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The Fighting Prodigal

He took a stout heart and flying fists with him into the North woods, this mysterious young stranger who called himself Jerry Lee; and he was to find urgent need of them in his secret mission

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Viciously Scanlon attacked his helpless prisoner

CHAPTER I.

A SUSPICIOUS OFFER.

ALL summer Barlow was dead, a cluster of low log buildings that housed two saloons, cooking and sleeping camps and storehouses. Then the lumberjacks arrived, and the place sprang into flaming, turbulent life.

As if they had worn uniforms, the men who worked for Joe North could be easily distinguished. They walked with a swagger, heads up, eyes challenging. For a stormy day or two they dwelt in Barlow, drinking hard, fighting hard, then disappeared in the forest for nine months of toil. Barlow was the jumping off place, and they dug in

their calked shoes for a mighty leap into the wilderness.

Abner Strain's men were of a different breed, just as Joe North and Strain, both lumbermen, had nothing in common. Joe North's fists and courage had given him leadership; a driving, unconquerable force had brought success. Abner Strain entered the business through the door of a town office, with the ink marks of a bookkeeper's pen on his sleeves and the soul of a scheming figure juggler within his scrawny frame. His camps drew the scum of the woods, castoffs who stepped aside when a North man strode up to the bar.

A young man arrived in Barlow to attract instant attention. For years the same crews had gone into Joe North's camps, and he was not one of them. Nor did he look as if he would give way for anything that walked. He did not swagger, his eyes did not challenge, but they were clear and steady and cool.

Almost at once he was offered a job. Abner Strain's walking boss, harried by poor crews, saw the stranger step off the train.

"Want a job, Jack?"

"Who with?"

"Strain."

"No."

"Look here, feller," the walking boss insisted. "Don't believe all you hear. A good man don't make a mistake in tying to Strain. Those that talk about him—"

"I never heard of Strain before," the stranger said. "I'm going to get a job with North."

There was a finality in his tone that the other missed. "They'll put you to swampin'. I can't promise for sure, but I'm going to need a camp foreman pretty quick."

"I'm going to work for North," the stranger said, and he walked away.

HE went at once to the North storehouse. Men watched him as he walked across the clearing. It was not alone his size. There were bigger men in the North crews. Rather they sensed a purpose in his long stride. The clerk in the office sensed it when he entered, even before he spoke.

"I want a job."

"Jim Galt's at the camps," was the answer. "He told me before he left he didn't want any more men."

"I don't know Jim Galt and I don't care where he is. There never was a camp in these woods that didn't need a man."

"Strain needs 'em."

"Listen, feller," the applicant said in a low voice. "I want a job in a North camp. I'll settle with this Jim Galt later."

The office door opened and a man entered. "What you going to settle with me?" he demanded.

"I want to go to work for North and this runt says I can't."

Jim Galt was a big man, most evidently preoccupied. He scarcely glanced at the stranger. "The runt's right," he said shortly. "Camps are full. Strain needs men."

He jerked his head toward the door in sign of dismissal and at once became busy with the clerk on long lists of supplies. The young man started away, then came back.

"I can do as good a day's work as any man who ever wore calked shoes," he said earnestly. "I want to go to work in North's camps. If you'll—"

Galt whirled from the desk. "Git!" he roared. "I don't want you or anybody else."

Still the young man hesitated, but

when Galt turned away he went out of the storehouse.

There was no longer a purpose in his stride. It was savage as he walked toward the nearest saloon, and there was a bleak, set expression on his face. He stepped up to the bar and asked for a drink.

A fight was in progress in the rear of the saloon but no one watched it. The young man took his glass to a corner table and sat down, facing the room.

Men looked at him. They did not approve of that solitude, and one or two made audible comments. The stranger did not seem to hear. He sat staring at the table, a hard glint in his eyes. More comments were made, and they were open challenges now.

At the far end of the bar a heavy voice rose above all else. "There's a man workin' for Strain that I always promised meself I'd whip and I've come near to forgettin' it. Out o' my way, you jacks. I'm goin' lookin' for him."

A big fellow plowed his way through the crowd. His broad face was twisted into what he believed to be an expression of dire threat, but its innate humor and good nature only made his effort ridiculous. Men laughed and thumped him as he passed.

"You'll just plain scare him to death, looking like that, Rory!" one shouted.

The continual thumping dislodged the purpose in Rory's mind. His fierce stride wavered. The scowl faded. Suddenly he stopped, perplexed.

"Now what was it I started—"

His uncertain glance found the young man at the corner table and instantly his eyes flamed with delight.

"Glory be!" he roared. "Here's a feller I've never whipped. Come on,

pretty boy, and get your nice new clothes mussed."

THE stranger did not move, nor did his expression change. His cool eyes surveyed Rory's thick shoulders, heavy arms and barrel chest, noted the granite cast of the big head. They saw, too, the laughing glint in blue eyes, and were not deceived by it.

Rory stopped when there was no response to his challenge. "Have I got to content meself by givin' ye a slappin'?" he demanded.

"One slap, and I throw you out of the place," the young man answered coolly. "If you had a reputation—"

There was a studied insolence in the last and Rory leaped straight up. His head struck a kerosene lamp, shattering the globe, but as the glass showered head and shoulders he lifted heedless fists.

"Reputation!" he bellowed. "The impudence of the brat askin' Rory O'Keefe if he's got a reputation. Listen, ye cub! There's one man on Beaver River who's licked me, and that's no less than Joe North himself. On yer feet. I'll use only the flat o' me hand on ye."

