

WOODEN SPOIL

By
**VICTOR
ROUSSEAU**

Illustrations by
Irwin Myers

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CHAPTER XIII.

—10—

The Island.

Lafe and Hilary started for the island at one o'clock. They planned to spend three hours there and return on the evening tide.

Hilary, seated opposite his friend, told him of the conversation with Louis, who, manipulating the tiller, heard nothing.

"If Louis will swear to what he informed me," he said, "it means that we can clap Brousseau into jail. Otherwise he'll never give up his schemes against me, because he has a personal grievance."

"Mr. Askew," said Lafe, "might I put a question to you without giving offense?"

"You may, Connell."

"I'm only saying what everybody's saying in St. Boniface, and that is about your cutting Brousseau out with Mademoiselle Rosny."

"I guess it's true, Lafe," said Hilary.

"Lafe, she's—well, you understand."

"I guess I do," said Lafe. He stretched out a sinewy hand and gripped Hilary's warmly. "I wish Clarice—my wife—could meet you," he said.

"I hope she will, Lafe, some day. But not about Brousseau."

"I asked you that," said Lafe, "because there's a lot hangs on it. Now as to Louis—he wouldn't swear. If he did swear, he'd swear that he'd been lying as soon as Brousseau slipped him a ten-dollar bill. No, sir, it won't do. We've got to get the fox right into the trap before we spring it."

"I'm afraid I am no hand at springing traps, Lafe."

"No. But we've got to give him rope enough to hang himself. We don't want to go off at half-cock. That's plainer, ain't it? My advice is as before; lie low. You see, sir, when a man schemes and schemes and plans his crooked work, all that he's doing is to twist the rope tighter round his own neck. We've got him now, so that we must get the noose tight, so that he won't wriggle out of it. And he'll twist it tight next time he wriggles. That's my idea, Mr. Askew."

"I guess you're right as usual Lafe," answered Hilary. "But I've been lying low a thundering long time."

No more was said upon the subject. Out in the Gulf the chopiness of the waves had changed to a steady sweep toward the island, which, lying in mid-stream, received and broke the full force of the daily tides. The wind aided them, and they swept through the water. Hilary watched the nearing land with interest that deepened as he began to make out the luxuriant growth of conifers that covered it almost to the sea's verge.

In the center he could now make out a ridge of low hills, which seemed to ascend to a terminal cliff, having on one side a gentle slope and, on the other, a precipitous descent toward the water.

"There ought to be some fine cutting there for us some day," said Hilary. "Hello! What's that?"

"Somebody has got there before us," said Connell.

A boat came into view, a little fishing sloop, much like Duval's, beached on the shore, the sails down, the bow high above high water.

"That boat belongs to Jacques Brousseau," said Louis, pointing toward it.

"What's he doing on my limits, I wonder," mused Hilary.

"I guess he's making this his winter quarters. He's trapped the seigniorly so long that he thinks it's his territory."

They grounded. Duval, leaping ashore, brought the bow round above the water level. Lafe and Hilary stepped out and stretched their cramped limbs.

The wind blew keenly, but, once under the shelter of the island, they found it warm autumn weather. Leaving Louis stretched out in the boat, under a tarpaulin, Lafe and Hilary started up the sloping beach toward the interior. The first thing that they noticed as peculiar, when they had passed the outer fringe of trees, was the existence of a well-defined trail. They stopped and looked at it.

"Do you suppose old Jacques made all that?" asked Lafe.

"Too wide."

"And too hard, Mr. Askew. This has been stamped out this summer. And Jacques has only been here a week, at most."

"Then—?" asked Hilary.

"Somebody else has been on the island all summer, or at least most of the summer. Maybe two or three of them. It looks like it."

The trail had disappeared. They were now scrambling up a gully between great rocks that towered on either side of them. At the top of the elevation appeared the point of the island, and the face of the great cliff, cleft into numerous fissures, some widening into small caves.

Suddenly Lafe gripped Hilary's arm and pointed. Through the scrub they could see Jacques Brousseau coming out of an aperture in the cliff, a deep

but narrow cleft that opened toward the base into a wide recess.

Jacques saw them at the same time and stood motionless. As Lafe and Hilary advanced he seemed to be galvanized into life. He rushed toward them, screaming, his face convulsed with fury.

Hilary cast his eyes about to ascertain the cause of the old man's fury. He saw, near the cave's mouth, a large slab of granite, and a heavy hammer lying beside it.

