

THE NEW ADVENTURES OF J. RUFUS WALLINGFORD

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Blackie insisted on reading to them the new bill of sale he had drawn up.

"An' now," said Jonas triumphantly, patting his leather money pouch in his pocket to make sure that it was still safe, "you may go ahead an' dig all the holes you want to."

"Thanks," returned Wallingford, with equal triumph. "I don't care to dig a hole now. By the way, Mr. Squibble, are you going over past the post-office?"

"I might," replied Jonas cautiously.

"Then kindly mail this letter for me, will you?" and Wallingford handed him a stamped, addressed and sealed envelope. "Now, sonny," he said to "Toad," "get me a carpenter, a load of straw and all the men in town who have crowbars, pickaxes and spades and who are willing to work for \$2 a day."

"Yessir," said "Toad," and immediately became a cloud of dust.

Jonas turned away with Wallingford's letter, and of course he read the inscription. It was addressed to the International Lithograph Stone company. Jonas, in deep thought, which was rapidly becoming painful, slowly walked halfway across to the store, which was also the postoffice, then turned and came back.

"Lookit here," he charged in a sudden panic, "you dug that hole on a purpose to make me think you was a-buying that property jes' because you was mad."

"How dare you suspect me?" said Wallingford, smiling.

"You come here a-purpose to buy my stone field?" Jonas further charged, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I'll make no admissions," stated Wallingford, stiffening.

"What do you want o' my field, anyhow?" Jonas demanded, now sure that he had been swindled.

"That's my affair, sir," announced Wallingford crisply. "Moreover, I can't waste time talking about it. I've got a great deal of work to do in Squibbleville, and very little time in which to do it. I'll take that letter if you please," and, receiving it from Jonas' nerveless fingers, he walked across to the postoffice and mailed his request for a catalogue.

"Jimmy," said Blackie, watching the retreating legs of Toad with vast admiration. "If you don't make that kid foreman of the works at regular foreman's pay I'll never draw up another legal document for you."

Before noon Squibbleville was the busiest town on the map. The blacksmith, the cooper and even the proprietor of the Auditorium hotel, to say nothing of pale eyed and pale haired and red faced Ben Jessup and all the other killers in the village, quit their respective occupations in a hurry, even to the ancient and honorable one of loading, to secure that unprecedented \$2 a day. Even Ben Hunt appeared with his crowbar and pick and spade, but it transpired that Jonas Squibble was merely subtletizing him and making \$6 a week profit from his labor, a fact which completed the dire work of making a thorough anarchist of Ben. He would have spent most of his time in expounding his reactionary views to his fellow workmen had it not been for the activity of the foreman. "Toad" Jessup was on the job from the first stroke of the pick in the morning until the echo of the last clank of the crowbar had died away at night, and he was continuously at the side of every individual man of the near a score employed, giving his slow moving and listless paw the same attention as any other careless workman who needed driving.

Wallingford, inspecting the new part which had come that day to replace the broken one of his machine, felt the touch of a friendly hand upon his shoulder and looked up to find Blackie pointing gloomily up the road.

"Shall we run, bluff or fight?" asked Mr. Daw.

Wallingford, following the direction of the pointing hand, saw Jonas riding down the road in his buckboard, and with him was a gaunt man who wore a dark blue suit and a dark blue soft hat with a cord and tassel.

Wallingford arose with a most cheerful smile. "None of the three Blackie," he returned placidly. "This isn't a pinch; it's a compromise, only it's about two days later that I expected. Here's where I win that jade fob pendant."

Turning from Blackie, he assumed an attitude of great dignity as Jonas and the county sheriff, without a word, thrust a folded paper into Wallingford's hands.

"Now I've served it according to the law in such cases made an' provided for," declared the gaunt one in a bass voice so surprisingly deep that it seemed to make the ground tremble. "That there's an injunction restrainin' you from diggin' any more of this here bluestone or removin' any more of it from this here field until the case of Squibble against Wallingford, now pending in the Squawmus county court, is settled, dismissed and the costs paid, an' this here other paper's a notice o' the aforesaid suit." Here he thrust upon Wallingford another document and, his official mission concluded, he mopped his brow with a flaming yellow handkerchief which gave an extra jaundice to his already squishlike complexion, and became his own agreeable self again by adding, "Fine growin' weather we're havin', ain't it?"

