



**I**T WAS an incongruous group that sat around the rough pine table in Magpie Simpkins's cabin, and played pitch by the light of an old smoky kerosene lamp.

Magpie Simpkins, six feet two, slender to the point of emaciation, with the face of a scholar above his walrus-like mustache, sat there peering at his cards through the only pair of glasses on Sleeping Creek.

Magpie had been to Missoula a short time before and at the earnest solicitation of an optician had purchased a pair of glasses, sans bows, which he fastened to his person through the medium of a wide silk ribbon. At the present time he wore the ribbon around his neck for safety.

Tellurium Woods, the second of the trio, was as fat as any outdoor man could ever expect to be, and his bald head and luxuriant brown beard gave one the impression of looking at a billiard ball on a rug. Tellurium affected buckskin shirts of his own manufacture and design, and it was impossible to tell, at the neck, just where the shirt left off and the skin began.

Bantie Weyman was the exact opposite of the others. He was about five feet two

inches in height and would weigh about a hundred. He had a soprano voice, a gold tooth, and took baths. In the latter he differed from any one else on the range.

Bantie wasn't exactly a man's man but he did a man's work on his claim in Bear Gulch and claimed to be the champion sourdough bread-maker of the world. Bantie was timid—so timid that he wouldn't pack a gun, and the only armament of his cabin consisted of a .22 rifle with a section of cleaning-rod broken off inside the barrel.

These three represented the social column of Sleeping Creek. Their cabins were situated within a radius of two miles, and in order to keep up the social life of the district they had instituted a private pitch club—two bits a corner and ten cents set back. The three were to alternate as hosts.

At this, their first session, there was a fourth party present. It seemed very much interested in the hands held by Bantie, much to Bantie's embarrassment and to the huge delight of the others. Bantie played the jack of diamonds and snorted loudly as Magpie took it with the queen and a chuckle.

"Magpie, yuh got to put that bear

outside!” he shrilled. “He gits his danged nose in m’ ear and I don’t know whether I’m playin’ th’ jack or th’ ace! I got th’ ace—see? By golly! That sets me back three and costs me ten cents! I ain’t goin’ to riffle another card until yuh puts that emblem uh California out in th’ shed, *sabe?*”

“Haw! Haw!” roared Tellurium. “Be uh man, Bantie. That pore li’l grizzly won’t hurt yuh. Look at him! He’s plumb heart-broke over them words, Bantie. While yore uh fair—jist fair—pitch player, Bantie, yuh lacks something. If yuh was simply sloppy with th’ milk uh human kindness like me and Magpie you’d git uh pet.”

“That ultimatum,” replied Bantie, “covers that wolf uh yours under th’ bunk, Tellurium. Every time I turns to spit I got to look into his shinin’ eyes. Don’t th’ loafer never sleep?”

“Well,” grinned Tellurium, “he ain’t no regular Rip Van Winkle, but he’s tame—tame enough fer uh man. I believes in uh man-sized pet and fer that reason I cottons to th’ wolf. Uh course he’s only good fer uh grown man.”

Bantie grunted and put on his coat.

“My re-marks goes as she lays,” he stated. “I don’t play with no danged menagerie. It’s bad enough to be whipsawed by uh pair uh snake-hunters like you and Magpie but I draws th’ line at havin’ uh wolf under m’ feet and uh grizzly workin’ down wind behind m’ ear. Why I——”

“Say, Tellurium, did yuh ever see my bear dance?” interrupted Magpie.

“He’s there four ways from th’ jack. Watch him now.”

Magpie slid the table over against the wall and took a rusty gold-pan from behind the stove. Using it as a tamborine, he began a shuffle on the rough floor.

The bear watched him for a minute and then with a squeal of delight got up on its hind legs and began to prance around the cabin.

Bantie forgot his fear and began to shuffle too, while Tellurium sat with his feet over the end of the bunk and sang “Annie Laurie” in a husky voice to the tune of “A Hot Time.”

Whether through accident or design the bear danced straight for the shuffling Bantie, who was intent on watching his own toes. Bantie looked up as the bear was almost against him and he stepped back hurriedly out of harm’s way. At least he was out of the bear’s way but unfortunately one of his boot heels landed squarely on the front foot of the wolf under the bunk.

A description of the rest of the action would be pure fiction as no one in the cabin ever knew just what did happen. Suffice to say that when the explosion was over Magpie was under the table, Tellurium was under the bunk, the bear was whining up on the rafters, Bantie and the wolf were gone and so was the one window to the cabin.

