The Blazed Trail

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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CHAPTER VII.

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. 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 that they had a new master over them.

Now it became necessary to put the roads in shape for hauling. All winter the blacksmith had occupied his time in fitting the iron work on eight log sleighs which the carpenter had hewed from solid sticks of timber. They were tremendous affairs, with runners six feet apart and bunks nine feet in width for the reception of logs.

The carpenter had also built two immense tanks on runners, holding each some seventy barrels of water and with holes so arranged that on the withdrawal of plugs the water would flood the entire width of the road. The 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 a water hole to an 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 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, 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 tomcats and had to be pulled apart entirely.

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 monkeys," saw now why such care had been required of him in smoothing the way of stubs, knots and hummocks.

When the road had been partly cleaned Radway started one of his sprinklers. Water holes of suitable size had been blown in the creek bank by dynamite. There the machines were filled. Stratton attached his horse to the chain and drove him back and forth, hauling the barrel up and down the slide way. 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.

That night it turned warmer. The change was heralded by a shift of wind.

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

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

"I don' know," confessed Hines, "but she is. She just feels that way."

In the morning the icicles dripped from the roof, and the snow 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.

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

Until 2 o'clock in the morning the four teams and the six men creaked back and forth spilling hardly gathered water. Then they crept in and ate sleepily the food that a sleepy cookee set out for them.

By morning the mere surface of the sprinkled water had frozen. Radway 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. 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. It even stopped freezing during the night. At times Dyer's little thermometer marked as high as 40 degrees.

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

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."

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

It was all so unutterably simple and yet so effective. It snowed.

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 glades 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.

As soon as loading began the cook served breakfast at 3 o'clock. The men worked by the light of torches, which were often merely catchup jugs with wicking in the necks. Nothing could be more picturesque than a teamster conducting one of his great pyramidical 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 stick 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 layer of five, say; then one of four 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. 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 into a gigantic skidway to await the spring freshets, which will carry them down stream to the "boom." In that inclosure they remain until sawed in the mill.

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 expedient could do the work.

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 assaults of the great enemy whom they personified under the generic "She."

One morning in February Thorpe was helping load a big butt log. He was one of the two men who stand at either end 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. Then 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.

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."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Thorpe finally 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 their shoulders and across the breast. Their heads were quaintly white-garbed in stiff winglike 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 month before. For these were sisters, and the young man lay in the hospital of St. Mary.

Like a great many other charities built on a common sense, self supporting, rational basis, the woods hospitals are under the Roman Catholic church. From one of the numerous agents who periodically visit the camps the lumber jack purchases for $8 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.

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.

The roofs were covered with snow. One day Thorpe saw it sink into itself and gradually run away. The tinkle tank tank of drops sounded from his own eaves. Down the faroff river sluggish reaches of ice drifted. Then in a night the blue disappeared from the stream. It became a 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 delightedly. "Early, is it! Sure th' freshet co't them all. Look, darlint; ye can see the 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 goodby to his attendant. 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.

He followed the trail by the river. Butterballs and scoters paddled up at his approach. Bits of rotten ice occasionally swirled down the diminishing stream. Around every bend Thorpe looked for some of Radway's crew "driving" the logs down the current. He knew from chance encounters with several of the men in Bay City that Radway was still in camp, which meant, of course, that the season's operations were not finished. Five miles farther Thorpe began to wonder whether this last conclusion might not be erroneous.

"I see," said Thorpe wearily.

The Cass branch had shrunken almost to its original limits. The drive must have been finished even this early, for the stream in its present condition would hardly float saw logs.

Thorpe, puzzled, walked on. At the banking ground he found empty skids. Evidently the drive was over. And yet even to Thorpe's ignorance it seemed incredible that the remaining million and a half of logs had been hauled, banked and driven during the short time he had lain in the Bay City hospital. More to solve the problem than in any hope of work he set out for the logging road.

Another three miles brought him to camp. It looked strangely wet and sodden and deserted. In fact, Thorpe found a bare half dozen people in it—Radway, the cook and four men who were helping to pack up the movables. The jobber showed strong traces of the strain he had undergone, but greeted Thorpe almost jovially.

"Hello, young man!" he shouted at Thorpe's mud splashed figure. "Come back to view the remains? All well again, heigh? That's good!"

"I didn't know you were through," explained Thorpe, "and I came to see if I could get a job."

"Well, now, I am sorry!" cried Radway. "You can turn in and help, though, if you want to."

