



CEDAR SWAMP

by Michael J. Phillips

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THE LEADING CHARACTERS —

Edison Forbes, a young resident of Scottsdale 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.

Isaiah 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.

The next day while walking about their property they discover a mysterious mound that contains outcrops similar to salt. At the tax office Forbes learns that the back taxes amount to over eight hundred dollars and that the certificates are held by a Chicago capitalist who is eager to obtain the property. Eddie has five months to pay. A few days later he helps a booze truck out of the mud and is presented with a bottle of whiskey which he hides before walking over to interview Sealman.

CHAPTER IX. An Offer

Sealman was not at home a woman of middle age who answered his knock told Eddie. He was downtown. She looked at him with the curiosity of people, one who sees few strangers. He could feel her eyes boring into his back from the small-paned windows after he had turned away and was retracing his steps.

Now what to do? he thought dissatisfiedly. There was plenty of wood cut. He didn't want to coop up and read. There was nothing else, except an exploratory tramp. That was it: He would follow the road north, to find out where the booze-truck came from.

He stopped at the house to tell Pat and then turned into the sinuous double track, along which the broad tires had left their impress. When he was opposite the point where the liquor was hidden, he turned to the jutting rock and thrust his arm into the hole.

He withdrew the flask and thrust it into his pocket without looking at it. He swung northward for a mile without pausing. Then he stopped abruptly snatching out the bottle, removed the cork with feverish haste and took a long drink.

The liquor was potent. He coughed and shuddered, but the effect of the stimulant was immediate. A genial glow coursed through his veins. He became optimistic. He whistled lightly as he fell into a distance-eating stride that took him due north.

Five miles after he was reeled off, for he was determined to find the end of the road. The soil was so poor that there were no settlers, no human habitation—nothing but the track, dipping into the hollow and surmounting the long sandy knolls with sparse jack-pine covering.

He stopped occasionally to drink again. The exercise kept the effects of the whiskey down. At last, long past mid-afternoon, Lake Huron, cold and gray, under the assault of the rain, broke in his vision. The lake filled the entire horizon ahead. The road ended at a dock which thrust itself into the shallows. Fretful waves broke upon the white sand. Pines of good size fringed the shores of the cove.

"They lighter is from out there a ways," was Eddie's thought. "The steamers shoot right across the lake from the Georgian Bay country. They

run the booze-trucks day and night up here. But as they get down where there are more towns they must lay up days."

He took the bottle out again. His potatoes had reduced the contents considerably. The stuff was beginning to take effect. "Well, another little drink won't do us any harm," he said aloud with a reckless laugh. "And I guess it's time to hit homeward then. It's a long, long ways to little old Tipperary down there by the creek."

"It's a long, long way to Tipperary," he sang, unsteadiness creeping into his footsteps.

Darkness had fallen when he slumped against the door of the cabin. The raincoat had impeded him. Somewhere back along the trail he had thrown it away. So that it was a drenched figure that toppled to the floor when Patsy Jane lifted the latch.

She got him undressed and to bed, somehow, lips compressed, eyes glowing with resentful inner fires. He was inert as a log. He slept the night through, without moving. Really it was more of a stupor that of sleep, for the liquor had the effect on his senses of a shrewdly-awung mallet.

He was sick next day, sick with a sense of failure and remorse and worthlessness, but physically ill as well. The exposure in the cold rain itself was a venomous drug. The adulterants which had been added to give bite and volume by the various handlers bordered on deadly poisons and they clawed and tore at stomach and intestinal linings.

It was not until the second morning, after he had eaten breakfast in a dressing gown, that Patsy steered herself against the pity which kept swelling up at sight of the pale face. She had tended his uncomplainingly, ignoring the fretful repinings and self-scourgings.

"Now, Eddie," she said gravely, across the breakfast table, "We'll have a little talk. I'm not going to say much. Nagging won't do any good. But we must have an understanding."

She hesitated before going on; "I don't need to tell you what liquor does for you. You know where it brought you—where you'd be if it weren't for the governor, Eddie. I won't stand any more. I can't stand any more. This is the last time. If you get drunk again I'll leave you."

He searched the sad, piquant little face. The gray eyes were steady, the tender mouth firm. The finality of her words struck a chill in his heart. "But, Patsy! What would I do if you left me?" he burst forth, involuntarily, and then flushed at the childish selfishness of the remark.

"I don't know, Eddie. It might cure you. I can't seem to cure you by staying." There was not bitterness in her words; only sadness.

He leaned forward to take her hands. "You won't have to go, Pat," he assured her, his voice trembling with eagerness. "I'm through with booze! Oh, I know I've said it before, but this time I mean it. You'll see. Never another drop as long as I live." He meant it. He was sure of himself. The chains were broken. The conviction that he was his own man shone in his eyes. She thrilled with faith and conviction. She squeezed his hands joyfully.

There was a knock at the door. Sealman, the sleek, stood in a background of brilliant sunshine when Patsy Jane opened it. "What's the matter, Mr. Forbes—sick?" he asked his keen blue eyes roving as he took a chair.

