The Blazed Trail

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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CHAPTER I.

IN the network of streams draining the eastern portion of Michigan and known as the Saginaw waters the great firm of Morrison & Daly had for many years carried on extensive logging operations in the wilderness.

Now at last, in the early eighties, they reached the end of their holdings. Another winter would finish the cut.

At this juncture Mr. Daly called to him John Radway, a man whom he knew to possess extensive experience, a little capital and a desire for more of both.

"Radway," said he when the two found themselves alone in the mill office, "we expect to cut this year some 50,000,000, which will finish our pine holdings in the Saginaw waters. Most of this timber lies over in the Crooked Lake district, and that we expect to put in ourselves. We own, however, 5,000,000 on the Cass branch which we would like to log on contract. Would you care to take the job?"

"How much a thousand do you give?" asked Radway.

"Four dollars," replied the lumberman.

"I'll look at it," replied the jobber.

So Radway got the "descriptions" and a little map divided into townships, sections and quarter sections and went out to look at it. He searched until he found a "blaze" on a tree, the marking on which indicated it as the corner of a section. From this corner the boundary lines were blazed at right angles in either direction. Radway followed the blazed lines. Thus he was able accurately to locate isolated "forties" (forty acres), "eighties," quarter sections and sections in a primeval wilderness. The feat, however, required considerable woodcraft, an exact sense of direction and a pocket compass.

These resources were still further drawn upon for the next task. Radway tramped the woods, hills and valleys to determine the most practical route over which to build a logging road from the standing timber to the shores of Cass branch. He found it to be an affair of some puzzlement. The pines stood on a country rolling with hills, deep with pot holes. It became necessary to dodge in and out, here and there, between the knolls, around and through the swamps, still keeping, however, in the same general direction and preserving always the requisite level or down grade. Radway had no vantage point from which to survey the country. A city man would promptly have lost himself in the tangle, but the woodsman emerged at last on the banks of a stream, leaving behind him a meandering trail of clipped trees.

"I'll take it," said he to Daly.

Daly now proceeded to drive a sharp bargain with him.

Customarily a jobber is paid a certain proportion of the agreed price as each stage of the work is completed. Daly objected to this method of procedure.

"You see, Radway," he explained, "it's our last season in the country. When this lot is in we want to pull up stakes, so we can't take any chances on not getting that timber in. If you don't finish your job, it keeps us here another season. There can be no doubt, therefore, that you finish your job. In other words, we can't take any chances. If you start the thing, you've got to carry it 'way through."

"I think I can, Mr. Daly," the jobber assured him.

"For that reason," went on Daly, "we object to paying you as the work progresses. We've got to have a guarantee that you don't quit on us and that those logs will be driven down the branch as far as the river in time to catch our drive. Therefore I'm going to make you a good price per thousand, but payable only when the logs are delivered to our river men."

Radway, with his usual mental attitude of one anxious to justify the other man, ended by seeing only his employer's argument. He did not perceive that the latter's proposition introduced into the transaction a gambling element. It became possible for Morrison & Daly to get a certain amount of work short of absolute completion done for nothing.

All this was in August. Radway, who was a good, practical woodsman, set about the job immediately. He gathered a crew, established a camp and began at once to cut roads through the country he had already blazed on his former trip.

Radway's task was not merely to level out and ballast the six feet of a roadbed already constructed, but to cut a way for five miles through the unbroken wilderness. The way had, moreover, to be not less than twenty-five feet wide, needed to be absolutely level and free from any kind of obstructions and required in the swamps liberal ballasting with poles, called corduroys. Not only must the growth be removed, but the roots must be cut out and the inequalities of the ground leveled or filled up. Reflect further that Radway had but a brief time at his disposal, but a few months at most, and you will then be in a position to gauge the first difficulties of those the American pioneer expects to encounter as a matter of course.

The jobber of course pushed his roads as rapidly as possible, but was greatly handicapped by lack of men. Winter set in early and surprised him with several of the smaller branches yet to finish. The main line, however, was done.

At intervals squares were cut out alongside. In them two long timbers or skids were laid andironwise for the reception of the piles of logs which would be dragged from the fallen trees. They were called skidways. Then finally the season's cut began.

The men who were to fell the trees Radway distributed along one boundary of a "forty." They were instructed to move forward across the forty in a straight line, felling every pine tree over eight inches in diameter. While the saw gangs, three in number, prepared to fell the first trees, other men called swampers were busy cutting and clearing of roots narrow little trails down through the forest from the pine to the skidway at the edge of the logging road. The trails were perhaps three feet wide and marvels of smoothness, although no attempt was made to level mere inequalities of the ground. They were called travoy roads (French travois). Down them the logs would be dragged and hauled either by means of heavy steel tongs or a short sledge on which one end of the timber would be chained.

Meantime the sawyers were busy. Each pair of men selected a tree, the first they encountered over the blazed line of their forty. After determining in which direction it was to fall they set to work to chop a deep gash in that side of the trunk.

Tom Broadhead and Henry Paul picked out a tremendous pine, which they determined to throw across a little open space in proximity to the travoy road. One stood to right, the other left, and alternately their axes bit deep. Tom glanced up as a sailor looks aloft.

