THE CINDER POND

BY

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"THE CASTAWAYS OF PETE'S PATCH," ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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To

SALLIE and IMOGENE

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ILLUSTRATIONS

THE CINDER POND

CHAPTER I

THE ACCIDENT

The slim dark girl, with big black eyes, rushed to the edge of the crumbling wharf, where she dropped to her hands and knees to peer eagerly into the green depths below.

There was reason for haste. Only a second before, the very best suit of boys' clothing in Bancroft had tumbled suddenly over the edge to hit the water with a most terrific splash. Now, there was a wide circle on the surface, with bubbles coming up.

It was an excellent suit of clothes that went into the lake. Navy-blue serge, fashioned by Bancroft's best tailor to fit Roger Fairchild, who was much too plump for ready-made clothes. But here were those costly garments at the very bottom of Lake Superior; not in the very deepest part, fortunately, but deep enough. And that was not all. Their youthful owner was inside them.

That morning when Jeannette, eldest daughter of Léon Duval, tumbled out of the rumpled bed that she shared with her stepsister, the day had seemed just like any other day. It was to prove, as you may have guessed, quite different from the ordinary run of days. In the first place, it was pleasant; the first really mild day, after months of cold weather. In the second place, things were to happen. Of course, things happened *every* day; but then, most things, like breakfast, dinner, and supper, have a way of happening over and over again. But it isn't every day that a really, truly adventure plunges, as it were, right into one's own front yard.

To be sure, Jeanne's front yard invited adventures. It was quite different from any other front yard in Bancroft. It was large and wet and blue; and big enough to show on any map of the Western Hemisphere. Nothing less, indeed, than Lake Superior. Her side yard, too, was another big piece of the same lake. The rest of her yard, except what was Cinder Pond, was dock.

In order to understand the adventure; and, indeed, all the rest of this story, you must have a clear picture of Jeanne's queer home; for it *was* a queer home for even the daughter of a fisherman. You see, the Duvals had lived on dry land as long as they were able (which was not very long) to pay rent. When there were no more landlords willing to wait forever for their

rent-money, the impecunious family moved to an old scow anchored in shallow water near an abandoned wharf. After a time, the scow-owner needed his property but not the family that was on it. The Duvals were forced to seek other shelter. Happily, they found it near at hand.

Once on a time, ever so far back in the history of Bancroft, the biggest, busiest, and reddest of brick furnaces, in that region of iron and iron mines, had poured forth volumes of thick black smoke. It was located right at the water's edge, on a solid stone foundation. From it, a clean new wooden wharf extended southward for three hundred feet, east for nine hundred feet, north for enough more feet to touch the land again. This wharf formed three sides of a huge oblong pond. The shore made the fourth side. The shallow water inside this inclosure became known, in time, as "The Cinder Pond."

After twenty years of activity, the furnace, with the exception of the huge smoke-stack, was destroyed by fire. After that, there was no further use for the wharf. Originally built of huge cribs filled with stone, planked over with heavy timbers, it became covered, in time, first with fine black cinders, then with soil. As it grew less useful, it became more picturesque, as things sometimes do.

By the time the Duvals helped themselves to the old wharf, much of its soft black surface was broken out with patches of green grass, sturdy thistles, and many other interesting weeds. There were even numbers of small but graceful trees fringing the inner edge of the old wharf, from which they cast most beautiful reflections into the still waters of the Cinder Pond. No quieter, more deserted spot could be imagined.

Jeannette's father, Léon Duval, built a house for his family on the southwest corner of the crumbling dock, three hundred feet from land.

When you have never built a house; and when you have no money with which to buy house-building materials, about the only thing you can do is to pick up whatever you can find and put it together to the best of your small ability. That is precisely what Léon Duval did. Bricks from the old furnace, boards from an old barn, part of the cabin from a wrecked steamboat, nails from driftwood along the shore, rusty stove pipe from the city dump ground; all went into the house that, for many years, was to shelter the Duvals. When finished, it was of no particular shape and no particular size. Owing to the triangular nature of the wharf, at the point chosen, the house had to ramble a good deal, and mostly lengthwise—like

a caterpillar. For several reasons, it had a great many doors and very few windows.

For as long as Jeanne could remember, she had lived in this queer, home-made, tumble-down, one-story cabin; perched on the outside—that is, the *lake* side—of the deserted wharf.

On the day of the mishap to Roger Fairchild's navy-blue suit, Jeanne, having put on what was left of her only dress, proceeded to build a fire in the rusty, ramshackle stove that occupied the middle section of her very queer home. Then, without stopping to figure out how many half-brothers it took to make a whole one, she helped three of these half-portions, all with tousled heads of reddish hair, into various ragged garments.

