CLASSICS TO GO

THE TIMBER TREASURE

FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

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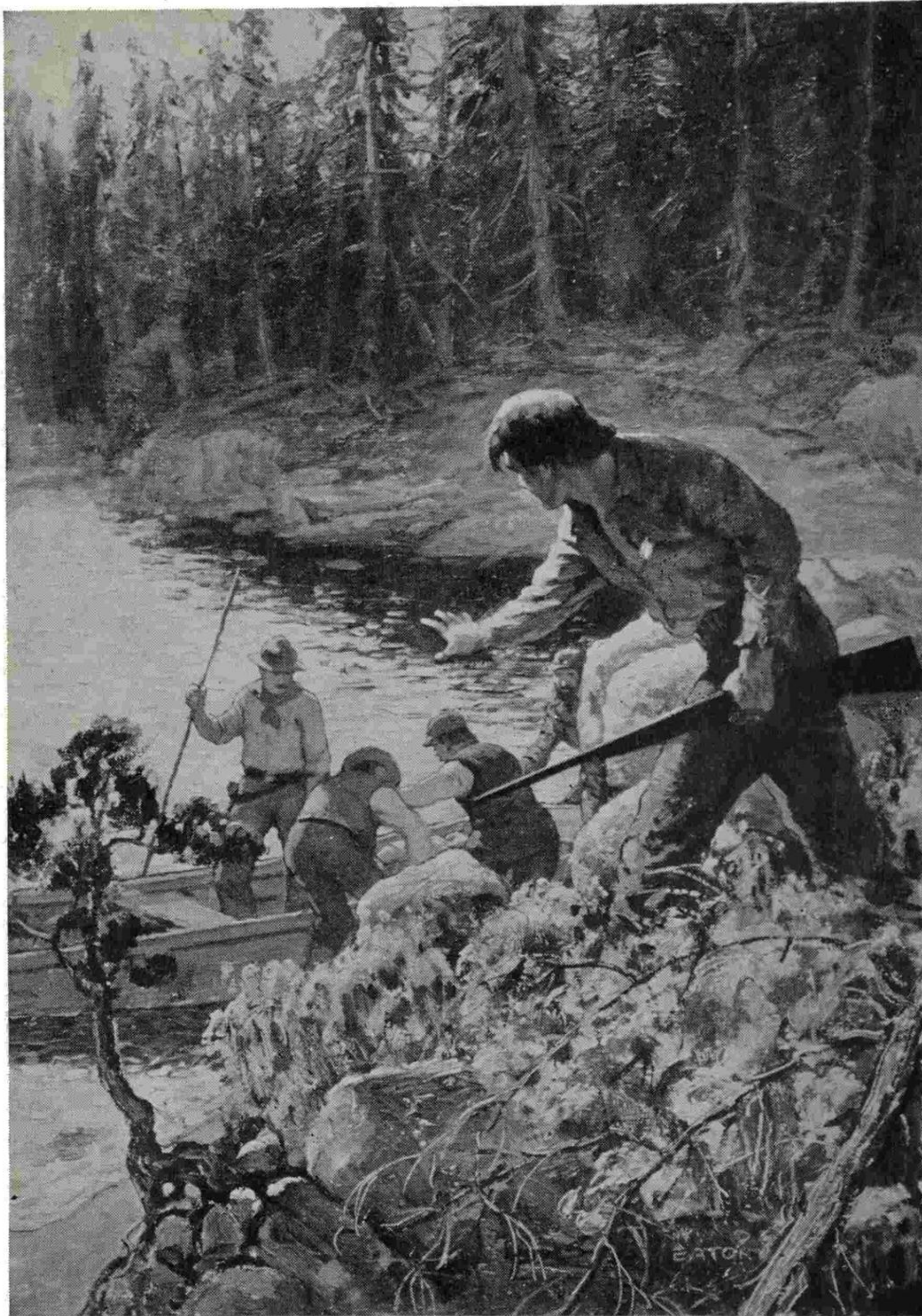

Tom arose and shouted to them

ILLUSTRATIONS

Tom arose and shouted to them
Tom rushed in and dragged him out
The game was up
Tom caught the half-directed blow

CHAPTER I
THE END OF A TRAIL

The heavy spruce forest broke away into scattered clearings; the road began to show more sign of use. The shriek of a sawmill began to be audible through the trees, and then the stage rolled into Oakley, splashed with mud from wheels to top, and the tired horses stopped. Tom Jackson crawled out, cramped and chilled with the rough twenty-mile drive, and looked about anxiously for a familiar face.

