

PART III

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ALUMBERING town after the drive is a fearful thing. Men just off the river draw a deep breath, and plunge into the wildest reactionary dissipation. In droves they invade the cities—wild, picturesque, lawless. As long as the money lasts, they blow it in.

“Hot money!” is the cry. “She’s burnt holes in all my pockets already!”

The saloons are full, the gambling houses overflow, all the places of amusement or crime run full blast. A chip rests lightly on every one’s shoulder. Fights are as common as raspberries in August. Often one of these formidable men, his muscles toughened and quickened by the active, strenuous river work, will set out to “take the town apart.” For a time he leaves rack and ruin, black eyes and broken teeth behind him, until he meets a more redoubtable “knocker” and is pounded and kicked into unconsciousness. Organized gangs go from house to house forcing the peaceful inmates to drink from their bottles. Others take possession of certain sections of the street and resist *à l’outrance* the attempts of others to pass. Inoffensive citizens are

THE BLAZED TRAIL

stood on their heads, or shaken upside down until the contents of their pockets rattle on the street. Parenthetically, these contents are invariably returned to their owners. The riverman's object is fun, not robbery.

And if rip-roaring, swashbuckling, drunken glory is what he is after, he gets it. The only trouble is, that a whole winter's hard work goes in two or three weeks. The only redeeming feature is, that he is never, in or out of his cups, afraid of anything that walks the earth.

A man comes out of the woods or off the drive with two or three hundred dollars, which he is only too anxious to throw away by the double handful. It follows naturally that a crew of sharpers are on hand to find out who gets it. They are a hard lot. Bold, unprincipled men, they too are afraid of nothing; not even a drunken lumber-jack, which is one of the dangerous wild animals of the American fauna. Their business is to relieve the man of his money as soon as possible. They are experts at their business.

The towns of Bay City and Saginaw alone in 1878 supported over fourteen hundred tough characters. Block after block was devoted entirely to saloons. In a radius of three hundred feet from the famous old Catacombs could be numbered forty saloons, where drinks were sold by from three to ten "pretty waiter girls." When the boys struck town,

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

the proprietors and waitresses stood in their doorways to welcome them.

"Why, Jack!" one would cry, "when did you drift in? Tickled to death to see you! Come in an' have a drink. That your chum? Come in, old man, and have a drink. Never mind the pay; that's all right."

And after the first drink, Jack, of course, had to treat, and then the chum.

Or if Jack resisted temptation and walked resolutely on, one of the girls would remark audibly to another:

"He ain't no lumber-jack! You can see that easy 'nuff! He's jest off th' hay-trail!"

Ten to one that brought him, for the woodsman is above all things proud and jealous of his craft.

In the centre of this whirlpool of iniquity stood the Catacombs as the hub from which lesser spokes in the wheel radiated. Any old logger of the Saginaw Valley can tell you of the Catacombs, just as any old logger of any other valley will tell you of the "Pen," the "White Row," the "Water Streets" of Alpena, Port Huron, Ludington, Muskegon, and a dozen other lumber towns.

The Catacombs was a three-story building. In the basement were vile, ill-smelling, ill-lighted dens, small, isolated, dangerous. The shanty boy with a small stake, far gone in drunkenness, there tasted the last drop of wickedness, and thence was flung uncon-

THE BLAZED TRAIL

scious and penniless on the streets. A trap-door directly into the river accommodated those who were inconsiderate enough to succumb under rough treatment.

The second story was given over to drinking. Polly Dickson there reigned supreme, an anomaly. She was as pretty and fresh and pure-looking as a child; and at the same time was one of the most ruthless and unscrupulous of the gang. She could at will exercise a fascination the more terrible in that it appealed at once to her victim's nobler instincts of reverence, his capacity for what might be called æsthetic fascination, as well as his passions. When she finally held him, she crushed him as calmly as she would a fly.

Four bars supplied the drinkables. Dozens of "pretty waiter girls" served the customers. A force of professional fighters was maintained by the establishment to preserve that degree of peace which should look to the preservation of mirrors and glassware.

The third story contained a dance hall and a theatre. The character of both would better be left to the imagination.

Night after night during the season, this den ran at top-steam.

By midnight, when the orgy was at its height, the windows brilliantly illuminated, the various bursts of music, laughing, cursing, singing, shouting, fight-

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

ing, breaking in turn or all together from its open windows, it was, as Jackson Hines once expressed it to me, like hell let out for noon.

