

**DUNCAN
NORMAN**

HIGGINS, A
MAN'S
CHRISTIAN

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I

HELL BENT

Twenty thousand of the thirty thousand lumber-jacks and river-pigs of the Minnesota woods are hilariously in pursuit of their own ruin for lack of something better to do in town. They are not nice, enlightened men, of course; the debauch is the traditional diversion—the theme of all the brave tales to which the youngsters of the bunk-houses listen in the lantern-light and dwell upon after dark. The lumber-jacks proceed thus—being fellows of big strength in every physical way—to the uttermost of filth and savagery and fellowship with every abomination. It is done with shouting and laughter and that large good-humor which is bedfellow with the bloodiest brawling, and it has for a bit, no doubt, its amiable aspect; but the merry shouters are presently become like Jimmie the Beast, that low, notorious brute, who, emerging drunk and hungry from a Deer River saloon, robbed a bulldog of his bone and gnawed it himself—or like Damned Soul Jenkins, who goes moaning into the forest, after the spree in town, conceiving himself condemned to roast forever in hell, without hope, nor even the ease which his mother's prayers might win from a compassionate God.

They can't help themselves, it seems. Not all of them, of course; but most.

II

THE PILOT OF SOULS

A big, clean, rosy-cheeked man in a Mackinaw coat and rubber boots—hardly distinguishable from the lumber-jack crew except for his quick step and high glance and fine resolute way—went swiftly through a Deer River saloon toward the snake-room in search of a lad from Toronto who had in the camps besought to be preserved from the vicissitudes of the town.

“There goes the Pilot,” said a lumber-jack at the bar. “Hello, Pilot!”

“Lo, Tom!”

“Ain’t ye goin’ t’ preach no more at Camp Six?”

“Sure, Tom!”

“Well—when the hell?”

“Week from Thursday, Tom,” the vanishing man called back; “tell the boys I’m coming.”

“Know the Pilot?” the lumber-jack asked.

I nodded.

“Higgins’s job,” said he, earnestly, “is keepin’ us boys out o’ hell; an’ he’s the only man on the job.”

Of this I had been informed.

“I want t’ tell ye, friend,” the lumber-jack added, with honest reverence, “that he’s a damned good Christian, if ever there was one. Ain’t that right, Billy?”

“Higgins,” the bartender agreed, “is a square man.”

The lumber-jack reverted to the previous interest. All at once he forgot about the Pilot.

“Hey, Billy!” he cried, severely, “where’d ye put that bottle?”

Higgins was then in the snake-room of the place—a foul compartment into which the stupefied and delirious are thrown when they are penniless—searching the pockets of the drunken boy from Toronto for some leavings of his wages. “Not a cent!” said he, bitterly. “They haven’t left him a cent! They’ve got every penny of three months’ wages! Don’t blame the boy,” he pursued, in pain and infinite sympathy, easing the lad’s head on the floor; “it isn’t all his fault. He came out of the camps without telling me—and some cursed tin-horn gambler met him, I suppose—and he’s only a boy—and they didn’t give him a show—and, oh, the pity of it! he’s been here only two days!”

The boy was in a stupor of intoxication, but presently revived a little, and turned very sick.

“That you, Pilot?” he said.

“Yes, Jimmie.”

“A’ right.”

“Feel a bit better now?”

“Uh-huh.”

The boy sighed and collapsed unconscious: Higgins remained in the weltering filth of the room to ease and care for him. “Don’t wait for me, old man,” said he, looking up from the task. “I’ll be busy for a while.”

