

PART V

THE FOLLOWING OF THE TRAIL



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

FOR a moment they sat listening to the clear staccato knocking of the distant blows, and the more forceful thuds of the man nearer at hand. A bird or so darted from the direction of the sound and shot silently into the thicket behind them.

"What are they doing? Are they cutting lumber?" asked Hilda.

"No," answered Thorpe, "we do not cut saw logs at this time of year. They are clearing out a road."

"Where does it go to?"

"Well, nowhere in particular. That is, it is a logging road that starts at the river and wanders up through the woods where the pine is."

"How clear the axes sound. Can't we go down and watch them a little while?"

"The main gang is a long distance away; sound carries very clearly in this still air. As for that fellow you hear so plainly, he is only clearing out small stuff to get ready for the others. You wouldn't see anything different from your Indian chopping the cordwood for your camp fire. He won't chop out any big trees."

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"Let's not go, then," said Hilda submissively.

"When you come up in the winter," he pursued, "you will see any amount of big timber felled."

"I would like to know more about it," she sighed, a quaint little air of childish petulance graving two lines between her eyebrows. "Do you know, Harry, you are a singularly uncommunicative sort of being. I have to guess that your life is interesting and picturesque—that is," she amended, "I should have to do so if Wallace Carpenter had not told me a little something about it. Sometimes I think you are not nearly poet enough for the life you are living. Why, you are wonderful, you men of the north, and you let us ordinary mortals who have not the gift of divination imagine you entirely occupied with how many pounds of iron chain you are going to need during the winter." She said these things lightly as one who speaks things not for serious belief.

"It is something that way," he agreed with a laugh.

"Do you know, sir," she persisted, "that I really don't know anything at all about the life you lead here? From what I have seen, you might be perpetually occupied in eating things in a log cabin, and in disappearing to perform some mysterious rites in the forest." She looked at him with a smiling mouth but tender eyes, her head tilted back slightly.

"It's a good deal that way, too," he agreed again.

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"We use a barrel of flour in Camp One every two and a half days!"

She shook her head in a faint negation that only half understood what he was saying, her whole heart in her tender gaze.

"Sit there," she breathed very softly, pointing to the dried needles on which her feet rested, but without altering the position of her head or the steadfastness of her look.

He obeyed.

"Now tell me," she breathed, still in the fascinated monotone.

"What?" he inquired.

"Your life; what you do; all about it. You must tell me a story."

Thorpe settled himself more lazily, and laughed with quiet enjoyment. Never had he felt the expansion of a similar mood. The barrier between himself and self-expression had faded, leaving not the smallest *débris* of the old stubborn feeling.

"The story of the woods," he began, "the story of the saw log. It would take a bigger man than I to tell it. I doubt if any one man ever would be big enough. It is a drama, a struggle, a battle. Those men you hear there are only the skirmishers extending the firing line. We are fighting always with Time. I'll have to hurry now to get those roads done and a certain creek cleared before the snow. Then we'll have to keep on the keen move to finish

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our cutting before the deep snow; to haul our logs before the spring thaws; to float them down the river while the freshet water lasts. When we gain a day we have scored a victory; when the wilderness puts us back an hour, we have suffered a defeat. Our ammunition is Time; our small shot the minutes, our heavy ordnance the hours!"

The girl placed her hand on his shoulder. He covered it with his own.

"But we win!" he cried. "We win!"

"That is what I like," she said softly, "— the strong spirit that wins!" She hesitated, then went on gently, "But the battlefields, Harry; to me they are dreadful. I went walking yesterday morning, before you came over, and after a while I found myself in the most awful place. The stumps of trees, the dead branches, the trunks lying all about, and the glaring hot sun over everything! Harry, there was not a single bird in all that waste, a single green thing. You don't know how it affected me so early in the morning. I saw just one lonesome pine tree that had been left for some reason or another, standing there like a sentinel. I could shut my eyes and see all the others standing, and almost hear the birds singing and the wind in the branches, just as it is here." She seized his fingers in her other hand. "Harry," she said earnestly, "I don't believe I can ever forget that experience, any more than I could have forgotten a battlefield, were I to

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see one. I can shut my eyes now, and can see this place, our dear little wooded knoll wasted and blackened as that was."

