

THE BLAZED TRAIL

Thorpe turned from the river with a thrust forward of his head. He was not a religious man, and in his six years' woods experience had never been to church. Now he looked up over the tops of the pines to where the Pleiades glittered faintly among the brighter stars.

"Thanks, God," said he briefly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

FOR several days this impression satisfied him completely. He discovered, strangely enough, that his restlessness had left him, that once more he was able to give to his work his former energy and interest. It was as though some power had raised its finger and a storm had stilled, leaving calm, unruffled skies.

He did not attempt to analyze this; he did not even make an effort to contemplate it. His critical faculty was stricken dumb and it asked no questions of him. At a touch his entire life had changed. Reality or vision, he had caught a glimpse of something so entirely different from anything his imagination or experience had ever suggested to him, that at first he could do no more than permit passively its influences to adjust themselves to his being.

Curiosity, speculation, longing — all the more active emotions remained in abeyance while outwardly, for three days, Harry Thorpe occupied himself only with the needs of the Fighting Forty at Camp One.

In the early morning he went out with the gang. While they chopped or heaved, he stood by serene.

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Little questions of expediency he solved. Dilemmas he discussed leisurely with Tim Shearer. Occasionally he lent a shoulder when the peaveys lacked of prying a stubborn log from its bed. Not once did he glance at the nooning sun. His patience was quiet and sure. When evening came he smoked placidly outside the office, listening to the conversation and laughter of the men, caressing one of the beagles, while the rest slumbered about his feet, watching dreamily the night shadows and the bats. At about nine o'clock he went to bed, and slept soundly. He was vaguely conscious of a great peace within him, a great stillness of the spirit, against which the metallic events of his craft clicked sharply in vivid relief. It was the peace and stillness of a river before it leaps.

Little by little the condition changed. The man felt vague stirrings of curiosity. He speculated aimlessly as to whether or not the glade, the moonlight, the girl, had been real or merely the figments of imagination. Almost immediately the answer leaped at him from his heart. Since she was so certainly flesh and blood, whence did she come? what was she doing there in the wilderness? His mind pushed the query aside as unimportant, rushing eagerly to the essential point: When could he see her again? How find for the second time the vision before which his heart felt the instant need of prostrating itself. His placidity had gone. That morn-

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ing he made some vague excuse to Shearer and set out blindly down the river.

He did not know where he was going, any more than did the bull moose plunging through the trackless wilderness to his mate. Instinct, the instinct of all wild natural creatures, led him. And so, without thought, without clear intention even—most would say by accident—he saw her again. It was near the “pole trail”; which was less like a trail than a rail-fence.

For when the snows are deep and snowshoes not the property of every man who cares to journey, the old-fashioned “pole trail” comes into use. It is merely a series of horses built of timber across which thick Norway logs are laid, about four feet from the ground, to form a continuous pathway. A man must be a tight-rope walker to stick to the pole trail when ice and snow have sheathed its logs. If he makes a misstep, he is precipitated ludicrously into feathery depths through which he must flounder to the nearest timber horse before he can remount. In summer, as has been said, it resembles nothing so much as a thick one-rail fence of considerable height, around which a fringe of light brush has grown.

Thorpe reached the fringe of bushes, and was about to dodge under the fence, when he saw her. So he stopped short, concealed by the leaves and the timber horse.

She stood on a knoll in the middle of a grove of

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monster pines. There was something of the cathedral in the spot. A hush dwelt in the dusk, the long columns lifted grandly to the Roman arches of the frond, faint murmurings stole here and there like whispering acolytes. The girl stood tall and straight among the tall, straight pines like a figure on an ancient tapestry. She was doing nothing—just standing there—but the awe of the forest was in her wide, clear eyes.

