

THE FOREST PILOT

A STORY FOR BOY SCOUTS

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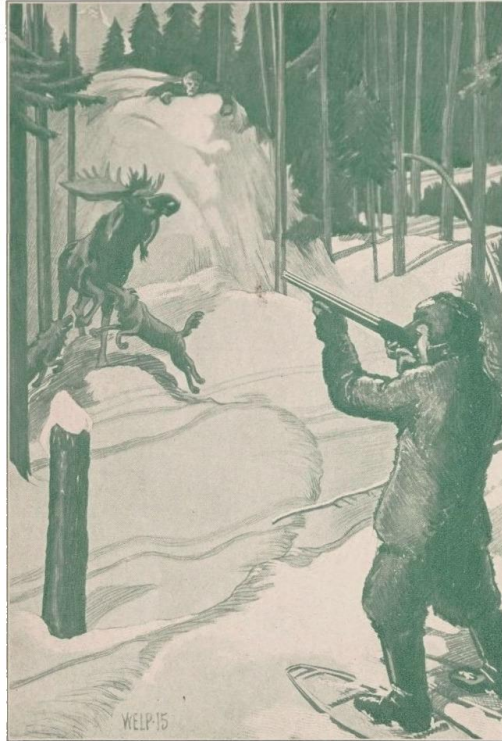
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THE FOREST PILOT



“Shoot! Shoot! For God’s sake shoot, Larry!”

CHAPTER I

THE STORM

The November sun that had been red and threatening all day, slowly disappeared behind a cloud bank. The wind that had held steadily to the south for a week, now shifted suddenly to the northeast, coming as a furious blast. In a moment, it seemed, the mild Indian Summer breeze was changed to a fierce winter gale.

The little schooner yacht that had been riding in the bay not more than a half mile from the jagged, rocky shore line, began dancing about like a cork. For a swell had come driving in from the ocean just as the wind changed, and now the two tall masts waved back and forth, bending in wide sweeps before the gale. Unfortunately for the little craft the change of the direction of the wind exposed it to the storm's full fury.

The captain, a weatherbeaten old Yankee who had sailed vessels of his own as well as those belonging to other people for forty years, was plainly worried. With a glass in his hand he scanned the shore line of the bay in every direction, occasionally giving a sharp order to the four sailors who hurried about the deck to carry out his commands.

The only other persons on the yacht were a man and a boy who had been sitting together beside the forward mast when the wind changed. The man was a tall, straight figure, with the erect carriage that sinewy, muscular men who are accustomed to hard work retain well into old age. His face, with its leathery

skin, which contrasted sharply with his iron gray beard, was softened by a pair of deep blue eyes—the kind of blue eyes that can snap with determination on occasion, in contrast to their usually kindly expression.

Obviously this man was past his prime, or, better perhaps, was past that period of life reckoned in years that civilized man has become accustomed to speaking of as “prime.” Yet he was old only in years and experience. For his step was quick and elastic, and every movement showed the alertness of youth. Were it not for the gray hairs peeping out from under his hat and his grizzled beard, he might have passed for a man of forty. Martin MacLean was his name, and almost any one in the New Brunswick forest region could tell you all about him. For Martin was a famous hunter and guide, even in a land where almost every male inhabitant depends upon those two things for his livelihood.

Needless to say, then, this man was something quite out of the ordinary among woodsmen. When the woods people gossiped among themselves about their hunting and trapping experiences, old Martin was often the theme of many a story. And the story was always one of courage or skill.

But you must remember that in this land, deeds of courage and skill were every-day occurrences. So that the man who could earn the admiration of his fellow woodsmen must possess unusual qualities. Martin had repeatedly demonstrated these qualities. Not by any single act at any one time, but by the accumulated acts of many years had he earned his title of leader in his craft.

The older woodsmen would tell you of the terrible winter when Martin had made a journey of fifty miles through the forests to get medicines from the only doctor within a hundred miles for a boy injured by a falling tree. They would tell you of the time that a hunting party from the States were lost in the woods in a great November blizzard, and how Martin, frost-bitten and famished, had finally found them and brought them back to the settlement. They could tell of his fight with a wounded moose that had gored another hunter, and would have killed him but for the quick work of Martin's hunting knife. Indeed, once the old hunter became the theme of their talk, there was no end to the tales the woodsmen would tell of his adventures.

The boy who was with him on the yacht was obviously from an entirely different walk of life. Any woodsman could have told you that he had been reared far from the country of lakes and forests. He was, indeed, a city boy, who except for one winter spent in the Adirondacks, had scarcely been beyond the suburbs of his native city. In the north country he would have passed for a boy of twelve years; but in reality he was just rounding his fifteenth birthday.

