

The Cross of Fire.

BY BERT LESTON TAYLOR AND EDWARD WARD.



THE footing grew rapidly more toilsome. At every step now I sank ankle-deep in mud and water, sometimes settling to my knees. My light bamboo rod had become a rod of iron, my basket an old man of the sea; and had my feet been encased in shoes of lead they could have borne me scarce less willingly. Panting, puffing, and perspiring, I threw myself across the prostrate form of a long ago king of the forest; the huge trunk crumbled like Dead Sea fruit beneath my weight. Startled by this unexpected dissolution, I scrambled back to my feet. Then the heart-chilling truth struck me like a blow in the face.

I was lost! — lost in the heart of the Maine forest!

Familiar though you may be with those vast woods, stretching for scores of miles uninterrupted save by lake and stream, you, who have never been lost in them, can have but a faint conception of the numbing terror that gripped my heartstrings; while to the man who has never penetrated the depths of the primitive forest a description of my sensations must seem wild exaggeration.

I stood stunned, looking about me with eyes that I felt were starting from their sockets. The smiles on Nature's face swiftly changed to scowls; the soft, spicy breath of the woodland became the chill of the tomb, and the damp, moss-draped trees its moldering walls; the merry note of the thrush rang in my ears as the raven's croak of woe.

Then, as if pursued by the mocking hosts of Pan, I fled through the swamp, recking little now of mud and water which splashed to my eyes at every plunge; hither, thither, aimlessly, blindly, until I sank exhausted upon the spongy floor of the forest.

I shouted with what power was yet in my lungs, straining my ears the while for the answering call that did not come. My

voice was lost, absorbed, in the fungus of the trees and the moss of the ground,

I tore to tatters the bushes around me and dug my fingers deep in the carpet of eternal green. I wept "like a three years' child," sobbing and laughing by turns. And when my voice had dwindled to a whisper, when I could no longer beat back the fluttering wings of Silence, I sat in black despair, with my head bowed in my hands, that I might not see the grim, relentless savagery of my environs.

Reason slowly returned, and with it came a feeling of deep shame. Was I a woman? Could a woman have been weaker? "Courage, man!" I chided, and I tried to laugh as I finished the quotation,— "the hurt cannot be much." Men had been lost in the forest before, and some of them had returned.

Reflection suggested that, as the lake by which my guide had pitched our temporary camp must drain the country for miles about it, any stream I might chance upon would lead me to it. Later I knew, as you know, the folly of such a conclusion in such a country, where a man may, by short carries, pass from one stream to another flowing in an opposite direction. But the conclusion heartened me, and I contemplated with a growing calm the difficulties which lay between me and the civilization which even a lonely camp and a single comrade meant. "Every man his own Moses," I said lightly, and I wondered how one of the children of Israel would have fared if separated from that oldest of guides. I reeled up my line, flung away the shattered joints of the rod, took a drink from a well-filled flask, and started. It was now one o'clock.

I strove to keep a straight course, turning aside only for the greater obstructions, that I might minimize the circling so fatal to the compassless and inexperienced traveler. My persistence was rewarded. The cedar swamp gave place to firmer ground; I crossed a ridge, and passing over a gently descending slope, came with no little satisfaction upon a brook. This brought me, in the space of an hour, to a sizeable stream, along the banks of which I was enabled to travel at a much more rapid pace.

The afternoon drifted into twilight, my stock of courage declining with the sun. I now accelerated my pace, leaping from rock

to rock, and splashing through pools instead of going around them, when I found my progress temporarily checked by a huge mass of fallen and drifted trees that choked the narrow gorge through which the stream wound. As I stood surveying this formidable barrier I fancied I saw, through the network of decaying brush, the farewell rays of the setting sun. This betokened a clearing, and with renewed courage I cut with my hunting knife a passage through the boughy labyrinth.

The lake at last!

