



## THE HARDWOOD PILE

Tins is a world wherein virtue often goes unrewarded. If R. B. Wilcox had not been such a moral man, he might have gotten the true story of the haunted woodpile for his book on the lore and legends of upstate New York. Mr. Wilcox's morals, alone, were not responsible for his failure to get the inside dope. There was also the fact that carrot-red hair did not appeal to him.

The hair belonged to Miss Aceria Jones, the hostess at The Pines. This was a self-styled tea room in the village of Gahato, county of Herkimer, State of New York. The Pines, despite the misleading sobriquet of "tea room," served liquor of all degrees of hardness and had a passable dance orchestra. Not the least of its attractions was Miss Aceria Jones. She was an uncommonly pretty girl, looking rather like a plane hostess.

R. B. Wilcox had landed at The Pines in the course of his prowling around the country -after lore and legends. After dinner he tried to collect some material. The restaurateur, a Mr. Earl Delacroix, was out; so the writer tackled Miss Jones. She gave him a little lore on the theory and practice of hostessing in an Adirondack sawmill town, but nothing that could be called a legend. To his questions about the haunted woodpile, she replied that she paid no attention to such silly stories.

In the hope of squeezing a little usable copy out of his charming questionee, Wilcox tried praise: "I'm surprised that you live up here in the sticks. I should think with your looks you could get a job in the city."

"You mean Utica?"

"New York."

"No, I would not like that. No trees."

"You're crazy about trees?"

"Well, some trees. If there was a job in a place with a Norway maple in front of it, I would take it at once."

"A what in front of the place?"

"A Norway maple-Acer platanoides. Do you know of a place that has one such?"

"\Why. . . uh. . . no. But I don't know much about trees. Is that a native species?"

"No, a European."

"Wouldn't another species do?"

"No; it must be that. I cannot explain. But, Mr. Wilcox, it would mean much to me." She rolled her large eyes meltingly at him.

Wilcox's morals began to assert themselves. He said stiffly: "I'm afraid I don't know what I could do for you."

"You could find a nice, clean place that has a job open, and a Norway maple growing in front of it. If you did, I would like you very, very much." Another roll of the optics.

At the second "very," Wilcox could fairly feel his morals tugging him toward the door. He, or rather his morals, may have been doing Miss Jones an



injustice. But he did not stay to investigate this melancholy redhead's passion for Norway maples, or her definition of "very." He paused only long enough to assure Miss Jones that he would let her know if he heard of anything. Then he passed out of the restaurant and out of this tale.

To get a proper perspective, we must go back to 1824. In that year there landed in New York a dark, paunchy, dignified man who said he was August Rudli of Zurich, Switzerland. He was, he said, a member of an old Swiss banking family, and also related to the Wittelsbachs, so that he was about forty-third in line for the Bavarian throne. He had been a colonel under Napoleon—he had a medal to prove it—and, finding the banking business too stuffy, had taken his share of the family fortune and come to America.

But it must be recorded that Herr Rudli's story contained one or two inexactitudes. He was related neither to the Wittelsbachs nor to any family of bankers. He had seen no military service; the medal was a phony. He had been in the banking business, but not in the way he had said. He had risen by sheer merit to the post of cashier. Thereupon, on a dark and stormy night, he had walked off with all the assets not securely nailed down.

As people were seldom if ever extradited across the Atlantic in those days, at least for embezzlement, Herr Rudli might have enjoyed the fruits of his enterprise for years, if he had not fallen in with an even slicker article. This article, one John A. Spooner, separated Rudli from most of his cash for a "country estate" consisting of several thousand acres of granite ridges, bog holes, and black flies in the Adirondacks. Rudli spent most of the rest in having a road run in, a biggish house built, and gewgaws imported from Europe to furnish the house. Among the more puzzling importations were two young Norway maples, which were planted in front of the house. Rudli's tract was already covered by a dense mixed forest consisting partly of sugar maple, red maple, and silver maple, the first of which grow at least as large and as fast as any European maple. But Rudli had his own ideas about being a country gentleman, and the planting of imported trees evidently formed part of them.

Rudli never learned how thoroughly he had been roodled. He died of pneumonia in the middle of the first winter he attempted to spend in his new house.

After Rudli's death, the tract went through various hands. Some of it ended up as the property of the International Paper Co.; some went to the State of New York; the piece on which Rudli's house had stood went to a man named Delahanty. After a century of neglect, all that could be seen of the house was a broad, low mound covered with leaf mold, from which one stone chimney stuck up. The clearing in which the house had stood and most of the road leading to it were completely grown up. Of the two Norway maples, one had died in infancy. The other was now a fine, big tree.

Delahanty the elder sold his pulpwood stumpage in 1903. Thirtyfive years later, Delahanty the younger sold the hardwood on the tract. In went the lumberjacks through the snow, and down came the beeches, birches, and hard maples. Down, too, came Rudli's surviving Norway maple, mistaken for a sugar maple, the "hard" maple of the lumberman.



In due course, the two logs that had been cut from this tree arrived in the hot pond of Dan Pringle's sawmill at Gahato. The name of the village is Mohawk for "log-in-the-water"; very appropriate for a sawmill town. In the spring, they were hauled up the jacker chain and sawn into about nine hundred feet of one-inch boards. These were put in Pile No. 1027, which consisted of one-inch FAS hard

maple. FAS-Firsts and Seconds-is the highest hardwood classification.

The following summer, Pringle got a hardwood order from Hoyt, his wholesaler, that included twenty thousand feet of one-inch FAS hard maple. The yard crew loaded the top halves of Piles No. 1027 and 1040 into a box car. The foreman, Joe Larochelle, ordered them to transfer the remaining half of Pile 1027 to Pile 1040. So Henri Michod lowered himself from the hardwood tramway to the top of Pile No. 1027. He picked up a board and handed it to Olaf Bergen, who turned and plunked it on a lumber truck, which stood on the tramway with its wheels chocked. Bergen took his pipe out long enough to spit-aiming between the tramway and the pile-steered the pipe back through the mossy curtain of yellow hair that hung from his upper lip, grabbed the next board, and so forth. 'When Michod had finished the topmost course of boards, he gathered up the stickers-the one-by-two's that keep the courses apart-piled them on the tramway, and went on to the next course.

