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THE
SKY LINE
OF
SPRUCE
by Edison Marshall
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CHAPTER X.—(Cont'd.)

"Your gun is empty, Beatrice," he told her quietly. He heard her sob, and he smiled a little, reassuringly. "Never mind—and pray for a good voyage," he advised. "We're going through."

The craft and its occupants were out of sight by the time Jeffery Neilson reached the river bank with his rifle.

He made his way fast as he could toward the claim. Sensing the old man's distress, Ray straightened from his work at the sight of him.

The face before him was drawn and white; but there was no time for questions. Hard hands seized his arm.

"Ray, do you know of a canoe anywhere—up or down this river?"

"No! There isn't one that you could even dream about shooting those rapids in. Tell me what's the matter. Has Beatrice—"

"Beatrice has gone down, that's all."

"You don't mean—she's run away?"

"Don't be a fool. The prospector I told you about—Darby—was the old man's partner. He's paying us back. Ray, I wish to God I had died before I ever saw this day!"

Ray stared blankly. "Then he found out about the murder?" he gasped.

"Yes. Here's his letter."

Ray read the letter carefully, crumpling it at last in savage wrath. "He can't do much if the claim's recorded in our names!"

"He can make us plenty of trouble. If you want the girl, Ray—don't lose a minute. Put your things together as fast as you can."

They crossed the divide, thus reaching the headwaters of Poor Man's Creek; then took the trail down toward the settlements. But the two claim-jumpers had not yet learned all the day's ill news. Halfway to the mouth of the stream they met Chan Hemingway on his way back to the claim.

At the first sight of him, they could hardly believe their eyes. It was not to be credited that he had made the trip to Bradleyburg and back in the few days he had been absent.

"What in the devil you coming back for?" Ray shouted, when Chan's identity became certain.

"Because the claim's recorded, that's why. Before old Hiram died he wrote a letter to an official in Bradleyburg and in it was a description of the claim. Whatever formalities were necessary was cut out because the old man had been too sick to make the trip—the recorder got special permission from Victoria."

"You see what that means, don't you?" he asked Neilson.

"It means we've lost!"

The eyes before him narrowed and gleamed. "So that's what it means to you! Well, I don't look at it just that way. It means to me that we've got to take these supplies and these pack horses and start out and find Ben Darby."

"Of course we've got to rescue Beatrice."

"Rescuing Beatrice isn't all of it now, by a long shot. Didn't old Hiram leave a will, giving this claim to

his brother Ezra? And hasn't this Ben got a letter from Ezra leaving the claim to him?"

"You mean we've got to find him?"

"We've got to; that's all." Neilson breathed heavily. "It's all plain enough."

Beatrice Neilson was a mountain girl, with the strong thews of Jael, yet she hid her face as the canoe shot into the crests of the rapids.

The wolf crouched on the heap of supplies, fearful to the depths of his heart of this mighty stream, yet still putting his faith in his master in the stern.

A sudden movement on the part of Beatrice, in the bow of the canoe, caught Ben's eye. She had leaned forward and was reaching among the supplies. She lifted into her hands a paper parcel, the same she had brought from her cabin early that morning.

His heart leaped; why he did not know. "What is it?" he asked.

"Ben—I called you that yesterday and there's no use going back to last names now—I've made an important decision."

"I hope it's a happy one," he ventured.

"It's as happy as it can be, under the circumstances. Ben, I came of a line of frontiersmen—the forest people—and if the woods teach one thing it is to make the best of any bad situation."

As she talked she was slowly unwrapping the little parcel she had brought. Presently she held it out to him.

It was just a box of homemade candy that she had brought for their day's picnic. But it was a peace offering not to be despised.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FOREST STRONGHOLD.

When the swirling waters carried the canoe down into the gorge of the Yuga both Ben and Beatrice were instinctively awed and stilled. Ever the walls of the gorge grew more steep, until the sunlight was cut off and they rode as if in twilight.

In mid-afternoon Ben began to think of making his night's camp.

In one of the more quiet stretches of water he saw the place—a small cove and a green, tree-clad bank, with the gorge rising behind. Handling his canoe with greatest care he slanted toward it. A moment later he had caught the brush at the water's edge, stepped off into shallow water, and was drawing the canoe up onto the bank.

"We're through for the day," he said happily, as he helped Beatrice out of the boat. "I'll confess I'm ready to rest."

"Here's where you sleep to-night, Beatrice," he informed her.

As twilight lowered they sat down to their simple meal, tea, sweetened with sugar, and vegetables and meat happily mingled in a stew.

