

Con of Misty Mountain

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CHAPTER I

CON

IT WAS A HARD WINTER on Misty Mountain—a winter bleak and pitiless for man and bird and beast. Jack Frost had come early this year—no merry monarch, but a grisly old despot, that not even Misty Mountain with all its golden glamour could defy. The trees that usually flaunted their gay banners far into November, stood bare and shivering in the icy blast before Thanksgiving; the birds had fluttered off early to warmer skies; all the furry little forest dwellers scuttled to shelter before half their harvesting was done. And today “Mountain Con” (he knew no other name), like the wild human thing he was, had come out with his hoarded nuts, to set traps for the unwary little creatures whose winter larders were unfilled.

For the “boys” were scattered in the hard-packed snows, and even old “Buzzard Bill” himself had vanished for the last fortnight. There was scant living up on the high steeps of “Buzzard Roost,” as crippled Mother Moll had whimpered when she dealt Con out his coarse mush this morning. Mush is but light diet on a crisp December day for a sturdy lad of twelve, and Con had set out to get a rabbit or squirrel for Mother Moll’s pot for dinner. With a root of the wild garlic drying in her smoky kitchen, and a few potatoes filched from some farmer’s open bin, it would be all the stew a hungry boy could ask.

For food and shelter were as yet the only needs that Con’s young life knew. He had grown up like the other wild creatures of Misty Mountain—lithe, strong and bold, but all unconscious

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of mind or heart or soul; a splendid, sturdy fellow, with a shock of yellow hair that seemed to have caught the sunshine in its tangles, eyes blue and bright as the summer sky, and a bright, brave young face that laughed hunger and cold and hardship to scorn; for poor Con in his brief twelve years of life had known little of love or comfort or care. But he had learned many things in these twelve wild years that neither books nor schools can teach. He set traps today with a practiced hand, brushing aside the snow with a dead branch, lest track or scent should betray him; then, bounding off lightly to a more sheltered hollow, flung himself down on the ground to wait for the furry little victims of his snare.

It was Christmas Eve, but Con knew nothing of such blessed festivals. Neither Old Bill, hoary sinner that he was, nor his "boys" kept account of them; and poor old Mother Moll's memory had been seared into dull forgetfulness by years of sorrow and toil. But though no stocking nor tree nor gift, nor any of the holier blessings that these earthly joys typify, had a place in Con's thoughts, he was vaguely conscious of a pleasant thrill as he lay back upon the snow, his yellow head cushioned in his sturdy clasped hands. Perhaps it was the thought of a rabbit stew for dinner, or the warmth of the winter sunbeams caught on this cleft of the mountain, or the cheery glimpse of berry and vine clinging to the rocks above, where, screened by the beettling cliffs, some hardy growth was flourishing amid the snow.

Well, whatever Christmas cause it may have been, Con lay most comfortably and happily in his ambush, when a sudden sound of voices made him start to his feet in fierce, breathless guard. Boys—boys from the Gap, the Valley; boys coming up here to frighten off his game, break his traps; boys, who had only taunts and jeers for wild Con of the mountain whenever they met! And Con's blue eyes flamed with sudden fire as he backed up against the rocks, and, grasping a handful of snow, hardened it in his strong young grip into a ball that would start the fight he felt was to come. On they came, half a dozen or more

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of them. Con felt his blood boil in fiercer defiance. When had they ever come upon him in such numbers before? Dick Dodson and Jimmy Ward and Tommy Randall and Pat Murphy! Con's young muscles tightened, his breath came quick. He would hold his own against them all.

"Halloo!"

It was red-headed Dick Dodson that first caught sight of the ragged young outlaw of Misty Mountain. Dick had cause to remember Con. Not three months ago they had met in a passage of arms at the Mill, where Con had gone for a sack of meal. The adventure had resulted rather disastrously for Dick. He had worn a patch over his left eye for a week, and had prudently avoided Con's ways ever since. But the strength of numbers was behind him now, and Con was alone.

"Halloo!" shouted Dodson. "Boys—boys! Here's Buzzard Con! Look out for the henroosts! The Buzzard's on the hunt."

"Look out for yourself, you red-headed weasel," flamed back Con. "I'll shut up one of them squint eyes of yours agin. Stand back, the hull lot of ye! Ye ain't going to tech my traps, if I have to fight you all!"

"Buzzard! Buzzard! Buzzard!" rose up the mocking chorus. "Let's see what he's got behind him, boys! It's somebody's Christmas turkey, sure."

And there was a rush at Con, but he was ready for it. One ice snowball caught Pat Murphy on the bridge of his nose; another, that Con had snatched in his left hand, knocked Jimmy Ward dizzy; then, grasping the lighter ammunition around him, the fight was on. The battle waged fierce and fast, but it was six to one. Con was making his last stand, with vengeful Dick Dodson clutching his legs and striving to pull him down, when a clear, strong voice rang like a clarion note through the white blur of combat:

"For shame, boys—for shame! What sort of a fight is this? Six of you against one! Take that, you young rascal! And that! and that!" And a stalwart figure sprang to Con's side and be-

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gan to hurl snowballs against his antagonists. “You forget I was captain of the team at St. Anselm’s not so many years ago. Stop now—stop! Why, you’ve hurt this chap in earnest! Stop, I say!”

And Con, reeling back dizzily against the rock, felt a strong arm thrown around him, heard a voice speaking in strange tones of kindness in his ear.

“’Tain’t nothing,” he murmured. “Jest—jest knocked out a bit. There was a stone in that ar last ball.”

“A stone?” The clear voice spoke out sternly now, as Con sank down on the ground and began, in primitive “first aid to the injured,” to rub his dizzy head with snow. “I would like to know the boy that put it there—that played such a mean, cowardly trick. But I won’t ask,” continued the speaker, with fine scorn. “I won’t tempt any of you to lie to me.”

