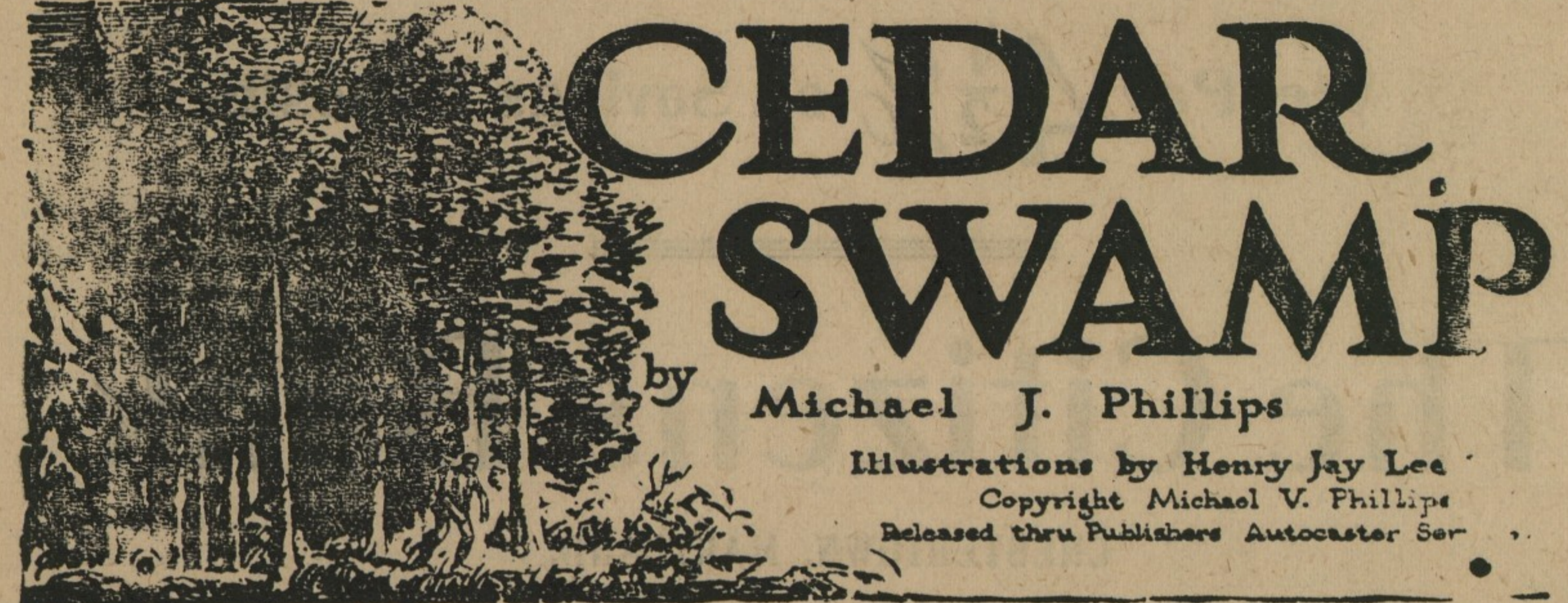


Not Many Steps Behind

By Albert T. Reid



THE LEADING CHARACTERS EDISON FORBES, a young resident of Scottsdale, with an inherent craving for liquor, is held for the death of a woman who has been killed by a bootlegging truck. Circumstantial evidence points to Forbes and rather than tell the truth of the episode, which would clear him but cast another friend in a bad light, he stands trial and is sentenced to a long term in prison. The governor of the state, an old friend of Eddie's father, believes him innocent and pardons him shortly after his arrival at the jail. Back in Scottsdale he and

SCOOT'S LIBBEY, a worthless character, who has smashed his machine into another car, killing its lone occupant, a woman. Forbes' companion and Libbey quit the scene hurriedly, leaving the former alone to face a constable who reasons that Eddie, with the scent of whiskey about him, must be connected in some way with the accident. Accordingly, Forbes is arrested.

PATSY JANE, Eddie's pretty wife, agree that public sentiment runs too high against him. Accordingly they migrate up north to some land that has been in the family for years. Settled in their log cabin.