It was probably ten minutes later that Bantie stuck his head into the open window and panted:

“My remarks still goes as she lays! I’ll play solitaire until m’ mind goes abroad before I’ll play in uh zoo like this again! Any time you jaspers want to play with me jist leave th’ specimens tied up, *sabe?*”

“Did yuh git cut up any, Bantie?” grinned Magpie.

“Lost m’ pants,” stated Bantie in a soprano voice.

Tellurium grinned and took a fresh chew.

“Better git uh pet to keep yuh company. Fine thing fer uh man.”

His accent on the last word irritated Bantie so much that he shrugged his thin shoulders and started off in the dark toward his cabin without replying.

“Hey!” yelled Tellurium. “What did yuh do with my wolf?”

“He’ll git back some time tomorrow!” shrilled Bantie. “That is, if he don’t lose m’

return trail.”

THE next night Magpie and Tellurium ambled down to Bantie’s cabin, ostensibly to square things with Bantie but it is worthy of notice that they took their pets along. Bantie wasn’t home and the cabin was locked, so they went back to Tellurium’s cabin and played single-handed poker.

It was four days later that Bantie sat in front of his cabin, and the stoop was gone from his shoulders. He was having the time of his life watching a little gray kitten pull off stunts with an old newspaper.

“Ain’t he th’ little rascal?” he chuckled. “Gosh, he shore is some pet and that’s whatever. I’m shore pleased with his color—yes sir. Almost uh dead ringer fer—huh! That’s goin’ to be uh good joke if it works. It’s goin’ to re-quire some thinkin’. Twenty dollars rent! That’s uh heap uh—gosh! Here comes Magpie down th’ trail! Kitty, kitty, kitty—well, git in th’ house then. Doggone, I got to cache that cat before he gits here.”

Bantie was busy with his broom when Magpie leaned against the doorway with a broad grin.

“Hello, Bantie. When did yuh git back?”

“Yesterday afternoon. Come inside while I sweeps this dirt out.”

Magpie came in and sat down on the bunk.

“To see yuh handle that broom, Bantie, reminds me uh heap of uh fee-male person. You shore are finicky about yor floor.”

Bantie blushed through his tan and swept vigorously.

Magpie saw that he had riled Bantie so he continued:

“You shore ought to have uh pet around yore cabin. Uh feller gits uh heap uh comfort out of uh pet. Now, old man Sims down at th’ forks, has got uh litter uh gray

kittens and I know he’d shore admire to give yuh one. Uh course yuh don’t want nothin’ bigger nor more fee-rocious than house cats. Wild animal pets are only fit fer——”

He had started to make a depreciatory gesture with his right hand, which had suddenly come into contact with fur. Also the fur moved. Magpie took one look and then swallowed his tobacco. A wildcat was sitting on the bunk beside him and two big, yellow eyes stared into his. Magpie knew wildcats—knew that no living animal could move more quickly. But if any wildcat had caught Magpie in the next ten seconds it would have set a new record for the species.

Bantie dropped his broom as Magpie went past and then leaned against the doorway and watched him slow down a hundred yards away and pull his gun as he whirled. The little gray kitten rubbed against Bantie’s leg and he picked it up and cuddled it to his face as he watched Magpie scratch his neck and then amble off up the trail.

To say that Magpie was astonished as he plodded off up that trail would be putting it mildly.

“I wonder if that was uh bob-cat?” he queried aloud. “Dang it all, my eyes ain’t what they used to be. Leavin’ my specs to home that away puts me plumb dim in th’ vision, but—huh, that shore looked like uh bob-cat—yes sir! But shucks, it ain’t possible! Bantie with uh bob-cat! No siree, it ain’t reasonable I tell yuh! Must ‘a’ been my eyes I reckon.”

He went rumbling along the trail with his head down and nearly ran headlong into Tellurium.

“Whoa, yuh old goat!” yelled Tellurium. “What yuh tryin’ to do—butt yore way home?”

“Howdy, Tellurium. Where yuh goin’?”

“Reckoned I’d pilgrim down and see if Bantie’s got home yet. Did yuh see him?”

“Uh-ha. I stopped by his cabin fer uh

spell.”

“Did he have anything to say about me and you and th’ pets?” asked Tellurium, with a grin.

“Not uh word. I reckon he’s done forgot it. Nice li’l feller that Bantie.”

“Nice enough fer uh runt, but I don’t admire th’ breed none. He’s too doggone scary, Magpie.”

