

The Riverman



crew of lumbermen fanned about two fires at the upper end of the pond—idle because of the strong adverse wind and the unexpected weakness of the current, which had arrested the progress of their thousands of logs. Suddenly a solitary figure appeared around a river bend. His progress was jerky and erratic, as a riverman goes, according as the logs lay, by long, short runs, brief pauses, as a riverman goes. Finally he stepped ashore just below the camp, stamped his feet vigorously free of water and approached the group around the cooking fire.

The newcomer was a man somewhere about thirty years of age, squarely built, big of bone, compact in bulk. His face was buried, jolly and reddened rather than red by long exposure. A pair of twinkling blue eyes and a humorously quirked mouth redeemed his countenance from commonplace. "Well, boys," he remarked at last in a rollicking big voice, "I'm glad to see the situation hasn't spoiled your appetites."

Tom North, in charge of the lumbermen, rose. He and the newcomer, who was Jack Orde, his principal, sauntered to the water's edge, where they stood for a minute looking at the logs and the ruffled expanse of water below. "It's a pity that old mossback had to put in a mill," said Orde. "The water was slack enough before, but now there seems to be no current at all."

"Case of wait for the wind," agreed Tom North. "Old Daly will be red-headed. He must be about out of logs at the mill, and I expect Johnson's drive will be down on our rear most any time."

"It's there already. Let's go take a look," suggested Orde. They picked their way around the edge of the pond to the site of the new mill.

"Sluice open all right," commented Orde.

Orde walked out on the structure and looked down on the smooth water rushing through.

"Ought to make a draw," he reflected. Then he laughed. "Tom, look here," he called. "Climb down and take a squint at this."

The sluice, instead of bedding at the natural channel of the river, had been built a good six feet above that level; so that, even with the gates wide open, a "head" of six feet was retained in the slack water of the pond.

"No wonder we couldn't get a draw," said Orde. "Let's hunt up old Wha's-bis-name and have a powwow."

"His name is plain Reed," explained North. "There he comes square," said Orde, now.

The owner of the dam flapped into view as a lank and lengthy white haired individual dressed in loose, long clothes and wearing atop a battered old plug hat.

"You haven't been square," said Orde. "You aren't letting us get our logs out."

"How so?" snapped the owner, his thin lips tightening.

"That sluice is a good six foot too high."

"Is that so?" cried the old man excitedly. "Well, I'm giving you all the law gives you, and that's the natural flow of the river, and not a thing more will you get."

Somewhat astonished at this out break, the two rivermen stood for a moment staring at the old man. Then a steely glint crept into Orde's frank blue eye and the corners of his mouth tightened.

"We want no trouble with you, Mr. Reed," said Orde. "But this is the only dam on the river with sluices built up that way, and I do know that we'll never get those logs out if we don't get more draw on the water. Good day."

When courage swells his heart. And the wooing and winning of Carroll Bishop by Jack Orde supply captivating romance that cannot fail to charm.

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Followed by the reluctant North, he walked away.

Chapter 2

THE next morning dawned clear and breathless. As soon as the wind died the logs had begun to drift slowly out into the open water. The surface of the pond was covered with the scattered timbers floating idly. After a few moments the clank of the bars and ratchet was heard as two of the men raised the heavy sluice gate on the dam.

Four more had by this time joined the two men who had raised the gate, and all together, armed with long pike poles, walked out on the funnel shaped booms that should concentrate the logs into the chute. Here they prodded forward the few timbers within reach and waited patiently for more.

Jack Orde wandered back and forth over the work, his hands clasped behind his back, a short pipe clenched between his teeth. To the edge of the drive he rode the logs, then took to the bank and strode down to the dam. Meeting Tom North's troubled glance, he grinned broadly.

"Told you we'd have Johnson on our necks," he remarked, jerking his thumb up river toward a rapidly approaching figure.

This soon defined itself as a tall individual with a choleric blue eye. "What in hades is the matter here?" he yelled. "We're right at your rear."

"Wait a minute," said the young fellow. "Have you any objections to my hanging around a little to watch the work? My name is Newmark—Joseph Newmark. I'm out in this country a good deal for my health. This thing interests me."

"Sure," replied Orde, puzzled. "Look all you want to. The scenery's free."

"Yes. But can you put me up?" "Oh, as far as I'm concerned," agreed Orde heartily. "But, with one of his contagious chuckles, "I'm only river boss. You'll have to fix it up with the doctor—the cook, I mean," he explained, as Newmark looked puzzled. "You'll find him at camp."