The stage was standing opposite an unpainted frame hotel, where a group of men had collected to meet it. There were rough woodsmen, forest farmers, dark-faced French habitants, an Indian or two, slouching and silent; the driver as he got down from his seat was exchanging jocularities with some of these, but no one spoke to Tom, and he saw no one whom he recognized. He had a twinge of anxiety. He had written to Uncle Phil to meet him that day. There had been plenty of time, and he had felt certain of seeing either Uncle Phil or one of his sons. Could the letter possibly have gone astray?

Tom's canvas dunnage sack was handed out to him, and his rifle in its case. He deposited these on the hotel steps, and again searched the group with his eyes. Becoming certain that he knew no one there, he applied to the nearest man, a raw-boned, bearded person in the rough dress of a backwoods settler. He had been talking freely, and seemed to know everybody.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Phil Jackson around here to-day—or either of his boys?"

“Don’t believe as I know ’em,” returned the pioneer, looking Tom over with acute curiosity. “Was you expectin’ to see ’em?”

“Yes, I wrote them to meet me here, but I don’t see any of them.”

“Well, the town ain’t very big. You can’t miss ’em if they’re here,” the other said, encouragingly.

This had already struck Tom’s mind. The straggling, muddy street of log houses, frame shacks, three or four stores was barely a hundred yards long, and then the vast northern Canadian forest closed in again. Away at the end of the village he had a glimpse of a good-sized river, yellow and swollen with melting snow. There were stray drifts of snow and patches of ice still lingering in sheltered places everywhere, rather to Tom’s surprise, for spring had seemed well advanced when he left Toronto; and despite the sunshine the air was full of a raw harshness, charged with a smell of pine and snow.

He carried his baggage into the hotel and left it there, glancing into the bar and sitting-room. Emerging again, he found the knot of idlers had scattered, and the horses were being unharnessed from the stage. He walked down the board sidewalk as far as it went, scrutinizing every face, looking into the stores, with anxiety growing upon him. Oakley was his uncle’s post-office, but his homestead was some thirty miles back in the woods, and Tom had no idea in which direction nor how to get there.

All at once it occurred to him that they must know at the post-office. That was the place for information. He had passed it already; he had seen the sign, and he turned more hopefully back. The post-office was a general store as well. It was full of a mixed smell of leather and molasses and tobacco, and there was a group of fur-capped settlers smoking and talking beside the big stove. Among them Tom recognized the man he had already spoken with, and they

all stopped talking and looked at the boy with great interest. Tom felt that they instantly recognized him as from the city, though he had taken pains to wear his roughest and heaviest clothes, a flannel shirt and high shoepacks which he had used in the woods before; but his hands and face were suspiciously untanned.

The postmaster, a spectacled elderly man, was behind a wire compartment at the rear of the store, and had just finished sorting the mail brought in by the stage when Tom approached him.

“Why, no,” he answered. “I ain’t see Phil Jackson to-day. Fact is, I don’t believe I’ve set eyes on him all winter. Seems to me I heard he’d gone away—him and the boys.”

It was indeed six or eight months since Tom had heard from any of his uncle’s family, but he had never dreamed that they could have left the north Canadian ranch where they had been for five years, and where they were doing prosperously.

“No, Jackson ain’t gone away,” put in one of the men by the stove. “Mebbe he don’t come in to Oakley no more, but he’s still on his homestead.”

“He ain’t been gettin’ his mail here lately, anyways,” said the postmaster. “There’s a letter here for him now—been here a week.”

He reached up to the pigeonholes, and took out a letter, peering at it through his glasses. With a shock Tom recognized the handwriting of the address.

“Why, that’s my own letter!” he cried. “That’s the letter I wrote him. He never got it.”

There was a silence in the store. Tom endeavored to collect himself.

“I fully expected him to meet me here,” he said at last. “Now I’ve got to get out to his ranch some way. Do you know where it is?”

There was a difference of opinion. Nobody seemed to be quite sure.

"I believe he lives over north somewheres," said the postmaster. "I dunno."

"Down the river, ain't it?" said another.

"No, it ain't," said a third, decisively. "I know where the Jackson place is. It's up on Little Coboconk, just below the narrers. I seen Dave Jackson there one day last fall. He was gettin' out beaver-medder hay."

"How far is it? How can I get there?" cried Tom.