The great sweet feeling clutched the young man's throat again. But while the other—the vision of the frost-work glade and the spirit-like figure of silence—had been unreal and phantasmagoric, this was of the earth. He looked, and looked, and looked again. He saw the full pure curve of her cheek's contour, neither oval nor round, but like the outline of a certain kind of plum. He appreciated the half-pathetic downward droop of the corners of her mouth—her red mouth in dazzling, bewitching contrast to the milk-whiteness of her skin. He caught the fineness of her nose, straight as a Grecian's, but with some faint suggestion about the nostrils that hinted at piquance. And the waving corn-silk of her altogether charming and unruly hair, the superb column of her long neck on which her little head poised proudly like a flower, her supple body, whose curves had the long undulating grace of the current in a swift river, her slender white hand with the pointed fingers—all these he

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saw one after the other, and his soul shouted within him at the sight. He wrestled with the emotions that choked him. "Ah, God! Ah, God!" he cried softly to himself like one in pain. He, the man of iron frame, of iron nerve, hardened by a hundred emergencies, trembled in every muscle before a straight, slender girl, clad all in brown, standing alone in the middle of the ancient forest.

In a moment she stirred slightly, and turned. Drawing herself to her full height, she extended her hands over her head palm outward, and, with an indescribably graceful gesture, half mockingly bowed a ceremonious adieu to the solemn trees. Then with a little laugh she moved away in the direction of the river.

At once Thorpe proved a great need of seeing her again. In his present mood there was nothing of the awe-stricken peace he had experienced after the moonlight adventure. He wanted the sight of her as he had never wanted anything before. He must have it, and he looked about him fiercely as though to challenge any force in Heaven or Hell that would deprive him of it. His eyes desired to follow the soft white curve of her cheek, to dance with the light of her corn-silk hair, to delight in the poetic movements of her tall, slim body, to trace the full outline of her chin, to wonder at the carmine of her lips, red as a blood-spot on the snow. These things must be at once. The strong man desired it.

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And finding it impossible, he raged inwardly and tore the tranquillities of his heart, as on the shores of the distant Lake of Stars, the bull-moose trampled down the bushes in his passion.

So it happened that he ate hardly at all that day, and slept ill, and discovered the greatest difficulty in preserving the outward semblance of ease which the presence of Tim Shearer and the Fighting Forty demanded.

And next day he saw her again, and the next, because the need of his heart demanded it, and because, simply enough, she came every afternoon to the clump of pines by the old pole trail.

Now had Thorpe taken the trouble to inquire, he could have learned easily enough all there was to be known of the affair. But he did not take the trouble. His consciousness was receiving too many new impressions, so that in a manner it became bewildered. At first, as has been seen, the mere effect of the vision was enough; then the sight of the girl sufficed him. But now curiosity awoke and a desire for something more. He must speak to her, touch her hand, look into her eyes. He resolved to approach her, and the mere thought choked him and sent him weak.

When he saw her again from the shelter of the pole trail, he dared not, and so stood there prey to a novel sensation—that of being baffled in an intention. It awoke within him a vast passion com-

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pounded part of rage at himself, part of longing for that which he could not take, but most of love for the girl. As he hesitated in one mind but in two decisions, he saw that she was walking slowly in his direction.

Perhaps a hundred paces separated the two. She took them deliberately, pausing now and again to listen, to pluck a leaf, to smell the fragrant balsam and fir tops as she passed them. Her progression was a series of poses, the one of which melted imperceptibly into the other without appreciable pause of transition. So subtly did her grace appeal to the sense of sight, that out of mere sympathy the other senses responded with fictions of their own. Almost could the young man behind the trail savor a faint fragrance, a faint music that surrounded and preceded her like the shadows of phantoms. He knew it as an illusion, born of his desire, and yet it was a noble illusion, for it had its origin in her.

In a moment she had reached the fringe of brush about the pole trail. They stood face to face.

She gave a little start of surprise, and her hand leaped to her breast, where it caught and stayed. Her child-like down-drooping mouth parted a little more, and the breath quickened through it. But her eyes, her wide, trusting, innocent eyes, sought his and rested.

He did not move. The eagerness, the desire, the long years of ceaseless struggle, the thirst for affec-

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tion, the sob of awe at the moonlit glade, the love—all these flamed in his eyes and fixed his gaze in an unconscious ardor that had nothing to do with convention or timidity. One on either side of the spike-marked old Norway log of the trail they stood, and for an appreciable interval the duel of their glances lasted—he masterful, passionate, exigent; she proud, cool, defensive in the aloofness of her beauty. Then at last his prevailed. A faint color rose from her neck, deepened, and spread over her face and forehead. In a moment she dropped her eyes.