For the first time the young man grinned. "That wouldn't be so bad," he said, and quite deliberately he arose and stepped out from behind the table.

Every one in the saloon was watching now. Rory O'Keefe could whip any of them, and when he fought there was something worth watching. They did not expect a real battle, of course. The stranger was big, but not big enough. He was too rangy. They liked Rory's thickness, the solidity of his body, and they knew the worth of that glad acclaim with which he entered a fight. They were amused rather than interested.

The stranger stumbled as he stepped from behind the table. A foot caught and he fell toward Rory. Or so it seemed. But as he fell a leg darted forward, caught a grip on the floor, and the thrust of that leg was added to the power behind a fist that shot out from the waist and caught Rory O'Keefe three inches above the top button of his trousers.

Rory went back—and down. His big body was doubled up. An expression of intense pain flashed in his face.

Men looked at the place Rory had been, then where he lay. When they glanced toward the stranger they saw him again in his seat behind the table, staring at his empty glass.

After a few moments Rory O'Keefe rose to uncertain feet and looked about.

"Who broke out that rollway when I was asleep beneath it?" he demanded. "And that lad I was thinkin' o' slappin'—"

He saw the young man at the corner table and started toward him, arms outstretched, face beaming.

"How you did it, I don't know!" he shouted. "I might say it was luck, or me foot slipped, or I wasn't expectin' much from one so young and slender. But that's not the point, me boy. You put Rory O'Keefe on his back, and when that's done nothin' more's to be said. Bring us a drink over here."

He dropped into a chair and threw a huge arm across the young man's shoulders. The crowd turned back to the bar.

"Boys, oh, boys!" Rory chuckled when the drinks had been served. "If ye ain't the modest lad, too. Not for ten years has any one licked me. Not since Joe North himself did it at Camp One the first winter I worked for him. There was a fight! Forty minutes it

lasted, and both of us blind and staggerin' like we was drunk. A lot of the lads here saw it. They can tell you."

RORY downed his drink and hugged the young man enthusiastically.

"Even at that, ye might have found a doubt," he continued. "Joe North was a savage man that year, his boy havin' run away on him. It made a devil of a man of Joe, the thing he thought was anger and wasn't. But it did give him a savage feelin' and when me, new to his camps and cocky as a bull cook in his first pair o' cork shoes, passed him some lip, Joe came at me with eight fists flyin'."

Rory laughed his delight at the memory. Then his beaming face became serious and he asked in a hoarse whisper, "Lad, how many times did ye hit me?"

"Once."

"That settles it. There's no more doubt in the mind of Rory O'Keefe. Whether I was lookin' or not, and no matter where the lone fist landed, it's never been done before. A pile driver might, but no mule, and no man until you came along. Have another drink with me, lad. It'll give me pleasure."

The young man smiled. There was no escaping it. Rory's delight was too genuine. The big fellow thought as he fought, openly, freely and without shame or hindrance.

"Ye're goin' into Joe North's camps, lad?" he asked. "And what's your name? I never saw ye before."

His companion hesitated. "Lee," he said at last. "Jerry Lee. I've never worked in Wisconsin and I wanted a job with North."

"Then come to Camp Four. It's Joe North's own crew there. We get

the toughest loggin', and bring down the rear of his drives, and we're hell cats from the devil's own private hot room."

"Galt told me he didn't need men."

"What?" Rory bellowed. "No man ever needed 'em more. Logs left in the woods last winter! His drive hung last spring! Jim Galt was like a crazy man, fighting hard luck and a snow and flood. I'll speak to Jim myself and you'll come to Camp Four with me."

Jerry Lee whirled in his chair. "Drive hung!" he repeated in an incredulous tone. "A North drive?"

"And why!" Rory O'Keefe demanded harshly. "Joe North flat on his back in bed. Two years now, and he's no better. The same crew, same everything, except Joe himself."

Jerry gripped the big riverman's arm. "What's that?" he demanded, and now his tone was savage. "Joe North in bed two years. What—what—?"

"And they say he can't speak, or hear much." Rory answered. "Think of that! The man who whipped me! He's over in Europe somewhere trying to get cured."

Jerry released his grip and sank back. Rory went on with a tale of misfortune, of excessive toil that went for nothing, and he was unaware that Jerry Lee was not listening.

The young man had slumped in his chair. The life was gone from his body, the cool confidence from his eyes. They stared dully. Suddenly he arose and stumbled toward the door.

Night had come. Jerry walked across to the tiny railroad station and learned that a freight train was passing southward in an hour. He bought a ticket, went outside to wait.

Barlow was turbulent. Shouts and

sounds of battle came from the two crowded saloons. Men wandered about in the darkness outside, whooping and singing. Jerry Lee heard nothing, saw nothing. Motionless, wide shoulders slumped, he sat on a box near the station window.

HE had not stirred a half hour later when a man came around the corner of the station. He glanced at Jerry in the light from the window, went inside, came back.

"Listen, feller," he whispered. "I can give you a job in a North camp."

"Don't want it!" Jerry snapped.

"This ain't no ordinary job, Jack. It's something special. Good money. Much as you want to make."

"Don't want it!" Jerry repeated more harshly. "Leave me alone."

The stranger was small, furtive, a rattish sort of person who had instantly aroused Jerry's contempt. Now he aroused suspicion.

"I saw what you did to O'Keefe," the man persisted. "I heard you talking to him, and I knew you was what we wanted. I'll get you a note to Mike Scanlon. He's foreman of Camp Four. Whip a few more and you've got your winter's stake."