"Must be 'bout thirty mile. I dunno how to get there—'less you had a canoe. You go right up the river to the Coboconk lakes," said the postmaster.

"Me and my pardner's plannin' to go up past there," said the man who knew the place. "Guess we could fix it to go to-morrow. We could take you up, if you know how to ride in a canoe without fallin' out."

"I've paddled a canoe a good many hundred miles," said Tom indignantly. "I'd be glad to go if you can take me. How much'll you charge me for the trip?"

The frontiersman glanced sidewise at the boy, and spat against the hot stove.

"Run you up for ten dollars."

Tom knew well that this was outrageous. If he had been a dweller in that neighborhood he would have been welcome to go for nothing, for the sake of an extra hand at the paddles. And about twenty dollars was all he owned.

"Can't afford to pay more than five," he said firmly.

"Oh, well; make it five," said the other, a little shamefacedly. "We'll start early—six o'clock, say. You stoppin' at the hotel?"

Tom had no other place to stop, though he could ill spare the additional dollar or two. He went back and engaged a room, and tried to amuse himself for the rest of the

afternoon by looking over the straggling little backwoods village and its environs. He had seen others exactly like it, but he had never before been so close as this to Uncle Phil's homestead, though he had been many times invited to visit it.

Tom's home was in Toronto, where his father was in the wholesale lumber business. But there had been a frequent inter-change of letters between the city and the north woods; Uncle Phil always sent down a deer in November, and twice the boys, Dave and Ed, had paid a visit to Toronto. They were three and five years older than Tom, but the cousins had become great friends, and the tales Tom heard of backwoods adventure made him regard it as a sort of ideal life.

Tom had spent his whole life in Toronto, but he did not care for the city. He had unusual physical strength for his seventeen years; he had made several summer camping and canoeing trips into the north woods; he could use a rifle, an ax, and a paddle; and he would immensely have liked to be old enough to go into the woods, secure a hundred acres of free government land, trap, hunt, prospect for minerals. There was iron in those wildernesses, graphite, mica, asbestos, silver, maybe gold too. There were pulp-wood and pine and fine hard woods. Dave had found a clump of “bird's-eye” maple and obtained three hundred dollars for half a dozen logs. All this appealed much more strongly to Tom than his present university studies and the prospect of a subsequent desk in his father's office. He came by these tastes honestly enough, for his father in his younger days had been a trapper, a timber-cruiser, a prospector in these same woods, until, growing older and making money, he had settled into a conservative city business.

Mr. Jackson looked with no favor on his son's disinclination for business. There was time enough, however. Tom had

finished his second year at Toronto University, where he had distinguished himself mainly in other ways than scholastically. He was a brilliant Rugby halfback, and had come close to breaking an intercollegiate record for the half-mile. Tom had enjoyed these two college years hugely, and had, in fact, taken little thought of anything but enjoyment. His father was not a millionaire, but Tom had usually only to ask for money in order to get it, and he had spent it with a tolerably free hand. Thinking now of the sums he had squandered, he squirmed with remorse.

The lumber business in Ontario is no longer what it was. Mr. Jackson was a dour and silent trader, who would no more have brought business troubles home with him than he would have discussed household matters with his office staff. He rarely mentioned the business to his son. Perhaps he hoped that Tom would volunteer an interest in the business, but it never occurred to the boy to do this. In fact, as Tom thought of it now, his father had become almost a stranger to him since he had entered the university and had taken up a multiplicity of new personal interests, social and sporting. He met his father only by chance at home, it seemed: at dinner, rarely at luncheon, on Sundays, sometimes of an evening. Tom almost never entered the big lumber-yards and office at the foot of Bathurst Street, and he had spent most of the last two vacations canoeing and camping near the Georgian Bay with a party of young friends.

He had planned to do the same this last summer. A party of college friends was going north to a club-house that some of them possessed near the Lake of Bays. It was to be rather an expensive outing; they were to take three motor-boats, several guides, a cook, and a princely outfit of supplies. Tom’s share of the expenses came to upward of a hundred dollars. He applied to his father for a check, and received a rather curt refusal, accompanied by no explanation.

It was the first time that he could remember having been denied money, and he felt bitterly aggrieved. He canceled his plans, however, and the motor-boats went without him.

About three weeks later his father summoned him to the office.

“I guess I can let you have that money after all, Tom,” he said; and, as he took out his checkbook, he added almost apologetically:

“I really couldn’t do it when you asked me before. Money was like blood to me just then. In fact, I don’t know whether the bank would have cashed the check.”