III

IN THE SNAKE-ROOM

Frank necessity invented the snake-room of the lumber-town saloon. There are times of gigantic debauchery—the seasons of paying off. A logger then once counted one hundred and fifty men drunk in a single hotel of a town of twelve hundred inhabitants where fourteen other bar-rooms heartily flourished. They overflowed the snake-rooms—they lay snoring on the bar-room floor—they littered the office—they were doubled up on the stair-landings and stretched out in the corridors. Drunken men stumbled over drunken men and fell helpless beside them; and still, in the bar-room (said he)—beyond the men who slept or writhed on the floor and had been kicked out of the way—the lumber-jacks were clamoring three deep for whiskey at the bar. Hence the snake-room: one may not eject drunken men into bitter weather and leave them to freeze. Bartenders and their helpers carry them off to the snake-room when they drop; others stagger in of their own notion and fall upon their reeking fellows. There is no arrangement of the bodies—but a squirming heap of them, from which legs and arms protrude, wherein open-mouthed bearded faces appear in a tangle of contorted limbs. Men moan and laugh and sob and snore; and some cough with early pneumonia, some curse, some sing, some horribly grunt; and some, delirious, pick at spiders in the air, and talk to monkeys, and scream out to be saved from dogs and snakes. Men reel in yelling groups from the bar to watch the spectacle of which they will themselves presently be a part.

IV THE CLOTH IN QUEER PLACES

This is the simple and veracious narrative of the singular ministerial activities of the Rev. Francis Edmund Higgins, a Presbyterian, who regularly ministers, without a church, acting under the Board of Home Missions, to the lumber-jacks of the remoter Minnesota woods. Singular ministerial activities these are, truly, appealing alike to those who believe in God and to such as may deny Him. They are particularly robust. When we walked from Camp Two to Camp Four of a midwinter day, with the snow crackling underfoot and the last sunset light glowing like heavenly fire beyond the great green pines—

“Boys,” said Higgins, gravely, “there’s just one thing that I regret; and if I had to prepare for the ministry over again, I wouldn’t make the same mistake: I ought to have taken boxing lessons.”

No other minister of the gospel, possibly, could with perfect propriety, in the sight of the unrighteous, who are the most severe critics of propriety in this respect, lean easily over a bar (his right foot having of long habit found the rail), and in terms of soundest common sense reasonably urge upon the man behind the wet mahogany the shame of his situation and the virtue of abandoning it; nor could any other whom I know truculently crowd into the howling, brawling, drunken throng of lumber-jacks, all gone mad of adulterated liquor, and with any confident show of authority command the departure of some weakling who had followed the debauch of his mates far beyond his little strength.

“Come out o’ this!” says Higgins.

“Ah, go chase yerself, Pilot!” is the indulgent response, most amiably delivered, with a loose, kind smile.

“Come on!” says Higgins, in wrath.

“Ah, Pilot,” the youngster pleads, “I’m on’y havin’ a little fun. You go chase yerself, Pilot,” says he, affectionately, with no offence whatsoever, “an’ le’ me alone.”

The Rev. Francis Edmund Higgins, in the midst of an unholy up-roar—the visible manifestation, this environment and behavior, it seems to me, of the noise and smell and very abandonment of hell—is privileged to seize the youngster by the throat and in no unnecessarily gentle way to jerk him into the clean, frosty air of the winter night. In these days of his ministry, nobody—the situation being an ordinary one—would interfere. If, however, it seemed unwise to proceed in this way, Higgins would at least strip the boy of his savings.

“Hand over!” says he.

The boy hands over every cent he possesses. If Higgins suspects, he will turn out the pockets. And later—late in the night—with the wintry dawn breaking, it may be—the sleepless Pilot carries the boy off on his back to such saving care as he may be able to exercise. To a gentle care—a soft, tender solicitude, all separate from the wild doings of the bar-room, and all under cover, even as between the boy and the Pilot. I have been secretly told that the good Pilot is at such times like a brooding mother to the lusty, wayward youngsters of the camps, who, in their prodigality, do but manfully emulate the most manly behavior of which they are aware.

