

No Man's To Own

Clenching his blistered hand and mumbling some, John Hanhraham began his walk at the banks of the Shiawasse. After investing another grueling day into the woods, he sat beside the river and began to drink until the winter sun retreated, content to make his way to camp under the soft shine of the moon. His footsteps landed on the soft snow. At his back were logs sitting on the river tightly stacked, awaiting the spring thaw. He looked into the distance at the majestic stand of white pines, causing him to quickly turn his head away from the river graveyard. It was an aspect of site that made him feel uneasy. Though he didn't earn much, John preferred his work to bootlegging, the family practice of his friends, the Boyers.

John rose each morning and went into the woods, neglecting his sore arms and back, and ignoring the monotony of his work. The thump of a fallen tree made the earth sound hollow, and that excited him. Mindful of little, he worked towards a simple goal of returning to camp before dark. Occasionally, John noticed the sun permeating the forest canopy, glistening off the snow bank and providing subtle art for the culturally deprived crew. Thirty or so men worked on John's crew. Together they would confront the forest, drink away the sorrows of their job, and reflect on their common disdain for the foreman.

"Hanhraham," shouted the angry foreman, in a voice made raspy by constant pipe smoking. The foreman was an old bastard who had over the years developed a talent for commanding sleep deprived, sex deprived, overworked men. When the foreman would yell, he would thrust his head forward in an effort to project his voice, causing his multiple chins to smack together. His satisfaction came not from the company of "professional women" in town, but from meeting

a deadline given him by the baron. He delighted in seeing forest animals scurry away as their habitats were removed.

John was removed from the haze of his daydream by the foreman's interruption. He stood across from his partner, and began to pull the giant blade of the two-man saw. They developed a rhythmical stroke, back and forth, with the saw moving fast enough to take off any flailing limb. The men took extra caution, on account of a man from a nearby mill having his arm torn out of his socket a few days back.

Back and forth ten more times and they had cut a conveniently shaped fragment out of the downed pine, so that it could be stored on the river. After the cut was finished, a loud cry resonated from a burly young man's tight vocal chords throughout the lot. Roger Boyer was the shouter's name. Atop legs the size of tree trunks sat his large muscled frame. His arms were covered in dark hair, each strand seeming to produce a viscous drop of sweat. Boyer was a formidable axe man. The other men on the crew all enjoyed pulling with him, as it required only absorbing the saws force and keeping it on-line. Men joked that the local women had marked on their calendars the days their men teamed with Boyer, and looked forward to the heightened sensuality of those nights. In reality the women didn't have that knowledge, as the foreman kept those types of schedules private, doing all he could to avoid reduced productivity.

"We ought to move in a straight line," Roger suggested.

"But if we down the thickest now, we can save the thinnest for later when we don't have any energy," John said.

Roger completely trusted his friends perceptions, and gave John his usual affirmative; a slow, deliberate nod of the head. The two men sidestepped over the freshly cut pine, their legs covered in sawdust and their hands in blisters. As they fiercely pulled the wooden handles, the teeth of the saw dragged against the grain of the wood, ripping the tree apart, separating it into another

symmetrical log. Each cut was exactly like the one before, except their arms were a bit more tired and sore with every stroke. Another log meant little to the lumberjacks, whose dollar-a-day wage knew nothing of per unit profit.

But each log was money in the pocket of the timber baron, who was across town playing cards with some of his cohorts. An oily, piney scent filled his brand new mansion. The men met occasionally to discuss business, and to exchange the spoils of their 'labors', such as fine tobacco and other imported goods.

"Wadsworth you cocksucker, that's the fourth one today", the baron blurted.

"Thank you for the early Christmas gift", the plump-faced colleague replied.

The baron chuckled and scratched his prickly beard, but was in fact distraught that a college-educated specimen such as himself could lose in a game of skill. His luck had been in disrepair recently, but his pride made it difficult for him to refuse a friendly bet. The men sat around the table, smoking their pipes. They proceeded in this manner until the baron mentioned business.

"And many more gifts to come. Have you forgotten about the expected profit margin for the new plot?"

"Of course not. With our crew's current output, and the new machinery, we could clear the stand within two months," said his colleague.

