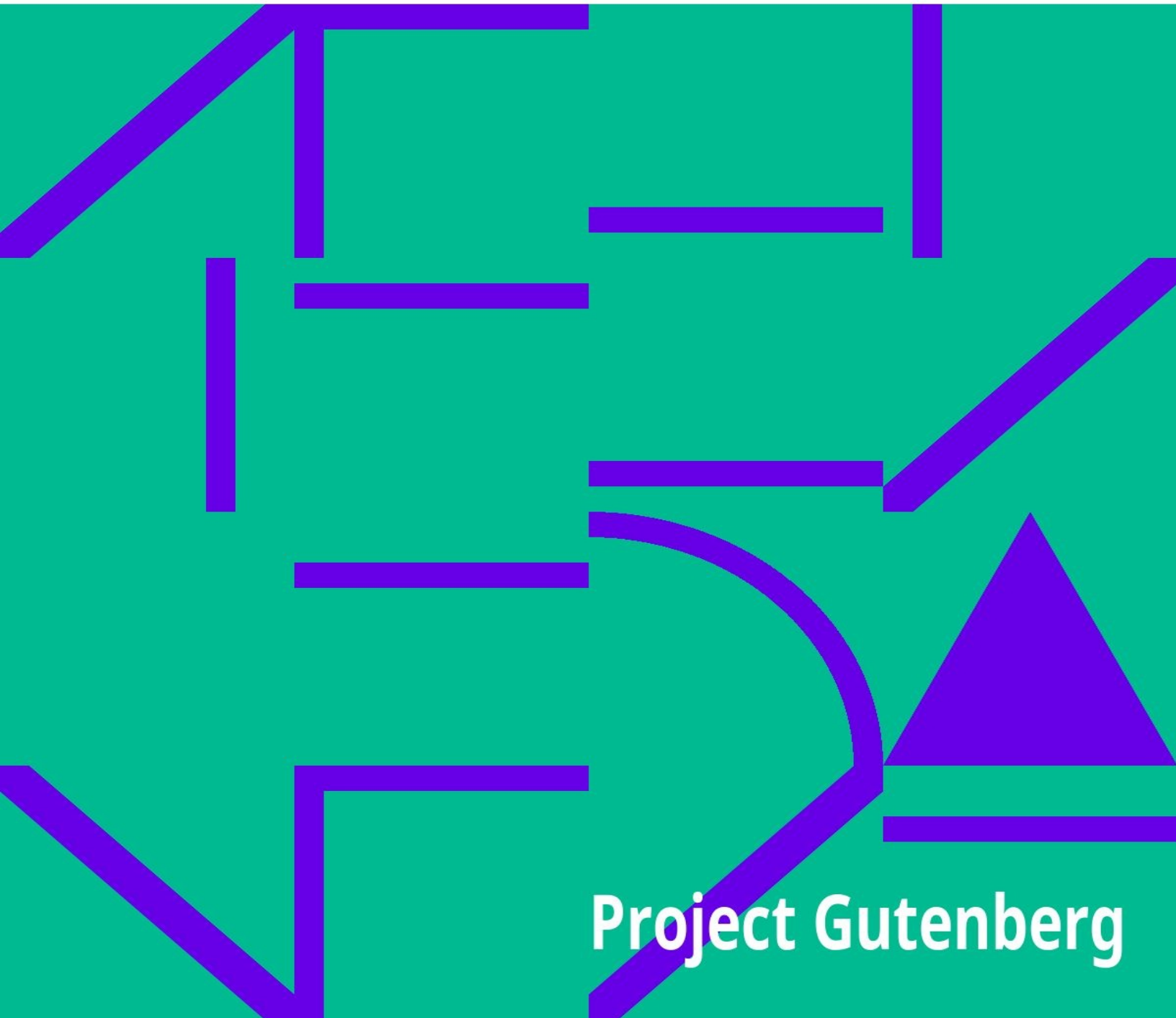
Northern Diamonds

Frank Lillie Pollock



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LOWERED THE CAN CAUTIOUSLY BY A STRING

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NORTHERN DIAMONDS

BY

FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

With Illustrations

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FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

ILLUSTRATIONS

LOWERED THE CAN CAUTIOUSLY BY A STRING . . . . . *Frontispiece*

THE OTHER BOYS HAD BEEN BUSY

"THAT IS OUR CABIN. LET US COME IN, I SAY"

DRAGGED HIM UP, PROTESTING, AND RUBBED SNOW ON HIS EARS

FLUNG THE SACK INTO THE MAN'S LAP

From drawings by Harry C. Edwards

NORTHERN DIAMONDS

CHAPTER I

It was nearly eleven o'clock at night when some one knocked at the door of Fred Osborne's room. He was not in the least expecting any caller at that hour, and had paid no attention when he had heard the doorbell of the boarding-house ring downstairs, and the sound of feet ascending the steps. He hastened to open the door, however, and in the dim hallway he recognized the dark, handsome face of Maurice Stark, and behind it the tall, raw-boned form of Peter Macgregor.

Both of them uttered an exclamation of satisfaction at seeing him. They were both in fur caps and overcoats, for it was a sharp Canadian December night, and at the first glance Fred observed that their faces wore an expression of excitement.

"Come in, boys!" he said. "I wasn't going to bed. Here, take your coats off. What's up? You look as if something was the matter."

"Is Horace in town?" demanded Peter.

Fred shook his head. Horace was his elder brother, a mining engineer mostly employed in the North Country.

"He's still somewhere in the North Woods. I haven't heard from him since October, but I'm expecting him to turn up almost any day now. Why, what's the matter?"

"The matter? Something pretty big," returned Maurice.

Maurice Stark was Fred's most intimate friend in Toronto University, from which he had himself graduated the summer before. He knew Macgregor less well, for the big Scotch-Canadian was in the medical school. His home place

was somewhere far up in the North Woods, but he had a great intercollegiate reputation as a long-distance runner. It was, in fact, chiefly in a sporting way that Fred had come to know him, for Fred held an amateur skating championship, and was even then training for the ice tournament to be held in Toronto in a few weeks.

"It's something big!" Maurice repeated. "I wish Horace were here, but—could you get a holiday from your office for a week or ten days?"

"I've got it already," said Fred. "I reserved my holidays last summer, and things aren't busy in a real estate office at this time of year. I guess I could get two weeks if I wanted it. I'm spending most of my time now training for the five and ten miles."

"Could you skate a hundred and fifty miles in two days?" demanded Macgregor.

"I might if I had to—if it was a case of life and death."

"That's just what it is—a case of life and death, and possibly a fortune into the bargain!" cried Maurice. "You see—but Mac has the whole story."

The Scottish medical student went to the window, raised the blind and peered out at the wintry sky.

"No sign of snow yet," he said in a tone of satisfaction.

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded Fred, who was burning with curiosity by this time. "What's going on, anyway? Hurry up."

"Spoil the skating," said Macgregor briefly. "Well," he went on after a moment, "this is how I had the story.

"I live away up north of North Bay, you know, at a little place called Muirhead. I went home for a little visit last week, and the second day I was there they brought in a sick Indian from Hickson, a little farther north—sick with smallpox. The Hickson authorities wouldn't have him at any price, and they had just passed him on to us. The people at Muirhead didn't want him either. It wasn't such a very bad case of smallpox, but the poor wretch had suffered a good deal of exposure, and he was pretty shaky. Everybody was in a panic about him; they

wanted to ship him straight down to North Bay; but finally I got him fixed up in a sort of isolation camp and looked after him myself."

"Good for you, Mac!" Fred ejaculated.

"Oh, it was good hospital training, and I'd been recently vaccinated, so I didn't run any danger. It paid me, though, for when I'd pulled him around a bit he told me the story, and a queer tale it was."

Macgregor paused and went to look out of the window again with anxiety. Fred was listening breathlessly.

"It seems that last September this Indian, along with a couple of half-breeds, went up into the woods for the winter trapping, and built a cabin on one of the branches of the Abitibi River, away up northeast of Lake Timagami. I know about where it was. I suppose you've never been up in that country, Osborne?"

"Never quite as far as that. Last summer I was nearly up to Timagami with Horace."

Fred had made a good many canoeing trips into the Northern wilderness with his brother, and Horace himself, as mining engineer, surveyor, and free-lance prospector, had spent most of the last five years in that region. At irregular and generally unexpected times he would turn up in Toronto with a bale of furs, a sack of mineralogical specimens, and a book of geological notes, which would presently appear in the "University Science Quarterly," or even in more important publications. He was an Associate of the Canadian Geographical Society, and always expected to hit on a vein of mineral that would make his whole family millionaires.

"Well, I've been up and down the Abitibi in a canoe," Macgregor went on, "and I think I know almost the exact spot where they must have built the cabin. Anyhow, I'm certain I could find it, for the Indian described it as accurately as he could.

"It seems that the three men trapped there till the end of October, and then a white man came into their camp. He was all alone, and complained of feeling sick. They were kind enough to him; he stayed with them, but in a few days they found out what the matter was. He had smallpox.

"Now, you know how the Indians and half-breeds dread smallpox. They fear it like death itself, but these fellows seem to have behaved pretty well at first. They did what they could for the sick man, but pretty soon one of the trappers came down with the disease. It took a violent form, and he was dead in a few days.

"That was too much for the nerve of the Indian, and he slipped away and started for the settlements south. But he had waited too long. He had the germs in him. He sickened in the woods, but had strength enough to keep going till he came to the first clearings. Somebody rushed him in to Hickson, and so he was passed on to my hands."

"And what became of the white man and the other trapper?" demanded Fred.

"Ah, that's what nobody knows. The Indian said that the remaining half-breed was falling sick when he left. The white man may be dead by this time, or perhaps still living but deserted, or he may be well on the road to recovery. But I left out the sensational feature of the whole thing. My Indian said that the white man had a buckskin sack on him full of little stones that shone like fire. He seemed to set great store by them, and threatened to blow the head off anybody who touched the bag."

"Shining stones? Perhaps they were diamonds!" ejaculated Fred.

"It looks almost as if he might have found the diamond fields, for a fact," said Peter, with sparkling eyes.

Canada was full of rumors of diamond discoveries just then. Every Canadian must remember the intense excitement created by the report that diamonds had been found in the mining regions of northern Ontario. Several stones had actually been brought down to Toronto and Montreal, where tests showed them to be real diamonds, though they were mostly small, flawed, and valueless. One, however, was said to have brought nine hundred dollars, and the news set many parties outfitting to prospect for the blue-clay beds. But they met with no success. In every case the stones had either been picked up in river drift or obtained from Indians who could give no definite account of where they had been found.

Could it be that this strange white man had actually stumbled on the diamond fields—only to fall sick and perhaps to die with the secret of his discoveries

untold? Fred gazed from Peter to Maurice, almost speechless.

"Naturally, my first idea was to get up a rescue party to bring out the sick prospector," Maurice went on. "But the woods are in the worst kind of shape for traveling. The streams are all frozen hard, but there has been remarkably little snow yet—not near enough for snowshoes or sledges. It would be impossible to tramp that distance and pack the supplies. Besides, when I came to think it over it struck me that the thing was too valuable to share with a lot of guides and backwoodsmen. If we find that fellow alive, and he has really discovered anything, it would be strange if he wouldn't give us a chance to stake out a few claims that might be worth thousands—maybe millions. And it struck me that there was a quicker way to get to him than by snowshoes or dogs. The streams are frozen, the ice is clear, and the skating was fine at Muirhead."

"An expedition on skates?" cried Fred.

"Why not? There's a clear canoe way, barring a few portages, and that means a clear ice road till it snows. But it might do that at any moment."

"A hundred and fifty miles in two days?" said Fred. "Sure, we can do it. I'll set the pace, if you fellows can keep up."

"Anyhow, I came straight down to the city and saw Maurice about it. He said you'd be the best third man we could get. But I had hoped we could get Horace, so as to have his expert opinion on what that man may have found."

"The last time I heard from Horace he was at Red Lake," said Fred, "but I wouldn't have any idea where to find him now. He always comes back to Toronto for the winter, and he can't be much later than this."

"Well, we can't wait for him," said Maurice regretfully. "I'm sorry, but maybe next spring will do as well, when we go to prospect our diamond claims."

"Yes, but we've got to get them first," said Peter, "and there's a man's life to be saved—and it might snow to-night and block the whole expedition."

"Then we'd get dogs and snowshoes," Maurice remarked, "but it would be far slower traveling than on skates."

"We must rush things. Could we get away to-morrow?" Fred cried.

