

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**HORPE was awakened a long time before daylight by the ringing of a noisy bell. He dressed, shivering, and stumbled down-stairs to a round stove, big as a boiler, into which the cripple dumped huge logs of wood from time to time. After breakfast Thorpe returned to this stove and sat half dozing for what seemed to him untold ages. The cold of the north country was initiating him.

Men came in, smoked a brief pipe, and went out. Shearer was one of them. The woodsman nodded curtly to the young man, his cordiality quite gone. Thorpe vaguely wondered why. After a time he himself put on his overcoat and ventured out into the town. It seemed to Thorpe a meagre affair, built of lumber, mostly unpainted, with always the dark, menacing fringe of the forest behind. The great saw-mill, with its tall stacks and its row of water-barrels—protection against fire—on top, was the dominant note. Near the mill crouched a little red-painted structure from whose stovepipe a column of white smoke rose, attesting the cold, a clear hundred feet straight upward, and to whose door a number of men were directing their steps through

## THE FOREST

the snow. Over the door Thorpe could distinguish the word "Office." He followed and entered.

In a narrow aisle railed off from the main part of the room waited Thorpe's companions of the night before. The remainder of the office gave accommodation to three clerks. One of these glanced up inquiringly as Thorpe came in.

"I am looking for work," said Thorpe.

"Wait there," briefly commanded the clerk.

In a few moments the door of the inner room opened, and Shearer came out. A man's head peered from within.

"Come on, boys," said he.

The five applicants shuffled through. Thorpe found himself in the presence of a man whom he felt to be the natural leader of these wild, independent spirits. He was already a little past middle life, and his form had lost the elastic vigor of youth. But his eye was keen, clear, and wrinkled to a certain dry facetiousness; and his figure was of that bulk which gives an impression of a subtler weight and power than the merely physical. This peculiarity impresses us in the portraits of such men as Daniel Webster and others of the old jurists. The manner of the man was easy, good-natured, perhaps a little facetious, but these qualities were worn rather as garments than exhibited as characteristics. He could afford them, not because he had fewer difficulties to overcome or battles to fight than an-

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

other, but because his strength was so sufficient to them that mere battles or difficulties could not affect the deliberateness of his humor. You felt his superiority even when he was most comradely with you. This man Thorpe was to meet under other conditions, wherein the steel hand would more plainly clink the metal.

He was now seated in a worn office chair before a littered desk. In the close air hung the smell of stale cigars and the clear fragrance of pine.

"What is it, Dennis?" he asked the first of the men.

"I've been out," replied the lumberman. "Have you got anything for me, Mr. Daly?"

The mill owner laughed.

"I guess so. Report to Shearer. Did you vote for the right man, Denny?"

The lumberman grinned sheepishly. "I don't know, sir. I didn't get that far."

"Better let it alone. I suppose you and Bill want to come back, too?" he added, turning to the next two in the line. "All right, report to Tim. Do you want work?" he inquired of the last of the quartette, a big bashful man with the shoulders of a Hercules.

"Yes, sir," answered the latter uncomfortably.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a cant-hook man, sir."

"Where have you worked?"

## THE FOREST

"I had a job with Morgan & Stebbins on the Clear River last winter."

"All right, we need cant-hook men. Report at 'seven,' and if they don't want you there, go to 'thirteen.'"

Daly looked directly at the man with an air of finality. The lumberman still lingered uneasily, twisting his cap in his hands.

"Anything you want?" asked Daly at last.

"Yes, sir," blurted the big man. "If I come down here and tell you I want three days off and fifty dollars to bury my mother, I wish you'd tell me to go to hell! I buried her three times last winter!"

Daly chuckled a little.

"All right, Bub," said he, "to hell it is."

The man went out. Daly turned to Thorpe with the last flickers of amusement in his eyes.

"What can I do for you?" he inquired in a little crisper tones. Thorpe felt that he was not treated with the same careless familiarity, because, potentially, he might be more of a force to deal with. He underwent, too, the man's keen scrutiny, and knew that every detail of his appearance had found its comment in the other's experienced brain.

"I am looking for work," Thorpe replied.

"What kind of work?"

"Any kind, so I can learn something about the lumber business."

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

The older man studied him keenly for a few moments.