To confuse Higgins with cranks and freaks would be most injuriously to wrong him. He is not an eccentric; his hair is cropped, his finger nails are clean, there is a commanding achievement behind him, he has manners, a mind variously interested, as the polite world demands. Nor is he a fanatic; he would spit cant from his mouth in disgust if ever it chanced within. He is a reasonable and highly efficient worker—a man dealing with active problems in an intelligent and thoroughly practical way; and he is as self-respecting and respected in his peculiar field as any pulpit parson of the cities—and as sane as an engineer. He is a big, jovial, rotund, rosy-cheeked Irish-Canadian (pugnacious

upon occasion), with a boy's smile and eyes and laugh, with a hearty voice and way, with a head held high, with a man's clean, confident soul gazing frankly from unwavering eyes: five foot nine and two hundred pounds to him (which allows for a little rippling fat). He is big of body and heart and faith and outlook and charity and inspiration and belief in the work of his hands; and his life is lived joyously—notwithstanding the dirty work of it—though deprived of the common delights of life. He has no church: he straps a pack on his back and tramps the logging-roads from camp to camp, whatever the weather—twelve miles in a blizzard at forty below—and preaches every day—and twice and three times a day—in the bunk-houses; and he buries the boys—and marries them to the kind of women they know—and scolds and beseeches and thrashes them, and banks for them.

God knows what they would do without Higgins! He is as necessary to them now—as much sought in trouble and as heartily regarded—as a Presbyterian minister of the old school; he is as close and helpful and dogmatic in intimate affairs.

“Pilot,” said Ol’ Man Johnson, “take this here stuff away from me!”

The Sky Pilot rose astounded. Ol’ Man Johnson, in the beginnings of his spree in town—half a dozen potations—was frantically emptying his pockets of gold (some hundreds of dollars) on the preacher's bed in the room above the saloon; and he blubbered like a baby while he threw the coins from him.

“Keep it away from me!” Ol’ Man Johnson wept, drawing back from the money with a gesture of terror. “For Christ's sake, Pilot!—keep it away from me!”

The Pilot understood.

“If you don't,” cried Ol’ Man Johnson, “it'll kill me!”

Higgins sent a draft for the money to Ol’ Man Johnson when Ol’ Man Johnson got safely home to his wife in Wisconsin. Another spree in town would surely have killed Ol’ Man Johnson.

V JACK IN CAMP

The lumber-jack in camp can, in his walk and conversation, easily be distinguished from the angels; but at least he is industrious and no wild brawler. He is up and heartily breakfasted and off to the woods, with a saw or an axe, at break of day; and when he returns in the frosty dusk he is worn out with a man's labor, and presently ready to turn in for sound sleep. They are all in the pink of condition then—big and healthy and clear-eyed, and wholly able for the day's work. A stout, hearty, kindly, generous crew, of almost every race under the sun—in behavior like a pack of boys. It is the Saturday in town—and the occasional spree—and the final debauch (which is all the town will give them for their money) that litters the bar-room floor with the wrecks of these masterful bodies.

Walking in from Deer River of a still, cold afternoon—with the sun low and the frost crackling under foot and all round about—we encountered a strapping young fellow bound out to town afoot.

“Look here, boy!” said Higgins; “where *you* going?”

“Deer River, sir.”

“What for?”

There was some reply to this. It was a childish evasion; the boy had no honest business out of camp, with the weather good and the work pressing, and he knew that Higgins understood. Meanwhile, he kicked at the snow, with a sheepish grin, and would not look the Pilot in the eye.

“You're from Three, aren't you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“*I thought* I saw you there in the fall,” said the Pilot. “Well, boy,” he continued, putting a strong hand on the other's shoulder, “look me in the eye.”

The boy looked up.

“God help you!” said the Pilot, from his heart; “nobody else 'll give you a show in Deer River.”

We walked on, Higgins in advance, downcast. I turned, presently, and discovered that the young lumber-jack was running.

“Can't get there fast enough,” said Higgins. “I saw that his tongue was hanging out.”

“He seeks his pleasure,” I observed.

“True,” Higgins replied; “and the only pleasure the men of Deer River will let him have is what he'll buy and pay for over a bar, until his last red cent is gone. It isn't right, I tell you,” he exploded; “the boy hasn't a show, and it isn't right!”

It was twelve miles from Camp Three to Deer River. We met other men on the road to town—men with wages in their pockets, trudging blithely toward the lights and liquor and drunken hilarity of the place. It was Saturday; and on Monday, ejected from the saloons, they would inevitably stagger back to the camps. I have heard of one kindly logger who dispatches a team to the nearest town every Monday morning to gather up his stupefied lumber-jacks from the bar-room floors and snake-rooms and haul them into the woods.