That was all very well. But when Michod started on the fourth course, the pile began to sway. First it swayed east and west, then north and south, then with a circular motion. It also set up a dismal moaning and squeaking as board and stickers rubbed together.

Olaf Bergen stared in childish wonder at the phenomenon. "Hey, Henri, what the Holy Jumping Judas you doing with that pile?"

"Me?" cried the harassed Michod. "I don't do nothing. It does it. Earthquake, maybe. I think I get the hell off." He jumped off the pile on a lower one with a clatter.

"Can't be no earthquake," Bergen called down to him. "You don't see the other piles actin' up, do you?"

"I~o."

"Well, if it was an earthquake, the other piles would have swayed, too, wouldn't they? So there wasn't no earthquake. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"Yeah? Then what makes the pile sway?"

"Nothin'. An earthquake's the only thing that could, and there wasn't no earthquake. So the pile didn't sway. Now get back up and gimme some more boards."

"So the pile didn't sway, huh? Les nuts, Mr. Bergen. I know better. And, by damn, I don't get back up there."

"Aw, come on, Henri. Stands to reason it must have been your imagination."

"All right, you stand on the pile then. I take the tramway." Michod swarmed up onto the trestle. Bergen, Jooking confident, jumped down onto No. 1027.

But No. 1027 had its own ideas, if lumber piles can be said to have ideas. The pile began to sway again. Bergen, staggering to keep his balance, perforce



had to sway, too. And with each sway his chinablue eyes got bigger.

The motion was not a very unpleasant or difficult one; in fact, it was rather like that of the deck of a ship in a stiff breeze. But that did not calm Olaf Bergen. The trouble was that this lumber pile was not the deck of a ship. Lumber piles do not, normally, act that way. A pile that does so is unnatural, perhaps unholy. Olaf Bergen wanted no part of such a pile; not even a splinter.

So he shrieked: "The damn thing's haunted!" and tumbled off even more quickly than Michod had done. There was a brief swishing of his work shoes through the weeds, and the lumber yards knew him no more, at least not that day.

Henri Michod sat down on the tramway and took out a pack of cigarettes. He would have to report this singular occurrence to Joe Larochelle, but that was no reason for not relaxing a little first.

Then he heard Larochelle's quick footsteps coming down the tramway and put away his cigarettes. Nobody walked quite so fast as Larochelle. He always arrived places slightly out of breath, and when he talked his sentences fell over one another. By these means he created an illusion of being an intensely busy man, passionately devoted to his employer's interests. Medium-sized, baldish, and snaggletoothed, he trotted up and gasped: "Wh-where . . - where's Ole?"

"Ole?" replied Michod. "He's gone home."

"You mean to say that lousy guy went home without saying anything to me and here I've got three cars of grain-door board to get loaded in time for the noon freight?"

"That's it, Joe."

"Was he sick?"

"Maybe. He got kind of upset when this pile began to sway under him."

"Well, of all the lousy tricks! You wait here; I'll send Jean Camaret over from the pine tram. What the hell kind of a place does he think this is, anyhow?"- and Larochelle was off again.

Presently Jean Camaret appeared. He was older and even beefier than Henri Michod, who was pretty beefy himself. Between themselves they spoke Canuck French, which is not quite the same as French French. More than one Frenchman has indignantly denied that it is French at all.

Camaret got on Pile No. 1027. Before he had time to do more, the pile began to sway again. Camaret looked up. "Is it that I am dizzy, or is it that this sacred pile shakes herself?"

"The pile shakes herself, I think. It is a thing most extraordinary. It is not the wind, and it is not the earthquake. But it makes nothing. Give me a board just the same."

Camaret was, through no desire of his own, giving a first-rate imitation of a reed in a gale, but anyone could see that his heart was not in the part. He was not suited to it. There was nothing reedlike about him. He spread his feet to brace himself, made a fumbling effort to pick up a board, then turned a large, red joyless face up to Michod.

"I cannot move," he said. "This unhappy pile gives me the sickness of the sea. Aid me to mount, my old."

His old helped him on the tramway. He sat down, put his head in his



hands, and groaned like a soul in purgatory.

Michod grinned unsympathetically. At this rate, he would get a day's pay for doing no work at all. He started to take out his cigarettes again, but Joe Larochelle bustled down the tramway. "Whwhat. . . what's the matter with Jean? Is he sick or something?"

Camaret groaned again, more horribly. "I have the sick to the stomach. The pile goes eomme ci-comme ça."

"\Vhaddya mean the pile goes this way and that way? What the hell's the matter with you? Scared because a pile sways a little?"

"This pile is different. You get on and see."

"Huh! Never thought I'd see a grown man like you scared of a little pile. What the hell, I'm not scared-" And Larochelle hopped off the tramway. The pile began its rocking-chair act. Larochelle yelped and scrambled back on the trestle.

"Anybody can see that pile ain't safe!" he bawled. "Must be the foundation beams are gone all to hell. Why the hell didn't you tell me sooner, Henri? Want us to break our necks?"

Henri Michod knew better than to argue. He grinned cynically and shrugged.

Larochelle concluded: "Well, anyway, you guys go over and help on the pine tram. Come back here at one."

When Camaret and Michod returned to Pile No. 1027 after the noon hour, they saw that Larochelle had tied it to the neighboring piles with a half-inch rope. He explained: "The foundation beams are okay; I don't see what the hell's wrong unless the supports are high in the middle so she's-whatcha call it?-unstable. But she ought to hold still with all this guying."

Neither yard worker showed any enthusiasm for getting back on the pile. Finally Larochelle shouted: "Damn it, Henri, you get on that pile or I'll put you on the soda tank!"

So Michod got, albeit sullenly. Larochelle referred to the tank of preserving solution in which freshly sawn pine planks were dunked. In pulling boards out of this tank, one had to move quickly to keep the next board from hitting one, and the solution made one's hands crack after a day. Larochelle's favorite method of settling arguments was to threaten to put a man on the disagreeable tank job out of his regular turn.