The man twisted his shoulder uneasily and withdrew his hand.

"Harry," she said again, after a pause, "you must promise to leave this woods until the very last. I suppose it must all be cut down some day, but I do not want to be here to see after it is all over."

Thorpe remained silent.

"Men do not care much for keepsakes, do they, Harry?—they don't save letters and flowers as we girls do—but even a man can feel the value of a great beautiful keepsake such as this, can't he, dear? Our meeting-place—do you remember how I found you down there by the old pole trail, staring as though you had seen a ghost?—and that beautiful, beautiful music! It must always be our most sacred memory. Promise me you will save it until the very, very last."

Thorpe said nothing because he could not rally his faculties. The sentimental association connected with the grove had actually never occurred to him. His keepsakes were impressions which he carefully guarded in his memory. To the natural masculine indifference toward material bits of sentiment he had added the instinct of the strictly portable early developed in the rover. He had never even possessed a photograph of his sister. Now this sudden dis-

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covery that such things might be part of the woof of another person's spiritual garment came to him ready-grown to the proportions of a problem.

In selecting the districts for the season's cut, he had included in his estimates this very grove. Since then he had seen no reason for changing his decision. The operations would not commence until winter. By that time the lovers would no longer care to use it as at present. Now rapidly he passed in review a dozen expedients by which his plan might be modified to permit of the grove's exclusion. His practical mind discovered flaws in every one. Other bodies of timber promising a return of ten thousand dollars were not to be found near the river, and time now lacked for the cutting of roads to more distant forties.

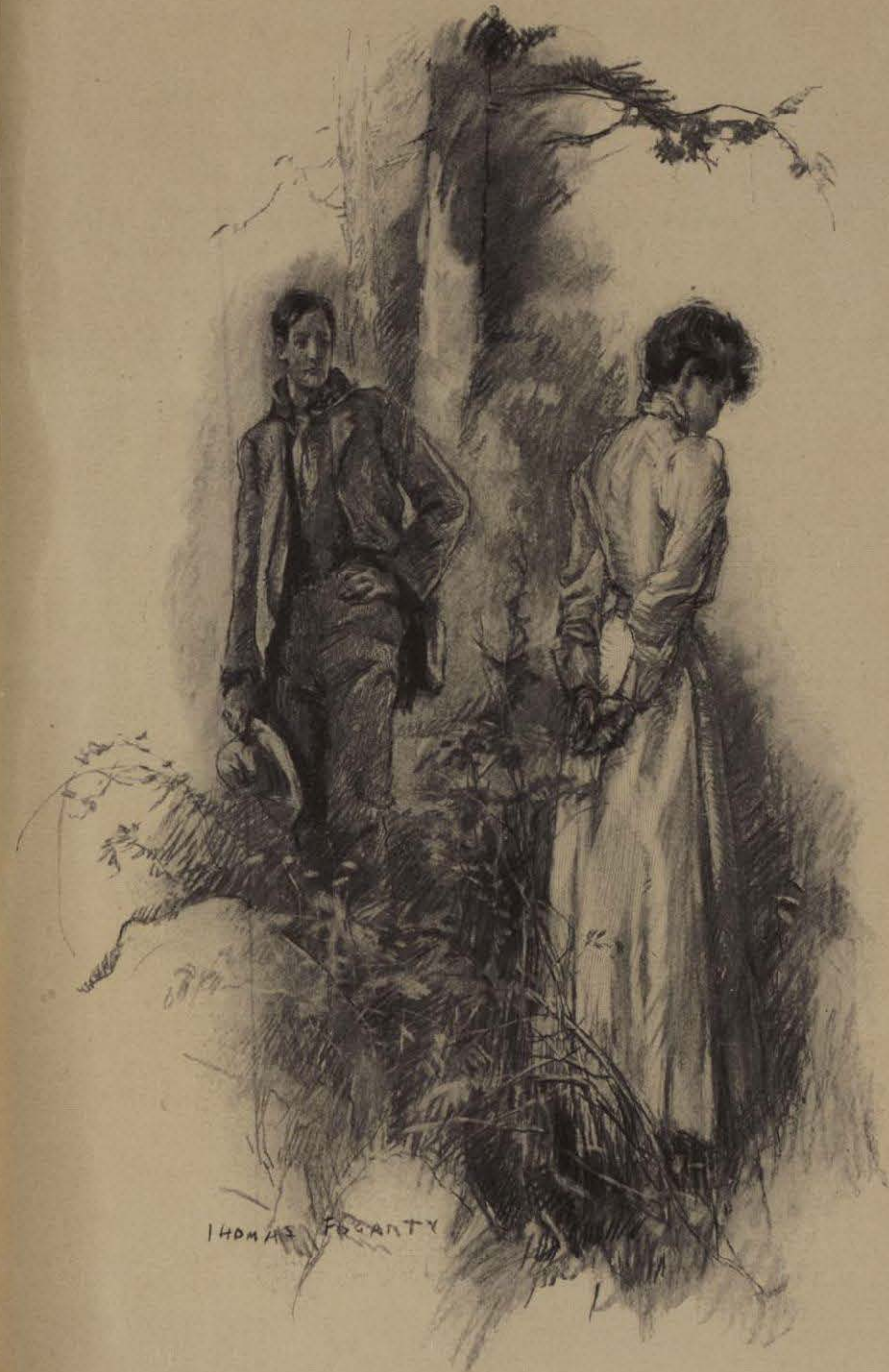
"Hilda," he broke in abruptly at last, "the men you hear are clearing a road to this very timber."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"This timber is marked for cutting this very winter."

