

The River Boss

by Steward Edward White

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STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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“Obey orders if you break owners,” is a good motto, but a really efficient river boss knows a better. It runs, “Get the logs out. Get them out peaceably, if you can, but *get them out.*” He needs no instructions from headquarters to tell him how to live up to this rule. That might involve headquarters.

Jimmy was such a river boss. Therefore when Mr. Daly, of the firm of Morrison & Daly, unexpectedly found himself contracted to deliver 5,000,000 feet of logs at a certain date, and the logs an impossible number of miles up-stream, he called in Jimmy.

Jimmy was a small man, changeless as the Egyptian Sphinx. A number of years ago a French comic journal published a series of sketches supposed to represent the Shah of Persia influenced by various emotions. Under each was an appropriate label, such as Surprise, Grief, Anger, or Astonishment. The portraits were identically alike, and uniformly impassive.

Well, that was Jimmy. He looked always the same. His hair, thick and black, grew low on his forehead; his beard, thick and black, mounted over the ridge of his cheek bones; and his eyebrows, thick and black, extended in an uninterrupted straight line from one temple to the other. Whatever his small, compact, muscular body might be doing, the mask of his black and white imperturbability remained always unchanged. Generally he sat clasping one knee, staring directly in front of him, and puffing regularly on a “meerschaum” pipe he had earned by saving the tags of Spearhead tobacco. Whatever you said to him sank without splash into this almost primal calm, and was lost to view forever. Perhaps after a

time he might do something about it, but always without explanation, calmly, with the lofty inevitability of fate. In fact, he never explained himself, even to his employers.

Daly swung his bulk back and forth in the office chair. Jimmy sat bolt upright, his black hat pendent between his knees.

“I want you to take charge of the driving crew, Jimmy,” said the big man. “I want you to drive those logs down to our boom as fast as you can. I give you about twenty days. It ought to be done in that. Sanders will keep time for you, and Merrill will cook. You can get a crew from the East Branch, where the drive is just over.”

When Daly had quite finished his remarks, Jimmy got up and went out without a word. Two days later he and sixty men were breaking rollways forty-five miles up-stream.

Jimmy knew as well as Daly that the latter had given him a hard task. Twenty days was too brief a time. However, that was none of his business.

The logs, during the winter, had been piled in the bed of the stream. They extended over three miles of rollways. Jimmy and his crew began at the down-stream end to tumble the big piles into the current. Sometimes only two or three of the logs would rattle down; at others the whole deck would bulge outwards, hover for a moment, and roar into the stream like grain from an elevator. Shortly the narrows below the rollways jammed. Twelve men were detailed as the “jam crew.” Their business was to keep the stream free in order that the constantly increasing supply from the rollways might not fill up the river. It was not an easy business, nor a very safe. As the “jam” strung out over more and more of the river, the jam crew was constantly recruited from the men on the

rollways. Thus some of the logs, a very few, the luckiest, drifted into the dam pond at Grand Rapids within a few days; the bulk jammed and broke, and jammed again at a point a few miles below the rollways, while a large proportion stranded, plugged, caught, and tangled at the very rollways themselves.

Jimmy had permitted himself two days in which to break out the rollways. It was done in two. Then the “rear” was started. Men in the rear crew had to see that every last log got into the current, and stayed there. When a jam broke, the middle of it shot down-stream in a most spectacular fashion, but along the banks “winged out” distressingly. Sometimes the heavy sticks of timber had been forced right out on the dry land. The rear crew lifted them back. When an obstinate log grounded they jumped cheerfully into the water--with the rotten ice swirling around them--and pried the thing off bottom, Between times they stood upright on single unstable logs and pushed mightily with poles while the ice water sucked in and out of their spiked river shoes.

As for the compensations. Naturally there was a good deal of rivalry as to which wing should advance fastest; and one experiences a certain physical thrill in venturing under thirty feet of jammed logs for the sole purpose of teasing the whole mass to cascade down on one; or of shooting a rapid while standing upright on a single timber. I believe, too, it is considered a mighty honor to belong to the rear crew. Still, the water is cold, and the hours long, and you have to sleep in tents.

It can readily be seen that the progress of the rear measures the progress of the drive. Some few logs in the “jam” may run fifty miles a day--and often do--but if the sacking has gone slowly at the

rear, the drive may not have gained more than a thousand yards. Therefore Jimmy stayed at the rear.

Jimmy was a mighty good riverman. Of course he had nerve, and could do anything with a log and a peeve, and would fight at the drop of a hat--any "bully boy" would qualify there;--but he also had judgment. He knew how to use the water, how to recognize the key log of jams, where to place his men--in short, he could get out the logs. Now Jimmy also knew the river from one end to the other, so he had arranged in his mind a sort of schedule for the twenty days. Forty-eight hours for the rollways; a day and a half for the upper rapid; three days into the dam pond; one day to sluice the drive through the dam; three days to the crossing, and so on. If everything went well, he could do it, but there could be no hitches in the programme.

Even from this imperfect fragment of the schedule the inexperienced might imagine that Jimmy had allowed an altogether disproportionate time to cover the mile or so from the upper rapid to the dam pond. As it turned out, however, he found he had not allowed enough, for at this point the river was peculiar and very trying.

The backwater of the dam extended upstream half a mile; then occurred a rise of five feet to the mile, down the slope of which the water whirled and tumbled, only to spread out over a broad fan of gravel shallows. These shallows did the business. When the logs had bumped through the tribulations of the rapid, they seemed to insist obstinately on resting in the shallows, like a lot of wearied cattle. The rear crew had to wade in. They heaved and pried and pushed industriously, and at the end of it had the satisfaction of seeing a single log slide reluctantly into the current. Sometimes a

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