



CEDAR SWAMP

by Michael J. Phillips

Illustrations by Henry Jay Lee
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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 bootlegger's truck. Circumstantial evidence points to Forbes and rather than tell the truth of the episode, he sends trial, which results in a long prison sentence. He is soon pardoned, however, but back in Scottsdale he and

PATSY JANE, his trusting wife, agree that public sentiment against him is too strong so they migrate up north to some land that has been in the family for years. While here they form the acquaintance of

ISAIAH SEALMAN, a shifty neighbor who is anxious to buy their land. Eddie learns that the back taxes amount to over eight hundred dollars but as he has five months to pay he decides to refuse Sealman's offer of \$1200 and try to get final title to his property—Sealman's offer having led him to think it very valuable. But things do not go well. Eddie drinks heavily from some bootlegger's portions, is forgiven by Patsy, but soon after falls in with the same gang, gets drunk, and wakes up in a freight car in Chicago—many miles away. Stricken with remorse he returns to his cabin but finds his wife has left and in her place a ruffian, who orders him out. A fight ensues in which Eddie finally knocks his opponent stone cold.

After ejecting the intruder, finding that he seems to be in league with Sealman, Eddie goes to Long Portage and sees Patsy, who is working for Kinnane, a lawyer. She announces that she will not join him until he definitely quits drinking. Determining to comply, he finds a job with Davenport, a rancher, and for several weeks abstains from the bottle that cheers. But one Sunday, Eddie walks on the lake trail, and encounters a series of truck smugglers. Among them he recognizes his "friends" who shanghaied him to Chicago—notwithstanding, Forbes hails them in greeting.

CHAPTER XV Demon Rum Again

Culley 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 boxer. 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 ways."

"She got in at dawn," replied Oscar. "We work up there all night. Maybe you think it wasn't cold, sleep-in' 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. "Noedn'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 persuasion of some unknown adversary. This was a peace offering of booze, at least reasonably pure. They were drinking 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 padlocked door. Part of the overhanging bank had been tunneled to receive the rear of the house.

"They keep to 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 underfoot. There was hardwood among the jackpines and an occasional great white pine tree which had evaded the axe and saw.

He drove steadily eastward holding the appetite at bay by physical exertion. Not for a moment did he forget it, like a tiger it lay in wait, ready to spring. The gurgle-gurgle against his side was its hunting-cry.

He had started on a faint trail, but this had long since disappeared. The silence was profound, except for the subdued twitter of birds and his own faint footsteps. A crash in the undergrowth ahead startled him. A magnificent buck crossed a little clearing and zoomed like an airplane over the top of a fallen tree. Two does followed, taking the same prodigious leap in graceful fashion.

There was no breath of air stirring. He wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve. At a rivulet which was one of the headwater streams of Portage creek he stopped to drink deeply. The cold water was gratefully refreshing. He plunged straight bearing a little to the south.

Somehow he did not dare sit down to rest. He was afraid of the bottle. If he could only keep going he had a chance to win. A blister formed on his right heel and his shoe rasped painfully at every step. His clothing was quite wet. An unnoted blackberry briar had drawn itself across his face, leaving a red trail that smarted and stung.

Noon came and passed. He was walking automatically now, obsessed with one idea only—to keep going on and on. The earth became soggy. His feet stumbled on slippery, regularly recurring humps, and he stopped.

The underbrush had become very thick and high. He was following a green tunnel through it. The bumps underfoot were the remains of a corduroy road, built to facilitate the taking out of logs years ago. He followed the road. Within a little time it ended on the edge of a cedar swamp.

A devil's cradle was ahead of him. Dead cedars with white trunks and short, spiky branches lay, stood and leaned in the stagnant water. In places the trunks were five deep in inextricable tangles. Here and there was long and brilliantly-green grass, but he knew there was no solid footing where such tufts grew. It was a cunning trap to snare the trusting. A foot upon such a tuft meant instant descent into sucking black ooze. Crows cawed dimly on some of the trees which still stood upright.