VI

“TO THE TALL TIMBER!”

It is “back to the tall timber” for the penniless lumber-jack. Perhaps the familiar slang is derived from the necessity. I recall an intelligent Cornishman—a cook with a kitchen kept sweet and clean—who with a laugh contemplated the catastrophe of the snake-room, and the nervous collapse, and the bedraggled return to the woods.

“Of course,” said he, “that’s where I’ll land in the spring!”

It amazed me.

“Can’t help it,” said he. “That’s where my stake ’ll go. Jake Boore ’ll get the most of it; and among the lot of them they’ll get every cent. I’ll blow four hundred dollars in two weeks—if I’m lucky enough to make it go that far.”

“When you know that they rob you?”

“Certainly they will rob me; everybody knows *that!* But every year for nine years, now, I’ve tried to get out of the woods with my stake, and haven’t done it. I intend to this year; but I know I won’t. I’ll strike for Deer River when I get my money; and I’ll have a drink at Jake Boore’s saloon, and when I get that drink down I’ll be on my way. It isn’t because I want to; it’s because I have to.”

“But why?”

“They won’t let you do anything else,” said the cook. “I’ve tried it for nine years. Every winter I’ve said to myself that I’ll get out of the woods in the spring, and every spring I’ve been kicked out of a saloon dead broke. It’s always been back to the tall timber for me.”

“What you need, Jones,” said Higgins, who stood by, “is the grace of God in your heart.”

Jones laughed.

“You hear me, Jones?” the Pilot repeated. “What you need is the grace of God in your heart.”

“The Pilot’s mad,” the cook laughed, but not unkindly. “The Pilot and I don’t agree about religion,” he explained; “and now he’s mad because I won’t go to church.”

This banter did not disturb the Pilot in the least.

“I’m not mad, Jones,” said he. “All I’m saying,” he repeated, earnestly, fetching the cook’s flour-board a thwack with his fist, “is that what you need is the grace of God in your heart.”

Again Jones laughed.

“That’s all right, Jones!” cried the indignant preacher. “But I tell you that what you need is the grace of God in your heart. *And you know it!* And when I get you in the snake-room of Jake Boore’s saloon in Deer River next spring,” he continued, in righteous anger, “*I’ll rub it into you!* Understand me, Jones? When I haul you out of the snake-room, and wash you, and get you sobered up, I’ll rub it into you that what you need is the grace of God in your heart to give you the first splinter of a man’s backbone.”

“I’ll be humble—then,” said Jones.

“You’ll have to be a good deal more than humble, friend,” Higgins retorted, “before there’ll be a man in the skin that *you* wear.”

“I don’t doubt it, Pilot.”

“Huh!” the preacher sniffed, in fine scorn.

The story fortunately has an outcome. I doubt that the cook took the Pilot’s prescription; but, at any rate, he had wisdom sufficient to warn the Pilot when his time was out, and his money was in his pocket, and he was bound out of the woods in another attempt to get through Deer River. It was midwinter when the Pilot prescribed the grace of God; it was late in the spring when the cook secretly warned him to stand by the forlorn essay; and it was later still—the drive was on—when, one night, as we watched the sluicing, I inquired.

“Jones?” the Pilot replied, puzzled. “What Jones?”

“The cook who couldn’t get through.”

“Oh,” said the Pilot, “you mean Jonesy. Well,” he added, with satisfaction, “Jonesy got through this time.”

I asked for the tale of it.

“You’d hardly believe it,” said the Pilot, “but we cashed that big check right in Jake Boore’s saloon. I wouldn’t have it any other way, and neither would Jonesy. In we went, boys, brave as lions; and when Jake Boore passed over the money Jonesy put it in his pocket. Drink? Not he! Not a drop would he take. They tried all the tricks they knew, but Jonesy wouldn’t fall to them. They even put liquor under his nose; and Jonesy let it stay there, and just laughed. I tell you boys, it was fine! It was *great*

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