

A LOST TRAIL

By A. C. ROBINSON

DRAWINGS BY LYNN BOGUE HUNT

1

BEN LAMARE sat upon the highest of three steps which gave ingress to his house, and looked upon the morning with a contented eye. The steps were of pine. They looked new, and in this respect formed a contrast to the man upon them and the house, the door of which stood open behind him. He was a small man powerfully built. The skin upon his face and neck looked like copper and was crossed and recrossed by innumerable wrinkles from the midst of which looked out a pair of piercing, small black eyes. His hands suggested the talons of a bird of prey, so crooked and sharp were the fingers. Although the thermometer was not far above the freezing point, he was without hat or coat. Indeed, his only upper garment was a dark flannel shirt the collar of which was unfastened, exposing his throat and upper chest.

A rod or two from where the man was sitting, the road passed his gate. Across the road was a desolate looking field from which the morning sun had not entirely removed the traces of the last night's frost. Beyond the field, the country swelled into wood-clad hills, and a white, low-hanging mist told of the existence of a lake. In the other direction, behind the house, began the Adirondack "woods," a virginal evergreen forest, through which a man might wander for days without coming upon a made road or a trace of human habitation. In the wonderful air of that late October morning, objects afar off could be seen as if upon the palm of the hand. The distant hills, the rocks and woods, shone motionless in the flood of sunlight, and throughout all nature was spread a silence and a strange serenity.

It is uncertain whether or not the old hunter was sensible of the peace and beauty of the scene upon which he gazed, but his expression was that of a man well satisfied with himself and his surroundings. In truth, Ben Lamare was at that

moment in possession of everything that this world could yield him. In his cellar were two barrels of flour, half a barrel of salt pork, fifty bushels of potatoes and ten pounds of tea. This, with the addition of a deer or two which he would kill it little later, was his supply for the winter. Let the snow pile up, his comfort was secure; and with the diversion afforded by a pile of five-cent detective stories which the "old woman" would read to him in the evenings, the days would slip by swiftly and pleasantly.

In the summer Lamare acted as guide and hunter to those sportsmen who came to the big hotel twenty miles up the road. His father had been a French Canadian, his mother a half-breed squaw. He knew nothing but forest lore, had been nowhere beyond the woods and lakes among which he was born. But he remembered when there were still moose and panther and bear, and he had heard the wolves howl when the wilderness was still a wilderness, and summer boarders, railroads and the law were unknown in the Adirondacks.

The day warmed, the mist disappeared from the lake, a breeze began to move about among the trees. The man on the step stood up and stretched himself.

"Guess I'll go ketch a partrich," he said aloud, and went indoors for his gun. Catching partridges with Lamare consisted in shooting off their heads with his rifle. A few moments later he was to be seen crossing the clearing back of the house towards the wood. After him hastened a small child, calling in a shrill voice: "Grandfather, take me, take me!"

The old man pretended not to hear, but when a tug at his back rendered dissimulation useless, he turned.

"You go right back or I'll slat ye," he said, but the tones of his voice were not those of reproof. At the edge of the clearing he looked over his shoulder at the child about to burst into a howl of disappointment. The sight evidently shook his resolution.

"Drat that kid," said the old man, "she kin do mos' anything with me." Then with an effort he plunged into the thicket, hastening to escape from the shrill sounds which he knew would follow him.

II

THE tract of country into which Ben Lamare entered when he left his home was the beginning of a preserve owned by a certain gentleman from New York. It consisted for the most part of land and water, but scattered through it were a number of homes such as the Lamares', situated in more or less propinquity to a small town known as Jones Forks. All these habitations the gentleman from the metropolis conceived to be out of drawing for a preserve of really exclusive and primitive character. He was a man who had amassed an enormous fortune not entirely with the help of the law. He thoroughly understood his rights as a citizen and property owner, and was imbued with the idea that whatever he bought and paid for was his. His reputation as a fighter was wide spread, and he had often been heard to remark that he would rather spend a thousand dollars than be "done" out of five cents. All of which things had not only procured him a large fortune, but the respect and admiration of a community very different from that to which his Adirondack purchase brought him. Acting under the belief that he owned the land he had paid for, he attempted to enforce the laws of trespass. The natives, who as firmly believed that the woods were free to all, no matter who owned them, and that where their fathers and grandfathers had hunted and fished they had a right to hunt and fish, were equally active in infringements. The result was that Mr. Holbene decided that the simplest method would be to buy out the town. The



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scheme came to nothing, however, as the property holders showed a disposition to ask more than Mr. Holbene considered a fair price; and he, on his part, was very solicitous not to be "done."