The respectable elements of the towns were powerless. They could not control the elections. Their police would only have risked total annihilation by attempting a raid. At the first sign of trouble they walked straightly in the paths of their own affairs, awaiting the time soon to come when, his stake "blown-in," the last bitter dregs of his pleasure gulped down, the shanty boy would again start for the woods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

NOW in August, however, the first turmoil had died. The "jam" had boiled into town, "taken it apart," and left the inhabitants to piece it together again as they could; the "rear" had not yet arrived. As a consequence, Thorpe found the city comparatively quiet.

Here and there swaggered a strapping riverman, his small felt hat cocked aggressively over one eye, its brim curled up behind; a cigar stump protruding at an angle from beneath his sweeping mustache; his hands thrust into the pockets of his trousers, "staggered" off at the knee; the spikes of his river boots cutting little triangular pieces from the wooden sidewalk. His eye was aggressively humorous, and the smile of his face was a challenge.

For in the last month he had faced almost certain death a dozen times a day. He had ridden logs down the rapids where a loss of balance meant in one instant a ducking and in the next a blow on the back from some following battering-ram; he had tugged and strained and jerked with his peavey under a sheer wall of tangled timber twenty feet high—behind which pressed the full power of the

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

freshet—only to jump with the agility of a cat from one bit of unstable footing to another when the first sharp *crack* warned him that he had done his work, and that the whole mass was about to break down on him like a wave on the shore; he had worked fourteen hours a day in ice-water, and had slept damp; he had pried at the key log in the rollways on the bank until the whole pile had begun to rattle down into the river like a cascade, and had jumped, or ridden, or even dived out of danger at the last second. In a hundred passes he had juggled with death as a child plays with a rubber balloon. No wonder that he has brought to the town and his vices a little of the lofty bearing of an heroic age. No wonder that he fears no man, since nature's most terrible forces of the flood have hurled a thousand weapons at him in vain. His muscles have been hardened, his eye is quiet and sure, his courage is undaunted, and his movements are as quick and accurate as a panther's. Probably nowhere in the world is a more dangerous man of his hands than the riverman. He would rather fight than eat, especially when he is drunk, as, like the cowboy, he usually is when he gets into town. A history could be written of the feuds, the wars, the raids instituted by one camp or one town against another.

The men would go in force sometimes to another city with the avowed purpose of cleaning it out. One battle I know of lasted nearly all night. Deadly

THE BLAZED TRAIL

weapons were almost never resorted to, unless indeed a hundred and eighty pounds of muscle behind a fist hard as iron might be considered a deadly weapon. A man hard pressed by numbers often resorted to a billiard cue, or an axe, or anything else that happened to be handy, but that was an expedient called out by necessity. Knives or six-shooters implied a certain premeditation which was discountenanced.

On the other hand, the code of fair fighting obtained hardly at all. The long spikes of river-boots made an admirable weapon in the straight kick. I have seen men whose faces were punctured as thickly as though by smallpox, where the steel points had penetrated. In a free-for-all knock-down-and-drag-out, kicking, gouging, and biting are all legitimate. Anything to injure the other man, provided always you do not knife him. And when you take a half dozen of these enduring, active, muscular, and fiery men, not one entertaining in his innermost heart the faintest hesitation or fear, and set them at each other with the lightning tirelessness of so many wild-cats, you get as hard a fight as you could desire. And they seem to like it.

One old fellow, a good deal of a character in his way, used to be on the "drive" for a firm lumbering near Six Lakes. He was intensely loyal to his "Old Fellows," and every time he got a little "budge" in him he instituted a raid on the town

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

owned by a rival firm. So frequent and so severe did these battles become that finally the men were informed that another such expedition would mean instant discharge. The rule had its effect. The raids ceased.

But one day old Dan visited the saloon once too often. He became very warlike. The other men merely laughed, for they were strong enough themselves to recognize firmness in others, and it never occurred to them that they could disobey so absolute a command. So finally Dan started out quite alone.

He invaded the enemy's camp, attempted to clean out the saloon with a billiard cue single-handed, was knocked down, and would have been kicked to death as he lay on the floor if he had not succeeded in rolling under the billiard table where the men's boots could not reach him. As it was, his clothes were literally torn to ribbons, one eye was blacked, his nose broken, one ear hung to its place by a mere shred of skin, and his face and flesh were ripped and torn everywhere by the "corks" on the boots. Any but a riverman would have qualified for the hospital. Dan rolled to the other side of the table, made a sudden break, and escaped.