Then Pat Murphy spoke up:

“I won’t lie to you, Father Phil: it was me. He cut my nose with an ice ball first. He started the fight—didn’t he, boys? There ain’t no wuss fighter in all Misty Mountain than Buzzard Con. They’re all fighters and thieves and jail birds up there at the Roost. Old Bill is dodging the sheriff now. Con started this fight hisself—didn’t he, boys?”

“Sure—for sure!” arose the affirming chorus. “He hit right out before we teched him at all.”

The clear eyes of his new friend looked down on the accused boy, who was rousing into remembrance now at the tingling touch of the snow. There was a pity and compassion in the questioning gaze, which Con answered simply:

“They were coming to break my traps.”

“We warn’t—we warn’t! He’s lying to you, Father!” was the indignant shout. “We didn’t know nothing about his traps. We were coming up, like you told us, to get Christmas greens for the altar.”

“And a fine way this is to deck the altar of God!” said Father Phil, in stern rebuke. “A fine way to keep Christmas, the blessed time of peace and good-will—fighting, wrangling, flinging cruel,

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hard, angry words that hurt worse than blows! I came here so gladly to say a Christmas Mass for you—my first mission Mass. There was no church, I knew; for I had been a boy here myself. But there was the old log cabin that had been our holiday camp in my school-days; and I felt that, with a lot of you sturdy chaps to help me, we could fix it up. We would bring Our Lord all we had to give—the light of the Christmas candles to brighten the winter night, the green of the Christmas wreath that we would seek even in the winter snow. But, above all, we would bring warm, young hearts that the cold, cruel, wintry world had not chilled. And I find you mocking, fighting, stoning, without any pity or mercy or love! You may go home, all of you!” Father Phil waved his hand in dismissal. “I will take no Christmas greens from you today.”

“O Father, please, please!” went up a pleading chorus. “Just look what fine ones are growing up there!”

Father Phil glanced at the cliff to which the boys pointed, its steep jagged sides curtained with a hardy growth of rich green vine, laden with scarlet berries that glowed like drops of blood in the winter’s snow. Here, indeed, was fair decking for his simple Christmas shrine. For a moment he hesitated; then a glance at the perilous height confirmed his judgment.

“No,” he said decidedly. “They grow, as it seems fitting today, too high for you to reach. I can’t allow you to risk the climb. Go home and think of what I have said. I hope to find you all better boys this evening.”

The boys turned away, abashed, for there was a soldier note in the speaker’s voice that commanded obedience. Father Phil paused a moment before he followed them for a friendly word to Con.

“Is your head all right now, my boy? That stone was a scurvy trick.”

“It don’t hurt now,” answered Con, philosophically. “I’ll give it back to ’em some day. But—you all have skeered off everything; no critter will come nigh my traps today. And—and—”

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Con stopped abruptly: it was not according to his code to “squeal” at such trifles as hunger or cold.

“You were counting on your traps for a Christmas dinner,” said Father Phil, with quick understanding.

“Don’t know nothing ’bout Christmas,” answered Con; “but ’twas for a dinner sure.”

“That’s too bad!” said this new friend kindly; “and as long as I set the boys on this track I ought to pay for your loss. Farmer Johnson, I hear, has some fine fat turkeys to sell for a dollar. Go buy one.”

“No,” said Con, shaking his head as Father Phil held out a crisp bill. “He wouldn’t sell no turkey to me. He’d think I stole the money. I’ll set my traps farther up the rocks and catch something maybe before night. But I say, Mister,” (the blue eyes were lifted in a look that went straight to Father Phil’s heart), “if you want them greens and berries up thar, I’ll get ’em fur you.”

“Oh, no, no, my boy!” was the quick reply. “It’s too steep and slippery a climb.”

“Lord!” laughed Con. “That ain’t no climb! I’ve hung out over Clopper’s Cliff where it goes down most too fur to see. I’ve clumb up Eagle Rock where thar ain’t twig or brier to hold. I’ve crossed Injun Creek with one jump. I ain’t skeery ’bout a little climb like that over thar. What do you want them ar greens and berries fur, anyhow, Mister?” Again the blue eyes looked up in a question that this young shepherd of the Lord, travelling far afield in his Master’s service, could not resist.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, reckless of the flying hours of this busy day. And, seating himself on the ledge of rock beside Con, Father Phil told his young listener the sweet story of Christmas, in brief, simple words that even the young outlaw of Misty Mountain could understand.

“Now you know,” said Father Phil, after he had talked for half an hour.

“Yes,” answered Con, drawing a long breath; for the coming of the Holy Babe to the stable, the manger, the watching shep-

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herds, the singing in the midnight skies had held him mute, in rapt attention. “I—I never heard no talk like that before. Mother Moll, she’s told me about spells and witches, and how the ha’rs from a black cat will give you luck, but nothing nice like that. I guess some of them ar shepherds was as rough and ragged as me.”

“I’m sure they were,” agreed Father Phil.

“I would like to have been there,” said Con. “But I wouldn’t have got in. You see, Uncle Bill and all our folks at the Roost are a bad lot. Nobody ever lets me in nowhar ’count of them.”

“My poor boy!” Father Phil had risen, for a glance at his watch had told him he could linger no longer. “Come down to the log cabin and I will let you in.”

“Will you, Mister?” There was a new light in Con’s blue eyes as Father Phil grasped his sturdy young hand, regardless of its grime. “And kin I bring you down greens and berries?”

“Yes,” answered Con’s new friend, feeling this was the best way to secure this wild mountain sheep. “Only don’t break your neck getting them, my boy.”

“Ain’t no fear of that!” laughed Con, as Father Phil nodded a friendly good-bye. “I’ll come.”