"If they won't take what's fair and sell out," said he, "I'll drive them out." Accordingly he employed an armed force to patrol his land, with the result that people in and about the Forks found themselves pretty much cramped. The cow could no longer graze in the accustomed pasture; the children must not cross the fence to pick blueberries. There were no more trout for breakfast or supper. He even stopped their walking along the railroad track. In fact, people found themselves restricted to the high road and their own yards.

But instead of accepting the situation, the woodsmen developed an ugly spirit. Lawsuits began in the Forks, and in the spring, there falling a severe drought, Mr. Holbene lost thirty thousand acres by forest fires. From the Forks they watched the red glare in the sky by night and the thick haze of smoke by day, with grim



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faces. Not a man could be hired to handle a spade for the magnate's relief.

Ben Lamare especially had been persistent in his poaching and ill-will. He had been so often caught that they watched him, and this morning he did not proceed a mile from his house when he found himself confronted by two of Holbene's men. The old hunter was not the man to submit quietly. There followed an argument at the end of which they took him, but not before one of the men had received a knife wound in the arm. The sentiment of the community supported him, but Holbene was determined, and at the end the old hunter went to Dannemora prison. He gave no outward sign of annoyance, and surprised the officials considerably by his opening remark.

"Young fellar," he said to his jailer, "you needn't bother so 'bout my gettin' away. I made all my arrangements to stay here, and I ain't a-goin' ter leave till my time's up."

As time went on they saw that he meant it and made him a "trusty."

Early in the spring they let him go.

III

SUMMER was opening in the woods when Lamare set forth upon his return. Trees and undergrowth were as if painted, so

vivid was the new green washed by the spring rains. The thrill of reawakening life was in the air. The good sun shone persistently upon the world, warming and filling it with promise of the pleasant days to come, but in the old man's heart it was still winter as he turned his back upon the high wall of Dannemora prison and reflected upon the past six months. He was provided with food and struck straight through the woods for his home. He moved with astonishing speed and directness, never

changing his gait except when some familiar sight or sound of the forest arrested his attention. Now he stooped to examine the track of a deer, now of a fox. Once he made quite a halt in order to procure a mouthful of gum from a young balsam, for he sorely felt the lack of tobacco. The exercise sent the sluggish blood racing through his veins. The sun warmed him and the free wind of the woods blew upon him. His nostrils were assailed by the peculiar smells of the woods, pine and balsam and hemlock, piercing, invigorating. It became brighter in the old hunter's mind. His heart rose. It was better here than at Dannemora.

Towards noon of the second day Lamare issued from the woods and saw before him the house where he had lived. It was just as he remembered it. Nothing was changed. For some minutes the old hunter regarded that habitation, standing in isolation among the hills and woods, hoping to see the small figure of his granddaughter come around a corner, or his wife appear in the door which stood open before him. After a time he advanced slowly, almost fearfully. No smoke was issuing from the chimney, no sound of life came to his ears. In spite of the warm sunshine the old man shivered. There was something ominous in the silence and

that wide-open door. He reached the threshold and stopped. Suddenly he called aloud, "Wife!" It was with a great leap of the heart that he heard a responding noise within doors, and he entered.

"Is that you, Ben?" his wife was saying. "They said you'd be comin' back now." The old man looked about the familiar room without replying. His glance rested in turn upon the stove, the table with its oil-cloth covering, the seat made out of an old flour barrel, the prints upon the walls. All at once he asked, "Where's Effie?"

"Effie's dead, Ben," said the woman, and there was a silence. After a while she began speaking in the weary voice of those who have ceased to hope for better things.