But his fighting blood was not all spilled. He raided the butcher-shop, seized the big carving knife, and returned to the battlefield.

The enemy decamped—rapidly—some of them through the window. Dan managed to get in but

THE BLAZED TRAIL

one blow. He ripped the coat down the man's back as neatly as though it had been done with shears, one clean straight cut from collar to bottom seam. A quarter of an inch nearer would have split the fellow's backbone. As it was, he escaped without even a scratch.

Dan commanded two bottles of whiskey, and, gory and wounded as he was, took up the six-mile tramp home, bearing the knife over his shoulder as a banner of triumph.

Next morning, weak from the combined effects of war and whiskey, he reported to headquarters.

"What is it, Dan?" asked the Old Fellow without turning.

"I come to get my time," replied the riverman humbly.

"What for?" inquired the lumberman.

"I have been over to Howard City," confessed Dan.

The owner turned and looked him over.

"They sort of got ahead of me a little," explained Dan sheepishly.

The lumberman took stock of the old man's cuts and bruises, and turned away to hide a smile.

"I guess I'll let you off this trip," said he. "Go to work—when you can. I don't believe you'll go back there again."

"No, sir," replied Dan humbly.

And so the life of alternate work and pleasure,

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

both full of personal danger, develops in time a class of men whose like is to be found only among the cowboys, scouts, trappers, and Indian fighters of our other frontiers. The moralists will always hold up the hands of horror at such types; the philosopher will admire them as the last incarnation of the heroic age, when the man is bigger than his work. Soon the factories, the machines, the mechanical structures and constructions, the various branches of co-operation will produce quasi-automatically institutions evidently more important than the genius or force of any one human being. The personal element will have become nearly eliminated. In the woods and on the frontier still are many whose powers are greater than their works; whose fame is greater than their deeds. They are men, powerful, virile, even brutal at times, but magnificent with the strength of courage and resource.

All this may seem a digression from the thread of our tale, but as a matter of fact it is necessary that you understand the conditions of the time and place in which Harry Thorpe had set himself the duty of success.

He had seen too much of incompetent labor to be satisfied with anything but the best. Although his ideas were not as yet formulated, he hoped to be able to pick up a crew of first-class men from those who had come down with the advance, or "jam," of the spring's drive. They should have finished

THE BLAZED TRAIL

their orgies by now, and, empty of pocket, should be found hanging about the boarding-houses and the quieter saloons. Thorpe intended to offer good wages for good men. He would not need more than twenty at first, for during the approaching winter he purposed to log on a very small scale indeed. The time for expansion would come later.

With this object in view he set out from his hotel about half-past seven on the day of his arrival, to cruise about in the lumber-jack district already described. The hotel clerk had obligingly given him the names of a number of the quieter saloons, where the boys "hung out" between bursts of prosperity. In the first of these Thorpe was helped materially in his vague and uncertain quest by encountering an old acquaintance.

From the sidewalk he heard the vigorous sounds of a one-sided altercation punctuated by frequent bursts of quickly silenced laughter. Evidently some one was very angry, and the rest amused. After a moment Thorpe imagined he recognized the excited voice. So he pushed open the swinging screen door and entered.

The place was typical. Across one side ran the hardwood bar with foot-rest and little towels hung in metal clasps under its edge. Behind it was a long mirror, a symmetrical pile of glasses, a number of plain or ornamental bottles, and a miniature keg or so of porcelain containing the finer whiskeys and

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

brandies. The barkeeper drew beer from two pumps immediately in front of him, and rinsed glasses in some sort of a sink under the edge of the bar. The centre of the room was occupied by a tremendous stove capable of burning whole logs of cordwood. A stovepipe led from the stove here and there in wire suspension to a final exit near the other corner. On the wall were two sporting chromos, and a good variety of lithographed calendars and illuminated tin signs advertising beers and spirits. The floor was liberally sprinkled with damp sawdust, and was occupied, besides the stove, by a number of wooden chairs and a single round table.

The latter, a clumsy heavy affair beyond the strength of an ordinary man, was being deftly interposed between himself and the attacks of the possessor of the angry voice by a gigantic young riverman in the conventional stagged (*i.e.*, chopped off) trousers, "cork" shoes, and broad belt typical of his craft. In the aggressor Thorpe recognized old Jackson Hines.