“Don't you think you stare a little rudely—Mr. Thorpe?” she asked.

CHAPTER FORTY

THE vision was over, but the beauty remained. The spoken words of protest made her a woman. Never again would she, nor any other creature of the earth, appear to Thorpe as she had in the silver glade or the cloistered pines. He had had his moment of insight. The deeps had twice opened to permit him to look within. Now they had closed again. But out of them had fluttered a great love and the priestess of it. Always, so long as life should be with him, Thorpe was destined to see in this tall graceful girl with the red lips and the white skin and the corn-silk hair, more beauty, more of the great mysterious spiritual beauty which is eternal, than her father or her mother or her dearest and best. For to them the vision had not been vouchsafed, while he had seen her as the highest symbol of God's splendor.

Now she stood before him, her head turned half away, a faint flush still tingeing the chalk-white of her skin, watching him with a dim, half-pleading smile in expectation of his reply.

“Ah, moon of my soul! light of my life!” he cried, but he cried it within him, though it

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almost escaped his vigilance to his lips. What he really said sounded almost harsh in consequence.

"How did you know my name?" he asked.

She planted both elbows on the Norway and framed her little face deliciously with her long pointed hands.

"If Mr. Harry Thorpe can ask that question," she replied, "he is not quite so impolite as I had thought him."

"If you don't stop pouting your lips, I shall kiss them!" cried Harry—to himself.

"How is that?" he inquired breathlessly.

"Don't you know who I am?" she asked in return.

"A goddess, a beautiful woman!" he answered ridiculously enough.

She looked straight at him. This time his gaze dropped.

"I am a friend of Elizabeth Carpenter, who is Wallace Carpenter's sister, who I believe is Mr. Harry Thorpe's partner."

She paused as though for comment. The young man opposite was occupied in many other more important directions. Some moments later the words trickled into his brain, and some moments after that he realized their meaning.

"We wrote Mr. Harry Thorpe that we were about to descend on his district with wagons and

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tents and Indians and things, and asked him to come and see us."

"Ah, heart o' mine, what clear, pure eyes she has! How they look at a man to drown his soul!"

Which, even had it been spoken, was hardly the comment one would have expected.

The girl looked at him for a moment steadily, then smiled. The change of countenance brought Thorpe to himself, and at the same moment the words she had spoken reached his comprehension.

"But I never received the letter. I'm so sorry," said he. "It must be at the mill. You see, I've been up in the woods for nearly a month."

"Then we'll have to forgive you."

"But I should think they would have done something for you at the mill——"

"Oh, we didn't come by way of your mill. We drove from Marquette."

"I see," cried Thorpe, enlightened. "But I'm sorry I didn't know. I'm sorry you didn't let me know. I suppose you thought I was still at the mill. How did you get along? Is Wallace with you?"

"No," she replied, dropping her hands and straightening her erect figure. "It's horrid. He was coming, and then some business came up and he couldn't get away. We are having the loveliest time though. I do adore the woods. Come," she cried impatiently, sweeping aside to leave a way clear, "you shall meet my friends."

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Thorpe imagined she referred to the rest of the tenting party. He hesitated.

"I am hardly in fit condition," he objected.

She laughed, parting her red lips. "You are extremely picturesque just as you are," she said with rather embarrassing directness. "I wouldn't have you any different for the world. But my friends don't mind. They are used to it." She laughed again.

Thorpe crossed the pole trail, and for the first time found himself by her side. The warm summer odors were in the air, a dozen lively little birds sang in the brush along the rail, the sunlight danced and flickered through the openings.

Then suddenly they were among the pines, and the air was cool, the vista dim, and the bird-songs inconceivably far away.

The girl walked directly to the foot of a pine three feet through and soaring up an inconceivable distance through the still twilight.

"This is Jimmy," said she gravely. "He is a dear good old rough bear when you don't know him, but he likes me. If you put your ear close against him," she confided, suiting the action to the word, "you can hear him talking to himself. This little fellow is Tommy. I don't care so much for Tommy because he's sticky. Still, I like him pretty well, and here's Dick, and that's Bob, and the one just beyond is Jack."