"Have you had any other business experience?"

"None."

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing."

The lumberman's eyes hardened.

"We are a very busy firm here," he said with a certain deliberation; "we do not carry a big force of men in any one department, and each of those men has to fill his place and slop some over the sides. We do not pretend or attempt to teach here. If you want to be a lumberman, you must learn the lumber business more directly than through the windows of a bookkeeper's office. Go into the woods. Learn a few first principles. Find out the difference between Norway and white pine, anyway."

Daly, being what is termed a self-made man, entertained a prejudice against youths of the leisure class. He did not believe in their earnestness of purpose, their capacity for knowledge, nor their perseverance in anything. That a man of twenty-six should be looking for his first situation was incomprehensible to him. He made no effort to conceal his prejudice, because the class to which the young man had belonged enjoyed his hearty contempt.

The truth is, he had taken Thorpe's ignorance a little too much for granted. Before leaving his home, and while the project of emigration was still

## THE FOREST

in the air, the young fellow had, with the quiet enthusiasm of men of his habit of mind, applied himself to the mastering of whatever the books could teach. That is not much. The literature on lumbering seems to be singularly limited. Still he knew the trees, and had sketched an outline into which to paint experience. He said nothing of this to the man before him, because of that strange streak in his nature which prompted him to conceal what he felt most strongly; to leave to others the task of guessing out his attitude; to stand on appearances without attempting to justify them, no matter how simple the justification might be. A moment's frank, straightforward talk might have caught Daly's attention, for the lumberman was, after all, a shrewd reader of character where his prejudices were not concerned. Then events would have turned out very differently.

After his speech the business man had whirled back to his desk.

"Have you anything for me to do in the woods, then?" the other asked quietly.

"No," said Daly over his shoulder.

Thorpe went out.

Before leaving Detroit he had, on the advice of friends, visited the city office of Morrison & Daly. There he had been told positively that the firm were hiring men. Now, without five dollars in his pocket, he made the elementary discovery that even in chop-

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

ping wood skilled labor counts. He did not know where to turn next, and he would not have had the money to go far in any case. So, although Shearer's brusque greeting that morning had argued a lack of cordiality, he resolved to remind the riverman of his promised assistance.

That noon he carried out his resolve. To his surprise Shearer was cordial—in his way. He came afterward to appreciate the subtle *nuances* of manner and treatment by which a boss retains his moral supremacy in a lumber country—repels that too great familiarity which breeds contempt, without imperiling the trust and comradeship which breeds willingness. In the morning Thorpe had been a prospective employee of the firm, and so a possible subordinate of Shearer himself. Now he was Shearer's equal.

"Go up and tackle Radway. He's jobbing for us on the Cass Branch. He needs men for roadin', I know, because he's behind. You'll get a job there."

"Where is it?" asked Thorpe.

"Ten miles from here. She's blazed, but you better wait for th' supply team, Friday. If you try to make her yourself, you'll get lost on some of th' old loggin' roads."

Thorpe considered.

"I'm busted," he said at last frankly.

"Oh, that's all right," replied the walking-boss. "Marshall, come here!"

## THE FOREST

The peg-legged boarding-house keeper stumped in. "What is it?" he trumpeted snuffingly.

"This boy wants a job till Friday. Then he's going up to Radway's with the supply team. Now quit your hollerin' for a chore-boy for a few days."

"All right," snorted Marshall, "take that ax and split some dry wood that you'll find behind th' house."

"I'm very much obliged to you," began Thorpe to the walking-boss, "and——"

"That's all right," interrupted the latter, "some day you can give me a job."

## CHAPTER FIVE

FOR five days Thorpe cut wood, made fires, drew water, swept floors, and ran errands. Sometimes he would look across the broad stump-dotted plain to the distant forest. He had imagination. No business man succeeds without it. With him the great struggle to wrest from an impassive and aloof nature what she has so long held securely as her own, took on the proportions of a battle. The distant forest was the front. To it went the new bands of fighters. From it came the caissons for food, that ammunition of the frontier; messengers bringing tidings of defeat or victory; sometimes men groaning on their litters from the twisting and crushing and breaking inflicted on them by the calm, ruthless enemy; once a dead man bearing still on his chest the mark of the tree that had killed him. Here at headquarters sat the general, map in hand, issuing his orders, directing his forces.

