

Blazed Trail Stories

Stories of the Wild Life

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE.

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THE SCALER.

(Continued.)

"Ye'll bend your backs a little, Jimmy Bourke," said he, "and cut th' stumps lower to th' ground. There's a bunch of chingles at least in every stump ye've left. And you must saw straighter. And th' contracts calls for eight inches and over; mind ye that. Don't go to skippin' th' little ones because they won't scale ye high. Tie in the contract so. And I won't have th' tops left. There's many a good log in them, an' ye trim them fair and clean."

"Go to hell, you —" shouted the Rough Red. "Where th' blazes did ye learn so much of loggin'? I log th' way me father logged, an' I'm not to be taught by a high-banker from th' Muskegon!"

Never would he acknowledge the wrong nor promise the improvement, but both were there, and both he and Fitzpatrick knew it. The Rough Red chafed frightfully, but in a way his hands were tied. He could do nothing without the report, and it was too far out to send for another scaler, even if Daly would have given him one.

Finally in looking over a skidway he noticed that one log had not been blue pencilled across the end. That meant that it had not been scaled; and that in turn meant that he, the Rough Red, would not be paid for his labor in cutting and banking it. At once he began to bel-low through the woods.

"Hey! Fitzpatrick! Come here, you blank-blanked-blank of a blank! Come here!"

The scaler swung leisurely down the travoy trail and fronted the other with level eyes.

"Well?" said he.

"Why ain't that log marked?"

"I culled it."

"Ain't it sound and good? Is there a mark on it? A streak of punk or rot? Ain't it good timber? What the hell's th' matter with it? You tried to do me out of that, you damn skunk."

A log is culled, or thrown out, when, for any reason, it will not make good timber.

"I'll tell you, Jimmy Bourke," replied Fitzpatrick, calmly, "th' stick is sound

and good, or was before your murderin' crew got hold of it, but if ye'll take a squint at the butt of it ye'll see that your gang has sawed her on a six-inch slant. They've wasted a good foot of th' log. I spoke of that afore; an' now I give ye warnin' that I cull every log, big or little, punk or sound, that ain't sawed square and true across the butt."

"Th' log is sound and good, an' ye'll scale it, or I'll know th' reason why!"

"I will not," replied Fitzpatrick.

The following day he culled a log in another and distant skidway whose butt showed a slant of a good six inches. The day following he culled another of the same sort on still another skidway. He examined it closely, then sought the Rough Red.

"It is useless, Jimmy Bourke," said he, "to be hauling of the same poor log from skidway to skidway. You can shift her to every travoy trail in th' Crother tract, but it will do ye little good. I'll cull it wherever I find it, and never will ye get th' scale of that log."

The Rough Red raised his hand, then dropped it again; whined away with a curse, whirled back with another, and spat out:

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"By God, Fitzpatrick, ye go too far! Ye've hounded me and harried me through th' woods all th' year. By God, tis a good stick, an' ye shall scale it!"

"Ye and yore Old Fellows is robbers alike!" cried one of the men.

Fitzpatrick turned on his heel and resumed his work. The men ceased their and began to talk.

That night was Christmas Eve. After supper the Rough Red went directly from the cook-camp to the men's camp. Fitzpatrick, sitting lonely in the little office, heard the sounds of debauch rising steadily like mysterious storm winds in distant pines. He shrugged his shoulders, and talked his day's scaling, and turned into his bunk wearily, for of holidays there are none in the woods, save Sunday. About midnight someone came in. Fitzpatrick, roused from his sleep by aimless blunderings, struck a light, and saw the cook looking uncertainly toward him through blood-clotted lashes. The man was partly drunk, partly hurt, but more frightened.

"The's too big fer me, too big fer me!" he repeated, thickly.

Fitzpatrick kissed aside the blankets and set foot on the floor.

"I won't bother you; I won't even make a noise. I'm skeered!"

"Course you can stay," replied the scaler. "Come here."

He washed the man's forehead, and bound up the cut with surgeon's plaster from the van. The man fell silent, looking at him in wonderment for such kindness.

Four hours later, dimly, through the mist of his broken sleep, Fitzpatrick heard the crew depart for the woods in the early dawn. On the crest of some higher waves of consciousness were borne to him drunken shouts, maudlin blasphemies. After a time he awoke and demanded breakfast.

The cook, pale and nervous, served him. The man was excited, irresolute, eager to speak. Finally he dropped down on the bench opposite Fitzpatrick, and began:

"Fitz," said he, "don't go in th' woods today. The men is fair wild wid th' drink, and th' Rough Red is beside hisself. Last night I heard them. They are goin' to skid the butt log again, and they swear that if you cull it again, they will kill you. They mean it. That's all why they want to th' woods this day."

Fitzpatrick swallowed his coffee in silence. In silence he arose and slipped on his mackinaw blanket coat. In silence he thrust his backwood tablets into his pocket, and picked his pliable scaler's rule from the corner.

