The Iron Hunter
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Published by Wayne State University Press

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The Iron Hunter.

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Chapter 8

Married on Credit I Give My Bride a Five Cent Bouquet and We Take a Wedding Trip on a Streetcar

The best act of my life was performed in Milwaukee when I fell in love and married. I do not know how any one could be more deeply in love than I was, unless I am now, and I think I am. My sweetheart was seventeen and I was twenty. I was refused a marriage license on this account. The moment we became of age I secured the license and we were married by the Reverend F. L. Stein, pastor of the Grand Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, in the parlor of his parsonage, Saturday evening, May 7, 1881.

I gave my bride a five cent bouquet from the German market, paid the preacher two dollars down and three dollars on the installment plan and paid Gluck, the tailor, for my wedding suit in the same way.

We joyously took our bridal tour on one of Washington Becker’s street cars drawn by horses, and spent the evening with Observer Mueller of the United States Weather Bureau and Mrs. Mueller.

If any bridegroom was ever happier before or since it is because of his greater capacity for emotion. I had wedded the most beautiful and the bravest girl in the world, and I know this now better than I thought it then. There never has been a time in African jungle or any other place demanding courage, when my wife has not been the braver of the two.

I made many friends, and one of the dear ones, Colonel J. A. Watrous, was directly responsible for my going to Florence as told in a previous chapter. My character began to take form in Northern Wisconsin. I wished to provide for my wife and family and be a good husband and citizen. That was an undertaking big
enough. Conditions at once compelled me to make a decision between the outlaws and the little Presbyterian Church. At that time I did not formally join the church, but I did enlist for the aims of the church. It is nearly true but not quite exactly the case that it was put up to me to be a horse thief or a Presbyterian, and I chose to be the latter.

At Florence I had my first real initiation into the politics of the times. Hiram Damon Fisher, a good-hearted, canny Green Mountaineer, born at Vergennes, Vermont, was the big man of the place in everything. He was the discoverer of the adjacent iron mine that made the town possible.

Mr. Fisher had “entered” from the Government most of the environal land to the extent of thousands of acres. His plan was to secure the minutes (descriptions) and take them to the capitalists to be purchased from the public domain at one dollar and twenty-five cents an acre. Generally one quarter interest, but sometimes only one-eighth and infrequently three-eighths would be given the cruiser, or whatever person supplied the chance. In this manner much of the best of the valuable public domain fell into a few hands.

All sorts of things had fallen to the lot of the father of Florence before he got his start. He was a sailor on Lake Winnebago and Fox River, connecting that water with Green Bay, where his finer character was shown by saying “jeeswax” instead of the profanity that was more plentifully charged with haemoglobin.

Book peddling carried him into insurance, and while thus engaged he met Emily, the beautiful daughter of Joseph Keyes, one of the pioneers of Wisconsin.

Boss Keyes, a son of Joseph, was a political power and for a long period dominated in Wisconsin.

Joseph Keyes came to be registrar of the United States land office at Menasha. Young Fisher got into the atmosphere of the office instinctively, as well as into the good graces of the majestic daughter.

He camped at the Keyes. Woods cruisers would come in with
the information gathered after long and adventurous trips. Oftentimes they were only concerned with certain specified parcels of land, but in going to or from that location they would incidentally gather much information about timber, rocks, soil, fur, game, Indians and what not. Very often they would race with other woodsmen for some rich stake, nearly always pine timber. Thrilling canoe trips in summer and great hikes on snow shoes trailing tobaggans in winter were common.

The time Charley LaSalle lost his trapping “pardner” up on Lac Vieux Desert in the middle of the winter and froze the corpse until spring, when he painfully and laboriously trudged out with it for some hundreds of miles, was a chiefer tale, and the fellow who did not know all about it was the worst of lobbobs—tenderfeet.

When these couriers du bois were at the land office, and some of them were there every day, Damon Fisher would cultivate them. A drink here, or a plug of tobacco or a present of a pipe and the jolly young Yankee was their bosom friend.

Then they would tell him everything, even the secrets they hoped to capitalize in the nebulous some day. In this manner he learned of places where the compass would turn a complete circle because the magnetic attraction was so strong.

Every little while a cruiser from the Lake Superior region would fish out of his pockets a specimen. Nearly all of them knew iron ore when they saw it. They were not very good judges of percentages of metallic iron, but that was relatively unimportant. Sometimes they would have jasper and at other times lean magnetite, resembling what they had known as loadstone.

One day a cruiser showed Fisher a small piece of sparkling specular hematite. That settled it. He had married Miss Keyes, but that did not prevent his decision. The woods were a terra incognita to him, so he interested George Keyes, who was a cousin of his wife, and a good woodsman named Nelson Halsey.

This trio made trip after trip up into the wilds. They could go as far as Green Bay by rail, and then they had to attack the brush. Each man carried a pack. They took a light cotton tent,
A WEDDING TRIP ON A STREETCAR

one blanket apiece, frying pan, tin tea pail, three tin cups, knives and forks sometimes, plenty of flour and pork, tea and salt. No sugar; no luxuries. Their food range was as important as a sea-fighter's coaling radius is.

Tea, grillades and galette for breakfast and supper, and cold dough-god for lunch made up the woods fare of all who deserved the name of cruiser. It was wearing upon the young prospector's bank account, which had not been a big one to start with.

There was a lonely wife and baby in a little cottage in Menasha. Fisher just would not give up. He exhausted his means so completely that he would borrow five dollars to buy flour with, and when pressed would borrow of another in order to pay the original loan.