They loaded the truck, pushed it down to Pile No. 1040, and unloaded it. When this had been done twice, Larochelle put another man on the job, to stand on the edge of the pile and pass boards up. No. 1027 groaned and creaked a good deal, but the guying kept it from doing its hula.

The new man, Edward Gallivan, picked up a board and handed it to Michod, who passed it up to Camaret. Gallivan had picked up another board, when the first board twisted itself out of Camaret's hands. It flew back down, landing on Gallivan's board. Thus Camaret found himself boardless, while Gallivan had two boards.

Now Edward Gallivan liked mill-yard work well enough, but not to the point of collecting hard-maple planks for the fun of it. He cried:

"Hey, Frenchy, watch what you're doin'! You damn near took the head off me with that thing."



Camaret muttered something apologetic and looked puzzled. Michod passed the errant board up again. Again it twisted itself away from Camaret and returned to the pile with a clatter.

Camaret looked down with an expression of perplexity, suspicion, reproach, and growing alarm. That is, he would have looked that way if the human face were capable of expressing so many emotions at once. "Henri," he said, "did you grab that board away from me?"

"Why would I go grabbing boards away from you? I got enough boards already."

"I don't ask that. Did you snatch her?"

"No, by damn, I didn't. I ain't no board-snatcher."

"Now, boys," said Gallivan, "we ain't getting nowheres arguin' like this. You do it over and I'll watch."

So Michod passed the board up a third time. When Camaret took it, it swung wildly and twisted like a live thing. Camaret released it to keep from being pulled off the tramway, and it floated gently back to the place from which Gallivan had picked it. "Saints preserve us!" cried Gallivan. "I don't like that."

Michod folded his arms triumphantly. "You satisfied, Jean? I didn't have nothing to do with that."

Camaret replied hollowly: "Me, I am satisfied. I am satisfied too much. I get the sick to the stomach when I think of that. You tell Joe I go. I go home, get drunk, beat my wife, forget all about these damn boards."

Joe Larochelle blew up when the state of affairs was explained to him. Ned Gallivan smiled paternally, and Henri Michod shrugged. Larochelle had recently turned in a certain credit slip for eight hundred feet of No. 1 Common Birch, of which the local customer had not returned all the allegedly unused lumber. Maybe it was a bona fide mistake; maybe Larochelle had not split the proceeds of the discrepancy with the customer. But Gallivan and Michod knew about the slip and were pretty sure of their own positions in consequence.

Finally Larochelle yelled: "All right, all right! I'll show you how to handle these jumping boards. You wait here-" When he returned he carried a double-bitted ax. "Now," he said, "Henri, you hand a board to Ned."

When Gallivan took the board, it apparently tried to pull him off the trestle. Larochelle, standing beside him, smacked the board with the flat of the ax. It quivered a bit and subsided.

"Ouch!" said Gallivan. "You're making my hands sting."

"Never mind that, it's the way to handle 'em. I'm the guy who has to figure everything out-" Larochelle's expedient seemed to have cowed the boards, temporarily at least. They went up without protest.

Michod thought, that was just like the stupid, pretending that nothing was wrong. Anybody could see that here was something of the most extraordinary. That was the way of the world. The stupid like Larochelle had the authority, while the intelligents like himself . . .

This reverie was interrupted by another singular occurrence. Michod carelessly shot a board up to Gallivan when the latter was busy fishing his eating tobacco out of his pants pocket. Gallivan made a one-handed grab and missed. It did not much matter, for the board kept right on going. It described a



graceful arc and settled cozily into its appointed place on the truck.

"Hey!" yelled Larochelle. "Don't go throwing those boards; you're liable to hit somebody."

Michod kept silent, not wanting to disillusion the others about his strength and adroitness. Gallivan caught the next board; it hoisted him a foot into the air before he stopped it.

"What the hell are you trying to do, Henri?" cried the surprised Gallivan.

It was all very well to get credit for the mill yard equivalent of tossing the caber, but to be blamed for all the vagaries of these athletic boards was something else. So Michod spoke up:

"I'm not trying to do nothing, by damn. I-" He was interrupted by finding his hands unexpectedly full of board. But the board did not stay there. It ripped his mittens in its eagerness to get up into Gallivan's hands, and thence on the truck.

Larochelle shrieked: "Stop it! Stop them!" As well try to stop a nestful of hornets by reading Jean Jacques Rousseau to them. All over the pile, boards were bouncing into Michod's uneager grasp, then flinging themselves up to Gallivan and on the truck. The load grew by leaps and even a bound or two. When they stopped, the truck was piled dangerously high. The last board took time out to thwack Joe Larochelle in passing. The foreman toppled from the tramway. As he did so he grabbed Gallivan for support. Both landed on the unfortunate Michod with a great clatter.

They picked themselves up to see the truck moving down the track of its own accord. Larochelle, who among his very modest list of virtues certainly counted energy, scrambled back onto the tramway in pursuit. The truck stopped in front of No. 1040, and its load cascaded crashingly off.

"Hey, look down!" said Michod.

The three men got down on their knees and peered over the edge of the trestle. A board had fallen off the truck during its trip and gone down between the tramway and the piles. It was now crawling after the fashion of an inchworm through the weeds. Arriving at No. 1040, it began to hump itself up the pile's side. Now and then it would be jerked upward without visible effort on its part. Its motions

were like those of a rather obtuse puppy whose owner is trying to teach it tricks and putting it through them by force majeure when it fails to get the idea. Finally, it left the stepboards on the side of the pile and swooped up on the disorderly tangle on top of No. 1040.

Joe Larochelle did not acknowledge defeat easily. No matter how red-handed one caught him in a bit of grafting, he was as firm as an early Christian martyr and as plausible as a street map in his denials. But now he said:

"It's too much for me. You boys can go home; I gotta see the boss."

Joe Larochelle repaired to Pringle's office, which was downstairs in his home. He told his story.

Dan Pringle was a small, plump man with a large watch chain decorated with an incisor tooth of *Cervus canadensis*-the wapiti. He asked: "You been drinking lately, Joe?"

"No, Mr. Pringle. I ain't touched a thing."



Pringle got up and sniffed. -"Well, I guess maybe not. Do you suppose a union organizer was back of this?" -

"No, there ain't been any around. I been watching for them."

