

ROBBING THE CAMP THIEVES

A Case of Trail Law Getting In its Work With a Vengeance

By J. HARMON PATTERSON

SINCE men began following and blazing trails there has been an unwritten law that it is no crime to hang or shoot the robber that rifles a cache or a camp. The trailman in the north has no trading post near his camp. He must depend for his daily life on the food that he has packed into the wilderness or that which he brings down with his rifle. Cache and camp thieves have been strung up when the law of the land made no interference. The law has its limits. The north country policeman leaves it to the prospector and the trailman to make and carry out his own laws, which are well understood in the commonwealth and are based upon absolute man-to-man justice.

For two years, Tom Forest, Indian Charlie and myself had been prospecting for syndicates. They had the money; we had the experience, which we used to get mining areas for the syndicate people who never saw the north, and men who were never so much as bitten by black flies.

This year we decided to take up the work on our own account, and we had mapped out for ourselves a hitherto unexplored area. It looked good to us, as all unknown and unexplored areas do. With three months' supplies we set out at the very opening of navigation. Many of the lakes were still covered with ice and much snow lay in the bush.

Tom Forest, my companion, was about twenty-two years of age, an expert with the paddle, a good packer, and with great powers of endurance. Charlie, the Indian, had been with us two years. He knew the country well and a better guide or more faithful friend would be impossible to secure.

After a rapid and arduous trip of about seventy miles, we arrived at a lake, where we decided to establish our camp. This lake, which we named Trout Lake, was very picturesque, being surrounded by high, wooded hills, and dotted with small, but beautiful islands. It is needless to make any special description of the lakes in this country. They are all beautiful, and rarely will you find one which does not show some special point of interest.

We pitched our tent on a point wooded with jack-pine. It was some twenty feet above the lake, and our white tent was visible for a long distance. Having settled down, as it were, we set about our work in earnest. We would be the sole owners of any property discovered, as formerly we held a small interest.

Day after day we made long excursions east or west, north or south. Occasionally we used the canoe, but more often we did not.

One morning, about six weeks after our arrival, we decided to make a long journey to some hills which were plainly visible about five miles to the eastward, and packing a generous lunch, we set out. The country which lay between proved to be more difficult than we had supposed, and it was about two o'clock when we reached a point sufficiently elevated to show us the lake. Great was our surprise on looking back to see columns of smoke rising from our camp. We looked at each other in silence as we well knew what such a tragedy meant.

"Caught this time all right," said Tom, turning to Charlie. "You couldn't have put the fire out when we left this morning."

"Put it out sure," was the reply. "Didn't leave a spark."

"What's the chance of saving our canoe?" I asked. It had been drawn up on the shore.

"Not much," said Charlie, "by the look of that fire I guess everything will be gone by the time we get back. The wind is blowing down the point, so not much chance for the canoe."

WE made a quick trip back to the lake. The whole point had been swept by the fire. Where our tent had stood there was a smouldering heap. The canoe was absolutely ruined. We soon extinguished the fire, which was not making much progress against the wind. When this was done we turned our attention to the remains of our supplies. There was nothing left except a small heap of scorched flour and a can of salt.

Charlie poked around carefully and scraped away all the ashes.

"Very strange fire, this," he said at last.

"How?" I inquired.

"Well," he replied, "one bottle fly-dope, glass all burned up not here at all, one can coffee, can all burned, two buckles on one pack strap burned, must be pretty hot fire."

Tom and I looked at each other as the truth began to dawn upon us. Further investigation showed

that Charlie was correct. Our camp had been robbed and then burned to hide evidence of the crime. We could not imagine who would do such a dastardly trick.

"Indians," said Tom.

"Don't think so," was Charlie's reply. "Indians would not take fly oil or anything that would not burn." He was on his way to the lake as he spoke and we saw him carefully examine the shores.

"I guess we're up against it now all right," said Tom. "No canoe, no tent, no blankets, no provisions, no fly-screen, and seventy miles from nowhere. We will have some pleasant trip out of this—if we get



"The whole joint had been swept by the fire. Where our tent had stood was a smouldering heap."

out at all," he added, later.

We saw Charlie beckoning to us from the other side of the point and we went over. He found where the canoe had landed. They had left a little pile of flour in the tent to deceive us and in carrying the rest to the shore spilt a small quantity on the beach. There was nothing to show their number or who they might be.

"Well, what next?" I inquired of Charlie.