"Damn you!" cried the old man, qualifying the oath, "let me get at you, you great big sock-stealer, I'll make you hop high! I'll snatch you bald-headed so quick that you'll think you never had any hair!"

"I'll settle with you in the morning, Jackson," laughed the riverman.

"You want to eat a good breakfast, then, because you won't have no appetite for dinner."

THE BLAZED TRAIL

The men roared, with encouraging calls. The riverman put on a ludicrous appearance of offended dignity.

"Oh, you needn't swell up like a poisoned pup!" cried old Jackson plaintively, ceasing his attacks from sheer weariness. "You know you're as safe as a cow tied to a brick wall behind that table."

Thorpe seized the opportunity to approach.

"Hello, Jackson," said he.

The old man peered at him out of the blur of his excitement.

"Don't you know me?" inquired Thorpe.

"Them lamps gives 'bout as much light as a piece of chalk," complained Jackson testily. "Knows you? You bet I do! How are you, Harry? Where you been keepin' yourself? You look 'bout as fat as a stall-fed knittin' needle."

"I've been landlooking in the upper peninsula," explained Thorpe, "on the Ossawinamakee, up in the Marquette country."

"Sho'!" commented Jackson in wonder, "way up there where the moon changes!"

"It's a fine country," went on Thorpe so every one could hear, "with a great cutting of white pine. It runs as high as twelve hundred thousand to the forty sometimes."

"Trees clean an' free of limbs?" asked Jackson.

"They're as good as the stuff over on seventeen; you remember that."

THE BLAZING OF THE TRAIL

"Clean as a baby's leg," agreed Jackson.

"Have a glass of beer?" asked Thorpe.

"Dry as a tobacco box," confessed Hines.

"Have something, the rest of you?" invited Thorpe.

So they all drank.

On a sudden inspiration Thorpe resolved to ask the old man's advice as to crew and horses. It might not be good for much, but it would do no harm.

Jackson listened attentively to the other's brief recital.

"Why don't you see Tim Shearer? He ain't doin' nothin' since the jam came down," was his comment.

"Isn't he with the M. & D. people?" asked Thorpe.

"Nope. Quit."

"How's that?"

"'Count of Morrison. Morrison he comes up to run things some. He does. Tim he's getting the drive in shape, and he don't want to be bothered, but old Morrison he's as busy as hell beatin' tan-bark. Finally Tim, he calls him. "'Look here, Mr. Morrison,' says he, 'I'm runnin' this drive. If I don't get her there, all right; you can give me my time. 'Till then you ain't got nothin' to say.'"

"Well, that makes the Old Fellow as sore as a scalded pup. He's used to bossin' clerks and such things, and don't have much of an idea of lumber-

THE BLAZED TRAIL

jacks. He has big ideas of respect, so he 'calls' Tim dignified like.

"Tim didn't hit him; but I guess he felt like th' man who met the bear without any weapon—even a newspaper would 'a' come handy. He hands in his time t' once and quits. Sence then he's been as mad as a bar-keep with a lead quarter, which ain't usual for Tim. He's been filin' his teeth for M. & D. right along. Somethin's behind it all, I reckon."

"Where'll I find him?" asked Thorpe.

Jackson gave the name of a small boarding-house. Shortly after, Thorpe left him to amuse the others with his unique conversation, and hunted up Shearer's stopping-place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE boarding-house proved to be of the typical lumber-jack class—a narrow "stoop," a hallway and stairs in the centre, and an office and bar on either side. Shearer and a half dozen other men about his own age sat, their chairs on two legs and their "cork" boots on the rounds of the chairs, smoking placidly in the tepid evening air. The light came from inside the building, so that while Thorpe was in plain view, he could not make out which of the dark figures on the piazza was the man he wanted. He approached, and attempted an identifying scrutiny. The men, with the taciturnity of their class in the presence of a stranger, said nothing.

"Well, bub," finally drawled a voice from the corner, "blowed that stake you made out of Radway, yet?"

"That you, Shearer?" inquired Thorpe advancing. "You're the man I'm looking for."

"You've found me," replied the old man dryly.

Thorpe was requested elaborately to "shake hands" with the owners of six names. Then he had a chance to intimate quietly to Shearer that he wanted a word with him alone. The riverman rose silently and led the way up the straight, uncarpeted