

The Free Press Short Story

THE BUCK AND THE BULL

By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

HETTY MARTIN was eighteen. She lived on her father's farm, not far from the banks of the Nashwaak River in New Brunswick. Like many other girls in the back settlements, it was her ambition to escape from the lonely life of the backwoods farm and fit herself to be a school-teacher.

If you will take your map of New Brunswick, you will find that few towns in this section, which consists largely of timber land. If you have one of the maps that show natural resources, you will find that the red ink is used to indicate such interesting words as "moose," "beaver," "deer," "walrus," "salmon" in the eastern rivers and "Caribou" toward the north. You will also find, here and there "Coal," "tungsten," "Copper," "Iron," and other indications of buried wealth, lying under the timber and the farm land; so you will not be surprised that people in search of buried treasure visit New Brunswick, as do other people in search of hunting and fishing.

Along the banks of the Nashwaak, however, you will find the symbol that stands for "Mixed Farming," and you will notice that there are creameries and cheese factories in the villages.

By the use of such maps people in search of new homes can make a far more intelligent choice than do those who plunge ahead blindly, attracted by the mere sound of a town's name or by reports of its good climate or of its many sports and recreations.

Hetty's father, Mr. Charles Martin, had come from an overcrowded part of England; and he was naturally well pleased with the living he made from his pioneer farm. Men who have lived in close touch with their neighbors in a grimy city often find themselves both soothed and inspired by a change to broad acres of their own. Mr. Martin was primarily a dairy farmer, but he also found the soil favorable to many vegetables and to an orchard which he both planted and cultivated with jealous care. His only regret in life, perhaps, was that Hetty was lonesome. He lacked companions of her own age, largely because the nearest neighbors seemed to specialize in boy children, rather than girls. And Hetty was not interested in boys. She wanted to teach. Her father respected this ambition and helped her as much as he could to attain it.

When were times, however when he told himself that Hetty would eventually become interested in some particular boy, if not in boys in general. That she would make an excellent wife for some achieving young farmer went without question, for she was strong, highly intelligent, thrifty, sympathetic and loyal. Mr. Martin was glad she showed no interest whatever in such matters at eighteen, for he knew that she would be able to make a far more intelligent choice later on. He dreaded the day when she would leave him, whether to teach or to establish her own home. Meanwhile, he found her a joy companion, as well as an ambitious one. He sometimes thought that the clear, Canadian sunshine outdoors was less bright than the sunshine of Hetty's presence inside the house; and this is possibly as fine a compliment as any father can pay his daughter, whether he tells it to her or not.

Hetty knew, of course, that her father loved her. She was always happy when she was near him. But few grown people can ever concentrate so hard on a given problem as does a girl of Hetty's age on some problem in her own life. Hetty's problem was to fit herself for school-teaching, and she gave it earnest thought and study every day.

On a beautiful autumn day, taking her ten-year-old brother Alec for company, Hetty walked into the little town of Stanley, a distance of about six miles by the main road, for the purpose of buying with her butter money some textbooks which she stood in need.

Her shopping proved successful and she hugged with elation under one arm the little bundle of books which her good day's work had earned for her. The goal of her ambition seemed nearer than ever before; and to her hopeful young eyes, the rough landscape wore a glory beyond even that of the brilliant autumn weather and the bright October sun.

The distance home, in a straight line through the woods and back pastures, was little over five miles.

"We'll go by this trail," said Hetty to Alec, and the boy was delighted by the prospect of a cross-country walk.

Pushing their way through the bushes with a pleasant rustle of dry leaves, among great boulders and stumps, over charred rail-fences and across swampy barrens and dismal stretches of burnt lands, the two moved blithely and briskly.

Alec was a light-hearted, well-built boy who adored his tall sister and felt proud of what he considered his responsibility in escorting her. Before long their trail led them across a stretch of rough pasture. There was a shallow brook, and beside it grew an old willow with wide-spreading branches. At the other end of the pasture, amid a thicket of gray and black stumps, was gathered a little herd of red cattle.

Hetty and Alec, being farm children, paid these cattle no attention, but walked steadily toward them.

The critics think we've got some fall for 'em? They're all moving down this way."

Hetty cast a careless glance in the direction of the herd. As she did so, her face changed and she cried, "Watch out, Alec!" in a tone of keen anxiety.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"That's Rodgers' bull!"

Hetty's face was even more anxious. "The big red-white critter?" inquired the boy, indifferently.

"Yes. They say he's terribly ugly," continued Hetty. "He's coming right at us. Whatever can we do?"

"I guess it's that red jacket of yours, Hetty. It's so awful red! Red makes bulls mad," exclaimed Alec, trying hard to keep himself from breaking into a run.

By this time they were near the centre of the big pasture. In front of them was the curious herd, advancing slowly with the angry bull in the lead. Behind them was the brook, with the big willow tree. Hetty looked back over her shoulder; and as she did so, the bull gave a hoarse, muzzling roar, pawed the turf, lowered his horns and seemed ready to charge.