"It grows splendidly," admitted Wallingford. "What's this suit about, anyhow?"

"About a doggone swindle!" interjected Jonas, unable longer to remain silent under his wrongs. "Bought my lithograph stone mine under false pretense."

"I never said it was lithograph stone, and I'm not saying so now," declared Wallingford, for whom the law had no nets of fine enough mesh.

"No, you was too slick," returned Jonas. "That's jes' the point. You bought that land as jes' plain land, at a regular land price. I got a lawyer over in Squawmus tells me he'll make a case o' general swindlin' out o' that, especially before a good, honest farmer jury, no bein' a regular citizen here an' you a blamed stranger, an' a slick lookin' one at that. So now you see where you're at."

"I may lose the suit," admitted Wallingford, with a wink at Blackie. "but I will not be bullyragged. If he had come at me with an offer of a compromise I might have considered it; but now I shall fight. I don't believe the farmers of Squawmus county love Jonas Squibble so well that they'd give him an unfair advantage, even of a decently dressed stranger."

Jonas winced at that painful truth. The gaunt stranger surveyed the impressive looking Wallingford with admiration and gauged correctly his heaven born ability to make friends where he chose, and the truth burst from him.

"You bet they don't," he agreed. "They all got it in for Jone because he's so slick himself." Jonas winced again.

"Well, I'm willin' to hear what Mr. Wallingford has to offer," ventured Jonas, after waiting a slightly more than reasonable time for Wallingford to speak first.

"Oh, confound it," snapped Wallingford, as one driven against his will. "I suppose I'll be compelled in the end to let Mr. Squibble in on at least a portion of this enterprise, and I might as well do it now and have a little peace. Mr. Squibble, I'll sell you a half interest—mind you, only a half interest—in this field for—(he hesitated just a moment; this was the crucial point—how much would Jonas Squibble stand?)—for \$7,000."

"I'll go you," returned Squibble, so quickly that Wallingford could scarcely repress an exclamation of triumph for Blackie's humiliation. "You're a witness to this, Lem Potter," went on Jonas. "It's a bargain that he sells me back a half interest in this four acre field and all that's in it, or under it, or on top of it, mind you, exceptin', o' course, Mr. Wallingford's automobile wagon, for \$7,000. Now don't you go away from here, Mr. Wallingford, an' I'll go right straight an' get you the cash money. Come on, Lem."

"I knew I was putting up an awful strong game, but I didn't believe I was enough of an artist to make this old penny squeezer fall so hard," exulted Wallingford to Blackie. "Now watch me work him to buy the other half."

What more might have been said was covered up in the hubbub which at that moment arose in the "mine," and walking out that way they discovered Toad Jessup directing an emergency

movement with great vigor and decisiveness.

"Tear some o' them planks out'n the fence back o' the store there!" he was ordering as they came up. "Never mind the damages. We kin afford to pay for a new fence rather than have that soft mud all run down and gum up them stones. It's a goanna rain inside o' ten minutes, I tell you. I been a-fahin' enough to know what that kind of a black cloud means."

The sheriff's voice, booming easily both over and under a roll of thunder, at that moment called across the field to Wallingford. Jonas Squibble was back with the money.

"Go get it quick!" urged Blackie. "I never believe money until I have it in my jeans and the padlock clamped on it."

His fears, if he really had any, were allayed as soon as they joined Jonas at the car, for Mr. Squibble thrust the money into Wallingford's hands as soon as he was near enough.

"Count it!" ordered Jonas in a voice positively squeaky with excitement.



Blackie insisted on reading his bill of sale to the girls.

"You'll find it all there. Some of it's a little tore, an' some of it's a little musty an' moldy, mebber, but it's good money. I got some more of it right here too. I got another seven thousand just like it that I'll give you, solid spot cash, right this minute, for the other half o' that field."

Wallingford felt his heart thump up in his throat and was conscious of Blackie patting him encouragingly upon the back, but there was something about the nervous eagerness of Jonas, who was exceptionally lacking in self control for so shrewd an old bargainer, which made Wallingford pause and stiffen.

"Make it eight thousand and I'll go you," he offered. "That's my last

Word. "Take it or Leave it."