Beatrice fell into troubled sleep, but wakened when the first ribbon of light stretched along the eastern horizon. She sat up, laying the blankets back with infinite care. This was her chance; Ben still lay asleep.

Just to steal down to the water's edge, push off the canoe, and trust her life to the doubtful mercy of the river. She could discern the black shadow of the canoe. She stepped nearer.

But at that instant a subdued note of warning froze her in her tracks.

A great, gaunt form raised up from the pile of duff in the canoe; and his fangs showed ivory white in the wan light. It was Fenris, and he guarded the canoe. He crouched, ready to spring if she drew near.

The girl sobbed once, then stole back to her blankets.

After breakfast they took to the river, yielding themselves once more to the whims of the current.

Shortly before the noon hour Ben's quick eye saw a break in the heavy brushwood that lined the bank and quickly paddled toward it. In a moment more he pushed the canoe into the mud of the creek bank.

They crossed a low ridge, following down another of the thousand creeks that water the northern lands. In a moment it led them to a long, narrow lake, blue as a sapphire in its frame of dusky spruce.

And all at once Beatrice, walking in front, drew up with a gasp.

She stood at the edge of a little

place, perhaps thirty yards across, lying at the base of the cliff. The grass was rich, beloved by the antlered heads that came to graze; the tall spruce shadowed it on three sides. But it was not these things that caught the girl's eye. Just at the edge of a glade a dark hole yawned in the face of the cliff.

"It's home," the man said simply.

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE COMRADESHIP.

Ben and Beatrice went together back to the canoe, and in two trips they carried the supplies to the cave.

Tired from the hard tramp, yet sustained by a vague excitement, neither of them could name or trace, they began to prepare for the night.

The silence dropped about them, settling slowly; and all except the largest heap of red coals burned down to gray ashes.

The brush cracked and rustled just beyond the glowing coals.

Some huge wilderness creature was venturing toward them, at the edge of the little glade.

"What is it?" Beatrice whispered. The man's eyes strained into the gloom.

"I don't know. It may be just a moose, or maybe a caribou. But it may be—"

His eye fell to the crouching form of Fenris.

Ben leaped to reach his gun.

"At him, Fenris!" he shouted. The wolf leaped forward like a thrown spear—almost too fast for the eye to follow.

Thereafter there was only a great confusion, event piled upon event with incredible rapidity. A grizzly lunged into sight with incredible storm of sound.

Immediately the wolf sprang, ready to wage this unequal battle to the death. But his brave fight was tragically hopeless. Yet by the law of his wild heart he could not turn and flee.

His master had given his orders, and he must obey to the end.

The bear paused one instant; then lunged forth again.

But the breath in which the wolf had stayed the charge had given Ben his chance. With a swift motion of his arm he had projected the single rifle shell into the chamber of the weapon. The stock snapped to his shoulder; and his keen, glittering eyes sought the sights.

His finger pressed back steadily against the trigger. The slightest flinching, the smallest motion might yet throw off his aim. The rifle spoke with a roar.

The grizzly was in his death-agony, nothing more; yet in that final convulsion he could rip into shreds the powerful form that opposed him. Ben dropped the empty rifle and seized the axe that leaned against a log of spruce beside the fire.



A great gaunt form raised up from the pile of duff in the canoe.

erful form that opposed him. Ben dropped the empty rifle and seized the axe that leaned against a log of spruce beside the fire.

Just in time Ben sprang aside, out of the reach of those terrible forearms; and his axe swung mightily in the air.

Ben's powers increased, rather than lessened. Ever he swung his terrible axe with greater power. (To be continued.)

GETTING SOMETHING FOR NOTHING.

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Robust
From out the west, when drifting storm-clouds pass,
The waking wind pipes out its piping notes.
From out the west, o'er hung with fringes grey,
The wind precludes with sighs its joundelay.
Then blowing, singing, piping, laughing loud,
It scurries on before the grey storm-cloud;
Across the hollow and along the hill
It whips and whirls among the maples, till
With boughs unbent, and green of leaves blown wide,
The silver shines upon their under-side.
A gusty freshening of humid air,
With showers laden, and with fragrance rare;
And now a little sprinkle, with a dash
Of great cool drops that fall with sudden splash;
Then over field and hollow, grass and grain,
The loud, crisp whiteness of the near-lying rain.
—E. Pauline Johnson, in "The White Wampum."

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"I hereby certify that this essay is the sole work of (name of scholar) and that (he or she) is not over seventeen (17) years of age."

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