

The Big Muskeg

by VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Illustrations by R.H. Livingstone

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

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Molly ran behind the blazing divan, picked up the rifle, and drove a smashing blow against the back wall. It cracked; again and again she dashed the stock against it, until a section of the pine planks gave way under her assault.

Together they carried Wilton through into a room behind. Outside it was quite light; a gust of wind came through an open window and fanned the flames to fury. With a roar the fire leaped up the outer walls, and the whole front of the camp was ablaze.

Molly scrambled to the sill, clung there, and dropped. The factor, leaning out, lowered Wilton's body. And he himself dropped to the ground beside the girl.

As he dropped she perceived, without realizing it, that he had used both arms and legs. The paralysis had left him.

They ran down toward the lake, carrying Wilton between them, and making instinctively for the shelter of the undergrowth.

As they passed the road, Bowyer came out of the stable, pulling fiercely at the horses, which were fastened to the rig. He had set his foot upon the step when Lee Chambers and Hackett broke upon him from among the trees.

They made a leap for the vehicle. "Let us in, d—n you!" Chambers yelled.

Bowyer dealt him a blow with the whipstock that sent him staggering. With a vile oath Hackett sprang for the step. Bowyer lashed him across the face, causing him to miss his footing, and cursing and shouting, the two men rushed after him and disappeared down the road. The sound of the galloping horses died away. Molly kneeled at Wilton's side, bathing his face with water from the lake. The factor held his wrist.

"His pulse beats sound," he said. "He'll come back to himself soon. Let's awa', lass; let's awa'."

The girl hardly heard him. Pitifully she scanned Wilton's face for some signs of returning consciousness. But Wilton did not stir, though he was breathing easily.

Presently, with a hideous clamor, the two outlaws returned. Molly held her breath as they came back along the road, only a few yards above where she crouched with the factor. But they passed on, and turned up toward the camp, which blazed furiously, a flaming parallelogram against the glow of the eastern sky, into which the rim of the sun just projected from the horizon.

Even as she watched the girl saw the blazing walls tumble inward. The men leaped back, and then, shouting drunkenly, made their way toward the stables.

"Come awa', lass!" muttered McDonald, pulling at Molly's arm.

He took Wilton by the legs, and together they crept with him cautiously further into the bushes beside the lake.

Suddenly Wilton opened his eyes. And his first words felt like an icy chill on the girl's heart.

"Kitty, I tried to save your life!" he muttered.

He was thinking of the fire. He stared into Molly's eyes without recognition, and his own closed again. Once more the factor pulled at the girl's sleeve.

"Come awa', lass!" he whispered eagerly. "He'll get well, Come! It's our chance—a grand chance for us!"

"What do you mean?" she whispered back.

"Dinna ye see? They think we're dead. Tom Bowyer'll think we're dead in the fire. He'll never trouble us again. Come, lass! He winna come to no harm!"

As he spoke, Molly perceived two horsemen riding along the road. They were policemen; they moved at a slow walk; and they carried their rifles on their arms.

When they were within two hundred yards of the camp they dismounted, tied their horses to a tree, and began to run forward swiftly along the road. The uproar in the stable had not ceased.

Lee Chambers came staggering out, a bottle in his hand. And suddenly, a hundred yards away, he saw Quain and the constable.

He bolted back with a scream of terror. Then followed Hackett's belching roar, and the two men appeared at the door with rifles in their hands.

The policemen ran toward them. Quain led the way. "Drop those! Hands up! We've got you!" he shouted.

Molly saw Hackett drop to one knee and draw a careful bead upon the inspector.

At that moment the constable fired. The outlaw toppled head over heels like a shot rabbit, and never stirred again.

again. The bullet had pierced his heart.

With a cry of despair Chambers fired wildly and turned to run. Once more Quain shouted, and the constable fired again. Chambers dropped in his tracks and lay still.

Horrified at the sight, Molly crouched by Wilton's side. His eyes were open again. He did not yet recognize her, but it was evident that consciousness was coming back to him.