To his immense surprise Jonas immediately produced the money. "Here it is," he said. "Now gi' me back my bill o' sale an' we don't need any more documents."

Then Squibble signed a receipt for the transfer, using Blackie's silk hat as a desk.

After all the preliminaries were arranged and Toad Jessup was told that they were going to leave he pleaded with Blackie to be taken along as a foreman.

"We don't need a foreman, Toad, for a foreman costs too much money," said Blackie, "but we do need a manager at about \$4 a week, board, clothes and smoking tobacco, so just go get your Sunday clothes and be ready to pull right out with us."

"Don't fool the boy that way, Blackie," remonstrated Wallingford. "His father never would let him go."

"He wouldn't, eh?" retorted "Toad," and, opening the door of the car, he strided out into the rain. "Here, you, Paw, come here!"

This time the tone was peremptory. The elder Jessup hesitated a moment and then came plodding stolidly across the rain.

"Whadgbe want?" he inquired, with his head protruding forward and utterly oblivious of the thin streams of water which were running down the back of his neck.

"I'm a-goin' away with Mr. Wallingford and Blackie. I got a job bein' manager for 'em. Mebbe we'll pull our freight tonight yet."

"Well," said the elder Jessup reflectively. "It had order be a good job, and I reckon you'll do well at it. I guess if your maw was alive she'd be plumb tickled to see you go, though, and I am too. By jinks, we ain't washed out your shirt yet!"

"I'll take it the way it is," decided "Toad" promptly. "Come on; we'll go right over to the house an' git my duds."

"Well, we got him," declared Blackie, almost embarrassed by the suddenness with which "Toad" had attached himself permanently to them. "He's ours, and now I suppose we'll have to take care of him."

"He's more likely to take care of us," laughed Wallingford. "I'm glad you signed him on. This town's been good to me. And, by the way, Blackie, while I think of it, I'll bother you for that jade fob pendant."

Blackie silently unfastened his pet bit of jewelry from his fob and passed it over. "You win," he confessed, "and you win running easy, ahead by seven lengths of daylight. But, Jimmy, if I had it to do over again I'd still bet my life against 3 cents' worth of tripe that nobody could skin Jonas Squibble out of \$5, let alone \$15,000. Let's see; deducting the \$12,000 we get back for the pretty Warden orphans, we have \$3,000 left for the expense fund. Pretty good for a long shot."

"You'll go broke picking long shots some day," commented Wallingford dryly, changing his coat for a mackintosh and hunting out his "silkker" hat.

"The rain's slackenin' up, cheerful looser, and if this car isn't standin' in three or four feet of water I'm goin'

to screw this attachment in place and we'll hike right on to that good town they tell us about, where there's a real hotel."

They smoked a contemplative cigar while they waited for the rain to die down. Before it had quite ceased Jonas Squibble was out on the field again, and with him, besides his friend, the sheriff, was a tall man in gum boots and yellow cravenette.

"This is Mr. Wallingford, Mr. Dickerson," introduced Jonas, rubbing his hands together and grinning a grin of pure delight. "Mr. Dickerson, Mr. Daw. Mr. Dickerson is from the International Lithograph Stone company. He was here last spring lookin' at my stone, an' as soon as I seen the address on that letter you gi' me to mail I wrote to 'im, an' Mr. Dickerson come right on. I had him hid in the hotel ever since last night."

"I couldn't see why Mr. Squibble wouldn't let me come out," laughed Mr. Dickerson, who wore queer little tufts of curly red beard, "but now I understand it. I want to compliment you on the care you've taken in mining and packing the rock, Mr. Wallingford. Of course this isn't high grade lithograph stone, but it's the best I could find in the three months' trip which I have just ended, and it's a very good sort for a variety of commoner work. I should judge the deposit to be worth in the neighborhood of \$50,000."

"Let me shake you by the hand again, Mr. Dickerson," said Blackie with surging enthusiasm. "Let me shake you by both hands. You're a pleasant stranger and a welcome stranger! You must come in and have a pipe and a glass of grog with me, while my friend, Jimmy, sits on the wet step and mourns. J. Rufus, I'll trouble you for my jade fob pendant again and also for my scarab scarfpin."

Wallingford slowly unfastened those articles of adornment and passed them over to Blackie with a sigh. "That's what I get for being a pikker," he said.

[Another adventure next week.]

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