde, with the physique of a Viking, yawned ponderously and leaned back against the logs.

"Say, boys, I reckon I've had erbout enough of this. Let's git Frenchy to tell us our fortunes."

This took the zest out of the game and the men rose to relight their pipes and stretch their legs. MacTavish collected the scattered cards, shuffled the pack a few times and held them out to Francois.

The French-Canadian was noted for his skill in foretelling the hand of fate. Many times his statements had been verified, until the simple men about him believed in his infallibility. If he had ever missed the mark they had forgotten it, but they remembered that George Smith had been forwarned of calamity six months before his little girl had died of typhoid fever, and Bob Hines was told of his good fortune long before Bessie Saunders had thought of accepting him. They could show the sceptic a dozen excuses such as these for their belief in his prowess.

He took the pack in silence and sat down. The men crowded around. "Who, eh? MacTavish? Good!" He broke the pile in two and shuffled them forwards and backwards without changing his hold. The lumberman cut. Then the fortune-teller placed them one at a time, face up, upon the table and in the smoky light of the lantern above his head proceeded to read the riddle of the greasy, thumb-marked cards before him. His voice was slow and solemn, and the men listened immovable while he told of their comrade's love affairs, the success of his next year's crops, how he should beware of a foreigner who would try to involve himself and his hard-earned capital in a scheme that meant ultimate failure. Finally he paused and eyed the cards narrowly.

"Jim, yer goin' ter have a mighty narrer squeak fer life 'fore long! First squint I took I thought yer was done fer, but the second I sees yer not."

MacTavish leaned forward anxiously. "No, by gosh, yer not! There's a short, dark man jumps in an' snatches yer from the clutch of Death. But—but—" and Francois looked up with an uneasy smile on his lips, "he's goin' ter git it good and plenty. There ain't no escape fer him!"

He stared at the fixed faces of the men about him and they stared back at him, and suddenly he seemed to read their thoughts.

"I knows what yer thinkin' of boys, an' maybe yer right. I reckon I'm erbout the shortest and darkest man here, all right; but that don't mean much. Ain't Jake there dark enough? an' Hal too fer that matter?" However, his voice was unconvincing and the smile had left his face. The men named looked uncomfortable and could not hide it.

"Say, Frenchy, what kind of a thing is it?" drawled MacTavish. "Perhaps we kin dodge it, yer know. I ain't goin' ter have one of the boys chuckin' away his life because of me. Not much I ain't!"

"This ain't somethin' that *may* happen, but sure has ter happen, Jim, an' it don't do no good makin' a fuss erbout it," answered Francois resignedly. "It ain't yer fault no more'n an earthquake is."

A sort of gloom had settled over the camp. The whole gang had joined the group about the table, and the only sound was the sharp crackling of the burning wood in the huge stove.

Hal broke the silence and his voice sounded huskier than usual.

"Can't yer tell us jest *which* one of us is doomed? If it's me I ain't afeared of knowin' it, an' if it isn't me I'd sort of feel more like sleepin' ter-night. Eh, Jake?"

"Yer right, Hal. Guessin' is a heap sight worse than knowin'. Tell us Frenchy."

The fortune-teller had relapsed into a black reverie with his eyes fixed on the cards. It was

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some minutes before he aroused himself. Then he gave a low mirthless chuckle.

"Don't worry boys. I reckons it's me all right enough. I don't rightly know *how* I know, but I sort of feel it in my bones. Here I'll prove it to yer sure enough."

He picked out the four aces and shoved the rest of the pack aside. Then he untied a red bandana from about his neck and made the man nearest him bind it tightly over his eyes.

Now, Jim, shuffle the four cards and place 'em face down in front of me. If I pick the ace of spades nothin' can save me!"

MacTavish obeyed. The cook leaning over his shoulder, looked as if he had seen a ghost.

Jake was much relieved at the French-Canadian's conviction that it was his own death he read in the cards, and a sudden sense of pity not unmixed with deviltry, awoke in his brain. Why not make the man's prophesying seem false, and who knows, perhaps save his life by a very simple expedient?

Just as MacTavish announced he was ready, Jake shot out his hand, lifted the edges of the cards until he found the ace of spades, drew it out and replaced it with the jack of hearts from the top of the discarded pile. One or two of the men grinned faintly at his audacity.

Francois stepped close and paused with his fingers a few inches above the row of cards. He appeared to be waiting for guidance or prompting from some unseen spirit. For almost a minute he stood there without a muscle moving and the crowd about scarcely dared to breathe for fear of breaking the spell. Their rough kindly faces were full of awe and expectancy, as their eyes strained on those thin bent fingers.

Some had begun to think that their comrade's trick had destroyed the test, when the hand slowly moved across the cards and dropped on the second from the end. The other snatched the bandage from its owner's eyes as he turned the card over.

A roar of laughter shook the camp. It was the jack of hearts!

The French-Canadian's face had been strangely pale in spite of the swarthy skin. As his eyes caught the flash of red the blood rushed back to his lips and a low gasp of relief escaped him.

