

## BLUSTER AND TROUBLE UP NORTH

By Gretchen Woelfle

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author*

“EVER CHOPPED TREES in the north woods before?”

“Firewood from our wood lot, since I was eight,” said George Erskine.

“Trees up north don’t look like a wood lot,” said Mr. Thompson, the lumber-company agent. “It’s hard work and dangerous, too. Our men broke four arms and got a leg amputated last season. Two men were killed in the camp just north of ours. Still willing to go?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How old are you, Erskine?”

“Eighteen, sir.”

“When do you reckon your beard’s going to grow?”

George ran his fingers over his fuzzy mustache. His face turned red, and he dropped his eyes. “Fifteen, sir. I’m just fifteen. But I’ve run the farm with my mother since Pa died three years ago. We manage all right, but I’d like to get ahead a little ways. The money I get from chopping will allow us that.” He looked straight at Mr. Thompson and said fiercely, “I’m strong and I’m able and I’ll work hard.”

Mr. Thompson looked out the window. The unpaved streets of Bangor, Maine, had frozen into deep ruts. A few townspeople went about their business this cold November day, but nearly all of the loggers had gone north already.

“Well, George,” he said finally, “I’ll take a chance on you. Read this contract and sign at the bottom. Be sure to write your mother’s address, too. . . in case anything happens.”

“The space that says wages—that part isn’t filled in,” said George.

“If you work like a man, you’ll get a man’s wages. You have my word. If not, you’ll get half pay at the end of the season.”

George signed the contract. “I won’t let you down, sir.”

“Be careful, son. Don’t let your mother down, either.” They shook hands, man to man.

• • •

Huge stands of spruce and balsam fir surrounded George as he trudged north. The big pines had already been cut from these woods. Fifty miles separated Bangor from the lumber camp on the Old Lemon River. A few settlers’ cabins offered lodging along the way. George had some pennies in his pocket, but he smiled at the thought of all the money he’d have when he walked this way again.

George reached camp near dusk on the third day. He could make out two long log bunkhouses, a square building—that must be the dining hall—and a few small cabins. He found the camp boss, Ezekial Bartlett, in a cabin.

Bartlett stroked his gray beard as he read George’s contract, then he handed him a bedroll. “Supper’s at five-thirty. Breakfast is five in the morning.”

Inside the bunkhouse George saw that mud and moss didn’t keep the wind from blowing through the chinks in the logs. A central stone fireplace warmed the building a little. George threw his bedroll on a top bunk near the fire.

“You don’t want that bed,” said Jeremiah, a big man with bushy black eyebrows and beard. “Frenchy sleeps down below. He snores and thrashes all night.”

“My brother does, too, and it doesn’t bother me,” said George, unrolling his bedding, “but I wish I could trade these scratchy blankets for one of Ma’s quilts.”

Jeremiah chuckled. “Nothing soft around here, boy.”

At five-thirty next morning the crew left for the pinewoods, an hour’s walk from camp.

When they reached the big pines, Jeremiah called, “George, climb this small one.”

It didn’t look small to George. The tree was fifty feet to the crown where the branches started. He felt his breakfast pancakes lurch in his stomach, but he flung a rope around the trunk and then attached it to his belt. He cut toeholds with his ax as he climbed. He didn’t dare look down.

When he reached the crown, he sat on a strong branch, wrapped his shaking legs around the trunk, and began to chop. Chips flew in every direction. Everyone was watching him, so he didn’t stop to rest, but he grunted and groaned to take his mind off his aching arms.

Finally the crown tumbled to the ground. The trunk began to sway like the pendulum on a grandfather clock, and George grabbed on with quivering arms and legs. He nearly dropped his ax. When the swaying stopped, he climbed down.

“*Tres bien*,” said Frenchy.

“Pardon?” George asked.

“That means good job!” said Frenchy, smiling. George had trouble understanding his French-Canadian accent, but he understood the smile.

“Rigger, get to work,” Jeremiah yelled.

The rigger tied heavy ropes around the trunk all the way up so that when the tree fell, it wouldn’t crash and damage the wood. Then two men sawed through the four-foot-thick trunk.

Now the whole crew worked together. They grabbed the ropes that circled the tree. “Tim-ber!” echoed through the woods. The men pulled this way and that until the tree lay down slowly, right along the narrow road that ran to the river.

“Chop it into logs, men,” yelled Jeremiah.

Teams of oxen arrived, and the men rolled and heaved fourteen foot logs onto a sledge. Then the oxen dragged the load to the riverbank. The ground was soft and spongy in the summer. Only in the winter, when the earth was frozen and the deep snow trampled to a slick, hard track, could the oxen haul such heavy loads of timber.

At the river, the men cut Thompson’s brand into the end of each log. When the ice broke up in the spring, log drivers would float the timber down to Bangor.

• • •

Life in the woods was a lot harder than life on the farm.

The cold was like a fox—silent, sly, and quick to pounce. Chopping kept George’s blood moving and his body warm, but when he stopped for lunch, his fingers and toes began to freeze, and his nose and cheeks lost their feeling. He wished he had a beard like everyone else.