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"Where is Harry?" asked Thorpe.

"I thought one in a woods was quite sufficient," she replied with the least little air of impertinence.

"Why do you name them such common, every-day names?" he inquired.

"I'll tell you. It's because they are so big and grand themselves, that it did not seem to me they needed high-sounding names. What do you think?" she begged with an appearance of the utmost anxiety.

Thorpe expressed himself as in agreement. As the half-quizzical conversation progressed, he found their relations adjusting themselves with increasing rapidity. He had been successively the mystic devotee before his vision, the worshipper before his goddess; now he was unconsciously assuming the attitude of the lover before his mistress. It needs always this humanizing touch to render the greatest of all passions livable.

And as the human element developed, he proved at the same time greater and greater difficulty in repressing himself, and greater and greater fear of the results in case he should not do so. He trembled with the desire to touch her long slender hand, and as soon as his imagination had permitted him that much, he had already crushed her to him and had kissed passionately her starry face. Words hovered on his lips longing for flight. He withheld them by an effort that left him almost incoherent, for he

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feared with a deadly fear lest he lose forever what the vision had seemed to offer to his hand.

So he said little, and that lamely, for he dreaded to say too much. To her playful sallies he had no *riposte*. And in consequence he fell more silent with another boding—that he was losing his cause outright for lack of a ready word.

He need not have been alarmed. A woman in such a case hits as surely as a man misses. Her very daintiness and preciousness of speech indicated it. For where a man becomes stupid and silent, a woman covers her emotions with words and a clever speech. Not in vain is a proud-spirited girl stared down in such a contest of looks; brave deeds simply told by a friend are potent to win interest in advance; a straight, muscular figure, a brown skin, a clear, direct eye, a carriage of power and acknowledged authority, strike hard at a young imagination; a mighty passion sweeps aside the barriers of the heart. Such a victory, such a friend, such a passion had Thorpe.

And so the last-spoken exchange between them meant nothing; but if each could have read the unsaid words that quivered on the other's heart, Thorpe would have returned to the Fighting Forty more tranquilly, while she would probably not have returned to the camping party at all for a number of hours.

"I do not think you had better come with me,"

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she said. "Make your call and be forgiven on your own account. I don't want to drag you in at my chariot wheels."

"All right. I'll come this afternoon," Thorpe had replied.

"I love her, I must have her. I must go—at once," his soul had cried, "quick—now—before I kiss her!"

"How strong he is," she said to herself, "how brave-looking; how honest! He is different from the other men. He is magnificent."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

THAT afternoon Thorpe met the other members of the party, offered his apologies and explanations, and was graciously forgiven. He found the personnel to consist of, first of all, Mrs. Cary, the chaperone, a very young married woman of twenty-two or thereabouts; her husband, a youth of three years older, clean-shaven, light-haired, quiet-mannered; Miss Elizabeth Carpenter, who resembled her brother in the characteristics of good-looks, vivacious disposition, and curly hair; an attendant satellite of the masculine persuasion called Morton; and last of all the girl whom Thorpe had already so variously encountered and whom he now met as Miss Hilda Farrand. Besides these were Ginger, a squab negro built to fit the galley of a yacht; and three Indian guides. They inhabited tents, which made quite a little encampment.

Thorpe was received with enthusiasm. Wallace Carpenter's stories of his woods partner, while never doing more than justice to the truth, had been of a warm color tone. One and all owned a lively curiosity to see what a real woodsman might be like. When he proved to be handsome and well-man-

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nered, as well as picturesque, his reception was no longer in doubt.

Nothing could exceed his solicitude as to their comfort and amusement. He inspected personally the arrangement of the tents, and suggested one or two changes conducive to the littler comforts. This was not much like ordinary woods-camping. The largest wall-tent contained three folding cots for the women, over which, in the daytime, were flung bright-colored Navajo blankets. Another was spread on the ground. Thorpe later, however, sent over two bear-skins, which were acknowledged an improvement. To the tent pole a mirror of size was nailed, and below it stood a portable washstand. The second tent, devoted to the two men, was not quite so luxurious; but still boasted of little conveniences the true woodsman would never consider worth the bother of transporting. The third, equally large, was the dining tent. The other three, smaller, and on the A-tent order, served respectively as sleeping-rooms for Ginger and the Indians, and as a general storehouse for provisions and impedimenta.

