

WOODEN SPOIL

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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"YOU WAN' TO FIGHT, EH? ALL RIGHT!"

Synopsis.—Hilary Askew, young American, comes into possession of the timber and other rights on a considerable section of wooded land in Quebec—the Rosny seignory. Lamartine, his uncle's lawyer, tells him the property is of little value. He visits it and finds Morris, the manager, away. From Lafe Connell, mill foreman, Askew learns his uncle has been systematically robbed. He sees Madeleine Rosny, the Seigneur's beautiful daughter. Askew and Connell reach an understanding, and Askew realizes the extent of the fraud practiced on his uncle. Askew learns that Morris, while manager of his (Askew's) property, is associated with the Ste. Marie company, a rival concern, of which Edouard Brousseau is the owner. Hilary discharges Morris.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Ah, yes, Monsieur Askew. But you see, Mr. Morris he pay the men their wages."
"Call them here," said Hilary.
Jean-Marie called, and the men came forward. "Now tell them what I have told you," Hilary continued.
Jean-Marie's translation was met with a volley of interjections. The little timekeeper began half a dozen explanations and finally gave up in despair.
"They say it's Monsieur Brousseau's orders," he explained. "You see, monsieur, we know now that the property is yours, but Monsieur Brousseau hires the mill hands."
"Tell them in future I shall hire the mill hands. Tell them it is my mill. This was met with blank incredulity. Evidently Brousseau's lease of mill rights had passed for ownership.
"Anyway, say that their jobs are good for the coming year," announced Hilary, and wondered whether he dared hope to make good on that statement. "Where's Lafe Connell?" he added.
"Lafe, he is discharged, too," answered Jean-Marie. "He go right away



"What Are You Deserting For?"

to catch the boat home, carrying his bag. See, Monsieur Askew!"
Hilary looked up. On the crest of the hill behind Rocky river, against the skyline, was a solitary figure, striding along with a bag in his hand.
The down boat to Quebec was almost due. Looking seaward, Hilary saw the white hull rounding the light-house point, and the black smoke from her funnels an inverted cone against the heavens. Evidently Lafe would be homeward bound within a half hour; and no time was to be lost if he hoped to stop him.
He jumped into the buggy and urged the horse through the disputing crowd. Without Lafe Connell he felt that his chance was almost a hopeless one.
He drove madly along the cliff and down the last descent. As he reached the stable the ship was being attached to the wharf. Hilary jumped out and ran to the wharf. A few passengers were gathered about the little baggage office and others were standing before the gangway, waiting to embark. Among them was Lafe, with a carpet-bag. Hilary flung himself upon him just as he set foot upon the planks.
Lafe spun round and looked sullenly at him. Hilary held to his arm. "What's the matter, Lafe?" he asked. "What are you deserting for?"
"What's that you say?" demanded Lafe ferociously. "Deserting what? Deserting who? I guess I don't have to stay here when I've been fired, do I, even if my contract is good till October one? Just let go my arm!"
The passengers had embarked; the sailors stood upward again, hard and firm, toward a bridge that spanned a wide creek tributary to Rocky river.
Now Hilary knew where he was. It was the creek which he had passed that morning when he drove out with Connell to inspect the seignory.
He was about to continue his way along the main road to the mill, but an impulse urged him to turn the horse about and seek the road that led to Leblanc's old concession. Presently he heard the sound of axes among the trees. He came upon the clearing, to find the old camp still standing, and a great pile of newly hewn timber stacked up under the trees.
At Hilary's appearance two or three men looked up from the logs which they were sawing and whispered. They seemed to draw together. At that mo-

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Hilary stepped aside as Pierre precipitated himself upon him, and gave him a short uppercut with the left. Pierre went reeling past him, tripped over a projecting trunk of a tree, and fell sprawling to the ground.
A second later he was up again, rushing at Hilary. Despite Hilary's blows, which nearly blinded him, and covered his face with blood, he managed to get

home two body deliveries which knocked the wind out of the American. Hilary was forced to give ground. He had boxed at college a good deal; that was several years before, but the memory instinctively came back to him. "It's foot-work wins," his teacher had told him. He stepped from side to side, guarding himself against Pierre's furious lunges dexterously, until the opportunity for a telling cross-counter with the right sent Pierre crashing backward.

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Black Pierre thrust his face forward into Hilary's. "Say, I got no time to waste wit' you," he snarled. "If you come to fight, say so."
"I'll give you five minutes to get off my land."
"You wan' to fight, eh? All right," growled the other, suddenly stripping off his short, open jacket.
Hilary had just time to fasten the top button of his coat before Pierre, with a bellow, charged him, his head down, his arms working like flails. Pierre made short, vicious stabs at him; he was muscle-bound and could not extend the elbow-joint with any force, but any of his short blows, delivered from a shoulder like a mutton joint, would have knocked a man senseless.