The baron parsed his lips; the wheels of his mind could be seen spinning through his glowing eyes. With the seemingly infinite demand for timber products, each batch his company could produce created enormous profits. It was only a matter of efficiency, a duel between his men and the forest. With the creation of a state-of-the-art sawmill at the foot of Shiawassee, the pines would flow through, bringing the forest to its knees.

“If we decide to sell you this land, what exactly are your intentions?” the local businessman Wadsworth asked.

The baron paused to gather his thoughts, and to summon a proper tone.

“Sir, my intention is simple; a fully integrated extraction. I intend to expand this operation to become the largest in the region. My men have estimated 600,000 board feet available within the acres I seek to acquire. My intention is to extract it within the year while the market is at its peak.”

A few years back the government had given away forested land for small prices. Opportunistic capitalists came to know this as the Great Land Giveaway of the 1800's. With the news of this development, Wadsworth acted quickly, and hired a half-dozen timber cruisers to stake claim to the land. They swarmed the area surrounding the river, and each made camp on a different plot. The baron's haste allowed him to originally claim only a small portion of the pine forest. He now sought to absorb the rest, knowing that his associate lacked the capital to begin a lumbering operation. As such, Wadsworth listened to the Baron's steep demands, and was only able to grunt, knowing that he had no option but to make the deal. With a handshake, the fate of the forest was jeopardized. The baron only needed investors to stock the hollow interior of the sawmill with steel beasts.

The next morning came, and John rose early to meet it. He walked out of his shanty and toward the heart of the forest. He was the first lumberjack awake, intending to get started on a gurdy piece of timber near the river's edge. As he treaded across the forest floor, his stride was interrupted by an unfamiliar grunt. Turning his stiff neck, he saw a man sitting at the edge of a short willow tree. The man motioned John over, and so he turned around and slowly began

walking, stopping a comfortable distance away. He could smell the combination of whiskey and age on the man, whose face was surprisingly expressive in comparison to his frail body. The old man licked his lips, squinted, moving a malformed monocle to his eye, and prepared to talk.

“A bit too early for me to be up nowadays,” he offered.

“Why is an old fellow like you out here so early?” John asked.

“I thought to catch you without the axe in your hand. The name is Gabriel Juniper. How do you do John?”

John vaguely remembered seeing this man at the saloon some time ago. His memory consisted of the bacchanalian Juniper attempting to free a horse while its owner was inside.

“I’m well. What do you need?” John muttered.

Juniper made no attempt to disguise his purpose, and began to deliver a blunt speech.

“John, a constantly extended hand has forced you to look downward, to look away, while performing your duties. Begin to look around you amidst the chaos of your labor, and then you will allow yourself to see the truth.”

Gabriel, at some point, seemed to tap into John’s inner fears. In a boozed fury, he said;

“No one would expect you to recognize what it is you must recognize, but you are the last line of defense. The least guilty, but the most responsible. These men have no consciousness of the land.”

John was not particularly aroused by the speech, but interested in Gabriel’s selection of him for this curious lecture. Suddenly sensing his questioned credibility, Gabriel interjected,

“I have lived on this land since I was a boy. The forest has always given to the people. The natives removed sections of the forest, but moved on and allowed it to recover. This is different. It is plunder.”

John felt nervous, but had the presence to record what was being said. He merely stared at old Gabriel, who began panting. It seemed as if Gabriel had just awoken from a nightmare, but he mustered the wind to deliver a sort of closing statement.

“John. They have given away what is no man’s to own. They say it costs \$1.50 an acre, but there can be price. It is no man’s to own.”

Juniper began to sob. Before John could react, he said,

“Take the leap, John. ”

Scared, and confused about this experience, John left and walked toward the shed where he kept his axe.

Though he tried, John could not dismiss the experience as merely a drunken rant. He found himself recalling some stifled images that had been stored in the recesses of his memory, now glossed by Gabriel’s premonitions. He envisioned the piles of logs stacked on the icy river. The stacks, thirty feet high and equally wide, blocked the outline of the sawmill building that could otherwise be seen in the distance. The lumberjacks had heard rumors of the company expanding. Most of them considered this good, simply a chance to hack away at the goliaths across the river. But John began to envision this as the trees being swiped from the earth by a hand; a soft hand, without callus. As he stroked away at the soft wood throughout the day, these images repeated, and began to bother him.

