

THE BLAZED TRAIL

rored the clouds, they hauled the carcasses out on the ice and stripped the harness. Then they rolled the log from the dray, piled the tools on it, and took their way to camp. In the blue of the winter's sky was a single speck.

The speck grew. Soon it swooped. With a hoarse croak it lit on the snow at a wary distance, and began to strut back and forth. Presently, its suspicions at rest, the raven advanced, and with eager beak began its dreadful meal. By this time another, which had seen the first one's swoop, was in view through the ether; then another; then another. In an hour the brotherhood of ravens, thus telegraphically notified, was at feast.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FABIAN LAVEQUE elaborated the details of the catastrophe with volubility.

"Hee's not fonny dat she bre'ks t'rough," he said. "I 'ave see dem bre'k t'rough two, t'ree tam in de day, but nevaire dat she get drown! W'en dose dam-fool can't t'ink wit' hees haid—*sacrè Dieu!* eet is so easy, to chok' dat *cheval*—she make me cry wit' de eye!"

"I suppose it was a good deal my fault," commented Radway, doubtfully shaking his head, after Laveque had left the office. "I ought to have been surer about the ice."

"Eight inches is a little light, with so much snow atop," remarked the scaler carelessly.

By virtue of that same careless remark, however, Radway was so confirmed in his belief as to his own culpability that he quite overlooked Fabian's just contention—that the mere thinness of the ice was in reality no excuse for the losing of the horses. So Pat and Henrys were not discharged—were not instructed to "get their time." Fabian Laveque promptly demanded his.

"*Sacrè bleu!*" said he to old Jackson. "I no work wid dat dam-fool dat no t'ink wit' hees haid."

THE BLAZED TRAIL

This deprived the camp at once of a teamster and a team. When you reflect that one pair of horses takes care of the exertions of a crew of sawyers, several swampers, and three or four cant-hook men, you will readily see what a serious derangement their loss would cause. And besides, the animals themselves are difficult to replace. They are big strong beasts, selected for their power, staying qualities, and intelligence, worth anywhere from three to six hundred dollars a pair. They must be shipped in from a distance. And, finally, they require a very careful and patient training before they are of value in co-operating with the nicely adjusted efforts necessary to place the saw-log where it belongs. Ready-trained horses are never for sale during the season.

Radway did his best. He took three days to search out a big team of farm horses. Then it became necessary to find a driver. After some deliberation he decided to advance Bob Stratton to the post, that "decker" having had more or less experience the year before. Erickson, the Swede, while not a star cant-hook man, was nevertheless sure and reliable. Radway placed him in Stratton's place. But now he must find a swamper. He remembered Thorpe.

So the young man received his first promotion toward the ranks of skilled labor. He gained at last a field of application for the accuracy he had so intelligently acquired while road-making, for now a

THE FOREST

false stroke marred a saw-log; and, besides, what was more to his taste, he found himself near the actual scene of operation, at the front, as it were. He had under his very eyes the process as far as it had been carried.

In his experience here he made use of the same searching analytical observation that had so quickly taught him the secret of the axe-swing. He knew that each of the things he saw, no matter how trivial, was either premeditated or the product of chance. If premeditated, he tried to find out its reason for being. If fortuitous, he wished to know the fact, and always attempted to figure out the possibility of its elimination.

So he learned why and when the sawyers threw a tree up or down hill; how much small standing timber they tried to fell it through; what consideration held for the cutting of different lengths of log; how the timber was skilfully decked on the skids in such a manner that the pile should not bulge and fall, and so that the scaler could easily determine the opposite ends of the same log;—in short, a thousand and one little details which ordinarily a man learns only as the exigencies arise to call in experience. Here, too, he first realized he was in the firing line.

Thorpe had assigned him as bunk mate the young fellow who assisted Tom Broadhead in the felling. Henry Paul was a fresh-complexioned, clear-eyed,

THE BLAZED TRAIL

quick-mannered young fellow with an air of steady responsibility about him. He came from the southern part of the State, where, during the summer, he worked on a little homestead farm of his own. After a few days he told Thorpe that he was married, and after a few days more he showed his bunk mate the photograph of a sweet-faced young woman who looked trustingly out of the picture.

"She's waitin' down there for me, and it ain't so very long till spring," said Paul wistfully. "She's the best little woman a man ever had, and there ain't nothin' too good for *her*, chummy!"

Thorpe, soul-sick after his recent experiences with the charity of the world, discovered a real pleasure in this fresh, clear passion. As he contemplated the abounding health, the upright carriage, the sparkling, bubbling spirits of the young woodsman, he could easily imagine the young girl and the young happiness, top big for a little backwoods farm.