ment Hilary had a clearly defined impression of approaching trouble.
He got down from the buggy and fastened the horse to a tree. He approached a little group that had formed. "Where's Monsieur Leblanc?" he asked the nearest man.
The man scowled and shrugged his shoulders. He glanced toward the camp. Hilary, looking that way, saw Black Pierre emerging from one of the huts. He went toward him, and the two men met face to face.
Still without reason to believe in Pierre's hostile intention, Hilary suddenly became aware that they were ringed by a circle of men, who gradually drew in toward them.
"Morning," said Hilary, nodding.
"Where is Monsieur Leblanc?"
"I don't know," answered Pierre, scowling. "Look for him if you want him. He's your man, ain't he?"
"He is, but you are not. What are you doing on my land? And these men—are they yours?"
"What you mean, your land?" demanded Pierre. "I work here for Monsieur Brousseau, with Monsieur Brousseau's men."
Hilary saw, out of the corner of his eye, that the ring was swiftly contracting. It struck him that Pierre and he were posted face to face, like prize-fighters. He tried to keep his temper and to remember Connell's counsel. Pierre thought he was afraid. He sneered openly.
"Last time I came here," said Hilary calmly, disregarding the other's truculence, "Monsieur Leblanc was in charge of this territory. Now I find you here in Leblanc's place. I have not hired you. Again I ask what you are doing here."
"I don't know what you mean," snorted Pierre, "an' I got no time to waste in damn foolishness. This here is the Ste. Marie limits. Monsieur Brousseau an' Monsieur Morris run the Ste. Marie limits. Leblanc he work for them last year. Now I got Leblanc's place."
"The Ste. Marie limits are on the other side of the Riviere Rocheuse," said Hilary.
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He rose, spitting the blood out of his mouth, and rushed at Hilary again. This time he managed to lock his arms about him and, holding him securely with the left, pummeled him. Hilary forgot his science and shot his right upward between the arm and the body, landing on Pierre's chin. Pierre reeled, but he did not let go his hold. He grasped Hilary like a bear, hugging him till the breath was nearly out of his body, and forcing the point of his chin in under Hilary's collar-bone.
Pierre was several years the older, and winded by fast living, but his muscles were as firm as a young man's. Knowing that his enemy's science was more than a match for his superior strength, he maintained the clinch, but gradually shifted his grasp upward, first pinning Hilary's arm, then gripping his shoulder, until he had him by the throat.
Hilary, gasping under the relentless pressure, saw the faces of the lumbermen swim round him. He saw the triumph and the joy, the mockery and the hatred on each; there was no pity for the American; many an old land question, many a racial conflict had become incarnate in that fight under the pines. Hilary realized that it was a battle, not for the timber tract, but for his own life.
Pierre's face grinned into his own malignantly, plastered with dust and smeared with the sweat that drove white furrows across it. Hilary let his hands fall limply. For just a second Pierre relaxed his grasp, to shift it so the thumb-knuckles should close on the carotids. Then Hilary put all his strength into a terrific drive with the left. The blow caught Pierre between the eyes, his arms went up, releasing Hilary, and he tottered backward. The yells of the lumbermen, which had been continuous, suddenly ceased.
Before Pierre could recover himself Hilary let him have it with the right. Pierre went to the ground. Hilary still only half-conscious, and hardly seeing the prostrate body, drew in a deep chestful of air. A black cloud filled with dancing specks swam before his vision. Out of it he saw the face of one of the nearest spectators. It was filled with an anticipation so pungent that instinctively Hilary leaped aside. Out of the cloud he saw Black Pierre plunge forward, knife in his hand. The spent blow cut Hilary's sleeve. Pierre recovered himself and rushed at the American, a fearful spectacle, dripping sweat and blood. Hilary caught him with the right under the jaw, sending him flat. The knife went whirling away into the underbrush. Black Pierre lay still.
Hilary turned to the nearest of the awed lumbermen. "Bring him a cup of water," he ordered.
The man understood and ran into Pierre's hut. But Pierre was shamming; he opened his eyes, fixed them with burning hate on Hilary, and mumbled.
"Get up!" said Hilary.
Pierre rose sullenly, edging out of the reach of the expected blow. He was cowed, the fighting spirit was out of him, as it was out of his companions. As civilized men fear the law, the lumbermen feared the unknown forces that lay behind Hilary and manifested themselves through the strength of his arm.
"I'll give you five minutes to get off the Ste. Boniface territory into the Ste. Marie limits, the other side of Rocky river," Hilary said. He turned to the spectators. "I'll thrash every man not employed by me who comes upon my land," he announced.
Whether they understood the meaning of the words or not, they realized the significance of the gesture. Black Pierre, among his companions at the edge of the clearing, stopped his retreat. He meant at least to save his face by threats. But Hilary had deliberately turned his back on him and, without apparent fear of danger, was examining the shacks, and poking the moss out of the interstices between the logs with a forked stick. When he turned the last of the Ste. Marie men was disappearing out of the clearing down the road. He waited long enough for them to reach the fork, before re-entering the buggy.
He was thoughtful on the drive homeward. He knew that it was only the unexpected nature of his action which had cleared the concession. That had been a paramount duty; at any cost he must preserve the integrity of his land. But, given Brousseau's leadership and active hostility, they could put up a fight which would render him impotent. Physical force could bring him nowhere in the end.
It took about an hour for the embellished story to filter through to the mill. Before work was knocked off that afternoon Hilary became conscious of a new deference in his hands' manner, of gaping looks that followed him when he went from office to mill, or back. For the first time St. Boniface began to believe that the Morris regime had really passed.
"We've still got Brousseau, though," said Hilary to Lafe. "When do you suppose he's going to declare himself?"
"Soon," said Lafe. "You've seen to that, Mr. Askew."

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