

CHAPTER TEN

RADWAY returned to camp by the 6th of January. He went on snowshoes over the entire job; and then sat silently in the office smoking "Peerless" in his battered old pipe. Dyer watched him amusedly, secure in his grievance in case blame should be attached to him. The jobber looked older. The lines of dry good-humor about his eyes had subtly changed to an expression of pathetic anxiety. He attached no blame to anybody, but rose the next morning at horn-blow, and the men found they had a new master over them.

And now the struggle with the wilderness came to grapples. Radway was as one possessed by a burning fever. He seemed everywhere at once, always helping with his own shoulder and arm, hurrying eagerly. For once luck seemed with him. The marsh was cut over; the "eighty" on section eight was skidded without a break. The weather held cold and clear.

Now it became necessary to put the roads in shape for hauling. All winter the blacksmith, between his tasks of shoeing and mending, had occupied his time in fitting the iron-work on eight log-sleighs which the carpenter had hewed from solid sticks of

THE FOREST

timber. They were tremendous affairs, these sleighs, with runners six feet apart, and bunks nine feet in width for the reception of logs. The bunks were so connected by two loosely coupled rods that, when emptied, they could be swung parallel with the road, so reducing the width of the sleigh. The carpenter had also built two immense tanks on runners, holding each some seventy barrels of water, and with holes so arranged in the bottom and rear that on the withdrawal of plugs the water would flood the entire width of the road. These sprinklers were filled by horse-power. A chain running through blocks attached to a solid upper framework, like the open belfry of an Italian monastery, dragged a barrel up a wooden track from the water hole to the opening in the sprinkler. When in action this formidable machine weighed nearly two tons and resembled a moving house. Other men had felled two big hemlocks, from which they had hewed beams for a V plow.

The V plow was now put in action. Six horses drew it down the road, each pair superintended by a driver. The machine was weighted down by a number of logs laid across the arms. Men guided it by levers, and by throwing their weight against the fans of the plow. It was a gay, animated scene this, full of the spirit of winter — the plodding, straining horses, the brilliantly dressed, struggling men, the sullen-yielding snow thrown to either side, the

THE BLAZED TRAIL

shouts, warnings, and commands. To right and left grew white banks of snow. Behind stretched a broad white path in which a scant inch hid the bare earth.

For some distance the way led along comparatively high ground. Then, skirting the edge of a lake, it plunged into a deep creek bottom between hills. Here, earlier in the year, eleven bridges had been constructed, each a labor of accuracy; and perhaps as many swampy places had been "corduroyed" by carpeting them with long parallel poles. Now the first difficulty began.

Some of the bridges had sunk below the level, and the approaches had to be corduroyed to a practicable grade. Others again were humped up like tom-cats, and had to be pulled apart entirely. In spots the "corduroy" had spread, so that the horses thrust their hoofs far down into leg-breaking holes. The experienced animals were never caught, however. As soon as they felt the ground giving way beneath one foot, they threw their weight on the other.

Still, that sort of thing was to be expected. A gang of men who followed the plow carried axes and cant-hooks for the purpose of repairing extemporaneously just such defects, which never would have been discovered otherwise than by the practical experience. Radway himself accompanied the plow. Thorpe, who went along as one of the "road monks," saw now why such care had been required of

THE FOREST

him in smoothing the way of stubs, knots, and hummocks.

Down the creek an accident occurred on this account. The plow had encountered a drift. Three times the horses had plunged at it, and three times had been brought to a stand, not so much by the drag of the V plow as by the wallowing they themselves had to do in the drift.

"No use, break her through, boys," said Radway.

So a dozen men hurled their bodies through, making an opening for the horses.

"Hi! *yup!*" shouted the three teamsters, gathering up their reins.

The horses put their heads down and plunged. The whole apparatus moved with a rush, men clinging, animals digging their hoofs in, snow flying. Suddenly there came a check, then a *crack*, and then the plow shot forward so suddenly and easily that the horses all but fell on their noses. The flanging arms of the V, forced in a place too narrow, had caught between heavy stubs. One of the arms had broken square off.

