

THE SKYLINE OF SPRUCE

By Edson Marshall
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Ben to his own successful rival, Ben's father. Ben did not wonder, now, at his own perplexity when Forrest had spoken of "Wolf" Darby. That was his own name known through hundreds of square miles of forest and in dozens of little river hamlets in an Eastern province. Partly the name was in token of his skill as a woodsman and frontiersman, partly in recognition of certain traits that his fellow woodsman had seen and wondered at in him. It was not an empty nickname, in his case. It was simply that the name suited him.

"The boys had reason a-plenty for callin' you that," Ezzram told him. "Up here, as you know, men don't get no complimentary epithets unless they deserve 'em. Some men, Ben, are like weasels. You've seen 'em. You've seen human rats, too. As if the souls they carried around with 'em was the souls of rats. Of course you remember 'Grizzly' Silverdale? Did you ever see any one who in disposition and habits and walk and everything reminded you so much of a grizzly bear? I've known men like sheep, and men with the faithful souls of dogs. You remember when you got in the big fight in the Le Parray bar?"

"I don't think I'll ever forget it again."

"That's the night the name came on you to stay. You remember how you'd drive into one of them, leap away, then tear into another. Like a wolf for all the world! You was always hard to get into a fight, but you know as well as I do, and I ain't savin' you when I say it, that you're the most terrible, ferocious fighter, forgettin' everythin' but blood, that ever paddled a canoe on the Athabaska. Some men, Ben, seem to have the spirit of the wolf right under their skins, a sort of wild instinct that might have come straight down from the stone age, for all I know. You happen to be one of 'em, the worst I ever saw. Maybe you don't remember, but you took your bull moose before you was 12 years old."

Ben sat dreaming. The Athabaska Rapids was not an empty name to him now. He remembered the day he had won the canoe race at Lodge Pole. Other exploits occurred to him—of brutal, savage brawls in river taverns, of adventures on the trail, of struggling with wild rivers when his canoe capsized, of running the great logs thru white waters. It was his world, these far-reaching wildernesses. And he blessed, with all the fervency of his heart, the man who had brought him home.

He went to his bed, but sleep did not at once come to him. He lay with hushed breathing, listening to the little, secret noises, known so well of the wilderness night. He heard the wild creatures start forth on their midnight journeys. Once a lynx mewed at the edge of the forest; and he laughed aloud when some large creature—probably a moose—grunted and splashed water in the near-by beaver meadow.

Thus ended the first of a brilliant succession of joyous days, descending the stream in the daylight hours and camping on the bank at night. Every day they plunged deeper into the heart of the wilderness, and every hour Ben felt more at home.

It was only play for him—to meet and shoot successfully the rapids of the river. In the long stillnesses he paddled hour upon hour, not only to find time to find an outlet for his surging energy. His old-time woodsman's pleasures were recalled again: shooting waterfowl for their mess in the still dawns, racing the swimming moose when they ran on him in the water. One day, fish hungry, he rigged up the elementary fishing tackle that they had brought from Saltville and tried for a salmon.

To a long, tough rod cut on the river bank he attached 30 feet of cheap, white cord, and to the cord he fastened a bright spoon hook—the spinner that salmon fishers know. He had no leader, no reel, no delicately balanced salmon rod—and Ezzram was full of scorn for the whole proceeding. And it was certainly true that, by all the rules of angling, Ben had no chance whatever to get a bite.

The cord was visible in the clear water, and the spoon itself was scarcely more than 20 feet from the rear of the boat. But this northern

stream was not at all like the famous salmon rivers known to sportsmen. In years to come, when the lines of communication are better and tourist hotels are established on its banks, the river may then begin to conform to the qualifications of a conventional fishing stream, and then Ben's crude tackle will be unavailing. But at present the salmon were not so particular. As fishermen cast but rarely, the fish were in countless numbers; and in such a galaxy there were bound to be a few misguided fish that did not know a sportsman's tackle from a dub's.