"We must—by the evening train. Maurice and I have been making out a list of the things we need to buy. Have you a gun? Well, we have two rifles anyway, and that'll be more than enough, for we want to go as light as possible. You'll need a sleeping-bag, of course, and your roughest, warmest woolen clothes, and a couple of heavy sweaters. We'll carry snowshoes and moccasins with us, in case of a snowfall. I'll bring a medicine case and disinfectants."

"Will we have to pack all that outfit on our shoulders?" Fred asked.

"No, of course not. I have a six-foot toboggan, which I'll have fitted with detachable steel runners to-morrow, good for either ice or snow. We'll haul it by a rope. But here's the main thing—the grub list."

Fred glanced over the scribbled rows of the carefully considered items,—bacon, condensed milk, powdered eggs, beans, dehydrated vegetables, meal, tea, bread,—and he was astonished.

"Surely we won't need all this for a week or ten days?"

"That's a man-killing country in the winter," responded the Scotchman grimly. "I know it. You have to go well prepared, and you never can depend on getting game after snow falls. Besides, we'll have no time for hunting. Yes, we'll need every ounce of that, and it'll all have to be bought to-morrow. And now I suppose we'd better improve the last chance of sleeping in a bed that we'll have for some time."

He went to the window and again observed the sky, which remained clear and starry, snapping with frost.

"No sign of snow, certainly. We can count on you, then, Osborne? Of course it's understood that we share expenses equally—they won't be heavy—and share anything that we may get out of it."

"Count on me? I should rather think so!" cried Fred fervently. "Why, I'd never have forgiven you if you hadn't let me in on this. But we'll have to do a lot of quick shopping to-morrow, won't we? Where do we meet?"

"At my rooms, as soon after breakfast as possible," replied Mac. "And breakfast early, and make all the preparations you can before that."

At this they went away, leaving Fred alone, but far too full of excitement to sleep. He sorted out his warmest clothing, carefully examined and oiled his hockey skates and boots, wrote a necessary letter or two, and did such other things as occurred to him. It was long past one o'clock when he did go to bed, and even then he could not sleep. His mind was full of the dangerous expedition that he had plunged into within the last hours. His imagination saw vividly the picture of the long ice road through the wilderness, a hundred and fifty miles to the lonely trappers' shack, where a white man lay sick with a bag of diamonds on his breast—or perhaps by this time lay dead with the secret of immense riches lost with him. And the ice road might close to-morrow. Fred tossed and turned in bed, and more than once got up to look out the window for signs of a snowstorm.

But he went to sleep at last, and slept soundly till awakened by the rattle of his alarm-clock, set for half-past six. He had an early breakfast and packed his clothes. At nine o'clock he telephoned the real estate office where he was employed, and had no difficulty in getting his holidays extended another week. Business was dull just then.

At half-past nine he met Maurice and Peter, who were waiting for him with impatience. Macgregor had already left his toboggan at a sporting-goods store to be equipped with runners for use on ice. But there remained an immense amount of shopping to do, and all the things had to be purchased at half a dozen different places. Together they went the rounds of the shops with a list from which they checked off article after article,—ammunition, sleeping-bags, moccasins, food, camp outfit,—and they ordered them all sent to Macgregor's rooms by special delivery.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the boys went back, and found the room littered with innumerable parcels of every shape and size. Only the toboggan had not arrived, though it had been promised for the middle of the afternoon.

"Gracious! It looks like a lot!" exclaimed Maurice, gazing about at the packages.

"It won't look like so much when they're stowed away," replied Peter. "Let's get them unwrapped, and, Fred, you'd better go down and hurry up that toboggan. Stand over them till it's done, for we must have it before six o'clock."

Fred hurried downtown again. The toboggan was not finished, but the work

was under way. By dint of furious entreaties and representations of the emergency Fred induced them to hurry it up. It was not a long job, and by a quarter after five Fred was back at Mac's room, accompanied by a messenger with the remodeled toboggan.

The toboggan was of the usual pattern and shape, but the cushions had been removed, and a thirty-foot moose-hide thong attached for hauling. It was fitted with four short steel runners, only four inches high, which could be removed in a few minutes by unscrewing the nuts, so that it could be used as a sledge on ice or as a toboggan on deep snow.

During Fred's absence the other boys had been busy. All the kit was out of the wrappers, and the room was a wilderness of brown paper. Everything had been packed into four canvas dunnage sacks, and now these were firmly strapped on the toboggan. The rifles and the snowshoes were similarly attached, so that the whole outfit was in one secure package. They hauled this down to the railway station themselves to make sure that there would be no delay, and dispatched it by express to Waverley, where they intended to leave the train. It was then a few minutes after six.

THE OTHER BOYS HAD BEEN BUSY
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"Well, we're as good as off now," remarked Maurice, with a long breath. "Our train goes at eight. We've got two hours, and now I guess I'll go home and have supper with my folks and say good-bye. We'll all meet at the depot."

Neither Fred nor Macgregor had any relatives in the city and no necessary farewells to make. They had supper together at a downtown restaurant, and afterwards met Maurice at the Union Depot, where they took the north-bound express.

Next morning they awoke from uneasy slumbers to find the train rushing through a desolate landscape of snowy spruces. Through the frosted double glass of the windows the morning looked clear and cold, but they were relieved to see that there was only a little snow on the ground, and glimpses of rivers and lakes showed clear, shining ice. Evidently the road was still open.

It was half-past ten that forenoon when they reached Waverley, and they found that it was indeed cold. The thermometer stood at five above zero; the

snow was dry as powder underfoot, and the little backwoods village looked frozen up. But it was sunny, and the biting air was full of the freshness of the woods, and the spirits of all the boys rose jubilantly.

The laden toboggan had come up on the same train with them, and they saw it taken out of the express car. Leaving it at the station, they went to the village hotel, where they ate an early dinner, and changed from their civilized clothes to the caps, sweaters, and Hudson Bay "duffel" trousers that they had brought in their suit-cases.

They had been the only passengers to leave the train, and their arrival produced quite a stir in Waverley. It was not the season for camping parties, nor for hunting, and no one went into the woods for pleasure in the winter. The toboggan with its steel runners drew a curious group at the station.

"Goin' in after moose?" inquired an old woodsman while they were at dinner.

"No," replied Peter.

"Goin' up to the pulpwood camps, mebbe?"

"No."

"What might ye be goin' into the woods fer?" he persisted, after some moments.

"We might be going in after gold," answered Maurice gravely.

He did not mean it to be taken seriously, but he forgot that gold is mined in several parts of northern Ontario. Before many hours the word spread that a big winter gold strike had been made up north, and a party from the city was already going to the spot, so that for several weeks the village was in a state of excitement.

The boys suspected nothing of this, but the public curiosity began to be annoying.

"Can't we start at once?" Fred suggested.

"Yes; there's no use in stopping here another hour," Peter agreed. "We ought

to catch the fine weather while it lasts, and we can make a good many miles in the rest of this day."

So they left their baggage at the hotel, with instructions to have it kept till their return, secured their toboggan at the depot, and went down to the river. The stream was a belt of clear, bluish ice, free from snow except for a little drift here and there.

Half a dozen curious idlers had followed them. Paying no attention, the boys took off their moccasins and put on the hockey boots with skates attached. They slid out upon the ice and dragged the toboggan after them.

The spectators raised a cheer, which the three boys answered with a yell as they struck out. The ice was good; the toboggan ran smoothly after them, so that they scarcely noticed its weight. In a moment the snowy roofs of the little village had passed out of sight around a bend of the river, and black spruce and hemlock woods were on either side. The great adventure had begun.

CHAPTER II

"Don't force the pace at first, boys," Fred warned his companions. "Remember, we've a long way to go."

As the expert skater, he had taken the leading end of the drag-rope. His advice was hard to follow. The ice was in perfect condition; the toboggan ran almost without friction on its steel shoes, and in that sparkling air it seemed that it would be easy to skate a hundred miles without ever once resting.

For a little way the river was bordered with stumpy clearings; then the dark hemlock and jack-pine woods closed down on the shores. The skaters had reached the frontier; it might well be that there were not a dozen cultivated fields between them and the North Pole.

Here the river was about a hundred feet wide, the long ice road that Fred had imagined. Comparatively little snow had yet fallen, and that little seemed to have

come with high winds, which had swept the ice clear. More, however, might be looked for any day.

But for that day they were safe. They rushed ahead, forcing the pace a little, after all, in a swinging single file, with the toboggan gliding behind. In great curves the river wound through the woods and frozen swamps, and only twice that day had they to go ashore to get round roaring, unfrozen rapids. Each of those obstructions cost the boys half an hour of labor before they could get the toboggan through the dense underbrush that choked the portage. But they had counted on such delays.

Not a breath of wind stirred, and the forest was profoundly still. Full of wild life though it undoubtedly was, not a sign of it was visible, except now and then a chain of delicate tracks along the shore.

Evening comes early in that latitude and season. At sunset Macgregor estimated that they had covered thirty miles.

"Time to camp, boys!" he shouted from the rear. "Look out for a good place —shelter and lots of dry wood."

Two or three miles farther on they found it—a spot where several large spruce trees had fallen together, and lay dry and dead near the shore. They drew up the toboggan and exchanged their skating-boots for moccasins. Maurice began to cut up wood with a small axe; the others trampled down the snow in a circle.

Dusk was already falling when the fire blazed up, making all at once a spot of almost home-like cheerfulness. Fred chopped a hole in the ice in order to fill the kettle, and while it was boiling, they cut down a number of small saplings, and placed them in lean-to fashion against a ridgepole. The balsam twigs that they trimmed off they threw inside, until the snow was covered with a great heap of fragrant boughs. On it they spread the sleeping-bags to face the fire.

They supped that night on fried bacon, dried eggs, oatmeal cakes, and tea—real *voyageur's* tea, hot and strong, flavored with brown sugar and wood smoke, and drunk out of tin cups.

Leaning back on the balsam couch, they made merry over their meal, while the stars came out white and clear over the dark woods. There was every

prospect now of their reaching the trappers' cabin in two days more, at most. There were only the two serious dangers—a snowstorm might spoil the ice, and Macgregor might not be able to hit upon the right place.

The boys were tired enough to be drowsy as soon as they had finished supper. Little by little their conversation flagged; the chance of finding diamonds ceased to interest them, and presently they built up the fire and crawled into their sleeping-bags. It was a cold night, and except for the occasional cry of a hunting owl or lynx, the wilderness was silent as death.

The boys were up early the next morning; smoke was rising from their fire before the sun was well off the horizon. The weather seemed slightly warmer, and a wind was rising from the west, but it was not strong enough to impede them.

After breakfast, they repacked the kit on the toboggan. The spot had been home for a night; now nothing was left except a pile of crushed twigs and a few black brands on the trampled snow.

The travelers were fresh again; now they settled down to a long, steady stroke that carried them on rapidly. Three times they had to land to pass round open rapids or dangerous ice, but about eleven o'clock Macgregor saw what he had been looking for. It was a spot where several trees had been cut down on the shore. A rather faint trail showed through the cedar thickets. It was the beginning of the main portage that ran three miles northwest, straight across country to the Abitibi River. They had been mortally afraid of overrunning the spot.

They boiled the noon kettle of tea to fortify themselves for the long crossing. Then they unshipped the runners from the toboggan, put on their moccasins and snowshoes, and started ashore across a range of low, densely wooded hills.

The trail was blazed at long intervals, but not cleared, and it was hard, exasperating work to get the toboggan through the snowy tangle. After two hours they came out on the crest of a hill overlooking a great river that ran like a gleaming steel-blue ribbon far into the north.

"The Abitibi!" cried Macgregor.

They had come a good seventy miles from Waverley. At that rate, they might expect to reach their destination the next day; and, greatly encouraged, they

coasted on the toboggan down to the ice, and set out again on skates.

During the tramp the sky had grown hazy, and the northwest wind was blowing stronger. For some time it was not troublesome, for it came from the left, but it continued to freshen, and the clouds darkened ominously.

Late in the afternoon the travelers came suddenly upon the second of the known landmarks. From the west a smaller river, nameless, as far as they knew, poured past a bluff of black granite into the Abitibi, making a fifty-yard stretch of open water that tumbled and foamed with a hoarse uproar among ice-bound boulders. Here they had to change their course, for according to Macgregor's calculation, it was about fifty miles up this river that the cabin stood.

Again they went ashore, and after struggling through two hundred yards of dense thickets reached the little nameless river from the west.

The change in their course brought them squarely into the eye of the wind, and they felt the difference instantly. The breeze had risen to half a gale; the whole sky had clouded. It was only an hour from sunset, but no one mentioned camping; they were resolved to go on while the light lasted. And suddenly Fred, struggling on with bent head against the wind, saw that the front of his blue sweater was growing powdered with white grains.