And out of the forest came mystery. Hunters brought deer on sledges. Indians, observant and grave, swung silently across the reaches on their snowshoes, and silently back again carrying their meagre purchases. In the daytime ravens wheeled and croaked about the outskirts of the town, bearing

## THE FOREST

the shadow of the woods on their plumes and of the north-wind in the sombre quality of their voices; rare eagles wheeled gracefully to and fro; snow squalls coquetted with the landscape. At night the many creatures of the forest ventured out across the plains in search of food—weasels; big white hares; deer, planting daintily their little sharp hoofs where the frozen turnips were most plentiful; porcupines in quest of anything they could get their keen teeth into;—and often the big timber wolves would send shivering across the waste a long whining howl. And in the morning their tracks would embroider the snow with many stories.

The talk about the great stove in the boarding-house office also possessed the charm of balsam fragrance. One told the other occult facts about the "Southeast of the southwest of eight." The second in turn vouchsafed information about another point of the compass. Thorpe heard of many curious practical expedients. He learned that one can prevent awkward air-holes in lakes by "tapping" the ice with an ax—for the air must get out, naturally or artificially; that the top log on a load should not be large because of the probability, when one side has dumped with a rush, of its falling straight down from its original height, so breaking the sleigh; that a thin slice of salt pork well peppered is good when tied about a sore throat; that choking a horse will cause him to swell up and float on the top of the

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

water, thus rendering it easy to slide him out on the ice from a hole he may have broken into; that a tree lodged against another may be brought to the ground by felling a third against it; that snowshoes made of caribou hide do not become baggy, because caribou shrinks when wet, whereas other rawhide stretches. These, and many other things too complicated to elaborate here, he heard discussed by expert opinion. Gradually he acquired an enthusiasm for the woods, just as a boy conceives a longing for the out-of-door life of which he hears in the conversation of his elders about the winter fire. He became eager to get away to the front, to stand among the pines, to grapple with the difficulties of thicket, hill, snow, and cold that nature silently interposes between the man and his task.

At the end of the week he received four dollars from his employer; dumped his valise into a low bobsleigh driven by a man muffled in a fur coat; assisted in loading the sleigh with a variety of things, from Spearhead plug to raisins; and turned his face at last toward the land of his hopes and desires.

The long drive to camp was at once a delight and a misery to him. Its miles stretched longer and longer as time went on; and the miles of a route new to a man are always one and a half at least. The forest, so mysterious and inviting from afar, drew within itself coldly when Thorpe entered it. He was as yet a stranger. The snow became the

## THE FOREST

prevailing note. The white was everywhere, concealing jealously beneath rounded uniformity the secrets of the woods. And it was cold. First Thorpe's feet became numb, then his hands, then his nose was nipped, and finally his warm clothes were lifted from him by invisible hands, and he was left naked to shivers and tremblings. He found it torture to sit still on the top of the bale of hay; and yet he could not bear to contemplate the cold shock of jumping from the sleigh to the ground—of touching foot to the chilling snow. The driver pulled up to breathe his horses at the top of a hill, and to fasten under one runner a heavy chain, which, grinding into the snow, would act as a brake on the descent.

"You're dressed pretty light," he advised; "better hoof it a ways and get warm."

The words tipped the balance of Thorpe's decision. He descended stiffly, conscious of a disagreeable shock from a six-inch jump.

In ten minutes, the wallowing, slipping, and leaping after the tail of the sled had sent his blood tingling to the last of his protesting members. Cold withdrew. He saw now that the pines were beautiful and solemn and still; and that in the temple of their columns dwelt winter enthroned. Across the carpet of the snow wandered the trails of her creatures—the stately regular prints of the partridge; the series of pairs made by the squirrel; those of the

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

weasel and mink, just like the squirrels' except that the prints were not quite side by side, and that between every other pair stretched the mark of the animal's long, slender body; the delicate tracery of the deer mouse; the fan of the rabbit; the print of a baby's hand that the raccoon left; the broad pad of a lynx; the dog-like trail of wolves;—these, and a dozen others, all equally unknown, gave Thorpe the impression of a great mysterious multitude of living things which moved about him invisible. In a thicket of cedar and scrub willow near the bed of a stream, he encountered one of those strangely assorted bands of woods-creatures which are always cruising it through the country. He heard the cheerful little chickadee; he saw the grave nuthatch with its appearance of a total lack of humor; he glimpsed a black-and-white woodpecker or so, and was reviled by a ribald blue jay. Already the wilderness was taking its character to him.