As the policemen began to carry the bodies of the outlaws into the stable the factor plucked violently at Molly's arm.

"What do you want to do, father?" she whispered.

"I'll tell ye, lass. Ye ken the trail that strikes off from the road below the lake and runs nigh the portage? We'll travel east through the bush two weeks. We'll go to the store and pack our few things and go. Aye, we'll go. We'll travel east through the bush two hundred miles or maybe more, till we strike the line somewhere. And then we're free. Dinna say no, lass!"

She was touched by the babbling stammered words. They went straight to her heart.

"He's naethin' to ye, lass?" asked the factor, pointing at Wilton.

Molly looked at him. He had fallen into a deep sleep. She could do nothing for him by remaining.

"No, father, he's nothing to me," she answered.

"We'll put him a wee bit higher on the slope, where they'll see him," the factor whispered.

They raised Wilton and laid him on the new-fallen snow, not far from the road. Then, cautiously and secretly, they turned and plunged into the depths of the underbrush.

It was two hours later when Wilton opened his eyes, to find himself lying in the stable. The inspector was standing at the door; the constable paced at his side.

Wilton looked at Quain with astonishment. He could remember nothing since his plunge into the burning building.

"Jack!" he called feebly. "What's happened to me? How did you get here, old man?"

Quain, who appeared to be struggling with some deep emotion, did not answer him.

"You know how I got here?" continued Wilton. "They trapped Miss McDonald and her father—where is she, Jack?"

"They're not here, Will."

"They must be here. I tell you I saw her. That beast Bowyer had her



At That Moment the Constable Fired.

by the throat. It made me see red! They got me down, and the place was afire, and—"

"Don't tell me that, Will," said the inspector in a choked voice. "Don't tell me any more."

"Why not, Jack? What's the matter with you?"

"Because you're under arrest for the willful murder of Joe Bostock. And I've—I've cautioned you!"

CHAPTER XVII

The Trap.

Bob Payne, the lawyer, could not make up his mind whether his client, Will Carruthers, was innocent or guilty, and that was his position in which he did not often find himself.

Either Carruthers was one of the coolest and most deliberate murderers that had ever lived, or he was the victim of an extraordinary well-woven conspiracy.

Molly saw Hackett drop to one knee and draw a careful bead upon the inspector.

Whether Wilton was innocent or guilty, Bob Payne meant to fight to the last. He had taken a liking to

Carruthers, and he was resolved to free him. That, of course, presumed his own belief in his client's innocence.

He found his client seated in his cell, scribbling upon pieces of paper covered with diagrams, just as he had found him on the occasion of his previous visit. Wilton rose and they shook hands.

The lawyer sat down. "Let's go over the facts together," he said. "There's going to be a fight. You realize that? Not that you won't win out. Of course you will. But when popular passions are stirred—when a newspaper campaign has practically prejudged the case, it's apt to be reflected in the minds of the jury. I've thought of asking for a change of venue. But I'm frank, Carruthers—the feeling is widespread, and Clayton is the town where your enemies have the least influence. I think we'll fight them here."

"I'll fight it out here," answered Wilton.

"And listen, boy! Ye remember how ye came to me about meeting that note when it falls due? I told ye I couldn't help ye. Well, boy, I was lying, I was trying ye, Will, and ye've made good; and I want to say—the old man's voice almost failed him—"I want to say the money's yours to meet that note when it falls due, and I—I want

obtained a permit to see him, and appeared outside the bars, accompanied by the warden.

"Will," he said huskily, "we're going to get you out of here. I told you they two snakes would be found at the bottom of the brushwood. I believe in ye, boy! That ain't much, maybe, but I want ye to know it."

Wilton was deeply moved. "Thank you, Jim," he said warmly.

"And listen, boy! Ye remember how ye came to me about meeting that note when it falls due? I told ye I couldn't help ye. Well, boy, I was lying, I was trying ye, Will, and ye've made good; and I want to say—the old man's voice almost failed him—"I want to say the money's yours to meet that note when it falls due, and I—I want

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