There was nothing for it but to fell another hemlock and hew out another beam, which meant a day lost. Radway occupied his men with shovels in clearing the edge of the road, and started one of his sprinklers over the place already cleared. Water holes of suitable size had been blown in the creek bank by dynamite. There the machines were filled.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

It was a slow process. Stratton attached his horse to the chain and drove him back and forth, hauling the barrel up and down the slideway. At the bottom it was capsized and filled by means of a long pole shackled to its bottom and manipulated by old man Heath. At the top it turned over by its own weight. Thus seventy-odd times.

Then Fred Green hitched his team on, and the four horses drew the creaking, cumbrous vehicle spouting down the road. Water gushed in fans from the openings on either side and beneath; and in streams from two holes behind. Not for an instant as long as the flow continued dared the teamsters breathe their horses, for a pause would freeze the runners tight to the ground. A tongue at either end obviated the necessity of turning around.

While the other men hewed at the required beam for the broken V plow, Heath, Stratton, and Green went over the cleared road length once. To do so required three sprinklerfuls. When the road should be quite free, and both sprinklers running, they would have to keep at it until after midnight.

And then silently the wilderness stretched forth her hand and pushed these struggling atoms back to their place.

That night it turned warmer. The change was heralded by a shift of wind. Then some blue-jays appeared from nowhere and began to scream at their more silent brothers, the whiskey jacks.

THE FOREST

"She's goin' to rain," said old Jackson. "The air is kind o' holler."

"Hollow?" said Thorpe, laughing. "How is that?"

"I don' no," confessed Hines, "but she is. She jest *feels* that way."

In the morning the icicles dripped from the roof, and although the snow did not appreciably melt, it shrank into itself and became pockmarked on the surface.

Radway was down looking at the road.

"She's holdin' her own," said he, "but there ain't any use putting more water on her. She ain't freezing a mite. We'll plow her out."

So they finished the job, and plowed her out, leaving exposed the wet, marshy surface of the creek-bottom, on which at night a thin crust formed. Across the marsh the old tramped road held up the horses, and the plow swept clear a little wider swath.

"She'll freeze a little to-night," said Radway hopefully. "You sprinkler boys get at her and wet her down."

Until two o'clock in the morning the four teams and the six men creaked back and forth spilling hardly gathered water — weird, unearthly, in the flickering light of their torches. Then they crept in and ate sleepily the food that a sleepy cookee set out for them.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

By morning the mere surface of this sprinkled water had frozen, the remainder beneath had drained away, and so Radway found in his road considerable patches of shell ice, useless, crumbling. He looked in despair at the sky. Dimly through the gray he caught the tint of blue.

The sun came out. Nuthatches and woodpeckers ran gayly up the warming trunks of the trees. Blue-jays fluffed and perked and screamed in the hardwood tops. A covey of grouse ventured from the swamp and strutted vainly, a pause of contemplation between each step. Radway, walking out on the tramped road of the marsh, cracked the artificial skin and thrust his foot through into icy water. That night the sprinklers stayed in.

The devil seemed in it. If the thaw would only cease before the ice bottom so laboriously constructed was destroyed! Radway vibrated between the office and the road. Men were lying idle; teams were doing the same. Nothing went on but the days of the year; and four of them had already ticked off the calendar. The deep snow of the unusually cold autumn had now disappeared from the tops of the stumps. Down in the swamp the covey of partridges were beginning to hope that in a few days more they might discover a bare spot in the burnings. It even stopped freezing during the night. At times Dyer's little thermometer marked as high as forty degrees.

THE FOREST

"I often heard this was a sort 'v summer resort," observed Tom Broadhead, "but danged if I knew it was a summer resort all the year 'round."

The weather got to be the only topic of conversation. Each had his say, his prediction. It became maddening. Toward evening the chill of melting snow would deceive many into the belief that a cold snap was beginning.

"She'll freeze before morning, sure," was the hopeful comment.

And then in the morning the air would be more balmily insulting than ever.

"Old man is as blue as a whetstone," commented Jackson Hines, "an' I don't blame him. This weather'd make a man mad enough to eat the devil with his horns left on."

By and by it got to be a case of looking on the bright side of the affair from pure reaction.