"We're caught, boys!" he exclaimed; and they stopped to look at the menacing sky.

Snow was drifting down in fine powder, and glancing over the ice past their feet. Straight down from the great Hudson Bay barrens the storm was coming, and the roar of the forest, now that they stopped to listen, was like that of the tempestuous sea.

"'Snow meal, snow a great deal,'" Macgregor quoted, with forced cheerfulness.

"Let's hope not!" exclaimed Maurice.

And Fred added: "Anyhow, let's get on while we can."

On they went, skating fast. As yet the snow was no hindrance, for it spun off the smooth ice as fast as it fell. It was the wind that troubled them, for it roared

down the river channel with disheartening force.

It was especially discouraging to be checked thus on the last lap, but none of them thought of giving up. They settled doggedly to the task, although it took all their strength and wind to keep going. But all three were in pretty good training, and they stuck to it for more than an hour. The forest was growing dark, and the snow was coming faster. Then Maurice, rather dubiously, suggested a halt.

"Nonsense! We're good for another ten miles, at least!" cried Peter, who seemed tireless.

They shot ahead again. Evening settled early, with the snow falling thick. The ice was white now; skates and toboggan left black streaks, immediately obliterated by fresh flakes. Just before complete darkness fell, the boys made a short halt, built a fire, and boiled tea. No more was said of camping. They had tacitly resolved to struggle on as long as they could keep going, for they knew that they would have no chance to use their skates after that night.

It grew dark, but never pitch dark, for the reflection from the snow gave light enough for them to see the road. Even yet the snow lay so light that the blades cut it without an effort.

The wind, however, was hard to fight against. In spite of his amateur championship, Fred was the first to give out. For some time he had felt himself flagging, dropping behind, and then recovering; but all at once his legs gave way, and he collapsed in a heap on the ice, half unconscious from fatigue.

Macgregor and Stark bent over him.

"Got to put him on the toboggan," declared the Scotchman.

Maurice felt that it was madness for two of them to try to haul the greater load, but without protest he helped to roll the dazed youngster in the blankets, and to strap him on the sledge. The next stage always seemed to him a sort of waking nightmare; he never quite knew how long it lasted. The wind bore against him like a wall; the drag of the toboggan seemed intolerable. Half dead with exhaustion and fatigue, he fixed his eyes on Macgregor's broad back, and went on with short, forced strokes, with the feeling that each marked the extreme limit of his strength.

Suddenly his leader stopped. A great black space seemed to have opened in the white road ahead.

"Another portage!" Macgregor shouted in Maurice's ear.

A long, unfrozen rapid was thundering in the gloom. With maddening difficulty, Maurice and Macgregor hacked a road through willow thickets and got the toboggan past.

Again they were on the ice, with the rapid behind them. It seemed to Maurice that the horror of that exertion would never end; then suddenly the night seemed to turn pitch black, and he felt himself shaken by the shoulder.

"Get on the toboggan, Maurice! Come, wake up!" Macgregor was saying. "Wake up!"

Dimly he realized that he was sitting on the ice—that they had stopped—that Fred was up again. Too stupefied to question anything, he rolled into the blanket out of which Fred had crawled, and instantly went sound asleep.

It seemed only a moment until he was roused again. Drunk with sleep, he clutched the towrope blindly, while Fred, who was completely done this time, again took his place on the sledge. Only Macgregor seemed proof against fatigue. Bent against the gale, he skated vigorously at the forward end of the line, and his strong voice shouted back encouragements that Maurice hardly heard.

The snow was now growing so deep on the ice that the skates ploughed through it with difficulty. Still the boys labored on, minute after minute, mile after mile. Maurice felt numb with fatigue and half asleep as he skated blindly, and suddenly he ran sharply into Macgregor, who had stopped short. There was another break just ahead—a long cascade this time, where snowy pocks showed like white blurs on the black water.

"Going to portage?" mumbled Maurice.

"No use trying to go any farther," replied the medical student, and his voice was hoarse. "Fred's played out. Snow's getting too deep, anyway. Better camp here."

Maurice would have been glad to drop where he stood. But they dragged the toboggan ashore somehow, caring little where they landed it. Peter rolled Fred off into the snow. The boy groaned, but did not waken, and they began to unpack the supplies with stiffened hands.

"Got to get something hot into us quick," said Peter thickly. "Help me make a fire."

Probably they were all nearer death than they realized. Maurice wanted only to sleep. However, in a sort of daze, he broke off branches, peeled bark, and they had a fire blazing up in the falling snowflakes. The wind whirled and scattered it, but they piled on larger sticks, and Macgregor filled the kettle from the river. When the water was hot he poured in a whole tin of condensed milk, added a cake of chocolate, a handful of sugar and another of oatmeal, too stiffened to measure out anything.

Maurice had collapsed into a dead sleep in the snow. Peter shook him awake, and between them they managed to arouse Fred with great difficulty. Still half asleep they swallowed the rich, steaming mess from the kettle. It set their blood moving again, but they were too thoroughly worn out to think of building a camp. They crept into their sleeping-bags, buttoned the naps down over their heads and went to sleep regardless of consequences.

Fred awoke to find himself almost steaming hot, and in utter darkness and silence. All his muscles ached, and he could not imagine where he was. A weight held him down when he tried to move, but he turned over at last and sat up with an effort. A glare of white light made him blink. He had been buried under more than two feet of snow.

It was broad daylight. All the world was white, and a raging snowstorm was driving through the forest. The tree-tops creaked and roared, and the powdery snow whirled like smoke. Fred felt utterly bewildered. There was no sign of the camp-fire, nor of the toboggan, nor of any of his companions, nothing but a few mounds on the drifted white surface.

Finally he crawled out of his sleeping-outfit and dug into one of these mounds. Two feet down he came upon the surface of a sleeping-bag, and punched it vigorously. It stirred; the flap opened, and Macgregor thrust his face out, blinking, red and dazed.

"Time to get up!" Fred shouted.

Mac crawled out and shook off the snow, looking disconcerted.

"Snowed in, with a vengeance!" he remarked. "Where's the camp—and where's Maurice?"

After prodding about they located the third member of their party at last, and dug him out. As for the camp, there was none, and they could only guess at where the toboggan with their stores might be buried.

"This ends our skating," said Maurice. "It'll have to be snowshoes after this. Good thing we got so far last night."

"No thanks to me!" Fred remarked. "I was the expert skater; I believe I said I'd set the pace, and I was the first to cave in. I hope I do better with the snowshoes."

"Neither snowshoes nor skates to-day," said Peter. "We can't travel till this storm blows over. Nothing for it but to build a camp and sit tight."

After groping about for some time they found the toboggan, unstrapped the snowshoes, and used them as shovels to clear away a circular place. In doing so they came upon the black brands of last night's fire, with the camp kettle upon them where they had left it. Fred ploughed through the snow and collected wood for a fresh fire, while Peter and Maurice set up stakes and poles and built a roof of hemlock branches to afford shelter from the storm. It was only a rude shed with one side open to face the fire, but it kept off the snow and wind and proved fairly comfortable. Fred had coffee made by this time, and it did not take long to fry a pan of bacon. They seated themselves on a heap of boughs at the edge of the shelter and ate and drank. They all were stiff and sore, but the hot food and coffee made a decided improvement.

"What surprises me," remarked Maurice, "is that we didn't freeze last night, sleeping under the snow. But I never felt warmer in bed."

"It was the snow that did it. Snow makes a splendid nonconductor of heat," replied Macgregor. "Better than blankets. I remember hearing of a man who was caught by a blizzard crossing a big barren up north with a train of dogs. The dogs wouldn't face the storm; he lost his directions; and finally he turned the

sledge over and got under it with the dogs around him, and let it snow. He stayed there a day and a half, asleep most of the time, and wouldn't have known when the storm was over, only that a pack of timber wolves smelt him and tried to dig him out. They ran when they found out what was there, but he bagged two of them with his rifle."

"I don't believe even timber wolves would have wakened me this morning. I never was so stiff and used up in my life," Maurice commented on this tale of adventure.

"Yes, we need the rest," said Mac. "We overdid it yesterday, and we couldn't have gone far to-day in any case."

"But meanwhile that man at the cabin may be dying," exclaimed Fred.

"If he's dead it can't be helped," responded the Scotchman. "We're doing all that's humanly possible. But if he's alive, don't forget that he can't get away while this storm lasts, any more than we can."

"Well, it looks as if the storm would last all day," said Fred, gazing upwards.

The blizzard did last all that day, reaching its height toward the middle of the afternoon, but it was not extremely cold, and the boys were fairly comfortable. They lounged on the blankets in the shelter of the camp, and recuperated from their fatigue, discussing their chances of still reaching the cabin in time to do any good. None of them could guess accurately how far they had come in that terrible night, but at the worst they could not think the cabin more than forty miles farther. This distance would have to be traveled on snowshoes, however, not skates, and none of the boys were very expert snowshoers. It would be certainly more than one day's tramp.

Toward night the wind lessened, though it was still snowing fast. The boys piled on logs enough to keep the fire smouldering all night in spite of the snowflakes, and went to sleep under cover of the hemlock roof. Maurice awoke toward the middle of the night, and noticed drowsily that it had stopped snowing, and that a star or two was visible overhead.

Next morning dawned sparkling clear and very cold, with not a breath of wind. Everything was deep and fluffy with the fresh snow, and when the sun came up the glare was almost blinding. It would be good weather for snowshoe

travel, and the boys all felt fit again for another hard day.

After breakfast, therefore, they packed the supplies upon the toboggan, unscrewed the steel runners, and put on the new snowshoes.

"We'd better stick to the river," Peter remarked. "It may make it a little farther, but it gives us a clear road, and if we follow the river we can't miss the cabin."

"No danger of going through air-holes in the ice?" queried Fred.

"Not much. An air-hole isn't generally big enough to let a snowshoe go through. We'll pull you out if you do. Come along."

Off they went again. But they had not gone far before discovering that travel was going to be less easy than they had thought. The snow was light and the snowshoes sank deep. They moved in a cloud of puffing white powder, and the heavy toboggan went down so that it was difficult to draw it. Without the smooth, level road of the river they could hardly have progressed at all.

They braced themselves to the work and plodded on, taking turns at going first to break the road. The sun shone down in a white dazzle. There was no heat in it, but the glare was so strong that they had to pull their caps low over their eyes for fear of snow-blindness—the most deadly enemy of the winter traveler in the North. During the forenoon they thought they made hardly more than ten miles, and at noon they halted, made a fire and boiled tea.

The hot drink and an hour's rest made them ready for the road again. Twice that afternoon they had to make a long détour through the woods to avoid unfrozen rapids, and once the brush was so dense that they had to cut a way for the toboggan with the axe. Once, too, the ice suddenly cracked under Fred's foot, and he flung himself forward just in time to avoid the black water gushing up through the snowed-over air-hole.

The life of the wilderness was beginning to emerge after the storm. Along the shores they saw the tracks of mink. Once they encountered a plunging trail across the river where several timber wolves must have crossed the night before, and late in the afternoon Maurice shot a couple of spruce grouse in a thicket. He flung them on the toboggan, and they arrived at camp that night frozen into solid lumps.

It was plainly impossible to reach the cabin that day. Peter, who was keenly on the lookout, failed to recognize any of the landmarks.

"We'd better camp early, boys," he said. "We can't make it to-day, and there's no use in getting snowshoe cramp and being tied up for a week."

They kept on, however, till the sun was almost down. A faint but piercing northwest breeze had arisen, and they halted in the lee of a dense cedar thicket close to the river. A huge log had fallen down the shore, and this would make an excellent backing for the fire during the night.

Drawing up the toboggan, the boys took off their snowshoes and began to shovel out a circular pit for the camp. The snow had drifted deep in that spot. Before they came to the bottom the snow was heaped so high that the pit was shoulder-deep. It was all the better for shelter, and they cut cedar poles and roofed one side of it, producing a most cozy and sheltered nook.

Fred continued to pull cedar twigs for bedding, while Peter and Maurice unpacked the toboggan and lighted the fire against the big log. Now that it was laid bare this log proved to be indeed a monster. It must have been nearly three feet in diameter, and was probably hollow, but would keep the fire smouldering indefinitely. Fred plucked the frozen grouse with some difficulty, cut them up and put them into the kettle to thaw out and stew.

This consumed some time, and it was rather late when supper was ready. A bitterly cold night was setting in. The icy breeze whined through the trees, but the sheltered pit of the camp was a warm and cozy place, casting its firelight high into the branches overhead.

