

Bert Sander's Brag

THIS YOUNG LOCHINVAR OF MAPLE RIDGE DID NOT RIDE
OUT OF THE WEST ON A PRANCING STEED, BUT
HE HAD A TRADITION TO MAINTAIN, AND
HE DID HIS LEVEL BEST

By Theodore Goodridge Roberts

THE settlement of Covered Bridge, straggling north and south from both ends of the structure to which it owes its name, is divided down the middle by Rolling River. The Dunder farm is on the western side. The Dunder house stands within thirty yards of the high road and within three hundred of the nigh end of the bridge.

The Dunder household, about this time, comprised seven humans and a varying number of dogs. Four of the humans were males.

If these male Dunders had any sense of humor, it was a queer one. To them a joke was a joke only when it was on somebody else. Perhaps you know that kind—the square-headed son of adverse circumstances who laughs immoderately when you sit down violently on the floor because the chair upon which you calculated to come to rest is not there, but who complains savagely when he happens to be on the receiving end of that same ancient example of back-country humor.

Melch and his three sons were funsters of that sort; but the female Dunders were different—especially Lucy. They were as different as chalk is from cheese. You can eat cheese.

The Dunder dogs were extraordinarily like their masters. They were big, and their jokes amused only themselves. They had collie in them, and an unknown number of other strains, all more or less fixed into a unique breed—more or less fixed, but not quite. A litter might contain one pup, even two pups, of startling dissimilarity to both parents. These were throwbacks, of course. All such were given away,

or done away with. Of those running true to the new type, one or two were kept and the others sold. As the folk of Covered Bridge and vicinity were not the kind to pay real money for anything so easily come by as a pup, the sales were usually made away down on the main river.

A big Dunder dog named Hero got into the habit of going down to the bridge whenever he felt spoiling for a fight, and hanging around there until something turned up to give him a battle. The dogs he met there were usually traveling with their masters. For that reason, most of them escaped with their lives, and Hero received some kicks which should have taught him better manners. One day in August, Hero charged a dog with such force as to knock him clean off the bridge and into the river before he could set his teeth for a hold. The strange dog swam ashore and went on his way with amazing speed and unmistakable signs of terror; and Hero's unpleasant sense of humor was stirred.

This calls for a few words of explanation. Though the bridge was a covered one, roofed and boarded in like a barn, and floored with planks like a stable, it was not absolutely tight. The builder had left a number of sizable openings in the walls, at floor level, through which the drifted snows of winter and the penetrating dusts of summer might be swept or shoveled, from time to time, into the swift waters below.

Hero was so well pleased with the splash made by that first dog that he threw another over on the following day, and yet a third a few days later; and, after that, every dog he caught on the bridge went

off it. Some went quick and easy, with scarcely a tooth mark. Others went more slowly, with more resistance, and pretty badly chewed. Many fell into open water, a few upon ice, some into deep snow, according to the season and the natural conditions. Hero thought it a choice joke; and so did Melch, Howard, Ham, and Frank Dunder.

This went on until well along in April of the next year, just after the ice had run. Then, one morning, the joker got hold of Bert Sander's dog.

He was considerably less than middling in size, was that dog Toby; but his teeth and jaws were a size larger, and his heart at least five sizes larger than the rest of him. When Hero jumped him, he grabbed; and when he went through the aperture and over the edge, Hero went with him. That was the biggest splash since the one made by Fiddler Nick Quinn, who mistook that same hole for his own kitchen door on his way home from Stickels's barn raising, and rolled right in.

Bert, who was traveling afoot, was just in time to see the two dogs go through. He legged it down the steep bank, grabbed a pole of driftwood, waded waist-deep into the swift, icy water, and fished them out. He pulled them apart and sent the big dog on its way. He gathered Toby into his arms, scrambled up the bank, and headed for the nearest house. The Dunder house was the nearest.

As Bert turned in at the Dunder gate, three large dogs appeared from as many directions and commenced a slow convergent movement. He shifted Toby to his left arm. With his right hand he picked up from a convenient wood pile, a nicely balanced stick of round maple.

