

CEDAR SWAMP

by Michael J. Phillips

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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, he stands trial which results in a long prison sentence. He is soon pardoned, however, but back in Scottdale he and... PATSY JANE, his pretty wife, agree that public sentiment against him would warrant their migration to north where Eddie has a quarter section of land. While there they form the acquaintance of... ISAIAH SEALMAN, a shifty neighbor who is anxious to buy their property. Eddie learns that the back taxes total over eight hundred dollars and must be paid in five months to avert forfeiture. Sealman makes a generous offer which is refused—Eddie thinking the land must have some value unknown to him to warrant his neighbor's interest. Things do not go well. Eddie fails to get work and succumbs to his old yearning by falling in with a bootlegger's gang, getting drunk and being shanghaied to Chicago. Upon his return he discovers that Pat has left him and will not return until he has quit drinking. This he determines to do. He secures work on a nearby ranch, run by Davenant, and after many temptations at last beats his enemy, John Harleycorn. All this time he is slowly earning money but realizes that when the tax is due he can't possibly have enough. Sealman renews his offer and is again refused. One day... NANCE ENCELL, his former sweetheart, calls, finds him alone, offers to marry the lout but is rebuffed. Then Nance kisses him—and is seen by Patsy who had called to attempt a reconciliation with her husband. Pat leaves without listening to his explanation. Broken-hearted, Eddie tries harder than ever to earn the money and one morning early while berry picking, notices fresh tire marks on his property.

CHAPTER XIX

Just Dessert

A light truck was standing near the rear of the side of the mound—the rear which he and Pat had noticed on the first day of their journey of exploration. Two men were busily at work, scraping and shoveling the sour-smelling earth into sacks which they loaded onto the truck. One of them was the Long Portage expressman. Eddie's face hardened at sight of the other. It was his companion of the night of the accident, the youth who had so cravenly deserted to avoid the possible consequences of discovery.

As Eddie came upon the workers, the youth started. Then he leaned on his shovel. He smiled insolently. "Gee, you're an early riser," was his first remark.

"Have to be, to keep my farm from being carried away. What's the big idea?"

"You mean—this?" The youth nodded at the truck. "Well, they say this stuff is good for stock, salt in it, you know. So I was getting some for the cattle at Encell's."

"At Encell's?"

"Yes. I'm visiting over there, you know?"

Eddie regarded him speculatively. "Well, of course I'd like to see Encell's stock do well," he said mildly.

"But wouldn't it be courteous to ask me first about this stuff?"

The sneer in the young man's smile became more pronounced. "Why should I ask you? You lose this place on tax-title the first of next month. I'm already the owner. I bought the title from the Brower estate by telegraph two days ago."

"The Brower estate?" echoed Eddie puzzled.

"Sure. You don't know what's going on under your own nose," was the contemptuous retort. "Old Brower died suddenly, and the family doesn't care about this northern Michigan estate idea of his. All his tax titles were put on the market. I got this. So, really I have more right here than you."

"Listen, kid," commanded Eddie, quietly. "You're off-away off. You haven't any right here until after the first day of next month. Then you only have a right if I fail to redeem the property. Well, it'll be redeemed. So right now you're a trespasser and a thief. You're stealing my property."

The lean-jawed expressman rubbed his bristles nervously. "Don't blame me, Mr. Forbes," he pleaded. "He said he owned this when he hired me." Eddie waved absolution.

"You're using pretty rough language, Forbes," commented the youth, coolly. "Thief, eh? I'll show you the first of the month. Where would you get three hundred and fifty dollars to take care of that tax-title?" He laughed ironically. "Everyone knows that you're broke, that your wife has left you and you're just stalling here because you don't dare show your face in Scottdale. Why, you escaped being a jailbird because that old crook of a governor pardoned you. So don't get fresh with me."

"So that's it, eh?" was Eddie's comment. "Well, I don't think those few sacks of earth are worth much. But you'll leave them, just the same. Unload."

The youth's reply was to drop his shovel and rush, a scowl on his weak, dark face. Eddie right hand with a straight right hander that puffed the loose lips. As a light it did not compare with the fierce battle against the motor-tramp. This adversary had neither the courage, the strength nor the resolution of the wanderer. His eyes were blackened and his nose bleeding, though he had scarcely left a mark on Eddie, when he turned his back and elamored onto the truck.

"All right, you big bully!" he complained. "I'll have the laugh when the sheriff throws you off. You put your foot on here and I'll shoot you like a dog. Yes, I will!" he raved, as the expressman started the truck. "And you keep away from Nance Encell, or I'll drill you anyway."