Snowshoe cramp had attacked none of the boys, but the unaccustomed muscles were growing stiff and sore. By Macgregor's advice they all took off moccasins and stockings and massaged their calves and ankles thoroughly, afterwards roasting them well before the fire. One side of the big log was a glowing red ember now, and they piled fresh wood beside it, laid the rifles ready, and crept into their sleeping-bags under the shelter.

Fred did not know how long he had slept when he was awakened by a sort of nervous shock. He raised his head and glanced about. All was still in the camp. His companions lay motionless in their bags. The fire had burned low, and the air of the zero night cut his face like a knife. He could not imagine what had

awakened him, but he felt that he ought to get up and replenish the fire and he was trying to make up his mind to crawl out of his warm nest when he was startled by a sort of dull, jarring rumble.

It seemed to come from the fire itself. Fred uttered a scared cry that woke both the other boys instantly.

"What's the matter? What is it?" they both exclaimed.

Before Fred could answer, there was a sort of upheaval. The fire was dashed aside. Smoke and ashes flew in every direction, and they had a cloudy glimpse of something charging out through the smoke—something huge and black and lightning quick.

"Jump! Run!" yelled Peter, scrambling to get out of his sleeping-bag.

At the shout and scramble the animal wheeled like a flash and plunged at the side of the pit, trying to reach the top with a single leap. It fell short, and came down in a cloud of snow.

Fred had got clear from the encumbering bag by this time, and floundered out of the pit without knowing exactly how he did it. He found Maurice close behind him. Peter missed his footing and tumbled back with a horrified yell, and Maurice seized him by the leg as he went down and dragged him back bodily.

Before they recovered from their panic they bolted several yards away, plunging knee-deep in the drifts, and then Peter stopped.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "It isn't after us!"

"But what was it?" stammered Maurice, out of breath.

Looking back, they could see nothing but the faint glow from the scattered brands. But they could not overlook the whole interior of the camp, where the intruder must be now lying quiet.

Trying to collect himself, Fred told how he had been awakened.

"It came straight out of the fire!" he declared.

"Out of the log, I guess," said Peter. "Here, I know what it must be. It's simply a bear!"

"A bear!" ejaculated Fred.

"Yes, a bear, that must have had his winter den in that big log. He was hibernating there, and our fire burned into his den and roused him out. That's all."

"Quite enough, I should think," said Maurice. "Bears are ugly-tempered when they're disturbed from their winter dens, I've heard. He's got possession of our camp, now. What'll we do?"

"We'll freeze if we don't do something pretty quick," Fred added.

In fact the boys were standing in stockinged feet in the snow, and the night was bitterly cold. All looked quiet in what they could see of the camp.

"I don't see why one of us hadn't the wit to grab a gun!" said Peter bitterly.

He turned and began to wade back cautiously toward the camp. The other boys followed him, till they were close enough to look into the pit. No animal was in sight.

"Perhaps he's bolted out the other side," muttered Peter. "Who's going to go down there and find out?"

Nobody volunteered. If the bear was still in the camp he must be under the roofed-over shelter, and, in fact, as they stood shivering and listening they heard a sound of stirring about under the cedar poles of the roof.

"He's there!" exclaimed Fred.

"And eating up our stores, as like as not!" cried Maurice.

This made the case considerably more serious.

"We must get him out of that!" Macgregor exclaimed.

How to do it was the difficulty, and, still more, how to do it with safety. Both

the rifles were still lying loaded under the shelter, probably under the very feet of the bear.

"Well, we've got to take a chance!" declared Macgregor at last. "Talk about cold feet! We'll certainly have them frozen if we stand here much longer. Scatter out, boys, all around the camp. Then we'll snowball the brute out. Likely he's too scared to want to fight. Anyhow, if he jumps out on one side, the man on the opposite side must jump into the camp and grab a rifle."

It looked risky, to provoke a charge from the animal in that deep snow, where they could hardly move, but they waded around the camp till they stood at equal distances apart, surrounding the hollowed space.

"Now let him have it!" cried Peter.

Immediately they began to throw snowballs into the camp, aiming at that dark hole under the cedar roof where the animal was hidden. But the snow was too dry to pack into lumps, and the light masses they flung produced no effect. Peter broke off branches from a dead tree and threw them into the shelter, without causing the bear to come out. Finally Fred, who happened to be standing beside a birch tree, peeled off a great strip of bark and lighted it with a match.

"Hold on! Don't throw that!" yelled Peter.

He was too late. Fred had already cast the flaming mass into the camp, too close to the piles of cedar twigs. The resinous leaves caught and flashed up. There was a glare of smoky flame—a wild scramble and scurry under the shelter, and the bear burst out, and plunged at the snowy sides of the pit on the side opposite Fred's position.

He fell back as he had done before, but floundered up with a second leap. Maurice, who was nearest, gave a shrill yell and tried to dash aside, but he stumbled and went head-long in the deep snow.

Fred instantly leaped into the camp. The shelter was full of smoke and light flame, but he knew where the rifles lay, and snatched one. Straightening up, he was just in time to see the bear vanishing with long leaps into the darkness, ploughing up clouds of snow.

He fired one shot wildly, then another, but there was no sign of the animal's

being stopped, and the next instant it was out of sight.

"Quick! Stamp out this fire!" exclaimed Peter at his shoulder.

They tore down the flaming branches and beat them out in the snow. The light flame was easily put out, but it left the camp a chaos of blackened twigs and ashes.

"Well, we turned him out," said Maurice, who had hastened in to help. "Did you hit him, do you think?"

"I wish I'd killed him!" said Fred. "He's ruined our camp. But I don't believe I touched him. He was going too fast."

Peter had raked the camp-fire together and thrown on fresh wood. A bright blaze sprang up, and by its light they took off their stockings and looked for the dead white of frozen toes. But it was only Maurice who had suffered the least frost-bite, and this yielded to a little snow-rubbing. The heavy woolen stockings, and perhaps the depth of the snow itself had protected the rest of them.

Putting on his moccasins Fred then went to look for results from his shots, but came back reporting not a drop of blood on the snow. The bullets had missed cleanly, and the animal was probably miles away by that time.

"What do you suppose he'll do for the rest of the winter?" Maurice asked.

"Oh, he'll find some hole to crawl into, or perhaps he'll just creep under a log and let the snow bury him," said Peter. "He'll have to look a long time to find another snug nest like this one, though."

The big log was hollow, as they had thought, and the fire had burned well into the cavity. They could see the nest where the bear had lain, soft with rotted wood and strewn with black hairs. It seemed a pity to have turned him out of so cozy a sleeping-place.

The boys' own sleeping-place was in a complete state of wreck. The cedar roofing had fallen in, and everything was littered with snow and burned brush. The fire had been too light and too quickly extinguished to do any damage to the stores, however, and they were relieved to find that the bear had eaten none of the bacon or bread. Probably the animal had been merely cowering there for

shelter, afraid to come out.

They did not attempt to rebuild the shelter roof, but cleared away the snow and ashes, and sat in their sleeping-bags by the fire. After all the excitement none of them felt like sleeping. They were hungry, though, and finally they boiled tea and cooked a pan of bacon and dried eggs. Even after this they lay talking for a long time, and it was between midnight and dawn when they finally fell asleep.

This was the reason why it was long after sunrise when they awoke, feeling rather as if they had had a bad night. It was another clear, bright day, though still very cold, and they felt it imperative that they should reach the cabin before nightfall.

That forenoon they made all the speed they could, halted for only a brief rest at noon, and pushed on energetically through the afternoon. The cabin could not be far, unless Macgregor had mistaken the way. Look as he would, he could not make out any landmarks that he could remember; but he had been through only by canoe in the summer, and the woods have a very different appearance in the winter.

As the afternoon wore on they began to grow anxious. At every turning they looked eagerly ahead, but they saw nothing except the unbroken forest. It was nearly sunset when Maurice suddenly pointed forward with a shout of excitement.

They had just rounded a bend of the river. A hundred yards away, nestling in a hemlock thicket, stood a squat log hut. But no trail led to its door, no smoke rose from its chimney, the snow had drifted almost to its eaves, and it looked gloomy and desolate as the darkening wilderness itself.

CHAPTER III

There was so grim an air of desolation about the hut that the boys stopped short with a sense of dread.

"Can this really be it?" Maurice muttered.

The hut and its surroundings were exactly as the Indian had described them. They ventured forward hesitatingly, reconnoitered, and approached the door. It stood ajar two or three inches; a heavy drift of snow lay against it. Clearly no living man was in the cabin.

"We've come too late, boys," said Macgregor. "However, let's have a look."

Using one of his snowshoes as a shovel, he began to clear the doorway. Fred helped him. They scraped away the snow, and forced the door open.

For fear of infection, they contented themselves with peeping in from the entrance; a glance showed them that no man was in that dim interior, dead or alive.

The cabin was a mere hut, built of small logs, chinked with moss and mud, and was less than five feet high at the eaves. The floor was of clay; the roof appeared to be of bark and moss thatch, supported on poles. A small window of some skin or membrane let in a faint light, and the rough fireplace was full of snow that had blown down the chimney.

No one was there, but some one had left in haste. The whole interior was in the wildest confusion, littered with all sorts of articles of forest housekeeping flung about pell-mell—cooking-utensils, scraps of clothing, blankets, furs, traps; they could not make out all the articles that encumbered the floor.

"The fellow must have simply got well and gone away with the other half-breed," said Macgregor, after they had surveyed the place in silence. "Well, that ends our hope of being millionaires next year. We've come on a fool's errand."

"Nothing for it now but to go home again, is there?" said Fred, in disgust.

"We've come one hundred and fifty miles to see this camp, and we ought to look through it," said Maurice.

"We must disinfect the place before we can go in. And there's no chance of our finding any diamonds here," Fred remarked.

"I want to have a look through, anyway. Let's get out the fumigating

machine."

It was a formaldehyde outfit, consisting simply of a can of the disinfectant with a bracket attached underneath to hold a small spirit lamp. By the heat of the flame, formalin gas, one of the deadliest germ-killers known, was given off.

Macgregor opened the can, lighted the pale spirit flame, and set the apparatus on a rude shelf that happened to be just inside the hut. They forced the door shut again, and sealed it by throwing water against it, for the water promptly froze. It was not necessary to close the chimney, for the germicidal gas is heavier than air, and fills a room exactly as water fills a tank.

As it would take the disinfectant ten or twelve hours to do its work, they hastened to construct a camp, for it was growing dark. It was a rather melancholy evening. The nearness of the cabin, with its sinister associations, affected them disagreeably; and, moreover, they were all tired with the day's tramp, and chagrined and mortified at having come, as Peter said, "on a fool's errand." After all their glittering hopes, there was nothing now for them except a week's snowshoe tramp back to Waverley, with barely enough provisions to see them through.

Still they were curious about the cabin, and before breakfast the next morning they burst open the ice-sealed door. A suffocating odor issued forth, so powerful that they staggered back.

"Good gracious!" gasped Fred, after a spasm of coughing. "It must certainly be safe after that!"

They found it impossible to go in until the gas had cleared away, and so, leaving the door wide open, they returned to breakfast. Afterward they idled about, trying to kill time; it was afternoon before they could venture inside the cabin for more than a moment.

It was disagreeable even then, for the whole interior was filled with the heavy, suffocating odor. They coughed, and their eyes watered, but they managed to endure it.

As they had seen, the contents of the place were all topsy-turvy. The furniture consisted solely of a rough table of split planks, and a couple of rough seats. A heap of rusty, brown *sapin* in a corner, covered with a torn blanket, represented a

bed—possibly the one in which the trapper had died.

In one corner stood a double-barreled shotgun, still loaded. Three pairs of snowshoes were thrust under the rafters; several worn moccasins lay on the floor, along with nearly a dozen steel traps, a bundle of furs, some of which were valuable, a camp kettle, an axe, strips of hide, dry bones, a blanket, fishing-tackle—an unspeakable litter of things, some worthless, some to men in a wilderness precious as gold.

The last occupants had plainly left in such a desperate hurry that they had abandoned most of their possessions. Why had they done it? The boys could not guess.

The heavy formalin fumes rose and choked them as they poked over the rubbish. But they found nothing to show the fate of the prospector and the surviving half-breed, or even to tell them whether this was really the cabin they were seeking.

"Throw this rubbish into the fireplace," said Macgregor. "Burning is the best thing for it, and the fire will ventilate the place. There's no danger of germs on the metal things."

"These furs are worth something," said Fred, who had been looking them over. "There are a dozen or so of mink and marten—enough to pay the expenses of the trip."

They laid the furs aside, and cramming the rest of the litter into the snowy fireplace, with the dead balsam boughs, set it afire. In the red blaze the hut assumed an unexpectedly homelike aspect.