He was a medium sized boy for his age, with bright red hair, and a rosy complexion. He had the appearance of a boy just outgrowing a "delicate constitution" as one of the neighbor women had put it, although he had every appearance of robustness. Nevertheless it was on account of his health that he was now on the little schooner yacht rolling in the gale of a bleak Labrador inlet. His neighbor in the city, Mr. Ware, the owner of the yacht, thinking that a few weeks in the woods and

on the water would be helpful to him, had made him a member of his hunting party into the northern wilderness.

The old guide was obviously apprehensive at the fury of the gale that had struck them, while the boy, Larry, seemed to regard it as a lark designed for their special amusement. Noticing the serious expression of Martin's face, and mistaking its meaning, he could not help jibing the old fellow, boy fashion, at his solicitude.

"You look as if you thought we were going to the bottom sure enough, Martin," Larry laughed. "Why, there isn't any more danger on this boat than there is on an ocean liner. You're no seaman, I can see that." And he threw back his bushy head and laughed heartily at his companion's serious face.

"Besides," he added, "there's the land only half a mile away even if we did spring a leak or something. It's only a step over there, so we surely could get ashore."

"That's just the trouble," said a deep voice beside him. "That's just the trouble. And if you knew the first thing about a ship or the ocean you would know it." And the captain strode aft, giving orders to his seamen as he went.

"What does he mean?" Larry asked of Martin, clinging to a brass stanchion to keep from being thrown into the scuppers as the little boat rolled heavily until the rail dipped the water.

"Why, just this," Martin told him. "The real danger to us now is that we are so near the shore. Out in the open sea we could roll and tumble about and drift as far as we liked until the storm blew over. But here if we drift very far we will go smash

against those rocks—and that would be the end of every one of us.”

“Well, if we went ashore why couldn’t we just jump and swim right to land a few feet away?” Larry asked, looking serious himself now, his blue eyes opening wide.

Martin’s little laugh was lost in the roar of the wind.

“That shows how much of a landlubber you are, Larry,” he said. “If you had been brought up near the ocean you would know that if this boat struck on this shore where all the coast is a lot of jagged rocks, it would be smashed into kindling wood. And no man can swim in the waves at the shore. They pick a man up like a cork; but they smash him down on those rocks like the hammer of the old Norse Sea god. That is why the sailor prays for the open sea.”

All this time Martin had been clinging to the rail with one hand, and trying to scan the shore line with his hunting glasses. But the blinding spray and the ceaseless rolling and pitching made it impossible for him to use them.

“But I’m not worrying about what may happen to this boat,” he shouted presently, putting the glasses in his pocket. “Either we will come out all right or else we won’t. And in any case we will have to grin and take what comes. What I’m worried about is Mr. Ware and the fellows in the boat with him. If they have started out from shore to come aboard before this gale hit us they are lost, sure. And I am certain they had started, for I caught a glimpse of the boat coming out of a cove fifteen minutes before the storm broke.”

For a minute Larry stared at the old man, comprehending the seriousness of the situation at last. "You mean then—" he asked, clutching the brass rail as the boat lurched forward,— "You mean that you think they will be drowned—really drowned, Martin?"

"That's it, Larry," Martin replied, seriously. "They haven't one chance in a thousand, as I see it. Even if they could reach us we couldn't get them aboard; and if they are blown ashore it will end everything. They haven't a chance."

As if to emphasize the seriousness of the situation the yacht just then dug her nose deep into the trough of a great wave, then rose, lifting her bowsprit high in the air like a rearing horse tugging at a restraining leash. It was a strain that tested every link of the anchor chain to its utmost. But for the moment it held.

"A few more like that, Larry," Martin shouted above the gale, "and that chain will snap. The anchor is caught fast in the rocks at the bottom."

Meanwhile the sailors and the captain were working desperately to cut loose the other anchor and get it over the side as their only chance of keeping the boat off the rocks. The gale, the rolling of the vessel, and the waves buffeted them about, however, so that before they could release the heavy mass of iron, the yacht again plunged her nose into the waves, then rose on her stern, trembling and jerking at the single anchor chain. For a moment it held. Then there was a sharp report, as a short length of chain flew back, knocking two of the sailors overboard, and gouging a great chunk of wood from the

fore mast. At the same time the boat settled back, careening far to port with the rail clear under.

