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## **WOODEN SPOIL**

By  
**Victor Rousseau**  
 Illustrations by Lewin Myers  
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"Oh, that ain't hard," said Lafe. "You see, the jobbers, who sublease the tracts, know how much their men have cut. And it's sealed in the woods before they shoot it down stream. I guess there ain't no difficulty there, Mr. Askew. And you see, Mr. Morris representing both concerns, he naturally does his best by both of 'em."

Hilary's suspicions, dormant even after the interview with Lamartine, were now thoroughly aroused.

"And Mr. Brousseau has no concern with us, except for the lease of the mill and the right-of-way down the river," mused Hilary. "Who is this Mr. Brousseau?"

"Why, I guess he's the big man of the district," said Lafe. "He's the nearest thing to a boss they've got up here; tells 'em how to vote and gets 'em out of trouble. He ain't good to his father, though. That was old Jacques Brousseau in the store, the trapper."

"I didn't see him."

"He was Mr. Rosny's slave, or whatever they called them, in the old times, before these people became free."

He tapped the ashes out of his pipe and pocketed it.

"He's got old Rosny in his pocket," he said, leaning toward Hilary. "He's got him bound and mortgaged after leading him to throw your uncle's money away in crazy investments. He did it deliberately, Mr. Askew. When he was a kid, growing up among the house servants at the Chateau, he wanted to be a big man, for which I don't blame him. He got his way,

but that wasn't enough. He wanted the Seigneur's place, because he found that the folks up here thought more of old Mr. Rosny, with his broken-down house and debts, than they did of him with all his money. So he set to work and got him cinched.

"The old man hates and despises him, and he's been fighting against it for a long time, but he seen what's coming to him and I guess he's made up his mind he'll have to stomach it. Brousseau's staked old Mr. Rosny's pride against his love, and I guess he's won his stake and won Mamzelle Madeleine into the bargain."

He rose. "That'll be all for tonight, Mr. Askew?" he asked.

Hilary rose too. "Thanks, Mr. Connell," he said. "In the morning I shall ask you to show me around the place."

He didn't follow Lafe Connell inside the hotel, but sat upon the porch, musing. Lafe had enlightened him on several points. He doubted whether Lamartine had spoken anything approaching truth concerning the property, and he was sure that Morris and Brousseau were the company in whose behalf he had offered forty-five thousand dollars. There would be need of a good many explanations from Morris. Yet Hilary felt instinctively that it was Brousseau, not Morris, with whom he would have to contend.

On the face of the soft night rose the face of Madeleine Rosny painted with surprising clearness. He saw the blue of her eyes, the curve of her



He Saw the Blue of Her Eyes, the Curve of Her Flushed Cheek, the Dignity and Gentleness and Pride That Blended in Her Looks.

flushed cheek, the dignity and gentleness and pride that blended in her looks. If ever he had any quarrel with Brousseau, he would show him—

Then he cursed himself for a fool, and, entering the hotel, took his lamp and went up to his room.

### **CHAPTER II.**

#### **Lafe Connell Explains.**

After breakfast the next morning Hilary hired Monsieur Tremblay's buggy and started out with Lafe, with the intention of covering a portion of the limits and seeing the operations of the jobbers; he also meant to keep his eyes open as to the nature of the timber.

The buggy surrounded a hill, and

another hill appeared in the distance. Here and there, scattered along the roadside, were solitary cabins, with little patches of cultivated ground about them.

"And on the right of the road is the Ste. Marie territory?" asked Hilary.

"Yep, Mr. Askew. The two runs neck and neck back into them mountains. We turn off presently. We haven't touched this district yet."

Hilary noted the first growth spruce along the banks. "Why don't we cut this, anyway, if the rest is mainly fir?" he asked. "There's enough lumber here to fill our dam instead of the Ste. Marie company's logs."

Lafe answered volubly, but did not meet Hilary's eyes.

"You see, Mr. Askew," he began to explain, "it's this way. There's a good deal of fir on our property, and what pine and spruce there is is smallish. There was a big fire over this district fifteen years or so ago. Now Mr. Morris calculates that if we go slow for a while and give the trees a chance to grow, they'll be worth twice as much in a few years. We're developing the property slowly, Mr. Askew."

Hilary's hand fell on Lafe's shoulder. "Connell," he said, "I brought you up here with me to learn the truth from you. You're going to sign on again on October first, and it's me you're going to sign with, not Mr. Morris. Now tell me the facts about all this."

Lafe stammered and hung his head like a schoolboy caught in wrongdoing. But Hilary's hand was gripping his shoulder, and at last Lafe raised his head and looked straight at Hilary.