Three days after the newcomer had started in at the swamping, Paul, during their early morning walk from camp to the scene of their operations, confided in him further.

"Got another letter, chummy," said he, "come in yesterday. She tells me," he hesitated with a blush, and then a happy laugh, "that they ain't going to be only two of us at the farm next year."

"You mean!" queried Thorpe.

THE FOREST

"Yes," laughed Paul, "and if it's a girl she gets named after her mother, you bet."

The men separated. In a moment Thorpe found himself waist-deep in the pitchy aromatic top of an old bull-sap, clipping away at the projecting branches. After a time he heard Paul's gay halloo.

"*Timber!*" came the cry, and then the swish-sh-sh—*crash!* of the tree's fall.

Thorpe knew that now either Hank or Tom must be climbing with the long measuring pole along the prostrate trunk, marking by means of shallow axe-clips where the saw was to divide the logs. Then Tom shouted something unintelligible. The other men seemed to understand, however, for they dropped their work and ran hastily in the direction of the voice. Thorpe, after a moment's indecision, did the same. He arrived to find a group about a prostrate man. The man was Paul.

Two of the older woodsmen, kneeling, were conducting coolly a hasty examination. At the front every man is more or less of a surgeon.

"Is he hurt badly?" asked Thorpe; "what is it?"

"He's dead," answered one of the other men soberly.

With the skill of ghastly practice some of them wove a litter on which the body was placed. The pathetic little procession moved in the solemn, inscrutable forest.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

When the tree had fallen it had crashed through the top of another, leaving suspended in the branches of the latter a long heavy limb. A slight breeze dislodged it. Henry Paul was impaled as by a javelin.

This is the chief of the many perils of the woods. Like crouching pumas the instruments of a man's destruction poise on the spring, sometimes for days. Then swiftly, silently, the leap is made. It is a danger unavoidable, terrible, ever-present. Thorpe, was destined in time to see men crushed and mangled in a hundred ingenious ways by the saw log, knocked into space and a violent death by the butts of trees, ground to powder in the mill of a jam, but never would he be more deeply impressed than by this ruthless silent taking of a life. The forces of nature are so tame, so simple, so obedient; and in the next instant so absolutely beyond human control or direction, so whirlingly contemptuous of puny human effort, that in time the wilderness shrouds itself to our eyes in the same impenetrable mystery as the sea.

That evening the camp was unusually quiet. Tallier let his fiddle hang. After supper Thorpe was approached by Purdy, the reptilian red-head with whom he had had the row some evenings before.

"You in, chummy?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"It's a five apiece for Hank's woman."

"Yes," said Thorpe.

The men were earning from twenty to thirty dollars a month. They had, most of them, never seen

THE FOREST

Hank Paul before this autumn. He had not, mainly because of his modest disposition, enjoyed any extraordinary degree of popularity. Yet these strangers cheerfully, as a matter of course, gave up the proceeds of a week's hard work, and that without expecting the slightest personal credit. The money was sent "from the boys." Thorpe later read a heart-broken letter of thanks to the unknown benefactors. It touched him deeply, and he suspected the other men of the same emotions, but by that time they had regained the independent, self-contained poise of the frontiersman. They read it with unmoved faces, and tossed it aside with a more than ordinarily rough joke or oath. Thorpe understood their reticence. It was a part of his own nature. He felt more than ever akin to these men.

As swamper he had more or less to do with a cant-hook in helping the teamsters roll the end of the log on the little "dray." He soon caught the knack. Toward Christmas he had become a fairly efficient cant-hook man, and was helping roll the great sticks of timber up the slanting skids. Thus always intelligence counts, especially that rare intelligence which resolves into the analytical and the minutely observing.

On Sundays Thorpe fell into the habit of accompanying old Jackson Hines on his hunting expeditions. The ancient had been raised in the woods. He seemed to know by instinct the haunts and habits

THE BLAZED TRAIL

of all the wild animals, just as he seemed to know by instinct when one of his horses was likely to be troubled by the colic. His woodcraft was really remarkable.

So the two would stand for hours in the early morning and late evening waiting for deer on the edges of the swamps. They haunted the runways during the middle of the day. On soft moccasined feet they stole about in the evening with a bull's-eye lantern fastened on the head of one of them for a "jack." Several times they surprised the wolves, and shone the animals' eyes like the scattered embers of a camp fire.

