S

Sometimes I wonder what I'm really like, inside. I feel as if I'm a mystery story, slowly revealing a plot to myself, but always in doubt as to what the outcome will be. I'd even reached a point where I figured it wasn't a bad idea to turn off. That way, I wouldn't have to face facts, wouldn't have to accept the consequences of what to do.

After all, if I didn't do anything, who would know whether I was broad-minded or prejudiced; a hero or a coward; capable or disorganized. Well, that's the way I used to think, until last summer. Then I found myself riding a dark horse and listening to a message, loud and clear, in that thundering water. Suddenly, I wanted to accept the challenge. Here's how it happened.

Right after breakfast, I left the Levesque Fishing Camp and headed along the narrow shoreline of the St. Maurice River toward Grandvue Rock. There I stood, my hands clenched deep in the pockets of my green nylon jacket, staring at the rapids, which only yesterday had dashed my hopes for a great holiday onto the rocks of my own carelessness.

I'd been coming to this camp with my dad for three years now, ever since I was thirteen. It's no secret that the river takes a mean turn at this bend, that the water plunges and rears over the shallows until a deeper channel gentles it down again and it flows on swiftly to Loretteville. I knew the danger, yet I drifted too close to the flecks of foam where an undercurrent swung the bow of my canoe against a jutting rock. The force tossed me, and some of the best fishing gear I'd ever worked for, into the water. Luckily, it's shallow there, but the pressure of the rushing water had my legs trembling and me gasping like a freshly hooked fish by the time I threw myself down onto the nice solid shore.
Disgusted, I glared at the channel ahead. To one side, an artificial sluiceway carried logs. To the other, the dark, racing water with its curling, swirling manes of white froth made me think of a herd of hard-sinewed horses. Well, when Dad got back from surveying timber farther upriver, he'd give me the horse laugh, all right. I must be the only dope around who'd forgotten that the dark water, even though it looks wilder, is a better bet than the shallow, bubbling stretches that mask a treacherous riverbed.

When I heard footsteps sliding on the rocky path behind me, I straightened quickly, hoping that I looked merely nonchalant, instead of discouraged.

Jean Paul Levesque scrambled up beside me. He's big Joe's son and he's been my friend for the past three years. "Bonjour, mon ami," he hailed me, his dark brown eyes sparkling. He was dressed as I was in blue jeans, but his shirt was a bright red plaid. "I have good news for you."

"Oh sure, my fairy godmother waved her wand and fixed my staved canoe," I commented sourly. "Then, using her magnetic personality, she dragged the rapids for my fishing gear."

"You Anglais," Jean Paul shrugged. "Why do you talk so fast that no one can understand, I do not make sense from your words. But mon père say, if you like, you can have small job helping me to clear logs from the river. Soon you will earn enough to buy a new canoe, n'est ce pas?"

For the first time since my accident, I began to feel good. I turned away from the hypnotic, tumbling water and we started back to camp. The St. Maurice is used as a workhorse, when it comes to getting logs to the pulp mill at Loretteville. Though swift-flowing by nature, the left side is even faster because extra water is released into it from a dam. The logs literally race one another until they arrive, sleek and glistening, at the mill.

Sometimes the big tree trunks flip out of the sluiceway and then they float, half-submerged, a definite hazard to boats and canoes. These are the strays that a good worker, with a strong arm and a pike pole, can drag to the shore and reap a bounty from the mill owners. The pay's generous, so I figured it wouldn't take too long to make up my loss.

"Thanks, Jean Paul," I grinned. "Your dad's a great guy to offer me a job."

"The others around are all busy guiding the tourists,"
he explained. “So you and I have the river to ourselves.”

We explored for a while tracking back and forth, but never too far from the shoreline. The bush is dense and the going heavy, unless you can get into the open. Then we figured it might just be time for one of Madame Levesque’s pancake lunches, complete with homemade maple syrup.

She is a plump, good-natured woman with big expressive eyes, which she uses to help her meagre knowledge of English. She rolled them in concern when Jean Paul told her we were taking on the job of timber salvage. A regular barrage of French pinned him into his chair at the big kitchen table, where we were eating, but he just grinned and shrugged. “Mama sees a bear behind every tree,” he explained, as we waved goodbye and headed for the wharf. “Between the bears and the river, we don’t stand a chance.”

“Aren’t you forgetting the black flies,” I asked, taking a swipe at a cloud of the pests, while we pushed off. “I guess that’s what’s meant when they say it’s the little things in life that get to you.”

By now, we were well into the current. My job was to sit in the bow, pike pole at the ready, and keep an eye on the swift sun-dappled water. The first log, although clearly visible, came at me so fast the canoe lifted dangerously. We rode up on the tree trunk but I managed to flail out, hook the bark and push with every ounce of my strength. My arms were aching by the time I’d brought our captive alongside. Jean Paul paddled expertly as we angled toward shore with the log in tow.