She had not a suspicion of the true state of affairs. "Isn't it lucky I spoke of it!" she exclaimed. "How could you have forgotten to countermand the order! You must see to it to-day; now!"

She sprang up impulsively and stood waiting for him. He arose more slowly. Even before he spoke her eyes dilated with the shock from her quick intuitions.



"Hilda, I cannot"

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"Hilda, I cannot," he said.

She stood very still for some seconds.

"Why not?" she asked quietly.

"Because I have not time to cut a road through to another bunch of pine. It is this or nothing."

"Why not nothing, then?"

"I want the money this will bring."

His choice of a verb was unfortunate. The employment of that one little word opened the girl's mind to a flood of old suspicions which the frank charm of the northland had thrust outside. Hilda Farrand was an heiress and a beautiful girl. She had been constantly reminded of the one fact by the attempts of men to use flattery of the other as a key to her heart and her fortune. From early girlhood she had been sought by the brilliant impetuous of two continents. The continued experience had varnished her self-esteem with a glaze of cynicism sufficiently consistent to protect it against any but the strongest attack. She believed in no man's protestations. She distrusted every man's motives as far as herself was concerned. This attitude of mind was not unbecoming in her for the simple reason that it destroyed none of her graciousness as regards other human relations besides that of love. That men should seek her in matrimony from a selfish motive was as much to be expected as that flies should seek the sugar bowl. She accepted the fact as one of nature's laws, annoying enough but

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inevitable; a thing to guard against, but not one of sufficient moment to grieve over.

With Thorpe, however, her suspicions had been lulled. There is something virile and genuine about the woods and the men who inhabit them that strongly predisposes the mind to accept as proved in their entirety all the other virtues. Hilda had fallen into this state of mind. She endowed each of the men whom she encountered with all the robust qualities she had no difficulty in recognizing as part of nature's charm in the wilderness. Now at a word her eyes were opened to what she had done. She saw that she had assumed unquestioningly that her lover possessed the qualities of his environment.

Not for a moment did she doubt the reality of her love. She had conceived one of those deep, uplifting passions possible only to a young girl. But her cynical experience warned her that the reality of that passion's object was not proven by any test besides the fallible one of her own poetizing imagination. The reality of the ideal she had constructed might be a vanishable quantity even though the love of it was not. So to the interview that ensued she brought, not the partiality of a loving heart, nor even the impartiality of one sitting in judgment, but rather the perverted prejudice of one who actually fears the truth.

"Will you tell me for what you want the money?" she asked.

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The young man caught the note of distrust. At once, instinctively, his own confidence vanished. He drew within himself, again beyond the power of justifying himself with the needed word.

"The firm needs it in the business," said he.

Her next question countered instantaneously.