The baron arrived to the site by carriage, emerging from the rich mahogany frame of the artisan vehicle wearing a black suit coat, tailored so that the tail hung just above his kneecaps. Walking out of the motorcade with a gang of groomed men, he pointed to the grand sawmill and began to talk financials. He led the group of five or so prospective investors, who he had

provided with fresh tobacco. He walked the men to the icy river, and pointed to the eerie assemblage of logs. On top of a log, the baron stood up and delivered a speech. The spectators shook their heads and scratched their beards.

“Be pleased to notice this beautiful sight. It is better than gold or the finest bottle of rum.” His description of timber ignited a hunger in the men; not the type that follows a day in the woods cutting down trees. More like the longing for another man’s wife. He mentioned that he had invested a large fraction of his wealth into the construction of the new sawmill, but that it was only skeleton. His words had the effect of morphing the wooden logs into currency, making the already corpulent men salivate.

“Turn your eyes this way. Watch my men work,” he said.

They redirected their glances upstream, at the in-progress operation. It started beyond view, with a crowd of men doing the same job as John and Boyer, fragmenting the pines into logs. Further into the woods, men could be seen in their bright-checkered shirts, chopping the trees down and sending them to the ground. Another group slid the finished products onto the river, where they were lifted and stacked by a dozen men. The investors observation was then interrupted by a loud noise.

Boyer’s angry chant echoed over five hundred yards. Workers toward the outside of that range found it humorous, but those closer were bothered. The sound of this cry was no different than usual, but his facial muscles tensed up like never before, making him seem possessed. After his cathartic cry, Roger dropped his axe, and turned his back on the river. He trotted back towards camp. His peers dismissed his exit, assuming that he felt his productivity merited an early dismissal from work. In the moment Boyer stormed off, John was rather preoccupied staring into a dense segment of the forest, inching closer and closer to the edge.

He shifted focus from that single virgin pine to the collective group that sat at the foot of the river nearest the shore. The crown exhibited the beauty of randomness. Thousands of clusters of needles emerged from small branches. Scores of these branches attached to dozens of the larger sort, which ultimately attached to its trunk. Symmetrical in girth but with a few blemishes, it penetrated the thick ground below. Needles, visibly prickly and stiff, pointed to the ground and to the sun, but none directly to the east or west. Patternless arrangements of bark cover it from top to bottom. Like streets, cracks in the bark provide ants a thoroughfare of commerce. The branches stopped midway up the trunk, delineating where fires had scorched it. In his moment staring at the single tree, and the hundred similar ones around it, John felt differently. He quickly switched his gaze to the stacked timber on the river. No longer were these trees the product of a strong day's work. John, feeling the pulse in his rough, hardened hands, remembered the physical pain this job caused him. The voice of the forest was too strong to resist, but there remained a sliver of doubt about his plan. Then, he remembered his nightly walks from the river to camp; he remembered the shine of the moon the night before.

John walked through camp, passing the wood shanties the men slept in, and headed toward the mill. To his right, he saw a beat up old buggy pulled by a single horse darted away from the site. In the evening light the outline of an enormous man filled the cabin of the buggy. The head of the shadow descended slightly, resembling a slow, deliberate nod. John then looked up at the towering mill and walked inside. Though the building seemed to stretch for a hundred yards, John did not feel small inside of it. Softened by the reflections of the days past, he placed

his kerosene lamp against the dripping wall of the sawmill, and watched the drunken structure ignite.

Suddenly, they smelled something burning. The baron rose from his seat with spring, and marched out the door. When he walked outside from the camp, he saw his enormous building engulfed in a wall of flame. Lumberjacks fled from their shanties as the mill burned slowly. Around the edges of the area it occupied, snow began to melt. From the shanties that stood nearby, emerged a few naked prostitutes. The loggers ran outside and gathered round in a semicircle, watching their livelihood fizzle into the cold winter night along with the smoke from the blaze. John did not flee the scene. Rather, he slept in his shanty only a hundred meters from the burning mill, comforted by the warmth of the fire. He acknowledged the threat that the fire could spread throughout camp in his sleep, but for some reason had faith that he would be protected.