After a little while, they arrived by way of a hill, over which they plunged into the middle of the camp. Thorpe saw three large buildings, backed end to end, and two smaller ones, all built of heavy logs, roofed with plank, and lighted sparsely through one or two windows apiece. The driver pulled up opposite the space between two of the larger buildings, and began to unload his provisions. Thorpe set about aiding him, and so found himself for the first time in a "cook camp."

## THE FOREST

It was a commodious building—Thorpe had no idea a log structure ever contained so much room. One end furnished space for two cooking ranges and two bunks placed one over the other. Along one side ran a broad table-shelf, with other shelves over it and numerous barrels underneath, all filled with cans, loaves of bread, cookies, and pies. The centre was occupied by four long bench-flanked tables, down whose middle straggled utensils containing sugar, apple-butter, condiments, and sauces, and whose edges were set with tin dishes for about forty men. The cook, a rather thin-faced man with a mustache, directed where the provisions were to be stowed; and the "cookee," a hulking youth, assisted Thorpe and the driver to carry them in. During the course of the work Thorpe made a mistake.

"That stuff doesn't come here," objected the cookee, indicating a box of tobacco the newcomer was carrying. "She goes to the 'van.'"

Thorpe did not know what the "van" might be, but he replaced the tobacco on the sleigh. In a few moments the task was finished, with the exception of a half dozen other cases, which the driver designated as also for the "van." The horses were unhitched, and stabled in the third of the big log buildings. The driver indicated the second.

"Better go into the men's camp and sit down till th' boss gets in," he advised.

Thorpe entered a dim, over-heated structure, lined

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

on two sides by a double tier of large bunks partitioned from one another like cabins of boats, and centred by a huge stove over which hung slender poles. The latter were to dry clothes on. Just outside the bunks ran a straight hard bench. Thorpe stood at the entrance trying to accustom his eyes to the dimness.

"Set down," said a voice, "on th' floor if you want to; but I'd prefer th' deacon seat."

Thorpe obediently took position on the bench, or "deacon seat." His eyes, more used to the light, could make out a thin, tall, bent old man, with bare cranium, two visible teeth, and a three days' stubble of white beard over his meagre, twisted face.

He caught, perhaps, Thorpe's surprised expression.

"You think th' old man's no good, do you?" he cackled, without the slightest malice, "looks is deceivin'!" He sprang up swiftly, seized the toe of his right foot in his left hand, and jumped his left foot through the loop thus formed. Then he sat down again, and laughed at Thorpe's astonishment.

"Old Jackson's still purty smart," said he. "I'm barn-boss. They ain't a man in th' country knows as much about hosses as I do. We ain't had but two sick this fall, an' between you an' me, they's a skate lot. You're a greenhorn, ain't you?"

"Yes," confessed Thorpe.

## THE FOREST

"Well," said Jackson, reflectively but rapidly, "Le Fabian, he's quiet but bad; and O'Grady, he talks loud but you can bluff him; and Perry, he's only bad when he gets full of red likker; and Norton he's bad when he gets mad-like, and will use axes."

Thorpe did not know he was getting valuable points on the camp bullies. The old man hitched nearer and peered in his face.

"They don't bluff you a bit," he said, "unless you likes them, and then they can back you way off the skidway."

Thorpe smiled at the old fellow's volubility. He did not know how near to the truth the woodsman's shrewdness had hit; for to himself, as to most strong characters, his peculiarities were the normal, and therefore the unnoticed. His habit of thought in respect to other people was rather objective than subjective. He inquired so impersonally the significance of whatever was before him, that it lost the human quality both as to itself and himself. To him men were things. This attitude relieved him of self-consciousness. He never bothered his head as to what the other man thought of him, his ignorance, or his awkwardness, simply because to him the other man was nothing but an element in his problem. So in such circumstances he learned fast. Once introduced the human element, however, and his absurdly sensitive self-consciousness asserted itself. He was, as Jackson expressed it, backed off the skidway.