"Let's see what he's got there," he said. "It doesn't look like traps to me."

The sun, now very low, shone full into the interior. It revealed a cavernous depth, whose recesses were lost in gloom, a high arch, and the remnants of many fires on the granite slabs that paved it almost as regularly as those of a city sidewalk. Somebody had camped here for a long time—possibly Jacques, though he must have burned a whole cord of wood, to judge from the charred remnants that were scattered everywhere.

"Look!" shouted Lafe, pointing.

The ground was covered with fragments of some sort of ore, and a trail of chips and dust led out of the mouth of the cave into another recess among the rocks. Among the brambles, under a roughly constructed roof, was a small hand machine, consisting in the main of two steel rollers, white with crushed rock.

"Looks like a hand flour-mill," said Lafe. "I thought maybe it might be gold. But it ain't gold. Alluvia's washed in a stream, and quartz gold has to be got with cyanide."

A pick next caught their eyes. Somebody, or party, rather, had been working at the rocks, apparently to take samples of some ore; but there was certainly no gold in the Laurentian granite.

Suddenly Lafe uttered an exclamation and, stooping down, picked up a matted handful of some fibrous, wool-like material that had been stuffed into a cleft. He pulled out yet another handful, and more and more—stiff wool, yet of a stony consistency—spun stone, if such a thing were possible.

"Rock flax!" he exclaimed. "I seen it down Thetford way years ago, Mr. Askew. Look there! The cliff's alive with it!"

"Asbestos!" cried Hilary.

"A regular asbestos quarry!" said Lafe. "There's thousands of dollars' worth here. Look at it!"

Hilary could see now that the coarse fibers ran through the side of the cliff in every direction. They were so blended with the mottled stone that he had not even noticed them.

"That accounts for everything," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Askew. I guess Brousseau wasn't paying all those hands at Ste. Marie and pretending to work his limits just to jump your timber rights. I know he had something up his sleeve, but I didn't know what. I knew there wasn't no gold round here."

"So that's why he wants to get me out of the way?"

"That's the whole game, sir. He knew you'd hit upon this mine sooner or later, though he'd left the island off the map of the seigniorly. Lord, what a fool I was not to have known!"

"There's more to it than that, Lafe. That's why he tried to draw us off the scent on the subject of the river boundary. He thought that if he could get

into a fight with us over that we wouldn't be thinking of the island. And this mine belongs to Rosny. No wonder Brousseau wants the seigniorly!"

"It's as good as a play," said Lafe.

"It gives us the trump card," said Hilary. "It means that he'll lose his hold over him, and—well, Lafe, I feel too happy to say any more about it."

Lafe grabbed him by the hand.

"We've won," he said ecstatically. "And now I guess we'd best be starting for the boat."

They retraced their steps along the trail. It was a nervous experience, with the thought that old Jacques

might be lurking in the bushes nearby. However, by the time they reached the little open space they satisfied themselves that he was not following them.

"We've passed our landing place," said Hilary.

Looking out across the gray waters he perceived, close at hand, and apparently beached on the shore, the white sail of a sloop. It seemed to be the vessel which they had seen earlier that afternoon, tacking toward the south shore.

The men looked at each other, and the same unspoken question was in the eyes of each. Then Lafe grabbed Hilary by the shoulders.

"See here!" he said. "We ain't going to stay and fight Brousseau's gang just for the fun of it. I guess it's Pierre and Leblanc in that boat all right, and that they're on their way home. We beat it for ours as hard as we can go—see? You ain't fit to do no more fighting anyway," he pleaded. "And I won't, no matter what happens—that's straight to you. I'll fight any man with fists if I got to, but I'm darned if I'll stand up against that scum with cane knives."

"You're quite right, Lafe," answered Hilary. "Come, let's get to the boat as quick as we can."

But as they started there rang out a woman's cry. Again came the scream; and in an instant, forgetful of their resolution, they had turned and raced back along the trail.

Not many steps, and, breaking through the trees, they saw Marie Dupont struggling in Pierre's arms, while Leblanc and Nanette stood near them, laughing.

Lafe leaped at Pierre, and his bony fist caught the outlaw beneath the chin. Pierre went down in a heap. Hilary made for Leblanc, whose expression would, under other circumstances, have been comical in its surprise.

He turned upon the girl and knocked her down savagely. Then, without another glance at Hilary, he made for the sloop.