"A little under the weather," returned Eddie, shortly. "I was over to see you the other day, but you were out."

"Yes. You have looked up the taxes, I suppose. What did you find?" "Well, I have better than eight hundred dollars to raise in five months. That job you talked about begins to look pretty good, Mr. Sealman."

Sealman considered, his hands folded over his rounded stomach, his lips pursed beneath his glossy beard. "Rather a lot of money," he said, meditatively. "Have you ever considered selling?"

"O, yes, we've talked it some," replied Eddie. "But I don't suppose it would bring much more than the taxes—the whole thing."

"It isn't worth any more," agreed Sealman. "That is, it isn't worth any more to anyone except possibly myself. I wouldn't mind owning this quarter-section. I would round out my

property nicely. I could run stock on it after it was fenced. You consider an offer?"

Eddie looked at his wife. Her face did not reveal her thoughts, but he knew that beneath the surface, she disapproved. The idea of selling was repugnant. "I'll listen," he said, non-committally.

"Well, the actual value is perhaps a thousand dollars. It might bring that if you had time to search for a buyer and interest the right party. Not a cent more. And it might take a year to find your man. Suppose I advance the money to satisfy the taxes, and give you a thousand dollars besides?"

A thousand dollars. The offer was surprisingly generous. It meant that Sealman considered the place worth particularly twice what the average person would pay. Well, if it was worth more than eighteen hundred dollars to Sealman, it must be worth that to them.

"I don't believe I care to sell," he said, Patsy Jane's eyes telegraphed approval.

CHAPTER X. Another Truck

Sealman showed his disappointment. "That's a good price, Mr. Forbes, a big price. You won't get another such offer."

"Maybe not." "You've admitted that there's a chance you can't raise the taxes. You may lose everything."

"That's a chance I mean to take," returned Eddie, smiling. He felt better that the refusal was behind him.

"Hum." Sealman digested this for a time. "I'm not justified Mr. Forbes, not justified at all. In fact, I'm probably foolish for doing it. But I might raise it to twelve hundred."

"No, thank you." Sealman rose. Displeasur was struggling to show through the sleekness of his manner. "Fifteen hundred! That's positively the last word, Forbes."

"No, Mr. Sealman. I think I can make it worth that by keeping it." The roving blue eyes encountered Eddie's for an instant. "Anyone else been making you an offer?"

"No. I haven't talked with another soul about it. By the way, how about that job? Does it look as though you could take me on as a farmhand?"

Sealman paused at the door and turned, his hand on the latch. "I've changed my plans somewhat, Forbes. I don't see how I can use you. Good day."

"Why, the old hoptoad!" ejaculated Eddie. "What's gotten into him? Is he sore because we wouldn't sell, or what?"

"I don't know, but I'm glad we didn't," returned Patsy Jane stoutly. "I don't like him any better than you do, Eddie. I'm glad you're not to work for him. What did he mean when he asked if anyone else tried to buy the place?"

"He meant that he's mighty anxious to get it. We haven't heard the last of him, Pat. Well, we'll have to jump in and pull it out of the fire. If he wants it and Brower wants it, there must be more to it than we realized. I can get a job, easy, I know."

His optimism was not justified. Most of the settlers in the vicinity had little good land, and that was illy-cultivated. They preferred hunting and fishing and getting out posts to farming for which they had neither capital nor equipment.

When he crossed the creek, however, there was a ray of hope. The Davenant ranch, plaything of a wealthy Detroitier, had a resident foreman. He told Eddie that the owner had ambitious plans for the year in the way of heavy planting and much clearing. He might need several men. When Mr. Davenant came up in a week or so, and made final decision, he had better be on hand.

Eddie felt that he could not afford to wait even a week. He went to town. But Long Portage was overflowing with labor. The married men who had been in the woods all winter were trooping back. Their summer jobs were kept for them. There was no chance for an outsider against the long-established claims.

The week passed dullly. He dug and chopped out pine stumps, for their roots and pitchy knots made excellent firewood. The hard labor of sawing and chopping smothered his homesickness and drowned in fatigue the craving for liquor which was ever near

the surface. He filled the woodshed to the eaves and even piled a tier around the inside of the garage, a slab shed with sloping roof. He made three trips to the Davenant ranch. But the owner had not yet arrived.

Another rainy day found him chinking the logs of the cabin with mud from the banks of the creek. It did not really need it. But restlessness was devouring him, and the demand for liquor was rising like a prairie fire. The intensity of the passion frightened him. Back home, in normal surroundings and with a regular occupation, he had been able to keep it somewhat within bounds. Especially as the little town and its uncompromising opinions imposed restraints upon him.

But here, the frontier still, where life was much more open and simple, the restraints were fewer. The wilderness, grim and unfriendly in storm, gay and sparkling in sunshine, invited one to live his own life, uncaring. There were few to see and to comment. It was, he fancied, like the early days in the west. Some of the settlers here were failures who had come to the jackpine country to forget the past. They did not ask too personal questions. Because they would resent such questions from others.

Just after noon, while he was at the (Continued on Page 8)

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