

Lighted Windows

By EMILIE LORING
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CHAPTER XVI

An uncanny howl from somewhere inland rose to crescendo, slid into diminuendo and died away.

"What's that?"
The teeth of one of the pilots visibly and audibly chattered as he answered Paxton.

"That a wolf cry, yes sirree. Smoke an' fire drive dem to shore. Dey no lak fire. Not much ever come oder time. Hunters come here. Shack up by trees."

Paxton's voice showed strain. "You've clung to your camera, I see. We may wish it were something to eat before we get through. There are two cans of crackers in the launch, that's all. If only this infernal smoke would lift, we'd get back to the yacht. The men were right. There's the shack."

Janice's heart went into a tailspin. On a little hill, a spur on the side of the mountain, sagged a cabin of warped, weather-beaten boards.

She didn't know how long she and Paxton stood there staring at the distant hut. He wheeled at sound of the put-out of an engine starting. With a startled oath he ran back to the water's edge. Janice stumbled after him. As they reached it, the stern of the launch vanished into the mist.

"Come back! Come back!" Paxton shouted. Only the fading throb of the engine responded. He drew his revolver and fired into the air. As though in answer, a wild wail was relayed by echo after echo through the woods. Janice caught his arm. Her voice came raggedly.

"Ned! Ned! Save your ammunition. Remember that ghastly howl!"

A shower of hot stones pelted the man and girl. Rain splashed.

"Come on, Jan. We'd better make for that shack while the going is fairly good. I'll bet it leaks like a sieve, but it will be some protection. Those infernal quitters threw out a can of crackers. I'll take that along."

He picked up the tin.

They passed great patches of blue lupin. Wild raspberry bushes, higher than Janice's head, clawed at her wet clothing, as though to direct attention to the dead ripe fruit hanging in maroon clusters. She gathered handfuls, carried them in her hat which she had lined with a damp but spotless handkerchief. The woods rustled with the motion of unseen life. A porcupine rattled across the trail ahead. An otter swam down stream, two martens scuttled into a tangle of brush. A fox trotted by, stopped, one foot raised, looked back before he dashed off as though pursued by furies. A fat ptarmigan rose with a whizz which sent Janice's heart into her mouth. A few blood-thirsty mosquitoes buzzed about her head, before drifting smoke sent them winging. Did everything living feel the pervading imminence of danger?

Paxton's eyes were inscrutable as they met Janice's. Something about the grimness of his mouth set her heart thumping. He waved his hand toward the hut.

"Let's investigate. I have a light. I was trained by an old sea-dog never to leave the ship without a flash, a gun and matches." He pulled an electric torch from an inside pocket of his soaked blue coat. Its glow revealed a room high enough for a man, a tall man, to stand upright without hitting his head. A bunk against one wall was heaped with dried boughs of spruce. A loose-jointed pipe, one end poking through the roof, acted as smoke-conductor between a rusty cook-stove and the outer world. A degenerate chair and a rickety stool kept dissolute company. A table, whose legs sprawled outward like those of a teetering new-born calf, supported two tallow streaked bottles and a dirty pack of cards. A rusty kettle and a frying-pan burned black hung from a crude shelf. Against the wall leaned an axe with a long handle and nicked blade.

Paxton snapped a gold lighter. After several futile attempts he succeeded in producing a small flame which he applied to a candle stub in one bottle. "We will save our matches for the fires. My knowledge of camping is all laboratory stuff, no field work, but I know enough for that."

They hung over the table breathlessly till the wick caught and a flickering flame set ghoulish shadows astir on the walls. Paxton snapped off the electric torch, laid his revolver on the shaky table, a card of matches beside it.

"Those must be kept dry. Think you can start the fire in the stove while I collect brush for a signal to the yacht? Wrecked on a desert island stuff."

He flung his wet blue coat over the chair-back. Axe in hand he smiled at her from the threshold.

Good, but not good enough. Did he think she didn't know that the outside fire was more to keep off marauding animals than to signal the boat, that she had forgotten those banshee howls? She steadied her lips and smiled back at him. This last hour had aged him unbelievably. It had set deep crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes, etched lines between his nose and lips. Except for war service, all his luxurious life he had played hard and worked little. His once immaculate buckskin shoes oozed mud; his soaked white flannel trousers were criss-crossed with black lines, where wet shrubs had lashed at him; little green rivulets, sponsored by his necktie, were cavorting down the front of the silk shirt which was plastered to his body. His eyes with a laugh in their blue depths met hers.

"I don't like the suggestion of criticism of my appearance in your expression. You're not so hot yourself."

The liking she had felt for him during the first weeks of their acquaintance, which had flamed into love—or fascination—crumbled into gray ashes of doubt and distrust, stole back. It warmed her voice.



She took careful aim. Fired.

"I'm a sight. I feel like a rag doll which has been left out in the rain."

She heard the crackle of brush under his feet.

She lifted a rusty cover from the stove. Her thoughts raced on as she laid a fire of dry leaves and brush. Billy and Bruce had taught her woodcraft when they had taken her with them on their fishing expeditions. If only Bruce were with her instead of Ned Paxton.

She struck a match to escape the memory which set her heart pounding unbearably. She watched the dry leaves ignite before she clapped on the rusty cover. She listened. The fire roared. Had she put in too much fuel?

How the pesky thing smoked. She wiped her smarting eyes as she hunted for a damper. Her throat stung. It was humiliating not to be able to start a dinky little fire, but she would have to ask Ned to help. She stepped to the entrance for air.