Thorpe learned to shoot at a deer's shoulders rather than his heart, how to tell when the animal had sustained a mortal hurt from the way it leaped and the white of its tail. He even made progress in the difficult art of still-hunting, where the man matches his senses against those of the creatures of the forest—and sometimes wins. He soon knew better than to cut the animal's throat, and learned from Hines that a single stab at a certain point of the chest was much better for the purposes of bleeding. And, what is more, he learned not to overshoot down-hill.

Besides these things Jackson taught him many other, minor, details of woodcraft. Soon the young man could interpret the thousands of signs, so insignificant in appearance and so important in reality,

THE FOREST

which tell the history of the woods. He acquired the knack of winter fishing.

These Sundays were perhaps the most nearly perfect of any of the days of that winter. In them the young man drew more directly face to face with the wilderness. He called a truce with the enemy; and in return that great inscrutable power poured into his heart a portion of her grandeur. His ambition grew; and, as always with him, his determination became the greater and the more secret. In proportion as his ideas increased, he took greater pains to shut them in from expression. For failure in great things would bring keener disappointment than failure in little.

He was getting just the experience and the knowledge he needed; but that was about all. His wages were twenty-five dollars a month, which his van bill would reduce to the double eagle. At the end of the winter he would have but a little over a hundred dollars to show for his season's work, and this could mean at most only fifty dollars for Helen. But the future was his. He saw now more plainly what he had dimly perceived before, that for the man who buys timber, and logs it well, a sure future is waiting. And in this camp he was beginning to learn from failure the conditions of success.

CHAPTER NINE

THEY finished cutting on section seventeen during Thorpe's second week. It became necessary to begin on section fourteen, which lay two miles to the east. In that direction the character of the country changed somewhat.

The pine there grew thick on isolated "islands" of not more than an acre or so in extent—little knolls rising from the level of a marsh. In ordinary conditions nothing would have been easier than to have plowed roads across the frozen surface of this marsh. The peculiar state of the weather interposed tremendous difficulties.

The early part of autumn had been characterized by a heavy snowfall immediately after a series of mild days. A warm blanket of some thickness thus overlaid the earth, effectually preventing the freezing which subsequent cold weather would have caused. All the season Radway had contended with this condition. Even in the woods, muddy swamp and spring-holes caused endless difficulty and necessitated a great deal of "corduroying," or the laying of poles side by side to form an artificial bottom. Here in the open some six inches of water and unlimited mud awaited the first horse that should

THE FOREST

break through the layer of snow and thin ice. Between each pair of islands a road had to be "tramped."

Thorpe and the rest were put at this disagreeable job. All day long they had to walk mechanically back and forth on diagonals between the marks set by Radway with his snowshoes. Early in the morning their feet were wet by icy water, for even the light weight of a man sometimes broke the frozen skin of the marsh. By night a road of trampled snow, of greater or less length, was marked out across the expanse. Thus the blanket was thrown back from the warm earth, and thus the cold was given a chance at the water beneath. In a day or so the road would bear a horse. A bridge of ice had been artificially constructed, on either side of which lay unsounded depths. This road was indicated by a row of firs stuck in the snow on either side.

It was very cold. All day long the restless wind swept across the shivering surface of the plains, and tore around the corners of the islands. The big woods are as good as an overcoat. The overcoat had been taken away.

When the lunch-sleigh arrived, the men huddled shivering in the lee of one of the knolls, and tried to eat with benumbed fingers before a fire that was but a mockery. Often it was nearly dark before their work had warmed them again. All of the skidways

THE BLAZED TRAIL

had to be placed on the edges of the islands themselves, and the logs had to be travoyed over the steep little knolls. A single misstep out onto the plain meant a mired horse. Three times heavy snows obliterated the roads, so that they had to be plowed out before the men could go to work again. It was a struggle.

Radway was evidently worried. He often paused before a gang to inquire how they were "making it." He seemed afraid they might wish to quit, which was indeed the case, but he should never have taken before them any attitude but that of absolute confidence in their intentions. His anxiety was natural, however. He realized the absolute necessity of skidding and hauling this job before the heavy choking snows of the latter part of January should make it impossible to keep the roads open. So insistent was this necessity that he had seized the first respite in the phenomenal snowfall of the early autumn to begin work. The cutting in the woods could wait.

Left to themselves probably the men would never have dreamed of objecting to whatever privations the task carried with it. Radway's anxiety for their comfort, however, caused them finally to imagine that perhaps they might have some just grounds for complaint after all. That is a great trait of the lumber-jack.

But Dyer, the scaler, finally caused the outbreak.