ISAIAH SEALMAN, a neighbor, pays the Forbes a visit and intimates that there are some back taxes for the young couple to pay. Sealman offers to give Eddie a job after he goes down to Long Portage, a nearby town, and learns about the taxes. The next day while walking about their property they discover a mysterious mound that contains out-crops similar to salt. At the tax office Forbes learns that the back taxes amount to over eight hundred dollars and that the certificates are held by a Chicago capitalist who is eager to obtain the property. Eddie has five months to pay. A few days later he helps a booze truck out of the mud and is presented with a bottle of whiskey which he hides before walking over to interview Sealman.

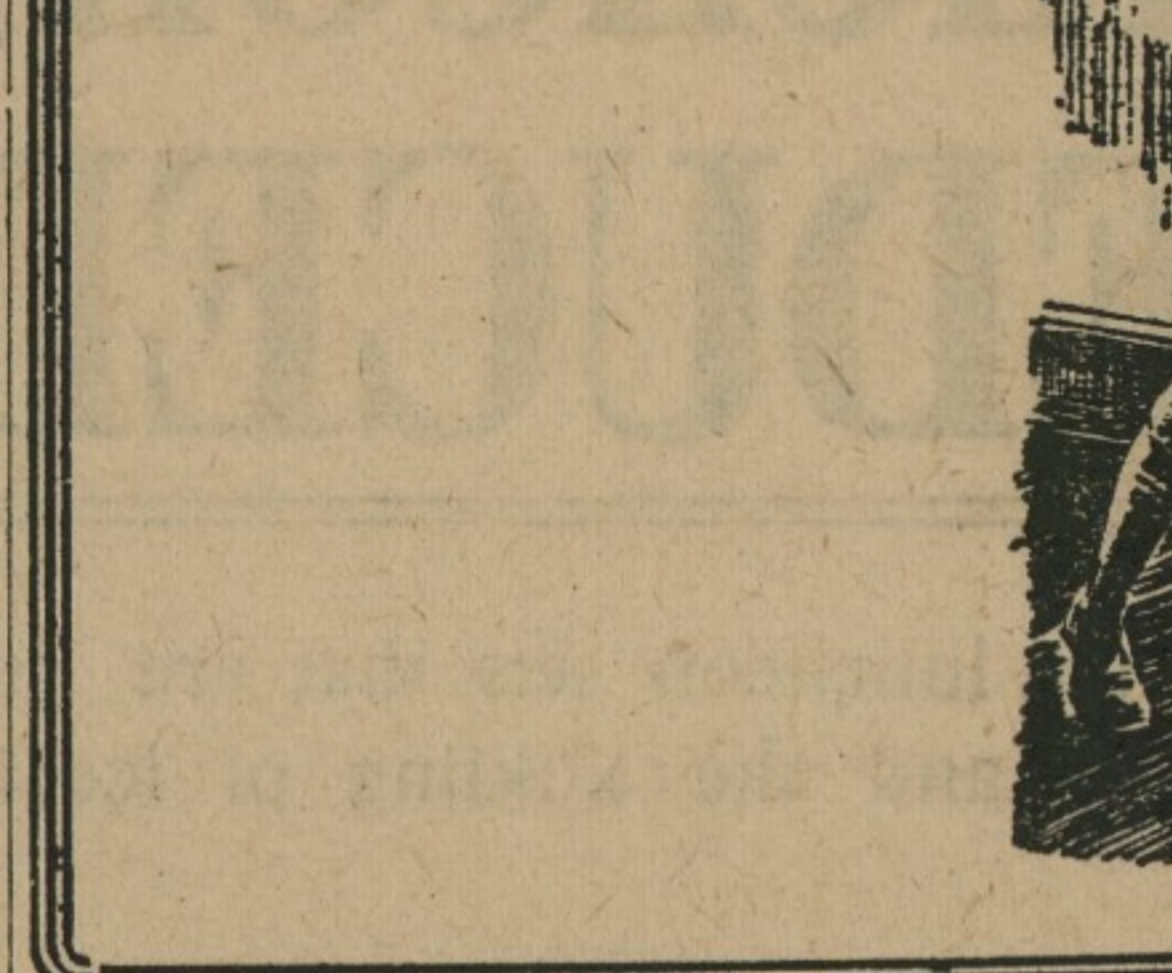
Not finding him in, Eddie imbibes too freely of his liquor and as a result Patsy warns him that the next occurrence of a similar nature will result in her departure. Sealman hears of the trip to the tax office and makes a generous offer for their place, but Eddie, sensing something in the air, declines. Sealman refuses him work and several weeks pass. Then one day, Eddie's resolves weaken and he accepts a ride aboard another liquor truck. He drinks heavily.