## THE BLAZED TRAIL

At dark the old man lit two lamps, which served dimly to gloze the shadows, and thrust logs of wood into the cast-iron stove. Soon after, the men came in. They were a queer, mixed lot. Some carried the indisputable stamp of the frontiersman in their bearing and glance; others looked to be mere day-laborers, capable of performing whatever task they were set to, and of finding the trail home again. There were active, clean-built, precise Frenchmen, with small hands and feet, and a peculiarly trim way of wearing their rough garments; typical native-born American lumber-jacks powerful in frame, rakish in air, reckless in manner; big blonde Scandinavians and Swedes, strong men at the sawing; an Indian or so, strangely in contrast to the rest; and a variety of Irishmen, Englishmen, and Canadians. These men tramped in without a word, and set busily to work at various tasks. Some sat on the "deacon seat" and began to take off their socks and rubbers; others washed at a little wooden sink; still others selected and lit lanterns from a pendant row near the window, and followed old Jackson out of doors. They were the teamsters.

"You'll find the old man in the office," said Jackson.

Thorpe made his way across to the small log cabin indicated as the office, and pushed open the door. He found himself in a little room containing two bunks, a stove, a counter and desk, and a number of

## THE FOREST

shelves full of supplies. About the walls hung fire-arms, snowshoes, and a variety of clothes.

A man sat at the desk placing figures on a sheet of paper. He obtained the figures from statistics penciled on three thin leaves of beech-wood riveted together. In a chair by the stove lounged a bulkier figure, which Thorpe concluded to be that of the "old man."

"I was sent here by Shearer," said Thorpe directly; "he said you might give me some work."

So long a silence fell that the applicant began to wonder if his question had been heard.

"I might," replied the man dryly at last.

"Well, will you?" Thorpe inquired, the humor of the situation overcoming him.

"Have you ever worked in the woods?"

"No."

The man smoked silently.

"I'll put you on the road in the morning," he concluded, as though this were the deciding qualification.

One of the men entered abruptly and approached the counter. The writer at the desk laid aside his tablets.

"What is it, Albert?" he added.

"Jot of chewin'," was the reply.

The scaler took from the shelf a long plug of tobacco and cut off two inches.

"Ain't hitting the van much, are you, Albert?"

## THE BLAZED TRAIL

he commented, putting the man's name and the amount in a little book. Thorpe went out, after leaving his name for the time book, enlightened as to the method of obtaining supplies. He promised himself some warm clothing from the van, when he should have worked out the necessary credit.

At supper he learned something else—that he must not talk at table. A moment's reflection taught him the common sense of the rule. For one thing, supper was a much briefer affair than it would have been had every man felt privileged to take his will in conversation; not to speak of the absence of noise and the presence of peace. Each man asked for what he wanted.

"Please pass the beans," he said with the deliberate intonation of a man who does not expect that his request will be granted.

Besides the beans were fried salt pork, boiled potatoes, canned corn, mince pie, a variety of cookies and doughnuts, and strong green tea. Thorpe found himself eating ravenously of the crude fare.

That evening he underwent a catechism, a few practical jokes, which he took good-naturedly, and a vast deal of chaffing. At nine the lights were all out. By daylight he and a dozen other men were at work, hewing a road that had to be as smooth and level as a New York boulevard.

## CHAPTER SIX

**T**HORPE and four others were set to work on this road, which was to be cut through a creek bottom leading, he was told, to "seventeen." The figures meant nothing to him. Later, each number came to possess an individuality of its own. He learned to use a double-bitted axe.

Thorpe's intelligence was of the practical sort that wonderfully helps experience. He watched closely one of the older men, and analyzed the relation borne by each one of his movements to the object in view. In a short time he perceived that one hand and arm are mere continuations of the helve, attaching the blade of the axe to the shoulder of the wielder; and that the other hand directs the stroke. He acquired the knack thus of throwing the bit of steel into the gash as though it were a baseball on the end of a string; and so accomplished power. By experiment he learned just when to slide the guiding hand down the helve; and so gained accuracy. He suffered none of those accidents so common to new choppers. His axe did not twist itself from his hands, nor glance to cut his foot. He attained the method of the double bit, and how to knock roots