



CEDAR SWAMP

by Michael J. Phillips

Illustrations by Henry Jay Lee
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THE LEADING CHARACTERS

Edison Forbes, a young resident of Scottdale with an inherent craving for liquor, is held for the death of a woman who has been killed by a bootlegging truck. Circumstantial evidence points to Forbes and rather than tell the truth of the episode which would clear him but cast another friend in a bad light, he stands trial and is sentenced to a long term in prison. The governor of the state, an old friend of Eddie's father, believes him innocent and pardons him shortly after his arrival at the jail.

Scotts Libbey, a worthless character, who has smashed his machine into another car, killing its lone occupant, a woman. Forbes' companion and Libbey quit the scene hurriedly, leaving the former alone to face a constable who reasons that Eddie, with the scent of whiskey about him must be connected in some way with the accident. Accordingly, Forbes is arrested.

Patsy Jane, Eddie's pretty wife, agrees that public sentiment runs too high against him. Accordingly they migrate up north to some land that has been in the family for years. Settled in their log cabin.

Isalah Sealman, a neighbor, pays the Forbes a visit and intimates that there are some back taxes for the young couple to pay. Sealman offers to give Eddie a job after he goes down to Long Portage, a nearby town, and learns about the taxes.

CHAPTER VII

Bad News

Eddie looked after him with wrinkles when Sealman struck off to the northwest. "Wonder what he means about taxes, Pat?" he mused. "They can't be so much on them—Who'd have the nerve to tax his stuff?" He pointed out to the rolling acres that flowed up to their door from nearly every direction. It was innocent of vegetation except sparse, laggard sweetfern and bracken, just peeping through the thin, old stalks, stunted, scattered jack pine; and the occasional jagged shell of a lone pine of some size, blackened by repeated fires. "I don't know, Eddie. Let's drive downtown tomorrow and find out."

They slept soundly that night. The bedroom contained an iron bedstead, stout and serviceable. Equipped with their camping bedroll, it served admirably. After breakfast they went out for a survey of the quarter-section. It was an oblong, the longer dimensions from north to south. It had once been fenced. But many of the posts were missing now, and the barbed wire, rusty and snarled, lay on the ground or trailed forlornly. The land sloped from the north and west. It was bisected by a brisk stream, Portage Creek, which purred over stones, a novelty in the Jackpine country, where there is very little rock foundation. Willows grew thickly along the stream and there was an occasional strong young hardwood.

The banks of the stream were very steep and precipitous, capable of holding no more water than flowed between them, even at freshest time. Not far from the southwest corner of the property was a curious mound. It rose abruptly from the plain to a height of perhaps eighty feet. It was as large as a city block at the top, a rough oval in shape.

The sides and top were clothed in a trick mat of luxuriant old grass through which the new spears were shooting. It was interspersed with stout trees and bushes. "That's a queer thing," commented Eddie, when they had stopped to survey it. "Wonder what it is—Indian burying-ground? There were lots of redskins around here in the old days."

"Would the Indian heap earth up so high?" queried Patsy Jane. "It might be a relic of the Mound Builders."

They followed a path which was fed by many branches, and which completely surrounded the mound. On the south side of the great heap of earth was a bare space, like a scar. The exposed earth was vari-colored. There were streaks of yellowish-brown, of chalky white, and dark purple. These were accompanied and bisected by thinner, semi-transparent veins of a quartz-like substance that sparkled dully in the sunlight. He stepped closer and sniffed. "Smell anything, Pat?"

Her little nose was wrinkled perplexedly. "Yes; that earth smells—smells sour."

"That's it," he nodded. "Sour makes

you think of the way salt should smell."

There was a trail following the easiest grade which surmounted the knoll. "Bet it was made by deer," said Eddie. "Gee, you get a fine view up here!"

Bare spot were visible on top of the knoll. The sod had been scraped away, and the subsurface was crystalline and white as snow. He broke off some of the crystals with his heel and tasted cautiously. It was salt. "Sure," he said; "this is a deerlick. The deer love salt, just like cattle. They'll travel miles to get it. Ought to be some hunting here in the season, though of course it's pretty close to the house."