What was that? Good grief! What was that behind the tree near him? A dog? A gray dog? A dog's eyes wouldn't be green. A wolf! What was hanging from the creature's cruel mouth? Cloth! A piece of plaid cloth caught on one yellowed fang. Sickening! She tried to call a warning. Her tongue dried to the roof of her mouth. Her body prickled with horror. The animal took a stealthy step toward the man on the stump. Stopped. Not a muscle rippled under its skin. Ned would have no chance to save himself.

Eyes on the motionless creature, Janice backed to the table, seized the revolver. On the doorsill she dropped to one knee. "Steady! Steady! Remember Jimmy's instructions," she warned herself. She took careful aim. Fired.

Man and beast leaped simultaneously. The wolf soundlessly slunk into the shadows. Paxton ran toward her, caught her shoulder. Shook her.

"Why in heaven's name did you do that?"
She steadied trembling lips. "It

was a wolf—just back of you—he— he was watching you—hungrily. I thought—I thought—"

She dropped her head in her hands. Shuddered uncontrollably.

"A wolf! You shot him?"
"I shot at him." There was a touch of hysteria in her laugh. "I'm not too good."

"God, we'll have the whole pack down on us."

Indignation steadied Janice's nerves as no commendation would have done. "I call that darned ungrateful. You would have been torn to shreds if I hadn't fired."

"Why didn't you yell?"

"Yell! I was dumb with horror. I came to the door to ask you to help with the stove, saw that terrible creature moving toward you, and fired."

He loosened the fingers still clutching the revolver, laid it on the table.

"Did you care when you thought me in danger, Janice?"

Her heart flew to her throat. Blue eyes aflame could be more terrifying than fierce green eyes.

"Care! Wouldn't you care if you saw a human being in peril of his life? Isn't the smoke stifling? Can't you do something to stop it?"

"I—" He coughed, sneezed, wiped his eyes. "What's the matter with the infernal thing?"

Lids half shut, tears marking grimy furrows down his cheeks, he poked about the stove. Tears brimming from her smarting eyes, Janice tried to help. He shook what seemed to be a damper. The portion of the pipe which pierced the roof fell with a clatter which set her already taut nerves twanging like violin strings under the fingers of an impassioned virtuoso. A vicious orange-red fang shot from the standing smoke-stack, licked at the rotting branches of the roof. Damp as they were, they ignited. Fire ran from twig to twig.

The man and girl stared incredulously.

"We've done it now! Quick! Out of this!"

Paxton pushed her to the door, caught up the revolver as he dashed by the table. Janice grabbed her camera, snatched the tin of crackers. As they jumped to the mossy log she heard the crackle of wood. The walls of the shack were on fire.

Side by side they watched the lurid light inside flicker, flame, wane. Heat poured out as through the door of a furnace. Janice turned her back.

"I'm thoroughly toasted on one side. 'Tis an ill wind, etc.' It would have taken hours before an ordinary fire to dry our clothes. What is the next feature on this peppy program? It ought to be announced over a coast-to-coast hook-up."

Paxton's eyes shone blue and clear in his smoke-grimed face. "Janice, you're the best sport in the world. You set a great pace." He steadied his voice. "The fire's dying down. We'll have a warm, charred shack at our backs. That will be some protection."

"Protection from what?" She hated herself for the terrified catch in her voice.

"From prowlers. You heard the native pilot say that the volcano smoke would drive animals to the water. They will come down the bed of this brook from the interior."

Hours passed. Hours filled with nerve-racking suspense, listening, listening for the sound of a boat which did not come, with the drip of rain, the pelt of hail, flash of lightning and detonations of thunder. Janice dropped to the mossy log in front of the shack which gave out an acrid odor of smoldering wood.

Paxton carefully laid a heap of brush beside him as he dropped wearily to the log. The fire had died down to red coals.

He opened a gold cigarette case. "One left." He snapped it shut. "Glad you don't smoke. Otherwise I would have to sacrifice that on the altar of chivalry. Any crackers?" She drew one grimy piece from her pocket. "The last?" She nodded. "Put it back. I have indulged in too many calories already. I'll lose my boyish figure if I don't watch out."

"What's that?"

"What? Where?"

Janice gripped his sleeve. Pointed. Two lambent green dots glowed between low alders.

With a muttered imprecation, Paxton threw on the pitifully inadequate pile of brush beside him. The fire flared. The sinister points of light retreated. A howl tore through the distance. From near at hand the blood-curdling wail was answered.

Paxton rose swiftly.

"I'm going for more wood."
"Where? You mustn't. It isn't safe."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

AROUND THE HOUSE

Don't run lamp cords under the rug. They wear out more quickly from being walked on, and present a fire hazard.

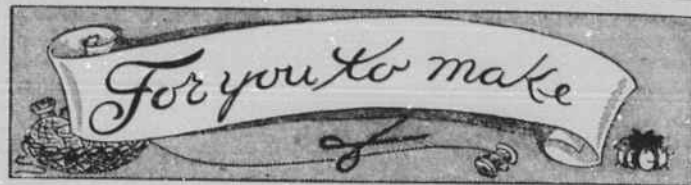
Silver should always be polished following the shape of the object—flatware lengthwise and hollowware with a large circular motion.

If you wish to serve your guests individual cakes, bake your cake in a loaf. When baked, cut it in squares, frost them on four sides and decorate the top with walnuts.

Spiced beet slices or pickled carrots make piquant garnishes for the cold-meat platter. A few of each will do, along with a few sprigs of parsley.

A piece of charcoal kept on one of the shelves will remove all odor from your refrigerator.

Thickening for gravies or soups may be made quickly by beating equal amounts of flour and water into a small, deep bowl with an egg-beater until a smooth mixture is formed.



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