“Un-ha,” agreed Magpie. “He shore ain’t got no corner on nerve. Well, I got to be goin’. Come over tonight and play uh little poker. I don’t suppose Bantie wants to play but yuh might ask him.”

Tellurium rambled off down the trail and Magpie stood there and watched him for a while. Finally he scratched his neck and murmured:

“Mebby I’d ought to have told him but—shucks, it wasn’t nothin’—not uh danged thing! But jist th’ same I—huh!”

Bantie was washing a pair of overalls in a battered dishpan when Tellurium hove in sight, and he threw them over a stump to dry.

“Howdy, Bantie,” greeted Tellurium, with a wide-mouthed grin. “As uh particular feller you shore got ’em all skinned. Washin’ overalls! What’s th’ use uh that? Say, I’ll bet you takes uh bath too when nobody ain’t lookin’. Haw! Haw! I knowed uh feller oncet who used to take uh bath twice uh month regular. Dang near rubbed all th’ skin off hisself. You ought to git uh buckskin shirt like mine, Bantie. Them skin shirts keep yuh from gittin’ dirty—sort a fit so tight th’ dirt can’t git in, *sabe?*”

Bantie grinned and dried his hands.

“Go inside, Tellurium, and sit down while I gits some fresh water. I drinks uh lot uh water this hot weather.”

“Un-ha, I reckon yuh would,” replied Tellurium, as Bantie took the pail and started for the creek. “Yes sir, I wouldn’t put it uh bit past yuh—drinkin’ lots uh water.”

It was probably two minutes later

when Bantie came back whistling with his pail of water and entered the cabin.

“This old Sleepin’ Creek shore produces th’ fine water,” he remarked but there was no response—the cabin was empty.

He walked to the door and looked around but there was no sign of Tellurium.

“That’s danged funny!” he exclaimed aloud. “Where in thunder is Tellurium?”

He went outside and walked around the cabin and then came in and looked under the bunk.

“Well, I’ll be uh——”

He gasped as he pulled an object from under the bunk and held it up to the light. It was a battered old sombrero and in the crown was punched the initials, T. W.

“Mama mine!” chuckled Bantie. “And Tellurium shore wasn’t built fer such speed neither!”

The little gray kitten on the bunk voiced its hunger and got a whole can of precious condensed milk for supper that night.

TELLURIUM went over to play poker with Magpie that night but neither of them mentioned Bantie until the evening was nearly over. Magpie shoved back from the table and began to polish his glasses on a piece of buckskin.

“My eyes are gittin’ plumb bad,” he complained. “Sometimes I think I see things and I know doggone well I don’t. I reckon I’d better wear my specs all th’ time.”

“Reckon I’ll have to git some too,” agreed Tellurium.

“Yore vision botherin’ yuh too?”

“Same as yours.”

“When did yuh notice it first?”

“This afternoon. I—huh—say, Magpie, did yuh notice anything—well, sort a unusual down to Bantie’s?”

“Say!” exploded Magpie, leaning across the table. “Did you see it too?”

“Felt it is nearer th’ word. Th’ danged

thing kept my Sunday hat!"

Magpie continued to polish his glasses and seemed lost in reflection.

"Jist about what do yuh reckon it is?" questioned Tellurium. "I didn't stay long enough to make uh good estimate."

"You and me both," agreed Magpie. "What little I saw of it shore re-sembled uh bob-cat, but bein' hasty thataway uh feller can't depend on snap judgement. Knowin' Bantie like we do I'm inclined to argue that we both was seein' things which ain't."

"Well, mebby," half agreed Tellurium. "But if it was it's th' first time that bad eyesight ever caused uh streak uh gray dynamite to crawl my frame and spit brimstone over my carcass and forcibly take my hat away. Mebby I'm seein' things, Magpie, but if I am I shore didn't start in th' lower grades. No sir, I reckon I got into fast company immediately."

"I'll tell yuh what we'll do," continued Tellurium, getting up and putting on his coat, "we'll go down there tomorrow and take our pets along. If that is uh bob-cat I'd shore admire to have it hop my wolf."

"And git yore wolf all scratched to shoestrings," grinned Magpie. "My grizzly is more like it. Bob-cats as uh rule don't hanker none to climb th' frame of grizzlies."

"We'll take 'em both," replied Tellurium, settling the argument. "I don't care a dang what happens jist so I gits my hat back. That lid cost me twelve dollars five years ago and I longs fer it something scandalous, Magpie."

