

# **Double Challenge**

By Jim Kjelgaard

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*For Patty Gallagher, and Linda, Pam,  
Larry and Craig Lewis*

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# 1. The Jolt

WHEN Ted Harkness reached the summit of Hawkbill, he hurried. He grinned a little smugly as he did so, for his had been a non-stop climb and most people who wanted to reach Hawkbill, the highest point in the Mahela and the only one that wasn't forested, had to rest at least twice. Some, starting out with firm determination to climb to the top, wavered en route and never did get there.

The gorgeous, tricolored collie that had been pacing beside Ted ran a short ways, snuffled into some brush and disappeared. Presently he came wagging back, to fall in beside his master, and Ted let a hand rest on the dog's silken head. A little farther on, the collie pricked up its ears and Ted stopped in his tracks.

Just ahead, a fallen tree lay at an angle down the slope. Either rooted in soft earth or shallowly rooted, it had toppled when its upper structure became too heavy for its root system to support, and it had fallen so recently that its leaves had not even started to shrivel. Sitting nervously on its trunk, suspecting danger was near but lacking the faintest idea as to where it was, were seven young, bobtailed grouse.

An imp of mischief danced in Ted's eyes. Ruffed grouse were one of the sportiest and one of the wisest of birds, but they weren't born wise and experienced. Like everything else, they had to learn and certainly these grouse weren't old enough to have learned much of anything. Ted said softly, "Get one, Tammie."

Very slowly, knowing his game and stalking it as a cat would have stalked, Tammie slunk forward. Ted watched with great interest. Rarely could any dog catch a mature ruffed grouse unless it was injured, and it was questionable as to whether Tammie could take one of these comparative babies. But he might.

Tammie neared the log, sprang, and six of the seven young grouse took fluttering wing. The seventh, clamped in Tammie's slender jaws, fluttered a moment and was still. Eyes proud, plumed tail waving, Tammie trotted back to Ted and placed the prize in his master's hand. Ted complimented him.

"Good boy, Tammie!"

He took the young grouse gently, feeling its thumping heart and understanding its terrified eyes. It wasn't hurt. When teaching Tammie to catch various birds and animals, Ted had taught him to be tender-mouthed. After a moment, he tossed his captive into the air and watched it fly out of sight.

"Let's go, dog."

They broke out of the beech woods onto the abutment that rose above. Almost solid rock, nothing grew here except lichens and, in the cracks, occasional strips of grass. Bent somewhat like a hawk's bill, it was a favorite playground for hawks that wanted to test their wings. The view was unsurpassed.

Ted sat down on the very tip of Hawkbill and Tammie squatted companionably beside him. Ted looked at the Mahela.

For as far as he could see in any direction, forested hills folded into one another. Spinning Creek sparkled like a silver ribbon that some giant hand had draped gracefully down a forested valley. The road to Lorton, from this distance, was a footpath beside the creek. Two miles down the valley, the green clearing in which lay Carl Thornton's Crestwood Resort, the only resort in the Mahela and Ted's place of employment, gleamed like a great emerald.

Just below, almost at Ted's feet, was the snug log house in which he and his father lived, surrounded by two hundred acres of forest, except for small and scattered patches here and there. The Harknesses owned the last remaining private land in the Mahela. Its only clearings were those in which the cabin was built and one for a garden patch. Al Harkness didn't want or need much clearing. He preferred the beech woods to the cultivated fields, the trap line or woodsman's ax to the plow.

Behind Hawkbill rose a mountain that, long ago, had been ravaged by fire. The fire had burned slowly in the lower reaches and the forest there remained green and virgin. But a little more than halfway up, probably fanned by sudden, fierce winds, the fire had become an inferno. Nearly all the trees had been killed and had long since fallen. The place had grown up into a tangle of blackberry canes, with a few patches of scrubby aspen here and there. As Ted watched, he saw what he'd hoped to see. It was only a wisp of motion, a mere flutter in the aspens, and as soon as Ted spotted it, he lost it. Presently he picked it up again.



It was an immense deer, a great gray buck. Heavy-bodied, thick-necked, it would outweigh most big bucks by at least fifty pounds. Massive of beam, with four perfect points on either side, its antlers were a hunter's dream come true. It was feeding on something, probably patches of grass that grew among the briars. Ted's eyes glowed and he continued to search.

Presently he saw the second buck, an exact twin of the first. It was standing quietly in the warm sun, a hundred feet up-slope.

These were the bucks that were known throughout the Mahela, and far beyond it, as Damon and Pythias. All who'd seen them thought that either one, if bagged, would set a new record. But so far, both had carried their antlers safely through several hunting seasons and from the lazy way they posed on the mountainside, they might have been two gray steers in any farmer's pasture. The appearance was deceptive, though, and Ted knew it. Let anything at all excite either buck's suspicion and they'd prove their mettle. Ted rubbed Tammie's head reflectively.

"There they are," he observed, "and one of these days I'm going to hang one of those heads over our fireplace."

Tammie yawned and Ted laughed. "Okay, so I'm bragging again. But I'm still going to do it. Let's go, dog."

Having seen what he had come to see, he struck back down the mountain, through the forest of massive, gray-trunked beeches that marched like rows of orderly soldiers in all directions. Forty-five minutes later he emerged into his father's clearing.

No shanty or casual cabin, but a solid log structure built by a master craftsman, the house was set back against the line of trees. Artfully designed, it belonged exactly where it was and as it was. The Harkness house fitted the Mahela as well as did the big beeches against which, and of which, it was built. With a wing on each side and a covered porch that jutted forward, somehow the house itself seemed to hold out welcoming arms. A huge brick chimney told of the big fireplace within.