Leaving Pierre where he had fallen, Lafe joined in the pursuit. But Leblanc had several yards' start, and his experience of Hilary's prowess lent wings to his feet. He plunged into the water and, by a miracle of strength, swung the sloop clear of the sand on which she had been beached. As the vessel was carried clear by the swift-flowing tide the ex-jobber scrambled aboard, dripping, and pushed off with the oar. Lafe and Hilary stood, baffled, upon the brink of the water, while Leblanc, at an ever increasing distance, began to put up the sail, shouting back defiant curses meanwhile.

They heard a sound of feet upon the shingle behind them, and turned quickly. It was Pierre, but he was bolting for the woods. They ran at him, but he had gained the shelter of the trees, and it was growing too dark to follow. They stopped and looked back. Leblanc was now quite a distance from the island, and making for the north shore upon the incoming tide.

"Let's go," said Hilary, and he took Marie gently by the arm. She went with him obediently, and Lafe followed with Nanette, whose lip was bloody from Leblanc's blow.

The tide was running fairly for St. Boniface. It was almost dark now, but the wind had died away and the stars were brilliant. Hilary, taking off his overcoat, wrapped it about Marie. The girl's bewilderment had yielded to abject gratitude. She raised Hilary's hand to her lips and pressed it. Beside her Nanette, wrapped in Lafe's waterproof, was sobbing wildly and wiping her wounded lip. The words that passed were drowned in the sound of the lapping waves before they reached the ears of Louis, at the tiller.

"Now, what happened?" asked Hilary of Marie. "Tell me, and we'll clap those ruffians into jail, I assure you. How did they get you into that boat?"

Marie sobbed out her explanation; but when Hilary gathered, with difficulty from the broken words, stammered in French, that she had gone aboard with Pierre to marry him in Quebec, he could hardly believe his ears.

"And your father knows nothing of this?" he inquired, when she had ended.

"He knows nothing, monsieur. Ah, monsieur, you saved me before, and I—I was ungrateful. Promise me, swear to me, that he shall never know!"

"And you, Nanette," continued Hilary, addressing the weeping girl, "what have you to say, who lured her here, knowing this?"

"I did not know, monsieur," cried Nanette. "Pierre told me that if I bring her he would get me back my sweetheart."

"Leblanc, eh?"

"Oui, monsieur. Then he take me to Quebec, and we get married. And he promised me a wedding ring of gold, monsieur."

"And he told you that he was going to marry Marie?"

"Oui, monsieur, we all go to Quebec together. Only just before we land

he tell me that we all stay on the island together first, and have a holiday."

"Nanette, Leblanc never intended to marry you," said Hilary. "They were using you to get Marie into Pierre's power. Nanette—"

He bent toward her and touched her on the shoulder. She looked up at him, her lips quivering, her face pathetic as a scolded child's.

"Is it long since you left your home?"

"Two years, monsieur."

"Nanette, you were a child then, like Marie here? Leblanc came to you and told you of the great world outside, and how he would marry you and be kind to you. Two years have passed, and he has ruined your life, and he has not kept his promise, and still he deceives you with his promises. Would you go back to him?"

"Never, monsieur! He struck me—see! Not in just anger, as a man

safe, dear," he answered, smiling. "There was never any danger. Lafe was with me, and we went and came on the tide."

As he spoke he noticed that the crowd at the wharf-head had drawn nearer. He heard a man shouting; there seemed to be some disturbance which he fancied they were trying to quell. Lafe stepped upon the wharf with the two girls, walking past Hilary. Madeleine turned.

Her eyes, lighting upon Marie's face, and then Nanette's, sought Hilary's in astonishment. But she asked nothing, and waited. Her hand, which had rested upon his arm, remained there. But whereas it had been a living, warm part of her, it now felt cold and heavy, and lifeless.

Then out of the crowd burst Jean Baptiste, screaming. He ran toward Hilary. A knife was flashing in his hand. His onset was so swift that it took Hilary and Madeleine completely by surprise. As the little man closed with him Hilary just managed to grasp his arm.

"I'll kill you!" panted Baptiste, and the breath whistled through his throat as if the force of his passion had constricted it to a pipe's dimension. "It is she, and you took her from her home last night. I sought for her; I was waiting and watchful; I did not sleep. I swore you should die—"

He fought for freedom of the stabling arm like a man possessed of a thousand devils. He worked the hand free, and it went up and down, the long knife flashing and slicing into Hilary's coat. And Madeleine did not utter a word.

