

# The Blazed Trail

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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[CONTINUED.]

sensation, that of being baffled in an intention. As he hesitated he saw that she was walking slowly in his direction. Perhaps a hundred paces separated the two. She took them deliberately. Her progression was a series of paces, the one which melted imperceptibly into the other without appreciable pause of transition.

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-dropping 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. 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 he prevailed. A faint color rose from her neck, deepened and spread over her face and forehead. In a moment she drooped her eyes.

"Don't you think you stare a little rudely, Mr. Thorpe?" she asked.

"The vision was over."

"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."

"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, 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.

"We wrote Mr. Harry Thorpe that we were about to descend on his district with wagons and tents and Indians and things, and asked him to come and see us."

The girl looked at him for a moment steadily, then smiled. The change of countenance brought Thorpe to himself.

"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, enlivened.

"But I'm sorry I didn't 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.

"He's horrid. He was coming, and then some business came up, and he couldn't get away. We are having the love feast time, though. I do adore the woods. Come," she cried impatiently, sweeping

aside to leave a way clear. "You shall meet my friends."

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 trail; 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 birds' songs inconceivably far away.

He said little, and that lamely, for he dreaded to say too much, to be playful sallies he had no repose, and in consequence he fell morose and silent with another hoding—that he was losing his cause outright for lack of a ready word.

And so the last spoken exchange between them meant nothing, but if each could have read the unspoken words that overleaped 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," 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 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."

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 chaperon, a very young married woman of twenty-two or thereabout; her husband, a youth of three years older, clean shaven, light nature, 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 squat 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 warm. One and all owned a lively curiosity to see what a real woodsman might be like. When he proved to be handsome and well-mannered 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 latter comfort. Simple things enough they were—it was as though a city man were to direct a newcomer to Central park—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 husbanded waiting for her words utterly impossible to him.

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."

One day he took them over to see Camp One. They were immensely pleased. One day they were correspondingly loud in exclamation. Thorpe's comments were brief and dry. On the way back for the first time Mrs. Cary found that chance—and Mrs. Cary had allotted Hilda to his care. 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.

The rest of the party had gone ahead, leaving them sauntering more slowly down the trail.

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

"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 about."

"I'll come tomorrow," 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



A ceremonious queue to the solemn trees, yet began their evening songs; the light itself seems to have left of sparkling and to lie still across the landscape. Such a hush now lay on their spirits. Over the way a creper was drooping sleepily a little chair, the only voice in the wilderness. In the heart of the man, too, a little voice raised itself alone.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart!" he breathed over and over again. After awhile 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 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.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

THORPE returned to Camp One shortly after dark. He found there a number of letters, among which was one from Wallace Carpenter.

After commending the camping party to his companions' care the young fellow went on to say that affairs were going badly on the ward.

"Some interest in I haven't been able to make out yet, has been hampering our stocks down day after day," he wrote. "I don't understand it, for the stocks are good 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. Some or later they will let up, and then we'll get things back in good shape. I am simply 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 they are about and let up. It may not be before next year. In this case I couldn't help you out on those notes when they come due. So put in your best licks, old man. You may have to pony up for a little while, though of course sooner or later I can put it all back. Then, you bet your life, I keep out of it. Lumbering's good enough for yours truly."

"By the way, you might shine up to Hilda Farrand and join the rest of the fortune hunters. She's got it to throw to the birds and in her own right. Seriously, old fellow, don't put yourself into a false position through ignorance; not that there is any danger to a hardened old woodsman like you."

Thorpe went to the group of pines by the pole trail the following afternoon because he had said he would, but with a new attitude of mind. He had come into contact with the artificiality of

conventional relations, and it estranged him.

They sat down on a log. Hilda turned to him with her graceful air of confidence.

"Now talk to me," said she.

"Certainly," replied Thorpe in a practical tone of voice. "What do you want me to talk about?"

She shot a swift, troubled glance at him, concluded herself mistaken and said:

"Tell me about what you do up here—your life—all about it."

"Well," replied Thorpe formally, "we haven't much to interest a girl like you. It is a question of saw logs with us." And he went on in his driest, most technical manner to detail the process of manufacture. It might as well have been bricks.

The girl did not understand. She was hurt. As surely as the sun tugged in his eyes a great passion. Now it was coldly withdrawn.

"What has happened to you?" she asked finally out of her great sincerity.

"Me? Nothing," replied Thorpe.

A forced silence fell upon him. Hilda seemed gradually to lose herself in reverie. After a time she said softly:

"Don't you love this woods?"

"It's an excellent bunch of pine," replied Thorpe bluntly. "I'll cut 3,000,000 at least."

"Oh!" she cried, drawing back, her hands pressed against the log either side of her, her eyes wide.

After a moment she caught her breath convulsively, and Thorpe became conscious that she was studying him furtively with a quickening doubt.

After that, by the mercy of God, there was no more talk between them. Unconsciously the first strain of opposition and of hurt surprise relaxed. Each thought vaguely his thoughts. Then in the depths of the forest, perhaps near at hand, perhaps far away, a single hermit thrush began to sing. His song was of three solemn, deep, liquid notes, followed by a slight rhetorical pause as of contemplation, and then deliberately three notes more on a different key. It is the most dignified, the most spiritual, the holiest of woods utterances. Combined with the evening shadows and the warm soft air it offered to the heart an almost irresistible appeal. The man's artificial antagonism modified, the woman's disenchantment began to seem unreal.

Then subtly over and through the bird song another sound became audible. At first it merely repeated the three notes faintly like an echo, but with a rich, sad undertone that brought tears. Then timidly and still softly it elaborated the theme, weaving in and out through the original three the glitter and shimmer of a splendid web of sound, spreading before the awakened imagination a broad river of woods imagery that reflected on its surface all the subtler moods of the forest.

With the first sign of the wonder music the girl had started and caught her

breath. She sought each other's eyes. As it went on they both forgot everything but the harmony and each other.

"Ah, beautiful!" she murmured.

"What is it?" he whispered, marveling.

"A violin—played by a master."

The bird suddenly hushed, and at once the strain abandoned the woods note and took another motif. At first it played softly in the higher notes, a tinkling, lightsome little melody that stirred a kindly surface smile over a full heart. Then suddenly, without transition, it dropped to the lower register and began to sob and wail in the full vibrating power of a great passion.

And the theme it treated was love.

At last the poignant ecstasy seemed slowly, slowly to die. Fainter and fainter ebbed the music. Through it as through a mist the solemn aloof forest began to show to the consciousness of the two. They sought each other's eyes, gently smiling. The music was very soft and dim and sad. They leaned to each other, with a sob; their lips met; the music ceased.

And over behind the trees, out of the light and the love and the beauty, little Phil huddled, his great shaggy head



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And over behind the trees, out of the light and the love and the beauty, little Phil huddled, his great shaggy head

bowed in his arms. Beside him lay his violin and beside that his bow, broken. He had snapped it across his knee. That day he had heard at last the heart song of the violin and, uttering it, had bestowed love. But he had that day lost what he cared for most in all the world—his friend.

Little Phil disappeared utterly, taking with him his violin, but leaving his broken bow. Thorpe has it even to this day. The lumberman caused search and inquiry on all sides. The cripple was never heard of again.

"I saw you long ago," said Hilda to Thorpe—"long, long ago, when I was quite a young girl. I had been visit-

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