They looked for miles over undulating stretches of wildness. It was as though they were standing in the bottom of a great cup, for on every horizon, soft hills rose, green when not too far away, purple with added distance. The stream with its thicker vegetation, was a slender green slash which ran into the picture from the far north and disappeared in the south.

Patsy Jane sighed with satisfaction. "It's wonderful up here, Eddie," she breathed. "So still, so peaceful, so unspoiled. Let's stay forever!"

He put an arm about her. "All right," he agreed. "Only we can't live on green grass and scenery. I'll have to find something to do, you know, to help out the trout we catch."

"Oh, you will," returned his wife, optimistically. "Why, Mr. Sealman has offered you a job already."

"Uh-huh," he grunted. "And I may take it. Though I'm not crazy about Sealman. He's sort of—well what you might call slick, Pat."

They resumed their inspection. They found that the road from Long Portage flanked the south line of Sealman's place, cut through their own property near the center, and crossed the creek not far from their front door. The high banks were notched at this point so the road might descend to water level. There was no bridge. "Must be other settlers beyond," surmised Eddie. "Lake Huron isn't a great many miles away over there to the east."

Another road came down from the north close to the water's edge, joining the main east and west highway

at the crossing of the stream. "Looks as though there were some travel on that, too," he continued. "We seem to have a corner on the main trails. This one must go north till it hits the lake. Remember on the map how Huron cuts in sharply just above us?"

The drive to the village was swift and pleasant. There were few grades. The sands which later in the summer would be powdery and hard to negotiate, was firm and damply brown. It made a ideal roadbed. The fiver skimmed about the myriad curves at a smart pace.

Portage county had recently invested in a combined courthouse, jail, and office-building. It was an ambitious two-story building of red brick. The population was sparse, and one office housed three departments—clerk, treasurer and register of deeds. Peter Wimpe held all titles and transacted all the business. He was a fat man who, in anticipation of summer had already donned a black alpaca coat.

"The Forbes quarter-section?" he echoed to Eddie's question. "Oh, yes; that's over east here, near Sealman's. He waddled to a large, canvas-jacketed book and made some figures, which he checked in a slimmer volume of red leather.

"You property's had a couple tax-plasters put on it," he announced. "Certificates are held by Marcus Bower, of Chicago. Year of grace pretty near up. Want to pay now?"

"No," answered Eddie apologetically. "How much time have I?"

"Oh, about five months—until the first of September. Then if you don't pay up he takes title."

"How much do I owe, altogether?" The fat man figured. "Eight hundred and ninety-seven dollars and ninety-three cents. That's everything that's overdue, and the penalties he can collect they're heavy."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "This Mr. Bower," ventured Eddie. "Who is he and what's his idea of bidding it in?"

"Well, he's a rich man. I think he wants to get big block of stuff back there as a reserve for fish and game. I'm his agent for this county. You can pay me the back-taxes when you get the money."

CHAPTER VIII

The Old Curse

A soberness which was almost

gloom encompassed the little car as they drove homeward. They had gone several miles before Eddie broke the silence: "Eight hundred dollars, Pat. That's a lot of money."

"I know it," agreed Patsy Jane, gravely.

"We've got about sixty," he went on, with a rueful smile. "This car is worth mighty little. All of our belongings wouldn't bring much."

"The land itself, Eddie. Couldn't we sell part of it and pay off the taxes?"

He shook his head. "It's a dozen miles from town and the railroad, if it were worth much for farming purposes, which it isn't. There are some jackpines which would produce railroad ties and fenceposts, only they'd bankrupt you, getting them to market. Some city sportsman might like it well enough to buy it as a summer home, or for the deer season. But he wouldn't give a great deal for the whole thing, the house included."

"Oh, dear," mourned Patsy Jane. "I don't want to sell the whole thing. I want it, I want it! I'm just crazy to live here!"

"So am I, Pat. Well maybe we can make the rifle. I'll get a job and we'll pinch and squeeze. That won't be very pleasant."