He marched forward. The dogs checked. "Yellow!" he sneered.

Just then the kitchen door of the house opened and a girl looked out and cried:

"Scat, you!"

The three big dogs faded from the scene, but not so the girl. She continued to stand in the open doorway and regard the approaching young man. He was within fifteen paces of her when she asked:

"Is the little dog badly hurt?"

"He's chewed up some," replied Bert.

"Did he go over the bridge an' into the river?"

"He did all of that, but he took the big mongrel with 'im."

"Glad to hear it! Step inside, an' I'll get you some rags an' salve an' help fix him up."

She stood aside, smiling; and Bert forgot his hot indignation for a moment as he stepped past her into the kitchen.

Melch Dunder was there, sitting back in a rocker with a pipe in his mouth. Mrs. Dunder was at the stove, and Emma looked out of the pantry. There was also a big dog, wet as a dishcloth, which slanted just one glance at the young man and then slunk into the farthest corner of the room.

"Somethin' happen to yer dog?" asked Melch in a comfortable, assured, you-know-who-I-am tone of voice.

"You said it first time," answered Bert, slowly, distinctly, unsmilingly. "Somethin' happened to my dog. A dirty mongrel cur five times his size jumped him on the bridge, an' the two of 'em went over."

"Sure they both went over—with you heavin' 'em!"

"Not me, mister. I didn't get there in time. If I had got there in time to do a chore of heavin', that yellow-gutted cur in the corner would 'a' made the trip all by himself."

"You hate yerself, young feller! Stranger in this part of the country, I take it."

"I'm from Maple Ridge, but I've heard rumors of this here mud hole in the woods." Melch sat up in the rocker.

"Keep a civil tongue in this house! My son Howard will be walkin' in any minute now."

Bert had something to say in answer to that, but, before he could get it out, Lucy brushed an arm against his elbow, and it flew from his mind. She held a bowl of warm water in one hand and strips of clean linen in the other.

"Let's doctor the poor little dog before you get to arguing," she said gently.

Together they bathed and bandaged the gashes and punctures in Toby's hide. Their hands touched four or five times in the course of the operation.

"Nothing serious," said the girl.

"He will be the same as ever he was in a couple of days," returned Bert, in a mournful sort of whisper, and with an uneasy grin.

She glanced up at him with concerned inquiry.

"Did you get hurt, too?"

"No, I—I'm all right. I didn't mean—"

Words failed him. He felt and looked

like a fool. He was thankful when the big man in the rocker spoke up in an unpleasant voice.

"Now ye're through messin' with that thing you call a dog, tell us yer name. You got a name, ain't you?"

Bert recovered his composure and his anger quick as winking.

"Sure I got a name!"

"Maybe you're ashamed of it."

"No, nor extry proud of it. It's only a short name, easy to say, but dangerous to make too free with. It's jist as easy to say as Melch Dunder, but it means more when it's said."

Melch came all the way out of his comfortable chair. His eyes bulged with wrath, and he made a slight but menacing gesture with his big right hand.

"If it warn't that I got a touch of rheumatics to-day, I'd heave you through that door without waitin' for Howard to come home."

"You'd best wait for Howard—an' for Ham an' the other one, too. My name's Bert Sander."

Melch Dunder resumed his seat. The bulge went out of his eyes, and the menacing glare along with it, as if a pin prick had deflated them. The expression of his whole face changed, and when he spoke it was in a new voice.

"You got to stop to dinner, Bert! 'Tain't often we see a Maple Ridger hereabouts nowadays. Make up a bed for the little dog. Hope he ain't hurt. Hero was only havin' his joke. Make yerself right to home!"

All eyes were upon the young man, and in the expression of every pair there was something new.

"That's so," said Bert Sander, with an embarrassed smile. "Ever since the gover'ment turnpiked us a road through to Boystown Junction an' blasted old Powderhorn clear of rocks, we bin switched off the Rollin' River route. That was a long time back—before my day."

"You said it! That's the way it happened; but how? Well, it's no concern of mine, I reckon. Make yerself to home, Bert!"