"Did you look between the piles and under the tramways?"

"Sure, I looked everywhere."

"Well, maybe. They're apt to sneak in no matter how careful you are, you know. Suppose you come back after supper and we'll take a look at these fancy boards. And bring a flashlight. We'll look around for union organizers, just in case."

Pringle and Larochelle arrived at the lumber yard as the sun was sliding down behind Gahato Mountain. Pringle insisted on creeping around the piles with his flashlight as if he were playing gangsters and G-men. He was, he explained, hoping to surprise a lurking union organizer. At Pile No. 1040 Larochelle said:

"That's her. See them boards lying in a heap on top?"

Pringle saw the boards. He also saw a young woman sitting on the edge of the pile, swinging her sandaled feet. Her green dress had obviously seen better days. About her hair, the kindest comment would be that it looked "nonchalant" or "carefree." It had apparently been red, but it had been singed off. It had grown out again but was still black at the ends and presented a distressing aspect.

"Good evening," said the young woman. "You are Mr. Pringle, the owner of the sawmill, are you not?"

"Why-uh-maybe," said Pringle suspiciously. "Who-I mean, what can I do for you?"

"Huh?" said a puzzled voice at his side. "What do you mean, Mr. Pringle?" Joe Larochelle was looking at him, ignoring the girl, whose feet were a few feet away on a level with his face.

"Why-I was talking-"

"You are the owner, Mr. Pringle? I have heard the men talking about you," said the girl.

"Just thinking out loud?" said Larochelle.

"Yes- I mean maybe," said the confused Pringle. "She just asked me-"

"WTho's 'she'?" asked Larochelle.

"That young lady."

"What young lady?"

Pringle decided that his foreman was simply dithering and asked the girl: "You're not a union organizer, are you?"

The girl and Larochelle answered simultaneously: "I don't know what that is. I don't think so." "Who, me? Aw, come on, Mr. Pringle, you oughta know I hate 'em as much as you-"

"Not you, Joe!" cried Pringle. "Not you! I was just asking her-" Larochelle's patience began to wear thin. "And I been asking you who 'her' is?"

"How should I know? I've been trying to find out myself."

"I think we're kinda mixed up. Here you talk about some skirt and I ask who and you say you don't know. That don't make sense, does it?"

Pringle wiped his forehead.

The girl said: "I would like to see you, Mr. Pringle, only without this





M'sieu' Larochelle."

"M.Te'll see, miss," said Pringle.

Larochelle spoke: "Say, Mr. Pringle, are you feeling well? Damned if you don't sound like you was talking to somebody who ain't there."

Pringle began to feel like a rat in the hands of an experimental psychologist who is, with the best of motives, trying to drive it crazy. "Don't be ridiculous, Joe. I sound as though I were talking to somebody who is there."

"I know; that's just the trouble."

"Wfhat's the trouble?"

"There ain't anybody there, of course!"

This statement, despite its alarming implications, gave Pringle a feeling of relief. Theretofore, this maddening dispute had been like fighting blindfolded with broadswords at sixty paces. Now he had a solid point of disagreement. He said sharply: "Are you sure you'ra feeling well, Joe?"

"Sure, of course, I'm well."

"Do you, or don't you, see a girl in a green dress sitting on the edge of the pile?"

"No. I just said there ain't anybody there."

"Didn't ask you whether anybody was there, but whether you saw anybody there."

"Well, if there was anybody there I'd see 'em, wouldn't I? Makes sense, don't it?"

"We'll waive that."

"Wave what? This green dress I'm supposed to see that ain't there?"

Pringle danced distractedly on his short legs. "Never mind, never mind! Have you heard a woman's voice coming from that pile?"

"No, of course not. What gives you the idea-"

"All right, all right, that's what I wanted to know. You can run along home now. I'll do the rest of the investigating myself. No"-as Larochelle started to protest-"I mean that."

"Oh, all right. But look out the union organizers don't get you." Larochelle grinned maliciously and trotted off. Pringle winced visibly at the last words but bravely faced the pile.

"Now, young lady," he said grimly, "are you sure you're not a union organizer?"

"Would I know if I was, Mr. Pringle?"

"You bet you would. I guess you aren't one, maybe. More likely an hallucination."

"Mr. Pringle! I did not ask to see you so you could call me bad names."

"No offense meant. But something's very funny around here. Either Joe or I are seeing things."

"If you have good eyes, you always see things. What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing, when the things are there. What I'm trying to find out is, are you real or am I imagining you?"

"You see me, no?"

"Sure. But that doesn't prove you're real."

"VsThat do I do to prove I am real?"



"I'm not just sure myself. You could put out your hand," he said doubtfully. The girl reached down, and Pringle touched her hand. "Feels real enough. But maybe I'm imagining the feel. How come Joe didn't see you?"

"I did not want him to."

"Oh, just like that, eh? You don't want him to, so he looks right through you."

"Naturally."

"It may be natural to you. But when I look at somebody I generally see him. Let's forget that question for a while. Let's not even think about it. If I'm not nuts already, I will be soon at this rate. Just what is all this funny business?"

"I don't think it is funny to have my home broken up."

"Huh?"

"You broke up my home."

"I broke up your home. I broke up your home. Young lady- What's your name, by the way?"

"Aceria."

"Miss Aceria, or Aceria something?"

"Just Aceria."

"Oh, well, skip it. I used to consider myself a pretty intelligent man. Not any parlor-pink intellectual, you understand, but a good, competent American businessman. But I'm not sure anymore. Nothing seems to make sense. What in the name of the great horn spoon do you mean, I've broken up your home? Did I lead your husband astray, maybe?" -

"Oh, not like that. Like that!" She pointed to the tangle of boards behind her. "That was my home."

"Those boards? Come on, don't try to tell me some man of mine tore your house down and sneaked the boards onto the pile."

"Well, yes and no. Those boards were my tree."

"Your what?"

"My tree. I lived in it."

"I suppose you'll say next you were responsible for that commotion today?"

"I am afraid yes."

"Well." Others had testified to the occurrence of the commotion. Or had Pringle imagined that Joe Larochelle had told that story-

No, no, no! He wasn't going to think about that anymore. "What was the idea?"