CHAPTER XVI A Victory.

It was impossible to determine the area of the swamp. The stiff and hostile trunks melted away against a line of blue hills on the horizon. Not far ahead, though, there was an oasis, an island which rose a few feet above the black water and was crowded with vigorous trees. It was perhaps an acre in extent. There was a breeze over there, the trees swayed.

"This seems to be a sort of—well, a symbol," he thought. "It's infernally hard going. It's dangerous. I don't know how far across. It would be easier to sidestep it, to go around. But it's in my path. It blocks the way I'm going. Why should I let a cedar swamp buffalo me? I wonder if this booze question wouldn't have been easier if I'd fought it in the past instead of sidestepping? Of course there isn't any answer for that. But I know I couldn't think so much of myself hereafter if I ducked this. So here goes."

Before many yards had been covered he regretted his decision to cross the swamp. It seemed useless and foolhardy to battle this grim and treacherous area. The labor was appallingly hard. He crawled on hands and knees along the slanting logs, their spikes bruising him and tearing the skin.

Sometimes he slipped on the trunks which had gathered moss that made them as smooth as ice. Then he

barely escaped dropping into wells of black water, paved far below with muck in solution. He knew the mixture had the clinging power of quicksand. The sun beat down viciously.

At last he won the oasis and flung himself down to rest in the shade of a good sized tree. His chest heaved. He closed his eyes and fought the vivid outline of an action which his appetite painted over and over on his brain.

In this action he saw himself withdrawing the bottle from his shirt, removing the cork and tilting his head so that the fiery liquid might run down his throat. He could sniff the beguiling bequest of the raw liquor and feel the filled nerves tingling to the ends of his fingers and toes. The counterfeit sensations caused him fairly to shudder with a longing to make them authentic.

He raised himself on his elbow to look out over the waste which intervened between the island and the further shore. It was not so distant as it had seemed, but it was greater than the first lap. He shook his head. "No booze until that behind me. Too dangerous. I need everything I have to make it."

He took up the journey again. New progress was slower. He was tired. The tangle seemed worse, the water deeper and blacker. Once he slipped and was immersed hip deep in the tepid water. He hastily crawled back to the grudging surface of a slender stick.

As he crawled one wide pool on a cedar whose far end was insecurely anchored, so that the trunk rocked with his weight, the bottle slipped from his shirt and plopped into the water. He straddled a log to consider. It was getting late. The shadows were long over this fiend's playground.

But he could not leave without the bottle. His nerves were searching with renewed insistence. Appetite beat upon him, shook him, tore him. He had to have that liquor. Yet he knew that the clamor was fictitious, and that there was a deeper reason for repossessing himself of the flask. If he went on without it, he was cravenly avoiding the possible knockout. It would be a drawn battle which he would have to fight again. The whiskey might be the bludgeon of defeat, but it might also be the symbol of victory. He might lose it, but he could never run away from it.

He removed his canvas leggings, his shoes and socks, as he perched perilously on the anemous trunk. He let himself down into the pool. His toes encountered the muck. His arms were extended their full length before his toes encountered the bottle in the sooty depths. It was a task requiring muscular strain and dexterity, to grip the bottle between his feet and bring it surfaceward.

A new difficulty presented itself. He released a hand to reach downward for the bottle. It eluded him, and sank again. As he lunged for it, the other hand slipped and he went under. Back at the surface he shuddered with distaste and clung to the log. The dead water and the treacherous molasses like muck filled him with nausea. Yet they had to be braved. He took a full breath and thrust himself under.

His arm encountered the muck and was absorbed in it, yet his fingers felt no bottle. His shoulders, the top of his head were in the ooze, yet the desperate fingers closed only on slime. Closing his eyes he rammed downward until the muck was in his nostrils.

