

The Lamp in the Valley

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THE STORY SO FAR

Sidney Lander rescued Carol Coburn from the annoyances of Eric (the Red) Ericson. She is returning to her native Alaska to teach. Her father, a sordid, died with an unproven mine claim. Lander, an engineer for the Trumbull Co., which is

fighting the Coburn claim, breaks with Trumbull. But he remains engaged to Trumbull's daughter, Barbara. Lander becomes field manager for the Matanuska Valley project. Carol and he both are enthusiastic about

the future of the new colony. Eric, the Red, and a gang of workers bring Carol a blackboard and become insulting. She faces them with a pistol. Lander arrives and knocks Eric out. Once more Lander had been her protector.

INSTALLMENT XIII

"Are you all right?" he asked. "I'm all right," I told him. And I attempted to prove it by going out and bringing in the mud-smeared and forgotten blackboard.

He stood watching me as I wiped the mud, and then what was unmistakably a bloodstain, from that ignobly acquired symbol of authority. Then, still without speaking, we stood rather foolishly looking into each other's eyes.

"This won't happen again," he said with a steely sort of quietness. He glanced down at his bruised knuckles. "You know, of course, what that rabble-rouser wants to do? He wants to throw a scare into you, to frighten you out of your job, to make this valley intolerable."

"Why should he?" I asked. "I think," answered Lander, "it's because he has Trumbull behind him. There's more than one way, remember, of fighting a mine claim."

A ghostly voice was telling me that it would be sweet to lean against a wide shoulder like that, whatever the outcome, until life lost a little of its uncertainty.

A car horn sounded outside the shack. The door opened, and we stared at the rough and mannish figure of Katie O'Connell.

"You're the bozo I want," was her grim-noted announcement. "We've got to get action here or there'll be hell to pay. There's three clear cases of measles in that tent colony, and about two hundred kids who've been exposed to it. Colonel Hart's gone over for the Anchorage doctor, but that doesn't solve our problem."

"What is it you want?" asked Lander.

"I want Doctor Ruddock here," said Katie's prompt proclamation. "And inside of twenty-four hours I've got to have a hospital of some kind."

"Then you'll get it," Lander said with reassuring curtness. "We've got the material and we've got two hundred workers."

"What workers?" challenged Katie. "Those bindle stiffs in the CCC camp have just told me they're walking out. They say they're on strike. And the building-gangs claim they have orders to stick to houses."

"To hell with orders," barked Lander, "at a time like this. I say you'll get that hospital. And you'll get it, lady, before I take these boots off."

CHAPTER XVI

Action is eloquence, as Shakespeare once said.

Lander didn't fail the valley in its time of need. And Katie got her hospital.

All she got was a board shed interlined with plywood and roofed with tar paper, a bald-looking building with square windows and a row of army cots along one wall. But it was shelter for Katie's patients.

It didn't come easy. When Lander put his pride in his pocket and talked to the transient workers he got nothing but jeers. For Eric the Red, obviously, had been working on them. They declared they were already imposed on and underpaid.

But Lander didn't give up. He hurriedly canvassed the colony tents and unearthed three men who had once done carpenter work. Then he went after the old-timers. He got Hans Wiebel. Then he got Sock-Eye, and the quick-handed father of Olie Eckstrom, and a stalwart excabinemaker who knew the meaning of edged tools. The acid-spirited Sam Bryson, it's true, flatly refused to come to our help. But Salaria just as flatly defied all paternal injunctions and joined up with the group.

Then the dirt began to fly. Half an hour after the site and size of the building had been decided the pillars were bedded and the sills laid. While I helped to lug two-by-fours from the track side lumber piles the wide-shouldered Salaria strode back and forth with twelve-foot boards on her back. She gloried in dumping her gigantic loads at the feet of the busy Lander. And almost as fast as we could carry the allotted timbers they were caught up and measured and shaped while the sound of hammer and saw filled the valley.

Northern nights, at this time of the year, are not long. But, when darkness came on, fires were lighted and lanterns were swung above the busy workers. They neither grumbled nor rested.

It wasn't until the sun began to show over the peaks of the Talkeetnas that Katie and I took time off to serve them with coffee and hard-tack. But by then the floor had been laid and the walls were up and the roof was ready and waiting for its covering of tarpaper.

By noon the roof was finished and Katie's brand-new Red Cross flag was flying from its peak. Then the windows were screened, and the drugs and dressings and towels and instruments and enamelware were carried in from the emergency tent. Everything looked so shipshape that

Katie hurriedly donned a uniform, as brand new as her Red Cross flag, and gave instructions for the carrying in of the sick children. There were seven of them by this time. And just as the last of them was being tucked into bed Doctor Ruddock appeared in our midst and promptly announced that from that day forward he was to be recognized as the official man-of-medicine for the valley project.

I could see the glow that came into Katie's Celtic eye as she caught the significance of that announcement.

"That's great," she said, with a quaver in her voice. He inspected the building and lamented the absence of running water and laughed at the electric sterilizer, which couldn't be used, of course, until the completion of the Project's generating plant.

"They're throwing money away on the wrong things," he said, after a quick appraisal of the supplies.

And that seemed confirmed, two days later, when a motor ambulance was unloaded from a flat car, a highly varnished and urban-looking ambulance designed for the use of the new Red Cross nurse. But Katie promptly cottoned to that vehicle, which because of its sable paint scheme, she christened "Black Maria."

But Katie soon had other things to think of. Two cases of scarlet fever developed in our little tent city.



"That's great," Katie said.