The violence of the shock had thrown Larry off his feet, but for a moment he clung to the railing with one hand. Then as the boat righted herself, quivering and creaking, the flood of water coming over the bow tore loose his hands, and hurled him blinded and stupified along the deck. The next thing he knew he found himself lying in a heap at the foot of the narrow companionway stairs down which he had been thrown by the waves.

He was dazed and bruised by the fall, yet above the roar of the storm, he heard faintly the howling of the huskie dogs, confined in a pen on the forward deck. Then there was the awful roar of the waves again, the crash of breaking timbers, and again a deluge of water poured down the companionway. At the same time Larry was struck with some soft, heavy object, that came hurtling down with the torrent of water. Gasping for breath and half choked with the water, he managed to cling to the steps until the water had rushed out through the scuppers as the boat heeled over the other way. Then crawling on hands and knees he succeeded in reaching the cabin door, the latch of which was not over six feet away.

With a desperate plunge he threw it open and fell sprawling into the room. At the same time two great malamoot dogs, who had been washed down the companionway with the preceding wave, sprang in after him, whining and cowering against him. Even in his fright he could not help contrasting the present actions of these dogs with their usual behavior. Ordinarily they were quiet, reserved fellows, given to minding their own

business and imparting the general impression that it would be well for others to do the same. Now all their sturdy independence was gone, and cowering and trembling they pressed close to the boy for protection, apparently realizing that they were battling with an enemy against whom they had no defence.

But the storm gave Larry little time to think of anything but his own safety. Even as he struggled to rise and push the cabin door shut, the boat heeled over and performed that office for him with a crash. The next moment a torrent of water rushed down the companionway, but only a few drops were forced through the cracks of the door casing, fitted for just such an occasion, so that the cabin remained practically dry. Over and over again at short intervals this crash of descending waters shook the cabin and strained at the door casing. And all the time the movements of the boat kept Larry lying close to the floor, clinging to the edge of the lower bunk to keep from being thrown violently across the cabin.

The dogs, unable to find a foothold when the cabin floor rose beneath them, were often thrown violently about the room, their claws scratching futilely along the hard boards as they strove to stop the impetus of the fall. But the moment the boat righted itself, they crawled whimpering back and crouched close to the frightened boy.

Little enough, indeed, was the protection or comfort Larry could give the shivering brutes. He himself was sobbing with terror, and at each plunge and crash of the boat he expected to find himself engulfed by the black waters. Now and again, above the sound of the storm, he heard the crash of splintering

timbers, with furious blows upon the decks and against the sides of the hull. He guessed from this that the masts had been broken off and were pounding for a moment against the hull, held temporarily by the steel shrouds until finally torn away by the waves.

Vaguely he wondered what had become of Martin, and the Captain, and the two remaining members of the crew. Perhaps they had been washed down the after companionway as he had gone down the forward one. But far more likely they were now in their long resting place at the bottom of the bay. There seemed little probability that they had been as lucky as he, and he expected to follow them at any moment. Yet he shut his teeth and clung fast to the side of the bunk.

It was terribly exhausting work, this clinging with one's hands, and at each successive plunge he felt his grip weakening. In a very few minutes, he knew he should find himself hurled about the cabin like a loose piece of furniture, and then it would only be a matter of minutes until he was flung against some object and crushed. He would not be able to endure the kind of pounding that the dogs were getting. The protection of their thick fur, and the ability to relax and fall limply, saved them from serious injury.

Little by little he felt his fingers slipping from the edge of the bunk. He shut his teeth hard, and tried to get a firmer grip. At that moment the boat seemed to be lifted high into the air, and poised there for a breathless second. Then with a shock that bumped Larry's head against the floor, it descended and stopped as if wedged on the rocks at the bottom, with a sound like a violent explosion right underneath the cabin.

Larry, stupified by the crash, realized vaguely that the boat had struck something and was held fast. In his confusion he thought she had gone to the bottom, but he was satisfied that he was no longer being pounded about the cabin. And presently as his mind cleared a little, and he could hear the roar of the waves with an occasional trickle of water down the companionway, he reached the conclusion that they were not at the bottom of the sea. Nor did he care very much one way or the other at that time. It was pitch dark in the cabin, and as he was utterly worn out, he closed his eyes and lay still, a big trembling dog nestling against him on either side. And presently he and his two companions were sleeping the dreamless sleep of the exhausted.

CHAPTER II

THE HOME ON THE ROCKS

It seemed only a moment later that Larry was roused by a thumping on the planks over his head. Half awake, and shivering with cold, he rubbed his eyes and tried to think where he was. Everything about the cabin could be seen now, a ray of light streaming in through the round port. For a little time he could not recall how he happened to be lying on the cold floor and not in his bunk; but the presence of the two dogs, still lying beside him, helped to freshen his memory.