"That's all right," returned young Sander, guessing at the unspoken question. "I've bin cruisin' for pulp, an' I come out at Cross's clearin' last night. I'll hoof it down to Milldam an' get a train there for Boystown. That's how it happened."

"Sure, that's yer easiest way to git home. Set down yer dog an' drag off them muddy boots. Throw down an old coat or somethin' for the poor dog to lay on, Em. Make yerself to home, Bert. I was wonderin' how you come to know my name."

"Well, I kinder guessed it. I've heard tell of the dogs."

"Sure, that would be the way of it. Here comes Howard. The other boys is downstream with Nelson's drive."

Howard was the largest of all the Dunders. He was fast becoming too large, in spots, though still a young man. His impressive appearance was beginning to stick out in front of him. His lower chest was gaining fast on his upper chest in the struggle for a place in the sun. His face was large, and his eyes were arrogant. Now he opened the door and stepped masterfully into the kitchen; but he had no more than turned a who-the-hell-have-we-here sort of glare on the strange young man seated on the settle than Melch spoke up, quick and loud.

"Shake hands with Bert Sander from Maple Ridge!" cried old Dunder.

Yes, just like that. It was almost a yell. It stopped Howard short and hard, and loosed his lower jaw so that it sagged an inch. One of the girls sniggered. Bert stood up.

"He's stoppin' to dinner—an' longer, if he has a mind to," added Melch.

"Pleased to meet you," said Howard, but he neither sounded nor looked it.

Bert glanced at Lucy Dunder with a flicker of a smile in his dark eyes. If she met his look, it was for no more than a split second—but her cheeks and brow went red as roses.

II

THERE was very little conversation during dinner, and the head of the house was almost entirely responsible for what little there was. He seemed to be determined to please. The fact that his efforts were not crowned with success was the fault of the others. Mrs. Dunder and the girls appeared to be tongue-tied. The massive Howard's responses never went further than "Maybe so," or "Sure thing," or "I dunno." His manner was at once sullen, subdued, and nervous. Bert Sander was polite but preoccupied.

Toward the end of the meal, Melch offered Bert the services of a horse and rig

and driver to convey him and the bandaged dog as far as Milldam.

"Much obliged," replied the man from Maple Ridge. "That would sure be easier and quicker than hoofin' it and totin' the dog."

"I couldn't go," said Howard, shooting a nasty eye at his father. "Couldn't spare the time to-day, nohow—nor to-morrow."

"What the—" began Melch, but then he bit it off and said: "I'll take you down myself, Bert."

"Not with that crick in yer back, pa," objected Mrs. Dunder.

"That's all right, Mr. Dunder," said Bert. "I'll walk. I got plenty of time. Thanky all the same."

He left the Dunder kitchen a few minutes later, with his pack on his shoulders and Toby in his arms. The door hadn't been closed behind him ten seconds before Melch commenced to bawl out his eldest son.

"What the hell's eatin' you? You could 'a' drove 'im all the way down to Milldam and bin home agin by nine o'clock, no matter how bad the roads might be. D'ye want him back here? If you do, you're crazy. Sarve you damned right if he was to come back, an' pick a fight over the rips in his dog's hide, an' lash into you like he's lashed into plenty of better men. Home's the place for him an' all that breed—home on Maple Ridge!"

"Howard was afraid to go with him, I guess," said Emma. "It made me laugh to see the look on his face when he heard the man's name; but I'm not scared of him. You harness me a horse, and I'll go after 'im and give 'im a lift to Milldam."

"I'll go with you," said Lucy.

"No, you won't!" exclaimed Melch. "I seen 'im slantin' his eye at you. You don't know them Sanders like I do. You'll stop right here!"

"It's both of them or nobody," said Mrs. Dunder, with an edge to her voice and a glint in her eye. "If you want to be quit of him so bad, and all because you was scared of his pa thirty year ago an' let 'im cut you out with that Jarvis girl, and because Howard's scared of him—the both of you for all the world like Hero there if a dog anywheres near his own size happens along—you best let Lucy and Emmy take him to the train. It's both of them or nobody. Not that I wouldn't trust 'im with either one of them alone, for he's got good

honest eyes in his head; but two's company an' three's a crowd, and I'm strong for crowds!"