"Does the firm need the money more than you do me?"

They stared at each other in the silence of the situations that had so suddenly developed. It had come into being without their volition, as a dust cloud springs up on a plain.

"You do not mean that, Hilda," said Thorpe quietly. "It hardly comes to that."

"Indeed it does," she replied, every nerve of her fine organization strung to excitement. "I should be more to you than any firm."

"Sometimes it is necessary to look after the bread and butter," Thorpe reminded her gently, although he knew that was not the real reason at all.

"If your firm can't supply it, I can," she answered. "It seems strange that you won't grant my first request of you, merely because of a little money."

"It isn't a little money," he objected, catching man-like at the practical question. "You don't realize what an amount a clump of pine like this stands for. Just in saw logs, before it is made into lumber, it will be worth about thirty thousand dol-

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lars—of course there's the expense of logging to pay out of that," he added, out of his accurate business conservatism, "but there's ten thousand dollars' profit in it."

The girl, exasperated by cold details at such a time, blazed out. "I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life!" she cried. "Either you are not at all the man I thought you, or you have some better reason than you have given. Tell me, Harry; tell me at once. You don't know what you are doing."

"The firm needs it, Hilda," said Thorpe, "in order to succeed. If we do not cut this pine, we may fail."

In that he stated his religion. The duty of success was to him one of the loftiest of abstractions, for it measured the degree of a man's efficiency in the station to which God had called him. The money, as such, was nothing to him.

Unfortunately the girl had learned a different language. She knew nothing of the hardships, the struggles, the delight of winning for the sake of victory rather than the sake of spoils. To her, success meant getting a lot of money. The name by which Thorpe labelled his most sacred principle, to her represented something base and sordid. She had more money herself than she knew. It hurt her to the soul that the condition of a small money-making machine, as she considered the lumber firm, should

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be weighed even for an instant against her love. It was a great deal Thorpe's fault that she so saw the firm. He might easily have shown her the great forces and principles for which it stood.

"If I were a man," she said, and her voice was tense, "if I were a man and loved a woman, I would be ready to give up everything for her. My riches, my pride, my life, my honor, my soul even—they would be as nothing, as less than nothing to me—if I loved. Harry, don't let me think I am mistaken. Let this miserable firm of yours fail, if fail it must for lack of my poor little temple of dreams," she held out her hands with a tender gesture of appeal. The affair had gone beyond the preservation of a few trees. It had become the question of an ideal. Gradually, in spite of herself, the conviction was forcing itself upon her that the man she had loved was no different from the rest; that the greed of the dollar had corrupted him too. By the mere yielding to her wishes, she wanted to prove the suspicion wrong.

Now the strange part of the whole situation was, that in two words Thorpe could have cleared it. If he had explained that he needed the ten thousand dollars to help pay a note given to save from ruin a foolish friend, he would have supplied to the affair just the higher motive the girl's clear spirituality demanded. Then she would have shared enthusiastically in the sacrifice, and been the more loving

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and repentant from her momentary doubt. All she needed was that the man should prove himself actuated by a noble, instead of a sordid, motive. The young man did not say the two words, because in all honesty he thought them unimportant. It seemed to him quite natural that he should go on Wallace Carpenter's note. That fact altered not a bit the main necessity of success. It was a man's duty to make the best of himself—it was Thorpe's duty to prove himself supremely efficient in his chosen calling; the mere coincidence that his partner's troubles worked along the same lines meant nothing to the logic of the situation. In stating baldly that he needed the money to assure the firm's existence, he imagined he had adduced the strongest possible reason for his attitude. If the girl was not influenced by that, the case was hopeless.

It was the difference of training rather than the difference of ideas. Both clung to unselfishness as the highest reason for human action; but each expressed the thought in a manner incomprehensible to the other.

"I cannot, Hilda," he answered steadily.

"You sell me for ten thousand dollars! I cannot believe it! Harry! Harry! Must I put it to you as a choice? Don't you love me enough to spare me that?"

He did not reply. As long as it remained a dilemma, he would not reply. He was in the right.

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"Do you need the money more than you do me? more than you do love?" she begged, her soul in her eyes; for she was begging also for herself. "Think, Harry; it is the last chance!"