“Bon,” he shouted encouragingly. “By the end of the week, you’ll be strong enough to crack a bear’s ribs.”

“If I’m able to stand up, you mean,” I gasped, as we dragged the log clear of the water.

One hour and ten logs later, we were both ready for a short rest. I threw myself down on the narrow beach, thankful for the shade of the maples crowding the shoreline. Jean Paul reached into the canoe and took out his gear. I tried not to be envious at the sight of his fibreglass fishing pole, with its smooth-running reel. “There’s a deeper spot back a little,” he commented. “Think I’ll do some casting.”

I settled my head on my life jacket and closed my eyes. If those blasted flies would leave me in peace, I intended to rest up for the next bout with the river.

I must have dozed off because when my eyes snapped open, I was aware that the shadows had lengthened and
that something had disturbed me. But what? Not one of Madame Levesque’s bears, surely! Then the crashing, stumbling sound became clearer and I was on my feet instantly. “Jean Paul,” I shouted and almost reeled back into the river as he came blundering into sight. He was falling, even as I reached him, and I could only help lower him to the ground.

My voice wouldn’t work as I stared at him. His face, covered with blood, was pulled sideways and distended by a long, vicious sliver of glistening metal. His casting lure must have snagged a low branch and fallen back on him, I thought, feeling my stomach lurch at the sight of him. The hooks were embedded above his eye and through his cheek and seemed to be actually alive and evil, gleaming there in the sunlight. He’d torn his shirt in his wild dash and long cuts on his chest were wet and swelling. Already, a swarm of insidious black flies hovered over the open wounds.

I heard my cracked voice whispering in disbelief. “What will I do, what will I do,” I kept saying, over and over, as I yanked on my life jacket and heaved at the canoe to ground it on the shore. The canoe had to be steadied before I could get him into it. I couldn’t risk jarring those hooks, so close to his dazed eyes. While I made him as comfortable as possible on the bottom of the canoe, my mind was racing like the sluiceway.

Should I try to battle the current upriver, to the camp? But the men were in the bush and the thought of Madame’s shrieking at the sight of her son decided my course. I’d head for the doctor at Loretteville.

The shore flashed past as I paddled at top speed, glad of some physical action to counteract my mental turmoil. I was afraid of the rapids and there would not be any second chances today. I had to be ready to hit deep water as soon as we rounded the bend.

While I was still trying to get a grip on myself, I heard it. More than ever, the water’s roar made me think of galloping horses and as the noise thudded against my eardrums and paced the straining tempo of my heartbeat, the two sounds seemed to merge into an inner rhythm that exhilarated, even as it terrified me.

Jean Paul half struggled to sit up, then collapsed back again. “You will nevair be able to make the portage with me,” he whispered in despair.

“Portage?” I made it sound like a word they used on
Mars—a word I’d never heard. “Keep low, mon ami, we’re going to ride a dark horse.”

And then I was breathing deeply in the spray-filled air, my paddle pressed hard back against the canoe to act as a rudder. Sweat oozed from my clenched hands as we darted between the rock walls, the water exploding over the shallow bed. The canoe trembled as she took the first shock of rushing water but I knew what I was looking for. We settled onto the nearest body, riding high beside the white foam mane. Once there, away from the pale slate water bubbling above the sharp stones, I held the paddle firm and guided the craft.

I suppose I breathed at least once before the bucking, straining horse finally slowed from his gallop to a canter and then, effortlessly slid us from his back. Personally, I was not conscious of using any part of me except my eyes. My hair hung down, soaked by the tossing spray, and I pushed it back as I swiped at my eyes with the back of my hand.

By now, although the going was easy, I felt exhausted; and when we finally glided to a smooth stop at the dock at Loretteville, I didn’t have another ten metres left in me.

Work-roughened hands seemed to reach out from every direction to help me to my feet, to ease Jean Paul from the canoe. The air was thick with muttered curses as big, tough men tried to express their sympathy for Jean Paul. More than one huge arm flailed my back in a gesture of friendship and approval, and I wondered if I had escaped the rapids only to be pounded to pieces by my new friends.

A taxi was called to take us to the hospital and I was trying to think of enough French words to tell Madame Levesque on the telephone that there had been an accident, but everything was okay. I stared up the river for a long moment, warmed by the good feeling of having come through in the clutch.

Then it struck me. What if I hadn’t given it a try? I’d never have known what I could do for a pal, when he so desperately needed my help.

I still feel like a mystery story inside. But now I’m not afraid to look over the clues to my personality; I’m not fearful of taking the action that will move the plot along. I know I’ll find out that there will be times when I’m not a great guy; as well as times when I have what it takes.

At least I’ll be doing, and living; and eventually, I may even understand myself.