“Why, has business been as bad as that, Father?” Tom exclaimed, appalled. “I had no idea, or I’d never—”

“The lumber business is pretty well played out in this part of the country,” replied Mr. Jackson. “It’s only far in the north that there’s any white pine left, and I’ve always been a white pine man. I’ll have to go in for pulp-wood, or move west, or shut up shop within a few years. This spring things were worse than I ever knew them to be. For a while it really looked as if I’d have to shut up shop.”

Jackson had never before said so much upon business affairs to his son. The revelation came upon Tom like a thunderbolt. Looking at his father with awakened eyes, he saw for the first time the deep-drawn lines of age and worry upon the face of the veteran lumberman.

“Things are much better now, though,” Jackson hastened to say. “I have a deal or two in hand that should make everything smooth. I think the worst is over.”

“I don’t want this money, Father!” Tom cried. “Look here, can’t I do something? Let me come into the office—or into the yards.”

“Afraid you wouldn’t be much use there, Tommy. We’re too busy to break in new hands. No, take your good time while you can. Your business just now is to get an education.

That's all I want to say to you, Tommy. Don't neglect it. Foot-ball is all right, but don't neglect the important thing."

Tom went away from this interview ashamed, humiliated, and full of good resolutions. He put the check into his bank, resolved to draw no more money for personal expenses that whole year, and instead of going on a holiday trip he, like many other students, secured a job as government fire ranger in the new country north of Lake Temiscaming.

He spent three months thus, mostly in a canoe, and came back brown and hard-trained in the early autumn, for the collegiate term. His good condition made him more than ever in demand for athletics, and his ardor for reform had lost a little of its fine edge during the summer. Nobody ever studied during the autumn term anyhow, he reflected, and he played foot-ball assiduously until the season closed. With the coming of the winter he took a lively interest in hockey; and not until the end of February did he begin to realize that he had made an even worse hash than usual of his scholastic year, and that he would almost infallibly fail to pass the June examinations.

With characteristic impulsiveness he dropped all sports, took no exercise, and plunged heavily into study to make up for lost time. He burned the midnight oil until daylight came; he grew pale and his health fell off, and, as a natural result, in March he was attacked by a serious inflammation of the eyes. He spent a week or so in a darkened room, and came out under orders not to look at a printed page for a month, and not to think of study for the rest of the spring and summer.

He was thrown into compulsory idleness, and he had the pleasure of knowing that it was by his own fault and foolishness. He thought again of suggesting that he take some minor part in the lumber business; but Mr. Jackson was evidently undergoing troubles of his own just then. Business was bad again; he was in ill health besides; he was

short-tempered and sarcastic, and Tom's conscience made him afraid. His eyes, besides, negatived office work; and at last he went down and spoke privately to Williams, the yard foreman, for a job on the lumber piles.

Williams smiled at first, but when he found that Tom really meant it he grew serious, and spoke plainly:

"We couldn't have the boss's son in the yard, Mr. Tom; you know we couldn't. I couldn't let you loaf on the job, and I couldn't drive you like the rest of the hands. Oh, I know you wouldn't loaf, but there's nothing to learn here anyway. It's all manual work—lifting and loading and handling. Stay around with me for a day and you can learn it all—if that's what you're after."

Checked again, Tom's thoughts turned back to the north, where his heart had always been. It was too early for fire ranging; that work is not undertaken until midsummer; but he began to think of Uncle Phil's homestead in the backwoods, and, little by little, in his hours of enforced inaction, he formed a plan.

His eyes were good enough for all outdoor purposes, and his health needed strong exercise. He would go up and stay with Uncle Phil and the boys, and help them at the spring cultivation, the logging, all the forest and farm work. There would be no doubt about his welcome; another strong arm is always useful in the woods. He would look over the surrounding country. Within a few months he would be eighteen, and capable of homesteading a hundred acres himself. Why should he not do it? There would be pulp-wood on the land, perhaps minerals. If necessary, he could still return to the city rather late next autumn, and continue his studies.

"But I'll never be any good as a student or at business," he thought mournfully. "I'm no good at anything but foot-ball, and paddling a canoe and shooting and chopping timber. I'd better go in for what I can do."