CHAPTER XI SHANGHAIED

Eddie lay for many hours in a stupor so profound it was deathlike. For other hours he was in a delirium shot through with the misery of real illness. His head ached. His flesh protested as though it were being torn from his bones. The bones themselves seemed racked with pain. He was very weak, and his head throbbed violently. He was able after many attempts to sit up, bracing himself against a wall or partition

while he groped in the maze that netted him. First, he was in darkness, clangorous and complete. Second, he was in a railway freight car in full motion. How he got there he could not recall. Think as he would, his head between his hands, he could remember nothing after the first drink on the rum-cruiser.

He clinched still more tightly, his head burrowing downward and inward.



It was a long time before he could stand up. His trembling fingers revealed that he was imprisoned in a narrow space running between the two doors in the centre of the car. There were cross wise partitions holding in place a cargo that pounded and rasped with the motion told him the cargo was hardened bolts about four feet in length.

He tried the two doors. He was able to slide each of them a little way. He could not open them, because they were sealed. It was apparent that they were now in the outskirts of a most ideal railroad centre. Pencils twilight from successive streetlamps pierced the darkness of the prison fleetingly. The train rattled interminably over switchboards. The droning sound of their progress proved that long lines of cars paralleled them on sidings.

Resolution overcame weakness. He had to get out! He crawled up the partition on his left. There was space for his body between the top-most layer of bolts and the car roof. He wriggle forward, toward the little door, high up, in the end of the car. He found it, but it, too, was locked. He could not budge it. He inched backward to the centre of the car, crossed the open space, and mounted the other partition to the piles of timber in the rear half. These tiers were not piled so high. He was soon examining rear end door. He found a slender bolt which could be handled as a battering-ram.

Half-sitting, half-crouching, he drove it against the little door which had been cracked across in the past by shifting cargoes. Soon he had broken away two of the boards composing it, so that he could reach out, twist off the seal and remove the hasp. The door slid back easily. He was free. But another problem presented itself. The train puffed steadily onward. The wheels made evil noises on the many curves, and the cars leaned sharply to the new direction. How could he,

in his weakened condition crawl out the narrow doorway, find the grab-irons and descend them to safety? He was sure to fall between the cars and be ground to pieces.

Fortune inclined to him in friendly fashion. There was a long whistle-train slowly stopped. He could hear blast from the locomotive, and the men, calling to one



another. The train was standing by a long freight shed, whose platform was illumined by many arc-lights. Seals were being broken; there was a rattling of hand trucks. The stop was a permanent one.

He crawled out of the little end door dizzily, found the grab irons, and descended in the darkness on the side opposite the platform. He was in a narrow aisle between two lines of cars. He turned in the direction from whence he had come.

The terminal was Chicago. This he learned from electric signs when the yards broadened out beyond the end of the train. He was several hundred miles from Long Portage. The first problem was food; the second, to get back to Patsy Jane as soon as possible. Remorse scourged him as he thought of her alone in the cabin in the wilderness; worrying over him, torn with suspense at his absence.

He thrust his hands into his pockets. Suspicion became a certainty. The rum-runners had drugged and shanghaied him. To make results more effective, they had robbed him of the few dollars he had had. Their motive was a mystery which could be left to the future for solution. Meantime, there was satisfaction in the thought that he had opened an account in the Long Portage State bank, a few days previously, and deposited nearly all his money. He carried a dollar bill for emergencies in a small pocket of his trousers, and this had been overlooked. When, on the windows of a dingy store on the street beside the railway grade he was invited to "Eat Here," he descended. He spent seventy cents for coarse filling food.