THE FOREST

Dyer was an efficient enough man in his way, but he loved his own ease. His habit was to stay in his bunk of mornings until well after daylight. To this there could be no objection—except on the part of the cook, who was supposed to attend to his business himself—for the scaler was active in his work, when once he began it, and could keep up with the skidding. But now he displayed a strong antipathy to the north wind on the plains. Of course he could not very well shirk the work entirely, but he did a good deal of talking on the very cold mornings.

"I don't pose for no tough son-of-a-gun," said he to Radway, "and I've got some respect for my ears and feet. She'll warm up a little by to-morrow, and perhaps the wind'll die. I can catch up on you fellows by hustling a little, so I guess I'll stay in and work on the books to-day."

"All right," Radway assented, a little doubtfully.

This happened perhaps two days out of the week. Finally Dyer hung out a thermometer, which he used to consult. The men saw it, and consulted it too. At once they felt much colder.

"She was stan' ten below," sputtered Baptiste Tallier, the Frenchman who played the fiddle. "He freeze t'rou to hees eenside. Dat is too cole for mak' de work."

"Them plains is sure a holy fright," assented Purdy.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

"Th' old man knows it himself," agreed big Nolan; "did you see him rammin' around yesterday askin' us if we found her too cold? He knows damn well he ought not to keep a man out that sort o' weather."

"You'd shiver like a dog in a briar path on a warm day in July," said Jackson Hines contemptuously.

"Shut up!" said they. "You're barn-boss. You don't have to be out in th' cold."

This was true. So Jackson's intervention went for a little worse than nothing.

"It ain't lak' he has nuttin' besides," went on Baptiste. "He can mak' de cut in de meedle of de fores'."

"That's right," agreed Bob Stratton, "they's the west half of eight ain't been cut yet."

So they sent a delegation to Radway. Big Nolan was the spokesman.

"Boss," said he bluntly, "she's too cold to work on them plains to-day. She's the coldest day we had."

Radway was too old a hand at the business to make any promises on the spot.

"I'll see, boys," said he.

When the breakfast was over the crew were set to making skidways and travoy roads on eight. This was a precedent. In time the work on the plains was grumblingly done in any weather. However,

THE FOREST

as to this Radway proved firm enough. He was a good fighter when he knew he was being imposed on. A man could never cheat or defy him openly without collecting a little war that left him surprised at the jobber's belligerency. The doubtful cases, those on the subtle line of indecision, found him weak. He could be so easily persuaded that he was in the wrong. At times it even seemed that he was anxious to be proved at fault, so eager was he to catch fairly the justice of the other man's attitude. He held his men inexorably and firmly to their work on the indisputably comfortable days; but gave in often when an able-bodied woodsman should have seen in the weather no inconvenience, even. As the days slipped by, however, he tightened the reins. Christmas was approaching. An easy mathematical computation reduced the question of completing his contract with Morrison & Daly to a certain weekly quota. In fact he was surprised at the size of it. He would have to work diligently and steadily during the rest of the winter.

Having thus a definite task to accomplish in a definite number of days, Radway grew to be more of a taskmaster. His anxiety as to the completion of the work overlaid his morbidly sympathetic human interest. Thus he regained to a small degree the respect of his men. Then he lost it again.

One morning he came in from a talk with the supply-teamster, and woke Dyer, who was not yet up.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

"I'm going down home for two or three weeks," he announced to Dyer, "you know my address. You'll have to take charge, and I guess you'd better let the scaling go. We can get the tally at the banking grounds when we begin to haul. Now we ain't got all the time there is, so you want to keep the boys at it pretty well."

Dyer twisted the little points of his mustache. "All right, sir," said he with his smile so inscrutably insolent that Radway never saw the insolence at all. He thought this a poor year for a man in Radway's position to spend Christmas with his family, but it was none of his business.

"Do as much as you can in the marsh, Dyer," went on the jobber. "I don't believe it's really necessary to lay off any more there on account of the weather. We've simply got to get that job in before the big snows."

"All right, sir," repeated Dyer.

The scaler did what he considered his duty. All day long he tramped back and forth from one gang of men to the other, keeping a sharp eye on the details of the work. His practical experience was sufficient to solve readily such problems of broken tackle, extra expedients, or facility which the days brought forth. The fact that in him was vested the power to discharge kept the men at work.

Dyer was in the habit of starting for the marsh an hour or so after sunrise. The crew, of course,

THE FOREST

were at work by daylight. Dyer heard them often through his doze, just as he heard the chore-boy come in to build the fire and fill the water pail afresh. After a time the fire, built of kerosene and pitchy jack pine, would get so hot that in self-defense he would arise and dress. Then he would breakfast leisurely.

