

# The Turn-down Man

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06 August 1930

SAM was an artist with the canthook. The stick seemed to live in his big hands as he twirled it in sweeping arcs, clamped it into a log, lifted, jerked it out, spun it and hooked again, never missing a hold.

Sweat rolled down his lean face, dripping steadily from his nose and chin. His dirty undershirt was black and soggy under the suspenders; his khaki trousers glazed with pitch. Thin brown hair, streaked with grey, grew far back on his forehead and lay on his temples in wet ringlets. Sam glanced up toward the cook house.

A tall, angular man, neatly dressed in a forester's uniform and high tan boots, was coming down to the mill. He was freshly shaven. Sam, looking at him, grunted in disdain. The tall man stopped by the pile of logs on the upper end of the skidway. He stood and watched Sam work.

Canuck, Sam's helper, knocked the wedges from the last log on the skidway. Sam gave it a twist from the end, and as it rolled by, leapt after it. When it banged onto the carriage he sank the canthook in and held it while the carriage men pounded in the dogs. Then he leaned on the handle of his hook and watched the whining saw eat its way thru the wood. The carriage rattled back and Sam turned the log for another cut.

Canuck set the wedges on the skidway and went up to the pile. He, too, stood and watched Sam for a moment.

"It's a pleasure to see him work," said the state scaler.

"He's the best canthook man in the country," Canuck answered.

"If he'd keep his mouth shut," the scaler said, slowly, "he'd be a lot better off."

"He's a damn sight smarter than some educated fellers," Canuck said meaningly.

"Smart? He has more fool ideas than a tree has leaves."

"Tell him that," said Canuck and started the logs rolling down the skidway.

The foremost bumped the wedges and stopped, the others rolled in behind it. Sam stood, back to them. The danger of the logs jumping the wedges didn't bother him. He was used to it.

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The scaler methodically began scaling logs, carefully putting a blue check on each one measured and recording the number of feet of lumber in his book. He picked up a canthook and awkwardly turned a partly rotted log to get a better look at it. Sam, watching, bit off a chew of Climax and spat; then went to work with excessive energy.

The scaler got Sam's goat. Sam hated his voice, his speech, his dude clothes. And the damn fool took his wife and kids clear down to Plains, seven miles, to go to church.

Spots of dusty sunshine fell thru the knot holes and cracks of the slab roof which covered the mill and lower end of the skidway. The hot air was littered with flying sawdust, and there was not a breath of wind to blow it away. When Sam got a moment's rest he could look up at the mountain over the piles of smoldering slabs. Somehow, it was good to look at, after the smoke and sawdust—green, blue and cool.

The whistle's screech cut thru the din, signaling a shut down. The saws hummed to a stop. The sawyer and carriage men began to take off the huge circular saw. As the dust settled, Sam leaned on his canthook, breathing deeply of the clean air.

The workers around the skidway rested on the logs while the sharp saw was put on. The scaler wiped his face with a clean, white handkerchief, as he came down to join them, followed by the chute greaser. The sawdust monkey came up from the sawdust pile, a youngster of about fourteen, scrawny, freckled, casual.

"You will be going back to school soon," said the scaler.

"Yeah-if I go," the kid let fly a squirt of tobacco-juice. Before he spoke Sam hit the knot that the boy had missed. "Yuh won't larn to spit t'bacco nor twirl a canthook in school. That's a place for sissies an' rich devils. They look down on yuh. What they larn yuh is nonsense."

Canuck nodded. The scaler smiled. "Don't take him seriously. An education is the best thing you can have. Get it."

Sam interrupted: "Don't let 'im talk yuh into nuthin', kid! They jist want your money. When it's gone they drop yuh flat. Stick with us. Put your money into Socialism an' when we git that we'll all be sittin' pretty."

"Bosh," said the scaler. "You don't know what Socialism is!"

"I know the only Socialism I want to. You don't want it because you're afraid you might have to get your clothes dirty."

They laughed; all but the scaler.

"Churches," Sam went on, "churches is another thing we ought to git rid of. They're a nuisance. Preachers is the worst of all. They tell you there's a God, take your money and tell you you'll go to Heaven if you keep on givin' to 'em. Hell, anybody knows there ain't a God. They know it, too. There ain't none of 'em really believes it."

The workers looked at the scaler, expectantly.

"You're wrong, Sam," the scaler was getting red, "There is a God and they all believe it—they know it!"

"Prove it. You can't see Him, you can't hear Him. How do you know there's a God?" Sam's voice was sharp, eager.

"What makes life? What makes trees grow? What's behind it all?" the scaler asked.

"Nature," Sam roared.

"Call it nature or call it God; it's all the same. God is the power, the thing, the force that regulates the world."

"Bunk! How do you know there's a force behind the world?" Sam's grin was triumphant.

The scaler stood up, looking squarely at Sam. "I can feel it!"

"Feel it!" That puzzled Sam. "Feel it! How the devil can you feel God?"

"How do you know you have a pain? You can feel it. That's how I can feel God." The scaler spoke earnestly.

"That's tellin' 'em straight," said the sawyer, looking up from his work.

Sam tipped back his head, "That's the damndest—", his laughter sounded thru the mill and most of the lumberjacks joined him.