She watched the struggle like a woman in a dream. Twice Hilary felt the point of the knife as it drove through the air and slashed to the end of Baptiste's reach. Then the crowd closed about them.

But Baptiste fought like a devil. He hurled the lumbermen aside; three times he fought out of their grasp and made for Hilary, who, horrified and still uncertain, made no attempt to escape or strike. Each time he caught the knife hand by a miracle of luck, and all the time he fought Baptiste never ceased shouting.

"Let me get at him!" he panted. "I watched them. I waited. I did not sleep. He took her last night to the island. I swore to kill him. Let me go! Let me go!"

His voice rang high above the shrieks of the frightened girls and the shouts of the men. They had closed about him now, but for the fourth time he broke through and made for Hilary, the knife held low now, ready for the ripping upward stroke. Hilary grasped at his arm again and missed. The knife flashed back—and then in an instant Madeleine stood where Baptiste had been, and the blood dripped from her sleeve. And still she had not uttered a sound.

They had got Baptiste down now, still fighting like a wild beast. They were holding him, one man to each limb, and his body writhed and curses broke from his lips. And Madeleine stood before Hilary, quiet and calm and silent.

He sprang toward her. "Madeleine!"

He seized her arm and toes the sleeve away. There was a gasp, long, but not deep, from which the blood was welling. He felt beside himself with mingled fury and fear. He began to bind it with his handkerchief, the icily cold arm that had been warm against his shoulder. But Madeleine drew herself away.

"It is nothing," she said, and began to walk toward the head of the wharf. Her rig was waiting there, the horse held by a boy.

Hilary walked by her side, speaking—he never remembered what it was he said—implored; Madeleine said nothing. Nothing until she reached the carriage step. Drops of blood marked her progress. There she paused and looked at him. He could see her face now in the light of the boy's lantern, and it was neither scornful nor proud, but very hard—like the Seigneur's, Hilary thought afterward.

But all his thoughts were on the wound. "Madeleine, your arm!" he cried, catching at it.

"It is nothing," she said once more, turning to mount the step.

Then Hilary knew what he had not let himself know he knew. He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Madeleine!" he cried. "You do not do not—surely you are not going to condemn me when I—"

She placed her foot on the step.

"I told you nothing but your faithlessness could kill my love," she said in a whisper. And, in a lower whisper, "Good-by!"

The wheels were moving before Hilary could grasp the scene, bring it home to his consciousness. And afterward he remembered that he ran beside the carriage, senselessly calling to her to let him bind her arm. He must have been half way through the village before his reason came back to him.

It was Madeleine. She ran to him with a little cry of gladness. She raised her lips to his.

"Dear, I have been waiting since dark," she said, pressing his arm. "I only got your letter this afternoon, telling me that you had gone to the island, and I was frightened, Hilary."

He patted her arm. "I am quite

strokes his wife who nags him, but because he was afraid. See where his fist fell—see!"

"Yet, Nanette, even as Leblanc did to you, you would have had Pierre do to Marie here."

"Monsieur! I thought he was to marry her, Pierre told me. If I bring Marie to Ste. Marie no harm is done, because he loves her and he wishes to save her from you, who mean no good to her."

"From me, Nanette!" exclaimed Hilary, stupefied.

"Oui, monsieur, and then you go to Ste. Marie to meet her and take her home. And everybody say Monsieur Askew loves her, and no doubt he has a wife in his own country."

Hilary looked at her in amazement. He noticed that Lafe was staring over the side of the boat, as if he had not heard.

"Nanette, if you went home, would your father receive you?"

"Ah, monsieur, do not speak of it. Perhaps he is dead. Perhaps they are all dead from grief."

"Would you like to go home, Nanette?"

"Yes, monsieur. I will go now, for I have nothing more to live for. I shall go and beg on my knees—"

"I shall send you home, then, Nanette. But now ask forgiveness from Marie here, and then thank God that He has saved her tonight in spite of all the evil that was against her."

Nanette crouched toward Marie Dupont, whose arms stole round her neck, and the two girls cried and whispered together. Hilary turned away. He thought of Madeleine, and breathed a prayer that their lives might run together, and that they might strive together for the right all their days.

He turned back into the boat. "Now, Marie, no word of this night's doings shall ever pass my lips," he said. "But, Marie, your life is unhappy. There is a good man in St. Boniface who cares for you. Do you think that you could learn to care for him?"