"You got that all wrong, Kate. Jim Sander never cut me out. He jist come along with a fast hoss an' buggy an' drive off with her to spite me. Not as I hold it agin 'im, mind you, nor never did; but it shows the kind of ugly blood runs in the breed."

"Never mind that! Howard, you go harness Rowdy an' hitch him to the light wagon, an' be quick about it. Nobody who's et at my table is goin' to tramp twenty miles through mud an' slush carryin' a helpless dog in his arms—so there!"

Howard went. "So there!" was something that Mrs. Dunder did not often say, but when she did she always put it across.

III

BERT SANDER had not gone two miles when the Dunder girls overhauled him. They didn't get him into the wagon without an argument.

"Don't be so contrary and independent," Emma admonished him. "We're goin' to Milldam anyhow, for sugar and matches." She was the talker of the two sisters. "It isn't all kindness, this offerin' you and Toby a lift. We got a lot of questions to ask you."

Bert established himself and the dog on horse blankets on the floor of the wagon, close up to the seat occupied by the girls. Rowdy resumed his heavy slogging through slush and mud. Emma looked backward and downward at the young man.

"What was the trouble between your father and ours?" she asked.

"That's an old story," he replied. "My old man happened through Covered Bridge on a drive of logs one spring, and he went up to a house and asked for a drink of water. The girl who fetched it to him in a tin dipper—well, she knocked 'im in the eye, so to speak. He drunk the water and went along down with the drive, but he couldn't get that girl out of his mind. He come down that way agin in June, all dressed up an' with his sorrel mare hitched into his new buggy. He drives right up to that same house, and there's that same girl."

"'Let's go get married,' he says. 'You're the sweetest an' the purtiest girl I ever see.'"

"She tells him she's got to marry Melch Dunder nex' Friday."

"'Never mind that,' he says. 'Monday's luckier for a weddin' than Friday.'"

"Well, she steps indoors and in five minutes she comes out agin with a grip in one hand an' a pup under her arm, and climbs aboard. The sorrel mare steps right out, and my old man don't know if he's awake or asleep.

"'What kinder pup's that?' he says, after five miles or so.

"She tells him how Melch Dunder gave it to her instead of drownin' it.

"'He'd sell it down on the main river for ten dollars, if it was a good one,' she says.

"Well, they get to Milldam at three o'clock an' get married at a quarter past three."

"That was a queer way to behave!"

"It's the Sander way."

"Did they live to regret it?"

"They're still livin', and they're still laffin' about Melch Dunder."

"That's not the way to get married, all the same. Why, they didn't even know each other!"

"They both had eyes. They could see. Besides, she knew the other lad. Why, the only present he ever give her was that pup, because he couldn't sell it. An' what d'ye think? That pup was the best dog any Dunder ever bred. We got some of the breed yet."

"It wasn't right, for all that. They happened to be lucky, but it wouldn't work out like that once in a hundred times."

"Lucky? He knew what he wanted when he saw it, and he went back and got it. I don't know any better way of gettin' married."

"I suppose that's how you did it?"

"Not yet."

Lucy had not taken part in the conversation. She had not even turned her head. After ten minutes of silence, Emma twisted her neck around and spoke again.

"You don't look bloodthirsty, but you got an awful reputation," she said.

"It's all lies," replied Bert, in his gentle voice. "I could see right off that you folks had heard some of them stories about me. It all started with the three Frenchmen from Madawaska who picked a fight with me four years back, up to the forks of Blue River. It's all lies. I'm a peaceable citizen."

"And there was a man called Barns," said Emma.

"That's right, too, but what was that to make a song an' dance about? Barns traveled all the way from Piper's Glen to take a swing at me. Not even a peaceable citizen has to lay down an' let total strangers stand on his face. I didn't do a thing to him you wouldn't 'a' done yerself. All I did was bend his nose; but the farther a story travels the worse it gets. Like as not you heard I busted all his slats."

"What we heard at Covered Bridge was that you killed him."