"Not such a bad place for the winter, after all," Maurice remarked, casting his eye about. "I shouldn't mind spending a month trapping here myself. What if we did, fellows, eh? Here are plenty of traps, and we might clear three or four hundred dollars, with a little luck."

"Here's something new," interrupted Peter, who had been grubbing about in a corner.

He came forward with a woodsman's "turkey" in his hands—a heavy canvas knapsack, much stained and battered, and rather heavy.

"Something in this," he continued, trying the rusty buckles. "Why, what's the matter, Fred?"

For Fred had uttered a sudden cry, and they saw his face turn deathly white. He snatched the sack, tore it open, and shook it out.

A number of pieces of rock fell to the floor, a couple of geologist's hammers, a pair of socks, and a couple of small, oilcloth-covered notebooks.

On these Fred pounced, and opened them. They were full of penciled notes.

"They're his!" the boy exclaimed wildly. "They're Horace's notebooks! I knew his turkey. Horace was here. Don't you see? *He* was the sick man!"

For a minute his companions, hardly comprehending, looked on in amazement. Then Macgregor took one of the books from his hand. On the inside of the cover was plainly written, "Horace Osborne, Toronto."

"It's true!" he muttered. "It must really have been Horace." Then, collecting his wits, he added, "But he must be all right, since he's gone away."

"No!" Fred cried. "He'd never have gone away leaving his notes and specimens. It was his whole summer's work. He'd have thrown away anything else. He must be dead."

"He was vaccinated. He's sure not to have died of smallpox," Peter urged.

Fred had collapsed on the mud floor, holding the "turkey," and fairly crying.

"He had the diamonds on him. That half-breed may have murdered him, and then fled in a hurry. Things look like it," said Maurice aside to Peter.

"Yes, but then Horace's body would be here," the Scotchman returned. "I don't understand it."

"They can't have both died, either, or they'd both be here. So they must both have gone. But no trapper would have left these valuable pelts, any more than Horace would have left his notes."

"There's something mysterious here," said Fred, getting up resolutely, and

wiping the tears from his eyes. "Horace has been here. Something's happened to him, and we've got to find out what it is."

"And we'll find out—if it takes all winter!" Macgregor assured him.

They searched the hut afresh, but found no clues. They now regretted having burned the heap of rubbish, which perhaps had contained something to throw light on the problem.

During the rest of that afternoon they searched and searched again throughout the cabin, and prowled about its neighborhood. They dug into the snowdrifts, poked into the brushwood, scouted into the forest in the faint hope of finding something that would cast light on Horace's fate. All they found was the trapper's birch canoe, laid up ashore, and buried in snow.

At dusk they got supper, and ate it in a rather gloomy silence.

"We've nothing to go on," said Macgregor. "I can't believe that Horace is dead, though, and we must stay on the spot till we know something more definite."

"Of course we must," Maurice agreed.

"I shouldn't have asked it of you, boys," said Fred. "I'd made up my mind to stay, though, till I found out something certain—and it would have been mighty lonely."

"Nonsense! Do you think we'd have left you?" Maurice exclaimed. "Aren't we all Horace's friends? The only thing I'm thinking of is the grub. We have barely enough for a week more."

"What of that?" said Peter. "We have rifles, haven't we? The woods ought to be full of deer—plenty of partridges and small game, anyway. We must make a regular business of hunting till we get enough meat for a week, and we must economize, of course, on our bread and canned stuff. Then there are sure to be whitefish or trout in the nearest lake, and we can fish through the ice. Lucky the Indians left their hooks and lines. And we can trap, too."

"Boys," cried Fred, "you're both bricks. You're solid gold—" A choke in his voice stopped him.

"A pair of gold bricks!" laughed Maurice, with a suspicious huskiness in his own tones.

But the thing was settled.

It turned colder that night, and the next day dawned with blustering snow flurries. Their open camp was far from comfortable, and with some reluctance they moved into the cabin.

A good deal of fresh snow had drifted in, but they swept it out, brought in fresh balsam twigs for couches, and lighted a roaring fire.

The hut was decidedly homelike and cozy, and a vast improvement on the open camp. The smell of formaldehyde had gone entirely. The light from the skin-covered window was poor, but that seemed to be the only drawback, until, as the temperature rose, the roof showed a leak near the door. Snow water dripped in freely, in spite of their efforts to stop it, until Maurice finally clambered to the roof, cleared away the snow, tore up the thatch, and covered the defective spot with a large piece of old deer-hide.

In the afternoon it stopped snowing; Macgregor and Fred, with the two rifles, made a wide circuit round the cabin, but killed no game except half a dozen spruce grouse. Not a deer trail did they see; probably the animals were yarded for the winter.

Without being discouraged, however, Peter set out again the next morning, this time with Maurice. Fred, left alone, spent most of the day in cutting wood and storing it by the cabin door, and the hunters did not return until just after sunset. They were empty-handed, but in high spirits, and had a great tale to tell.

Five miles from camp, Maurice and Peter had come upon the fresh trail of a moose, and had followed it nearly all day. Toward the middle of the afternoon, however, they were obliged to give up the chase and turn back, for they were fully fifteen miles from home.

On the way to the cabin they chanced upon a well-beaten deer trail that they felt certain must lead to a "yard." It was too late to follow it that day, but they determined to have a great hunt on the morrow.

Killing yarded deer is not exactly sportsmanlike, and is unlawful besides; but

law is understood to yield to the necessities of the frontier, and the boys needed the meat badly.

The next morning they were off early. It was clear and cold. A little wind blew the powdery snow like puffs of smoke from the trees, and the biting air was full of life. It was impossible to be anything but gay in that atmosphere; even Fred, oppressed with anxiety as he was, felt its effect.

The fresh snow was criss-crossed here and there with the tracks of small animals,—rabbits, foxes, and squirrels,—and now and again a spruce partridge rose with a roar. These birds were plentiful, and the boys might have made a full bag if they had ventured to shoot.

It was nearly noon before they reached the deer trail. They followed it back for some twenty minutes, and came down into a low bottom, grown up with small birch and poplar. Fred had only the vaguest idea what a deer yard was like; he half expected a dense huddle of deer in a small, beaten space, and he was consequently much startled when he suddenly heard a sound of crashing and running in the thickets.

Macgregor's rifle banged almost in his ear. Maurice fired at the same instant. Something large and grayish had shot up into view behind a thicket, and had departed with the speed of an arrow. Peter fired again at the flying target, and Fred caught a single glimpse of a buck, with antlered head carried high, vanishing through a screen of birches.

"Hit!" shouted Macgregor, and he ran forward, clicking another cartridge into his rifle.

They had walked right into the "yard." All round them the snow was trampled into narrow trails where the herd had moved about, feeding on the shrubbery. With a little more caution they might have got three or four of the animals.

They found the buck a hundred yards away, dead in the snow. It was no small task to get him back to the cabin, for he was too fat and heavy to carry, even if they had cut him up. They had to haul the carcass with a thong, like a toboggan, over the snow. The weather changed, and it was beginning to bluster again when they arrived, dead tired, to find the fire gone out and the cabin cold. But they rejoiced at being supplied with meat enough to last them for perhaps a month.

CHAPTER IV

That night they heard the timber wolves for the first time, howling mournfully a little way back in the woods. No doubt they had scented the fresh carcass of the deer, and probably there would have been no venison in the morning if they had not had the wisdom to carry the carcass into the cabin. Peter opened the door quietly and slipped out with a cocked rifle, but the wolves were too wary for him. Not one was in sight, and the howling receded and grew fainter. But they heard it at intervals again during the night—a dismal and savage note, that made them feel like making the fire burn brighter.

"They must have followed the trail where we dragged the buck home," said Maurice. "Good thing they didn't happen to strike it before we got back."

"Oh, they'd hardly venture to attack three of us," replied Peter. "I almost wish they would. We could mow them down with our repeaters, and you know there's a Government bounty of ten dollars a head on dead timber wolves. We might make quite a pile, and besides the skins must be worth something."

"Might set some traps," Fred suggested.

"No use. The timber wolf is far too wise to get into any steel trap. That's why so few of them are killed. But say, boys, why couldn't we manage to ambush 'em?"

"How?" Maurice demanded.

"Well, suppose I shot a couple of rabbits to-morrow night and went through

the woods dragging them after me, so as to make a blood trail. Any wolves that happened to cross it would certainly follow, and I'd lead them past a spot where you fellows would be ambushed, ready to pump lead into them."

"Sounds all right," said Fred, "but suppose they overtook you before you got to the ambush?"

"Oh, they wouldn't dare to attack me. They'd keep me in sight, stop if I stopped, and turn if I turned, waiting for a chance to take me at a disadvantage. A shot would scatter them, anyway. The only trouble would be that they'd scatter so quick when you opened fire that you wouldn't be able to bag more than one or two. And I don't suppose the same trick could be worked twice."

They discussed the matter all that evening and grew so enthusiastic over it that they determined to try it the next night. There was no hope now of diamonds, and the expedition had cost them nearly two hundred dollars. A few wolf bounties and pelts, together with the furs found in the cabin, would cover this and perhaps leave a little profit.

It was cold and cloudy the next day, and they waited impatiently for evening. The moon would not rise till nearly midnight, and it was necessary to wait in order to have light enough for the proposed ambush. They sallied out toward eleven o'clock, and shot three rabbits, which Peter attached to a deerskin thong. Selecting an open glade, Maurice and Fred established themselves in ambush under the thickets, while Peter started on a wide circle through the woods, trailing his bait, in the hope of attracting the wolves.

Fred and Maurice waited for more than two hours, nearly frozen, stamping and beating their arms, listening for the hunting cry of the wolf pack. At the end of that time Peter reappeared, tired and disgusted. The wolves had failed to do their part, and had not picked up the trail.

Still he was not discouraged, and insisted on trying it again the next evening. This time Fred and Maurice stayed in the cabin to keep warm, listening intently. At the first, distant howl they were to rush out and ensconce themselves in a prearranged spot, a quarter of a mile up the river, which Peter was to pass. They kept the two repeating rifles, while Mac carried the double-barreled gun, loaded with buckshot, which they had found in the cabin.

Half a mile from the shanty Peter shot a swamp hare that was nibbling a

spruce trunk, and a little way farther he secured another. These carcasses he tied together with a deerskin thong as before, and trailed them in the wake of his snowshoes. This time he intended to make a longer circuit than on the preceding night.

He dragged this bait across a hardwood ridge and down into a great cedar swamp on the other side. In hard weather all the wild life of the woods resorts to such places for shelter, and here the wolves would be hunting if there was a pack in the neighborhood. But he found few tracks and no sign at all of wolves.

After traveling slowly for two or three miles, Mac sat down on a log to rest, and as the warmth of exercise died out, the cold nipped him to the bone through the "four-point" blanket coat. He got up and moved on, intending to return in a long curve toward the cabin. He did not much care, after all, whether he started any wolves. It was too cold for hunting that night.

The dry snow swished round his ankles at the fall of the long racquets. He still dragged the dead hares, which were now frozen almost as hard as wood, but not too hard to leave a scent.

He had reached the other side of the swamp when his ears caught suddenly a high-pitched, mournful howl, ending in a sort of yelp, sounding indefinitely far away, yet clearly heard through the tense air. He knew well what it was. The pack had struck a trail—possibly his own, possibly that of a deer. He would very soon learn which.

Thrilling with excitement, he walked on slowly, turning his head to listen. Again and again he caught the hunting chorus of the wolf pack, far away, but still perceptibly nearer. He was just then in the midst of a tangled stretch of second-growth timber, and he hurried on to reach more open ground. As soon as he felt convinced that the pack was following him he intended to turn back toward the river.

He kept moving on, however, and at last came to the river before he expected it. He was still more than a mile above the point where the ambush was to be set, and he paused on the shore and hearkened. Far away through the moonlit woods he heard the savage, triumphant yell, much nearer now—so much so that he felt that he might as well make for the ambush at once. He felt suddenly alone and in peril; he longed earnestly to see his companions.

He started down the river at a swinging trot, still listening over his shoulder, when the ice suddenly gave way under his feet, and he went down with so swift a plunge that he had time for only a shuddering gasp.

He had stepped on an airhole lightly crusted over with snow. He went down to his neck without touching bottom, and the black water surged up to his face. It was the gun that saved him; it caught across the hole, and he clung to it fiercely. As the current fortunately was not rapid, he was able to draw himself up and out upon the ice.

But he found himself unable to extricate his feet. The long-tailed snowshoes had gone down point foremost, and now were crossed under the ice, and refused to come up. He dared not cut them loose, for in the deep snow he would have been helpless. Growing fainter at every moment, he struggled in the deadly chill of the water for four or five minutes before at last he succeeded in bringing them up end first, as they had gone down.