I stood on the dark shore and shouted; a loon answered me. I discharged my revolver into the air, saving the last cartridge; I might need that, I reflected. Besides, what need of wasting breath and ammunition? My guide would see the light of a fire, and would know that I was safe; and if he had found the canoe where I had beached it at the outlet, he would put in an appearance before long. I anticipated his quiet "I told you so,"—a convincing answer to my superior smile when, that morning, he earnestly warned me, who had no knowledge of the woods, against sallying forth without his companionship. His fears had been well grounded, but, thank fortune, no great harm was done.

I kindled a blaze, fed it with fuel ripped from the under side of a dead tree, as I had seen the guide do, and cooked some of the forgotten trout in my creel. After an unpalatable meal, washed down with the warm water of the lake, I smoked a pipe of comfort before the sputtering fire, which recalled the philosophical reflection that "man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward." The cheery heat induced a speedy drowsiness, and, dismissing expectation of seeing my fishing companion that night, I hauled a backlog for the fire and piled it high with brush, and lay down to dreams of a pleasanter morrow.

When I awoke, my limbs were cramped from cold and the exertions of the preceding day, but I turned toward the lake with expectant eyes. One look, and a chill crept into my heart.

It was not the lake I sought!

You, secure in your environments, have stood upon such a shore and looked upon such a picture. Nature's lines were unblurred by the smoke from campfire of fisherman or lumberer. The distant, wood-girt shores were without sign of man or beast. The mist

that hung upon the surface of the lake was as yet unstirred by the rays of the forest-hidden sun. Not a trout leaped, not a tree swayed, not a bird soared into the deepening blue. The solitude was complete; there was nothing lacking. It was Balzac's picture of the desert; it was God without mankind!

You, I say, have looked upon such a scene; but it has been with a poet's eye and an artist's sense of the beautiful. You have turned from it uplifted, and thought of life. I turned from it crushed, and thought of death!

It would be as tedious as impossible to detail my wanderings of the ensuing five days. Mile upon mile I drifted, following the windings of the shores of lakes and the banks of streams, living on fish when hunger compelled me to a nauseous meal, and on what few berries I could find; cut and bruised by countless falls, drenched by rains and tortured by insects. I dreaded the approach of night; I shuddered when I woke and faced another day. Even now I do not like to think upon that time. My hair is bleached; it whitened then. Let me come to the afternoon of the seventh day, when I found myself too weak to continue the struggle for existence. My feet were torn and bleeding, my clothing was in shreds, the liquor which had sustained me was gone, to the last precious golden drop, and I shook with fever. A light rain was falling.

I stood in a narrow cañon on the bank of a wild and rocky stream. Above me was a dull, gray sky; around me a shaggy, dripping wall of green. I took from my pocket the single cartridge and watched it with burning, fascinated eyes as it rolled about in my trembling palm. To me it was no longer lead and brass; it was a precious stone set in a tiny cylinder of gold — a gem that I would not then have exchanged for the crown jewels of an emperor. For this meant release from an existence that had become hideous.

And yet, in that awful moment, I clung to the hope that perishes only with life. Clutching fast that solitary cartridge, I shouted — once, twice, thrice. The dull roar of the rapids was the answer.

I loaded the revolver. "God forgive me!" I murmured, and cast my eyes upward.

At that instant I saw a face — the face of a man !

He was peering down at me from among the bushes that fringed the brink of a cataract which I stood facing. It was an old, a half-savage face, framed in a shock of long, unkempt, graying hair, and lighted by eyes that glittered behind shaggy, overfalling eyebrows ; but to me — to me it was the face of an angel !

I stood transfixed, doubting the evidence of my eyes. Then, with a sob of joy, I advanced slowly with arms upraised. The old man vanished, but a moment later I saw him creeping across the shelf over which the torrent flung itself.

“Stop !” I cried. “Don’t leave me ! My God, don’t leave me !” He made no answer, nor even glanced back.

“Stop !” I shrieked again, in a frenzy of rage and cheated hope. “Stop — or I’ll murder you !”

I raised the revolver, but dropped it with a cry of horror. The man had leaped for an overhanging bush, had slipped on the wet rocks and fallen from the shelf, clutching at the air. His body struck a projection midway of the cliff, and bounded to the rocky bed of the stream.