"If I thought you'd stick here," he said, "I guess I'd back you to the hilt. But you'll never stand for St. Boniface, Mr. Askew. They're so infernally slow here, they ain't got human ways, sir. And they're crooked. I thought, when I heard you was coming, you'd be like Mr. Morris—I mean, wise to the game—but you ain't. I guess most business is crooked everywhere, but here it's crooked all through. You'll be selling out to Mr. Brousseau in a month's time, and that'll be my finish."

"You're dead wrong, Connell," answered Hilary. "I like the looks of

this country, and I'm here to stay. Now suppose you forget about Mr. Brousseau for a while and consider yourself to be what you are, my paid employee. And you can count on my standing by you."

He held his hand out. For a moment Lafe Connell's keen gray eyes met his searching inquiry; then he took Hilary's hand and wrung it.

"I believe you mean what you say, Mr. Askew," he returned. "And you can reckon on me so far as my duty goes."

"I suppose that tale about the Rosny signatory being nothing but fir is a lie, Connell?" asked Hilary presently. "Mostly," said Lafe. "There is a deal of fir, but there's enough spruce and pine to make the concession pay. If Mr. Morris wanted it to."

"So Morris has been playing double?" Lafe nodded. "You see, Mr. Askew, it's this way," he said. "When Morris came up here I believe he meant to run straight. But he'd been a lumber man in a small way up in Ontario, and he wasn't wise to the game as it's played here. Here it's graft, and it's never been nothing else. So when Morris found your uncle didn't know nothing about the business, and left it in his hands, he naturally fell for the game Brousseau was playing."

"Brousseau is the big man up here, and he'd had his eye on the Rosny signatory for a long time. He wanted to buy, but Rosny was sore on him, and he closed the deal with your uncle instead. But afterward Brousseau got the mortgage on the Chateau and the little bit of land round it, to keep hold on Rosny."

"Well, the Rosny signatory is the only piece of free-hold up this way. Beyond it's government land, and all round it's government land. Brousseau started in to squeeze your uncle out. And Morris went with him. He played double, as you were saying, Mr. Askew. The point of the whole game was to freeze out your uncle and get the property for a song. That's how it stands. Here we turn off into Mr. Leblanc's lease."

"Who's he?"

"Your chief jobber," said Lafe.

The buggy turned off through the forest along a new road. Here was some splendid timber, black and white spruce and tall white pine. The sound of axes began to be audible, and presently they reached a clearing, in which a number of frame shacks were under construction. Superintending the work was a tall, rather fair man of about forty years, with a cast in one eye; and with him was a short, thickest man of great muscular power. The two looked up as the buggy approached, and the short man scowled.

"This is Mr. Leblanc," said Lafe.

"Mr. Leblanc, this is Mr. Askew, the owner."

Leblanc put out his hand limply, but Hilary, nettled by his manner, did not take it.

"Mr. Leblanc is clearing a camp for his next year's lease," continued Lafe. "But the lease is not signed," asked Hilary.

"It will be signed in October," answered Leblanc. "I have arranged with Monsieur Morris."

"You'll make your arrangements with me in future," said Hilary. "If the price is satisfactory, you can have this tract."

Leblanc stared at him insolently with his good eye, the other fixing a tree on Hilary's right. "I work for Mr. Morris, I make arrange with him," he answered.

"See here, Leblanc, you didn't catch who this gentleman is," said Lafe.

"This is Mr. Askew, the nephew of the late Mr. Askew. He has come into the property. He's boss. You got me, don't you, Leblanc?"

Leblanc shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, yes, I understand," he answered, and, turning without another word, walked back toward the lumbermen, accompanied by the short man, who was chuckling maliciously at Hilary's discomfiture.

Hilary flushed, but Lafe laid his hand on his wrist, closing the fingers about it with a viselike grip.

"Steady, Mr. Askew. Don't let those fellows get you riled," he said. "If you're coming into this game it means steady work. You've got to hold back and hold back, until you've got things ready."

They re-entered the buggy and, turning the horse, drove back.

Presently Hilary cooled down. "Who was the little man?" he asked.

"That's Pierre something-or-other. Black Pierre, he's called. He's Brousseau's chief crook. He's a troublesome man, Mr. Hilary. He'll bear watching."

"We'll fire him first thing," said Hilary.

"Why, he ain't hired by us," answered Lafe.

"Then what in thunder is he doing on my concession, talking to my chief jobber?"

"Well, there ain't no law against it," said Lafe, with a humorous look on his face. "I guess them two are pretty thick together."

"You see, Mr. Askew, it's this way," he went on. "If you're going to clean up this mess, it ain't a bit of good going for the little fellows. They're the tall that Brousseau wags. Once you get Brousseau's hand out of your pie, the others follow him. When Pierre sees there ain't no more pickings out of the St. Boniface land he'll go back to the smuggling business."

"Brandy-smuggling?"