When he staggered back stiffly upon the snow the very life seemed withdrawn from his bones. His heavy clothing had frozen into a coat of mail almost as hard as iron plate. There was no sensation left in his limbs, and he trembled with a numb shuddering.

Long forest training told him what must be done. He must have a fire at once. He would have to find a dry birch tree, or a splintered pine that would light easily.

His benumbed brain clung to this idea, and he began to stumble toward shore, his snowshoes sheets of ice, and his clothes rattling as he went. But with a hunter's instinct he stuck to his gun, tucking it under his icy arm.

He could see no birch tree, and the bank was bordered with an impenetrable growth of alders. He dragged himself up the river, and each step seemed to require a more and more intolerable exertion.

He could not feel his feet as he lifted and put them down; when he saw them moving they looked like things independent of himself. He had ceased to feel cold. He no longer felt anything, except a deadly weariness that was crushing him into the snow.

He went on, however, driven by the fighting instinct, till of a sudden he saw it

—the birch tree he was seeking, shining spectrally among the black spruces by the river.

It was an old, half-dead tree, covered with great curls of bark that would flare up at the touch of a match. He had matches in a water-proof box, and he contrived to get them out of his frozen pocket. He dropped the box half a dozen times in trying to open it, opened it at last with his teeth, and dropped it again, spilling the matches into the snow.

Snow is as dry as sand at that temperature, however, and he scraped them up, and tried to strike one on the gun barrel. But he was unable to hold the bit of wood in his numbed fingers; there was absolutely no feeling in his hands, and the match fell from his grasp at every attempt. This is a familiar peril in the North Woods, where dozens of men have frozen to death with firewood and matches beside them, from sheer inability to strike a light.

Mac beat his hands together without effect. He began to grow indifferent; and as he fumbled again for the dropped match he fell at full length into the snow.

A sense of pleasant relief overcame him, and he decided to rest there for a few minutes. The snow was soft, and he had never before realized how warm it was. His shoulders were propped against the roots of the birch, and with a hazy consciousness that game might be expected, he dragged his gun across his knees and cocked it. Then, with a comfortable sense of duty done, he closed his eyes.

Curious and delightful fancies began at once to flood his brain, fancies so vivid that he seemed not to lose consciousness at all. How long he lay there he never knew. But he grew alive at last to a vise-like pressure on his left arm that seemed to have lasted for years, and which was growing to excruciating pain.

He opened his eyes with a great effort. There were savage, hairy faces close to his own, pouring out clouds of steaming breath into the frosty air. Something had him by the arm with such force that he almost felt the bones cracking, and something was tugging at his leg.

The nervous shock aroused him as nothing else on earth could have done. A tingle of horrified animation rushed through his body. He was on the point of being torn to pieces by the wolf pack that had trailed him, and the powerful stimulus of the new peril called out the last reserves of strength.

He made a convulsive start. His frozen hand was on the trigger of the shotgun, and both barrels went off. At the sudden flash and report the half-dozen wolves bolted incontinently—all but one gray monster that got the full force of the buckshot and dropped in its tracks.

Macgregor staggered to his feet, full of terrible cramps and pains in every muscle. But his head had cleared somewhat. He saw the dry birch tree and again tried to fumble for a match. Almost by sheer luck he succeeded in striking it. The birch bark caught fire and flamed crackling up the trunk. The dry trunk itself caught and burned like a torch.

Macgregor rubbed his face and hands savagely with snow. They hurt intensely, but he welcomed the pain, for it showed that they were not frozen. He was beginning to feel a little more life when he heard the creak and flap of snowshoes, and saw Fred and Maurice hurrying up the river toward him.

"What's the matter?" they shouted, as soon as within hearing distance. "We heard the shot. See any wolves?"

Mac tried to shout something in answer, but found that he could not speak distinctly.

"I see you've bagged one," cried Fred, rushing up. "Why, man, you're covered with ice! What's happened to you?"

"Been in the river," Peter managed to ejaculate. "Get my moccasins off, boys—rub feet with snow. Afraid—I'm going—to lose toes!"

With exclamations of sympathy the boys got his frozen outer clothing off,—broke it off, in fact, from the caked ice,—removed his moccasins and socks, and rubbed his feet with snow. Several of the toes had whitened, but they regained color after some minutes' rubbing, and began to hurt excruciatingly. Peter squirmed with the pain.

"But I don't mind it," he said. "Rub away, boys. I certainly thought I was going to lose part of my feet."

Perhaps the solid cake of ice that had instantly formed over his heavy socks and moccasins had actually protected them from freezing. At any rate, he got off much more easily than he would have thought possible. The attack of the wolves

had left little mark on him, either. He had a few light lacerations on his hands and face, but for the most part the beasts seemed to have laid hold on him where the thick, ice-caked cloth was almost like armor plate. And no doubt the arrival of the pack had saved him from death by freezing.

Fred dragged up the carcass of the fallen wolf and skinned its head and ears for the Government bounty. The rest of the pelt was so terribly torn with buckshot as to be worthless.

"Your scheme didn't work, Mac," he remarked.

"It did work. It worked only too well," Macgregor protested. "It's the best scheme for catching wolves I ever heard of."

"You don't want to try it again, do you?"

"Well—that's a different thing!" he admitted. "No, I don't know that I do. But if I hadn't gone through the ice we would probably have bagged nearly the whole pack."

After thorough snow friction Mac considered it safe to approach the fire by degrees. The ice thawed off his clothing, but left him wet to the skin. It was certain that he ought to get back to the cabin and dry clothing as soon as possible, and he thought he would be able now to travel. It was less than two miles.

It proved a painful two miles, but he reached the cabin at last, where his companions put him to bed in one of the bunks, covered him warmly, and dosed him with boiling tea. It was then growing close to three o'clock in the morning.

Naturally they did not get up as early as usual for breakfast. Macgregor's feet were sore and somewhat swollen, but there was no longer any danger of serious trouble. He had to remain in the cabin that day and was unable to put on his moccasins, but he was much elated at his luck in getting off so lightly. It was snowing and stormy, besides; none of the boys went out much, except for the endless task of cutting firewood. They lounged about the cabin and discussed the problems that perplexed them so much—whether Horace had really discovered any diamonds, and what had become of him, and how and why—until the subject was utterly worn out. Maurice then made a checkerboard, and they played matches till they wearied of this amusement also.

The next day they had to fall back on it again, however, for the weather was still stormy. During the afternoon it snowed heavily. Mac's feet were much better, and he wore his moccasins, but judged it unsafe to go out into the snow for another day. In the midst of the storm Fred and Maurice cut down a couple of dead hemlocks, and chopped part of them up for fuel. It was amazing to see what a quantity of wood the rough fireplace consumed.

"If we had acres of diamond beds we couldn't afford such fires in town," Maurice remarked.

The next day the weather cleared, but turned bitterly cold. In the afternoon Maurice ventured out to look for game, and came back about four o'clock with three spruce grouse and a frost-bitten nose. The boys were all standing outside the cabin door, when Fred suddenly started.

Round the bend a sledge had just appeared on the river. It was drawn by six dogs, coming at a flagging trot through the deep snow; four men on snowshoes ran behind and beside it. For a moment the men seemed to hesitate as they caught sight of the hut. But they came on, turned up the shore, and drove straight to the cabin at a gallop.

Three of the *voyageurs* were plainly French Canadians, or possibly French half-breeds, wiry, weather-beaten men, dark almost as Indians; the fourth was big and heavily built, and wore a red beard that was now a mass of ice. All of them wore cartridge belts, and four rifles lay on the packed sledge.

"*Bo' jou'*!" cried the dark-faced men, as they came within hailing distance.

"*Bon jour*!" Maurice shouted back. He was the only one who knew any French, and he knew but little. He was searching his memory for a few more words, when the red-bearded man came forward and nodded.

"Didn't know any one was living here this winter," he said. "Trapping?"

"Hunting a little," said Macgregor. "Unharness your dogs and come inside. It's a cold day for the trail."

"You bet!" said one of the French, and they made no difficulty about accepting the invitation. They rapidly unhitched the dogs, which had sat down, snarling and snapping in their traces; then they unpacked the sledge and carried

the dunnage inside the cabin.

They were a wild-looking set. The French Canadians were probably woodsmen, shanty-men or hunters, apparently good-natured and jovial, but rough and uncivilized. The Anglo-Saxon, who seemed to be their leader, was more repellent, and when he took off his *capote*, he revealed a countenance of savage brutality, with small eyes, a cruel mouth, and a protuberant jaw, framed in masses of bricky red hair and beard.

"I don't much like the looks of this crowd!" Maurice whispered in Macgregor's ear.

"Rough lot, but they'll be away in the morning," answered Peter.

In the North it is obligatory to be hospitable, and the boys prepared to feed and entertain the party as if they were the most welcome guests. At the usual time they prepared supper. The four newcomers ate enormously. During the meal the red-bearded man explained that his name was Mitchell, that he was "going north with these breeds," as he rather vaguely put it, and that they had run somewhat short of provisions.

Luckily, they had food for the dogs; one of the "breeds" presently produced six frozen whitefish and carried them outside, where he gave one to each dog with much dexterity. The fish were bolted in a twinkling, and the unhappy brutes began to look for a sheltered spot where they could sleep through the sub-Arctic night.

After supper the French, stuffed to repletion, lay back and engaged in an animated conversation in a dialect that seemed to be a mixture of French, English, and Ojibwa. They laughed uproariously, and seemed thoroughly happy. But Mitchell said little, and continually examined the interior of the hut with keen, restless eyes.

The next morning the visitors showed no anxiety to be off. They fed the dogs, lounged about, smoked, and stayed until dinner time. After dinner Mitchell announced that the dogs were tired, and would have to rest that day.

It is very unusual to take a day off the trail for the sake of the dogs, but the boys made no objection, although secretly much annoyed. The presence of the strangers inspired them all with uneasiness. Besides, they could not continue

their search or speak freely of it.

The next morning the strangers said nothing about moving on. They sat about the fire, and evading a suggestion that they help to cut wood, played cards nearly all day.

"What's the matter with them? Are they going to stay here all winter?" said Fred, in great irritation.

Certainly the dogs needed no more rest. They pervaded the place, trying to bolt into the warm cabin whenever the door was opened, and spending much time in leaping vainly but hopefully at the frozen carcass of the deer, swung high on a bough in the open air.

The prodigious appetites of the newcomers had not diminished in the least, and the carcass was rapidly growing less. The boys thought that at the least their guests might help replenish the larder, and the next morning Macgregor proposed that they all go after deer.

"No good to-day," said Mitchell gruffly. "Snow's coming. You boys go if you want to. We'll mind camp."

That was the last straw; there was no sign whatever of storm. Peter went out of the cabin to consult with his friends.

"They think we're greenhorns from the city, and they're trying to impose on us!" he said angrily. "If they don't make a move by to-morrow morning, I'll give them a pretty strong hint."

All the same, fresh meat had to be procured, and after dinner Macgregor and Maurice took the two rifles and went back to the deer yard to see if the herd might not have returned. Fred stayed to watch, for the boys disliked to leave their guests alone.

The quartette were playing cards as usual, and Fred presently began to feel lonely. After hanging about the hut for a time, he went out to pass the time in cutting wood.

It was very cold, but he much preferred the outer air to the smoky atmosphere of the shack, and he soon grew warm in handling the axe. He spent nearly the

whole afternoon at this exercise, and it was after four o'clock when he finally reëntered the cabin.

He opened the door rather quietly, and was astounded at what he saw.

The card game had been abandoned. The shanty was in a state of confusion and disorder. Blankets and bedding were strewn pell-mell; the contents of the dunnage sacks were tossed upon the floor. Everything movable in the place seemed to have been moved, and a great part of the moss chinking had been torn from one of the walls, as if a hurried and desperate search had been made for something.

And the object of the search had been found. The four men were bent together over the table, watching intently, while Mitchell took something from a small leather sack. They were all so feverishly intent that Fred tiptoed up close behind them unobserved.

Mitchell was shaking out little lumps from the sack; each was wrapped in paper, and each, when he unwrapped it, was a small pebble that flashed fire.

Fred's heart jumped, and he gasped. The diamonds! Horace had really found them, then! The sack seemed to contain a large handful—it was appalling to think what they might be worth! And then it flashed upon the boy with increased certainty that his brother must be dead, for otherwise he would never have left them there.

Mitchell looked up and round at that instant. At his explosive oath, the Frenchmen wheeled like a flash. For a moment there was a deathly silence, while the four men glared at the boy with scowling faces. Fred realized that not only the possession of the stones, but probably his life, hung on his presence of mind.