Hetty tugged frantically at her red jacket. For the first time in Alec's memory she seemed to have lost her presence of mind.

"Come!" Alec tugged at her arm. "We must run, Hetty, even if it's nothing" but an old bull, he can catch us—he'll kill us if we don't."

This brought the girl to her senses. She and Alec broke into desperate flight. Hetty was the faster runner of the two, but her skirt impeded her, and so did the precious package of books. They could plainly hear the thunder of the bull's hoofs on the turf behind them; and, although Hetty expected that she would leave Alec behind, as she had always done when racing him for fun, he now ran several steps in front of her.

With difficulty, changing the package from hand to hand, Hetty tore off her red jacket as she ran. She loved it, and it cost her a pang to sacrifice it, even at that moment when she felt that the bull might pause to toss and gore it. She had heard of a woman who had once done the same thing, escaping from a bull by judiciously tossing to him her hat, her shawl, her coat and other specimens of her wearing apparel. Hetty hoped that the same strategy would work again.

A two-hundred-yard sprint brought the fugitives to the brook. As they splashed through it, they realized it was far too shallow to stop the bull. The big branches hung right overhead. Tossing her package into a bush, Hetty grasped one of them and swung herself up, as gracefully as a sailor, to safety.

The bull was now but twenty yards behind. He paused, as Hetty had hoped, to trample and toss the offending red jacket. But he soon realized it was only a sacrifice to him—a sort of sop to his anger. Abandoning it with a snort, he thundered after the boy and girl.

Alec was only too eager to follow Hetty's example and climb the willow. But the branch was far beyond his reach. His first cry of fear broke from his lips; yet it was not craven fear, but rather a cry of desolation and abandonment. He thought that Hetty had deserted him, leaving him to face his fate alone at the foot of the great, inaccessible trunk.

At Alec's heart-broken cry, a horror of remorse and self-reproach went through Hetty's heart and transformed her. Up to now she had been but a frightened girl, thinking mostly about her gay red jacket and her books. Now she became a different being. If a pack of wolves had been surrounding her brother, she would have rushed to his side without a thought of fear. And this was only a stupid blundering bull.

She dropped to the ground, with the bull less than forty feet away. Lifting Alec in her strong arms, she hoisted him until his fingers could catch the friendly branch overhead. He squirmed and kicked, drawing himself up to safety. With not a single second to spare, Hetty jumped for the branch, caught it with her strong hands and drew up her feet just as the bull's right horn caught one of them in a glancing blow. But the blow meant nothing to her. She was safe; and more important, she had saved little Alec's life.

Even at that moment, however, her feeling of self-reproach was so strong that she burst into uncontrolled sobs. In a minute she felt Alec's hand patting her arm.

"Aw, what are you crying for?" asked Alec, in surprise. "That old bull can't climb trees. We're as safe as if we were in church."

"Oh, Alec," gasped the girl. "I pretty nearly left you all alone down there on the ground."

"Forget it!" said Alec stoutly. "You booted me up here before I knew what was happening. What's the matter with you? Maybe you forgot I wasn't big enough to grab this branch from the ground."

Evidently he ascribed Hetty's tears to womanly weakness. Before long she stopped crying, and wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

It was no time to think about handkerchiefs, and Hetty was in her jacket pocket, out in the pasture. The bull had trampled the jacket deep into the muddy soil near the brook.

Both Hetty and Alec looked down from their perch at the bull with surprise. They were used to bulls, but this one's savage anger went beyond anything they had seen before. They expected him to glare at them for a while with his protruding red eye, to snort and belch for a while, and then to become bored by his inability to reach them. He would then go away, no doubt, and resume his ordinary meditations at some other place in the field.

But this bull was far too furious to forget his present business. He faced the willow tree, pawing the earth and throwing it up into the air with his horns, meanwhile bellowing every now and then in a hoarse, muzzling voice. He even charged the tree, digging his short but sharp-pointed horns into the soft willow wood, and making the branches quiver. Knowing that the tree was far too big for him to uproot, the girl and boy felt a fearful sort of pleasure in this sensation.

"But away, you big bully!" cried Alec, putting one arm around the trunk for greater security. "I hope it makes your head ache! I hope you break every bone in your head."

But the bull's skull was evidently far harder than the wood of the tree, and he seemed to take ferocious joy in his efforts to knock the tree down. Around him, at a respectful distance, stood the cows and young steers, staring at the scene with what seemed to be soft-eyed curiosity.

"The nasty things!" cried Hetty angrily. "I believe they'd like to see him knock this tree over and then hook us. Who'd have thought cows could be so bold near the brook."

From his perch Alec now caught sight of the red jacket, fifty feet on the other side of the brook. It was a sorry sight, torn, trampled, and muddy.

"Look, Hetty! He's spoiled your new jacket. What a shame!"