"Catch the thieves," he replied. "We have some tea, a little flour, one small axe, and one revolver." The latter I had in my belt and fortunately it was loaded. Charlie always carried a small axe wherever he went.

"That will be impossible," I replied; "how do we know which way they have gone, besides, they have six or eight hours start of us and can travel with a canoe, while we will have to take the bush."

"If there's any chance at all," said Tom, bitterly, "we'll get them, if it takes all summer, and I know what we'll do when we catch them, that is," he added, "if they have any rope in their outfit."

"All right, then," remarked Charlie, "we'll catch them, but it will be a hard, hard trip, little sleep and not much to eat."

"I guess we're game," I replied, "and you take charge from now on."

We gathered up the little flour in a handkerchief, mixed with pine needles and ashes as it was, took a little salt and set out for the lower end of the lake.

We reached the portage, but there was no sign that it had been used, however, by skirting along the shore

we found their landing. It was evident that there were two men in the party. They had kept parallel to the portage and landed in the river a short distance down.

"Got him sure now," remarked Charlie, "about sixty miles down to Transcontinental Railway and only two or three portage routes leading off."

We hurried on down the river. The walking could not be much worse. Thick underbrush, fallen trees, varied with heavy swamps or soft, wet muskeg, but without a word we plunged on, Charlie in the lead, and in spite of our best efforts we could not keep up with him. Darkness came on, but he showed no signs of stopping. The river widened out and became quite shallow, so we got in and waded. The water did not reach above our knees, but occasionally a log would trip one of us and we would recover after a plunge.

SEVERAL hours passed, and just as I was beginning to think that I had reached the limit of endurance, the river narrowed and was too deep for wading. We crawled up on the bank more dead than alive. Charlie lit a fire, which helped to warm us and dry our clothes. Fortunately, we had a tea-pail, and a drink of hot tea gave us new life. Out of the knap-sack Charlie then drew a flat stone, some ten inches in diameter, which he placed in the fire. He next spread out the handkerchief containing the flour, and we spent some time in picking out the most prominent cinders and pine needles. Then a portion of the flour was mixed with water and put on the stone facing the fire, where it soon cooked. It was not particularly palatable, as the flavour from the burnt tent and blankets was rather too pronounced, but we were not in a position to criticize. Charlie then produced the hind quarters of three large frogs, which he had captured earlier in the evening. These, fried on the stone, were very delicious, and Tom remarked that no more frogs would escape next day, as he would sure fill his pockets with them. The mosquitoes were very troublesome, and only close to the fire could we escape their attention. Tired as we were, sleep was out of the question, although we occasionally fell into a dose and would fall over to wake up with a sudden start. At the earliest light we were on our way again. Charlie had cooked the rest of the flour, but no breakfast was allowed, as he remarked that later we would get some more frogs. About nine o'clock we came to a back-water, where we had no trouble in securing a dozen fat croakers, which made us a good meal.

The country was now nearly all swamp and flooded for a considerable distance on each side of the river. It was nothing but wade, wade, wade. We had passed the portage leading to the west, but Charlie was confident that they had not taken this route. Late in the afternoon we saw a poplar ridge running parallel to the river about a half mile to the east, and Charlie advised us to follow it as far as possible and then return to the river. We found the walking on this ridge to be good, although considerably obstructed by underbrush. Later in the afternoon the ridge terminated in a bluff, on which grew a large poplar tree. At my suggestion, Tom climbed into this to spy out the country ahead. He had no more than reached the topmost branches when he called for me to come up, as he could see a thin haze in the distance which looked very much like smoke. As we watched it grew in volume. It was perfectly clear that there was a fire beside the river about five miles further down, and we had no doubt that the thieves had camped there for the night.

A FRINGE of poplar, shown by the lighter green crossed the river just in front of the smoke. We made our way quickly to the river. Tom blew a sharp call, which was quickly answered by Charlie. We told him what we had seen and proceeded to lay our plans while Charlie made the fire, from which, however, there was no smoke, and cooked the frogs we had gathered. These we ate with the last of our bread. Charlie suggested that we push on as far as possible while the day-light lasted and catch our friends at the earliest dawn, when they would likely be sound asleep. He knew the place well and informed us that there was a portage at the point where we could see the poplar grove, and as the smoke rose from beyond this, they were evidently camped at the lower end. We made about three miles before dark, but it was nearly mid-night before we reached the portage. Here Tom and I waited while Charlie went ahead to reconnoiter. After a long time he returned and told us that he had been

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