"I don't know," said Radway, "it won't be so bad after all. A couple of days of zero weather, with all this water lying around, would fix things up in pretty good shape. If she only freezes tight, we'll have a good solid bottom to build on, and that'll be quite a good rig out there on the marsh."

The inscrutable goddess of the wilderness smiled, and calmly, relentlessly, moved her next pawn.

It was all so unutterably simple, and yet so effective. Something there was in it of the calm inevitability of fate. It snowed.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

All night and all day the great flakes zigzagged softly down through the air. Radway plowed away two feet of it. The surface was promptly covered by a second storm. Radway doggedly plowed it out again.

This time the goddess seemed to relent. The ground froze solid. The sprinklers became assiduous in their labor. Two days later the road was ready for the first sleigh, its surface of thick, glassy ice, beautiful to behold; the ruts cut deep and true; the grades sanded, or sprinkled with retarding hay on the descents. At the river the banking ground proved solid. Radway breathed again, then sighed. Spring was eight days nearer. He was eight days more behind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AS soon as loading began, the cook served breakfast at three o'clock. The men worked by the light of torches, which were often merely catsup jugs with wicking in the necks. Nothing could be more picturesque than a teamster conducting one of his great pyramidal loads over the little inequalities of the road, in the ticklish places standing atop with the bent knee of the Roman charioteer, spying and forestalling the chances of the way with a fixed eye and an intense concentration that relaxed not one inch in the miles of the haul. Thorpe had become a full-fledged cant-hook man.

He liked the work. There is about it a skill that fascinates. A man grips suddenly with the hook of his strong instrument, stopping one end that the other may slide; he thrusts the short, strong stock between the log and the skid, allowing it to be overrun; he stops the roll with a sudden sure grasp applied at just the right moment to be effective. Sometimes he allows himself to be carried up bodily, clinging to the cant-hook like an acrobat to a bar, until the log has rolled once; when, his weapon loosened, he drops lightly, easily to the ground. And it is exciting to pile the logs on the sleigh, first a

THE BLAZED TRAIL

layer of five, say; then one of six smaller; of but three; of two; until, at the very apex, the last is dragged slowly up the skids, poised, and, just as it is about to plunge down the other side, is gripped and held inexorably by the little men in blue flannel shirts.

Chains bind the loads. And if ever, during the loading, or afterward when the sleigh is in motion, the weight of the logs causes the pyramid to break down and squash out;—then woe to the driver, or whoever happens to be near! A saw log does not make a great deal of fuss while falling, but it falls through anything that happens in its way, and a man who gets mixed up in a load of twenty-five or thirty of them obeying the laws of gravitation from a height of some fifteen to twenty feet, can be crushed into strange shapes and fragments. For this reason the loaders are picked and careful men.

At the banking grounds, which lie in and about the bed of the river, the logs are piled in a gigantic skidway to await the spring freshets, which will carry them down stream to the "boom." In that enclosure they remain until sawed in the mill.

Such is the drama of the saw log, a story of grit, resourcefulness, adaptability, fortitude and ingenuity hard to match. Conditions never repeat themselves in the woods as they do in the factory. The wilderness offers ever new complications to solve, difficulties to overcome. A man must think of

THE FOREST

everything, figure on everything, from the grand sweep of the country at large to the pressure on a king-bolt. And where another possesses the boundless resources of a great city, he has to rely on the material stored in one corner of a shed. It is easy to build a palace with men and tools; it is difficult to build a log cabin with nothing but an axe. His wits must help him where his experience fails; and his experience must push him mechanically along the track of habit when successive buffetings have beaten his wits out of his head. In a day he must construct elaborate engines, roads, and implements which old civilization considers the works of leisure. Without a thought of expense he must abandon as temporary, property which other industries cry out at being compelled to acquire as permanent. For this reason he becomes in time different from his fellows. The wilderness leaves something of her mystery in his eyes, that mystery of hidden, unknown but guessed, power. Men look after him on the street, as they would look after any other pioneer, in vague admiration of a scope more virile than their own.

Thorpe, in common with the other men, had thought Radway's vacation at Christmas time a mistake. He could not but admire the feverish animation that now characterized the jobber. Every mischance was as quickly repaired as aroused expeditious could do the work.