Jerry had risen, was about to kick the fellow off the platform, but that last hurried statement stopped him.

"Few more of what?" he demanded.

"Joe North's old-timers. Scanlon'll tell you. Ten dollars for each one that asks for his time."

Jerry did not speak or move. His back was to the window and the stranger could not see his face.

"How about it, Jack? Pretty soft, eh? You going?"

"Yes," Jerry said suddenly.

"Where's this note to Scanlon?"

"Stay here. I'll get it for you."

The fellow disappeared past the corner of the station. Jerry slipped around the other way, close to the building. He saw a shadow crossing to the Strain storehouse and then the Strain office door opened and closed. He ran toward it, saw a thin, bald-headed, sharp-faced man writing at a desk.

A few minutes later the stranger found Jerry at the station and handed him an envelope. "Give it to Scanlon," he whispered, and disappeared.

Jerry remained where he was until the freight came in. Then, walking to the other side of the locomotive, he held the flap of the envelope in a jet of escaping steam.

After the freight had gone, Jerry entered the station and read this note, unaddressed and unsigned:

Here is the man I have been trying to find for you. He'll get the results we want. He has been told nothing. Use your discretion.

CHAPTER II.

A CONSPIRACY.

JERRY LEE walked the thirty miles to Camp Four with Rory O'Keefe. Rory had celebrated his downfall too well to be surprised that Jerry had a job or to remember much of their conversation. He recalled only that here was the man who had whipped him, and his instant allegiance was manifested in repeated protestations.

But thirty miles on a tote road is a long way, and Jerry waited until Rory was quiet, and completely sober.

"What is the matter with Joe North?" he asked.

"If the doctors knew, he might be a well man," was the answer. "It hit him like your own fist hit me, when the camps started in the fall two years ago.

He couldn't talk and he couldn't move. We carted him out to White Pine and Ben Blair, his old walking boss, run the camps. Ben did fine, took out a big drive, and from that day to this, no one's ever seen him."

"What do you mean?" Jerry asked sharply.

"What I said. No word and no trace. Then Jim Galt got the job. He's from further east. He's a good man, but he's had the hardest luck I ever saw in the woods. There's millions of feet on the ground we couldn't get to the river, and millions more we couldn't get down to the mill. And Joe North flat on his back and helpless. At that he was lucky."

"How?" Jerry demanded.

"He knew nothin' of it. He'd already been shipped off to Europe. Switzerland, I think it was. And the doctors wouldn't let him hear a word. Nor could he, they say."

"He's there now, in Switzerland?"

"And may die there, they were saying in White Pine," Rory answered in a low voice. "There never was a logger like Joe North, and he never earned that."

Jerry was silent for a while as they trudged on.

"Who's this Scanlon at Camp Four?" he asked at last.

"Never saw him. The old foremen are all gone, after last winter."

"Is Galt a good man?"

"He knows logs, and he works harder'n any walkin' boss I ever see. He's unlucky, is all, or was last year. I'm hopin' so, for another year like the last will wipe Joe North clean."

They reached Camp Four after dark, among the first to arrive. Rory turned in at the sleeping camp, but Jerry went on to the little log office. Two men were there, a tall, raw-boned

fellow of middle age and a second, unmistakably the clerk. Jerry leaned across the counter and whispered to the big fellow.

"I was sent."

Mike Scanlon whirled and looked sharply at Jerry.

"What you know?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

"What—what they tell you!"

"Ten dollars per."

Swift scrutiny flashed in Scanlon's eyes.

"You don't look it," he said with a sneer.

"Meaning you want a demonstration?" Jerry asked, quietly.

"Listen, feller," Mike growled. "I'm not here to prove anything like that. I'm foreman of this camp, and I'm running it. I use an ax handle or piece of logging chain or anything that comes handy."

Jerry jerked an ax handle from a bundle in a corner and laid it on the counter.

"Start," he whispered.

IT was only an instant that Scanlon hesitated, but it was enough. Contempt flashed in Jerry's eyes.

"Ain't he the touchy one, Ed?" Mike laughed as he turned to the clerk. "But if he's achin' for a fight, he'll get plenty from North's hellions. Where you from?"

"State of Washington."

"That's pickin' a stranger!" Ed Jackson, the clerk exclaimed.

Jerry ignored that. "What you want of me?" he demanded of Mike Scanlon.

"To earn a lot o' those ten dollar bills," Scanlon grinned.

"Why don't you fire 'em and be done with it?"

"We do things different here in

Wisconsin. Quite a bit different," and Scanlon winked at Jackson. "We've had one queer winter and we're in for a queerer one. You're only doing a bit of it, feller."

"How was you figurin' on me working this?"

"It won't be hard. North's men don't like strangers and they'll ride you plenty. Just work 'em around to makin' an agreement that the one who loses has to leave camp. And if you can't do that, whip one and ride him until he's glad to leave."

Again scrutiny flashed in Scanlon's eyes, an expression of doubt.

"Don't worry about my part of it," Jerry said.

"Not too fresh, lad," Scanlon advised seriously. "They've always been a hard bunch, this Camp Four outfit. And steer clear of Rory O'Keefe."

"I started on him in Barlow," Jerry answered as he turned and went out.

The men straggled in that evening, rather bleary and decidedly ill-tempered as a result of thirty miles on top of their hard drinking. Most of them had been in the saloon when Jerry had his encounter with Rory O'Keefe but, except for a glance, ignored him.

The next morning the camp sprang to life as if months had not elapsed since the crew departed on the drive. The accomplishment of a full day's work was the pride of each man, and nothing stood in its way. After a day in the crisp air, they were in a better humor that night.