"So that's it?" mused Eddie. "I remember that he always did like her. Of course he wouldn't have been so nasty if it hadn't been for booze. His

breath was like a distillery. He got away with that dirt, after all. Oh, well, I guess he paid for it." He grinned.

Absentmindedly he picked up an empty sack, one which had been left and which had been overlooked. A name and address were printed on the sack in black letters. He whistled when their significance came to him with the others. He was, the slick one, a director of the bank, Eddie recalled.

When he drove back to the big ranch, Davenant himself, black with passion, met him at the door of the bunkhouse.

"Get your dirty traps together, Forbes, and make tracks," snarled the big man.

"Why, Mr. Davenant, what's the matter?" asked Eddie, in surprise.

"Matter?" echoed Davenant, doubling his fists, and Eddie noted that the formidable knuckles were barked, "matter? You've been giving liquor to Millig, that's all."

Millig, another farmhand had managed heretofore to keep his potatoes from the notice of the owner. But he had seemingly been careless, had been thrashed when he grew impudent, and discharged.

"But I didn't give him liquor," protested Eddie.

"You did. Don't lie to me."

"I tell you I didn't," returned Eddie, sharply.

"Well, he got it from you. You had it."

"He didn't. I—" he began, and stopped. He recalled the bottle in his suitcase.

"Hah!" growled Davenant at his hesitancy. "You'd better admit it. Eddie entered the bunkhouse. His suitcase open, lay in the middle of the floor. The bottle was gone. He returned to the outside. "You're right, Mr. Davenant," he acknowledged.

"There was some liquor in my bag, and it's gone. I didn't give it to him, or tell him—"

"But you had it." The owner's voice rose to a shout. "You know how I hate booze, but you brought it here. I suppose you figured on a spree yourself. I've a notion to give you what I gave him." He advanced, his arms swinging.

"Well, maybe you can, but you'll get something in return," snapped Eddie. "You won't be beating up a drunken squarehead if you try any funny business with me. I'll leave you a few marks, anyway."

"Get off my place," shouted Davenant, more furiously than before. But his advance ceased. Eddie came out to load his possessions in the car, the owner was nowhere to be seen. Bull, the foreman, was and he was regretful and sympathetic.

"Sorry to lose you, Forbes." He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, toward the main ranch house, a commodious two story log house, as though fearful of being overheard.

"But you know how it is. The old man's crazy on the subject of liquor. They say his son drank himself to death a year ago. What in thunder did you want to keep that bottle around for? You might have known that nut Millig would smell it out."

"Oh, I don't know, I'd forgotten it more or less," replied Eddie. "I'm sorry to have to go, Bull. I like working for you. Well, if you'll give me what's coming—"

The foreman went to the ranch house and returned, presently, with Eddie's pay check for wages to the end of the month. He bought Eddie's pig, which had thrived wonderfully, for eighteen dollars. As the discharged farmhand drove homeward and later, as he was disposing his goods and chattels to make the cabin costly livable, he had time to ponder on two things which had been crowded to the back of his mind by more stirring events.

"The address on that sack means something," he thought. "It's up to me to squander a little something on telegrams to find out exactly what. His story about carting the stuff away as salt for the stock is all bosh. The pure salt is on top."

"What about the other remark of his? What did he mean by talking about three hundred and fifty dollars for the 'first' tax title? Didn't I get the dope straight from the county treasurer? Guess I'll get downtown right away and find out where I'm at."

CHAPTER XX

Wiped Out

He drove to the railroad station and sent away two telegrams. He went to the county building and stated his errand to Peter Wimpe. That official nodded, as though confirming something that had long been a matter of doubt.

"You know, Forbes," he explained, puffing on his pipe, "I've thought a good many times that maybe you didn't understand me. I suppose you knew that a tax-title issues for each year of back taxes, but that you have two years from the date of issue of each to redeem them."

"There are two such plasters out against your property. To settle them both would be eight hundred and thirty-odd dollars. But if you'll pay the two-year-old one the first of the month, you'll still have a year for the other one."

Eddie swallowed jerkily. "How much is the first one?"

Peter consulted his canvas-jacketed book. "Three forty-eight, seventy-two," he reported. "Seems pretty heavy. It makes it pretty binding, built two rounds and widened and deepened Portage creek, all in the same year. Then the penalties are heavy. It makes it pretty binding,

"Why?" asked Eddie. He felt Sealman's bright, bold eyes upon him.

"I wanted to notify you of your overdraft—Mr. Forbes." The latter's exclamation was a flustered remonstrance. For Eddie, trusting an arm through the wicket, seized his deposit and pulled his bankbook from the cashier's fingers, so that the uneasy pen left a long, black mark down the page.

"Now, say that again," commanded Eddie.

