



“‘Would you have gone as far by now if you had stopped in the Old Country?’”

SMILING VALLEY.

BY HAROLD BINDLOSS.

(Concluded from page 407.)

A WEEK or two afterwards a letter from the vessel's owners arrived, and Mr. Winthrop called the boys into his room.

'They're just people and don't dispute your claim,' he said. 'I think you ought to take their offer.'

Jake thrilled with satisfaction when he heard the sum, and then looked thoughtful.

'You won't need us much until the spring,' he remarked. 'There's the bridge-stringer contract; we know the Trail Surveyor and I think we could get the job.'

'I'll let you go,' said Mr. Winthrop, with a smile. 'You ought to make some profit, and you have some money at the bank. I suppose you're thinking about the valley in the North?'

'I'm always thinking about it, and so is Tom. Still I reckon somebody else has taken the best blocks for homesteads already; it's Government land.'

'I will write to the record office and find out,' Mr. Winthrop replied, and in a few days got an answer. No application had yet been made for a homestead grant in the Smiling Valley.

Mr. Winthrop told the boys, and after talking for some time said, 'You are both young, but if you mean to own a ranch, this is perhaps a good chance, and if I'm satisfied about the location, I may lend you the money you will need. Anyhow, you can take the bridge-stringer contract, and if we get a spell of fine weather I'll go north with you to look at the place.'

He went and approved. The valley was sheltered and well watered, and the soil looked good. For the most part, it was covered with big trees, but big trees are numerous in British Columbia and the soil is often stony when one has cut them down. In the meantime, Jake and Dawson had begun to haul out the logs that were needed for bridges on a new waggon trail. The work was hard, for they must chop the great trees and afterwards hew them roughly to the proper size. They lived in a rude bark shack and heavy rain often rolled up from the Pacific and swept the woods. Then, at times, the snow lay deep and for a week or two there was a snap of arctic cold when water froze near the stove. Sometimes they were wet, and sometimes numbed by frost; their food was plain and cooked by themselves, but they often came back from work so tired that they did not care what they ate. For all that they finished the contract, and the Trail Surveyor was satisfied when he countersigned the bill. Soon afterwards they went to the land office and registered two adjoining claims.

Summer had begun in the northern wilds when, one calm evening, they lounged outside their tent in the Smiling Valley. In front, a row of tall stumps marked their first day's work, and a sweet resinous smell came from the big fallen trunks. The tent stood on the hillside, and they looked down across fresh green maples and stiff dark pines to the shining lake that reflected gleaming snow and stately trees. In the background, high white peaks caught the evening light. A faint warm breeze sighed in the pine-tops above the tent.

Jake was making bannocks in a wood-pulp pail, but Dawson lay among the wineberries, doing nothing, with the sleeves of his old blue shirt rolled up. He was

hard and muscular, his face was resolute and brown, for since he left England he had done a man's work and boldly fronted risks. Now he was calmly satisfied; the dream Jake and he had dreamed had come true.

'We're here,' he said. 'Seems strange the thing we hardly durst hope for should happen. All we see between the range and the water is ours. We can do what we like with it—somehow, that makes one think.'

Jake smiled as he got up and rubbed the dough from his hands. He looked lean and athletic in his thin brown overalls.

'Well,' he said, 'it's a big job, and we've got to go slow at first. To begin with, there's some hard slashing to be done before we can raise oats enough to winter-feed a few head of stock. In the meantime, soon as we can clear some ground, we'll plant high-grade fruit trees and garden truck that we can trade at Vancouver. We can't buy a sloop yet, but the old Siwash sea canoe will carry the stuff. That ought to keep us in groceries while we go on slashing, and by-and-by we'll buy some young cows. They've got to be the right kind; I reckon it's the best that pays.'

Dawson nodded. 'Yes; if it's fruit or stock, go for the best! We want to let folk know that when they deal with us we deliver the goods. Means work and trouble; there's a stiff job ahead, but we're pretty fit and ought to put it over.'

'We have got no debts, for one thing,' Jake remarked. 'Would you have gone as far by now if you had stopped in the Old Country?'

'I think not,' said Dawson, who mused for a time.