Once more he was face to face with a vital decision. To his surprise he discovered in his mind no doubt as to what the answer should be. He experienced no conflict of mind; no hesitation; for the moment, no regret. During all his woods life he had been following diligently the trail he had blazed for his conduct. Now his feet carried him unconsciously to the same end. There was no other way out. In the winter of his trouble the clipped trees alone guided him, and at the end of them he found his decision. It is in crises of this sort, when a little reflection or consideration would do wonders to prevent a catastrophe, that all the forgotten deeds, decisions, principles, and thoughts of a man's past life combine solidly into the walls of fatality, so that in spite of himself he finds he must act in accordance with them. In answer to Hilda's question he merely inclined his head.

"I have seen a vision," said she simply, and lowered her head to conceal her eyes. Then she looked at him again. "There can be nothing better than love," she said.

"Yes, one thing," said Thorpe, "—the duty of success."

The man had stated his creed; the woman hers.

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The one is born perfect enough for love; the other must work, must attain the completeness of a fulfilled function, must succeed, to deserve it.

She left him then, and did not see him again. Four days later the camping party left. Thorpe sent Tim Shearer over, as his most efficient man, to see that they got off without difficulty, but himself retired on some excuse to Camp Four. Three weeks gone in October he received a marked newspaper announcing the engagement of Miss Hilda Farrand to Mr. Hildreth Morton of Chicago.

He had burned his ships, and stood now on an unfriendly shore. The first sacrifice to his jealous god had been consummated, and now, live or die, he stood pledged to win his fight.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

WINTER set in early and continued late; which in the end was a good thing for the year's cut. The season was capricious, hanging for days at a time at the brink of a thaw, only to stiffen again into severe weather. This was trying on the nerves. For at each of these false alarms the six camps fell into a feverish haste to get the job finished before the break-up. It was really quite extraordinary how much was accomplished under the nagging spur of weather conditions and the cruel rowelling of Thorpe.

The latter had now no thought beyond his work, and that was the thought of a madman. He had been stern and unyielding enough before, goodness knows, but now he was terrible. His restless energy permeated every molecule in the economic structure over which he presided, roused it to intense vibration. Not for an instant was there a resting spell. The veriest chore-boy talked, thought, dreamed of nothing but saw logs. Men whispered vaguely of a record cut. Teamsters looked upon their success or failure to keep near the top on the day's haul as a signal victory or a disgraceful defeat. The difficulties of snow, accident, topography which an ever-

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watchful nature threw down before the rolling car of this industry, were swept aside like straws. Little time was wasted and no opportunities. It did not matter how smoothly affairs happened to be running for the moment, every advantage, even the smallest, was eagerly seized to advance the work. A drop of five degrees during the frequent warm spells brought out the sprinklers, even in dead of night; an accident was white-hot in the forge almost before the crack of the iron had ceased to echo. At night the men fell into their bunks like sandbags, and their last conscious thought, if indeed they had any at all, was of eagerness for the morrow in order that they might push the grand total up another notch. It was madness; but it was the madness these men loved.

For now to his old religion Thorpe had added a fanaticism, and over the fanaticism was gradually creeping a film of doubt. To the conscientious energy which a sense of duty supplied, was added the tremendous kinetic force of a love turned into other channels. And in the wild nights while the other men slept, Thorpe's half-crazed brain was revolving over and over again the words of the sentence he had heard from Hilda's lips: "There can be nothing better than love."

His actions, his mind, his very soul vehemently denied the proposition. He clung as ever to his high Puritanic idea of man's purpose. But down deep in

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a very tiny, sacred corner of his heart a very small voice sometimes made itself heard when other, more militant voices were still: "It may be; it may be!"

The influence of this voice was practically nothing. It made itself heard occasionally. Perhaps even, for the time being, its weight counted on the other side of the scale; for Thorpe took pains to deny it fiercely, both directly and indirectly by increased exertions. But it persisted; and once in a moon or so, when the conditions were quite favorable, it attained for an instant a shred of belief.