A few nodded to Jerry. All looked at him with appraisal and interest. A one-blow defeat of Rory O'Keefe was not entirely a fluke, and some had watched him at work that day.

"You're a stranger," a man next to Jerry said as they sat on the deacon seats after supper.

"Complete," was the curt answer.

"I'm not pumpin' you," the man replied calmly. "I've been working for Joe North fifteen years and I know his outfit. Camp Four's a bit clannish. They're all old-timers and they're liable to make it hard for a newcomer."

"Maybe I can take care of myself," Jerry said.

"Maybe so. I saw you and Rory in Barlow. But that ain't everything."

A man across the camp shouted to Jerry's companion, used his name. Jerry turned with quick interest. "What did he call you?"

"White Water. Dan Wheeler's my name, but they generally call me White Water Dan."

JERRY'S manner changed at once. "What's this about North having a hard season last year?" he asked.

Wheeler explained it. He spoke calmly, displayed an intimate acquaintance with all the problems of logging. "Jim Galt'll make up for it," he concluded. "Can't have two winters in a row like last. And the boys don't like it, havin' a drive hung. They'll get the logs to the sorting booms next spring."

"How about Scanlon?" Jerry asked.

"That's to be found out," White Water Dan answered in a noncommittal tone.

They became friends, these two, sitting there in the evenings after supper. Jerry did not ask many questions, but he listened, directed the conversation.

Nor did he make any move toward earning a ten-dollar fee. Peace dwelt in Camp Four. Mike Scanlon never came into the sleeping camp, but when he made his rounds in the woods he watched Jerry. After a week he spoke.

"When you goin' to start somethin', feller?"

"Soon enough," Jerry retorted.

"Make it quick or I get some one in here who will."

That night Jerry spoke in a whisper to White Water Dan. "Noticed anything queer going on in this camp?"

Dan did not even glance around. He puffed at his pipe for a moment.

"Joe North's crew can't fail two years-runnin'," he commented at last.

"They're going to," Jerry said.

Dan was not startled. "Scanlon?" he asked.

"A blind man could see that. We'll haul few logs on the roads he's laid out. Take a squint at the grades tomorrow. Look where he's put the rollways. And he's riding the crew. This outfit needs a foreman who never leaves the office. They'd bank more logs. What's going on in the other camps?"

"About the same, from what a tote teamster told me last night."

"Sure. Now what do you know about Jim Galt?"

White Water Dan started. "Jim's all right," he said. "He's a logging fool. Near went crazy last year, trying to get that drive through."

"Maybe," Jerry said coldly. "I'm going to find out."

A few minutes later Dan asked, "How?"

"Watch me."

Galt appeared the next day, walked across the slash and down the logging roads with Mike Scanlon. He made no comments, asked no questions, but that night after supper he appeared in the sleeping camp. Scanlon accompanied him.

"This camp's rotten," Galt began at once. "You're going to bank fewer logs than last winter if you don't get a hustle on you. Thought you were all friends of Joe North."

He said a lot more. It was scathing. Rory O'Keefe sat next to Jerry. "Jim's scared," he whispered. "After last year. But we'll show him."

No one interrupted the walking boss, who quickly worked himself into a fury. When he had finished he turned abruptly to the door.

"Wait a minute," Jerry Lee called. "We're not the ones for you to jump on."

GALT whirled back. "Who said that?" he demanded in fresh fury.

"I did," Jerry answered calmly. "Give us a foreman and you'll have no complaints."

Mike Scanlon started forward but Galt caught his arm.

"We can't work for a foreman who doesn't know his business," Jerry continued. "Scanlon couldn't pile cordwood."

The foreman broke away then and came charging down the camp. Jerry leisurely arose, raised his arms, rested his chin behind his left shoulder. As Scanlon rushed up, both fists flying, Jerry side-stepped and drove a left to the foreman's ribs.

It was not a hard blow. It only stopped Scanlon, who charged in again. He had weight and strength. He was a veteran of the rough and tumble. His actions and manner showed that, and his rage would have carried him into anything.

And yet he was a child in Jerry's hands. A skill those heavy fisted men had never known was flashed before their eyes. They saw the young man weave and feint, saw his feet were more active than his hands, and they saw those hands driven with unerring precision.

They saw more than that. Jerry

was playing with Scanlon. It was unmistakable. His coolness and deliberation showed it, and the calculating glint in his eyes. For several minutes he conducted that encounter according to his own ideas, and then, without added exertion, he ended it with a blow no one was ever able to describe.

Jerry returned to his seat. Jim Galt did not speak, but when Scanlon rolled over and sat up, then scrambled to his feet, the two went out together. A few minutes later Ed Jackson, the clerk, summoned Jerry to the office.

Galt was still silent. Scanlon rose from a chair and shook a fist at Jerry. "What you tryin' to do?" he demanded.

Jerry did not answer, but looked at Galt. The walking boss was worried, and studying the young lumberjack.

"You're playing us dirt!" Scanlon rushed on. "Why ain't you tackled some of North's old-timers?"

"So that's it," Jerry said, and he faced Galt. "I figured you were in on this, and that's why I showed Scanlon up. He was queering things fast."

"How?" Galt asked coldly.

"North's men aren't complete fools. They're smellin' something, asking questions of each other. Scanlon's work is too raw."

"Why do you care?"

"Don't want to be on the wrong side when they blow up."

"They suspect last year?" Galt asked anxiously.

"Not a thing. They're for you. Say you had hard luck."