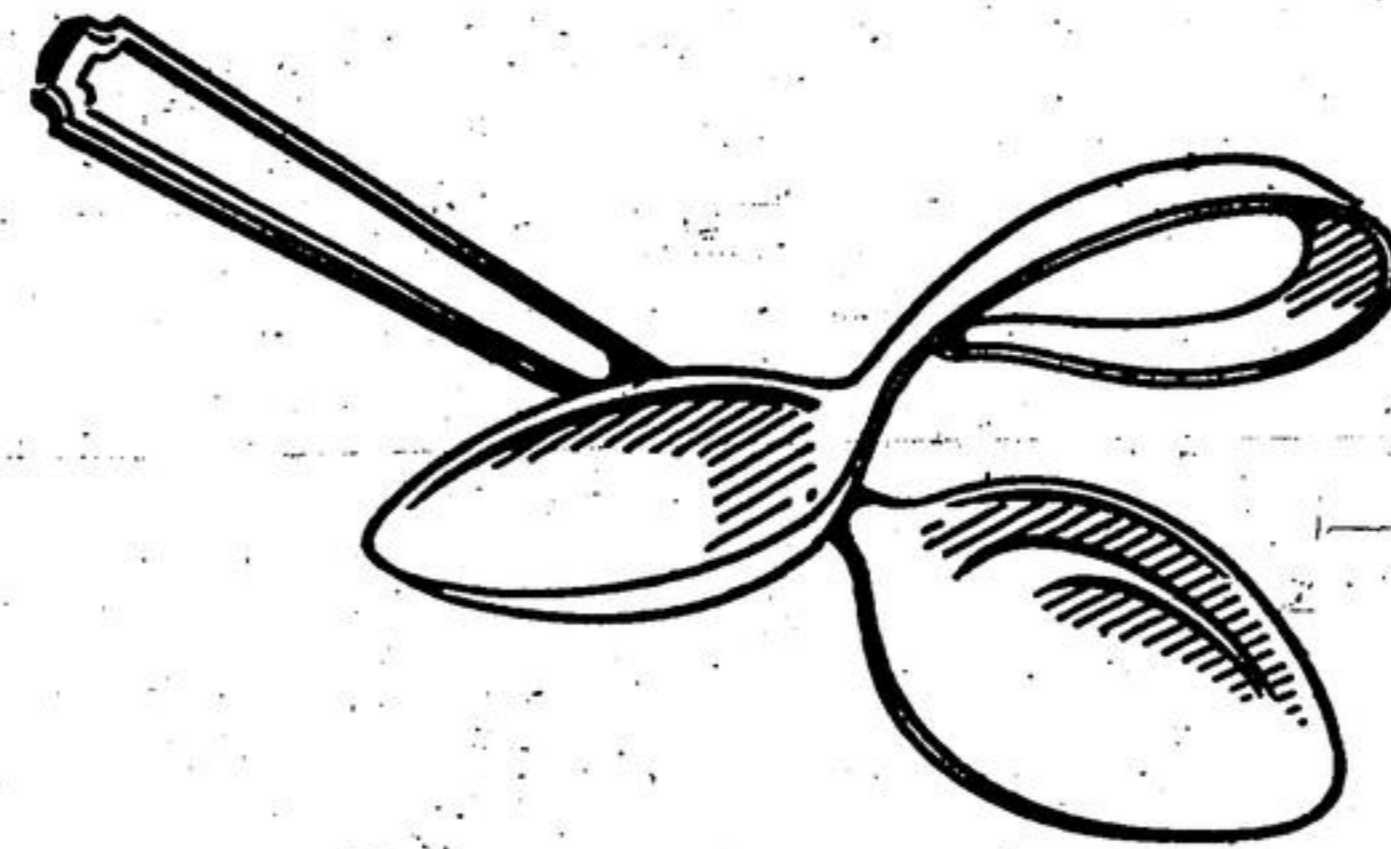
"Let him," answered the girl. "Guess that jacket paid for itself, all right. It saved both of our lives."

But after ten minutes more, which the bull filled with his terrifying antics, Hetty began to notice that twilight was setting in. The prospect of being tired all night by this persistent bull was a serious one, more especially as she had no coat to wear. She fixed her eyes regretfully on the wreck of her jacket. She wondered if her father would come to the rescue. But he would not search for her on this rough country trail; he would expect her, as usual, to keep to the road. There was no house within a mile or more. It would be useless to call for help; anyone who could hear such a call would have long since heard the roar of the bull.

A faint glimmer of hope came to Hetty when the bull seemed at last to weary of the one-sided game he was playing. Rejoining the herd, he led it back to the red jacket, which he again attacked. As he was waving it on his horns, and flinging it to the ground and trampling it under his hoofs, Hetty and Alec suddenly became aware of a new spectator.

A large, wide-antlered buck had emerged from the woods and seemed to be

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