The joy of angling, once known, dwells in the body until death, and Ben was a born fisherman. The old delight that can never die crept back to him the instant he felt the clumsy rod in his hands and the faint throb of the line thru the delicate mechanism of his nerves. And apparently for no other reason than that the river hordes wished to welcome him home, almost at once a gigantic bull salmon took his spoon.

Ezzram's first knowledge of it was a wild yell that almost started him over the side—the same violent outcry that old anglers still can not restrain when the fish takes hold, even after a lifetime of angling. When he recovered himself he looked to see Ben kneeling frantically in the stern, hanging for dear life to his rod and seemingly in grave danger of being pulled overboard.

No man who has felt that first, overpowering jolt of a striking salmon can question the rapture of that first moment. The jolt carried thru all the intricacies of the nerves, jarred the soul within the man, and seemingly registered in the germ plasma. As an impression that could be recalled, in dreams, 10 generations hence. Fortunately the pole withstood that first, frantic rush, and then things began to happen in earnest.

The great trout seemed to dance on the surface of the water. He tugged, he swam in frantic circles, he flopped and darted and sulked and rushed and leaped. If he hadn't been securely hooked, and if it had not been for a skill earned in a hundred such battles, Ben would not have held him a moment.

But the time came at last, after a sublime half-hour, when his steam began to die. His rushes were less powerful, and often he hung like a dead weight on the line. Slowly Ben worked him in, not daring to believe that he was conquering, willing to sell his soul for the privilege of seeing the great fish safe in the boat. His eyes protruded, perspiration cleaned on his brow, he talked foolishly and incessantly to Ezzram, the fish, the river-gods, and himself. Ezzram, something of an old Isaac Walton himself, managed the canoe with unusual dexterity and chuckled in the contagion of Ben's delight.

And lo—in a moment more the thing was done.

"You'd think you never had a rod in your hand before," Ezzram commented in mock disgust. "Such holterin' and whoopin' I never heard."

Ben grinned widely. "That's fishin'—the sport that keeps a man an amateur all his days—with an amateur's delight." His vivid smile tumbled at his lips and was still. "That's why I love the North; it can never, never grow old. You're just as excited at the close as at the beginning. Ezzram, old man, it's life!"

Ezzram nodded. Perhaps, in the moment's fire, Ben had touched at the truth. Perhaps life, in its fullest sense, is something more than being born, breathing air, consuming food, and moving the lips in speech. Life is a thing that wilderness creatures know, realized only when the blood, leaping red, sweeps away lifeless and palsied tissue and builds a more sentient structure in its place; invoked by such forces as adventure and danger and battle and triumph. For the past half-hour Ben had lived in the fullest sense, and Ezzram was a little touched by the look of unspeakable gratitude with which his young companion regarded him.

But the journey ended at last. They saw the white peak that they had been told to watch for, and soon after they came to a green bank from which the forest had been cut away. Softly, rather regretfully, they pushed up and made landing on the banks of a small stream, tributary to the great river, that marked the end of the water route.