THE next morning Magpie and Tellurium arrived at Bantie's cabin with their pets. The grizzly was a poor leader and Magpie was worn out trying to drag several hundred pounds of protesting bear for two miles over a trail. Tellurium was equally tired from having to dig his heels into the ground all the way trying to hold his wolf to a sedate pace.

Bantie was sitting in the shady side of his cabin reading, and on his lap lay a little gray kitten. Tellurium saw the kitten first and stopped in his tracks, but the wolf kept right on going and nearly upset Bantie's chair. The kitten arched its back, clawed its way up the side of the cabin and spat at the wolf from the eaves.

"What yuh tryin' to do?" yelled Bantie, trying to escape from the attentions of the pets. "Gol dang it! When yuh comes visitin' why don't yuh come a-lone!"

"Givin' th' pets uh little airin'," mumbled Magpie, still eying the kitten on the roof. "Where did yuh git th' kitten, Bantie?"

"Got him from old man Sims uh few days ago. I needed company so I gits th' kitten. Didn't yuh see him when yuh was here before?"

"Say," continued Bantie, before Magpie had a chance to answer, "where did yuh go th' other day, Tellurium? When I gits back with that pail uh water yuh was gone. I finds the kitten maulin' yore hat around th' floor and you ain't no place in sight."

"I—I—huh! You say yuh finds that kitten playin' with my hat?"

Bantie picked the hat off the bed and handed it to Tellurium.

"Ain't that yore hat?"

"By golly, she shore is!" exclaimed Tellurium. "How do yuh reckon that hat got down here? I must be gittin' absent minded, Magpie."

"I reckon yore both that way," grinned Bantie. "Th' other day Magpie is here sittin' comfortably on m' bunk, and all to oncet he shoots out of th' door and gallops off up th' trail. I stands here plumb surprised. I'm plumb scared that he's loco."

Magpie looked at Tellurium in an inquiring way, but Tellurium's face was hopelessly blank.

The bear and wolf, unleashed, wandered into the cabin just as Bantie stood

up and remarked:

“You fellers might as well come in out of th’ sun. Mebby it was th’ heat that affected yuh. I’ve got uh li’l bottle of hooch from old man Sims’ keg, and he told me that it was th’——”

“Say no more, Bantie,” beamed Tellurium, starting for the cabin door closely followed by the willing Magpie. “Old man Sims gives me uh shot uh that stuff oncet and ever since that time I’ve wished——”

Came a roar of pain and a yelp of surprise and the upheaval started. A streak of roan-colored bear, with a gray hump on its back, hit Magpie dead center, knocking him back into Tellurium, and as they fell the bear raked them fore and aft and the wolf, yipping like the fiends of the bad place were tied to its tail, raced across their prostrate bodies and disappeared in a cloud of dust up the trail.

The wolf, running at its best speed, was a poor second to the bear. The bear was carrying weight but handled it nicely.

Bantie leaned against the door frame and shrilled his mirth in a high key while the little gray kitten stood in the door and looked inquiringly at the two in the dust.

“What in —— happened?” wailed Magpie, feeling tenderly of a spot on his chest where the bear had grasped a foothold.

“Avalanche!” gasped Tellurium. “Top of th’ mountain busted right off and half of it hit me in th’ belt-buckle. I reckon I’d better light uh match to see if I’m conscious.”

Magpie gazed ruefully up the trail as he brushed off his clothes.

“I wonder what got into them pets? Gosh, uh grizzly shore has uh lot uh motive power when he gits a-goin’! Where yuh goin’ Tellurium?”

“I’m goin’ to find them animiles and see what’s th’ matter. Gol darn! I wouldn’t take uh fortune fer that wolf. He’s uh——”

“Man-sized pet,” finished Bantie with a grin, as he picked up the little gray kitten

and snuggled it to his face. “Pore li’l kitty, did they scare yuh?”

“Scare——!” exploded Magpie. “I’ll bet—huh!”

He turned and followed Tellurium up the trail, and Bantie watched them with an expectant grin on his face. The trail led over a point of rocks above the creek and at that point there was a sheer drop of about fifteen feet to the water, which was about five feet in depth.

Magpie caught up with Tellurium at this place and they stopped to argue the question. Beyond them the trail curved sharply around another cliff of rocks.

Tellurium shoved his hands into his pockets and faced Magpie belligerently.

“It don’t stand to reason, Magpie, that uh house cat——”

His argument was cut off. The avalanche had returned.