"What we care what they think?" Scanlon demanded contemptuously.

"Mike, you're through here," Galt said. "I was afraid it wasn't your sort of work. You'll go back to last year's job. Lee, think you can run this camp?"

"I know I can," Jerry answered sharply. "And run it any way."

"You're foreman."

"Not so fast. I've been looking, and listening. I've guessed some things. If I run this camp, I've got to know."

Galt asked many questions. They led through Jerry's life, a life spent partly at sea in square riggers, partly in the logging camps of the Pacific Coast, at that time new and strange and remote.

"All right," Galt finally grunted. "You're a stranger, and the sort we're looking for. Eh, Mike?"

CHAPTER III.

PLANS FOR BATTLE.

THE next day Jerry Lee, in his first rounds through the woods as foreman, stopped beside White Water Dan Wheeler and whispered, "Go down the logging road past the first bend. I'll be there soon."

Dan was waiting, without apparent curiosity.

"Know a man named Len Hardy?" Jerry asked.

"He's driving team in Camp Three."

"There was a kid once who wanted to go to sea and be a sailor," Jerry began in an odd, flat tone. "His father wouldn't let him, so the kid ran away. He didn't get far. His father caught him and gave him a licking and told him to stay at school. The boy waited a year and tried it again.

"He was a husky youngster, about fifteen. His father was a big man, and he was used to having things his own way. He caught the kid the second time and brought him back. He took him out of town, into the woods, and he gave that kid an almighty bad lick-

ing. 'I'll break you of that if I have to kill you,' he says.

"The boy was about all in but he never backed down. 'I'm going to be a sailor,' he said to his dad, 'and to the devil with you.' So his old man waded into him again."

Jerry stopped and looked down the wide logging road. His eyes were hard. His mouth was hard. A powerful emotion held him breathless. At last he shook himself, relaxed, but he did not look at White Water Dan.

"Go down to Camp Three," he said harshly. "Tell Len Hardy that story, just like I've told it to you. What the kid said. 'I'm going to be a sailor and to the devil with you.' Then come back here."

Jerry strode off. Dan went down to Camp Three and was back at supper time, but it was not until the next forenoon that Jerry again spoke to him in the woods, motioned him down the logging road.

"You needn't 'a' sent me to Len Hardy, lad," Dan said when Jerry joined him. "I would 'a' believed you."

"Then you believe I'm Jerry North?"

"I know it, and Len says he'll never forget how you said that to Joe."

"I didn't know any other way to prove it to you. Len happened on us in the woods. My father said he'd kill him if he ever spoke of it. But I had to prove it, Dan, to you and the rest of the old-timers. The old man was right. I got all the sailing I wanted. But it wasn't easy to get away from, until I hit Grays Harbor, out in Washington, and when I saw a logging camp I quit the sea for good.

"That didn't change things for me, though. I had one idea all the time. I wasn't coming home until I knew I

could whip him. It's why I came up here. I'd always figured how I'd do it. Get a job in one of his camps and wait for him to come. He wouldn't think about me coming back that way. And I knew enough of Joe North to see how easy it would be to pick a fight with him."

Jerry stared down the road.

"Ten years planning on one thing, getting big enough and learning enough," the young man said bitterly. "Then coming back and finding he can't lift a hand."

STILL, White Water Dan waited. He knew more was to come and that the present mood would pass. Jerry started away, wheeled back.

"I remember you, Dan," he began abruptly. "It's why I cottoned to you in the sleeping camp at night. Joe North's got to have help, lots of it."

"There's more'n two hundred of the lads who'll do anything for Joe North," Dan said simply.

Jerry stared at him for a moment, then grinned. "And me!" he exclaimed. "Coming back with no idea but to give him the sort of whipping he gave me, and now having to turn to and— Dan, we've got a job cut out for us."

"But you put Scanlon on the skids."

"Scanlon! It's Jim Galt and Abner Strain. I'm not to the bottom of it yet, but Galt told me enough, and I'll learn the rest. By next summer they'll have my father broke and own all that timber on the West Fork."

"They can't do that to Joe North, even if he is sick," Dan growled.

"Can't, eh? Galt's clever. Not one of you old-timers even suspected he ran things so last season was a failure. He must have gone pretty far in the hole, and with another bad year

the North Lumber Company would be swamped in debt and no logs to saw. Galt borrows from Strain to keep going, and Strain takes the West Fork timber as security. Simple and easy.

"This year they knew they could not fool you old-timers much longer. So I was hired to run as many of you out of camp as I could, one way and another. With you boys gone, and the scum of the woods in your places, he'd have a clear field."

"Good thing you caught it in time," White Water Dan commented.

"I haven't," Jerry answered. "Galt has complete power in the North Lumber Company. My father signed papers for it. Galt's safe. Even if my father lives, he's so sick nobody can get to him. And even if I proved I'm Joe North's son it wouldn't do any good."

"Galt tell you Strain was in it?"

"No, but I've a note in Strain's handwriting that I'm keeping. Galt did not tell me any more than he had to, even when I forced him to put me in as foreman here. We've got to work this from the inside, Dan, and for a while I've got to pretend I'm doing all he wants. You're the one to start the trouble."

"Anything you say. But, look here, lad. How about Ben Blair? He'd been your dad's walking boss for fifteen years."

"I remember Ben. Disappearing as he did, there's only one answer. Murder. But we can't prove that against Galt yet. Right now you can get things lined up."

WHITE WATER DAN was gone four days. He returned in mid-afternoon and found Jerry in the woods.