"That would rile some men, but I got an easy temper. Say, he was able to go home to Piper's Glen two days after he took that swing at me. He married him a wife that same summer, an' he's alive an' hearty right now. Maybe you heard I killed one of them Frenchmen?"

"What we heard was that you killed all three of them."

"Have a heart! I didn't get a chance to hit only two of 'em. One of 'em started back for Madawaska before I could get around to him. That shows you the kind of lies gets abroad!"

"But you must be a fighter, or people wouldn't talk so. Where there's smoke there's fire. You must be pretty good at that sort of thing, and full of courage."

"Now I'll tell you all about it. I don't go lookin' for trouble. I got a mild nature. I don't like to fight. I'd sooner eat, any day, or play checkers; but when I do get into a jam I try to defend myself."

Not a word had Lucy contributed to the conversation. Not once had she turned her head. She seemed to give all her attention to the horse and the road and the landscape.

The village of Milldam was reached soon after four o'clock. Lucy drove right up to the railway siding. Bert Sander did not move. Emma had told him that she and Lucy would spend the night at their Aunt Jane's; and now he offered to accompany them to Aunt Jane's, stable the horse, and wash out his feet and his fetlocks.

Then Lucy spoke up for the first time.

"Uncle Ned can do all that, thank you," she said; "and you can catch the freight train for Boystown Junction."

At that Bert descended from the wagon. He swung his pack over a shoulder, tucked Toby under his left arm, and raised his hat in a gesture new to Rolling River.

"Much obliged for your kindness to me and my dog," he said gravely. He replaced

his hat and added, in a more spirited tone of voice: "I'll call agin in June—with a bigger dog."

Then he strode off.

"Now what did he mean by that?" asked Emma.

"Impudence," replied Lucy, shaking Rowdy into a weary jog. "Don't look back at him."

"You seemed to like him well enough at first, helpin' doctor his dog, and blushin' like a sick owl every time he looked at you," said Emma. "What turned you against him?"

"I didn't. I was sorry for the little dog. I didn't think one way or the other about him, until he started to brag."

"But he didn't brag. He was real modest."

"That talk he was giving you was the worst brag I ever heard, and I've heard a whole lot. Oh, no, he didn't kill anybody! He only fanned them with a finger, and they were able to walk three or four days afterward. He thinks every man in the world is scared of him."

"They all seem to be. Pa and Howard were, anyhow."

"Oh, them! And he thinks any girl in the world would drive off in his buggy with him and marry him!"

"Well, I would, for one—if it wasn't for Sam Bolster."

"Well, I wouldn't—not if he was the only man in the world!"

IV

THE girls reached home at noon next day. At dinner, Howard gave them his reason for not taking Bert Sander down to Milldam. He said that he had a hunch that Bert would try to pick a fight with him, and, as he had nothing against the young fellow, he didn't want to have to hurt him.

"Set that to music," said Melch.

Emma laughed and Mrs. Dunder sighed.

"You were both scared of him," said Lucy. "It's enough to make a girl ashamed of her name! Shout at me—that's right! You're like your dogs—roarin' lions until something your own size comes along!"

Melch and Howard did a lot of talking that did not get them anywhere.

Sam Bolster and Wes Henderson came in after supper. Emma told them all about the visit of Bert Sander and his dog.

"Don't you wish you'd bin here, Sam?" exclaimed Wes. "Say, don't you wish you'd happened along?"

Sam was just the kind of quiet young man that gets married to a chatterbox and becomes quieter and quieter.

"I'd 'a' liked fine to see the little dog take Hero over the bridge," he replied.

"Sure, but I'd sooner 'a' bin right here in this kitchen when he bellered out his name. Bert Sander! Say, that may scare some folks, but it makes me laff. I'd 'a' laffed in his face!"

"I wonder," said Lucy quietly.

"Yes, I would, honest!"

"What about?" asked Sam.

"At him expectin' me to be scared by his name. I ain't one to brag, but I don't mind sayin' it would take more'n a man from Maple Ridge to scare me."

"You're braggin' now!"

"No, Lucy, I ain't braggin', honest. I'm only sayin' as how he couldn't 'a' got away with that bad man stuff if I'd bin here."