"It's been a hard winter, Ben. I done the best I could, and John helped or I couldn't have got through without you. That Holbene shut up the railroad station, and lots of people hed ter move away 'cause they couldn't git no things. The wood give out here long 'bout two months ago and I couldn't git some more for two clays. That was when Effie took sick. I done the best I could, Ben, but the folks down ter the Forks was havin' such a hard time I couldn't git nobody ter help me."

Tears emerged from the eyes of the hunter and rolled down the furrows of his cheeks. "Effie's gone," he said, as if questioning the fact.

"God rest her sweet soul," said the woman. She too had been crying silently. After a time she rose and laid her emaciated hand upon her husband's shoulder. "I'm glad ter have you back, Ben," she said. "How you been feelin' up yonder?"

The old man took the hand for a moment and pressed it. "Pretty good," he said. "Got any terbaccer in the house?" The woman bustled to find it.

"I've ben savin' some fer you," she said.

Lamare took it and went out upon the doorstep. He had ceased to cry. The sun crossed to the other side of the house and the colors changed on the hills. Presently there came to his ears the sound of wheels and there appeared upon the road a buckboard driven at a smart pace. It passed the house and disappeared, leaving a little line of dust which slowly

drifted to one side. In it sat two men, one of whom was Holbene.

The man on the doorstep grew pale until the blood had entirely gone from his face, leaving it a peculiar color. He began to tap, with a persistent, nervous movement, the palm of his left hand with the fingers of his right, and to mutter in French. After a while he got up and commenced some preparations in the house.

The sun was very near the tops of the tallest pine trees when he again issued forth, carrying his rifle and a small package containing food. At the edge of the clearing he paused a moment to look around, then taking three steps forward, he vanished in the woods as a stone dropped into water.

The distant hills turned to purple, which slowly faded into a black-green as the color left the sky. At the extreme end of the clearing a buck thrust its antlered head forth from the cover, regarding the house with an inquiring glance. The long spring twilight continued for some time to render the scene visible—the hill, the lake, the little house through the window of which a light began to shine—but in the



The trees had a story for Ben.

silent woods night had already fallen. Yet Ben Lamare continued to advance into their depths.

IV

MR. HOLBENE arose early and called for his horse. It was his pleasure to ride in the freshness of morning, through the sharp sweet smells of the woods, and feel himself alone among his possessions, shut away from the intrusion of that world which he had conquered. He loved also to come suddenly upon some four-footed denizen of the forest on a hunt for breakfast. He never tired of the thought that in the heart of a State the most densely populated of a country which contained nearly eighty million souls, and within twelve hours of the second largest city in the world, one could find a solitude as complete, a wilderness as undisturbed, as when only savages had ranged it. So upon this beautiful morning he allowed his horse to walk along the road, while his eyes sought among the trees and bushes on either hand for some sign of life. And thus he passed on to his death. For presently, with no more noise than a shadow, a man stepped into the road behind him. There was a sudden detonation in the still air and the rider pitched swiftly to the ground. The frightened horse sprang forward and for a few moments his hoof-beats were heard

upon the soft sand. A twig snapped once, twice, in the thicket. Then the silence of the woods shut down again. The sun rose higher, the day grew warmer. But the thing in the road lay where it had fallen, while the sand beneath its head changed slowly to a dark, stale pool, and the pool widened moment by moment. After a time there arose in the quiet of the woods a low, intense hum, persistent, full of excitement. The flies had discovered that there was something in the road.

They found him in the afternoon and bore him to his house. The next morning it thundered through the whole country that Mr. Holbene had been shot to death on his Adirondack preserve. Excitement, indignation and a cry for vengeance ran high, but in and about the Forks there was only grim satisfaction. No attempt was made to apprehend the murderer. They said there were a hundred men who might have done the deed, and no clew connected it with any one. It had been for a long time expected.

The Lamares heard of it among the rest. They made the same comment.

"Wife," said the old hunter as he stretched himself for rest, "I guess I'll go up ter the hotel ter-morrow. It's 'bout time some of them city fellers was goin' fishin'." Then he sank into the most peaceful slumber he had enjoyed for many nights.

