

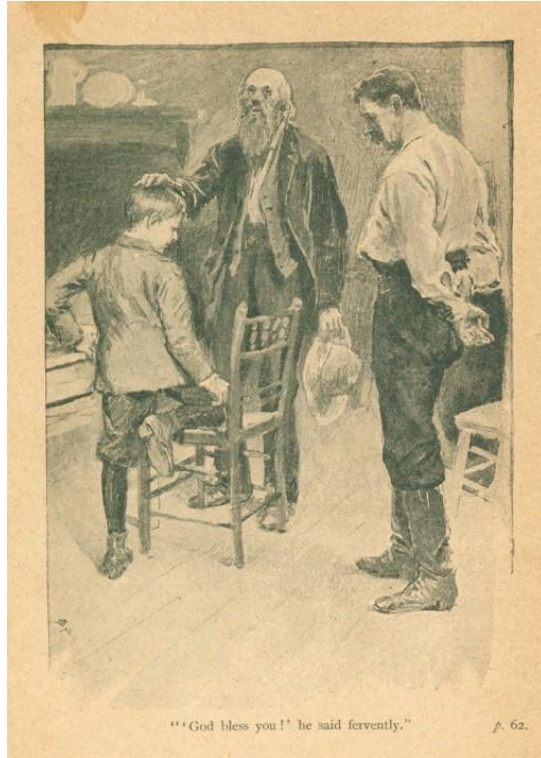
LOST IN THE BACKWOODS

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LOST IN THE BACKWOODS



"'God bless you!' he said fervently."

CHAPTER I.

ATTACKED BY ROBBERS.

"Your money or your life! Quick! Your money or your life!"

Cyril Morton gave a cry of horror and alarm. A masked brigand was pointing a revolver at his father, whose pale face confronted it with unnatural calmness.

Cyril had never passed through such a terrible minute in his whole life as that one during which his father remained silent, instead of replying to his fierce assailant's demand. A short while before the train-boy, passing down the outside passage of the comfortable American train, bearing his tray of chocolate, biscuits, fruit, etc., had waited on them and promised to return in a few minutes with illustrated papers wherewith to beguile the tedium of the journey. The train, which was a very slow one, was going from Menominee northwards. Cyril and his father had come to North America in search of the latter's brother, now long absent from his home. When last heard of Gerald Morton was in Michigan, so to that State they came on the death of Cyril's mother, whose last request was that her husband should go and look up his only brother. Cyril was twelve years old; he was an only child, and his father, in his sorrow, could not bear the thought of leaving him behind in England, so the two travelled together and were "chums," as the boy called it. After a delightful sail from Chicago over the calm grey waters of Lake Michigan they were enjoying their slow journey through immense pine forests, when suddenly a band of robbers galloped up to the train, flung themselves from their horses, and clambered on to it. First they struck down the engine-driver,

reversed the engine, and stopped the train. Then they began to search the passengers, demanding of all their money or their life.

On receiving no answer the ruffian who was threatening Mr. Morton repeated his words in a voice of thunder.

"Oh, father," cried Cyril, "give him the money, or he will kill you! Father, *please*." He screamed the last words in his agony of apprehension.

His attention being diverted by the boy the man glanced aside at him, and in that moment Mr. Morton, with a sudden movement, wrested the pistol from his grasp.

The other instantly snatched at it, and a struggle commenced between the two men for its possession. Backwards and forwards they swayed, now locked in each other's arms, now flung apart. Once the revolver fell upon the soft-cushioned seat, when Cyril instantly caught hold of it, and, watching his opportunity, slipped it back into his father's hand.

Maddened with rage the brigand struck the boy down with his huge fist. Then Cyril lay like a log upon the floor of the carriage, and knew no more.

A few moments and the struggle between the men was ended by the brigand's firing point-blank at Mr. Morton, who fell back on the seat apparently lifeless.

The robber proceeded to rapidly search his victim. Quickly he pocketed a gold watch and chain, a well-filled purse, and also a pocket-book containing notes. Then he stooped over the boy, looking in his pockets. As he did so something in the white upturned face touched even his hard heart.

"He's not unlike my Harry," he muttered, thrusting back the little purse his fingers had just closed on. "No, I'll not take his money. He'll come to, and maybe want it."

Turning away he went on to rob someone else; and presently, with his pockets full of notes and gold, returned to his first victims, still lying where he had left them.

The other outlaws were leaving the train and mounting their horses; they were all in a hurry to get away.

The man who had struck down poor Cyril stood over him now, with a softened look in his hard face as he felt anxiously for the boy's pulse.

"Living!" he exclaimed, when his rough fingers had found it. "Well, he's a plucky little lad. I'll take him with me. His father's dead," he added, glancing at him. "I'll adopt the lad. He shall be my son, instead of poor Harry." So saying he lifted Cyril in his arms, carried him to where he had left his horse, and when he rode off with the others the boy, still unconscious, was on the saddle before him, his curly head drooping against his shoulder.



'The boy was on the saddle before him.'

[p. 10.]

"The boy was on the saddle before him."

Now it happened that under the double burden the brigand's horse lagged behind the others, and although its master whipped and spurred it cruelly it could not keep up with them.