It revived him wonderfully. When he took to the grade again his aches and pains had grown more subdued. His head was clearer; he was no longer so terrifyingly dizzy. Fortunately the night was warm for April. After two hours of walking a lumberyard invited him. He crawled through strands of barbed wire and

laid down on some sheltered planks, odorously with the scent of the north. He slept soundly.

Winning his way home was not easy. He was inexperienced in stealing rides. He walked many miles. Eating problems, though not a serious one. When he asked for food at back doors, he offered so earnestly to work for it that he was rarely refused. When the work was efficiently and eagerly performed, the grateful housewife, usually gave him a package of food for the coming meal.

He passed through Scottsdale at night on the bumpers of a fast freight. It was early, but the little town slumbered peacefully, its arcs illuminating empty streets. Nostalgia and self-pity possessed him as he clung to a brakebeam and rumbled through the place where he was born. He yearned toward it, even though it regarded him as a criminal, an outcast and a failure.

He dropped from an empty car at daybreak, the sixth day of his absence, in the Long Portage yards. He was tired and hungry and dirty; but he could not wait. He hurried on the cement sidewalk which flanked the broad main street. His footsteps clicked hollowly in the bush that settles on the world just before sunrise. He was well beyond the town when the sun appeared on the winding sandy track ahead of him, sentinelled in its arising by two stags of what had once been giant trees.

Fatigue slowed his footsteps in the waist of the long tramp. He saw no one; there was no friendly voice to offer a lift. He scanned the horizon ahead with increasing eagerness as the sun mounted, and signs told him he was approaching the end of his journey. There, at last, was the ridge marking the western boundary of their land, from which he could see the cabin. He hurried until he was almost running. A sigh of thankfulness welled up; Patsy Jane had not carried out her threat. Smoke was rising from the chimney of the cabin. All was right with the world. With Pat beside him he could make good and show the world that its persecution was as unfair as it was cruel. He would get a job, redeem this home in the wilderness they had both come to love. And he would never drink again!

CHAPTER XII A FIGHT

He began to note ominous signs. The place had a down-at-the heel and neglected air. There was an unsightly litter by the woods. Papers were strewn about the sandy yard. Something was wrong. He veered cautiously to bring the garage between the open back door and himself. He did this after a cry of greeting had died unuttered on his lips. This didn't look like Patsy Jane. It was as squalid as a city slum.

His teeth set themselves when he noted the composition of the heaps about the woods. It was his own furniture and bedding, bundled out, unsheltered. He applied his eye to a crack in the rear of the garage. A small car, much more battered and rusty than his own with soiled gunny sacks bundles on the sagging running boards wis within.

He guessed correctly that the occupant of the cabin was cooking a late breakfast in the kitchen. The door of the kitchen opened to the south and there was no window on the west side, from which he approached. The sand stilled his footsteps. He gained the door without detection.

As his shadow fell across it, the sole occupant of the small room looked up from his task. He was a mean faced, narrow-eyed man with a stubble of beard on his lined cheeks. He was in the garb of the motor-tramp, soiled cotton shirt, the sleeves rolled up; khaki breeches, stained with grease; worn canvas leggings, and stubby brown shoes. A cigarette hung from his lip. He was in the act of turning a strip of bacon in the frying pan.

The man was startled, but his quick recovery showed he was not unprepared for a visitor. The fork on which the bacon was impaled clattered into the pan and the man dodged into the livingroom through the door behind him. It was his intention to close it, but he was not quick enough. Eddie's body crushed against it; his foot thrust itself into the narrowing crack.

Seeing that he had failed, the motor-tramp withdrew his weight suddenly, so that Eddie was overbalanced and fell into the livingroom on his hands and knees. The stranger, treating to a bunk in the farthest corner, had snatched up a rifle. Now he covered Eddie, the weapon against his hip.

