

CEDAR SWAMP

by Michael J. Phillips

Illustrations by Henry Jay Lee
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CHAPTER XXIII.

Saved!

"Eddie!"

He started quickly at his name, called in those soft tones, and turned. Patsy Jane stood in the doorway. She was smiling and beckoning. He went to her, wondering, and closed the door behind him.

"I've been watching for you all the afternoon," she said, smiling. "You haven't—any money?"

He shook his head bitterly. "Not enough."

"I know. Mr. Kinnane is attorney for the bank. He knew about the raised check and warned me your account would be held up. Here."

She thrust a roll of bills into his hands. Amazed to the point of speechlessness, he took it automatically. He saw that the dear little face was pale; that the wan little fingers were stained purple.

"Where did you get it, Pat?" he asked, kissing the fingers.

"Huckleberries," she smiled. "I saw that what I was earning wouldn't make it. So I arranged to do Mr. Kinnane's work evenings. I've been in the marshes for three weeks. It really wasn't bad. I was a good picker."

"It wasn't exactly necessary," she went on, giving him time to recover. "The Kinnane's would have loaned it to me. They're the dearest people, Eddie! They treated me like a daughter. But I just wanted to get it myself. Go in now; it's nearly closing time." For an instant he held her close, with a tender violence that left her breathless though starry-eyed. Then they went back together.

"Here's your money," said Eddie, briefly, counting it out. There were a few small bills left when he had done so. Peter Wimple grinned as he recharged his pipe.

"Sort o' thought you'd do it," he said. "Your place is safe for a year now. No one can take it away from you. We'll fix up the papers tomorrow, but I'll give you a receipt now. I'm acting as his agent," he pointed with his shoulder toward the dark scowling young man, "just as I was for Mr. Brower." It was plain that he did not share his principal's ill-humour over the turn affairs had taken; markedly plain.

Nance rose from her chair, sauntered to Patsy Jane, who stood with averted eyes by her husband. She linked her arm through Patsy's. There was a motion of aversion and resistance, but the smile on Nance's wilful, attractive face only deepened.

"Come on outside, Patsy," she commanded. When they were alone in the vestibule she placed both her hands on the other girl's shoulders, as she had on Eddie's that Sunday. "Don't be a fool," she admonished, with a gentle shake. "You have a husband that's a real man, Pat. You've had a lot to do with making him. But you're taking chances on spoiling him now."

"I suppose you believe with stupid old Scottsdale that I was with your husband the night that woman was killed?" She paused for a reply, but there was none. "You couldn't understand that a chap could be big enough and generous enough to keep another's secret, even at considerable risk to himself. You thought there must be something disgraceful to conceal."

"That seemed so silly to me, knowing Eddie. You see, I knew him better than you did." Patsy Jane made a movement to free herself but the supple, slender hands held her. "He was doing a big thing and a brave thing. I was about the only one that appreciated it. And I couldn't go to him and tell him how I admired him." She tossed her head good humoredly.

"I didn't care about the gossips, but I knew if I were talking to him it would make the case worse. And—well, Pat, I was a little nasty, too. You'd come in and taken him on the wing. I felt sometimes as though I wanted you both to suffer. That's all the clinic stuff. Do you know who was really with him that night?"

"You know I don't," returned Patsy. Nance tilted her head toward the room they had just quitted, and the other girl's eyes widened in surprise. "Not—" she began, and stopped.

"Yes. He told me so just the other day. He was a pretty weak sister, Pat. He let Eddie all but go to prison because he didn't have the moral courage to face his dad and the rest of Scottsdale. He hasn't much moral courage yet. But I'm working on him."

The color rose in Patsy's cheeks. She knew it was so. Many remarks that Eddie had made, even while guarding closely his secret, fitted in. And she had distrusted and disbelieved him. She had joined in the uncharity of feeling toward Nance.

"I'm sorry, Nance," she said, simply.

The hands on her shoulders became subtly caressing. "In a way you weren't to be blamed," she smiled. "Now that that's off my chest, I'll tell you something else. You know that Sunday morning?"

