

# THE KEY-LOG

*Life, Love and Death Among the River-Drivers*

By ARTHUR STRINGER

WE could see that it was the worst jam of all the "run." And since it had been a late and uncertain spring, leaving the waters of the upper Titagami black with countless logs that were being hurried down to the lower river mills, it soon became a maddening enough situation for the "river-drivers."

Three of their best men had foreseen the danger, and had waded with pike-pole and ax and cant-hook hip-deep into the raging channel, and there battled to keep it clear. But the mischief had already been done. On one grounded log had locked and wedged a second, and piling on that, as quick as thought, had come a third, and grinding on that a fourth. In an incredibly short space of time the whole foaming river had been blocked and dammed, every minute adding to the hopeless bulk and solidity of the obstruction. As those blindly rushing, madly hurrying battalions of timber raced down with the racing current, log by log they had slackened and ground and settled into place, building up an ever-higher barrier for the battalions still behind them.

The turbulent river, we could see, thus checked in its speed, had drawn back on itself, swollen with rage, becoming first an eddying mill pond, and then a turgid and ever-widening lake, creeping higher and higher along the cut banks, fingering and gnawing and fighting for an outlet, seemingly mad to be once more on its mad way. From the interstices of that closely massed timber, at the outer base of the log-jam, spurted jets of yellow water, as fierce as the stream from a fireman's hose. And all the while that ever-increasing tangle had wedged and ground and massed into a more and more inextricable bulwark.

We still stood gazing at it, stupidly, wonderingly, helplessly, when Black Malotte, the river foreman, came running up, his frantic face seeming a blush-white above the black-whiskered cheek-bones. He studied the scene for one silent moment, from under his bushy eyebrows. Then he turned about on his men, and with a sudden cyclonic burst of profanity ordered out the teams and cables. Impatient of the delay, he caught up the rope and irons, and carried them out on that perilous causeway with his own hands, leaping from log to log, clambering down through the yellow jets to the very foot of the frowning black dam.

"He's looking for the key-log," explained old Antoine Fiset to me. "There is always a key-log."

I did not understand. "There is always one log, m'sieu, just one, that locks and holds all the others back," the old guide went on. "When that is made loose, or cut in two with an ax, or perhaps torn away with the dynamite, then the jam is broken. See, Malotte has found it—he's putting the irons on it. Now the horses will draw on the cable. Ah, you see, it is no use; the log is locked too tight. He will have to send to the powder-house for dynamite. . . . No, see, he's come in for his ax. . . . He will have to be quick. . . . Stand back, m'sieu, if you please. When the log is cut, see, this will be the nearest rock. He will come this way!"

"Do you mean," I asked, "that he's cutting that log out there with a million tons of wood and water hanging over him?"

"Why not, m'sieu," answered old Antoine, with a shrug. "It must be done. The mills are waiting!"

"But he hasn't one chance in a thousand—"

"The logs must be got down, m'sieu. . . . But wait, and you will see. He will let his ax go when he feels the log giving way. It will snap in two, maybe. He will run, like a cat, m'sieu, along that wall of moving timber, before it breaks away. If he makes the shore, well and good. It is his race. If he goes down with the logs—well, they may get him out if not, it will be the same thing that happened to young Cyprien Latour in the same place, seven years ago. . . . But look, m'sieu. . . . Mon dieu, he's down. . . . No, he's up! He's—"

OLD Antoine's voice was lost in the gathering roar as the great black causeway bridging the river exploded outward into space. The very rock on which we stood shook with the force of that outburst. The figure of a man, water-soaked, panting, bluish-white about the face, leaping through the spray smote the shelf of rock where we had stood a moment before. He rolled over

and over ludicrously, and then sat up on his haunches dazed, with gaping eyes and mouth. He had faced death, and had been flung back to his world again.

But it was less the escape of the cat-footed man than the Vesuvian eruption of power that held me appalled. With that first growl and crash and thunderous roar, pine logs, weighing hundreds of pounds, were sky-rocketed high in the air, here and there, like a handful of chips. Now and then a great log was snapped in two like a match. But nothing could hold back that overtaunted thing of hurry. The black wall, stippled with jetting yellow, burst and rolled and trembled and roared itself loose, sweeping everything before it. A hell of waters boiled and foamed and hurled after it, sucking and tossing and spinning the puny pieces of felled pine down its channel or turbulence, until their ends looked like the bruised and battered faces of great mauls. The lake subsided to a mill pond; the mill pond melted away to a river-bed once more, hurrying fretfully on with its never-ending streams of timber. The jam was broken.

IT was an hour later, in a quiet cove two miles and more below Little Forks, the place of the jam, that old Antoine showed me a great log split from end to end by the force of the water. And as we sat there in the warm, soft sunlight of the early spring afternoon, I asked the guide for the story of how it was that young Cyprien Latour had come to his death in the waters of Titagami.

"It begins with a woman," said old Antoine, with a suavely deprecating shrug of his French shoulders, and although I cannot attempt to recount the story as it was there told to me, with many a quaint twist and turn of the homely Norman-Canadian patois, I shall follow the thread of the tale as closely as I can. "It begins with a woman, m'sieu, as most of them do. She was a French girl—in those days there were all French along the river—and we called her Philomene. She was the happiest girl I ever saw, and had a little smile for everybody, from 'Tite Pierre who tended the geese, to the kind little cure in his old green coat. In those days I always thought Mamzelle Philomene was the prettiest girl on all the river. And so did many dozen other men, who would have made love to her, and married her, had not her mother watched over her like an infant in arms. She was a very hard and ambitious woman, was little Philomene's mother. She would say, m'sieu, 'I have brought this girl up very careful, and she has got to better herself!' And we older ones would say yes, that girl ought to make the best match on the river. For she had brown hair, that she could braid almost down to her knees, and eyes like a young deer, m'sieu, and a cheek like the blossom of the peach-tree. She was a pretty girl, was Philomene!"