It drew him, sucked him insidiously into its grip. Panic that made his eyes pop and his heart race possessed him. But something elemental and fundamental would not permit him to withdraw. Both arms worked in a wide circle. His lungs cried for air. His eardrums cracked. He was under-

going all the agonies of drowning. At last! A fingertip touched it. He worked lower, grasped the bottle firmly, and splashed frantically upward. The mud clung to him, it was reluctant to let him go. But a submerged log aided him with a firm footing. He leaved waist high above the surface, now as opaque as a puddle of ink.

He breathed deeply and thankfully. While he dangled with one hand he inserted the bottle into one of his shoes, which were tied together and swung across the log. His reserve strength was all but drained before he was on the uneasy log again, his shoes on his feet, the bottle buttoned within his shirt.

Sunset was at hand before he won the shore, to find another corduroy road opening out conveniently in front of him. And he was trembling with weakness. The bottle was at his lips. . . .

Patsy Jane's face came up before him, her eyes swimming in tears as he raised them to him in Lawyer Kinnane's office. There was that fond, tremulous smile of her lips. Somehow the wonder of her, the priceless boon of her love, came to him as it never had before. She was the most precious thing in the world.

He jammed the cork home again, the liquor unostentatious, and thrust the bottle back into his wet shirt. He strode buoyantly away, laughing with joy and relief. The enemy was defeated.

Though not entirely routed. There were other waves of clamor, though their strength was noticeably less. The craving died down as darkness thickened. The liquor became unimportant until he no longer thought of it.

It was late when he struck a road leading in the direction of the ranch. It was nearly midnight when he trudged wearily into the log bunkhouse which he shared with the other

hands. He could hear their snores through the thin board partitions. He lighted his oil lamp, and stood for a time surveying the liquor. With a little shake he addressed it.

"Oldtimer, you did your best. But it wasn't good enough. You're licked, and licked for keeps. And if you don't believe it, I'm going to make you prisoner, sort of keep you around, to prove it."

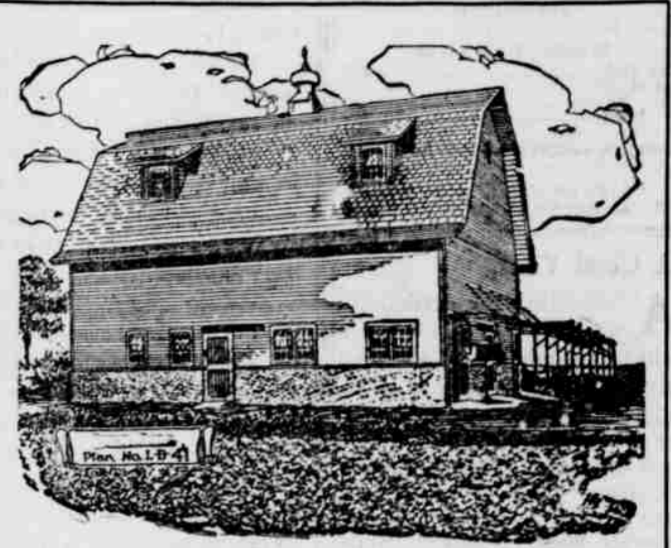
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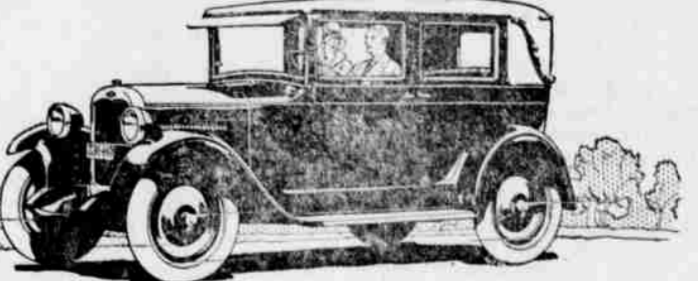
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