"I wanted to keep my home together. First I tried to keep the men from moving the boards. When I could not, I hurried the last ones up to get them together again."

"What are you? Some kind of spook?"

"I am a sphenamniad. That is a kind of wood nymph. Some people would say dryad, but that is not just right. They are oak spirits. I am a maple spirit. A man brought my tree from Austria more than a hundred years ago. Last winter your men cut my tree down. I could not stop them, because I was hibernating, I think you call it, and by the time I woke up it was too late. That is how my hair got burned, when the men burned the branches and tops. It has grown out, but I know it looks terrible. I cannot leave my home on weekdays to go to the



hairdresser, for fear the men will move the boards."

"You mean those aren't real hard maple?" snapped Pringle with sudden alertness. He climbed the side of the pile with an agility remarkable in a man of his age and girth. He looked at the boards with his flashlight. "Yeah, the grain isn't quite the same. Let's see; if they fooled the grader. . . I guess maybe they can go out with the rest on Tuesday."

"You mean you are going to sell these boards?"

"Sure. Just got a big order from Hoyt."

"What will happen to them?"

"Dunno. They'll be made into desks and bureau drawers and things, maybe. Depends on who buys them from Hoyt."

"But you must not do that, Mr. Pringle! My home, it will be scattered. I will have no place to live."

"Can't you set up housekeeping in another tree?"

"I can only live in Norway maples, and there are no more around here."

"Well, do you want to buy them? I'll let you have them at eighty dollars a thousand, which is less than I could get in the open market."

"I have no money."

"Well then, they'll have to go out with the rest. Sorry if it inconveniences you, but the sawmill costs alone are over seven dollars a thousand, counting insurance and depreciation."

"I do not know about such things, Mr. Pringle. I know you will break up my home so I can never get it together again. You would not do that, yes? I would like you so much if you did not."

She looked appealingly at him, a tear trickling down one cheek. If she had done this earlier, while it was still light, it might have worked. But all Pringle could see of her face was a dim, pale oval in the darkness; so he snapped:

"You bet I'd do that! This is business, young lady. If I let sentiment interfere with business, I'd have gone broke long ago. Anyway, I'm not convinced that you exist. So why should I give away lumber I paid good money for to somebody who's a mere hallucination, maybe?"

"You are a bad, wicked man. I will never let you send these boards away."

"Oh," he grinned through the dark. "It's to be a fight, huh? Nobody ever accused Dan Pringle of running away from a good, honest business fight. We'll see. Good night, Miss Aceria."

Pringle was as good as his word. Monday morning, he called in Larochelle and told him to load the lumber in Pile No. 1040 that day, instead of Tuesday as planned.

Michod, Camaret, Gallivan, and Bergen all looked solemn when they saw they were to work on No. 1040. But Larochelle forestalled any objections by mention of the soda tank.

So they set up the rollers. These were objects that looked like iron ladders, except that on what would be the rungs were mounted steel sleeves rotating on ball bearings. The rollers were mounted end to end on sawhorses so that they could carry boards across the tramway and across the tops- of the two low piles between the tramway and the railroad spur.

Fassler, the inspectoi turned the first board over with the sharpened T-



piece on the end of his flexible lumber rule and made a note on his tally sheet. Gallivan, wondering if he hadn't been several kinds of fool for taking the job on Pile No. 1040, picked up the board and gave it to Michod. Michod put it on the nearest roller and shoved. Zing! went the rolls and away went the board.

In the normal course of events, the board should have continued its way to the box car, where Camaret and Bergen awaited it. Their mittens were outstretched to seize it, when it slowed down, stopped, and reversed its motion. Zing! went the rolls, but this time in reverse. Michod stared at it dumbly as it shot past under his nose, left the end of the line of rollers, and slammed down on the top of the pile.

Aceria had not been caught napping.

But Fassler knew nothing about Aceria, except for some vague talk, which he had discounted, about jumping boards. Since the tramway was between him and the box car, he could not see what had happened and assumed that somebody had pushed the board back up the rollers. He said so, with embellishments. He was a very profane man, though a slight, stoop-shouldered, harmless-looking one. People liked to play jokes on him so that they could stand around and admire his profanity.

Gallivan grinned at him. "Hey, Archie, will you say some more? Sure, it's as good as an education for a man to listen to you."

But the others were not so amused. Camaret and Bergen came up from the car. Camaret said: "I begin to get the sick to the stomach again."

Bergen said: "I'm damned if I'll work in a yard that's full of spooks." -

Michod cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "You don't believe in those things, Ole?"

"Well, not exactly. But there's a powerful lot of queer things you don't know about."

"All right. You argue. I take a rest." And Michod sat down to enjoy a smoke.

The others explained to the incredulous Fassler. Finally, not knowing what else to do, they went back to work. Michod undertook to conduct the next board personally down to the box car. It went along reluctantly; just before they arrived, it shot forward, in one door of the car and out the other into the weeds before Camaret and Bergen could stop it.

So Joe Larochelle presently found his workers sitting on the tramway and settling the affairs of the universe. He yelled:

"You get back there and load that stuff or, by jeebers, you can start looking for another job!"

Gallivan grinned. "Sure, now, wouldn't that be a terrible thing?" He lowered his voice. "And wouldn't it be terrible, Joe, if the boss found out about that credit slip you turned in for Jack Smeed?"

"I dunno what you're talking about," said Larochelle. "But, anyway, I guess there's some other stuff you can pile."

So nothing more was done to Pile No. 1040 that day. Larochelle, if he had a soul, wrestled with it mightily. He had definite orders from Pringle, but he could not adopt the usual method of enforcing them because of the delicate credit slip situation.~ By Tuesday night he worked up enough courage to



report to Pringle.

Pringle snapped: "Sounds like they're getting pretty damned independent. Maybe a union organizer got next to them, after all. Let's see. I'll think of something by tomorrow, maybe."

Neither was altogether candid. Larochelle obviously could not explain why he could not get tougher with the yard crew, and Pringle could not explain about Aceria for fear of having people tap their foreheads. He was not too sure about his sanity himself. He thought of going down the line to Utica to be looked over, but he was afraid to do that for fear the doctor would find something wrong with his clockwork.