"First there's your dad," he report-

ed. "I saw old Doc Atkinson in White Pine. Told him I just happened in, and the boys in the camps was anxious to know how Joe is coming on. The doc says Joe couldn't sign a paper if he had to, or even be told about business. He's in Switzerland, and the doc gets reports every week or two. There's a chance Joe will get well, but it 'll be a long time. Ain't it like Ab Strain to pick on a man down as bad as that?"

"And the old camp foremen Galt kicked out?" Jerry asked.

"I got hold of Marty Malloy and Dave Fall. George Wray was in a Kettle River camp, and I sent him a letter. Steve Rawson's disappeared, but I left word for him."

"And the other camps?"

"I picked a good man in each. Got 'em off alone while they were at work and told what's happening. They've all been with your dad a good many years and you won't have to worry about 'em. They'll have the other three camps lined up. What you done?"

"Nothing with the men," Jerry answered. "Left that for you. I have changed the logging roads a bit. Had to do that before ground freezes. Changed rollways, too. How were things in the other camps?"

"Galt's cute," Dan said. "Nobody has noticed anything. He's been in each place, givin' 'em the deuce, like he did here."

"You told them what to do?"

"Sure. There'll be a howl to the foreman in every camp. Galt's gone to White Pine, but it won't be long before he'll find out something about you, lad."

"That's all right after I've had just one more talk with him. Then Galt's telling the truth about not being able to get word through to my father!"

"Not a line. He don't know about

the hung drive last spring. It was doctor's orders not to send reports."

"That puts us on our own," Jerry said soberly. "Understand, Dan? We haven't any money, we haven't any rights, we haven't anything, and we've got to bank fifty million feet and drive 'em out next spring."

"We've got the men to do it," White Water Dan said confidently.

"Men, but no pay for 'em! Men, and nothing to feed 'em!" Jerry gripped Dan's shoulder, shook it savagely. "You think you had a tough winter last year, but wait until we're into this one."

That night White Water Dan spread the word of what was afoot. Camp Four had always held the cream of the North crew and so far the plotters had not dared to change it. A few strangers had been introduced, but fifty men were known and dependable.

Rory O'Keefe was wildly jubilant. "Nothing but a splinter off of old Joe himself could 'a' given me a lickin'!" he exclaimed in a dangerously loud whisper to White Water Dan. "I been broodin' about that fight in Barlow. I got to wonderin' if me foot didn't slip, or something of the sort."

"You saw what he did to Scanlon."

"Scanlon! Tricks licked him. But in a real fight! I'd got meself all worked up to trying it again."

There was a purpose in the work at Camp Four the next day. The crew had not taken kindly to the changes Jerry had made, the undoing of Scanlon's work. They had resented a youth and a stranger being placed over them. For years they had been practically their own foremen in Camp Four.

But now, when Jerry made his morning rounds, they greeted him with grins and, if alone, with profane declarations of loyalty and of confidence.

"Lay into it."

"Keep moving, lad, or you'll have our calks in your heels."

A WEEK after Jerry took charge, all Scanlon's work had been undone. Logging roads were in perfect shape and laid out most efficiently. Falling and skidding were going on apace. Then Jim Galt arrived.

Jerry and Ed Jackson, the clerk, were in the office. The walking boss spoke no word of greeting. He was worried. His expression and eyes told that, and his first glance, to Jerry's face, quickly shifted to Ed Jackson's, and was a question. The clerk's answer was a blank stare. He knew nothing.

"Well?" Galt rasped. "What's your trouble?"

"Haven't any," Jerry answered curtly.

Galt started. "How's North's men behaving?"

"Don't see why you want to get rid of them," Jerry said. "I could make half of them believe a Norway is a white pine. I've put some crimps in the logging roads Scanlon never thought of, and nobody got wise."

"Let's see your falling and skidding tallies."

Jackson laid them on the counter. They comprised the nightly reports of the crew, and were thirty per cent of the real tally. Galt studied the figures and found them eminently satisfactory. "I'd like to have a few more foremen like you," he growled.

"What's the matter?" Jerry asked.

"Wish I knew. Hell's busted loose in the other three camps. The men smell something, and they're grouching to the foremen and finding fault with the logging roads and where the roll-ways are placed. Somebody's stirred 'em up."

He searched Jerry's face suspiciously. "None of that here?"

"Ask Ed," Jerry retorted.

"We're foolin' 'em straight through," the clerk agreed enthusiastically.

"If you've put foremen in the other camps like Scanlon, they're sure to smell a rat," Jerry said. "One man did say something yesterday, but he didn't speak, or work either, for an hour."

"You got rid of any of the old North men?"

"Don't need to. That's queering the game. You're getting too raw, Galt."

"I'm running things, feller."

"Yeh, and the way you are I'm not so sure I want to tie up with you. There's too much dynamite in this."

"Where? We can't lose, and we can't get caught. If these old-timers make too much trouble, I'll give 'em their time."

"And tell everybody what you're doing!" Jerry sneered. "Besides, what am I getting out of this? And how about old North coming back?"

"He won't. We get reports every week from the doctors, and North might just as well be dead as the way he is."

"Who's we? Listen, feller. I'm doing your dirty work for you and I'm the only one who's delivering the goods. You let me in on this, and show me where I come out, or I'm on a train to-morrow night."

Galt did not answer for a moment. He was troubled, and he had to have Jerry's help. Jerry could read that in his eyes.

"You don't have to know who 'we' are," Galt said at last.

"No? I've got to have something more than your word. You've let Jackson in, and Scanlon."