He had no rich friends in England, and admitted that he had no particular talents. If he had stopped at home he would probably have been a clerk, working for small pay and without much chance of promotion. Now he was a rancher, owning the land he meant to cultivate and owing nobody anything, for Mr. Winthrop had made a gift to the boys of the money he promised to lend. They had earned the rest, and Dawson knew that the one safe way to get money was to work for it.

Now he was calmly satisfied. He had made a good start and what happened afterwards would depend upon his efforts. The efforts would have to be strenuous, for it was not an easy matter to clear the land of the big trees, but the reward would be his and not another man's. By-and-by the sunset faded from the snow, which turned a delicate blue in the shadow, and a loon's wild call rang across the lake. He saw the bird, a small black dot, where the water reflected the light in the sky. The wind had turned colder and a heavy dew was beginning to fall. He got up and stretched his arms, which ached after a long day's toil.

'Time to go to bed,' he said. 'There's much to be done to-morrow, and I want to start fresh. We're working for our own hands now.'

WANDERERS IN THE WAR.

BY A. A. METHLEY.

(Concluded from page 403.)

IT was some distance from the bridge to the town where Val had been taken by Fräulein Heinz, and, in addition, there were many delays and difficulties to be endured and overcome. Now a road was found to be closed for the passing of troops, now a permit had to be

obtained from the military authorities, and often there were long tedious waits while papers were examined and endorsed. Hour after hour passed, and it was noon on the following day before the travellers reached their destination and stopped outside a large hotel.

Roger jumped out of the car and ran into the building, almost expecting to find Val waiting to welcome him, but this hope was doomed to disappointment, and the landlord, when questioned by Boughton, only shook his head and regretted that he could give no information.

'Mervyn, Mademoiselle Val Mervyn, no, there is nobody of that name in the hotel,' he shrugged his shoulders, as if dismissing the subject, and then suddenly, a tall grey-haired woman who had been speaking to the hall porter, turned round, with a little exclamation, and came forward.

'Mervyn! Pardon, me, sir, but did I hear you speak of Val Mervyn? Is it possible that you can tell me something about little Val?'

She spoke in French, and Boughton answered her in the same language. The next moment he called to Roger, who was standing disconsolately in the doorway watching the people who were passing up and down the street outside.

'Mervyn,' he said, 'come here. This is Madame Martin, from St. Denis-sur-Meuse. She will help us to find your little sister, and she says that there are some other friends of yours here. What names did you say, Madame? Yes, Suzanne and Jules.'

Roger's eyes widened and he drew a long breath of amazement, but in reality it was all very simple. Madame Martin had started for home at the first news of war, but she had been in an out-of-the-way part of Switzerland and there had been many delays. She had reached the school in a motor-car the day after the departure of Val and Roger, and had left again almost immediately, taking Suzanne and little Jules with her. The schoolmistress had been terribly anxious about Val and Roger, for she had not been able to get any news of their whereabouts, and now Val was still missing. Her lips tightened and an angry light came into her eyes when she heard of Fräulein's Heinz' reappearance and of the part she had played in the drama.

'We must go and look for them at once,' she said, but Fräulein Heinz is certain to have given a false name. It will be best, sir, if you go one way and I another. There is no time to be lost.'

The town was a large one and there were many hotels and inns, but at none of these could a trace of Val or of Fräulein be discovered. 'The usual place,' that was what the German girl had written to her brother, but there was no clue to show where the usual place might be.

Roger grew desperate at last, and while Boughton was making inquiries of the police, he and Jules set off on a search of their own. Toto followed at their heels, and before long as they were going down a narrow, rather dirty street, they heard behind them a scuffling sound mingled with growls, snarls, and shrill angry barks.

Toto, warlike as usual, had managed to pick a quarrel with another dog, and this time he had chosen an antagonist who was more than four times his size and weight.

'Help! Help! The monster! The villain! Toto! Toto! He will be killed, he will be devoured.' Jules rushed to the rescue of his pet with wild screams, and Roger, turning quickly, saw an indistinguishable mass

of fur, teeth, and claws rolling hither and thither in the dusty road.