Eddie came slowly to his feet. He was careful to tone down a drab rah rather than to close it. For the man's eyes were deadly. Here was a killer, who would shoot without conscience and without mercy if it seemed expedient to shoot.

"What are you doing in my house?" growled Eddie.

"Your house? Say, you got a nerve!" was the insolent response. "This old shack is empty, goin' to be sold for taxes, and you talk about 'your' house! It ain't yours as much as it is mine."

"You let me snap Eddie. 'It's mine. Get out here, quick.' The deadly eyes narrowed. "Better not call me a liar, sport. Go on, yourself, before I have to drop you."

Eddie moderated his tone and his language. The stranger had the upper hand. "See here, my friend, you're in wrong," he said. "I own this place. My name is Forbes. They'll tell you in Long Portage it's my property. I've been away; that's all. Since Eddie kept his distance and seemed disposed to argue, the trespasser accommodated himself to the situation. He shifted the rifle from his hip across his body, holding it slightly higher than before. It was still reasonably ready for service. "I'd say you been away," was his jeering comment. "No one's lived here for years. I was here last four, five weeks. I brought that stove.

This place is as much mine as it is yours."

"You know I'd been here," replied Eddie. "You saw my stuff, and threw it out."

"No one was here when I came," replied the man, doggedly. "I like it here. I'm goin' to stay. You better move."

His eyes had wavered about the room as he spoke, and Eddie took the slender chance offered. He flung himself across the room and hard against the man's stomach. The latter, an instant too late, saw his danger and tried to swing the gun. But Eddie was inside, his arms around the other's body. He forced the tramp against the wall.

His adversary shifted his tactics. His arms, holding the gun, were free. Eddie was under them. A hand near either end, he raised the weapon to crash it down crosswise on his assailant's head. Eddie sensed the move, though he could not see it. He clinched still more tightly, his head burrowing downward and inward.

The weapon struck him a glancing blow on the back of the head, the main force expending itself harmlessly on his back. The trigger-guard tore his scalp, however, and he could feel the warm blood trickle down. Now his right hand went up to the other's throat, jamming his head back against the logs. The tramp was of necessity, compelled to drop his rifle to avoid strangulation.

He tripped Eddie and they fell. But Eddie, more active, was only briefly underneath. He turned the tramp over with a thump, and struggled to mount astride. A heave of the other's body broke his hold and sent him flying.

Eddie had no clear picture of what was happening. He was in a white rage that prevented clear thought. He was lurching against this hard-faced man everything that had happened in recent days, and fighting for revenge for those happenings.

Their scuffling feet pushed the rifle partially under a bunk. Neither dared stoop for it. They fought with their fists. A wave of savage blows on his face and body, but he did not feel their hurt. He was knocked down, and rose to grip the other man and hurl him against the walls.

Another blow sent Eddie on his head and shoulders. The stranger with a grimace of triumph, tried to leap upon him. A frantic foot-thrust stopped the motor-tramp. The boot heel caught his forehead, so that blood flew from his smashed nose.

It was soon after that the stranger stooped to the fireplace for a bludgeon. It was a sizable stick that had burned in two, leaving one piece more than a foot long in length and pyramidal in form. He caught it by the smaller end, as if by a handle. His face was contorted into the snarl of a maddened huskie dog as he threw it with all his might at Eddie's head.

Eddie dodged just in time, the missile grazed his temple, struck the logs and rebounded in front of him so that it was almost under his feet. The throw left the stranger off balance. A heavy table stood against the wall at Eddie's left hand. He jerked it in front of him. With both hands in its nearest edge and the full power of his 160 pounds behind it, he drove the table ahead of him along the floor.

It caught the stranger across the thighs, jamming him against the wall. With a groil of triumph, Eddie seized him by the hair and dragged him face downward across the table. He held the table like a vise with one hand and his knee. He belabored the tramp with the other fist. But he could not get enough power behind the blows and the man's struggles threatened to free him.

The bludgeon of pine was near. He swept it from the floor at the second attempt and swung it like a war club in a wide arc. It struck the man, as he straightened, below the ear. He fell forward across the table again, out completely.

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