

# The Blazed Trail

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## CHAPTER XIV.

**N**EXT day the articles of partnership were drawn, and Carpenter gave his note for the necessary expenses. Then, in answer to a penciled card which Mr. Morrison had evidently left at Thorpe's hotel in person, both young men called at the lumberman's place of business. They were ushered immediately into the private office.

Mr. Morrison was a smart little man, with an ingratiating manner and a fishy eye. He greeted Thorpe with marked geniality.

"My opponent yesterday," he cried jocularly. "Sit down, Mr. Thorpe. Although you did me out of some land I had made every preparation to purchase, I can't but admire your grit and resourcefulness. How did you get here ahead of us?"

"I walked across the upper peninsula and caught a boat," replied Thorpe briefly.

"Indeed, indeed!" replied Mr. Morrison, placing the tips of his fingers together. "Extraordinary! Well, Mr. Thorpe, you overreached us nicely, and I suppose we must pay for our carelessness. We must have that pine even though we pay stumps on it. Now, what would you consider a fair price for it?"

"It is not for sale," answered Thorpe. "We'll waive all that. Of course it is to your interest to make difficulties and run the price up as high as you can. But my time is somewhat occupied just at present, so I would be very glad to hear your top price. We will come to an agreement afterward."

"You do not understand me, Mr. Morrison. I told you the pine is not for sale, and I mean it."

"But surely—What did you buy it for, then?" cried Mr. Morrison, with evidences of a growing excitement.

"We intend to manufacture it."

Mr. Morrison's fishy eyes nearly popped out of his head. He controlled himself with an effort.

"Mr. Thorpe," said he, "let us try to be reasonable. Our case stands this way: We have gone to a great deal of expense on the Ossawinimakee in expectation of undertaking very extensive operations there. To that end we have cleared the stream, built three dams and have laid the foundations of a harbor and boom. This has been very expensive. Now, your purchase includes most of what we had meant to log. You have, roughly speaking, about 300,000,000 in your holding, in addition to which there are several millions scattered near it which would pay nobody but yourself to get in. Our holdings are farther up stream and comprise only about the equal of yours."

"Three hundred millions are not to be sneezed at," replied Thorpe.

"Certainly not," agreed Morrison suavely, gaining confidence in the sound of his own voice. "Not in this country. But you must remember that a man goes into the northern peninsula only because he can get something better there than here. When the firm of Morrison & Daly establishes itself now it must be for the last time. We want enough timber to do us for the rest of the time we are in business."

"In that case you will have to hunt up another locality," replied Thorpe calmly.

Morrison's eyes flashed, but he retained his appearance of geniality and appealed to Wallace Carpenter.

"Then you will retain the advantage of our dams and improvements?" said he. "Is that fair?"

"No, not on the face of it," admitted Thorpe. "But you did your work in a navigable stream for private purposes without the consent of the board of control. Your presence on the river is illegal. You should have taken out a charter as an improvement company. Then as long as you attended to business and kept the concern in repair we'd have paid you a toll per thousand feet. As soon as you let it slide, however, the works would revert to the state. I won't hinder your doing that yet, although I might. Take out your charter and fix your rate of toll."

"In other words, you force us to stay there and run a little two by four improvement company for your benefit or else lose the value of our improvements?"

"Suit yourself," answered Thorpe carelessly. "You can always log your present holdings."

"Very well," cried Morrison, so suddenly in a passion that Wallace started back. "It's war! And let me tell you this, young man—you're a new concern, and we're an old one. We'll crush you like that!" He crumpled an envelope vindictively and threw it in the wastebasket.

"Crush ahead," replied Thorpe with great good humor. "Goodby, Mr. Morrison." And the two went out.

Wallace was astonished and

the taciturnity of their class in the presence of a stranger, said nothing.

"Well, bub," finally drew a voice from the corner, "blow that stake you made out of Redway 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 river man rose silently and led the way up the straight, uncarpeted stairs, along a narrow, uncarpeted hall, to a square, uncarpeted bedroom. The walls and ceilings of this apartment were of unpainted planed pine. It contained a cheap bureau, one chair and a bed and washstand to match the bureau. Shearer lit the lamp and sat on the bed.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I have a little pine up in the northern peninsula within walking distance of Marquette," said Thorpe, "and I want to get a crew of about twenty men. It occurred to me that you might be willing to help me."

The river man frowned steadily at his interlocutor from under his bushy brows.

"How much pine you got?" he asked finally.

"About 300,000,000," replied Thorpe quietly.

The old man's blue eyes fixed themselves with unwavering steadiness on Thorpe's face.