"Well, when the time came, when she was eighteen or nineteen years old, her mother settled it that she was to marry Patrice Guerin, who owned the three mills at Michel Pointe. He was a good man, was Patrice, and they say he had always had his eye on little Philomene, from the days when she used to come and play on his rafts. But she was very young when she married. She did not understand, m'sieu. He was old enough to be her father, I think; and in those days she was very light-hearted, and was singing her little *chansons* all the time, and it seemed a funny thing to me, for that sober old man to fall in love with that slip of a girl.

"Now, m'sieu, making love is like log-driving; there is a time to do it, or you should not do it at all. It is in the spring, m'sieu, when everything moves, that you must move your logs. With love, it is the same. And almost everybody on the river said that Philomene would be sorry, some day. When somebody told that to Patrice, he only laughed in his quiet way and said, 'Maybe not.' And when his young wife Philomene heard it, too, she put her arms around Patrice's neck and said, 'We are the happiest people in all the world, aren't we, Patrice?' And Patrice, he said, 'We are.' Then he hurried down to the mills, to make sure that none of the log booms had broken.

"Patrice was a very quiet man. He wondered, I think, if he was too quiet for Philomene. So he used to think how he could make some *plaisurement* for that young wife of his, who got so that she never sang about the house any more. She seemed to grow tired of everything, for no reason at all,

and Patrice began to worry about that. 'When the winter is over, she will be all right,' he used to say. But Philomene got whiter and thinner, and though she always told Patrice that she was very happy and very contented, and that he was too good to her, everybody on the river could see the change. Then, the next winter, she had a little baby come to her; and that made a difference, m'sieu. She was very happy then, all the time, and when the windows were open we could hear her sing to the little one all day long when her husband was away in the north woods or with the drivers along the river.

"Then, m'sieu, the worst thing happened; the little one died with the croup; and after that Philomene grew whiter and thinner than ever, and liked to be alone, and would walk up and down her room, they say, and wring her hands. And when her husband was there with her she would begin to cry, all of a sudden, over nothing at all.

"When spring came, and Patrice had to go to the head of the river with his gang of drivers, to bring the logs down to the mill, he felt bad about Philomene. He thought a long time about what he could do. Then he went to young Cyprien Latour and his sister Emmeline, and he told the boy he would buy him the best horse on the river, and the girl the biggest gold locket in Mon'real, if they would go to his house and keep Philomene from feeling too lonesome and *triste*, when he was away. Young Cyprien, he laughed about the horse, and said, 'Na, thanks' for that; but he promised to take his old violin to Philomene's house and play, whenever she might want him to make a little music for her. For he and Philomene had been children together, and he, too, had always said she was the prettiest girl on the river.

"Cyprien was a fine young *garcon*, with brown hair that curled, like a woman's, m'sieu, and the jolliest laugh I ever heard. But by and by, after he had gone to make company for Philomene Guerin for a month or two, everybody saw he had changed very much. He got thin and quiet, like Philomene, and everybody on the river shook their heads and looked wise. You know the way, m'sieu. Philomene, I think, she saw that he had changed, too, and one day under the snow-apple tree, when the blossoms were all out, she told him good-bye, without any warning, and said he must not come back again. And Cyprien shook his head, and said he knew it. And he went away, and for five days, m'sieu, he stayed away. Then he went back, and Philomene let him in through the orchard gate, and old Beaupre, who tended the lock below the mill, said he heard her crying as though her heart would break, next to young Cyprien, under the snow-apple tree.

"WELL, when Patrice came down with his first drive Philomene went up to Little Forks to meet him, the same as she had always done. When she found him among all his men, she ran up to him, and she hung on him, and she cried, old Beaupre said, just the way she cried under the snow-apple tree. Patrice, he looked at her, and couldn't make out what she meant. And nobody on the river, m'sieu, cared to tell old Patrice what had happened. Then old Beaupre he said, 'By God, he'd put that business straight.' And he talked to Patrice alone on the runway, and told him, man to man, that he'd better watch out about that young wife of his. Old Beaupre, he told me afterward that Patrice took him by the throat, like a bloodhound, and nearly choked the breath out of him. Then, he told me, he let go, and laughed, very quiet. 'That Philomene of mine,' he said to Beaupre, 'that Philomene of mine is as true as blue steel, and you know it!' And old Beaupre he said yes, he knew that was the truth. But one night when Patrice came back from the mills, they say, he saw Philomene with young Cyprien, under the old snow-apple tree. I think maybe he saw, too, the way Philomene hung on young Cyprien, and how they looked at one another with the eyes—for he went back to the mill, and walked up and down all night long.

"Well, next day he had his mind made up, and he sent for Cyprien. Then he asked him, very quiet, if it would not be the best thing for him to join the gang and help bring down the next drive of logs. 'Maybe it would,' said Cyprien, looking at Philomene. And Philomene she turned away and looked out at the river and said nothing. Then the two men looked at one another again, face to face, and then Cyprien, he said, 'Yes, I will go!'

"So, that, m'sieu, was how Cyprien Latour went back to the river-drivers and helped Patrice bring down the log-drive once more. Everything went well until they got as far as Little Forks; then, m'sieu, just as they did to-day, the logs piled up across the channel, and held back the water, ten,

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