"Those things are my brother's, Mr. Mitchell," he said, with an outward coolness that astonished himself. "He hid them in this cabin. I don't know how you came to find them, but I'll ask you to hand them back."

His voice broke the spell of silence. One of the French said something in the ear of another, and then dropped quietly back toward the corner where the men's four rifles stood together.

But Mitchell swept the pebbles together back into the bag. "Your brother's?" he said. "Why, I bought 'em myself from a gang of Ojibwas down on Timagami. Rock crystals they call 'em, and I reckon to get ten or twelve dollars for 'em at Cochrane."

He spoke with such assurance that Fred was taken aback, and did not know what to say. Then his eye fell on one of the scraps of paper in which a stone had been wrapped. He leaned forward and picked it up.

"Did you put this on it?" he exclaimed indignantly. "Look! It's my brother's handwriting. 'October second, Nottaway River, near Burnt Lake,' it says. That's where he found it. And look at that!" He swept his hand round the devastated cabin. "What did you tear the place to pieces for if you weren't hunting for something?"

"They're mine, anyway," retorted the woodsman, slipping the precious bag into his pocket. "Them papers was wrapped round 'em when I got 'em."

"Impossible!" said Fred. "I tell you—"

"Shut up!" said Mitchell suddenly, with a snarl.

A sense of his peril cooled Fred's anger like an icy douche, and he was silent. There was death in the four grim faces that regarded him. He had no doubt that the men would murder for a far less sum than the value of that sackful of precious stones.

For an instant he thought hard. He was entirely unarmed, and the men's rifles stood just behind them. He would have to wait for reinforcements. It was surely almost time for Maurice and Peter to be back, and they must be warned of the danger before they entered the cabin.

"All right," he said, with sudden mildness. "If you can prove that the stones are really yours, I'm satisfied. The sack looked like my brother's, that's all."

Mitchell gave a contemptuous grin. The Canadians lighted their pipes again.

Fred felt that they watched him closely, however. He lounged about the cabin with assumed nonchalance for a quarter of an hour, and then ventured to go out on the pretext of bringing in a fresh log for the fire. But once outdoors, he put on

his snowshoes and rushed down the trail to intercept his friends.

CHAPTER V

In deadly fear of hearing a shot or a shout from behind, Fred did not stop running until he was out of sight of the cabin. He knew the direction from which the hunters would be sure to return, and he posted himself in ambush, in a spot whence he could keep watch in front and rear.

Fortunately, he was not pursued. Fortunately, too, he had not very long to wait there, for it was bitter cold. In the course of half an hour, he discerned two black specks crossing a strip of barrens to the north.

Fred ran to meet them. The hunters had no deer, but each of them carried a great bunch of partridges.

"What's the matter? Is the camp on fire?" shouted Macgregor, as Fred dashed up.

He had to stop to regain breath before he could gasp out an account of what had happened.

"The diamonds!" Maurice exclaimed.

"But, don't you see, this makes it certain that Horace never left that cabin alive!" Fred said heavily.

It looked like it, indeed, and no one found anything to say. Macgregor's face had grown very grim.

"Anyhow, Horace risked his life for those stones,—perhaps lost it,—and we 're not going to let those wretches carry them off," he said. "Besides, the diamonds are the least important thing. Those fellows have got our cabin, grub, ammunition, everything. We're stranded if we don't get them back."

"We must take them by surprise," said Fred. "I'd been thinking that we might

come up to the cabin quietly, throw the door open suddenly, and hold them up."

"They have four rifles," suggested Maurice.

"Yes, but they won't be ready to use them," said the Scotchman. "It's the only way."

He threw open the chamber of his rifle, glanced in, then fumbled in his pockets.

"Lend me a couple of cartridges, Maurice."

"Don't say you haven't any! I used the last of mine on those partridges."

"Then we're done!" Peter exclaimed, and he struck his hand furiously on the breech of the empty repeater. "Not a shot between us."

They looked at one another hopelessly.

"Come, we've got to do something—or starve in the snow," said Peter, at last. "We'll hold them up, anyhow—with empty guns."

"But suppose they fire on us?" Fred asked.

"At the first move any one makes toward a gun, we'll jump for him. The cabin's too small to use rifles in, and if it comes to a rough-and-tumble, why, we'll just have to keep our end up. But I don't think it will come to that. We'll have them bluffed."

Certainly it seemed a long chance to take, but, as Peter said, it was better than starving in the snow. They laid down the partridges, and began to move toward the cabin.

"Take the axe, if it's by the door, Fred," Macgregor advised. "You'll go first, and open the door. We'll aim over your shoulders. And remember, at the first hostile movement, jump for them with clubbed rifles and the axe."

They went on, rather slowly. The cabin came in view, with no one in sight, and they made a détour through the hemlocks so as to get as close to the door as possible without showing themselves.

"Now for it!" muttered Macgregor.

With hearts beating tumultuously, they burst out from the evergreen screen. But they had taken only two or three steps, when the cabin door opened a few inches, and four black rifle barrels were thrust out.

"*Halte-là*!" shouted one of the Canadians.

The boys stopped in their tracks. They could see nothing of the men within, nothing except those four ominous muzzles in the streak of firelight that shone through the crack.

"What do you mean?" cried Macgregor boldly. "Don't you know who we are? Put those guns away, and let us in!"

He ventured another step, but a second voice roared from the doorway, "Stop!"

It was Mitchell. Peter stopped suddenly. The hoarse voice bellowed again, "Git!"

"What's the matter with you?" Peter persisted. "That is our cabin. Let us come in, I say."

"THAT IS OUR CABIN. LET US COME IN, I SAY"
"THAT IS OUR CABIN. LET US COME IN, I SAY"

"Git, *I* say!" Mitchell repeated. "After this, we'll shoot on sight. I give ye till I count three. One—two—"

"Back off. We 're caught!" Peter muttered.

They backed away slowly. When they were at the edge of the thickets, Mitchell shouted again:—

"When we're gone, you can come back! Now keep away for your own good!"

The cabin door closed as they stepped back into the undergrowth. Macgregor's face was black as he tucked the useless rifle under his arm. They were all boiling with rage and mortification.

"If we'd only turned those scoundrels out yesterday!" Peter muttered.

"We couldn't foresee this," said Maurice. "Those fellows evidently knew that the diamonds were here—or strongly suspected it. They must have heard of it from your sick Indian, or from the third trapper. They must have been astonished to find us on the spot."

"Very likely," said Fred, "but the present question is what we're going to do to-night."

"We must make the best camp we can in the snow," remarked Maurice.

"I don't see how we'll cut wood without an axe," said Peter. "It's going to be a savage cold night. We have no blankets, either. Lucky we shot those partridges."

But when they came to the spot where they had dropped the partridges, a fresh disappointment awaited them. The famished sledge dogs had found them. There was nothing left of the fourteen grouse except a litter of feathers and a few blood-stains on the snow.

Their night was to be supperless as well as cold, it seemed. Darkness was already falling, with the weird desolation that the winter night always brings down on the wilderness. It had been always impressive, but now, as they faced the night without food or shelter, it was appalling.

Destitute of an axe, they would have to make a camp where they could find fuel, and they scattered to look for it. It was rapidly growing too dark to search, but Fred presently came upon a large, dead spruce, lying half buried in snow, but spiked thickly with dry branches. He was breaking these off by the armfuls when the other boys came up in answer to his calls.

They trampled down the snow, gathered birch bark and spruce splinters, and laid the kindling against the big back log. Maurice set about pulling twigs for a couch, in case the temperature permitted them to sleep.

"How about matches? I haven't one on me," said Fred, in sudden anxiety.

Macgregor discovered four rather damp ones in his pockets; Maurice had a dozen or more, but the snow had got into his pocket, and wet them.

They used up five matches in lighting the fire, but finally the birch bark flared up, curling, and the spruce twigs began to crackle.

They were sure, at any rate, of a fire, and this little success raised their spirits wonderfully. They started at once to bring in all the loose wood they could find; but it proved to be little, for snow covered everything except the largest logs. However, they counted on the big spruce trunk to burn all night.

Without an axe, it was impossible to build any sort of shelter; so they sat down close beside the fire, and huddled together to escape the cold, which was growing hourly more piercing.

In spite of all their efforts, the fire was a poor one. The spruce trunk proved rotten and damp, and merely smouldered and smoked. The dead branches went off in a rapid flame, and they had to economize them to make them last the night out.

That was a terrible night. The temperature must have gone far below zero. A foot away from the fire, they could hardly feel its warmth; their backs and feet were numb, and their faces smoked and scorching.

Two of the boys were tired with a long snowshoe tramp, and all of them were hungry. Macgregor's feet were still far from being in a condition to stand further exposure; they would have frozen again easily, and he kept them as close to the wretched fire as possible. Sleep was out of the question, for they would have frozen to death at six feet away from the fire. They sat with their arms round each other, as close to the blaze as possible, and turned now their faces and now their backs to the warmth.

Fortunately, there was no wind. About midnight a pallid moon came up behind light clouds. Far in the woods they heard strange, lugubrious noises, moans, hootings, and once a shrill, savage scream.

Now and then they talked, but they were too miserable from the cold to say much. In spite of the cold, they grew drowsy. Fred could have gone dead asleep if he had allowed himself to. He got up, stamped, and engaged in a rather spiritless bout of wrestling with Peter. Then they all straggled off to try to find more wood.

Finally, that night of horror wore itself away. The light of a pale, cold dawn

began to show.

Feeling twenty years older, they scattered to bring wood again. They built up the fire to a roaring blaze that gave some real warmth.

"Aren't those fellows likely to make off the first thing this morning, and take all our outfit with them?" said Maurice.

"They're almost certain to. We must keep watch on the cabin," said Fred.

"We must hope they don't," added Peter. "We'd have to follow them—follow them till we dropped or captured them. For they'd be taking away our lives with them."

In view of this danger, they sent Maurice at once to reconnoiter the place, which was not more than a quarter of a mile distant. He was gone nearly half an hour, and on his return reported that smoke was rising from the cabin, but that there were no signs that the men intended to depart.

And he had had a stroke of luck. A couple of partridges had flown up and perched stupidly on a log, so close to him that he had been able to knock one of them over with a cleverly thrown club.

In less than a minute that partridge's feathers were scattered on the snow, and it was cut up and roasting on sharp sticks before the fire. Too ravenous to wait until it was thoroughly cooked, the boys began to eat it, but Maurice made a wry face at his second mouthful.

"No salt!" he remarked.

The half-cooked flesh was nauseous without salt, and hungry though they were, they got it down with difficulty. It did them good, however, and they all felt more capable of facing the situation.

"The first thing we must do," said Peter, "is to find a better camping-place, put up some sort of shelter, and gather plenty of wood."

"Why, you don't expect to live like this long?" cried Fred, looking startled.

"It's hard to say. You know we're fearfully handicapped. Our only chance is to

get those fellows off their guard, for if we strike once and fail, we'll probably never get another chance. We must lie low, and make them think that we've gone away, or that we're dead. We'll put our new camp half a mile away, or more, and one of us must keep watch near the cabin from sunrise to sunset."

It sounded disheartening, but they could think of no other plan. Eventually, Maurice went to stand guard, while Fred and Macgregor searched for a camp-site.

They could not find what they wanted. Dead timber in any quantity was scarce. At the end of a couple of hours Fred went to relieve Maurice, and found him walking round and round a tree in order to keep from freezing.

"I thought I might get a chance to collar the axe," said Maurice, with chattering teeth. "But they've carried it inside. They've taken in the rest of the venison, too, and they've even got the dogs inside the shanty. Afraid we'd shoot them, I suppose."

Maurice tramped off to aid Peter in his search, while Fred stamped about in the trees. No one was in sight about the hut, but after a long time one of the French Canadians came out and went down to the river with a pail for water.

It made Fred's blood boil to think of the warmth and comfort in that cabin, from which they had been so treacherously turned out. He puzzled his brain to devise some plan of retaliation, but he could think of nothing except setting fire to the place, and that would destroy the supplies of friend and foe alike.

His feet grew numb, and he adopted Maurice's plan of running round in a circle. He fancied that his ears and nose were frosted, and he rubbed them with snow. A long time passed; he wondered what had become of his companions. It was nearly noon when Maurice hurried up with his face full of consternation. "The fire is out," he said, "and we've used the last match!"

CHAPTER VI

At this crushing news, Fred left his post and went back with Maurice, who explained what had happened.

They had found a good camping-ground, where wood was abundant, and had tried to light a fire. But the remaining matches proved to have been badly dampened; the heads were pasty or entirely soaked off. One by one they fizzled and went out. As a last hope, Maurice had hurried back to their night camp for fire, only to find that the wet log had smouldered down and gone dead out.