Wednesday morning, Pringle wandered down to the sawmill. There he saw something that filled him with dismay and apprehension. It was nothing more than an elderly, dried-up man looking at a box car standing on the end of the spur. That seems like a harmless enough combination. But the elderly man was the New York Central freight agent, and the car was one that had arrived with a carload of lime some months before. Pringle had not had any place to store the lime, had not wanted to build a shed, and had not wanted to pay demurrage on the car. So he had had the car jacked down to the end of the spur and hidden with brush. There it had stood, serving as free storage space, while Pringle unloaded at his leisure and the Central wondered vaguely what had become of their car. Now the camouflage had been removed.

"We been wondering where that car was," accused Adams, the agent.

"I guess maybe it just slipped my mind," replied Pringle lamely.

"Mebbe. Looks like you owe us about three months' dernurrage. I'll get the bill out first thing tomorra'." And Adams walked off uncompromisingly.

Later, Pringle grated to Larochelle: "If I find who took that brush away, I'll kill the-"

When Larochelle departed, a woman's voice said: "I took the branches away from the car, Mr. Pringle." There she was, standing between a couple of piles.

"You-" sputtered Pringle. He got a grip on himself. "I suppose maybe you think you're smart, young lady?"

"Oh, but I know I am smart," she replied innocently. "I thought out that you wanted the car hidden all by myself."

"Well, if you think it's going to make any difference about those boards, you can change your idea. They're going in spite of hell or high water."

"Yes? We will see, as you said that night." And she vanished.

Pringle yelled after Larochelle: "Hey, Joe! Spot a car for No. 1040 right away. If the hardwood gang don't want to work on it, get some men from the pine gang." He muttered to himself: "I'll show this wood spook! Thinks she can scare me-"

But the men from the pine gang fared no better than the hardwood gang. They fared rather worse, in fact. The boards slewed crosswise on the rollers, jumped off the pile, paddled the men, and finally hit one man, Dennis Ahearn, over the head. He required two stitches in his scalp, and there were no more attempts to load the car that day.

As Ahearn himself explained: "It may be the spooks, or it may be the wood,



or it may be the sap runnin', but the devil himself won't get me to touch another of them damn live boards. What you need, Mr. Pringle, is a crew of lion tamers."

Pringle was angry enough over his failure to get the car loaded. But he was a shrewd man; he would not have lasted so long as he had in the precarious Adirondack lumber business otherwise. He suspected that Aceria would try some devilment or other in retaliation for his latest attempt to load the car. Maybe there would be an accident in the mill-so he ordered extra guard rails installed around the saws. Or, he thought, he might find some morning that all the lumber trucks were at the bottom of the Moose River. True, they weighed over three hundred pounds apiece, but he was not taking any chances with Aceria's supernatural powers, whatever they were. So he hired some of the workers overtime as night watchmen.

But Aceria was not exactly stupid either. Uninformed, perhaps, as a result of living in the woods for so many centuries, but she learned quickly. So her next attack was in a quarter that Pringle had not thought of.

Mrs. Pringle, a waspish woman, was due back at Pringle's home from a visit to some relatives. There was not much pleasurable anticipation of the reunion on either side. The corrosive effect of Helen Pringle's disposition, applied over a period of thirty years, had seen to that. But whatever Helen Pringle expected, she did not expect to

find a comely young woman sitting at her dressing table, in her bedroom, calmly drying a head of freshly shampooed carrot-red hair.

Aceria looked up with a quick smile at Mrs. Pringle's gasp. "Yes?" she said politely.

Mrs. Pringle's mouth moved soundlessly. Then she said: "Gug."

"I'm sorry."

"You. . . you. - . what. . . what are you doing in my room?"

It was the first time since she had been five years old that words had failed-or almost failed-Mrs. Pringle. But then, the fact that Aceria was not wearing her green dress might have had something to do with it.

Aceria, still polite, remarked: "Your room? Oh, I see, you are Mrs. Pringle! This is embarrassing. It was stupid of Danny not to send me away before you came back, no? But if you will leave me for a minute, I will be gone like a flash."

Thus it came to pass that Pringle found the reunion more exciting, if no more pleasant, than he had expected. Helen descended on him and demanded to know, in a voice like a band saw going through a twenty-four-inch pine log-with knots in it-who that creature was, and didn't he have sense enough to know that nobody would want an old fool like him for anything but his money, and if he had to make a fool of himself couldn't he have the decency to keep his follies out of his wife's sight, and it was a good thing she hadn't unpacked because she was leaving forthwith. Which she did.

Through this tirade, Pringle was merely bewildered until the end. As Helen slammed the door behind her he saw the light and dashed upstairs. There was nobody there, of course.

Dan Pringle started for the mill, intending to denounce Aceria up one side and down the other. But he cooled off on the way. He began to grin and arrived feeling like a triumphal procession.



He looked around to see that nobody was within hearing, and called softly: "Aceria!"

There she was, between two piles. Pringle accused: "I suppose it was you who appeared to my wife just now?"

"I am afraid yes. I do not like to interfere in the affairs of mortals. But I had to teach you not to try to move my boards."

Pringle grinned. "That's okay, little lady. Don't give it a thought. You did me a favor. If I can count on my wife staying away awhile, maybe I can really enjoy life. So better not try any more stunts, or they're liable to backfire."

"You are still determined to break up my home?"

"Yep. Might have gotten soft-hearted if you hadn't pulled all these stunts. But now that lumber's going out if it's the last thing I do."

"I warn you, Mr. Pringle. I have some more stunts, as you call them."

"Such as?"

"You will see."

Pringle's pride—at least, the quality that his competitors called his orneriness—prevented him from giving in. He could not let things go on as they were; the turmoil at the mill was costing him money every day, and he operated on a slim margin of profit. So next day he called all his mill workers together. They assembled in a silence made obtrusive by the lack of the band saw's shriek. Pringle called for volunteers for a risky job.