"Ah, pauvre Jean!" wept the girl. "I have been ungrateful to him, monsieur. And now I am not worthy that he should have anything to do with me."

"He shall know nothing unless you tell him," said Hilary. "As to that, I cannot advise. But you need have no fears as to me."

The black shadow of the wharf began to project out of the shore line, with Baptiste's schooner moored alongside. Lights of lanterns were moving, and as the sloop drew near Hilary perceived a little group of people near the wharf-head. Louis Duval led down the sails and guided the vessel's prow toward the mooring ring. Hilary stepped out, but before he could turn to give his hand to Marie a woman stepped forward.

It was Madeleine. She ran to him with a little cry of gladness. She raised her lips to his.

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CHAPTER XIV.

A Letter From Morris.

The weather continued mild, and Hilary's financial prospects continued

to improve. There was every likelihood now of being able to carry on through the winter. Brousseau had showed no signs of further interference with his men, and there was even the possibility of getting out another small load.

Hilary had sent Nanette home to St. Joseph. She had promised to write to him, but, as he had expected, he had not heard from her. Baptiste had thrown up his position with Dupont and gone into the Ste. Marie limits to trap. Marie Dupont avoided Hilary; he had not seen her since the day of their adventure.

As for Dupont, whatever he knew, he showed no signs. And things seemed to settle into equilibrium, though Hilary was sure that a denouement was to follow. He could only wait patiently for that. No action could come from him. He could not violate his pledge to Marie in order to secure himself with Madeleine.

Then came the news which stunned Hilary out of his mental apathy. Madeleine was to marry Brousseau. It was to be in three weeks—at Christmas, and the bans had been read in church that Sunday morning for the first time.

What had happened was this: The Seigneur had not given his daughter any sign of remembrance of the events that had transpired immediately before his stroke, though he was in other respects normal, save for the paralysis of the left side. But as the weeks went by he grew more and more nervous and depressed, until one night he blurted out:

"Where will you take me after the estate changes hands? I cannot remain in St. Boniface, nor can I remain with you and the American. I am too old to go anywhere but to the grave."

So he had remembered all the time! Madeleine put her arms about his neck. "I am not going to marry Monsieur Askew," she answered.

Then, without warning, the old Seigneur fell to crying and laughing, as if a tremendous load of care had been lifted from his shoulders. The land, which had meant so much to him all his life, now seemed to be everything, and he interpreted Madeleine's answer to indicate her willingness to marry Brousseau.

"Well, why not?" she thought with intense bitterness, as she listened. "Have I any other duty now, save to my father?"

She never doubted her judgment of Hilary. The story had been dinned into her ears by Brousseau since Hilary's first visit to Ste. Marie. She had heard it from tradesmen's wives, the postmistress, until their attachment was known; then had come silence and furtiveness. And she had seemed to think of its possibility until that night.

And she had given him his chance and he had said nothing.

She accepted the situation and sat down and penned a short, formal letter to Brousseau.

He came the next day, driving furtively to the Chateau. He thrust Robitaille out of his way and pushed into the living room, where he found Madeleine, deathly white, seated alone, waiting for him. He opened his arms to embrace her.

"Sit down, Edouard," she said with chilling apathy. "I am going to talk frankly to you. You wish to marry me?"

"I want you for my wife," said Brousseau. "You know that. You know I don't think anything of that affair"—Madeleine winced at the word, but he did not notice it—"with Monsieur Askew. The man's a scoundrel, a thief, and a libertine—"

"I do not wish to hear that, monsieur," said Madeleine peremptorily. "Diable, that's natural enough! And so that's forgotten." Brousseau could

afford to be magnanimous. "I've heard for a week past that you'd quarreled, but I'm not the sort of man to push in where he isn't wanted."

"Edouard," said the girl quietly, "how much are you willing to pay for me?"

Brousseau stared. "Eh? Ah, mon Dieu, why do you talk about money? Haven't I enough?"

"I am going to have an agreement in place of an indefinite understanding. If I marry you at Christmas you will, on the morning of the ceremony, destroy my father's mortgage, and you will wait until his death to own the seigniorly. It won't take long," she ended, with a flicker of scorn.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



They Saw Marie Dupont Struggling in Pierre's Arms.

into a fight with us over that we wouldn't be thinking of the island. And this mine belongs to Rosny. No wonder Brousseau wants the seigniorly!"

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"It gives us the trump card," said Hilary. "It means that he'll lose his hold over him, and—well, Lafe, I feel too happy to say any more about it."

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