"Whiterock," cried the captain of the band more than once, "come on. Why do you linger?"

"Coming, sir," answered Whiterock, redoubling his efforts, but in vain.

At last the captain, turning in anger to see why he was disobeyed, perceived the boy, and cried impatiently—

"What have you got there? A lad? Ridiculous! Absurd! Fling him down. Leave him. We want no babies."

Outlaw though he was—strong, desperate too—the brigand dared not disobey his chief. Reluctantly, therefore, he stopped short, sprang off his horse, and lifted the boy down in his arms. Muttering that he had once a son like him he laid Cyril down under a forest tree, and then, turning quickly, remounted his horse and rode rapidly after his captain.

All the horsemen rode away. The sound of their horses' hoofs died out in the distance.

Presently, as evening drew on, a huge grey bear, stealing through the bushes, stood looking down on the unconscious boy. After a few minutes the bear stooped, and almost poked him with his nose.

If Cyril had awoke then, if he had moved one hand, or in any way "shown fight," it would have been all over with him. Unless very hungry, however, these North American bears do not attack human beings if they make no aggressive movement; so Cyril remaining perfectly still the bear, having satisfied his curiosity, moved slowly away.

The shades of night stole over the forest. It became quite dark. The wild beasts sought their prey. All sorts of dangers were on every side; but, quite unconscious still, the boy lay there, a faint stirring of his pulse alone showing that life was still within his slight young frame.

He had no mother at home praying for him, but it might be in the Paradise above she was pleading for her boy, over whom a merciful Providence was watching.

CHAPTER II.

ALONE IN THE FOREST.

About midday Cyril came to himself, opening wondering eyes upon an unknown world. Where was he? What had happened? Where was his father? Why were his limbs when he tried to move them so stiff and cramped? Raising himself with difficulty he leaned upon one elbow, and looked round searchingly.

He was alone in these unknown wilds. Where was his father? Why had he left him?

Suddenly the boy gave a great cry; he remembered all. His father was killed, must have been killed, or he would never have parted from him. He had put the pistol in his father's hand before the robber struck him; he did not know what had happened after that. But he felt convinced that his father was dead, and he lay down again upon the ground, crying as if his heart would break. There was a very tender love between him and his father; since the mother's death they had been all in all to one another. But a new thought came to Cyril by-and-by, and that was that someone must have brought him to the place where he was lying. For there was no railway line to be seen near there; indeed, the trees grew too thickly to admit of such a possibility. Who, then, had brought him away from the train, away from the railway line? Was it, could it possibly have been his father? But if so, where was he now?

Animated by the hope of finding him Cyril struggled to his feet. Then he called as loudly as he could, which was not very loud, for his throat was parched and dry, and he himself felt very faint.

"Father! Father!" he cried. "Father, where are you? Father, speak; tell me you are here! Father! Father!"

But there was no answer.

Despairingly the boy turned in first one direction and then another, repeating his cries until he could not utter another word. But all in vain. There was no trace of a human being in any direction. He was alone, quite alone in the forest.

In silence now he wandered up and down, finding some wild raspberries, or what looked like them, and eating them quite ravenously. The soft fruit allayed his thirst, and then he could shout again, which he did repeatedly. At first it had been his intention to remain near the place where he had been lying, that if his father or whoever brought him there returned he might be found. But he lost his way very soon and could not find the place again.

"Father! Father! Help! help!" he cried, pushing his way through the long grass and bushes, and running along narrow tracks in first one direction and then another. "Oh, help, I am perishing! Save me!"

For now a despairing feeling came over him that help would never come, that he would wander up and down there until he died—perhaps killed by some wild beast. He knew there were bears in that part of America, and presently he came across a young one. It did not appear to see him, and he ran away from its neighbourhood as fast as he could. He had no weapon of any kind, and the thought of that made him presently get out his pocket-knife and cut himself a stout stick. Then it was that he discovered that after all he had not been robbed. His purse was still in his pocket. He took it out, opened it, and examined its contents ruefully. One piece of gold, a

sovereign, and a good many shillings and sixpences were all there. But of what use was money to him now? How gladly, thankfully, he would give the whole of his money to anyone who would show him the way out of that fearful solitude! However, he was in a place where money availed not. What could he do? He was in despair.

Then he remembered his heavenly Father, and, kneeling down just where he was in the lonely forest, he prayed to Him for help and guidance, and especially that, if his father still lived, they two might speedily find each other.

He felt somewhat comforted when, at length, he rose from his knees, for he knew that he had done the very best thing he could for himself and his dear father by laying all their concerns before God in prayer.

Looking round for more berries he soon found some, ate, and was again refreshed. Then he walked on once more in the hope that he would get to some inhabited place. But he was very tired; and presently, when his foot slipped over a tree-root and he fell heavily to the ground, he did not feel able to rise again. He therefore lay still where he was, and soon fell fast asleep.

Again the shades of night crept over the tall trees of the forest, veiling them and the sleeping boy in darkness. And once again the beasts of prey stole forth in search of food, but did not come near Cyril to harm him, whilst, unconscious of his danger, he slept on.