"You're jacking some of it, eh?" he submitted finally as the only probable conclusion. "Do you think you know enough about it? Who does it belong to?"

"It belongs to a man named Carpenter and myself."

The river man pondered this slowly for an appreciable interval, and then shot out another question:

"How'd you get it?"

Thorpe told him simply, omitting nothing except the name of the firm up river. When he had finished Shearer evinced no astonishment nor approval.

"You done well," he commented finally. Then, after another interval:

"Have you found out who was the men stealin' the pine?"

"Yes," replied Thorpe quietly, "it was Morrison & Daly."

The old man flickered not an eyelid. He slowly filled his pipe and lit it.

"I'll get you a crew of men," said he, "if you'll take me as foreman."

"But it's a little job at first," protested Thorpe. "I only want a camp of twenty. It wouldn't be worth your while."

"That's my lookout. I'll take the job," replied the logger grimly. "You got 300,000,000 there, ain't you? And you're goin' to cut it? It ain't such a small job."

Thorpe could hardly believe his good fortune in having gained so important a recruit. With a practical man as foreman, his mind would be relieved of a great deal of worry over unfamiliar details. He saw at once that he would himself be able to perform all the duties of scaler, keep in touch with the needs of the camp and supervise the campaign. Nevertheless he answered the older man's glance with one as keen and said:

"Look here, Shearer, if you take this job we may as well understand each other at the start. This is going to be my camp, and I'm going to be boss. I don't know much about logging, and I shall want you to take charge of all that, but I shall want to know just why you do each thing, and if my judgment advises otherwise, my judgment goes. If I want to discharge a man, he walks without any question. I know about what I shall expect of each man, and I intend to get it out of him. And in questions of policy mine is the say so every trip. Now, I know you're a good man—one of the best there is—and I presume I shall find your judgment the best, but I don't want any mistakes to start with. If you want to be my foreman on those terms just say so, and I'll be tickled to death to have you."

For the first time the lumbering man's face lost, during a single instant, its mask of immobility. His steel blue eyes flashed; his mouth twitched with some strong emotion. For the first time, too, he spoke without contemplative pause of preparation.

"That's the way to talk!" he cried. "Go with you? Well, I should rise to remark! You're the boss, and I always said it. I'll get you a gang of bully boys that will roll logs till there's skat'ing in Tophet."

Thorpe left, after making an appointment at his own hotel for the following day, more than pleased with his luck. None the less, he anticipated his next step with shaky confidence. He would now be called upon to buy four or five teams of horses and enough feed to last them the entire winter, and he would have to arrange for provisions in abundance and variety for his men; he would have to figure on blankets, harness, cook camp utensils, stoves, blacksmith's tools, iron, axes, chains, cant hooks, van goods, pails, lamps, oil, matches, all sorts of hardware—in short, all the thousand and one things, from needles to court plaster, of which a self-sufficing community might come in need. And he would have to figure out his requirements for the entire winter.

Navigation closed he could import nothing more.

Deep in these thoughts he wandered on at random. He suddenly came to himself in the toughest quarter of Bay City.

Through the summer night thrilled the sound of cacklings pointed to the colors of mirth. A cheap piano rattled and thumped through an open window. Men's and women's voices mingled in rising and falling gradations of harshness. Lights streamed irregularly across the dark.

Thorpe became aware of a figure crouched in the doorway almost at his feet. The flickering rays of a distant street lamp threw into relief the high lights of a violin and a head. The face upturned to him was thin and white and wolfish under a broad white brow. Dark eyes gleamed at him with the expression of a fierce animal. Across the forehead ran a long but shallow cut from which blood dripped. The creature clasped both arms around a violin. He crouched there and stared up at Thorpe, who stared down at him.

"What's the matter?" asked the latter finally.

The creature made no reply, but drew his arms closer about his instrument. Thorpe made a sign to the unknown to rise.

"Come with me," said he, "and I'll have your forehead attended to."

The eyes gleamed into his with a sudden savage concentration. Then their owner obediently arose.

Thorpe now saw that the body before him was of a cripple, short legged, hunchbacked, long armed, pigeon breasted. The large head sat strangely top heavy between even the broad shoulders. It confirmed the hopeless but sullen despair that brooded on the white countenance.

At the hotel Thorpe, examining the cut, found it more serious in appearance than in reality. With a few pieces of sticking plaster he drew its edges together.

Then he attempted to interrogate his find.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Phil."

"Phil what?"

Silence.

"How did you get hurt?"

No reply.

"Were you playing your fiddle in one of those houses?"

The cripple nodded slowly.

"Are you hungry?" asked Thorpe, with a sudden thoughtfulness.

"Yes," replied the cripple, with a lightning gleam in his wolf eyes.