"I don't care," returned Pat, sturdily. "This place is worth sacrificing for."

A fine insistent rain was falling next morning when they awoke and there was a chill in the air which seemed to penetrate the marrow. The Jackpines wilderness looked particularly desolate and forbidding, as though it were sufficient unto itself in its inhospitality, and resented the human beings who attempted to live within it.

Eddie had dragged several blackened logs into the woodshed the previous day, and after breakfast he attacked them with axe and bucksaw, until the pile of billets of stove-length proportions.

Patsy Jane sang lightheartedly within the house as she arranged and rearranged the scant furniture, and swept and scrubbed. But a reaction had set in with her husband. He felt depressed and shivery. He was homesick for Scottdale, Scottdale the ungenerous, the narrow and unkind,

which had convicted him even before the jury had. From a distance of some hundreds of miles the little town had taken an endearing and desirable qualities. He wanted to go back where he could see familiar faces, even though they were turned from him, cold with disapproval.

He worked doggedly away, hoping that the mood would pass, while the rain drummed monotonously away on the leaky roof of the log woodshed. It was approaching noon when he heard the exhaust of a heavy-laden vehicle on the north and south road; and later voices.

When the voices persisted he went out to investigate. A big truck from the north had attempted to make the turn on of the sunken road into the Long Prairie highway. But there was muck instead of sand for a footing near the creek and muck squashed treacherously under moisture. One of the rear wheels had sunken to the hub.

The two burly, hard faced men in short, waterproofed coats; the tarpaulined truck, the bulge at the hip of each of the truck attendants—all there were easily-read signs. This was a booze-truck. Apparently the main line of entrance from Canada ran past his very door.

"Want some help?" he asked, with a smile. They looked up suspiciously, but his friendliness disarmed them. He welcomed the break in the day's monotony. They cut a stout sapling for a lever; rolled a fire-blackened stub beneath the sunken hub for a fulcrum; and paved the truck's pathway to firm ground with bits of wood. Within a few minutes the truck, barking with deep exhausts, rolled out of the bog.

Once on safe footing the driver brought the vehicle to a halt. The guard, who had been working with Eddie, went forward. After a little low-toned conversation with his companion, he thrust his hand under the seat and brought forth a bottle of liquor.

"Much obliged, kid," he said gruffly. "Have a little drink on us. And say: Just forget you saw us. Hey!"

Eddie stood looking at the bottle in his hand. His first impulse was to smash it on a nearby rock. He raised his arm, in fact, to do so. Then he temporized. Of course, he wasn't

going to drink any of it. Though a nip on a bleak and dreary day like this would help. But he'd hide it. Maybe someone else would need a drink pretty badly, sometime.

His thoughts were not very clear, except that he could keep the liquor for the present. He went upstream a short distance, looking for a niche in which to hide it. He found a narrow opening under a rock which jutted out from the bank of the stream. He thrust in his arm; the hole went back for a considerable distance. He pushed the bottle into it as far as he could reach and went home to dinner.

The devil of restlessness and homesickness was not exorcised by the tempting meal which Patsy Jane had prepared. The warm kitchen fire and the crackling pine knots and splinters in the fireplace could not banish the clammy dew which the rain drumming on the windowpane seemed to distill in his heart.

"Guess I'll run over and see Sealman," he said, when the dishes had been washed and put away. "Want to go along, Pat?"

She looked out at the pelting rain and shook her head. "I'll put in a riotous afternoon with those magazines we bought yesterday," she told him.

Waterproofed and booted he stepped out the back door and cut through the fields toward Sealman's. It was not unpleasant. The sand was drinking up the rain as it fell. The brown surface was firm and springy. Exercise fought off the chill.

Sealman's double log house was pretentious. His barn, nearly as large, sheltered considerable stock. There were implements under a long shed, open along the front, which adjoined the barn. Almost from his own line fence Eddie could see that the soil was closer knit and heavier, because of an admixture of clay with the sand. It compared favorably with the land of the rich agricultural belt of southern Michigan.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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