"She'll do, Hank," he said.

The two then with a dozen half clips of the ax removed the inequalities of the bark from the saw's path. The long flexible ribbon of steel began to sing, bending so adaptably to the hands and motions of the men manipulating that it did not seem possible so mobile an instrument could cut the rough pine. In a moment the song changed timbre. Without a word the men straightened their backs. Tom flirted along the blade a thin stream of kerosene oil from a bottle in his hip pocket, and the sawyers again bent to their work, swaying back and forth rhythmically, their muscles rippling under the texture of their woolens like those of a panther under its skin. The outer edge of the saw blade disappeared.

"Better wedge her, Tom," advised Hank.

They paused while, with a heavy sledge, Tom drove a triangle of steel into the crack made by the sawing. This prevented the weight of the tree from pinching the saw. Then the rhythmical z-z-z, z-z-z, again took up its song.

When the trunk was nearly severed Tom drove another and thicker wedge.

"Timber!" halloed Hank in a long drawn melodious call that melted through the woods into the distance. The swampers ceased work and withdrew to safety.

"Crack!" called the tree.

Hank coolly unhooked his saw handle, and Tom drew the blade through and out the other side.

The tree shivered, then leaned over so slightly from the perpendicular, then fell, at first gently, afterward with a crescendo rush, tearing through the branches of other trees, bending the small timber, breaking the smallest and at last hitting with a tremendous crash and bang which filled the air with a fog of small twigs, needles and the powder of snow.

Then the swampers, who have by now finished the travoy road, trimmed the prostrate trunk clear of all protuberances. It required fairly skillful ax work. The branches had to be shaved close and clear, and at the same time the trunk must not be gashed. And often a man was forced to wield his instrument from a constrained position.

The chopped branches and limbs had now to be dragged clear and piled. While this was being finished Tom and Hank marked off and sawed the log lengths, paying due attention to the necessity of avoiding knots, forks and rotten places. Thus some of the logs were eighteen, some sixteen or fourteen and some only twelve feet in length.

Next appeared the teamsters with their little wooden sledges, their steel chains and their tongs. They had been helping the skidders to place the parallel and level beams, or skids, on which the logs were to be piled by the side of the road. The tree which Tom and Hank had just felled lay up a gentle slope from the new travoy road, so little Fabian Laveque, the teamster, clamped the bite of his tongs to the end of the largest or butt log.

"Allez, Molly!" he cried.

A horse, huge, elephantine, her head down, nose close to her chest, intelligently spying her steps, moved. The log half rolled over, slid three feet and menaced a stump.

"Gee!" cried Laveque.

Molly stepped twice directly sidewise, planted her forefoot on a root she had seen and pulled sharply. The end of the log slid around the stump.

"Allez!" commanded Laveque.

And Molly started gingerly down the hill. She pulled the timber, heavy as an iron safe, here and there through the brush, missing no steps, making no false moves, backing and finally getting out of the way of an unexpected roll with the ease and intelligence of Laveque himself. In five minutes the burden lay by the travoy road. In two minutes more one end of it had been rolled on the little flat wooden sledge and, the other end dragging, it was winding majestically down through the ancient forest.

When Molly and Fabian had travoyed the log to the skidway they drew it with a bump across the two parallel skids and left it there to be rolled to the top of the pile.

Then Mike McGovern and Bob Stratton and Jim Gladys took charge of it. Mike and Bob were running the cant hooks, while Jim stood on top of the great pile of logs already decked. A slender, pliable steel chain like a gray snake ran over the top of the pile and disappeared through a pulley to an invisible horse—Jenny, the mate of Molly. Jim threw the end of this chain down. Bob passed it over and under the log and returned it to Jim, who reached down after it with the hook of his implement. Thus the stick of timber rested in a long loop, one end of which led to the invisible horse, and the other Jim made fast to the top of the pile. He did so by jamming into another log the steel swamp hook with which the chain was armed. When all was made fast the horse started.

"She's a bumper," said Bob. "Look out, Mike!"

The log slid to the foot of the two parallel poles laid slanting up the face of the pile. Then it trembled on the ascent. But one end stuck for an instant, and at once the log took on a dangerous slant. Quick as light Bob and Mike sprang forward, gripped the hooks of the cant hooks like great thumbs and forefingers, and, while one held with all his power, the other gave a sharp twist upward. The log straightened. It was a master feat of power and the knack of applying strength justly.

At the top of the little incline the timber hovered for a second.

"One more!" sang out Jim to the driver. He poised, stepped lightly up and over and avoided by the safe hairbreadth being crushed when the log rolled. But it did not lie quite straight or even. So Mike cut a short, thick block and all three stirred the heavy timber sufficiently to admit of the billet's insertion.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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	DEC. 15, 1895,	
320,184 73.		369,026.17
	DEC. 15, 1897,	
327,859.44.		469,751.16
	DEC. 15, 1899,	
781,018.11.		937,156.48
	DEC. 15, 1901,	
1,043,282.04.		1,180,265.70
	DEC. 15, 1903,	
2,237,075.14.		2,863,997.16
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