Being as the two were occupying most of the trail there was no chance to avoid the shock. Tellurium had hold of Magpie’s arm and the two of them performed their aerial spin and dip of death as one person.

The chase had evidently turned as the wolf was in the lead and using all the power of its legs and voice to hold that lead. The bear was due to slow up or run over the wolf if the race continued for a hundred yards further.

“Leggo my face!” spluttered Magpie, trying to shake Tellurium’s grip loose and grab a trailing willow shoot at the same time. “What yuh tryin’ to do, drown me?”

“Don’t claw me—gimme room!” gasped Tellurium. He lunged toward the bank and shook Magpie’s hold from the willow.

“Danged hippopotamus, tread water!” choked Magpie. “Leggo my arm! If I ever gits you—gurgle—gurgle—on dry land-leggo!”

“What did yuh push me in fer?” wailed Tellurium.

He tried to stand up but the current was too strong and he went pin-wheeling his

way down the creek to a sand-bar. Magpie, relieved of Tellurium's clutches, managed to grab the bank and pull himself out. He wandered down to where Tellurium was pouring the water out of his boots and sat down disconsolately on a log.

"I'd shore admire to know what happened?" he remarked. "Something shore has happened that I ain't got no light on. Now, that danged little kitten ain't—huh, I dunno, I dunno."

"No, it shore ain't," agreed Tellurium foolishly. "But if it ain't, what is? I asks yuh, Magpie, what is?"

"Why ask me?" demanded Magpie,

"Do yuh reckon I'm uh palmist? I know one thing, I'm goin' over and git my bear. Whatever it is it ain't no place fer bears. I reckon I'll have to tame that pet all over again. Let's go over and interview Bantie."

Bantie was still standing in the door with his kitten on his arm and he grinned widely at their dilapidated appearance.

Magpie wiped his mustache and glared at Bantie.

"Where's my bear?"

"And also that wolf uh mine!" snapped Tellurium.

"Do yuh want 'em sudden like or jist natural?" inquired Bantie.

"Sudden like suits me!" stated Magpie. "If I could git away from this place goin' uh thousand feet uh second I'd feel that I was sort a loiterin'."

"Watch m' root-house door," said Bantie, as he shoved the kitten back into the cabin and shut the door.

The root-house was simply a dug-out under the cabin, with a rough hinged door opening on a slant from the ground. The door was closed but not fastened. Magpie started to walk over and open it but he moved too late.

Came a yelp and a grunt of fear and the door heaved up, nearly tearing the hinges off, and the bear sailed out of the cellar and

streaked for the nearest tree.

The wolf hit only the highest points of the scenery until it came to a high point across the creek, where it stopped long enough to elevate its nose and voice its displeasure to the world.

Inside the cabin Bantie was down on his hands and knees, peering down into the cellar through a hole made by removing some of the rough flooring. He pulled on a short rope and called softly and a full-grown wildcat climbed out of the hole and rubbed affectionately against his leg. Bantie tied the leash to the bunk leg and the cat crawled under the bunk.

"By th' great horn spoon!" exclaimed Bantie. "You shore are some pet! Frenchy Burgoyne said uh mouthful when he said that yuh didn't allow strangers to trespass. Li'l cat, yuh cost me jist twenty dollars rent but yore shore worth it—every cent. I plumb hates to take yuh back but uh bargain's uh bargain. As uh bare-back rider of grizzlies I takes m' hat off to you, li'l bob-cat."

Outside, Magpie and Tellurium leaned against each other and watched the wolf bid farewell to humanity.

Finally, evidently with misgivings, the bear slid down out of the tree. It gazed at the two with melancholy in its little eyes and then waddled off into the willows down Sleeping Creek.

Tellurium sat down heavily on a log and wiped his bald head with a wet handkerchief.

"This is gittin' to be th' dangdest——"

"Look!" exclaimed Magpie, pointing to the open root-house door. The little gray kitten was perched on the top step and its little ears twitched as it looked cautiously about before coming out.

"What General Sherman said about war, goes double fer cats!" remarked Tellurium.

Magpie scratched his neck

thoughtfully for a moment and then started off down the Sleeping Creek trail on a half run.

“Where in —— yuh goin’?” yelled Tellurium.

Magpie stopped for a moment and considered the little kitten on the root-house door, before he yelled back:

“I’m goin’ down to dicker with old man Sims before he gits rid of all that litter uh cats. I needs uh pet and I shore admires th’ best there is.”

“You and me both,” agreed Tellurium fervently, and they went down the trail together.