I floundered into the torrent, opposing the strength of desperation to the rushing waters. They swept the body to my eager arms, and on hands and knees I dragged it, treasure trove, to the opposite bank. The old man’s eyes were closed, and a crimson stream trickled from a cut over one temple. I looked upon him in fierce pity and blind resentment.

“Unhappy wretch !” I cried, “could you not let me die without this added torment ? Have I found a human being in this hell of solitude only to lose him ?”

Then my mood changed. I flung myself down beside the man, and in babbling phrases besought him to live — to live, if but for an hour. Weak, worn, and selfish, I thought only of my own hapless condition.

The gray, sunken orbs unclosed. There was reproach, but not malice in them. “To my cabin — yonder,” he whispered, indicating with his eyes the direction he could not lift his hand to point.

Through the dripping bushes I half dragged, half carried him, up a steep and winding trail that led to his dwelling. I laid him

upon his bunk, washed the blood from his face, replaced his wet garments with dry ones that hung from a peg, and poured down his throat liquor found in a locker. He revived, and thanked me with his melancholy gray eyes, in which wonder and pity were mingled.

"You are exhausted," he said. "There is food in the locker."

The reminder was timely. In another minute I should have sunk to the floor. A draught of the liquor put life in my veins, and I ate ravenously of the food. Then I kindled a fire, and as I stood drying my dripping extremities before the crackling blaze, I surveyed my surroundings.

The cabin was a rude affair, built of mammoth logs chinked with clay and moss. The flat roof was fashioned of long splints of spruce, with heavier strips of the same for the floor. There was but the one room, spacious, cobwebbed, and smoke-grimed, with a large, irregular window consisting of a single sheet of glass set into the clay plastering, and a huge fireplace and chimney of rough rock. I noted the single bunk, a table and two stools, the pelt of a black bear stretched before the hearth, and above it an immense pair of antlers, from which depended a rifle and rod. I was not a little surprised to see in this lodge of the wilderness a shelf of books of uncommon size and appearance and a quantity of maps and charts, besides a very large map of the world, which covered the larger part of one wall. But there were still other objects in the cabin that excited more than passing wonder.

In one corner stood a wooden, sink-shaped frame, fitted with drivewheel, belt, and treadle. Later I knew that it was a grinding and polishing machine. In the center of the box, which was sprinkled with dust and powder, was a horizontal disc; standing along the wall, underneath were other discs of varying sizes, the largest about four feet in diameter, while on a neighboring shelf were lenses in various stages of completion, together with irregular-shaped chunks of glass.

A movement from the bunk drew my attention back to the owner of the cabin. He had raised himself upon his elbow, and was signing for me to draw near.

"You will live?" I said, half appealingly, as I pushed a stool to his side and took, not without a qualm, his cold, claw-like hand.

Since we had reached the cabin I had given no thought to the nature or extent of the injuries he had sustained by his fearful fall.

"I will live — for an hour ; perhaps less, perhaps more," he replied. "And in that time I must give to you the result of a lifetime of dreaming, of hope, and of accomplishment. Do not seek to interrupt me ; there is no time for that."

You must not suppose that these words or the story which succeeded were uttered in the unbroken strain of my repetition. There were frequent intervals, short and long, during which he gasped, choked, or clutched at his breast, as if the recital caused him intense agony. These were the tragic details which served to stamp his words indelibly upon the tablets of my memory,— details which I cannot, do not, desire to recall. I repeat the story as I remember it ; for its brevity my own folly is responsible.

"Ten years ago," said he, "I ostracized myself from my kind, and came to this wilderness to work out the dream of my life. It is accomplished. At last I have perfected an invention of incalculable value. By its means a man, standing at any spot, may see half way around the globe, in any direction. By its means one eye can watch the movements of the world's millions. I do not expect you to believe me without the proof. Your own eyes shall attest the truth of my words.

