



CEDAR SWAMP

by Michael J. Phillips

Illustrations by Henry Jay Lee
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CHAPTER XV. Demon Rum Again

Cully and Jake, confused, took his proffered hand with mumbled greetings. The third man was introduced as Oscar. "Say," Eddie went on, his smile taking a tinge of humorous ruefulness, "there was an awful kick in that last bottle. Do you know where I was when I came out of it with a head like a haystack."

The driver and Culley exchanged glances. "No, where?" asked the guard. "Coming into Chicago in a freight car."

"You don't say," ejaculated the driver.

"Surest thing you know. Where'd you leave me?"

Again the exchange of puzzled looks. "Long Portage," returned Jake.

"Well," went on Eddie, easily. "I don't remember a thing after that third drink, although it seems to me I had a dream about a boxcar. I must have wandered to the yards and laid down in the car to sleep it off. They didn't see me and locked the door. Boy. That booze had a kick."

He had convinced them, and there was a decided increase of cordiality in their manner. Oscar and Jake, smiled sympathetically. "I know," explained Jake, "it wasn't very good stuff. We were all sick next day. You can't always be sure of the quality. But we've changed wholesalers since then. We're getting the real Canadian Scotch now."

Eddie sat on a log by the roadside and the three returned to their task. They regarded him, evidently, as one of them—a man dependent upon liquor who would not dream of betraying the illicit traffic which almost daily crawled across the state like a stain.

"Ship's just in. I take it" he said carelessly. "Passed the other four trucks down the road a ways."

"She got in at dawn," replied Oscar. "We work up there all night. Maybe you think it wasn't cold, sleepin' on the deck of that truck with only one blanket."

The tire was bolted, and the truck was ready to take up its journey. While the other two clambered to their places, Culley went to the box under the seat and drew forth a bottle of golden brown liquor. "Needn't be afraid of this stuff kid," he said. "It's the real goods. I think it's the best we've hauled this season. Hey, Jake?"

"Uh huh," agreed the driver.

"So have a real one on us," concluded Culley, waving his hand. He knew that he could partake of this liquor. Though they had drugged and shanghaied him before, it was not because of personal enmity. They did it for some mysterious reason which he had not been able to solve, and at the persuasions of some unknown adversary. This was a peace offering of booze, at least reasonably pure. They were making amends for shabby treatment. Which shabby treatment they would repeat, however, if inducements were offered.

He had fooled them and put himself up against one of the gravest crises of his life. Craving for liquor was scratching at every nerve. The kick of the alcohol—how he yearned for it. Alcohol was in his hand. He could almost smell its fumes. And he knew that if the actual odor came to his nostrils, he was gone.

Cold perspiration came out on his forehead. His mouth went dry. His teeth were clenched as though the tetanus germ had locked them. Ridges of muscle appeared on cheeks which had grown haggard. The fight was on, and it was going to a finish.

The tension eased. "I don't have to settle it right this minute," he told himself speciously. "Let's go and see about that ship."

He wore no coat, for the day was bright and warm. He thrust the bottle inside his flannel shirt where it gurgled against his body with every step. He was marvelously relieved that a reprieve had been granted, even on terms so shabby.

The cove was deserted. Far out on the lake he discerned the dumpy outlines of a good sized fishing tug, heading for Canadian waters again. There were few marks of the unloading. The beach had been raked over, probably, and there was no one in sight. But a stroll up the shore revealed behind masking undergrowth a log house built partially below the lake level. A channel ran to its strongly-padded door. Part of the overhanging bank had been tunneled to receive the rear of the house.

"They keep their skills in there," he mused. "I suppose if all the trucks

aren't here when they need them, the stuff is locked up until they come."

The possibilities of the cove were exhausted and his own problem pressed. The longing for liquor lay in wait so that when mind and body were unoccupied, it seized on them. "While I'm busy it isn't so bad," he thought. "Well, let's try keeping busy."

Below the cove the shoreline turned abruptly to the east, taking in many square miles. He plunged into this wilderness which was to him virgin. It was pleasant walking. The soil was more than mere sand, and firm under foot. There was hardwood among the jackpines and an occasional great white pine tree which had evaded the axe and saw.

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