Those who had not experienced the athletic boards had heard about them and were not too anxious to learn more firsthand. But Pringle offered time and a half, and they had to eat. Twenty-one responded. Pringle had decided against the use of rollers. Most of the gang would simply sit on Pile No. 1040 to hold the boards down, and four men would carry each board across the intervening piles to the box car.

The boards tugged and wiggled a bit first, but Larochelle hit them with his ax and they went along. All went well until the car had been partly filled. Then there was an outbreak of yells from the car. Seconds later Michod and a man named Chisholm popped out of it, scrambled up the nearest pile to the tramway, and raced along the trestle. After them flew a short length of board. It swung this way and that, exactly as if somebody were chasing the two men and trying to hit them with it.

Pringle knew very well who was on the rear end of that piece of board, but he could not think of anything to do. While he watched, the board dropped lifeless to the tramway. Then there was a mighty clatter from the car, and most of the load of one-inch FAS maple spilled out the open car door on the side away from the piles. The boards, instead of being nice and rigid, like respectable maple planks, were writhing like a nestful of loathsome larvae. As they flopped out onto the cinders, they bent into semicircles like bows, then straightened out with a snap, and soared off toward the woods.

"After 'em!" yelled Pringle. "You, Joe! Two bits a board for every one that's brought back!"

He scrambled down and set out after his lumber as fast as his short legs would carry him. Larochelle followed. The crew's nerves, already shaken by the sight of the unnatural pursuit of Michod and Chisholm, were now completely



demoralized. But a few men followed Pringle and Larochelle.

They ran and they ran, tripping over logs and falling into brooks. Eventually Aceria ran out of ectoplasm, or something, and the boards ceased their bounding flight. They were gathered up in armfuls and brought back. They were piled on No. 1040 again. The men flatly refused to enter the box car with them, where there would be no room to dodge. It took all Pringle's authority and gifts of leadership to get them to go back to work at all; the scream of the saw did not ring out over hill and pond again until after the noon hour.

After lunch, Pringle hopped about the mill yard nervously, awaiting the counterattack, which he was sure was coming. It came soon enough. A mill like Pringle's, which is not equipped for turning out little things like chessmen, accumulates a vast amount of waste. Some of the slabs and edgings can be used as boiler fuel; some can be sold locally as firewood. But there is a surplus and also a lot of useless sawdust. On the edge of the mill yard stood a pile of sawdust twenty feet high, waiting to be fed into the waste burner, a huge sheet-iron incinerator.

Presently this pile of sawdust did a curious thing. It swirled up into a whirling, top-shaped cloud, as if a whirlwind had settled on its apex. The cloud grew until there was no more sawdust on the ground, and the cloud was as big as a house. Then it swooped hither and thither about the yard. It hid the workers from each other and stung their faces. They were not encouraged when one of them pointed out that, while the cloud itself seemed to be borne on a miniature tornado, the far-off trees stood stiff in still air. They stampeded, yelling, into the sawmill. The engineer, hearing the tumult, prudently shut down the engine, and again the band saw and the edging, trimming, and slashing saws fell silent. Nobody else was silent. Pringle, rubbing sawdust out of his bloodshot eyes, could not make himself heard at all.

The cloud made a couple of tentative rushes at the mill. But Aceria's powers were apparently not equal to getting it in a lot of separate doors and windows and reforming it inside. It hovered, teetering and swooshing menacingly, about the yard.

Many people did not love Dan Pringle, but they admitted that he had what it takes. He got the sneezing and blaspheming Larochelle and Fassler aside and sent them on an errand. They went out and ran to Fassler's car. The cloud swooped after them, but they jumped in and cranked up the windows, and off they went.

When they came back, they had two boxes full of colored sunglasses with little metal shields that made passable goggles out of them. Fassler said: "That's all there are of these things around here. We went clear up to Old Forge and cleaned out the stores. And my car stopped just before we got back. Sawdust in the carburetor."

Pringle yelled for attention. He put on a pair of the goggles, tied a handkerchief over the lower part of his face, turned up his shirt collar, pulled his hat down over his ears, and said:

"Now, if you guys have got any guts, you'll do like me and go out there and get back to work. The sawdust can't hurt you. I'm going out if I have to load the damn cars myself. Who's with me? Time and a half as long as that cloud's





around."

Nobody said anything for a minute. Then Edward Gallivan mumbled something and put on a pair of goggles. Most of the others did likewise. They were, after all, a strong, tough lot, and the sight of their fat and aging boss preparing to face the cloud alone may have shamed them.

So, masked and goggled, they went back down the tramways, clutching at the piles for support as the whirlwind buffeted them and the sawdust stung every exposed inch of skin. Pringle grinned behind his handkerchief as he watched them get slowly on with their work, while Aceria's top shrieked about their ears. So, the wood spook still thought she could lick him? If this was her last stunt, he'd won, by jeebers. Or at least it was still a draw.

- But it was not Aceria's last stunt. The cloud rose up and up until it looked no bigger than a marble. Everybody thought it was leaving for good, although they continued to glance up nervously at it.

Then it started down again. As it came near, they saw that it was a lot smaller and more opaque than when it had gone up. As it approached, it resolved itself into something that might be imagined by a paleontologist with the d.t.'s. It looked somewhat like a pterodactyl, somewhat like an octopus, and somewhat like Fafner in "Siegfried."

It had huge batlike wings and six long tentacular limbs with hands on their ends.

The shouts that had sounded on previous occasions about the yard were but as the chirp of canaries compared with the yells that now arose. As the thing glided over the yard, workers, foreman, inspectors, everybody went away. They went in straight radial lines, like droplets of mercury when a gob falls on a table top, only much faster. They jumped fences and waded neck-deep across the Moose River. Those inside the mill looked out to see what was up. They saw, and they went, too.

Pringle danced on the tramway. "Come back!" he screamed. "It can't hurt you. It's only sawdust! Look!" The monster was bobbing up and down in front of him, moving its horrid yellow jaws. He strode up to it and punched it. His fist went right through the sawdust, which swirled out in little puffs around his wrist. The hole made by his fist closed up as soon as he drew his arm back. For it was, as he surmised, merely the same cloud of animated sawdust, somewhat condensed and molded into this horrifying form.