And that stirred her Ruddy into still more frantic action. He bundled his nurse off to an isolation tent in a clearing at the edge of the Wiebel farm and commanded her to carry on as best she could.

"This is like stamping out a prairie fire," he announced. "We've got to check it before it starts."

Katie went without a murmur. I think she would have gone to the north pole if her abstracted man-of-medicine had ordered it. He boiled with indignation at the carelessness of the colony mothers. One neglected child, in spite of his warnings, developed pneumonia. And that brought a hurry call to me.

"We've got to have help here," he said when I confronted him in his crowded little tent office. "And as I'm stopping all public assemblage, your schoolwork peters out and leaves you free."

So I was not only a day-nurse and scrubwoman and deputy-marshal but also a human laundry and a stove-stoker and milk-distributor and oiler of desquamating little bodies. I took temperatures and changed sheets and doled out a gallon of cathartics. I kept the shed warm at night and the sunny side screened by day. I patted soda solutions on itchy little torsos and swabbed out spotted little mouths and baked sheets and played checkers with the convalescents and shooed overinquisitive urchins away from the door and went to bed so dog-tired that seven hours' sleep seemed nothing more than seven ticks of my alarm clock.

But behind my back, all the while, life was going on as life has the habit of doing.

For the colony wasn't without a valor all its own. Every mass migration, I felt, must have had its casual mishaps and touches of misery.

The misfits might rail at Ruddy and his health rules and the malcontents might squat about the Commissary porch and orate at the bureaucrats who were turning Matanuska into something worse than Soviet Russia. But the real home-seekers were already out on their plots getting a bit of land ready for belated seeding or lending a hand at building shelter for their belated stock. They were the hope of the Project.

And among the women, I found,

there was the same division between the misery-mongers and the homemakers. While the triple-chinned Betsy Sebeck sat on a chopping-block and railed at the Commissary for larding out coffee that wasn't dated and butter that smelt cheesy, a more energetic group of housewives were down at the salmon stream, with pitchforks, lading out half a ton of fresh fish, where the water was almost solid with red-meated bodies, which were promptly dressed and salted, or processed and canned and stowed away against a rainy day. Some of them, I noticed, had already planted sweet peas along the black-earthen terraces in front of their still unfinished houses.

They made my own humble wicky-up, when Ruddy's prairie fire was finally stamped out and I moved back to my home on the Jansen clearing, seem a very small and antiquated affair. The quietness oppressed me.

I was glad when Katie dropped in. But her spirits, for once, seemed anything but light and airy.

"What's on your mind?" I demanded.

"A couple of snapshots," was Katie's rather cryptic answer.

"Snapshots of what?" I asked.

"Of a snip of a surgical nurse down in that Seattle hospital," the gloomy-eyed Katie replied. "Ruddy just showed 'em to me. He seems to think she's the last word in womanhood."

Life, I felt when Katie went on her way again, was a dolorously muddled-up affair.

It didn't make a good beginning for my first night back in the wicky-up. And, a little later, it was crowned by a still more unpleasant thing.

For most unmistakably, on that first midnight of my new loneliness, somebody came to my cabin and tried to force the door open.

I wasn't sure just how much pressure my crossbar would stand. So I groped about in the darkness, after slipping out of my bunk, and made a search for Sock-Eye's revolver.

I waited, with the big six-gun in my hand, until the sounds began again. Then I deliberately fired a shot at the wall, as a gentle reminder of what that would-be intruder might expect.

The warning, apparently, wasn't wasted. For nothing but silence, after that awful roar of sound, came to my ears.

But, even though I took Sock-Eye's six-gun to bed with me, it was a long time before I could go to sleep.

CHAPTER XVII

Long before this colony was thought of there was a small school at Matanuska Village. It was housed in what had once been a wooden-fronted trading post. Its floors had heaved with the frosts of many a long winter, its walls had sagged, and its roof leaked like a sieve. Sam Bryson, its owner, soured by his removal as district superintendent, refused to lift a hand in repairing the old wreck. The CCC workers were equally recalcitrant. So Lander marshaled a corps of volunteers and tackled the job. The undulating floor was made level once more; the side walls were patched and straightened; two new windows were put in, and the roof was made waterproof. They also built a double row of rough little desks and replaced the rusty old drum stove with a new and shining air-tight heater, to say nothing of four equally bright and shining gas lamps.

The Project officials may have been short on labor but they proved prodigal enough with supplies. For they promptly shipped in six gross of blackboard wipers and a half truckload of chalk boxes and enough paper and pencils to run a state university. They also, ironically enough, sent a nickel and enamel water-cooler and an electric fan, both of them, of course, quite useless. But all shipments of textbooks must have fallen by the wayside.

S'lary, openly defying her acidulous old dad, helped me sandpaper the rough little chair desks and sweep up shavings and brighten the windows with chintz.

When I asked S'lary, as we worked there side by side, if it wouldn't be easier to pursue her studies in such surroundings, she startled me by the vigor of her revolt.

"Me plant my carcass in one of them kid seats?" she indignantly demanded. "Me squat here and do sums with a bunch of undersized cheechakos who ain't able to wipe their own noses? Not me."

She was conscious of my frown of disapproval as I watched those full and rose-red lips framing language so unsuited to the seeker of culture. "Pop's been wonderin'," she observed with a new meekness in her smoldering eyes, "if you couldn't come and teach me private. And once I got 't handlin' a pen as easy as I handle a rifle, he allows, I'd be ready to go outside and have a winter in the States."

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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