He darted forward to separate the unequal combatants, and then suddenly his face changed and a cry of joy burst from his lips. He seized the larger dog by his neck fearlessly and dragged him away: for it was Bob, yes, Bob the sheep-dog, rough-haired and tangled as ever, and, surely, if Bob were here, Val, his mistress, could not be far away.

And Roger was right, for the very next moment another voice called, 'Bob, Bob!' and a little boyish figure flew out from the doorway of a tall, dingy house and clasped the great, shaggy, struggling beast in her arms.

'Roger, please give me back Fräulein's letter,' said Val, when, at last, all the greetings and exclamations of delight and surprise had come to an end.

Roger shook his head and showed an empty pocket. 'I haven't got it, and I couldn't give it to you if I had,' was his answer, and he explained what had happened and how he had given the letter into Graham Evans' charge.

'I see; and of course I know that Fräulein Heinz is a spy, she told me that herself; but I never thought of there being any harm in the letter.' Val's bright face grew serious for a moment, and then she laughed and shrugged her shoulders. 'Oh, well, it's a jolly good thing that you haven't got it, Roger, because I told Fräulein that I'd burn it, and now it's not my fault that I have to break the promise.'

* * * * *

John Boughton was obliged to go to London a few days later with an important dispatch for his newspaper, so he escorted Roger and Val across the Channel. It was a grey, misty morning when they left the French port, with golden gleams of sunshine. On the northern horizon trailed the smoke of a Man-of-War, and in the distance, very far away, could be heard the sound of guns.

Boughton and Roger paced up and down the deck while Val played with some little Belgian children in the saloon.

'It's hateful for me to have to go back to England again now,' Roger said, pausing by the rail and gazing with longing eyes at the French coast. 'If only I were three years older and could get into the Army at once.'

'How old are you?' Boughton glanced down at the boy's discontented face with a thoughtful expression in his eyes. 'Fifteen, isn't it? Well, there's plenty of time.'

'I'm fifteen and a half, but what's the good of that, when I have to stick on at school for years. It's simply sickening, and every one says that the War is certain to be over by Christmas.'

'Not every one.' Boughton stared out over the grey water and his face was set into hard, steadfast lines. 'Some people think it will take three years. I should give it a bit longer myself.'

'Three years!' Roger echoed the words in an awed voice, then his eyes brightened. 'I may get a chance after all. I wonder where I shall be in three years?'

Boughton did not answer for a moment. He was still looking across to the distant coast where the September sunlight flickered on green hills and white lines of cliff.

'I think,' he said at last, 'that most likely you will be over there—somewhere in France.'

THE END.



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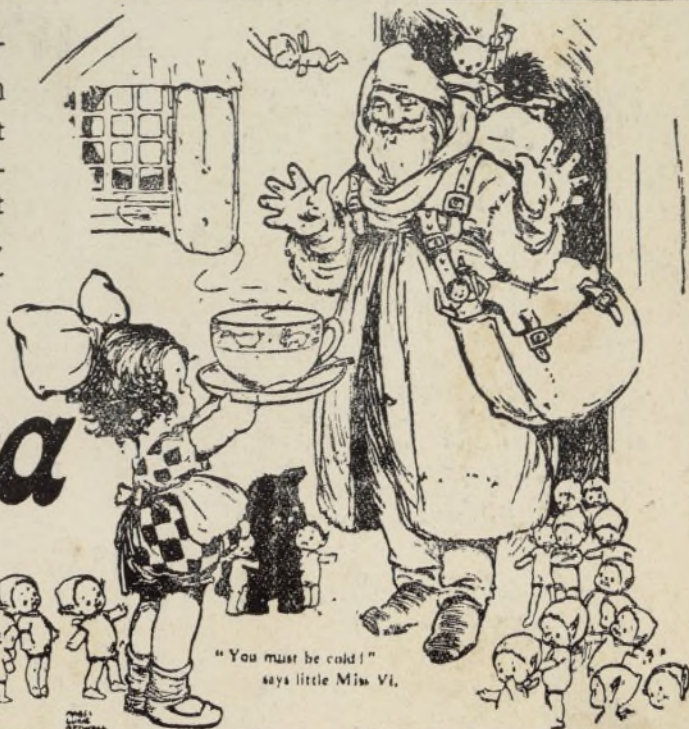
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