"For twenty years I have experimented with the forces of nature, my chief studies being in optics and electricity. Like nearly everybody else who has dabbled in the former science, I early tried my hand at the manufacture of high-power lenses, and encountered the usual obstacles to going beyond certain limits, which limits are represented by the most powerful microscopes and telescopes now in use.

"I knew that glass was not an absolute non-conductor of electricity, and one day I discovered that, when subjected to a powerful continuous current, it undergoes, under favorable conditions, certain molecular changes, which annul its chromatic properties. You can better realize the importance of this discovery when I tell you that it is chiefly on account of the chromatic properties of glass that lenses of vastly greater power than those now known to science have been impossible. I was now in possession of a fact

which would enable me to make lenses hundreds of times more powerful than had ever been dreamed of.

“Here in this wilderness, where no man’s foot save mine had been since, perhaps, the days of the savage, I built this cabin, and here I lived and wrought. First, I made a microscope, fitting it with a high-grade electrical lens, and I can best give you an idea of the power of the instrument when I tell you that with it I have been enabled to study the ultimate atomic structure of matter. Startling revelations as to the nature and properties of both atoms and molecules, with all the other details of my life work and discoveries, may be found in papers of which I will later tell you.

“Then I built my masterpiece, my telescope. I spent years in grinding and polishing the lenses. The objective is so arranged that when it is in use 150,000 volts of electricity pass through it continuously. I shall not attempt to tell you what I have seen in the heavens; my published observations will upset half the guesses of modern astronomy. There is a more practical, financial value attached to my discovery.

“Within half an hour I can tell you how many ships are plowing the waters of the Mediterranean, the English Channel, or what you will. I can locate the precise position of any army or fleet in Europe. You see the possibilities of the thing are stupendous, enormous. What nation but would give millions for the possession of such a potent instrument for war or peace!”

The man’s eyes glowed with the fire of enthusiasm; and I, who had been sitting spellbound,— I at this point smiled, as you are smiling now. I was no scientist, but I could doubt and scoff with the best of them.

The old scientist saw my smile, and a trace of irritation rested for an instant upon his face.

“That is my story,” said he. “And now for the proofs. Come, a draught of the liquor, and then your arm. I shall live for hours yet. You shall see! You shall see!”

With a flash of strength, generated by a powerful excitement, he dragged me out and around the cabin, where a narrow footpath led up the hill through the forest. Here he collapsed, and, as he was no great burden, I took him upon my back. The rain had ceased, and the sun broke through the clouds.

At the top of the slope we came out into a species of basin. For a radius of two hundred feet or more the trees had been felled, but only in part removed, and around this chaos of fallen and decaying timber the untouched forest rose, tier upon tier. A strange, wild scene it was, and the strangest object in it was an enormous telescope of wood, mounted upon a pier formed by two stumps, across which a heavy beam had been fixed. The tube was poised on a huge wooden pin at the center of this crossbeam, and around the pier a deep space had been cleared. Between the supporting stumps stood an old leather-covered chest, from which issued wires that connected with, and ran along the sides of, the telescope, first passing through what I took to be a switchboard, such as I had seen in telegraph or telephone offices. This was fastened to the crosspiece, and although I examined the entire apparatus more closely the next day, I cannot describe it to you more intelligibly. I was and am densely ignorant in such matters. An unmechanical mind is helpless before machinery of the least complexity.

While my wondering eye made note of these things my companion had crawled into the pit. He directed me to remove the oiled canvas that protected the object-glass of the telescope, and then swung the vast tube skyward. A few rapid touches at the keys on the switchboard and of adjustment of the tube, and with one hand still controlling the wires, he stepped back with an eager "Look!"

In astonishment I glanced from him to the sky, toward which the instrument still pointed. There was naught there but a few fleecy clouds.

"Look!" he repeated impatiently, and I placed myself at the eyepiece.

I looked upon the sea, blue as the heaven above me. White sails dotted its surface, and the shore line was broken by cliffs and a glimpse of a village. As I gazed, wonder bound, the picture grew in distinctness, and I made out, not only dwellings, but the forms of men and women. Startled, I sprang back, and glanced up and around me, and encountered the triumphant, half-scornful smile of my companion.