"All right. You've guessed, it's Strain, and my only telling you it's him won't help you much. In the spring you'll get a thousand, cash."

"Three thousand, you mean." Jerry snarled. "What have you mortgaged? The West Fork timber?"

Galt nodded.

"The mill and what we're cutting now?"

"We've got to make a clean sweep."

"Sure! Sweep in a million! And offer me a thousand! So that's it. Tell Strain I get ten thousand or I'm gone. And I stop at White Pine on my way."

"All right! All right! But get down to Camp Three and earn it."

CHAPTER IV.

TRAPPED!

WHITE WATER DAN WHEELER had done his work well. Jerry was greeted with grins and winks in Camp Three. Freezing weather had not come and he was able to eliminate some disastrous grades in the logging roads and rearrange the rollways. The men were alert now to Galt's scheme and were able, without direction, to avoid many of the cunningly laid devices whereby they would have been delayed later.

It was a beautiful thing to watch, the loyalty and the skill of these men. Two hundred of them were scattered through four camps. Mingled with them were aliens, men who had never worked for Joe North and to whom a job was a job. Yet not one of the latter heard a suspicious statement or caught a surreptitious glance.

Galt came. He stormed up and down the tote road, from camp to camp, finding fault. He gave an excellent imitation of a harried walking boss upon

whom rested the responsibility of a successful year. He abused and belittled, and Joe North's men listened and went about their business of defeating him.

Jim Galt's confidence in Jerry was complete. He tested him, examined tallies, and he was driven to believe by the very necessity of having something to which he might cling.

In all four camps the falling and skidding tallies were carefully scaled thirty per cent before being reported to the clerks each night. In Camps One and Two the foremen were openly derided. Men would not obey orders. They found fault with the judgment of their superiors. They even talked back to Galt when he abused them.

"I've got to get rid of those North men," Galt said to Jerry one night.

"Fire them."

"They're dynamite. They might even take the camps away from me."

"Trouble with you, Galt, you haven't any nerve. I'm not afraid of North's men, and they won't take a camp away from me. I'll go down to Camp Two and show 'em."

The freezing weather and snow held off. Again Jerry was able to straighten out a few grades in the logging roads. But back in Camps Three and Four Galt's new foremen were not successful. The lumberjacks laughed at them, and worked as they pleased.

In Camp Four Jerry had planted a little bomb. He touched it off with a message carried by a tote teamster. When Galt arrived and walked through the slash, Rory O'Keefe stopped him.

"Please, Mister Galt," he said obsequiously, "can I go down to White Pine and see Doc Atkinson about my eyes?"

"What's the matter with your eyes?" Galt snarled.

"Something very bad. All the logging roads run up hill, the way it seems to me."

Several old North men had gathered around and they laughed uproariously and claimed a similar optical trouble. Galt faced them savagely.

"Go to town!" he shouted. "The lot of you. But get your time and don't come back."

"Yes, sir," they answered, and trooped away to camp.

But they did not pack their turkeys, and the next morning, when Galt had gone, they returned to work.

GALT was desperate now. Rory's reference to the logging roads was the most disturbing thing that had happened.

Up and down Beaver River he stormed. Lumberjacks were given time checks and told to go, and in the morning they were back at work. It was sabotage, open defiance. Foremen were helpless. Two were badly beaten. Rory O'Keefe succumbed to enthusiasm and chased the new foreman out of Camp Four.

"You're a grand crook!" Jerry scoffed when Galt told his troubles. "Why don't you bring in the sheriff and clean 'em out?"

"The law's the last thing I want in this," Galt retorted.

"You've got all the rights, with that power of attorney from Joe North."

"And I might play right into their hands. The men are not doing this alone. Somebody's put 'em up to it, somebody who knows what we're doing."

"Who can that be?"

"I don't know," Galt answered savagely, "but if I find out—"

In that moment Jerry understood how dangerous Galt could be. His

was a big game, with huge stakes. The elimination of Ben Blair, Joe North's old walking boss, was the first step in his scheme, and Jerry knew that nothing short of murder could have accomplished that.

For the first time, the young man looked at Jim Galt from a new angle. He had known him to be cold and calculating. Now he saw that the man was capable of the utmost violence in the furthering of his plot.

"How about my going back to Camp Four?" Jerry suggested. "That's the worst bunch. I'll tame 'em."

"They'd kill you."

"Then close the camps."

"And turn 'em loose to talk. We can't let this thing get out. I don't even want any talk in White Pine. The thing to do is to find out what's back of them."

Jerry had little fear in that respect. The North crew could be trusted, and it was back of him to a man. But as a precaution, he sent word to each camp by the tote teamsters. These men, all old-timers in the North employ, served as his means of communication. They carried his orders and brought reports, not only from the camps but from Barlow, and several times, late at night, they had crept up to the windows of Strain's office and had seen Galt talking to Strain.

Galt continued his rounds of the camps. He no longer made a pretense of being the driven, harried walking boss. His abuse of the men had ceased. He talked to foremen, watched the work, went on. More and more he confided to Jerry, and asked advice, and as the days passed a plan formed in Jerry's mind, dazzling in its possibilities.

It was a simple scheme—to oust Galt as he had ousted Scanlon. Each

day a break with Galt seemed more imminent, and it was the last thing Jerry wanted. With the camps in open revolt, Galt need only shut off the food supplies to regain control and install a new crew. Even the loyalty of Joe North's men could not prevail against empty storehouses.