"Look here! It's not a real thing at all! Come on back!" He passed his hand right through one of its groping limbs, which joined together again immediately.

But there was nobody to appreciate this display of nerve. Across the river, Pringle could see the rear elevation of a couple of small figures in drab work clothes, getting smaller every minute. As he watched, they disappeared into the forest. The form floated low over the site of the sawdust pile and collapsed. The pile was back where it had been, and Pringle was alone.

The thing that perhaps annoyed Pringle the most was that this time the engineer had run off without shutting down the engines, so that all the saws were whirling merrily in the empty mill. Pringle had to go down and turn the valve himself.

It was almost dark when Pringle and Larochelle appeared at the sawmill. They looked odd. Pringle was wearing, among other things, a catcher's mask and



chest protector. Larochelle wore an old football helmet, several sweaters, and a lumber yard worker's heavy leather apron. Pringle carried a flashlight; Larochelle, a five-gallon can of kerosene and a gasoline blowtorch.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Pringle?" asked Aceria. She was sitting on No. 1040. Larochelle had gone off to start the water pump and uncoil the fire hose.

"Going to have a little fire."

"You are going to bum my home?" "Maybe." -

"Won't you burn up the whole yard?"

"Not if we can help it. We're going to wet down the neighboring piles first. It's taking a chance, but what the hell?"

"Why are you so determined to destroy my home?"

"Because, damn it," Pringle's voice rose, "I've had all I can stand of this business! It's cost me a hundred times the value of those boards. But I won't give in to you, see? You won't let me load the boards. Okay, they're no good to me. So I might as well burn 'em up and end this nonsense for good. And you can't stop me. Your boards are tied down so you can't crawl inside 'em and animate 'em. Joe and I are protected, so it won't do you any good to get rough with us. And your sawdust monsters won't have a chance against this blowtorch."

Aceria was silent for a while. The only sounds were the hum of insects, the slap of Pringle's hand as he hit a punkie on his cheek, the whir of an automobile on the state highway, and Joe Larochelle's distant footsteps.

Then she said: "I do not think you will burn my home, Mr. Pringle."

"Who's going to stop me?"

"I am. You were very clever and very brave about facing my magics, no? And now you say, 'Ho-ho, I have beaten all Aceria's tricks.'"

"Yep." Pringle had been making a heap of edgings and bark, well away from the pile. A loud swish in the dark showed that Joe had begun his wetting down. "Now, Joe," Pringle called, "you catch the other end of this rope. We want to tighten up on the pile as soon as we pull a couple of boards out, so the rest can't get loose."

"Okay, Mr. Pringle. Here goes." There were sounds in the semidark as the two men moved around the pile, making sure that their enterprise would suffer neither from spreading of the flames nor unwanted activity on the part of the boards.

"Very clever," continued Aceria, "but I should have remembered sooner that it is not always the most complicated magic that is the most effective."

"Uh," said Pringle. He splashed kerosene over his pile of kindling and lighted it. It flared up at once into a big, cheerful flame. "No wind," said Pringle, "so I guess she's safe enough. All right, Joe, let's haul the first board out."

Aceria seemed not to mind being ignored so pointedly. As Pringle and Larochelle laid hands on the board, she said:

"You were only so-so afraid of the boards when I went into them and made them alive, no? And you stood up to my monster. But there is something you are more afraid of than the boards or the monsters."

Pringle just grinned. "Is there? All right, Joe, heave! Don't pay any



attention if I seem to be talking to myself."

"Yes. Union organizers," said Aceria.

"Huh?" Pringle stopped pulling on the board.

"Yes. You would like it, no, if I organized your men."

Pringle's mouth dropped open.

"I could do it. I have been listening to them talk, and I know something about unions. And you know me. I appear, I disappear. You could not keep me away, like you do those men from the A.F.L. and the C.I.O. Oh, I would have a nice revenge for the burning of my home."

For the space of thirty seconds there was no sound but the breathing of the two men and the crackle of the flames. When Pringle made a noise, it was a ghastly strangling sound, like the death rattle of a man dying of thirst in the desert.

"You-" he said. And again, "You-"

"You sick, Mr. Pringle?" asked Laroche.

"No," said Pringle, "I'm dying."

"Well?" spoke Aceria.

Pringle sat down heavily in the muck, took off his wire mask, and buried his face in his hands. "Go away, Joe," he said, and would listen to no remonstrances from the alarmed Laroche.

Pringle said: "You win. What do you want me to do with the damn boards? We can't just leave 'em sit here until they rot."

"I would like them put in some nice dry place. I do not mind having them sold, if they are kept together until I can find another tree of the right kind."

"Let's see," said Pringle. "Earl Delacroix needs a new dance floor in his joint. But Earl's so tight he'll wait till somebody falls through the old one. Maybe if I offered him the boards at half price-or even a quarter-"

So it came to pass that, three weeks later, Earl Delacroix surprised those who knew his penurious habits by installing a new dance floor in The Pines. He surprised them somewhat less by hiring a luscious, red-haired girl as hostess. He himself was not too pleased over that innovation. But Pringle had brought the girl in personally and given her the strongest recommendation. Delacroix's mental eyebrows had gone up a bit. Hadn't Pringle's wife left him a while before? Oh, well, it was none of his business. If Pringle, who owned most of the town, wanted a friend-employed, it was a good idea to employ the friend, without asking too many questions.

Delacroix had been particularly intrigued when the girl gave her name as Aceria; then, when he asked her full name, a whispered consultation between the girl and Pringle produced the surname of Jones. Jones, eh? Heh, heh.

Since then, Aceria has worked at The Pines. For appearance's sake, she has a room in the boarding house next door. But its bed is never slept in. Her landlady does not know that, every night, Aceria returns to the restaurant. It is dark then, and nobody is there to see her do whatever she does to merge herself with the floorboards. Probably she just fades out of sight. On these nocturnal trips, she always wears her old green dress. Or rather, it was green, but with the coming of fall it gradually turned a rich orange-yellow.

She dances divinely, and the local boys like her but find her a little odd.



For instance, sooner or later she asks every acquaintance whether he knows of a place where a Norway maple grows. She is still asking, and if you know of one I am sure she would be grateful if you would inform her. - .