Thorpe greeted the cook and old Jackson Hines, the only two whom he knew, and set to work to tie up bundles of blankets and to collect axes, peavies and tools of all descriptions. That evening the seven dined together at one end of the long table. The big room exhaled already the atmosphere of desertion.

"Not much like old times, is she?" laughed Radway. "Can't you just shut your eyes and hear Baptiste say, 'Mak' heem de soup one tam more for me?' She's pretty empty now."

Jackson Hines looked whimsically down the bare board. "More room than God made for geese in Ireland," was his comment.

After supper they sat outside for a little time to smoke their pipes, chair tilted against the logs of the cabins, but soon the chill of melting snow drove them indoors. The four teamsters played seven up in the cook camp by the light of a barn lantern, while Thorpe and the cook wrote letters. Thorpe's was to his sister.

"I have been in the hospital for about a month," he wrote. "Nothing serious—a crack on the head, which is all right now. But I cannot get home this summer, nor, I am afraid, can we arrange about the school this year. I am about $70 ahead of where I was last fall, so you see it is slow business. This summer I am going into a mill, but the wages for green labor are not very high there either," and so on.

When Miss Helen Thorpe, aged seventeen, received this document she stamped her foot almost angrily. "You'd think he was a day laborer!" she cried. "Why doesn't he try for a clerkship or something in the city where he'd have a chance to use his brains?"

And thus she came to feeling rebelliously that her brother had been a little selfish in his choice of an occupation; that he had sacrificed her inclinations to his own.

After finishing the letter Thorpe lit his pipe and strolled out into the darkness. Opposite the little office he stopped amazed.

Through the narrow window he could see Radway, seated in front of the stove. He had sunk down into his chair until he rested on almost the small of his back, his legs were stuck straight out in front of him, his chin rested on his breast, and his two arms hung listless at his side, a pipe half falling from the fingers of one hand. All the facetious lines had turned to pathos.

"What's the matter with the boss, anyway?" asked Thorpe in a low voice of Jackson Hines when the seven up game was finished.

"Hain't ye heard?" inquired the old man in surprise.

"Why, no. What?"

"Busted," said the old men sententiously.

"How? What do you mean?"

"What I say. He's busted. That freshet caught him too quick. They's more than a million and a half logs left in the woods that can't be got out this year, and as his contract calls for a finished job he don't get nothin' for what he's done."

"That's a queer rig," commented Thorpe. "He's done a lot of valuable work here. The timber's cut and skidded anyway, and he's delivered a good deal of it to the main drive. The M. & D. outfit get all the advantage of that."

"They do, my son. When old Daly's hand gets near anything it cramps. I don't know how the old man come to make such a contrac', but he did. Result is he's out his expenses and time."

The exceptionally early break up of the spring, combined with the fact that owing to the series of incidents and accidents already sketched the actual cutting and skidding had fallen so far behind, caught Radway unawares. He saw the rollways breaking out while his teams were still hauling in the woods. In order to deliver to the mouth of the Cass branch the 3,000,000 already banked he was forced to drop everything else and attend strictly to the drive. This left still, as has been stated, a million and a half on skidways, which Radway knew he would be unable to get out that year.

In spite of the jobber's certainty that his claim was thus annulled and that he might as well abandon the enterprise entirely for all he would ever get out of it, he finished the "drive" conscientiously and saved to the company the logs already banked. Then he had interviewed Daly. The latter refused to pay him one cent.

The next day Radway and Thorpe walked the ten miles of the river trail together, while the teamsters and the cook drove down the five teams. Under the influence of the solitude and a certain sympathy which Thorpe manifested Radway talked—a very little.

"I got behind; that's all there is to it," he said. "I bit off more than I could chew."

Thorpe noticed a break in the man's voice and, glancing suddenly toward him, was astounded to catch his eyes brimming with tears. Radway perceived the surprise.

"You know when I left Christmas?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The boys thought it was a mighty poor rig—my leaving that way."

He paused again in evident expectation of a reply. Again Thorpe was silent.

"Didn't they?" Radway insisted.

"Yes, they did," answered Thorpe.

The older man sighed. "I thought so," he went on. "Well, I didn't go to spend Christmas. I went because Jimmy brought me a telegram that Lida was sick with diphtheria. I sat up nights with her for eleven days."

"No bad after effects, I hope?" inquired Thorpe.

"She died," said Radway simply.

CHAPTER IX.

"RADWAY," said he suddenly, "I need money, and I need it bad. I think you ought to get something out of this job of the M. & D.—not much, but something. Will you give me a share of what I can collect from them?"