In the center of the stream the work had been gradually slowing down to a standstill with the subsidence of the first rush of water after the sluice gate was opened. Tom North, leaning gracefully against the shaft of a peavy, looked up eagerly as Orde approached.

"Is it peace or war?" "War," replied Orde briefly.

"By your own folly shall ye perish," and you ain't even made a start getting through this dam! We'll lose the water next!"

"Keep your shirt on," advised Orde. "If you want these logs pushed any faster, do it yourself."

"If you can't get out logs, why do you take the job?" roared Johnson. "If you hang my drive, blank you, you'll catch it for damages! I tell you our mills need logs, and, what's more, they're a-goin' to git them!"

He departed in a rumble of vituperation. Orde found the old mill owner occupying a chair tilted back against the wall of the building. His ruffled plug hat was thrust, as usual, well away from his high and narrow forehead. He was whittling a pine stick, which he held pointing down between his spread knees, and conversing animatedly with a young fellow occupying another chair at his side.

"I want to talk this matter over," Orde began. "We can't afford to hang up the drive, and the water is going down every day. We've got to have more water. I'll tell you what we'll do: If you'll let us cut down the new mill we'll replace it in good shape when we get all our logs through."

"No, sir!" "Well, we'll give you something for the privilege. What do you think is fair?" "I tell you I'll give you your legal rights and not a cent more," replied

the old man.

"Well, Mr. Reed, stop and think what this means," returned Orde. "No logs means no lumber. That is bankruptcy for a good many who have contracts to fulfill. And no logs means the mills must close. Thousands of men will be thrown out of their jobs, and a good many of them will go hungry. And with the stream full of the old cutting, that means less to do next winter in the woods—more men thrown out. Getting out a season's cut with the flood water is a pretty serious matter to a great many people, and if you insist on holding us up here in this slack water the situation will soon become alarming."

The old man brought to earth the front legs of his chair with a thump. "And if the whole kit and caboodle of ye starved outright," said he, "it would but be the fulfilling of the word of the prophet who says: 'So will I send upon you famine and evil beasts, and they shall bereave thee, and pestilence and blood shall pass through thee, and I will bring the sword upon thee. I the Lord have spoken it.' And don't forget that. Ye that make of God's smillin' land waste places, and a wilderness by your own folly shall ye perish."

Orde whirled on his heel. The young man, who sat an interested spectator, arose and joined him. He was a very slender young man, with a shrewd, thin face, steel gray eyes.

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He filled his plate and walked across to a vacant place. Here he found himself next to Newmark.

"Hello!" he greeted that young man. "Fixed it with the doctor all right?" "Yes," replied Newmark, "thanks. I think I ought to tell you that the sheriff is not at Spruce Rapids, but at the village—expecting trouble."

Orde roared in delight. "Boys," he called, "old Plug Hat's got the sheriff right handy. Has he a posse?" Inquired Orde of Newmark. "I didn't see any, but I heard that the governor had been advised to hold troops in readiness."

At last Orde's face cleared, and he slapped down his tin plate violently. "I have it!" he cried aloud. He instructed a half dozen men to provide themselves with saws, axes, picks and shovels and march toward the mill.

When near the structure the riverman saw the lank, black figure of the mill owner mount a bony old horse and clatter away into the forest.

Orde rapidly designated ten men of his crew. "You make things hum. Get as much done as you can before the sheriff comes, and when that sheriff comes I want you to go peacefully. Understand?"

"Cave in? Not much," cried Purdy. "See here," and Orde drew them aside in earnest conversation. When he had finished he clapped each of them on the back, and all moved off, laughing, to the dam.

"Now, boys," he commanded the others, "no row without orders. If there's going to be a fight I'll give the word."

The chopping crew descended to the bottom of the sluice, the gate of which had been shut, and began immediately to chop away at the apron.

The work had continued nearly an hour when Orde commanded the fifty or more idlers back to camp.

"The sheriff will be here pretty quick now."

"And leave them to fight alone? Guess not," grumbled a tall, burly individual.

"You'll find him at camp."

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By Stewart Edward White Author of "THE BLAZED TRAIL"

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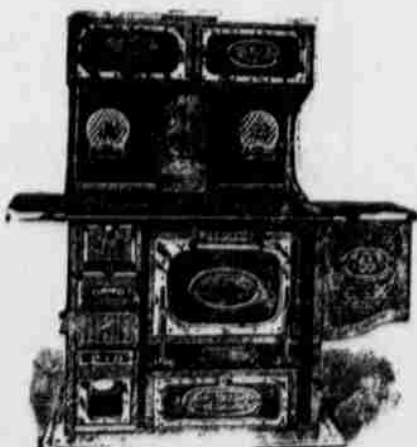
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