Thus he incurred the enmity of the cook and cookee. Those individuals have to prepare food three times a day for a half hundred heavy eaters; besides which, on sleigh-haul, they are supposed to serve a breakfast at three o'clock for the loaders and a variety of lunches up to midnight for the sprinkler men. As a consequence, they resent infractions of the little system they may have been able to introduce.

Now the business of a foreman is to be up as soon as anybody. He does none of the work himself, but he must see that somebody else does it, and does it well. For this he needs actual experience at the work itself, but above all zeal and constant presence. He must know how a thing ought to be done, and he must be on hand unexpectedly to see how its accomplishment is progressing. Dyer should have been out of bed at first horn-blow.

One morning he slept until nearly ten o'clock. It was inexplicable! He hurried from his bunk, made a hasty toilet, and started for the dining-room to get some sort of a lunch to do him until dinner time.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

As he stepped from the door of the office he caught sight of two men hurrying from the cook camp to the men's camp. He thought he heard the hum of conversation in the latter building. The cookee set hot coffee before him. For the rest, he took what he could find cold on the table.

On an inverted cracker box the cook sat reading an old copy of the *Police Gazette*. Various fifty-pound lard tins were bubbling and steaming on the range. The cookee divided his time between them and the task of sticking on the log walls pleasing patterns made of illustrations from cheap papers and the gaudy labels of canned goods. Dyer sat down, feeling, for the first time, a little guilty. This was not because of a sense of a dereliction in duty, but because he feared the strong man's contempt for inefficiency.

"I sort of pounded my ear a little long this morning," he remarked with an unwonted air of *bonhomie*.

The cook creased his paper with one hand and went on reading; the little action indicating at the same time that he had heard, but intended to vouchsafe no attention. The cookee continued his occupations.

"I suppose the men got out to the marsh on time," suggested Dyer, still easily.

The cook laid aside his paper and looked the scaler in the eye.

THE FOREST

"You're the foreman; I'm the cook," said he. "You ought to know."

The cookee had paused, the paste brush in his hand.

Dyer was no weakling. The problem presenting, he rose to the emergency. Without another word he pushed back his coffee cup and crossed the narrow open passage to the men's camp.

When he opened the door a silence fell. He could see dimly that the room was full of lounging and smoking lumbermen. As a matter of fact, not a man had stirred out that morning. This was more for the sake of giving Dyer a lesson than of actually shirking the work, for a lumber-jack is honest in giving his time when it is paid for.

"How's this, men!" cried Dyer sharply; "why aren't you out on the marsh?"

No one answered for a minute. Then Baptiste:

"He mak' too tam cole for de marsh. Meester Radway he spik dat we kip off dat marsh w'en he mak' cole."

Dyer knew that the precedent was indisputable.

"Why didn't you cut on eight then?" he asked, still in peremptory tones.

"Didn't have no one to show us where to begin," drawled a voice in the corner.

Dyer turned sharp on his heel and went out.

"Sore as a boil, ain't he!" commented old Jackson Hines with a chuckle.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

In the cook camp Dyer was saying to the cook, "Well, anyway, we'll have dinner early and get a good start for this afternoon."

The cook again laid down his paper. "I'm tending to this job of cook," said he, "and I'm getting the meals on time. Dinner will be on time to-day—not a minute early, and not a minute late."

Then he resumed his perusal of the adventures of ladies to whom the illustrations accorded magnificent calf-development.

The crew worked on the marsh that afternoon, and the subsequent days of the week. They labored conscientiously but not zealously. There is a deal of difference, and the lumber-jack's unaided conscience is likely to allow him a certain amount of conversation from the decks of skidways. The work moved slowly. At Christmas a number of the men "went out." Most of them were back again after four or five days, for, while men were not plenty, neither was work. The equilibrium was nearly exact.

But the convivial souls had lost to Dyer the days of their debauch, and until their thirst for recuperative "Pain Killer," "Hinckley" and Jamaica Ginger was appeased, they were not much good. Instead of keeping up to fifty thousand a day, as Radway had figured was necessary, the scale would not have exceeded thirty.

Dyer saw all this plainly enough, but was not

THE FOREST

able to remedy it. That was not entirely his fault. He did not dare give the delinquents their time, for he would not have known where to fill their places. This lay in Radway's experience. Dyer felt that responsibilities a little too great had been forced on him, which was partly true. In a few days the young man's facile conscience had covered all his shortcomings with the blanket excuse. He conceived that he had a grievance against Radway!