"Why, he's the bad man of Ste. Marie. He runs cargoes of gin and brandy ashore from the south coast, and there's never been a revenue officer in this district within human memory, nor would one dare to show his face here."

Say, I'll take you through Ste. Marie on the way back to the mill!"

They had reached the main road again; they went on a little way and then turned westward over a rough track through a burned-over district densely covered with fireweed and white starved asters. Soon another rig appeared before them, topping the hill. Lafe pulled in as it approached.

"Bonjour, Father Lucy," he called to the elderly priest, who sat inside. "This gentleman is Mr. Askew, the new owner of the Rosny concession. He's old Mr. Askew's nephew."

The cure looked Hilary over, then he leaned forward and extended his hand, which Hilary grasped.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Askew," he said. "I hope we shall become friends, like Mr. Lafe here, an' not quarrel so much."

"Ah, Father Lucy, you make me tired sometimes," said Lafe. "What in thunder's the use of praying for rain when the forests are burning, instead of getting busy and putting out the fire?"

"Mr. Lafe, there is many thing you do not understand," said the cure, putting the Yankee on the shoulder benevolently. "Mr. Lafe is fine fellow," he added to Hilary, "but he want to go too quick all the time."

It was evident to Hilary that the two were fast friends. Father Lucien clucked to his pony, took off his hat with a flourish, and resumed his journey.

"Father Lucy's a good sort," muttered Lafe, "but he makes me tired sometimes. Slow as the devil, Mr. Askew. And yet, now I come to think of it, he does get results in his own time. He ain't equal to cleaning up Ste. Marie, though."

After a pause he added: "Sometimes I've thought that Father Lucy had something up his sleeve about Ste. Marie after all."

An hour's drive brought them within sight of the village. Ste. Marie was almost a replica of St. Boniface externally, with the same shacks, clustered about the brick offices of the company.

"Not much to see now," said Lafe. "But on pay night it's fierce, Mr. Askew. I guess this place is a real hell."

"Rowdy, Connell, you mean?"

"I didn't mean that, Mr. Askew. It's that, God knows; but what I meant by hell was a place where everybody's a law to himself with nothing to restrain him. A place where everybody does what he wants to do. That's my idea of hell, sir."

The road wound along the shore. Presently St. Boniface came into sight. "I think I'll go into the office, Connell," said Hilary.

"I guess you'll have to break it open, then," said Lafe. "Mr. Morris took the keys with him."

"When's he coming back?"

"We were expecting him on the boat this afternoon."

Hilary considered for a moment. "I'll wait till tomorrow then," he said. "Hello, Monsieur Baptiste!"

The little scuder and timekeeper was hurrying toward the buggy. "Monsieur!" he gasped. "Monsieur Askew, yesterday I did not know who you were. Excuse!"

"That's all right, Baptiste," answered Hilary. "Just remember that I'm running things here now, that's all. And, by the way, that order about trespassers and visitors is at an end. There's going to be nothing done here that we'll be afraid of people finding out. Got it?"

Jean-Marie Baptiste evidently had got it, for he looked almost terrified. He touched his hat and withdrew with a sort of shuffling bow.

"You certainly do have the knack of putting things across, Mr. Askew," said Lafe admiringly. "I guess you're ready to go back to the hotel. Wait. There's old Dupont, the captain of the lumber schooner. I guess you'll want to meet him?"

"I suppose so," said Hilary.

Dupont came toward the rig, accompanied by the timekeeper. The captain was a tall old man of about sixty years, with a gray beard, a weather-beaten face, and pale gray eyes that seemed to burn with some consuming fire. His look, as he turned it on Hilary, was so searching, and so inscrutable, and so momentarily hostile, that Hilary felt uncomfortable. There was a history behind that penetrating stare—a history and a hate.

But after a moment's examination of Hilary's face a film seemed to come over the old man's eyes. Whatever the reason for his strange gaze, Dupont was satisfied. He stood by Lafe, and Jean-Baptiste translated.

"The captain says the schooner's full," he said. "He want to start for Quebec on tonight's tide."

"Tell him to speak to Mr. Askew here," answered Lafe. "Say that Mr. Askew's in charge."

The timekeeper translated back into the French. A smile flickered upon Dupont's face. He shook his head and answered.

"He says he's got to have Mr. Morris' orders," said Baptiste.

Lafe turned to Hilary, who took up the conversation. "Ask him if he doesn't understand what I am here for," he suggested.

Dupont was impregnable in his position. He had lumber from both concessions, and Mr. Morris was in charge of both. What orders had been left with reference to his freight?

Lafe was pleased and surprised at the way Hilary took it. But Hilary had learned a good deal during that morning.

"That sounds reasonable," he said. "Give him Mr. Morris' orders, Connell, whatever they are." And, when the matter had been settled, he added: "You were dead right, Connell. We've got to settle with the big fellows first." He dropped Lafe at the mill and

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