"I hate braggarts!" cried Lucy.

V

HERO's startling experience with the little dog with the outsize jaws cured him of his amusing habit of throwing strange canines off the bridge. He thought up something safer, if not so funny; and he and the next largest member of the Dunder pack took to running the roads in company, far and wide, in search of less risky diversion. They possessed terrific voices. They charged from ambush. They killed a dog from Kelly's Brook, maimed one from Burnt Tree, and scared a dozen nearly to death.

May came and went. On the 5th of June, on the stroke of midday, Wes Henderson came over to the Dunder place to borrow a spread chain. The kitchen door stood open. Mrs. Dunder and the girls were dishing the dinner, and Melch and the boys were sitting around, washed and relaxed after a hard, long, hot morning in the brown fields.

Wes paused on the threshold and glanced over a shoulder.

"Here comes Hero an' Major," he said. "Can't see what they're after, but they're sure burnin' their feet!"

Howard rose from his chair with an inquiring grunt and strode massively to the door. Wes pointed. Howard shaded his eyes with a hand.

"That's them, all right, comin' hell-bent-for-'lection; but I don't see nothin' ahead of 'em."

"Looky there, will you? Twenty rod *behind* them! Roundin' the bend!"

"Jumpin' cant-hooks!"

It was too true. Hero and Major were on the wrong end of that chase. Wes and Howard stepped down into the chip yard, while the others crowded in the doorway. The Dunder dogs made the turn through the open gate at top speed and came straight for the kitchen door; but their pursuers flew the five-foot fence and came streaking for the common objective on a long slant, with the obvious intention of heading them off. Other Dunder dogs appeared, only to disappear.

Hero and Major had a safe lead, and they held it. They went through the crowded doorway like pigs through a brush fence. Their pursuers halted ten yards off, turned, and trotted back by the way they had come. They went over the fence like deer. Howard and Wes threw down the cordwood sticks with which they had armed themselves.

"They looked kinder like Dunder dogs to me," said Melch. "Now where d'ye reckon they come from? I never seen 'em before."

"Kinder like, but better, if you was to ask me," replied Wes; "and they sure must 'a' looked better to Hero an' Major."

"Their coats was harder an' shorter, looked to me," said Howard. "Higher at the shoulder, too, an' stouter in the neck."

Mr. Henderson accepted Melch's invitation to sit up to the table and make himself at home. There they were all sitting when a shadow moved on the threshold, and then Bert Sander appeared in the open door. He was all dressed up. He lifted his Sunday hat. He looked steadily at Lucy.

"Let's go get married," he said.

Emma laughed, left her seat, and went over to where the dinner horn hung from a nail near the door. The others sat like graven images.

Emma smiled at Bert and stepped past him. She saw a long-legged bay horse, a light wagon with high yellow wheels, and the two strange dogs sitting near by with their tongues out.

"I don't want to scare your horse, Bert, but I simply got to blow this horn," she said.

"Blow away, Emmy," he replied. "Gabriel's horn itself wouldn't scare Lightnin'."

So Emma blew—toot, toot, toot. She blew again, and yet again; and her father and brothers were glad to hear it, for it was her private summons to Sam Bolster.

"Let's go get married, Lucy," repeated the man from Maple Ridge.

Lucy lowered her glance then. Not a word did she say. She turned her head and looked at Wes Henderson. Wes rose slowly to his feet, and Melch Dunder followed his example.

"Get out!" cried Wes. It was more of a scream than a shout. "Get out, or I'll throw you out!"

"Did you speak to me?" asked Bert, smiling.

"That's right!" bellowed Melch. "Get to hell out of this!"

Up stood Howard and Ham and Frank.

"How about it, Lucy?" asked Bert.

"Please go—quick!" she cried.

"Then go fetch your grip."

"Are you crazy? Why did you think I'd go with you? Run! Please run!"

"I bin bankin' on it ever since the first time we met. You're the purtiest an' the sweetest—"

Wes Henderson and Howard Dunder charged together. Howard got his feet tangled up in a chair. Wes staggered back and clapped a hand to his nose.