“It’s thirty degrees below and falling,” said Jeremiah one day on the way to breakfast. “So cold the mercury went through the bottom of the thermometer and two feet down my ax handle.”

“It did?” George piped up.

The men laughed, and George blushed as he followed them into the dining room.

At meals George ate a man's share and more. He needed his two plates of hot cakes to carry him through until lunchtime, and every night he filled up on salt codfish or pork, beans, and tea so strong a spoonful of molasses couldn't sweeten it. He missed creamy milk, fresh from the cow. He missed his mother's flaky biscuits and apple pie.

George slept till noon on Sundays. Then he wrote to his mother. The mail only went out once a month, when the supply sled came up the frozen river, but George felt less homesick when he wrote every week.

He didn't tell his mother much about the hard work, so as not to worry her. Instead he talked about how they would spend the money he earned. They could buy a new plow horse. Then he could clear more trees to make a new field that would give them more crops to sell. Perhaps he could buy an extra cow or two.

He'd also heard about a new invention called a Singer sewing machine that let a woman stitch about a mile a minute. He wanted to buy one for Ma.

Some men sat around the fire playing cards on Sunday. A few read their Bibles. Others, including George, washed their woolen socks and hung them above the fire to dry. Dripping water hissed and steamed on the hearth all afternoon.

Frenchy taught George to play the harmonica. "Blowing those notes might put a beard on your cheeks, eh?" he joked.

George was embarrassed—and a little annoyed. Would they ever let up on him? He blew fiercely, and the harmonica made a screech.

"Cool down, George," said Frenchy. "You make better music that way."

George took a deep breath and tried again. Men began singing.

*A is for Ax as you very well know;  
B is for the Boys that use them just so.  
C is for the Chopping that soon will begin,  
And D is for the Danger we always stand in.*

George knew what they were singing about. That was his life in the north woods. He kept playing, and they sang the chorus.

*Sing hi, derry-o, so merry as we,  
There's no one one-half as happy as we.  
With a hi, derry-o, hi, derry-dong,*

*At the woodman's shanty there's nothing  
goes wrong.*

Once in a while a fiddler struck up a sorrowful tune, and George sang along.

*Oh, a shanty-man's life is a wearisome life,  
although some think it void of care,  
Swinging an ax from morning till night,  
in the midst of the forests so drear.  
Lying in the shanty bleak and cold  
while the cold stormy wintry winds blow,  
And as soon as the daylight doth appear,  
to the wild woods we must go.*

Sometimes George believed the happy song about the logger's life, and sometimes he felt that the truth lived in the sad song.

• • •

The snow got deeper, the weather got colder, and George got stronger. Ezekial Bartlett sometimes came to watch the choppers. One day he brought a man with short hair and a trimmed beard.

“That's Matthew Thurlow, the company clerk,” Jeremiah muttered. “He's nothing but bluster and trouble. Keeps count of how much lumber each team pulls from the woods. Cheats us whenever he can. Stay clear of him.”

Thurlow sat next to George at supper. The other loggers took their plates and moved away. George wanted to follow them, but the clerk started talking.

“You're young to be working in the woods,” said Thurlow.

“I'm strong and I work like a man,” said George.

“They paying you full wages?” Thurlow asked.

George explained his handshake agreement with Mr. Thompson.

“Watch your step, young fella,” Thurlow said. “I've heard of company men cutting costs by not paying their loggers.”

“How?” asked George.

“Along about March, when the season's almost over, the boss will pick a fight with a man new to the woods. Make up a story or find something to complain about. The man gets so mad he quits on the spot. Then the company refuses to pay him.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” said George.

“Mind your step,” the clerk warned him. “Mind your step.”

George brooded all the next day. If he should only earn half pay...

He grew careless and just missed getting hit by a falling branch.

At supper he asked Thurlow, “You ever heard of Mr. Thompson holding back a man’s pay?”

“Well, no,” allowed Mr. Thurlow, “but there’s not many people in this world you can trust.”

That night George couldn’t sleep. His pay depended on good reports from Jeremiah and Mr. Bartlett. He thought he could trust Jeremiah, but what about the camp boss? He had not exchanged a word with him since his first day in camp.

“What about Mr. Bartlett?” George asked Thurlow the next night. “Did you ever know him to cheat someone?”

“He’s a quiet one. Keeps his opinions to himself. That’s the worst kind in my book. Never know what they’ll do. Now, I’ll tell you what I think, even if you don’t like hearing it. But that’s the way I am.”

He smiled at George. George tried to smile in return, but his mouth just wouldn’t go that way.

Thurlow went on, “No, I’m not sure you can trust a man like Ezekial Bartlett. He might give you a bad report just to save money and make himself look good. I’d hate to see a hardworking boy like you lose those wages.”

“What should I do?” George asked.

“Go and demand what’s yours.” Thurlow stood up and left George alone.

George chewed his salty pork until it had no taste at all.