The mill started up again and Sam turned to the work he claimed to hate, to the work that he did with such pride and skill. For an hour the saws screeched and whined and Sam spun the canthook and sweated. Then a belt broke. Trouble pleased Sam. It made him feel as tho he were getting the better of the Company while it lasted. He took a healthy chew, spat, drew a bare arm across his mouth, and sat down on a log. His eyes rested on the green wave of spruce and tamarack that rolled up to the skyline. When it was quiet like this he could sometimes catch the sound of falling trees back a mile where the swamper were chopping and sawing.

"Hey! Look't that log," shouted the carriage man, pointing to the chute that stretched up the mountain like a long snake. A team was pushing a string of logs down it. The last one was a monster, the biggest they had ever brought down.

"I bet she'll scale fourteen hundred," said the sawyer.

"Closer to thirteen," Canuek yelled back.

"Twelve," said Sam. "Bet you five dollars I'm within twenty-five feet of it."

"I'll take you," said the sawyer. At noon they all went over to the log while the scaler measured it. "Eleven-fifty," he said. "Bum guess, Sam."

Sam leaned forward. The tone of his voice held the men silent. "That measured twelve-twenty-five," he stated.

"Minus seventy-five for butt rot," explained the scaler, "leaves eleven-fifty. They teach that in school,"

"School, hell! That rot won't take off twenty-five."

"That's the way it goes in the book," the scaler answered.

"Don't let 'im git away with that," chirped the shifty carriage man, "He's always pullin' that highbrow stuff."

Sam looked at the scaler. "You— —," he said. It was the word a man can't take.

The lumberjacks drew closer. Sam's eyes lighted as the scaler put down his book and scaling rule. Sam was looking at the scaler's long neck; his big fingers were working. A huge grin spread over his face. But before the scaler could

reach Sam his little girl came running down the chute, bare legs, torn calico dress flapping, crying in a thin, excited voice.

"Daddy, come to dinner right away."

"Here, kid, g'wan home," one of the men said gruffly, stepping toward her. Frightened, she tried to turn quickly, slipped and fell, striking her head on the chute. She screamed. The scaler rushed to her. "I'll see you later," he flung at Sam.

Sam stood irresolute a moment, then turned and slouched off.

"Aw hell!" said Canuck as he watched the scaler go, carrying the girl to his cabin.

The next morning when a belt jumped its pulley the saw shut down momentarily. There was a cool breeze blowing thru the mill. Sam faced it, raising his eye to the hillside. His gaze fell upon the scaler's children playing on the sawdust pile. The little girl took a run, jumped over the edge and tumbled to the bottom with a cry of delight. Sam smiled, but remembering whose brat she was, he stopped and looked around, sheepishly. He saw the scaler standing by the chute, grinning at him.

A few minutes later they came to the big log. While Sam was waiting for Canuck to roll it down the skidway, he spoke to the scaler.

"Where do you feel God today, in your belly?"

The scaler stiffened—"All over," he said, and as he moved away Sam's guffaws followed him.

The logs started with a jar that shook the platform. One of the blocks jumped off the skidway, but no one noticed. Sam leaned on his canthook, feeling fine.

The log hit the remaining wedge; the far end skidded. Another log bunted in behind it. The wedge shot out and the big log, suddenly freed, leapt towards Sam. The scaler yelled. Sam jerked up his head and stood motionless, while he took a quick breath. Then he spat on his hands, at the same time setting his feet. Like a flash he swung the canthook up, twirling it.

In the split second while the great log came crashing down Sam caught a glimpse out of the end of the mill—greenness and quiet.

He was between the carriage men and tons of smashing wood. His fingers tightened on the worn handle of the canthook. He had to check the log enough for the carriage to hold, then—he could leap back; it wasn't far.

He swung with all the beef of his shoulders. The canthook grabbed the log. For an instant he was rigid, only his knees bending with the strain. The lumberjacks stood helplessly, mouths loose, unheading the crying saws. The wind twisted Sam's wet hair; drops of sweat glistened on his face. His boot calks bit deep into the planks. The cords on his neck: bulged and drew taut like wet rope. His arms and shoulder muscles knotted. His eyes were steady; his mouth tight.

The handle of the canthook bent like a bow. "Hold her, Sam," the scaler shouted, as he snatched up a hook and leapt for the skidway. Sam turned his head to watch him, his lips twitching. The weight was getting him. When the scaler got there he'd clear out; let "God" take care of the scaler.

The scaler threw his hook up on the platform and hurried to climb after it. Sam raised his eyes to the woods, a hard laugh growing deep in his throat. Over the short stretch of creek he saw the scaler's children splashing in the water. Sam's mouth tightened, "Damn kids." The scaler was almost on the skidway.

"Back, you fool," Sam roared. The scaler hesitated, stopped. Sam reefed up on the hook. It bent in his hands, sprung back, then cracked. Sam staggered, straightened, and leapt back. He fell short, landing between the carriage and the skidway. The log smashed onto him. The slap of his head on the carriage platform was drowned by the saws and the heavier thump of the log as it struck the carriage guards and stopped.

The whistle screeched and the saws slowed to a tired hum. The men ran to the carriage with canthooks and prys. They rolled the big log back on the skidway and lifted Sam out on the mill floor. They used the scaler's jacket for a pillow. The foreman ran for his car and sped down the gulch for the doctor.

The men stood around Sam in an awkward silence, looking at his crumpled legs. It was too late for a doctor. They knew that. The scaler got some water and splashed it on Sam's face.

Sam's body quivered and he stared up at the scaler. A spasm of pain clouded his eyes, blood trickled from his mouth; the pain passed and his lips drew away from his tobacco-yellowed teeth in a faint leer. "Scaler," he whispered, "I feel God-allover."