Then as he stared at the piece of pasteboard in his hand his eyes opened wide with surprise, and suddenly he realised what had been done. His face grew hard and drawn and he sank heavily into his seat.

The laughter instantly stilled. Jake drew the ace of spades from its hiding place under the edge of the table and threw it onto the others with a poor attempt at humour.

"I reckon yer escaped that time, Frenchy."

"No, boys," he answered dully, "I'm marked. That would have been the ace of spades if yer had let it be, an' it don't make no difference what I drew."

A murmur of protest and encouragement went up from the onlookers, but he stilled it with a wave of his hand.

"No, boys, *the cards don't lie!*"

II.—THE FULFILLMENT.

It was the first of May, three months after the affair of the four aces. A week before, the last of the winter's "cut" had been "got out" and the men had returned to the outskirts of civilisation for a few crowded and hilarious days of freedom. Now they were back on the upper waters of the Tobique, a little soberer than usual, but prepared for the hardships of the "drive."

For the space of a hundred yards, and from the top of a steep bank to half way across the narrow frozen stream, the logs had lain piled like cordwood, waiting for spring to give them freedom. The last three days of heavy rain and melting snow had burst asunder the rotting ice and started the logs in a blind, jostling mass down the swollen, yellow channel.

But deep and swift as the river was, few of the logs would have reached the mills a hundred miles below unaided. In their clumsy panic they would ram and shoulder each other high up on either bank lose their way up "bogans" and smaller tributaries, spread out over submerged marshes where the sinking waters would leave them high and dry, far from the main river, and endeavour to crowd *en masse* around narrow bends that could not accommodate a tenth of their number, and so cause jams

to form that nothing less powerful than dynamite could break.

So the "lumberjacks" had now become "sackers" or stream-drivers, and exchanged their axes for cant-hooks and pike-poles with which to herd their unwieldy flock into civilisation and the shriek of buzz-saws. Strung out on both sides of the river, they kept pace with the lumber, pushing and prying and preventing dawdling, half the time wading up to their waists in the icy flood and risking their lives a hundred times as they sprang across the wallowing backs beneath them.

Though the winter had gone without unusual event, Francois' certainty of approaching death had not weakened. If not this month, well then the next, and he would continue doing his duty as he saw it without being influenced by his fears. His strange psychical powers had prepared him for what was to happen and nothing he could do would delay or prevent it. However, from one of the gayest men in the camp he had become the most preoccupied and quiet, and his fellow lumbermen understood in silent sympathy.

For a time the drive moved on swiftly and without serious hindrance, and anticipation of a near return to families and snug farmhouses kept the rough jests and boyish shoutings ringing in the wet, shaggy spruces above the river. Even MacKenzie, the silent boss, grinned cheerfully over the successful close of the season's work and the fulfilling of his contract.

Then one morning as they returned from an old deserted camp along their route where they had spent the night, they discovered a jam had formed opposite the mouth of Little River. In the few hours of darkness a solid tangled mass, a dozen feet in height and a hundred in width, had blocked the stream. Logs had been sucked down to fill the chinks below and wedged into the gravel. Their ends stuck out at every conceivable angle. Each moment fresh ones were joining their fellows and the water was already banked a good five feet higher above the jam than below.

MacKenzie glanced at it, muttered a curse beneath his breath and sent one of the men back to the camp for a stick of dynamite. Then he and MacTavish studied the problem carefully by scrambling out upon the jam, and finally agreed upon the vital spot.

The boss fired the fuse himself and dropped the explosive in between the chinks. A moment later a dull roar made the ground tremble beneath the feet of the watching men and a column of water shot high into the air, scattering huge logs in every direction as if they had been chips. Bark and gravel and splinters rained about them.

Next instant with much grumbling and growling the mass settled forward, gathered momentum and swept down. In its magnificent strength stout timbers were snapped in two like matchwood. Great arms rose and fell above the chaos and its voice shook the woods like the bellowing of thunder.

But the dynamite did not completely accomplish its design. The tail end of the barrier stuck fast in the bend again.

Instantly MacKenzie called to MacTavish and Francois, who were standing beside him, and ran out upon the logs. They followed behind, armed with their short, heavy peavies. It was no use shattering good timbers with explosives, except in extreme cases. A small jam could usually be opened by hand and this was a simple enough affair.

The three worked swiftly, throwing all their strength where it was most needed. Soon it was evident that the main strain came on one huge timber and they attacked it warily, ready to leap for safety if the need arose.

Francois was too busy at first to think of anything but the work in hand. But now as they pried and wrenched at the key log, realisation of his expected fate and the danger they were in sent a wave of dread through his body. Ordinarily such danger would have been taken philosophically as being all in the day's work, for the French-Canadian was no coward at heart; but the months of patiently waiting for some horrible death had sapped his courage and strained his nerves to the breaking-point.

And the blonde giant, of all men in the gang was straining and panting here beside him, calm and unconcerned. Had he forgotten the part he was to play in the tragedy? He felt fierce resentment of his comrade's indifference, and hated MacKenzie that he should have put him in such a position. He was too full of his fear to argue with himself as he had at first, that the hand of fate could not be pushed aside and the uselessness of endeavouring to escape