Thorpe sent an Indian to Camp One for the bear-skins, put the rest to digging a trench around the sleeping tents in order that a rain-storm might not cause a flood, and ordered Ginger to excavate a square hole some feet deep, which he intended to utilize as a larder.

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Then he gave Morton and Cary hints as to the deer they wished to capture, pointed out the best trout-pools, and issued advice as to the compassing of certain blackberries, not far distant.

Simple things enough they were to do—it was as though a city man were to direct a newcomer to Central Park, or impart to him a test for the destinations of trolley lines—yet Thorpe's new friends were profoundly impressed with his knowledge of occult things. The forest was to them, as to most, more or less of a mystery, unfathomable except to the favored of genius. A man who could interpret it, even a little, into the speech of everyday comfort and expediency possessed a strong claim to their imaginations. When he had finished these practical affairs, they wanted him to sit down and tell them more things—to dine with them, to smoke about their camp-fire in the evening. But here they encountered a decided check. Thorpe became silent, almost morose. He talked in monosyllables, and soon went away. They did not know what to make of him, and so were, of course, the more profoundly interested. The truth was, his habitual reticence would not have permitted a great degree of expansion in any case, but now the presence of Hilda made any but an attitude of hushed waiting for her words utterly impossible to him. He wished well to them all. If there was anything he could do for them, he would gladly undertake it. But he would

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not act the lion nor tell of his, to them, interesting adventures.

However, when he discovered that Hilda had ceased visiting the clump of pines near the pole trail, his desire forced him back among these people. He used to walk in swiftly at almost any time of day, casting quick glances here and there in search of his divinity.

"How do, Mrs. Cary," he would say. "Nice weather. Enjoying yourself?"

On receiving the reply he would answer heartily, "That's good!" and lapse into silence. When Hilda was about he followed every movement of hers with his eyes, so that his strange conduct lacked no explanation or interpretation, in the minds of the women at least. Thrice he redeemed his reputation for being an interesting character by conducting the party on little expeditions here and there about the country. Then his woodcraft and resourcefulness spoke for him. They asked him about the lumbering operations, but he seemed indifferent.

"Nothing to interest you," he affirmed. "We're just cutting roads now. You ought to be here for the drive."

To him there was really nothing interesting in the cutting of roads nor the clearing of streams. It was all in a day's work.

Once he took them over to see Camp One. They were immensely pleased, and were correspondingly

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loud in exclamations. Thorpe's comments were brief and dry. After the noon dinner he had the unfortunate idea of commending the singing of one of the men.

"Oh, I'd like to hear him," cried Elizabeth Carpenter. "Can't you get him to sing for us, Mr. Thorpe?"

Thorpe went to the men's camp, where he singled out the unfortunate lumber-jack in question.

"Come on, Archie," he said. "The ladies want to hear you sing."

The man objected, refused, pleaded, and finally obeyed what amounted to a command. Thorpe reentered the office with triumph, his victim in tow.

"This is Archie Harris," he announced heartily. "He's our best singer just now. Take a chair, Archie."

The man perched on the edge of the chair and looked straight out before him.

"Do sing for us, won't you, Mr. Harris?" requested Mrs. Cary in her sweetest tones.

The man said nothing, nor moved a muscle, but turned a brick-red. An embarrassed silence of expectation ensued.

"Hit her up, Archie," encouraged Thorpe.

"I ain't much in practice no how," objected the man in a little voice, without moving.

"I'm sure you'll find us very appreciative," said Elizabeth Carpenter.

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"Give us a song, Archie, let her go," urged Thorpe impatiently.

"All right," replied the man very meekly.

Another silence fell. It got to be a little awful. The poor woodsman, pilloried before the regards of this polite circle, out of his element, suffering cruelly, nevertheless made no sign nor movement one way or the other. At last when the situation had almost reached the breaking point of hysteria, he began.