"Sure!" agreed the jobber readily, with a laugh. "Sure! But you won't get anything. I'll give you 10 per cent quick!"

"Good enough!" cried Thorpe. "Now, when we get to town I want your power of attorney and a few figures, after which I will not bother you again."

The next day the young man called for the second time at the little red painted office under the shadow of the mill and for the second time stood before the bulky power of the junior member of the firm.

"Well, young man, what can I do for you?" asked the latter.

"I have been informed," said Thorpe without preliminary, "that you intend to pay John Radway nothing for the work done in the Cass branch this winter. Is that true?"

Daly studied his antagonist meditatively. "If it is true what is it to you?" he asked at length.

"I am acting in Mr. Radway's interest."

"You are one of Radway's men?"

"Yes."

"In what capacity have you been working for him?"

"Cant hook man," replied Thorpe briefly.

"I see," said Daly slowly. Then suddenly, with an intensity of energy that startled Thorpe, he cried: "Now, you get out of here! Right off! Quick!"

The young man recognized the compelling and autocratic boss addressing a member of the crew.

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" he replied, with a flash of fire.

The mill owner leaped to his feet. Thorpe did not wish to bring about an actual scene of violence. He had attained his object, which was to fluster the other.

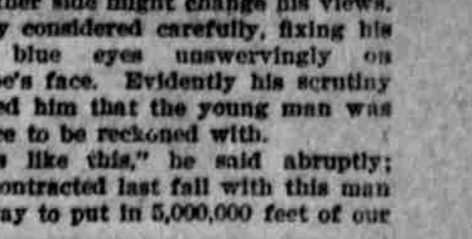
"I have Radway's power of attorney," he added.

Daly sat down, controlled himself with an effort and growled out, "Why didn't you say so?"

"Now, I would like to know your position," went on Thorpe. "I am not here to make trouble, but as an associate of Mr. Radway I have a right to understand the case. Of course I have his side of the story," he suggested, as though convinced that a detailing of the other side might change his views.

Daly considered carefully, fixing his flint blue eyes unswervingly on Thorpe's face. Evidently his scrutiny advised him that the young man was a force to be reckoned with.

"It's like this," he said abruptly; "we contracted last fall with this man Radway to put in 5,000,000 feet of our



The mill owner leaped to his feet.

timber, delivered to the main drive at the mouth of the Cass branch. In this he was to act independently, except as to the matter of provisions. Those he drew from our van and was debited with the amount of the same. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," replied Thorpe.

"In return we were to pay him, merchantable scale, $4 a thousand. If, however, he failed to put in the whole job the contract was void."

"That's how I understand it," commented Thorpe. "Well?"

"Well, he didn't get in the 5,000,000. There's a million and a half hung up in the woods."

"But you have in your hands three million and a half, which under the present arrangement you get free of any charge whatever."

"And we ought to get it," cried Daly. "Great guns! Here we intend to saw this summer and quit. We want to get in every stick of timber we own so as to be able to clear out of here for good and all at the close of the season, and now this condigned jobber ties us up for a million and a half."

"It is exceedingly annoying," conceded Thorpe, "and it is a good deal of Radway's fault, I am willing to admit, but it's your fault too."

"To be sure," replied Daly, with the accent of sarcasm.

"You had no business entering into any such contract. It gave him no show."

"I suppose that was mainly his lookout, wasn't it? And, as I already told you, we had to protect ourselves."

"You should have demanded security for the completion of the work. Under your present agreement, if Radway got in the timber, you were to pay him a fair price. If he didn't, you appropriated everything he had already done. In other words, you made him a bet."

"I don't care what you call it," answered Daly, who had recovered his good humor in contemplation of the security of his position. "The fact stands all right."

"It does," said Thorpe unexpectedly, "and I'm glad of it. Now, let's examine a few figures. You owned 5,000,000 feet of timber, which at the price of stumpage" (standing trees) "was worth $10,000."

"Well?"

"You come out at the end of the season with three million and a half of saw logs, which with the $4 worth of logging added are worth $21,000."

"Hold on!" cried Daly. "We paid Radway $4. We could have done it ourselves for less."

"You could not have done it for one cent less than four-twenty in that country," replied Thorpe, "as an expert will testify."

"Why did we give it to Radway at four then?"

"You saved the expense of a salaried overseer and yourselves some bother," replied Thorpe. "Radway could do it for less because, for some strange reason which you yourself do not understand, a jobber can always log for less than a company."

"We could have done it for four," insisted Daly stubbornly. "But get on

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