Perhaps, if all the Duvals had risen at once, the house wouldn't have held them. At any rate, the older members of the family stayed abed until the smaller children had scampered either northward or eastward along the wharf, one to get water, one to get wood.

And then came the adventure.

Roger didn't *look* like an adventure. Most anyone would have mistaken him for just a plump boy in *very* good clothes. He carried himself—and a brand-new fish-pole—with an air of considerable importance. He had risen early for some especial reason; and the reason, evidently, was located near the outer edge of the Duval dock; because, having reached a jutting timber a few feet east of the Duval mansion, he proceeded to make himself comfortable.

He seated himself on the outer end of the jutting timber, attached a wriggling worm to the hook that dangled from the brand-new pole, and then, raising the pole to an upright position, proceeded to cast his baited hook to a spot that looked promising. He repeated this casting operation a great many times.

Unfortunately, he failed to notice that the outward movement made by his arms and body was producing a curious effect on the log on which he sat. Each time he made a cast, the squared timber, jarred by his exertion, moved forward. Just a scrap at a time, to be sure; but if you have *enough* scraps, they make inches after a while.

When the insecurely fastened log had crept out five inches, it took just one more vigorous cast to finish the business. Roger, a very much surprised young person, went sprawling suddenly into the lake. Straight to the

bottom of it, too; while the log, after making the mighty splash that caught Jeannette's attention, floated serenely on top.

Jeannette, whose everyday name was Jeanne, promptly wrenched a great fish net that was drying over the low roof of her home from its place, gathered it into her arms, and rushed to the edge of the dock.

She was just in time. The boy had come to the surface and was floundering about like a huge turtle. Jeanne threw a large portion of the big net overboard, keeping a firm grasp on what remained.

"Hang on to this," she shouted. "Don't pull—just hold on. There! you couldn't sink if you wanted to. Now just keep still—keep *still*; I tell you, and I'll tow you down to that low place where the dock's broken. You can climb up, I guess. Don't be afraid. I've pulled my brother out four times and my sister once—only it wasn't so deep. There, one hand on that plank, one on the net. Put your foot in the crack—that's right. Now give me your hand. There—stand here on my garden and I won't have to water it. My! But you're wet."

Roger *was* wet. But now that he was no longer frightened, he was even angrier than wet. To be saved by a *girl*—a thin little slip of a girl at that—was a fearful indignity. A fellow could stand falling in. But to be saved by a girl!

To make it worse, the dock was no longer deserted. There were folks gathering outside the tumble-down shack to look at him. A fat, untidy woman with frowzy reddish hair. A bent old woman with her head tied up in a filthy rag. A small dark man with very bright black eyes. Two staring children. The morning sun made three of the tousled heads blazed like fire. But the boy's wrath blazed even more fiercely. To be saved *by a girl*! And all those staring people watching him drip! It was too much.

Without a word of thanks, and with all the dignity that he could muster, plump young Roger marched past the assembled multitude—it seemed like that to him—straight along the dock toward the shore, leaving behind him a wet, shining trail.

With much difficulty, because of his soggy shoes, he climbed the rough path up the bank to Lake Street, crossed that thoroughfare to clamber up the exceedingly long flight of stairs—four long flights to be exact—that led to the street above. A workman going down met him toiling up.

"Hey!" the man called cheerfully. "Looks like you'd had an accident. Fell in somewheres?"

There was no response. Roger climbed steadily on. By sneaking through backyards and driveways, he managed at last to slip into the open door of his own home, up the stairs, and into his own pleasant room, where he proceeded, with some haste, to change his clothes.

He owned three union suits. He had one of them on. One was in the wash. The other *should* have been in his bureau drawer—but it wasn't. To ask for it meant to disclose the fact that he had been in the lake—a secret that he had decided never to disclose to *anybody*. With a sigh for his own discomfort, young Roger dressed himself in dry garments, *over* his wet union suit.

"But what," said Roger, eying the heap of sodden clothing on the floor, "shall I do with those?"

Finally he hung the wet suit in the closet, with his dry pajamas spread carefully over them. He concealed his wet shoes, with his socks stuffed inside, far back in a bureau drawer.

CHAPTER II

PART OF THE TRUTH

Roger, with his rather long hair carefully brushed, sauntered downstairs to the nicely furnished dining-room, where his mother was eating breakfast. Mrs. Fairchild was a most attractive little woman. Like Roger, she was blue-eyed and fair. She was taller, however, than Roger and not nearly so wide.