He ventured to confide part of this project to his mother, who endeavored to dissuade him, but finally admitted that a summer in the woods might do him good. He casually introduced the subject to Mr. Jackson, and got an ironical remark that he would “probably be no more useless there than anywhere else,” which put an end to the conversation. It left Tom with some feeling of bitterness. He was not going to ask for any money; on the contrary, he was going to be self-supporting. He had enough money in his bank-account for the articles of outfit he needed, and for his railway fare and for the stage across to Oakley; and while at his uncle’s farm he would have no need of money. He left with the casual manner of going on a pleasure-trip, but he was inwardly determined that it should be winter before the city should see him again, and that he would have something definite to show for the time between.

It had been a great disappointment to find no one at Oakley to meet him. He had counted on a jubilant welcome from his cousins; but he ought to have remembered that pioneers do not go thirty miles to the post-office every week. He would have a little more trouble and expense; that was all; and he went to bed in the bare, cold hotel room in the sure expectation of sleeping the next night at Uncle Phil’s farm.

He was up at daylight, breakfasting early; and when the canoemen called for him punctually at six o’clock he was ready to shoulder his dunnage sack and rifle and go down to the river at the far end of the street.

They put Tom in the middle, and entrusted him with a paddle when he assured them that he was used to this sort of navigation. The Coboconk River was running full and strong with the April freshets and the melting snows, and the three of them found it stiff work to propel the loaded Peterboro up against the current. The roofs of the village passed out of sight, and after the first mile there was no

trace of settlement along the wooded shores. It was a rough, picturesque country, densely timbered with small pine and spruce and hemlock, and streaks of snow still lay in the shaded woods. Half a dozen times they started a flock of wild ducks splashing and squawking from the water. There was plenty of game in these woods. Tom had eaten venison steak for supper at the hotel, he felt sure, though it was called beef out of deference to the game-laws. There were bears in this spruce wilderness, and deer and lynxes and sometimes wolves; and muskrats and minks and ermines swarmed along the streams and in the swamps.

Toward noon they reached the end of the river, where it flowed out of the Coboconk lakes, and here they stopped to eat a cold lunch. There were two of the Coboconk lakes: Little Coboconk and Big Coboconk, connected by a narrow strait. The little lake, which they now entered, was perhaps three miles long, and Tom's destination was just at the upper end. They skirted up close along the shores, and the canoemen scanned the shores narrowly. There was no clearing, nor smoke, nor any trace of a farm. They passed the mouth of a small river and went on almost to the connecting straits, and then the men ran the canoe up to a stranded log.

"Here you are," said his guide. "See this here trail? That takes you on to Dave Jackson's barn, where he put his hay. I dunno just where the house is, but you keep a-follerin' the trail and you can't miss it."

They heaved Tom's dunnage ashore after him, and paddled quickly on toward the upper lake. Tom felt indignant and cheated. He had expected to be landed at his uncle's door for his five dollars, and he found himself put ashore with a hundred pounds of dunnage and his destination indefinitely distant. But the canoe was already out of sight in the spruce-bordered channel, and there was no help for it.

It was impossible to think of carrying the heavy canvas sack for any distance, and so he hoisted it into the low fork of a tree, intending to get Dave to come down and help him bring it home. He had brought a few delicacies as presents for the younger children—a box of candy, a box of dates and figs—and he crammed these into his pockets, put his rifle under his arm, and started inland.

There was a sort of trail, as the canoeman had said—a faint indication of wheelmarks certainly made no later than last autumn. It was possible to follow them, however, and here and there trees had been cut to open the way; after perhaps a mile of tramping Tom came in sight of the barn he expected.

It was a rough, unchinked log structure, with the door yawning wide, standing close by a wide flat of long grass and reeds, through which a tiny stream slowly wandered—evidently the beaver meadow where Dave had cut his hay. But there was no house in sight, and the woods came up densely around the beaver meadow, with no trace of either road or clearing.

Tom's heart sank with discouragement. Nevertheless, the barn indicated that he was on the right track, and the house could not be very remote. Experimentally he uncased his rifle and fired it—three shots, the wilderness signal of distress. No woodsman would neglect to answer that call, and he listened long for an answering signal, but none came. The whiskey-jacks squalled from the spruces, excited by the shots, but there was nothing else.

He struck off, however, beyond the beaver meadow, still in the same direction he had been going. Within half a mile he came upon a rushing, swollen little river, doubtless the same which he had seen flowing into the lake. He followed its shores for some distance, and then struck away into the woods, on the watch for a blazed trail or any sign of clearing. But he had been walking in irregular directions for