"There are no pictures, no photographs," he said, reading my thoughts. "You have just seen the Mediterranean."

I could not well contradict him; I had never looked upon it before. But all my pent-up doubts and objections welled forth in one explosive inquiry:—

“The curvature of the earth?”—

“Is obviated by my cloud-mirrors,” he replied calmly. “Thus do I deflect the rays of light. It is all explained and worked out in my papers. There is nothing left to chance. Now for a glimpse of the Hawaiian Islands.”

He swung the telescope swiftly round, elevating it a trifle more in the adjustment. Again I clapped my eye to the tube, and again the picture grew until every object in the field of vision stood out in cameo-like relief. An exclamation escaped my lips. I descried a palace with spacious grounds; but it was not merely a picture, it was a scene of action. Men were fighting for their lives. Puffs of white smoke of volleys of musketry. I caught myself listening for the reports.* Bewildered beyond expression, I turned to my companion.

“Show me London!” I cried. “That I know, and in that I cannot be deceived.”

A spasm contorted his face. He reeled, and would have fallen had I not caught him. He pushed me away and turned to the telescope.

“Doubter!” he muttered hoarsely. “Doubt no longer!”

I waited in brutal impatience while, in manifest suffering, he made the necessary adjustments, and eagerly sought the tube. One glance, and every shadow of incredulity vanished. For I saw as plainly as I see the words I write, the Houses of Parliament, the Tower, the bridge, the river, and a score more of objects as familiar to me as the streets of New York. It was London beyond question.

Don't remind me of what I told myself a hundred times before that moment. Never was there man more practical, less given to dreaming than myself. But I looked, I saw, and I was convinced.

Suddenly the picture vanished, and I turned questioningly to

* At the time I looked through the telescope I had no conception of the nature of the disturbance on the Pacific isle, nor did I give more than a passing thought to it. I afterward ascertained that what I saw was the uprising headed by Messrs. Wilcox and Boyd, which culminated in the struggle in the palace grounds at Honolulu on the thirtieth of July, 1889. Tidings of this event were not published in the press of this country until a week or more after its occurrence.

my companion. His hand was no longer at the switchboard; he had fallen on his face. I caught him up and staggered back to the cabin. As I laid him upon his bunk he tried to speak, but a hemorrhage prevented. His injuries, whatever they might be, were internal.

In sudden dismay I reflected upon what his death meant. "Man, man, you must not die!" I burst out. "This discovery must not be lost to the world. I will summon assistance! You shall live! You shall live!"

"Fool!" I heard him gasp as I ran out of the cabin and down the winding trail. And "Fool!" I echoed as I stood on the bank of the river and looked about me helplessly. I hurried back to the cabin.

The old man was dead. I was again alone in the wilderness.

The next morning I gave him such sepulture as was possible in the primeval wild. Though it mattered little what spot was set apart in that vast tomb, I buried him where, I thought, he could have wished to sleep—beneath the monument his genius had wrought. Above his rude grave the big tube still pointed skyward, and the subtle forces that operated it still coursed through the connecting wires; but the cunning hand that controlled those forces was cold in death. A scientist might have read the secret after an hour's study; to me it was the profoundest of mysteries. I replaced the protecting cover of oiled canvas, and so left it, with a long backward look.

The remainder of the day I passed in preparing for a return to the world. In what part of the Maine wilderness I was, I had of course no means of guessing. I had forgotten, had delayed until too late, to ascertain that important fact from the only source of information open to me. There was not a scrap of paper, nothing on the various charts and maps upon the walls of the cabin, that might cast light upon my position. As for the papers containing the details of the dead scientist's marvelous works, I gave to them no thought whatever. My all-absorbing idea was to get back to civilization.