Then Ham and Frank got to work. Melch stood irresolute. Ham got a hold around Bert's middle, but did not keep it. Frank lashed out a kick, and came down on the back of his neck. It was four to one, for all that; and Howard had shut the door to keep the dogs out.

"Now you got 'im!" Melch suddenly shouted, and jumped heavily into the fray.

"You keep out of it!" screamed Mrs. Dunder.

Also she crowned Melch with the earthenware teapot, and he kept out of it; but it was still four to one.

Wes Henderson picked up a chair and made a slash at Bert's head.

"Duck!" cried Lucy, and that slash missed its mark.

Emma tried to open the door, but one of her brothers, or Wes, was always there to fling her away from it. The battle went around the kitchen, with the man from Maple Ridge in the staggering middle of it and the girls on the swinging edge of it.

Bert fought silently. The pressure and

close contact, which saved him from serious injury and from being pulled down, also muffled his own offensive efforts. The girls alone were in a position to be really effective. Lucy stooped, grasped a straining leg, and yanked with all her strength until Wes Henderson lost his balance. Emma jerked Ham backward from the fight by both ears.

In five seconds Wes was up and into it again, and so was Ham, but the girls grabbed and yanked again. Mrs. Dunder, remorsefully pouring cold water over her unconscious husband's head, was entirely out of it.

There was blood on Bert's face, but he was still smiling. He spoke breathlessly:

"If I was to holler once—they'd come right through—the window—an' rip the windpipes out of you!"

Howard reeled out of the struggle, jumped to the big dresser, and set a shoulder to it. Lucy darted to the door.

"Don't open it!" cried Bert. "Sure death! I couldn't stop 'em! I can handle this trash!"

The dresser slid heavily along the floor and blocked the window. Then Howard jumped to the outer door, locked it, and pocketed the key. He turned to help put the finishing touches on the man from Maple Ridge.

At that moment the jam broke as if a stick of dynamite had been touched off in the middle of it. Wes hit the floor, and crumpled and slid. Ham came out spinning, and brought up against the stove. He staggered away from there and flopped in a corner.

Now it was only two to one. The girls dropped out of it and clung to each other, sobbing; but they kept their eyes wide open. They didn't miss anything.

It was a treat and an education to watch Bert Sander. He did not appear to be in a hurry. He did not seem to jump, or even to step, but just to drift here and there; but when he was here, Howard and Frank were floundering there, and when he was

there they were here. He was hitting with his left hand only. His right arm hung limp.

An inner door opened, and there stood Sam Bolster.

"I didn't like the looks of them dogs, so I come in the front way," said Sam. "What's the game here?"

Emma pointed at her big brother Howard, who had snatched a stick of rock maple from the wood box at the instant of Sam's appearance.

"Take it away from him!" she cried.

Sam was not quite quick enough. Bert's left fist found the right place on Frank's jaw just a fraction of a second before Howard's stick descended; but Sam was almost quick enough. His sudden onslaught took at least half the weight out of Howard's murderous blow.

VI

WHEN Bert Sander opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Lucy's face.

"Fetch your grip," he whispered.

"It's packed and in the rig," she told him; "but don't you think you'd best lay still awhile longer, Bert? You got a mean bump on your head, your right hand's all bruised an' skinned, and it's a long ride to Milldam."

He sat up on the settle.

"Say, I never felt better in all my life! Let's go! Parson Smith an' his wife are expectin' us."

Away they went. Lucy held the reins. The two big dogs that looked something like the Dunder breed, but were shorter of hair and stouter of neck and heart, coursed the sunlit road ahead of them.

Lucy drove with one hand. She slipped an arm across Bert's shoulders.

"I thought you were bragging, that day in April," she whispered.

"I suspicioned you did, an' that's why I didn't whistle for the dogs when my right hand gave out. I'd sooner bin killed than have you feel that way about me!"

And then she kissed him.

MUSIC

WHEN dawn, a radiant bugler, mounts the height,
He flings across the earth his golden bars;
And yet more moving on the ears of night
Falls the cool, silent music of the stars.

Clinton Scollard