His voice ordinarily was rather a good tenor. Now he pitched it too high; and went on straining at the high notes to the very end. Instead of offering one of the typical woods chanteys, he conceived that before so grand an audience he should give something fancy. He therefore struck into a sentimental song of the cheap music-hall type. There were nine verses, and he drawled through them all, hanging whiningly on the nasal notes in the fashion of the untrained singer. Instead of being a performance typical of the strange woods genius, it was merely an atrocious bit of cheap sentimentalism, badly rendered.

The audience listened politely. When the song was finished it murmured faint thanks.

"Oh, give us 'Jack Haggerty,' Archie," urged Thorpe.

But the woodsman rose, nodded his head awkwardly, and made his escape. He entered the men's

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camp swearing, and for the remainder of the day made none but blasphemous remarks.

The beagles, however, were a complete success. They tumbled about, and lolled their tongues, and laughed up out of a tangle of themselves in a fascinating manner. Altogether the visit to Camp One was a success, the more so in that on the way back, for the first time, Thorpe found that chance—and Mrs. Cary—had allotted Hilda to his care.

A hundred yards down the trail they encountered Phil. The dwarf stopped short, looked attentively at the girl, and then softly approached. When quite near to her he again stopped, gazing at her with his soul in his liquid eyes.

"You are more beautiful than the sea at night," he said directly.

The others laughed. "There's sincerity for you, Miss Hilda," said young Mr. Morton.

"Who is he?" asked the girl after they had moved on.

"Our chore-boy," answered Thorpe with great brevity, for he was thinking of something much more important.

After the rest of the party had gone ahead, leaving them sauntering more slowly down the trail, he gave it voice.

"Why don't you come to the pine grove any more?" he asked bluntly.

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"Why?" countered Hilda in the manner of women.

"I want to see you there. I want to talk with you. I can't talk with all that crowd around."

"I'll come to-morrow," she said—then with a little mischievous laugh, "if that'll make you talk."

"You must think I'm awfully stupid," agreed Thorpe bitterly.

"Ah, no! Ah, no!" she protested softly. "You must not say that."

She was looking at him very tenderly, if he had only known it, but he did not, for his face was set in discontented lines straight before him.

"It is true," he replied.

They walked on in silence, while gradually the dangerous fascination of the woods crept down on them. Just before sunset a hush falls on nature. The wind has died, the birds have not yet begun their evening songs, the light itself seems to have left off sparkling and to lie still across the landscape. Such a hush now lay on their spirits. Over the way a creeper was droning sleepily a little chant—the only voice in the wilderness. In the heart of the man, too, a little voice raised itself alone.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart!" it breathed over and over again. After a while he said it gently in a half voice.

"No, no, hush!" said the girl, and she laid the soft, warm fingers of one hand across his lips, and

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looked at him from a height of superior soft-eyed tenderness as a woman might look at a child. "You must not. It is not right."

Then he kissed the fingers very gently before they were withdrawn, and she said nothing at all in rebuke, but looked straight before her with troubled eyes.

The voices of evening began to raise their jubilant notes. From a tree near by the olive thrush sang like clockwork; over beyond carolled eagerly a black-throat, a myrtle warbler, a dozen song sparrows, and a hundred vireos and creepers. Down deep in the blackness of the ancient woods a hermit thrush uttered his solemn bell-note, like the tolling of the spirit of peace. And in Thorpe's heart a thousand tumultuous voices that had suddenly roused to clamor, died into nothingness at the music of her softly protesting voice.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THORPE returned to Camp One shortly after dark. He found there Scotty Parsons, who had come up to take charge of the crew engaged in clearing French Creek. The man brought him a number of letters sent on by Collins, among which was one from Wallace Carpenter.

After commending the camping party to his companion's care, and giving minute directions as to how and where to meet it, the young fellow went on to say that affairs were going badly on the Board.

"Some interest that I haven't been able to make out yet has been hammering our stocks down day after day," he wrote. "I don't understand it, for the stocks are good—they rest on a solid foundation of value—and intrinsically are worth more than is bid for them right now. Some powerful concern is beating them down for a purpose of its own. Sooner or later they will let up, and then we'll get things back in good shape. I am amply protected now, thanks to you, and am not at all afraid of losing my holdings. The only difficulty is that I am unable to predict exactly when the other fellows will decide that they have accomplished whatever