THE BLAZED TRAIL

The marsh received first attention. There the restless snow drifted uneasily before the wind. Nearly every day the road had to be plowed, and the sprinklers followed the teams almost constantly. Often it was bitter cold, but no one dared to suggest to the determined jobber that it might be better to remain indoors. The men knew as well as he that the heavy February snows would block traffic beyond hope of extrication.

As it was, several times an especially heavy fall clogged the way. The snow-plow, even with extra teams, could hardly force its path through. Men with shovels helped. Often but a few loads a day, and they small, could be forced to the banks by the utmost exertions of the entire crew. *Esprit de corps* awoke. The men sprang to their tasks with alacrity, gave more than an hour's exertion to each of the twenty-four, took a pride in repulsing the assaults of the great enemy, whom they personified under the generic "She." Mike McGovern raked up a saint somewhere whom he apostrophized in a personal and familiar manner.

He hit his head against an overhanging branch.

"You're a nice wan, now ain't ye?" he cried angrily at the unfortunate guardian of his soul. "Dom if Oi don't quit ye! Ye see!"

"Be the gate of Hivin!" he shouted, when he opened the door of mornings and discovered another six inches of snow, "Ye're a burrd! If Oi couldn't

THE FOREST

make out to be more of a saint than that, Oi'd quit the biznis! Move yor pull, an' get us some dacint weather! Ye awt t' be road monkeyin' on th' golden streets, thot's what ye awt to be doin'!"

Jackson Hines was righteously indignant, but with the shrewdness of the old man, put the blame partly where it belonged.

"I ain't sayin'," he observed judicially, "that this weather ain't hell. It's hell and repeat. But a man sort've got to expec' weather. He looks for it, and he oughta be ready for it. The trouble is we got behind Christmas. It's that Dyer. He's about as mean as they make 'em. The only reason he didn't die long ago is becuz th' Devil's thought him too mean to pay any 'tention to. If ever he should die an' go to Heaven he'd pry up th' golden streets an' use the infernal pit for a smelter."

With this magnificent bit of invective, Jackson seized a lantern and stumped out to see that the teamsters fed their horses properly.

"Didn't know you were a miner, Jackson," called Thorpe, laughing.

"Young feller," replied Jackson at the door, "it's a lot easier to tell what I *ain't* been."

So floundering, battling, making a little progress every day, the strife continued.

One morning in February, Thorpe was helping load a big butt log. He was engaged in "sending up"; that is, he was one of the two men who stand

THE BLAZED TRAIL

at either side of the skids to help the ascending log keep straight and true to its bed on the pile. His assistant's end caught on a sliver, ground for a second, and slipped back. Thus the log ran slanting across the skids instead of perpendicular to them. To rectify the fault, Thorpe dug his cant-hook into the timber and threw his weight on the stock. He hoped in this manner to check correspondingly the ascent of his end. In other words, he took the place, on his side, of the preventing sliver, so equalizing the pressure and forcing the timber to its proper position. Instead of rolling, the log slid. The stock of the cant-hook was jerked from his hands. He fell back, and the cant-hook, after clinging for a moment to the rough bark, snapped down and hit him a crushing blow on the top of the head.

Had a less experienced man than Jim Gladys been stationed at the other end, Thorpe's life would have ended there. A shout of surprise or horror would have stopped the horse pulling on the decking chain; the heavy stick would have slid back on the prostrate young man, who would have thereupon been ground to atoms as he lay. With the utmost coolness Gladys swarmed the slanting face of the load; interposed the length of his cant-hook stock between the log and it; held it exactly long enough to straighten the timber, but not so long as to crush his own head and arm; and ducked, just as the great piece of wood rumbled over the end of the skids and

THE FOREST

dropped with a thud into the place Norton, the "top" man, had prepared for it.

It was a fine deed, quickly thought, quickly dared. No one saw it. Jim Gladys was a hero, but a hero without an audience.

They took Thorpe up and carried him in, just as they had carried Hank Paul before. Men who had not spoken a dozen words to him in as many days gathered his few belongings and stuffed them awkwardly into his satchel. Jackson Hines prepared the bed of straw and warm blankets in the bottom of the sleigh that was to take him out.

"He would have made a good boss," said the old fellow. "He's a hard man to nick."