"Good morning," said she, with a very pleasant smile. "I guess we're both late this morning. Your father's been gone for twenty minutes."

"Good morning," shivered Roger.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Fairchild, catching sight of her son's remarkably sleek head. "I do wish you wouldn't put so much water on your hair when you comb it. It isn't at all necessary and it looks *horrid*—particularly when it's so long. Do be more careful next time."

"I will," promised Roger, helping himself to an orange.

"It must have taken you a great while to dress. I thought I heard you stirring about hours ago."

"Yes'm," returned Roger, looking anywhere except at his pretty mother.

"I'm glad you remembered to put on your old clothes, since it's Saturday. But—why, *Roger*! What is that?"

"That" was a thin, brownish stream, scarcely more than an elongated drop—trickling down the boy's wrist to the back of his plump hand. Roger looked at it with horror. His drenched, fleece-lined underwear was betraying him.

Mrs. Fairchild pushed up his coat sleeve, turned back the damp cuff of his blue cotton shirt, and disclosed three inches of wet, close-fitting sleeve. She poked an investigating finger up her son's arm. Then her suspicious eye caught a curious change of color in the bosom of his blue shirt. It had darkened mysteriously in patches. She touched one of them. Then she reached up under his coat and felt his moist back.

"Roger, how in the world did your shirt get so wet? Surely you didn't do all that washing yourself?"

"No'm."

"Have you been outdoors?"

"Yes'm."

"Watering the grass?"

"No'm."

"Hum—Katie says somebody dug a hole in my pansy bed last night. It's a splendid place for worms. Have you, by any chance, been trying your new pole?"

Silence.

"*Have* you, Roger?"

"Ye—es'm," gulped Roger.

"Did you fall in?"

"Ye—es'm."

"How did you get out?"

"Jus—just climbed out."

"Roger Fairchild! You're *shivering*! And that window wide open behind you! Come upstairs with me this instant and I'll put you to bed between hot blankets. It's a mercy I discovered those wet clothes. I'll have Katie bring you some hot broth the moment you're in bed."

Roger, under a mountain of covers, was thankful that he hadn't had to divulge the important part Jeanne Duval had played in his rescue. All that morning, when his mother asked troublesome questions, he shivered so industriously that the anxious little woman fled for more hot blankets or more hot broth. The blankets were tiresome and he already held almost a whole boyful of broth; but *anything*, he thought, was better than telling that he had been pulled out of the lake in a smelly old fish net; and by a girl! A *small* girl at that.

But, in spite of his care, the truth, or at least part of it, was to come out. The very next day, a small red-headed, barefooted, and very ragged boy appeared at the Fairchilds' back door. He carried a fish-pole in one hand, a navy-blue cap in the other. Inside the cap, neatly printed in indelible ink, were Roger's name and address; for Roger, like many another careless boy, frequently lost his belongings.

"My sister," said Michael Duval, handing the cap and the pole to the cook, "sent these here. She pulled 'em out of the lake—same as she did the fat boy what lives here."

"How was that, now?" asked Katie, with interest.

"Wiv a fish net. It was awful deep where he fell in—way over *your* head."

"Wait here, sonny. I'll tell the missus about it."

But when Katie returned after telling "Missus," she found no small red-headed boy outside the door. Michael had turned shy, as small boys will, and had fled. Neither Katie nor Mrs. Fairchild, gazing down the street, could catch a glimpse of him.

But Mrs. Fairchild managed to extract a little more information from Roger, now fully recovered from his unlucky bath.

Yes, the water was deep—ten miles deep, he guessed—because it took an awful while to come up. Yes, he had been pulled out by *somebody*. Perhaps it *might* have been a girl. A *big* girl. A perfectly tremendous girl. A regular giantess, in fact. She had reached down with a long, *long* arm, and helped him up. A fishnet? Oh—yes (casually), he believed there *was* a fish net *there*.

"Where," asked Mrs. Fairchild, "*was* that dock?"

"Oh, I dunno—just around anywhere. There's a lot of docks in Bancroft—a fellow doesn't look to see which one he's *on*."

"But, Roger, where does the girl *live*? We ought to do something for her. I'm *very* grateful to her. You ought to be too. Can't you tell me where she lives?"

"Didn't ask her," mumbled Roger. "I just hiked for home."

"And you don't know her name?"

"No," said Roger, truthfully. "I didn't ask her *that*, either. I'm glad I got my pole back, anyhow."

"Roger," said his mother, earnestly, "hereafter, when you go fishing, I shall go with you and sit beside you on the dock and hold on to you. Another time there might not be a great big, strong girl on hand to pull you out. We *must* thank that girl."