OUR BOARDING HOUSE

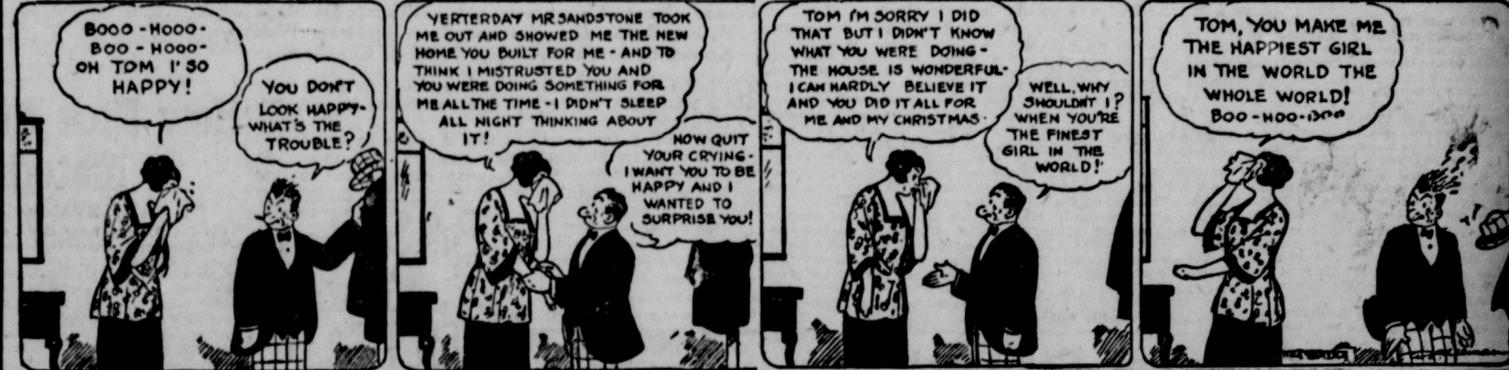
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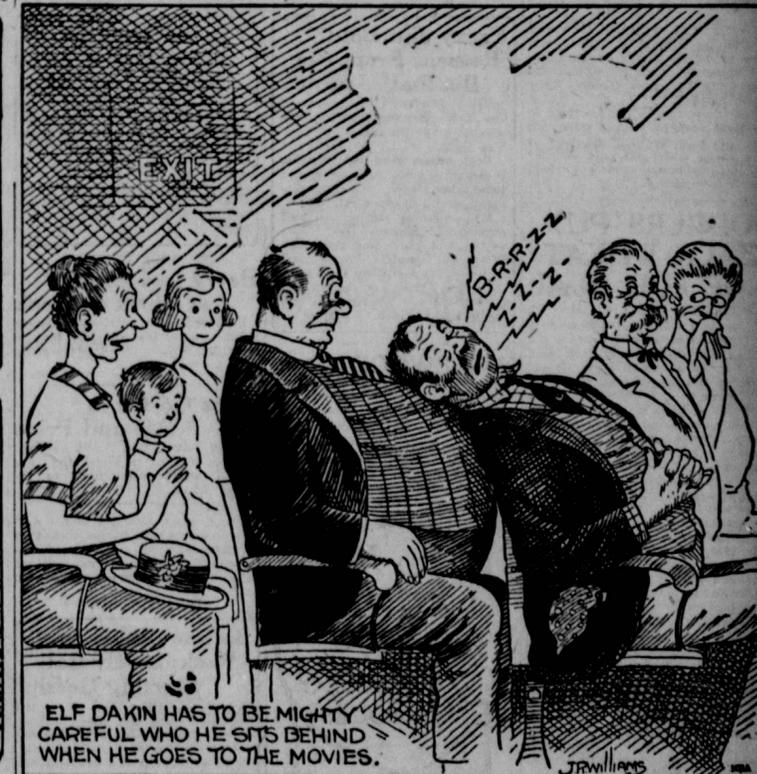
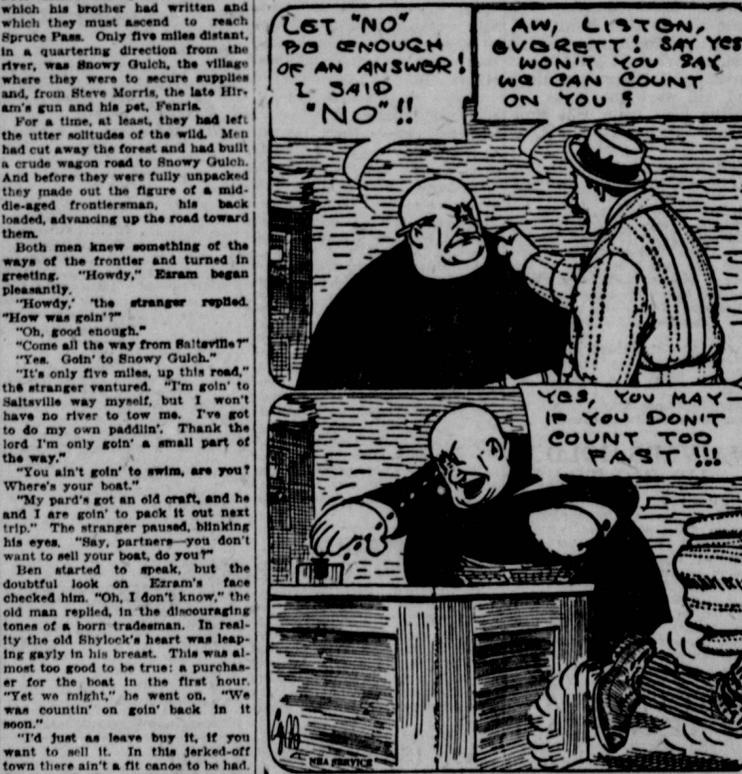