"I'd been hearing things. I heard that Eddie was drinking hard and headed straight for the bowwows; that he was going to lose his property; and that you had left him under fire when he needed you the most. So I went there to find out for myself and to—grab him if you'd been so foolish as to cut him adrift."

"But I know Eddie pretty well—I've told you that—and I found out that Dame Humor was about 99 percent wrong. I saw that he had the booze whipped. That while you were away you hadn't left him. And that he thought the world of you. I revised my opinion of you, Patsy. I

had thought you a little simpleton, without brains or character, mostly because that's what I wanted to think. But that saving him to fight liquor his own way was really a masterpiece. It was the only thing that would have cured him." She paused to smile whimsically.

CHAPTER XXIV

"When I saw there weren't any pieces to pick up—That kiss you saw was goodbye. The 'Come soon' I threw in was just pure goodness. That finishes that. No, you know, Patsy, the mending idea is like any other. When you set your heart on picking up pieces and making over into a better model—So I'm going to marry—" And she moved her head backward again.

"I'm glad, Nance."

"Oh, I've undertaken a job," the girl went on, with her astonishing frankness. "But the difficulty makes it all the more fascinating. Did you know Eddie thrashed him the other day?"

"I'd heard something about it."

"That was a forward step. That young gentleman thought for awhile he was going to take your land away from you. He bought the tax title from the Browers, you know. But I wouldn't have permitted him. If you two hadn't found the money, I'd have paid it myself."

"You're good, Nance," said Patsy, gratefully.

"Get out!" she scorned. "It's better fun to shoot straight. That's all."

Meanwhile the city stranger had drawn Eddie into Whimple's private office. "Been waiting to see who'd get that quarter-section, so I could deal," he began, briskly. "Mr. Forbes, I'm Malone, of the National Power. You know us. We furnish light and power for the Great Lakes states, manufacturing the juice from water-power wherever we can. We're planning a big dam five miles below your place on Portage Creek. We need your quarter-section."

Light flooded a landscape long darkened. "Then Sealman—" began Eddie.

"Yes, Sealman!" The other spat out the name scornfully. "Maybe you're surprised we're out in the open, and Sealman's the answer. We tried to do it under cover, so we wouldn't be held up. He was our agent. But we found out he was taking about half the options in his own name. He was to be his own holdup man."

"Some of the land he had to buy outright. He needs quite a wad of money, quick, and he ran in a cargo of liquor to raise the wind. That was his booze the state police captured today. So he fell down, and I've been over to the jail and gotten releases out of him."

"Now, this quarter-section of yours, Forbes. We've been paying on an average around sixty dollars an acre, and that's more than the stuff is worth. Yours—"

"Will cost you a hundred, but I reserve the mound above the water line. All right!"

"Ouch! You're certainly careless with your language, young fellow."

"But you have to have it. That's my price. It's a little high, but it'll compensate for some of the things that crook agent of yours did to me. By the way, I reserve that mound on the southwest corner. It must be away above your proposed waterline."

The dark youth waited patiently in the outer office. When Eddie and Malone came out, he approached the former sulkily. "About that mound, Forbes—" he began, but Eddie cut him short.

"I'll deal only with headquarters. You know why."

It seemed to Eddie that, as he heard, Judge Randolph Perkins shifted his thick white hand until it threw a shadow on his face, making its expression impossible of interpretation. But when he had quite finished, the jurist's hand went up and his big jaw was thrust out.

"This purports to be a confession by one Herman Libbey that he was driving the truck which collided with a motor car on the River road last summer, causing the death of Mrs. Maria Knowles," he said, in measured, colorless tones.

"It is a certified copy of the confession," Eddie corrected him, quietly.

The judge bowed. "So I see. Well," "It completely exonerates me. I was convicted of manslaughter in your court because of that accident."

"Yes; the evidence—"

"Was mostly prejudice. I was really convicted of taking a drink."

"Granted that may be in a measure true. What is your purpose in coming to me? The press will publish this, and you will be set right in the eyes of the community."