Though still utterly at sea as to my exact location on the face of the earth, I was now well equipped for a voyage of discovery, as canoe, compass, rifle, lines and hooks, food and liquor, were at

my command. I reasoned that if I journeyed doggedly toward the south, availing myself of lake and stream only when these trended southerly, and blazing a trail as closely as a natural haste admitted of, I should not only reach the confines of civilization, but be able to go back at my leisure over the path I had made.

So the next morning, at the first sign of daylight, I started. Half a mile or more down the river the rips gave place to deep water, and here I embarked. The stream still ran so swiftly that a paddle was needed only for purposes of steering, and after a time I noted with surprise that it was nothing else than an inclined liquid plane, down which I shot with a rapidity that was exhilarating, but productive of not a little uneasiness. For a mile or two there was no break in the parallel walls of forest, but in time these gave way to precipitous banks of rock which rose gradually to a height of some thirty feet. I noted now with genuine alarm that the cañon was contracting at its crests and the watery plane becoming steeper; that I was being swept along, without power to check myself, into a veritable tunnel. While I was watching the vanishing patch of sky, a peculiar roaring noise drew my eyes back to the stream. I had a glimpse of a towering wall of rock, a cavern around which the water was dashed into foam, then the blackness of night, and I fell senseless upon the floor of the canoe.

When I came to myself the murmur of running water was still in my ears, but the canoe was stationary, entangled in a network of alders, through which the blessed light of heaven struggled. My subterranean voyage could not have been of great length, as the sun was not yet over the trees. Wondering what fresh surprises fate had in store, I cut a passage for the canoe through the alders, and pushed out upon the bosom of a lake.

It was not a large body of water, and had, in fact, the appearance of newly flowed land, being wooded to the water's edge and without sign of beach. The forest rose gently to low-lying hills, but not a peak of significance broke the sky line. On all sides the irregular shore presented the same picture as above the hidden inlet whence I had emerged.

Scanning this spot for some sort of a landmark, my eyes rested upon a giant white pine, dismantled by the lightning, which lifted

its gaunt, shattered form above its brethren into the rosy field of the coming day. Near the top the trunk had been split vertically and transversely by the freakish bolt, so that the fissures presented the appearance of an almost perfect cross. As I looked, the sun rose directly behind this pine, and the fissures became a cross of living fire!

I explored the lake, paddling slowly around the shore and searching carefully for an outlet. Finding none, I decided that, like the inlet, it must be subterranean.

A fortnight later, after incredible exertions, I reached the north bay of Moosehead Lake.

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Away up near the headwaters of the Penobscot I have a cabin, and for seven years my home has been the Maine woods. Upon one wall of that cabin hangs a vast map of Maine. It is ruled off into squares, each representing a mile of the State's surface. Across the forty-sixth parallel, from Canada on the west to the eastern boundary of Piscataquis County, and thence northerly, is drawn a heavy black line, and within the territory thus set off two hundred or more squares have been checked as one would check an invoice.

Seven years I have devoted to a quest that to others would seem madness. In company with an Indian guide, who knows those woods as a child knows its mother, I have tramped hundreds of miles, moving from square to square on my map as a pawn on the chessboard. I have explored thoroughly the Chesuncook and Chamberlain Lake country, and next spring I shall range the territory between the Allaguash and the St. John. Seven times have the snows of winter sent me back to my cabin, but each spring finds my spirit keener than before, even though my bodily strength wanes.

It is not likely, and yet it may be, that what I seek lies without the boundaries I have drawn. In spite of my efforts to keep a straight course to the south, my path out of the wilderness must have been at best a winding one. During a shower, a drop of water lodged in my compass and seriously disturbed the needle.

But I have twice crossed that trail, verifying it by my handiwork upon the trees and by certain landmarks, so that it is not

altogether in despair of eventual success that I reveal a secret that for seven years I have kept, even from the companion of my quest. But now I am a wreck of my former rugged self, and each year finds me less fitted to withstand the perils and hardships that attend upon my search.

I record these facts, that, should disaster overtake me, the secret may not perish with me; that some man more fortunate than I may find the square which holds that lost lake of the northern wilds, where at sunrise a cross of fire blazes above the gateway to millions.