EVERETT TRUE

BY CONDO

OUT OUR WAY

BY WILLIAMS



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WHEN SEEING IS BELIEVING

"It was Christmas eve," Mrs. Kellogg continued, "and I was ready for anything, so I wasn't at all startled by the voice. It seemed awfully late, but I haven't an idea what time it was. It was Sam's voice calling my name."

"Sarah," he whispered, "you know what I told you about that Santa Claus business. Well, let's creep into the storeroom over the kitchen and peep thru the crack in that loose floor and see if mother and father don't fill our stockings. Then I guess we'll know."

"Now, that storeroom opened off the boy's room. You entered it by way of a low door, and you walked cautiously because its floor was a treacherous one of loose boards laid across the beams. Thru that floor one looked directly into the fire-lit spaces about the hearth."

"See! Sam whispered excitedly, 'I told you, didn't I? There's mother and there's father. But you don't see any ole Santa Claus, do you?'"

"I didn't, but just at that point mother paused, and looking up said, 'Children! I thought you were in bed.'"

"We couldn't sleep," Sam explained, "and—p—p—we just thought we'd peep down, and—watch to see if Santa came."

"Well, he won't," mother said calmly. "He never comes till little boys and girls are asleep. Now you go right back to bed and go to sleep."

"Just the same," Sam grumbled, "I'll bet she just wants us out of the way so she can fill 'em." "I tried and tried to go to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. And once more I heard Sam's voice saying: 'Let's go look again,' and back we crept, making never a sound."

"Downstairs the fire had burned low. Mother was nowhere to be seen, nor father either. A few bulky parcels stood near the chimney, the stockings hung no longer limp as we had last seen them, and right over our heads we heard a sound on the roof—a sound which was followed by a soft thud on the hearth, then another and then another, every thud meant a parcel dropped down the chimney. Yes, down the chimney they came in a regular shower."

"Back to bed we hustled. Every doubt removed, Santa Claus had made good!"

"What did sister and Dave bring from Olympia? Toys, wonderful toys, I think Olympia had more toys than any other place. Tin soldiers and a cannon, and much else. In the stockings were nuts and raisins and candy. I can't remember when we didn't have candy, and in the top of each a wee mince pie for a stopper."

The most vital importance to their venture. And it came like a bolt of mthe blue.

"So you don't know any folks in Snowy Gulch, then?" the stranger had asked politely. "But you'll get acquainted soon enough—"

"I've got a letter to a feller named Morris," Ezzram replied. "And I've heard of one or two more men too—Jeffery Neilson was one of 'em—"

"You'll find Morris in town all right," the stranger ventured to assure him. "He lives right next to Neilson's. And—say—what do you know about this man Neilson?"

"Oh, nothin' at all. Why?"

"If you fellows is prospectin', Jeffery Neilson is a first-class man to stay away from—and his understraps, too—Ray Brent and Chan Hemlinway. But they're out of town right now. They skinned out all in a bunch a few days ago—and I can't tell you what kind of a scent they got."

Ezzram felt cold to the marrow of his bones. He glanced covertly at Ben; fortunately his partner was not listening to this conversation. Yet likely enough it was a false alarm! Doubtless the ugly possibility that occurred to him had no jus-

tification whatever in fact. Nevertheless, he couldn't restrain the question that was at his lips.

"You don't know where they went, do you?" he asked.

"Not exactly. They took up this creek here a ways, thru Spruce Pass, and over to Yuga river—the country that kind of a crazy old chap named Ezzram Melville, who died here a few weeks ago, has always prospect-

The stranger marveled that his old listener should have suddenly gone quite pale.

(Continued Tomorrow.)

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