Eddie leaned forward. "Judge," he said, "the newspapers published a statement from you after the government pardoned me. You said his action was 'a miscarriage of justice' and a travesty. You did all you could to ruin me. Now—"

"I did make such a statement," agreed the jurist. "I was not trying to ruin you. But you were half-drunk when the accident happened. You had liquor illegally in your possession. You had been drunk before. In the circumstances, I consider the statement quite justified."

"All right," replied Eddie, softly. "I wanted to get your ideas on the subject. But I came for something else, really. You own—"

The door of the judge's study opened. A dark, weak-faced young man entered. "Hello, dad," he began, and stopped. "Didn't know you were

"He shall learn to bear the responsibility of his own acts," replied the judge, implacably. "If he hadn't been a coward and run away, he wouldn't have put me in this—this humiliating position."

"As a favor to me, Judge, please don't mention him—"

The judge raised his hand. "You said there was another matter you came to see me about, Mr. Forbes."

"Yes. I've had the sour earth from that mound on my place analyzed too, Judge. It's precisely the same composition as your supply in Texas, which is about exhausted."

"Do you mean to tell me that the mound which Randolph discovered near Long Portage is on your property?" The judge's surprise was obviously genuine.

"It certainly is. Ran left a sack when he came to get samples a few weeks ago. The name 'Mineral Medicine Corporation, Austin, Texas' was printed on it. I found out that your mound not far from Austin is about exhausted. That the 'ore' in your mound, known as sour earth by the Indians and settlers, is a sandy material containing salts of calcium, magnesium, sodium and iron and free acid. That it was overlaid by a solid vein of rock salt—a sort of cap."

"I discovered that it has a tremendous sale when reduced to solution by boiling to free the medicinal salts, and that it is bottled and sold under the trade name 'Mineral Magic.' I know that hundreds of thousands of people regard it as a panacea for rheumatism and indigestion and things like that."

"You've been combing the country for another supply, especially where geologic conditions were somewhat similar. You became, a couple of years ago, principal stockholder in the Mineral Medicine Corporation by the death of my uncle. When the analysis of my stuff proved up—well, I thought you might want to see me."

The judge permitted himself a grim and appreciative smile. "That was considerate. Because, when Randolph made his report, I should certainly have had to look you up. Apparently we are to be rather closely associated, Mr. Forbes. Had you thought of any basis of doing business; say a sale of this mound outright to us?"

"Not an outright sale, Judge. I'm getting some money to play with. I yearn now for a steady income. I've set my heart on a royalty—say a certain percentage of the price of every bottle sold."

The Forbes family occupied the one large and comfortable chair in the cabin on Portage creek. It was night; and outside the northern lights were putting on a show with half the sky as their stage. Bars and pennons and lances of white radiance, the greatest of them in dimension like Lake Huron set on end, blazed from horizon to mid-heaven. The air was crisp with coming frost, and winey with the tang of the pines and the aromatic wild growth of the barrens. The creek, swollen by autumn rains, splashed and murmured beyond their front door.

Eddie sat in the chair and Patsy sat in his lap, her knees well up to her chin. His arms were about her; her head on his shoulder. They were engaged in that most delightful of occupations—the building of air-castles which have a solid foundation of practicality and possibility.

"I want to stay here until after the first deep snow," said Patsy, dreamily.

"The deer season's early November," answered her husband. "We'll get our deer and stick around until the snow comes up to the window sill. That suit you, Pat?"

"I'll love it," breathed Patsy. "Anyway, till the novelty wears off. Then we'll follow the sun southwest for the rest of the winter."

"Next spring we'll come back here," Eddie pursued the thread, "and I'll study up on cattle-feeding with Devenant. He's a good old scout, after all. Pat. He apologized like a man for threatening to lick me over the bottle."

that squarehead got. We'll live here—"

"But the dam: Won't this be all under water?"

"They won't start construction until a year from next April. Malone says we may have this house all next summer, because I'm going to buy a ranch from them somewhere near here. They have a lot of acreage they don't need above the new water level."

"Isn't it wonderful?" sighed Patsy Jane, in utter content.

His arms tightened about her. "Not so wonderful as you, Pat," he whispered.

THE END.

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