The thumping on the deck seemed to have a familiar sound; there was somebody walking about up there. Some one else must have been as lucky as he in escaping the storm. And presently he heard some one come clumping down the companionway stairs. The dogs, who had been listening intently with cocked ears to the approaching footsteps, sprang across the cabin wagging their tails and whining, and a moment later old Martin stood in the doorway. He greeted the dogs with a shout of surprise and welcome, followed by another even louder shout when his eyes found Larry. For once the reserved old hunter relaxed and showed the depths of his nature. He literally picked the astonished boy up in his arms and danced about the little room with delight.

“Oh, but I am sure glad to see you, boy,” he said, when he finally let Larry down on his feet. “I didn’t suppose for a minute that I should ever see you or any one else here again—not even the

dogs. I thought that you and everybody else went over the side when the first big wave struck us.”

“Why, where are all the rest of them, and why is the boat so still?” Larry asked, eagerly.

The old man’s face grew grave at once at the questions.

“Come out on deck and you can see for yourself,” he said quietly, and led the way up the companionway.

With his head still ringing, and with aching limbs and sore spots all over his body from the effects of bumping about the night before, Larry crawled up the companionway. He could hear the waves roaring all about them, and yet the boat was as stationary as a house. What could it mean?

When he reached the deck the explanation was quickly apparent. The boat was wedged hard and fast in a crevice of rock, her deck several feet above the water, and just below the level of the rocky cliff of the shore. She had been picked up bodily by the tremendous comber and flung against the cliff, and luckily for them, had been jammed into a crevice that prevented her slipping back into the ocean and sinking. For her bottom and her port side were stove in, and she was completely wrecked.

For a few minutes the boy stood gazing in mute astonishment. Old Martin also stood silently looking about him. Then he offered an explanation.

“’Tisn’t anything short of a miracle, I should say,” he explained to Larry. “I have heard of some such things happening, but I

never believed that they did really. You see the waves just washed everything overboard—captain, crew, masts, everything—except you and me, and the two dogs. It washed me just as it did you, but I went down the after hatchway by luck, and I hung on down there in the companionway until the thing struck. But all the time that the waves were washing over us we were being driven along toward this ledge of rock full tilt. And when we were flung against this rock we should by good rights, have been battered to kindling wood at one blow, and then have slipped back into the water and sunk.

“But right here is the curious part of it all. Just as she got to the foot of this cliff, an unusually big comber must have caught her, raised her up in its arms fifteen or twenty feet higher than the usual wave would have done, and just chucked her up on the side of this bluff out o’ harm’s way—at least for the time being. The sharp edge of the ledge happened to be such a shape that it held her in place like the barb of a fish-hook. And all that the smaller waves could do was to pound away at the lower side of her, without hurting her enough to make her fall to pieces.

“But of course they’ll get her after a while—almost any hour for that matter; for this storm is a long way from being blown out yet, I’m afraid. And so it’s up to us to just get as much food and other things unloaded and up away from this shore line as fast as we can. Most of the stores are forward, and that is where she is stove in the least.

“I suppose we’ve got to take off five minutes and cram a little cold food into ourselves, so that we can work faster and longer. For we surely have got to work for our lives to-day. If this boat should suddenly take it into her head to slide off into the ocean

again, as she may do at any minute, we're goners, even if we are left on shore, unless we get a winter's supply unloaded and stored on the rocks. For we are a long way from civilization, I can tell you."

With that Martin rushed Larry to the galley, dug out some bread, cold meat, and a can of condensed milk. And, grudging every minute's delay, they stood among the wreckage of the once beautiful cabin, cramming down their cold breakfast as hastily as possible. In the excitement Larry forgot his bruises and sore spots.

As soon as they had finished Martin hurried the boy to the forward store-room door, bursting it open with a heavy piece of iron.

"Now pick up anything that you can handle," he instructed, "run with it up on deck, and throw it on to the bank. I'll take the heavier things. But work as hard and as fast as you can, for our lives depend upon it."

For the next two hours they worked with furious energy rushing back and forth from the store-rooms, staggering up the tilted steps to the deck, and hurling the boxes across the few feet that separated the boat from the ledge. Every few minutes Martin would leap across the gap, and hastily toss the boxes that had been landed further up on the shore, to get them out of the way for others that were to follow.

The enormous strength and endurance of the old hunter were shown by the amount he accomplished in those two hours. Boxes and kegs, so heavy that Larry could hardly budge them,

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