"Your account is eighty-four dollars overdrawn," returned Gilman. He glanced over his shoulder in hunted fashion as if to make sure that Sealman were there in support.

"You're crazy," was the brief retort.

"Here are your vouchers. See for yourself," invited the cashier, defensively.

Eddie leafed them over. They were all in order—Hold on, the check to Sealman for the pig had been raised from five dollars to five hundred.

"Look to me as though the bank is out four hundred and ninety-five dollars," he announced. "This check has been raised. Of course you know that, Gilman. This man has told you it was written for five dollars."

"I haven't told him anything of the kind," returned Sealman.

Eddie turned the check over. It was endorsed "I, Sealman," but just below was another signature in a smooth and flowing script. "Henry W. Robbins." He reverted to the face of the check again. The forgery had been cleverly done, though close scrutiny revealed how the "hundred" had been cramped because of limited space.

"Any jury would call that a raised check," said Eddie, scornfully, shoving it back. "Looks as though this bank was negligent in taking it."

"We'll have to ask a jury to decide it," returned Gilman. "This bank disavows responsibility. You were negligent in drawing it. If the line after 'Five' had started closer to the '0' and had been drawn clear through, there would have been no negligence. But you left a space and the forger took advantage of it."

So that was it. Maybe Sealman was not responsible for the forgery, but he had taken advantage of it to tie up his funds until after the pas-

age of tax-day, two weeks away. He thrust his head and shoulders through the wicket, so that the flimsy grill creaked under the strain.

"Sealman, you damned crook," he said harshly, "you've been trying ever since I came here to swindle me out of my place. You've connived at this trick to tie up my money. But it won't do you any good. You'll never put a finger on a grain of that white sand. You hear?"

"This is slander, Forbes," warned the other, his combing fingers moving spitefully. "I have witnesses."

"Witnesses be damned," retorted the angry man. "You don't go into court." He turned on his heel and strode out, banging the door violently behind him. He had barely reached the street when he heard his name called. Sealman must have said his name rapidly, for he was in the tiny vestibule of the bank. He came hurriedly toward Eddie.

"Now, Forbes, there's no use in having trouble over this," he began, placatingly. "I don't deny the check was for five dollars. I passed it on for a load of huckleberries to a stranger. He didn't want to take them to town because it was late. I've never seen him since. How was I to know he'd raise the check?"

"Well, what else?" demanded Eddie.

"I don't want you to lose your place and get nothing for it. I want it, Forbes, it goes well with my land. I'll make you a good offer."

"You will, eh?"

"Yes, I'll give you thirty-five hundred."

Eddie's answer was to place the heel of a work-roughened hand against Sealman's high-bridged nose and push violently. The bearded man tottered from the edge of the walk into the gutter. Wherast he uttered a venomous oath, quite out of keeping with his sleek placidity.

Eddie went on up the street, thinking rapidly. That morning he had had two strings to his bow. One had been snapped. He could not borrow money from Davenant. But the governor remained.

The postoffice at Long Portage occupied a corner of the largest general store. Eddie bought a pencil tablet. He stood at the post office desk and wrote the governor, outlining his situation and asking for a loan of three hundred dollars. He told of his bat-

tle with liquor, and how he had won. He stamped it and affixed a special delivery postage. He carried it to the station himself, and handed it to the clerk on the southbound train. The governor would have it early next morning in his office at Lansing.

Always there had been with him the thought of Patsy. Now he went to Attorney Kinnane's office. The old lawyer was alone. "Where's my wife, Mr. Kinnane?" he asked.

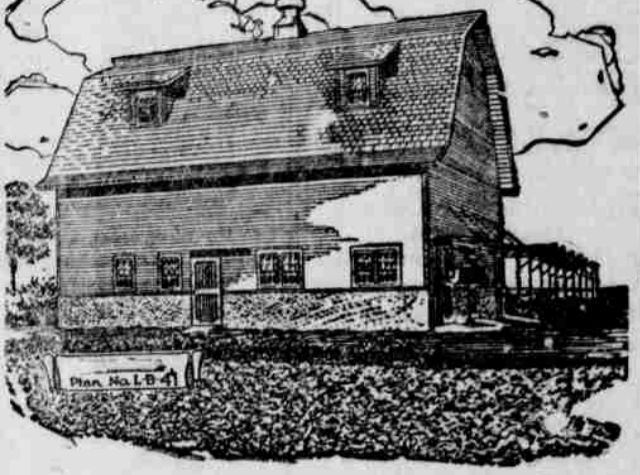
"Not here just now, Mr. Forbes. She's out in the country for a few weeks."

To Eddie's look of bewilderment he added: "She comes in quite frequently. If you wish to reach her a letter in my care will be delivered promptly."

(Continued Next Week)

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