He thought of the last three months—the frozen toes, the smashed fingers, and the monotonous food. He liked Frenchy and the rest, but they weren’t his family. He thought of all the jokes they made about him. Then he thought of the money he needed for the farm. Yes, he would demand it!

He jumped up, knocking the plate off the table. It smashed to pieces.

“Daydreaming of your mother’s cooking?” called someone.

George stormed out to Bartlett’s cabin.

“I made a contract to work like a man and I’ve done it. If I don’t get my full wages, I’ll... I’ll...”

“Hold on, Erskine...” said Bartlett.

“I work as hard as anyone, and nobody’s going to cheat me out what’s mine—not you or anybody.” George’s voice cracked with anger.

“Cheat...who’s cheating you, boy?” Bartlett pulled at his beard.

“Don’t call me boy! Who do you think you are?”

Bartlett jumped up. “I’m the boss here, that’s who! And you’re just a half-grown kid who doesn’t know his place. You got a grievance? Go talk to Thompson. As far as I’m concerned, you’re fired!”

Back in the bunkhouse Frenchy shook his head. “It is Thurlow again. He snared you in his trap.”

“He wanted to help me,” insisted George. “It’s Bartlett that fired me.”

“*Mon ami*, my friend,” said Frenchy, “some men take pleasure by getting other folks in trouble. Thurlow is like that. Learn to read the faces of men, George. I can read the lies in Thurlow’s eyes and in his hard smile. *Regardez*, look close. You will see. It is worth more than the wages you lost.”

“But I haven’t lost them,” insisted George. “Mr. Thompson will pay me.”

Deep snow covered the trail to Bangor. As he plodded step by step, George had plenty of time to think. He had proved he could do a man’s work—Pa would have been proud of him—but his pride and temper had wiped it all away. His pockets still only held a few coins. Would Mr. Thompson take the word of a hotheaded boy over his own camp boss?

“Bartlett sent me good reports about you, Erskine,” said Mr. Thompson, when he had heard George’s story. “Says you’re one of the best choppers in the crew.”

George lowered his head.

“I want you to go back to camp. You’ll get full pay in the spring, if there’s no more trouble—taking money out for the days you took to make this trip, of course.” George tried to read Mr. Thompson’s face, like Frenchy told him. He saw a firm mouth, not quite a smile, and blue eyes that might—or might not—be honest. George couldn’t tell.

He trudged down the street. His feet were sore, and he dreaded facing the men at the camp. What was Mr. Thompson's promise worth? Could he trust any of them?

Smells of dinner wafted from a hotel. He remembered his mother's beef stew with lots of onions and sweet turnips, their warm kitchen fire, and his soft bed.

George stood still. If he went home, he could clear that field by spring even without a new plow horse. The extra crops might bring enough money for a down payment for Ma's sewing machine in the fall. Next winter he'd go back to the woods, work all season, and pay it off.

The dinner smells reminded him he hadn't eaten all day. He ran down the street toward the road south. With luck he could hitch a ride on a one-horse sleigh and be home for dinner tonight.

But when he reached the end of Main Street, he slowed to a walk. Ma would be glad to see him, but would she be disappointed in him? He knew the answer. It wasn't the money. It wasn't even his quarrel with Bartlett. Ma and Pa had taught him to finish what he started. And to keep his word.

He'd got too close to things up north. That's a mistake for all kinds of reasons, when you're chopping big trees. A branch you can't see when the tree is standing can crush you when it comes crashing down. You stand way back from the trees. You keep your distance.

He'd got too close to Thurlow, that's for sure. So close he couldn't see him straight. He should have kept his distance from the clerk—about twenty miles or so.

He'd got too close to the teasing, too. The men didn't mean any harm. They just wanted to warm up the cold winter with a few laughs. He should keep his distance and throw a few jokes their way, even laugh at himself sometimes. If George went back to camp, the men would understand. They had warned him about Thurlow in the first place.

George turned around and walked north. He'd go back to camp.

He walked as far as the hotel before he remembered Mr. Bartlett. George knew their quarrel was all his fault. His temper had been short as an icicle in a February thaw. He could admit that to himself and even to Mr. Thompson, but he couldn't admit it to Bartlett. His face grew hot just thinking about it. He couldn't do it. He should, but he couldn't. He turned south and took a few steps toward home.

Then he stopped again. What was harder—chopping trees or saying “I’m sorry” when he knew he was wrong?

I’ll do it, George thought. I’ll walk into Mr. Bartlett’s cabin and set it on the table. Set that “I’m sorry” right down where it belongs.

He looked north.

A man walked out of the hotel. “Where are you headed, son? I’ve been watching you go back and forth for quite a spell now. Can I point you in the right direction?”

George grinned. “Thank you, sir. But I know where I’m going and I know the way.”

*George B. Erskine (1838-1929), born in Palermo, Maine, had an adventure much like this in the north woods when he was fifteen. After serving in the Civil War and mining for gold and silver out West, he spent many winters working in logging camps in Michigan. Finally, in the 1870s, he married, bought a farm in Jefferson, Maine, and settled down to raise a family of five sons.*