But with Jerry acting as walking boss and Galt remaining in the background, it would be a simple thing to run the camps efficiently and report demoralization, to bank the full season's cut and show a scale of only twenty-five million on the rollways.

LATE one afternoon Galt drove into Camp Two from Barlow.

"Strain wants to see you," he said to Jerry. "Hop in and we'll be in Barlow by supper time."

Jerry hesitated. He suspected a trick to get him away from the protection of his father's men, but he saw, too, the opportunity for which he had been waiting. He wanted to talk to Strain. Galt no longer controlled the camps, and if Jerry could become walking boss in his place—

He was young, possessed of youth's confidence and recklessness. He believed he could handle himself in any trap Galt might set, and if there were no trap, a talk with Strain could mean victory. He climbed to the seat beside Galt.

Galt had little to say as they drove through the forest. The early darkness came. They passed a tote team, and Jerry greeted the driver.

"We ought to get rid of those fellows," Galt said.

"Sure," Jerry agreed. "Whatever's going on, they're carrying the word from camp to camp. But there's one other man we ought to get rid of first."

"Who's that?"

"Jim Galt. He's useless now. The North men know what he's doing. They only laugh at him. I'm going to tell Strain so."

"I think you're right," the walking boss assented readily. "They've about forced me into the open. It means you get my job."

"That what Strain wants of me?"

"I think so."

They went on in silence. Jerry considered Galt's words, each syllable, and each shade of intonation. The whole thing fitted too well with his plans. He searched the shadows ahead, was alert in his seat. But they drove into Barlow, and nothing had happened.

Galt turned the team over to the stableman and led the way to the office in the North warehouse. The room was dark. Galt threw open the door, and quickly stepped aside.

Men poured out. Jerry's first impression was of rats leaving a burning building. Simultaneously, he knew he should flee. But there was no time. The trap had been too well laid. Men darted out to head him off. In a moment he was surrounded.

Jerry did not wait for them to close in. He charged, feinted, slipped to one side, whirled and broke through the ring. An outthrust foot sent him headlong.

He was up in an instant, but they were upon him, striking, making full use of mass and weight and numbers, bearing him down at last, beating and kicking him. He was barely conscious when dragged into the office.

His hands and feet were bound. The men departed. A lamp was lighted and Jerry saw Galt beside it.

"What fool trick you up to now?" the young man demanded.

"You overlooked something," Galt answered. "Ed Jackson smelled a

skunk at Camp Four. He figured the tote teamsters were carrying messages, so he hid in the stable nights and heard a lot. What's your game, feller?"

JERRY did not reply. He knew he was caught, but he did not believe Galt suspected who he was.

"What is it?" Galt repeated savagely. "I'm going to know if I have to beat you into telling."

"I told you coming in here," Jerry retorted. "If I'm going to play a crooked game, I want all I can get out of it. I'm after your job."

"Yeah? Then why did you take the grades out of the logging roads? And how about those fake tallies? You'd better come through."

"Sure. Bring Strain in here and I'll tell him what I told you on the tote road."

Galt ignored that. He grasped Jerry's shoulder and shook him violently.

"Going to tell me why you're doing this?" he demanded with sudden fury.

"I have."

"Oh, Mike!" Galt called.

The door opened and Scanlon came into the room.

"He won't talk," Galt said. "Take him out and work on him."

"I was in hopes he'd be stubborn and give me a chance," Scanlon chuckled.

"Go as far as you like, Mike. And if you can't get the truth out of him, he's no more use to us—or anybody else. Understand?"

"Leave that to me, Jim."

"And don't get lazy. Go where I told you to. North's hellions might come after him."

Scanlon grasped the collar of Jerry's shirt, pulled him across the room and into the dark warehouse beyond, on over the rough floor to a door. There he whistled, and out of the darkness came a team and tote wagon. Three men jumped off, tossed Jerry onto the rack, and he was driven away.

Blankets were thrown over him, and he could not see in which direction he was taken. Neither did he know how long he was on the way. After what seemed an interminable time the wagon stopped and he was dumped out onto the ground and dragged into a building. Even in the darkness he could see that it was a deserted logging camp.

Scanlon lighted a lantern and hung it from a beam. "Set him on that bench," he commanded.

Ankles tied together, wrists bound behind him, his face bloody from a torn scalp, Jerry was lifted to the seat. Scanlon stood before him, grinning.

"Make a monkey out of me, would you?" he chuckled, and drove a heavy fist into Jerry's face.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

The greatest mystery novel of the year—a story you will always remember—with its trail of grinning little gold skulls whose coming brought death to lonely atolls and to proud Singapore homes! Coming next week: "The Gold Skull Murders," by Frank L. Packard.



Swiftly Brick wrenched away the gun

Mexican Crude

*Queer things happen when justice and human nature clash,
finds Brick Kennedy, one-man police force of
an oil-town south of the Rio Grande*

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

THE flares of Mexico's newest and largest oil field were lighting the sky when Brick Kennedy rode the trail to Denton's. The red-headed special officer of the North American Petroleum Company rode grimly with an unlighted home-rolled cigarette hanging from his tight lips. For the first time since he'd worn the company star, a North American pay roll wagon had been knocked over. Brick took it as a personal affront.

Below him Petrolia sprawled like an

unwashed squaw; a few dingy lights among a slovenly group of frame buildings that flanked a street of black mud. The road leading down to it curled and back-tracked on itself like a snarled length of drill cable. Kennedy swore softly.

"A man's a fool to work in a country like this, with a nation like the United States just north of him. Funny thing about fools, though. Most of 'em know it."

At the foot of the twisted trail he