In this way of high finance he kept himself and his little crew in the woods. But there must be success or an end to it all. Anybody who ever had confidence in him had lost it.

So it came to the third mid-summer's prospecting. Halsey and Keyes were looking for a corner in order to locate themselves. They were in a dense cedar swamp between two small lakes. Fisher wandered about quite aimlessly and got away from his men. Coming to the edge of the swamp he climbed a hill, so that he might get a birds'eye view of the country if possible. But it was too thickly timbered at the hilltop. Then he hallooed to his men. No answer.

"Lost! by jeeswax," he soliloquized.

He sat down and took out his small exploring pick. Sticking it in the ground at haphazard, as one would idly play mumblety-peg along, he pulled it out and behold! The point was red.

He had stuck it into hematite just beneath the leaf-mold. Feverishly he scraped away the leaves and plied the little pick. There was iron ore.

Restoring the original appearance Fisher's next task was to find his men or have them find him. The work of anxious months was at an end.

Thus was discovered the Menominee Iron Range.

Not even telling Halsey and Keyes when they came together,
Fisher started for Menasha just as soon as he was certain of the section his find was on. The land was entered. More weary years ensued before John H. Van Dyke and Albert Conro of Milwaukee, and A. C. Brown of Marinette, and Henry Patton of Menasha and other rich bankers were interested.

The railroad followed, and then development and riches. To secure all this Fisher had to give up to capital three-fourths of his discovery.

Two lakes may be seen from the denuded crest of Florence Mine hill. The one to the southwest is called Keyes and the nearer one, which is southeast, is called Fisher. On the banks of the latter, in a beautiful location, is the mining village of Florence, named for Mrs. N. P. Hulst, of Milwaukee.

It was Mr. Fisher who came to have a drag on the town weekly, as a quite common result of loaning to it small sums of money. I went north in response to a wire from him to Colonel Watrous. The Colonel, a most generous and brave man, saw me climbing the stairs of the Wisconsin building with a series of jumps. Peck’s Sun was on one floor and the Sunday Telegraph, published by Calkins & Watrous, on another.

He asked me if I would like to go into business for myself.

I answered, “You bet!” without a moment’s thought of capital.

That was four o’clock P.M. I left on the six o’clock train, two hours later, and did not return. Mr. Fisher asked me how much money I had. I told him eighty dollars. He asked me how much I could raise. I told him all that was necessary.

“Where?” he queried.

“You,” I replied.

“All right,” he said.

I signed notes for two thousand, five hundred dollars, at ten per cent., all to be paid in a year.

It took sixty dollars of my eighty dollars to bring up my wife and babe and our scant household truck. I did not know there was a great depression in iron, and that the mine was idle. A small force was working two miles away at Commonwealth. There was some lumbering. Over the Michigan line there was a
good deal of exploring in the region of Tobin Lake, and along the Paint and Iron rivers, where the towns of Crystal Falls and Iron River were just starting. Small mines had opened at the Delphic and Mastodon locations.

Edward Breitung, of Negaunee, was doing some work at the lower Pine River falls, and Angus Smith, of Milwaukee, had an exploring crew on the Menominee, near Bad Water Indian village. The Lake Elwood section, between Spread Eagle and Pine River, was also attracting attention. Norway, Quinnesec and Iron Mountain were flourishing new towns. Keel Ridge mine had caved in and killed a number of men, the first big tragedy of the range.

The Breenes and others had done some work in the vicinity of Waucedah, which had been abandoned as beyond the extension of the productive iron formation. There was much excitement in the Metropolitan and Felch mountain regions and the Chicago & Northwestern built a branch in from Narenta, but the ore bodies turned out to be a shallow blanket, and large sums of money were lost.

To say that I worked night and day is the only description of my activity. I loved the wild new country. It brought into play everything that a soul and mind and body possesses. Nearly all the pioneers were young. The pace demanded youth. Jim Knight had a paper at Norway. I think they called it the Chronicle then; now his paper is the Current. Boulders Bennett was a feature of it.

Jim Russell, then a bellicose tyro, since become an able and dignified penologist, had just joined A. P. Swineford in the Marquette Mining Journal. George Newett, always a man and now famous for his tilt with Colonel Roosevelt, ran the Iron Agitator—now Iron Ore, at Ishpeming. C. G. Grifffey was plugging away with the Negaunee Iron Herald.

A fine fellow named Devereux seemed out of the world with the Portage Lake Mining Gazette at Houghton, and he gave it a tone that was high and distinctive.

Fred McKenzie was at Calumet, where he had a poster affair
much like his own pudgy self. Alfred Meads, father of them all and a credit to everything he contacted, was the pioneer publisher of the Ontonagon Miner.

Colonel Van Duzer, a veteran of Sherman’s army, published the Escanaba Iron Port, and the way the splendid old hero “marched to the sea” every issue was good for contemplation.

I have mentioned this press personnel because these men had more to do with developing the social and civic structure in their respective communities, that were in turn interwoven, than all the acquirors whatsoever. Every one of them waged a battle for equality and decency every minute and it was a prideful thing to know them.

The Mining Journal, of Marquette, and the Green Bay Advocate just about controlled things in the new field I had entered. It was my business to drive them out, which I did. I could do it only by appealing to local loyalty and meeting their competition. I started departments in my paper for Iron River and Crystal Falls and at last, when forced, I printed papers for these towns that were set up and run off at Florence.