He was happy now, for he was dreaming of his mother. She looked as sweet as ever and far happier, for the lines of pain and trouble on her face had been all smoothed away. "Cyril, my boy," she said to him, stooping to kiss his brow, "it was brave of you to help your

father as you did yesterday. You suffered for it. Yes, but that is all over. Now you must be brave in searching for your father and waiting patiently until God, in His good providence, permits you both to meet again."

"I will, I will, mother," Cyril cried in his dream; and then it ceased, and he lay in heavy, dreamless slumber until he awoke with a consciousness of its being very hot, and that there was a strong smell of something burning.

Starting up and looking round he found that it was morning, and that away to the right of him there was a mighty cloud of smoke mingled with flames, out of which great showers of sparks flew up into the sky. A tremendous roaring as of thunder announced the burning of great forest trees. The noise of it almost drowned the pitiful cries and screams, roars and screeches of wild animals and birds as, in their flight for their lives, the cruel flames caught hold of them and burnt them.

"The forest is on fire!" cried Cyril aloud in terror-stricken accents, "and I, where shall I go? Oh, God," he murmured, "help me!" and set off running fast in the opposite direction from that in which the fire was advancing.

The air had become exceedingly hot. It dried up everything before the fire, so that when the flames came up they caught hold of the great pine trees without a moment's loss. The very ground seemed scorched.

Cyril found the fire gaining upon him. Of what use was it to run? Oh, if he could only come to some open space, or a sheet of water into which he could hasten!

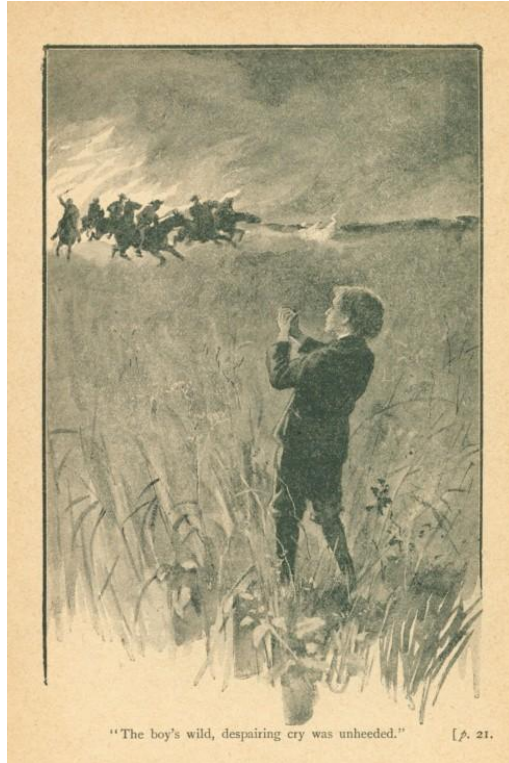
But no. There were no signs of either. Cyril became hotter and hotter. Soon, very soon, the fire would overtake him. He almost felt its hot breath on his cheeks. Wringing his hands he sank down with a loud, despairing cry.

CHAPTER III.

RESCUED.

Now it happened that Whiterock and his companions had been fleeing before the fire for at least an hour, when its direction brought them to the place where Cyril fell.

The boy's wild, despairing cry was unheeded by most of the men, who were only bent on saving their own lives, but on Whiterock's ears it fell with powerful appeal. Swiftly he galloped up, espied the boy, leaped from his horse, flung Cyril upon the saddle, remounted, and once more rode off with him at full speed.



"The boy's wild, despairing cry was unheeded." [A. 21.]

"The boy's wild, despairing cry was unheeded."

The men knew of a large clearing extending for several miles, where lumbermen had felled and carried away the great pines. They rode straight there, and in the course of an hour reached the place.

There was no fear of any fire following them into the clearing, for nothing remained there upon which it could feed. It took another direction, more to the north-west, and the men and boy were safe.

With noisy jests and much jeering at the fears which now were over the company made their way to the deserted camp of the lumberers. This proved to be a big frame-building, run up for the temporary convenience of the men who felled the trees, and then deserted when their work was done and the timber conveyed away. All round the inside of the building were sleeping-bunks, half filled still with dry grass and ferns.

They set to work with alacrity to kindle a fire, make coffee, cook some meat, and spread out their biscuits.

No one took any notice of Cyril, who stood in a corner watching them furtively. What powerful men they were! And how wicked some of them looked! But others seemed quite pleasant and kind. He watched Whiterock closely with very mingled feelings. He would have been most grateful to him for saving his life if it were not for the strong suspicion he had that he was the very man who had attacked his father. At that time he wore a mask. Now his dark-bearded face was uncovered. But there was something in his build and manner, and especially in the tones of his voice, which made Cyril confident that he was his poor father's assailant. How the boy longed to ask him if he had left his father living still! Would he be very angry if he were asked the question?

"Whiterock!" Cyril called timidly to him, stealing nearer as he did so.

The man had constituted himself cook, and was stooping over a battered frying-pan, whereon spluttered great slices of meat. Being much absorbed in his cooking he only noticed Cyril's call by giving him a nod.

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