Thorpe rang the bell. To the boy who answered it he said:

"Bring me half a dozen beef sandwiches and a glass of milk, and be quick about it."

"Do you play the fiddle much?" continued Thorpe.

The cripple nodded again.

"Let's hear what you can do."

"They cut my strings," cried Phil, with a passionate wail.

The cry came from the heart, and Thorpe was touched by it. The price of strings was evidently a big sum.

"I'll get you more in the morning," said he. "Would you like to leave Bay City?"

"Yes!" cried the boy, with passion.

"You would have to work. You would have to be chore boy in a lumber camp and play fiddle for the men when they wanted you to."

"I'll do it," said the cripple.

"All right; then I'll take you," replied Thorpe.

The cripple said nothing nor moved a muscle of his face, but the gleam of the wolf faded to give place to the soft, affectionate glow seen in the eyes of a setter dog. Thorpe was started at the change.

A knock announced the sandwiches and milk. The cripple fell upon them with both hands in a sudden ecstasy of hunger. When he had finished, he looked again at Thorpe, and this time there were tears in his eyes.

A little later Thorpe interviewed the proprietor of the hotel.

"I wish you'd give this boy a good cheap room and charge his keep to me," said he. "He's going north with me."

Thorpe lay awake for some time after retiring. Phil claimed a share of his thought. In an hour or so he dozed. He dreamed that the cripple had grown to enormous proportions and was overshadowing his life. A slight noise outside his bedroom door brought him to his feet.

He opened the door and found that in the stillness of the night the poor deformed creature had taken the blankets from his bed and had spread them across the door sill of the man who had befriended him.

While Morrison & Daly owned the place itself, the land on which it abutted belonged to him.

From the arms of the bay he could make out a dozen figures standing near the end of the wharf. When, with propeller reversed, the Pole Star bore slowly down toward her moorings, Thorpe recognized Dyer at the head of eight or ten woodmen. It looked suspicious.

"Catch this line!" sung out the mate, hurling the coil of a hand line on the wharf.

No one moved, and the little rope after a moment slid overboard with a splash.

The captain, with a curse, signaled full speed astern.

"Captain Morse," cried Dyer, stepping forward, "my orders are that you are to land here nothing but M. & D. merchandise."

"I have a right to land," answered Thorpe. "The shore belongs to me."

"This dock doesn't," retorted the other sharply, "and you can't set foot on her."

"You have no legal status. You had no business building in the first place"—began Thorpe, and then stopped with a choke of anger at the futility of arguing legality in such a case.

The men had gathered interestedly in the waist of the ship, cool, impartial, severely critical. The vessel swung her bow in toward the dock. Thorpe ran swiftly forward and during the instant of rubbing contact leaped.

He alighted squarely upon his feet. Without an instant's hesitation he rushed on Dyer and with one full, clean in-blow stretched him stunned on the dock. For a moment there was a pause of astonishment. Then the woodsmen closed upon him.

During that instant Thorpe had become possessed of a weapon. It came hurling through the air from above to fall at his feet. Shearer, with the cool calculation of the pioneer, had seen that it would be impossible to follow his chief and so had done the next best

thing, thrown him a heavy iron dea-ling pin.

Thorpe hit with all his strength and quickness. He was conscious once of being on the point of defeat. Then he had cleared a little space for himself. Then the men were on him again more savagely than ever. One fellow even succeeded in hitting him a glancing blow on the shoulder.

Then came a sudden crash. Thorpe was nearly thrown from his feet. The next instant a score of yelling men leaped behind and all around him. There ensued a moment's scuffle, the sound of dull blows, and the dock was clear of all but Dyer and three others who were, like himself, unconscious.

The captain, yielding to the excitement, had run his prow plump against the wharf.

Some of the crew received the mousing lines. All was ready for disembarkation.

Bryan Moloney, a strapping Irish-American of the big boned, red cheeked type, threw some water over the four stunned combatants. Slowly they came to life. They were promptly yanked to their feet by the irate river men, who commenced at once to bestow sundry vigorous kicks and shakings by way of punishment. Thorpe interposed.

"Quit it," he commanded. "Let them go."

The men grumbled. One or two were inclined to be openly rebellious.

"If I hear another peep out of you," said Thorpe to these latter, "you can climb right aboard and take the return trip." He looked them in the eye until they muttered and then went on: "Now, we've got to get unloaded and our goods ashore before those fellows report to camp. Get right moving and hustle!"

So Dyer and his men picked themselves out of the trouble, sullenly and departed. The ex-scaler had nothing to say as long as he was within reach, but when he had gained the shore he turned.

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The men were on him again.