"Where care ye goin'?" asked the cook, anxiously.

"I'm goin' to do th' work they pay me to do," answered Fitzpatrick.

He took his way down the trail, his face set straight before him, the smoke of his breath streaming behind. The first skidway he scaled with care, laying his

rule flat across the face of each log, entering the figures on his many-leaved tablets of beech, marking the timbers swiftly with his blue crayon.

The woods were empty. No ring of the axe, no shout of the driver, no fall of the tree broke the silence. Fitzpatrick comprehended. He knew that at the next skidway the men were gathered, waiting to see what he would do; gathered openly at last in that final hostility which had been maturing all winter. He knew, besides, that most of them were partly drunk and wholly reckless, and that he was alone. Nevertheless, after finishing conscientiously skidway number one, he moved on to skidway number two.

There, as he had expected, the men were waiting in ominous silence, their eyes red with debauch and hate. Fitzpatrick paid them no heed, but set about his business. Methodically, deliberately, he did the work. Then, when the last pencil-mark had been made, and the tablets had been closed with a snap of finality, the Rough Red stepped forward.

"Ye have finished with this skidway?" asked the foreman in soft cat-tones.

"I have," answered Fitzpatrick, briefly.

"Ye have forgot to scale one stick."

"No."

"There is a stick still not marked."

"I culled it."

"Why?"

"It was not sawed straight."

Fitzpatrick threw his head back proudly, answering the man at ease, as an accomplished swordsman. The Rough Red snatched his feet, almost awed in spite of himself. One after another the men dropped their eyes and stood ill at ease.

The scaler turned away; his heel caught a root; he stumbled; instantly the pack was on him, for the power of his eye was broken.

Mad with rage they kicked and beat and tore Fitzpatrick's huddled form long after consciousness had left it. Then an owl hooted from the shadow of the wood, or a puff of wind swept by, or a fox barked, or some other little thing happened, so that in blind unreasoning panic they fled. The place was deserted, save for the dark figure against the red-and-white snow.

Fitzpatrick regained his wits in pain, and so knew he was still on earth. Every movement cost him a moan, and some agency outside him if inflicted added torture. After a long time he knew it was the cook, who was kindly kneeling his limbs and knocking his hair. The man proved to be in a maze of wonderment over his patient's tenacity of life.

"I watched ye," he murmured, "I did not dare interfere. But I ken to ye's soon as I could. See, here's a fire that I built for ye, and some tea. Take a little. And no bones broke! True for ye, ye're a hearty man, and strong with th' big muscles on ye fit to fight th' Rough Red man to man. Get th' use of yere legs, darlint, an' I'll tak' ye to camp, for its fair drunk they are by now. Sure an' I tole ye they'd kill ye!"

"But they didn't," muttered Fitzpatrick with a gleam of humor.

"Sure 'twas not their fault—nor yer own!"

Hours later, as it seemed, they moved slowly in the direction of camp. The cold had stiffened Fitzpatrick's cuts and bruises. Every step shot a red wave of torture through his arteries to his brain. They came in sight of the camp. It was silent. Both knew that the men had drunk themselves into a stupor.

"I'd like to kill th' whole lay-out as she sleeps," snarled the cook, shaking his fist.

"So would I," replied Fitzpatrick.

Then as they looked, a thin wreath of smoke curled from under the open doorway and spread lazily in the frosty air. Another followed; another; still another. The cabin was on fire.

"They've kicked over th' stove again," said Fitzpatrick, seating himself on a

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stamp. His eyes blazed with wrath and bitterness.

"What ye' goin' to do?" asked the cook.

"Sit here," replied Fitzpatrick, grimly. The cook started forward.

"Stop!" shouted the scaler, fiercely; "if you move a step, I'll break your back!"

The cook stared at him through saucer eyes.

"But they'd be burnt alive!" he objected, wildly.

"They ought to be," snarled the scaler; "if ain't their fault I'm here to help them."

"Tis their own deed that I'm now helpin' them there in th' forest, unable to help myself. Do you understand? I'm out there in th' woods!"

"Ah, wirra, wirra!" wailed the cook, wringing his hands. "Th' poor lads!" He began to weep.

Fitzpatrick stared straight in front of him for a moment. Then he struck his forehead, and with wonderful agility, considering the injuries he had but just received, tore down the hill in the direction of the smouldering cabin. The cook followed him joyfully. Together they put out the fire. The men snored like beasts, undisturbed by all the tumult.

"Tis th' soft heart ye have have after all Fitz," said the cook, delightedly, as the two washed their hands in preparation for a lunch. "Ye could not bear to see th' lads burn."

Fitzpatrick glowered at him for an instant from beneath his square brows.

"They can go to hell for all of me," he answered, finally, "but my people want these logs put in this winter, an' there's nobody else to put them in."

(The End.)

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