To one side was a shed, half of which formed a home for the few chickens Al Harkness saw fit to keep. There were never fewer than six of these and never more than ten, just enough to furnish Ted and his father with the eggs they needed and to provide an occasional fowl for the pot. The other half of the shed was a storage place for tools.

Behind the house was another, larger shed which sheltered a gasoline engine and buzz saw and provided a place for Al to take care of the furs, wild honey, herbs and other treasures that he brought in from the Mahela. In front stood the game rack, a cross pole mounted on two heavy timbers imbedded in the ground. Here hung the deer and occasional black bear that Al, Ted and their guests brought down.

To one side lay the garden, big enough to provide all the vegetables the Harknesses needed but not big enough to make a glaring scar in the beech woods. As a protection against raiding deer, this garden was surrounded by an eight-foot fence. The road to Lorton ran about sixty yards in front of the house but was hidden from it by trees. Beside the road was the high line with its two wires stretching into the house. There was a rutted drive that served as an entrance and exit for the battered pickup truck which was all the car Al Harkness had ever thought he needed.

When the boy and dog entered the clearing, Tammie raced ahead and streaked toward the work shed. Knowing his father would be there or Tammie wouldn't have gone, Ted strolled up and looked in at the open door. Sitting on a wooden chair with a broken back, Al Harkness was using his hunting knife to put the finishing touches on a board over which, when the time was right, a mink pelt would be stretched. He looked up and said, "Hi, fella."

"Hi, Dad. I'm back."

"Figgered that out all by myself, when your dog came in to say hello." Tammie was sitting near, watching Al work. For a moment, Ted watched too.

Perfectly-shaped, with exactly the right taper, the board upon which Al worked did not vary a hundredth of an inch from one side to the other. Al, who got more money for his furs than other trappers did because he took better care of them, sliced off another shaving and squinted down the board. A big man, he seemed as rugged as one of the giant beech trees. His brows jutted out like stone crags, while the eyes beneath them were gentle. But they were gentle in the manner of a soft wind that can become a fierce gale. There was something about him that was more than faintly akin to the grouse Ted had held in his hand, the rugged summit of

Hawkbill, and the two immense bucks he had seen. Al Harkness would be out of place anywhere except in the Mahela.

“What’d you see?” he asked.

“Damon and Pythias,” Ted answered happily. “Anybody who thinks they had a rack of horns last year should see them now!”

“Where they hangin’ out?”

“Where they always are at this time of year, in the briars on Burned Mountain.”

“And where,” Al asked, “will they be come huntin’ season?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure going to find out. One or the other of those heads will hang over our fireplace.”

“For sure now?” Al smiled faintly.

“If it doesn’t, it won’t be for lack of trying on my part.”

“One, two, three, four,” Al counted rapidly. “One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand— You’ll have to get at the end of a long line of hunters who want those heads.”

“I know a lot of hunters have tried for them, but they can be had.”

“Anything can be had,” Al observed sagely, “and one nice thing ’bout young ’uns is they think they can get it. Land either of those bucks and your picture’ll be in every paper in the state. Maybe even in some out of state.”

“Sure,” Ted grinned, “I’ll be famous as a deer hunter before I ever am as a resort owner.”

Finally satisfied with his stretching board, Al laid it carefully in a corner. He took a blackened pipe from his shirt pocket and an exquisitely wrought tobacco pouch from his trousers. Made of home-tanned buckskin, even if the pouch had not borne the stamp of Al’s craftsmanship, it would have been recognized as his. His name, A. HARKNESS, was stencilled on it. Al filled his pipe, lighted it and puffed lazy bursts of blue smoke into the air.

Tammie, who, in common with most dogs, disliked the smell of tobacco, sneezed and moved farther away. For a moment Al did not speak. Finally he murmured, “So now you’re goin’ to be a famous resort owner?”

“Why, didn’t you know?” Ted asked gaily. “The Mahela Lodge will be known all the way from Lorton to Danzer.”

Al grinned faintly. “That’s a real long ways, nigh onto six miles. You wouldn’t change your mind?”

“About what?”

“You can still go to college this fall and learn to be a dentist, lawyer, or anything else you want.”

“Colleges cost money.”

“I have,” Al said tartly, “been scarin’ up a penny every now and again since I been changin’ your didies. I can still scare up enough to send you through college, but I mistrust about startin’ you in the resort business. Crestwood cost Carl Thornton more money than I’ve earned in my whole life.”

“I don’t want to leave the Mahela.”

“Too much of your pappy in you,” Al growled, “and not enough of your mother. I want you to be somethin’ besides a woods runner.”

“It isn’t that, Dad. I’ve tried to explain to you. It’s the people—seeing them come in here all tired out, and seeing them go away rested and refreshed after we’ve shown them everything we have in the Mahela. I know college is valuable and I don’t look down my nose at education. But this is my job.”

Al sighed. “I’ve tried to talk some sense into you. How are you and Thornton gettin’ along?”

“Dad, Thornton owns Crestwood. I just work there.”

“So that makes Thornton better’n you, huh? You’re goin’ to be a right smart passel of time, savin’ enough to start your own resort on what Thornton pays you.”

“I’m getting experience, meeting people, learning how it’s done. I’m really learning the business from the bottom up.”

“Huh?”

“Nels Anderson and I have been working on the plumbing in Crestwood’s basement,” Ted grinned.

Al frowned. “I’m not foolin’. This is a big job you’ve set up for yourself and I don’t see how you’ll ever get enough money to do it.”

Ted said confidently, “I’ll work it out.”

“I wish,” Al declared, “that I was eighteen ’stead of forty-nine. I’d be able to work things out, too. But it’s you doin’ it. Everybody’s got to live the way they see fit.”

Al picked up another board and began shaping it. Ted took his pocketknife from his pocket.