Probably never since the Puritan days of New England has a community lived as sternly as did that winter of 1888 the six camps under Thorpe's management. There was something a little inspiring about it. The men fronted their daily work with the same grim-faced, clear-eyed steadiness of veterans going into battle; with the same confidence, the same sure patience that disposes effectively of one thing before going on to the next. There was little merely excitable bustle; there was no rest. Nothing could stand against such a spirit. Nothing did. The skirmishers which the wilderness threw out were brushed away. Even the inevitable delays seemed not so much stoppages as the instant's pause of a heavy vehicle in a snowdrift, succeeded by the momentary acceleration as the plunge carried it through. In the main, and by large, the machine moved steadily and inexorably.

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And yet one possessed of the finer spiritual intuitions could not have shaken off the belief in an impending struggle. The feel of it was in the air. Nature's forces were too mighty to be so slightly overcome; the splendid energy developed in these camps too vast to be wasted on facile success. Over against each other were two great powers, alike in their calm confidence, animated with the loftiest and most dignified spirit of enmity. Slowly they were moving toward each other. The air was surcharged with the electricity of their opposition. Just how the struggle would begin was uncertain; but its inevitability was as assured as its magnitude. Thorpe knew it, and shut his teeth, looking keenly about him. The Fighting Forty knew it, and longed for the grapple to come. The other camps knew it, and followed their leader with perfect trust. The affair was an epitome of the historic combats begun with David and Goliath. It was an affair of Titans. The little courageous men watched their enemy with cat's eyes.

The last month of hauling was also one of snow. In this condition were few severe storms, but each day a little fell. By and by the accumulation amounted to much. In the woods where the wind could not get at it, it lay deep and soft above the tops of bushes. The grouse ate browse from the slender hardwood tips like a lot of goldfinches, or precipitated themselves headlong down through five

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feet of snow to reach the ground. Often Thorpe would come across the irregular holes of their entrance. Then if he took the trouble to stamp about a little in the vicinity with his snowshoes, the bird would spring unexpectedly from the clear snow, scattering a cloud with its strong wings. The deer, herded together, tramped "yards" where the feed was good. Between the yards ran narrow trails. When the animals went from one yard to another in these trails, their ears and antlers alone were visible. On either side of the logging roads the snow piled so high as to form a kind of rampart. When all this water in suspense should begin to flow, and to seek its level in the water-courses of the district, the logs would have plenty to float them, at least.

So late did the cold weather last that, even with the added plowing to do, the six camps beat all records. On the banks at Camp One were nine million feet; the totals of all five amounted to thirty-three million. About ten million of this was on French Creek; the remainder on the main banks of the Ossawinamakee. Besides this the firm up-river, Sadler & Smith, had put up some twelve million more. The drive promised to be quite an affair.

About the fifteenth of April attention became strained. Every day the mounting sun made heavy attacks on the snow: every night the temperature dropped below the freezing point. The river began

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to show more air holes, occasional open places. About the centre the ice looked worn and soggy. Some one saw a flock of geese high in the air. Then came rain.

One morning early, Long Pine Jim came into the men's camp bearing a huge chunk of tallow. This he held against the hot stove until its surface had softened, when he began to swab liberal quantities of grease on his spiked river shoes, which he fished out from under his bunk.

"She's comin', boys," said he.

He donned a pair of woolen trousers that had been chopped off at the knee, thick woolen stockings, and the river shoes. Then he tightened his broad leather belt about his heavy shirt, cocked his little hat over his ear, and walked over in the corner to select a peavey from the lot the blacksmith had just put in shape. A peavey is like a cant-hook except that it is pointed at the end. Thus it can be used either as a hook or a pike. At the same moment Shearer, similarly attired and equipped, appeared in the doorway. The opening of the portal admitted a roar of sound. The river was rising.

"Come on, boys, she's on!" said he sharply.

Outside, the cook and cookee were stowing articles in the already loaded wanigan. The scow contained tents, blankets, provisions, and a portable stove. It followed the drive, and made a camp wherever expediency demanded.

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"Lively, boys, lively!" shouted Thorpe. "She'll be down on us before we know it!"

Above the soft creaking of dead branches in the wind sounded a steady roar, like the bellowing of a wild beast lashing itself to fury. The freshet was abroad, forceful with the strength of a whole winter's accumulated energy.

The men heard it and their eyes brightened with the lust of battle. They cheered.