Thorpe was carried in from the front, and the battle went on without him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THORPE never knew how carefully he was carried to camp, nor how tenderly the tote teamster drove his hay-couched burden to Beeson Lake. He had no consciousness of the jolting train, in the baggage car of which Jimmy, the little brakeman, and Bud, and the baggage man spread blankets, and altogether put themselves to a great deal of trouble. When finally he came to himself, he was in a long, bright, clean room, and the sunset was throwing splashes of light on the ceiling over his head.

He watched them idly for a time; then turned on his pillow. At once he perceived a long, double row of clean white-painted iron beds, on which lay or sat figures of men. Other figures, of women, glided here and there noiselessly. They wore long, spreading dove-gray clothes, with a starched white kerchief drawn over the shoulders and across the breast. Their heads were quaintly white-garbed in stiff wing-like coifs, fitting close about the oval of the face. Then Thorpe sighed comfortably, and closed his eyes and blessed the chance that he had bought a hospital ticket of the agent who had visited camp

THE FOREST

the month before. For these were Sisters, and the young man lay in the Hospital of St. Mary.

Time was when the lumber-jack who had the misfortune to fall sick or to meet with an accident was in a sorry plight indeed. If he possessed a "stake," he would receive some sort of unskilled attention in one of the numerous and fearful lumberman's boarding-houses—just so long as his money lasted, not one instant more. Then he was bundled brutally into the street, no matter what his condition might be. Penniless, without friends, sick, he drifted naturally to the county poorhouse. There he was patched up quickly and sent out half-cured. The authorities were not so much to blame. With the slender appropriations at their disposal, they found difficulty in taking care of those who came legitimately under their jurisdiction. It was hardly to be expected that they would welcome with open arms a vast army of crippled and diseased men temporarily from the woods. The poor lumber-jack was often left broken in mind and body from causes which a little intelligent care would have rendered unimportant.

With the establishment of the first St. Mary's hospital, I think at Bay City, all this was changed. Now, in it and a half dozen others conducted on the same principles, the woodsman receives the best of medicines, nursing, and medical attendance. From one of the numerous agents who periodically visit

THE BLAZED TRAIL

the camps, he purchases for eight dollars a ticket which admits him at any time during the year to the hospital, where he is privileged to remain free of further charge until convalescent. So valuable are these institutions, and so excellently are they maintained by the Sisters, that a hospital agent is always welcome, even in those camps from which ordinary peddlers and insurance men are rigidly excluded. Like a great many other charities built on a common-sense self-supporting rational basis, the woods hospitals are under the Roman Catholic Church.

In one of these hospitals Thorpe lay for six weeks suffering from a severe concussion of the brain. At the end of the fourth, his fever had broken, but he was pronounced as yet too weak to be moved.

His nurse was a red-cheeked, blue-eyed, homely little Irish girl, brimming with motherly good-humor. When Thorpe found strength to talk, the two became friends. Through her influence he was moved to a bed about ten feet from the window. Thence his privileges were three roofs and a glimpse of the distant river.

The roofs were covered with snow. One day Thorpe saw it sink into itself and gradually run away. The *tinkle tinkle tank tank* of drops sounded from his own eaves. Down the far-off river, sluggish reaches of ice drifted. Then in a night the blue disappeared from the stream. It became a

THE FOREST

menacing gray, and even from his distance Thorpe could catch the swirl of its rising waters. A day or two later dark masses drifted or shot across the field of his vision, and twice he thought he distinguished men standing upright and bold on single logs as they rushed down the current.

"What is the date?" he asked of the Sister.

"The elevent' of March."

"Isn't it early for the thaw?"

"Listen to 'im!" exclaimed the Sister delightfully. "Early is it! Sure th' freshet co't thim all. Look, darlint, ye kin see th' drive from here."

"I see," said Thorpe wearily, "when can I get out?"

"Not for wan week," replied the Sister decidedly.

At the end of the week Thorpe said good-by to his attendant, who appeared as sorry to see him go as though the same partings did not come to her a dozen times a year; he took two days of tramping the little town to regain the use of his legs, and boarded the morning train for Beeson Lake. He did not pause in the village, but bent his steps to the river trail.