The spot was about two thirds of a mile away, south from the river. A great windrow of hemlocks and jack-pines had fallen together, and afforded plenty of wood. On one of the logs sat Macgregor, with his elbows on his knees, and his chin in his hands, the picture of despair; and at his feet was a litter of bark and kindling, and a dozen burnt matches.

They all sat down together in silence, and nobody found a word of comfort.

It was a brilliantly clear day, but the temperature had certainly not risen to zero, and a slight, cutting wind blew from the west. The sun shone in an icy blue sky, but there was no heat in its rays.

"If we only had a cartridge," said Fred, "we might make a fire with the gun flash."

They all made another vain search of their pockets, in the faint hope of finding a cartridge or an overlooked match head.

"If we don't find some way to make a fire before sunset," said Macgregor gloomily, "we'll have to attack the cabin to-night. I really don't believe we could live through a night without fire, with nothing to eat, especially as we had no sleep last night."

"Surely if we went up to the cabin, they'd give us some fire," Maurice protested. "They wouldn't let us die in the snow."

"That's just what they count on us to do," said the Scotchman bitterly.

No one said anything about renewing the guard on the cabin. Nothing seemed to matter much—nothing except the cold. The morsels of half-raw food they had eaten that morning did not keep them from being ravenously hungry again, and

an empty stomach is poor protection against Arctic cold.

Like the rest of them, Fred was heavily clad, but the cold seemed to find his skin as if he were naked. He began to feel numb to the bone, lethargic, incapable of moving. Then he realized his danger, forced himself awake, and tried to think of some expedient for making a fire.

Flints could not be found under three feet of snow. A burning-glass—if they only had one! It should have been included in the outfit.

And then an idea flashed upon him. He jumped up suddenly.

"Wait here for me, fellows!" he cried.

He rushed off toward the river, and came back in a few minutes with a piece of clear ice, almost as large as his palm, and an inch or two thick. He slipped off his mittens, and began to rub it between his hands, so as to melt it down with the heat of his skin.

"See what it is? Burning-glass!" he exclaimed.

"But you can't make a burning-glass of *ice*!" said Maurice.

"Why not? Anyhow, I'm going to try."

But before he had worked the ice long, he had to stop, for his hands seemed freezing. While he beat and rubbed them, Maurice, incredulous but willing, took the lump of ice, and shaped it down while the heat lasted in his hands. He then passed it on to Macgregor, who in turn handed it to Fred again. He finally succeeded in melting and curving it roughly into the proper shape.

He tried it on the back of his hand. An irregular but small and intensely hot spot of light concentrated itself there.

"I do believe it will work!" Peter cried.

They hastily collected a handful of fine, dry hair moss from the fir branches, and peeled filmy shreds of birch bark. Fred brought the "glass" to bear on the little heap. His numbed hands trembled so that he could hardly hold it still. For some time there was no result. Then a thin thread of smoke began to arise. The

boys held their breath. The hair moss suddenly sparkled and flamed. A shred of bark caught. Peter interposed a large roll. It flared up.

"Hurrah! We've got it!" cried Macgregor. "Fred, you've saved our lives, I do believe."

They piled on twigs, branches, and heavy lumps of wood, and soon had a brisk fire going. Better still, they were now assured of having always the means of making one—at least, whenever the sun shone.

The magical influence of the fire gave back to them a little of their cheerfulness. They warmed themselves thoroughly, and then started to have another look at the outlaws, and to see whether they could find any small game. For now that they no longer suffered from the cold, their stomachs cried loudly for food.

Leaving the empty rifles by the fire, they armed themselves with clubs and poles for hunting, and had good hopes of being able to knock over a partridge or a hare. But the grouse seemed to have turned wild. They saw only two at a great distance. No hares showed themselves, nor could they find any trace of porcupines on the trees.

Skulking within sight of the cabin, they perceived one of the Frenchmen carrying in logs of wood for the fire—some of those that Fred himself had cut. Mitchell stood by, smoking his pipe, with a rifle under his arm. Fred fancied he could smell frying venison as the door was opened.

Plainly the outlaws were on the alert still. The boys crouched, unseen and unheard, among the hemlocks; but if they had been armed, they could easily have picked off the two men at the door. And they had come to such a state of rage and desperation that they would very likely have done it.

They found no comfort in the fact that the robbers showed no inclination to leave the place. The boys were perplexed at their staying, but probably the men had no reason to hurry, and, finding themselves comfortably placed, had decided to remain where they were while the extreme cold snap lasted.

In spite of the cold, the boys remained on watch for some time after the men had gone indoors. Suddenly Peter laid his hand on Fred's shoulder, and nodded backward.

A deer had come out of the thickets within thirty yards of where they lay,—a fine, fat buck,—and stood looking uneasily, sniffing, and cocking its ears in their direction. Then, without showing any particular alarm, it walked on, and passing within twenty yards of them, disappeared again.

They had to let it go; it was perhaps the cruelest moment they had lived through.

Deer might be out of the question, but if they were to keep alive, it was absolutely necessary that they should find something, and they separated in order to look for small game.

In the course of an hour or two they all straggled back to the camp fire, half frozen and empty-handed. Macgregor indeed had seen a partridge, but his muscles had been so benumbed that he missed his throw.

After warming themselves, they made another expedition—all but Maurice, who had neuralgic pains in his face, and who remained by the fire. But again Peter and Fred came back without game.

The sun had set by this time, and it was hopeless to try again. A hungry night was inevitable, but they tried so to arrange matters that at any rate they would be warm. They gathered all the wood that they could break off or lift. Then with their snowshoes they dug down to the ground, heaping the snow up in a rampart behind them, and piled in balsam twigs, and trusted that in this pit they would be able to sleep.

It grew dark rapidly, and the wind rose. The fire, flaring and smoking, drove smoke and sparks into their faces until their eyes streamed. It made the leeward side of the fire almost unbearable, whereas the windward side was freezingly cold.

The temperature was perhaps not quite so low as the night before, but the gale made it far more disagreeable. Regardless of smoke and sparks, they had to sit as near the fire as they dared, or risk freezing. Sleep was impossible.

All three of them were faint and sick with starvation, but the plight of Maurice was the most wretched. His neuralgia had grown agonizing; his face was badly swollen, and he sat with his head buried in his arms, and his inflamed cheek turned to the heat.

Much as they sympathized with him, they could do nothing to relieve him, except to try to keep up the fire. This task caused them endless trouble. The high wind made it burn furiously fast, and the small branches they had gathered were licked up like magic. They had thought there was enough fuel for the night, but soon after midnight Fred and Peter were foraging about in the deep snow and the storm for a fresh supply.

Toward morning their endurance broke down. They piled on all the rest of the wood, and went to sleep huddled up by the fire, reckless whether they froze or not.

Fred was awakened from a painful and uneasy slumber by Peter's shaking his arm.

"Your ears are frozen," the Scotchman was saying. "Rub them with snow at once."

While asleep, Fred had fallen back beyond the range of heat. It was broad daylight, and snowing fast. The fire was low. All of them were covered with white, and Maurice was still asleep, sitting up, with his head fallen forward on his knees.

Never in his life did Fred feel so unwilling to move. He did not feel cold; he hardly felt anything. All he wanted was to stay as he was and be let alone.

But Macgregor insisted on rousing him, dragged him up, protesting, and rubbed snow on his ears. Fred was very angry, but the scuffle set his blood moving again. His ears were not badly frozen, but the skin came off as he rubbed them. They bled, and the blood froze on as it ran, and made him a rather ghastly spectacle.

DRAGGED HIM UP, PROTESTING, AND RUBBED SNOW ON HIS EARS
DRAGGED HIM UP, PROTESTING, AND RUBBED SNOW ON HIS EARS

Maurice was awakened by the disturbance, and sat up stiffly. He declared that his neuralgia was much better.

They built up the fire again, and sat beside it, shivering. Fred felt utterly incapable either of action or of thought, and even his hunger had grown numbed. Maurice obviously felt no better, and Macgregor, who seemed to retain a little energy, looked at them both with a face of the gravest concern. Presently he rose, put on his snowshoes, took a long pole, and started away with an air of determination.

Maurice and Fred remained sitting by the fire in a sort of lethargy, and exchanged hardly a word. Macgregor was gone almost an hour; then he came back at a run, covered with snow, and carrying a dead hare. He skinned the animal, cleaned it, cut it into pieces, and set it to roast. At the odor of the roasting meat, the boys' appetites revived, and they began to take the fragments from the spits before they were half cooked. The scorched, unsalted meat was even more tasteless and nauseating than that of the grouse, but they all bolted it voraciously, and washed it down by eating snow.

Almost immediately afterward they were taken with distressing cramps and vomiting, which left both Maurice and Fred in a state of weak collapse. Macgregor suffered least, perhaps because he had eaten less incautiously. He alone bore the burden of the rest of that day. He brought wood, kept the fire up, and propped Fred and Maurice up on piles of hemlock branches. There were some small pieces of the hare remaining, and he finally made the boys chew them, and swallow the juice. It seemed to do them good; at any rate, the nausea did not return. Then the Scotchman spoke.

"Look here," he said, "we've got to do it this very night—get back into the cabin, I mean. We've gone almost too far now, and by another day we'll be too weak to move."

"But how'll we do it, Peter?" asked Fred weakly.

"There's only one way. We'll wait till after midnight, when they'll be asleep, and then burst in the door, aim our rifles at them, and get hold of their guns

before they can recover their wits."

"They'll have the door barricaded. We'll be shot down before we can break in."

"I know it's a long chance, but we're living by a succession of miracles as it is. It can't last, and I'd as soon be shot as frozen to death. I'm most afraid of the dogs. They'll make an awful uproar, and probably spring at us as soon as we get in."

As far as Fred was concerned, he felt ready for the attempt, or rather, perhaps, that it made no difference what he did. Maurice also assented, but their force seemed a pitifully small one with which to oppose four able-bodied, well-armed men.

It was then late in the afternoon. Peter began to work energetically at gathering wood enough to last until they should try their desperate chance, and Fred and Maurice tried to help him. It had stopped snowing and had cleared. The night promised to be intensely cold.

Suddenly, faint and far, but very distinct, the sound of a rifle-shot resounded through the trees. They listened, and looked at one another.

"One of those ruffians has gone hunting," Maurice remarked.

"So he has," said Peter. "And see here," he added, with a suddenly brightening face, "this gives us a chance. Let's ambush that fellow as he comes in. We'll knock him down and stun him. That'll make one less against us, and we'll have his rifle and cartridges. Perhaps he'll have something to eat on him. Boys, it doubles our chances."

The plan did look promising. At any rate, it would, if successful, give them a firearm. The shot must have been fired fully a mile away; but they put on their snowshoes at once, and hastened in the direction of the cabin.

The light was failing fast as they stopped about two hundred yards from the hut, trying to guess just where the returning hunter would pass. It was very still, and they would be able to hear his footsteps for a long way.

But they waited for nearly half an hour, and the woods were dusky when at

last their strained ears caught the regular creak, crunch, and shuffle of snowshoes in the distance. They were posted too far to the right, and they had to run fifty yards in order to cross the man's path. There they crouched behind the hemlocks, in great fear lest their enemy had heard their steps. But in another minute they caught sight of him. The man was alone, muffled in a great *capote*, carrying a rifle over his shoulder, and something on his back—possibly his game. His face was indistinguishable, but he looked like one of the French Canadians.

On he came with a steady stride, now in sight, and now concealed by the thickets. He passed within ten feet of the ambush where the boys crouched palpitating.

"Now! Tackle him!" Macgregor cried.

CHAPTER VII

The three boys plunged at the man together. He stopped short, and made a motion to lower his rifle; but he was too late. The boys had fastened on him as wolves fasten on a deer. He uttered a single, stifled cry; then they all went down together in a mass of kicking snowshoes and struggling limbs. The hunter's efforts were feeble, and the boys had no trouble in over-powering him. Fred pinioned his arms, and Maurice sat on his legs.

Macgregor peered into the man's face. "Why, this isn't one of that gang!" he cried.

It had grown almost dark. Fred bent forward to look at the man.

"It's my brother!" he cried. "It's Horace!"

"What? It can't be!" cried Peter and Maurice together. They let go their hold on their prisoner in order to look closer.

"I declare, I believe it is!" said Macgregor, stupefied.

It really was Horace Osborne, but he was almost unrecognizable in his

muffling *capote*, long hair, and a three months' growth of beard. He had no idea who had thus attacked him, and he was in a towering rage.

"What do you mean by all this? Who are you, anyway?" he exclaimed, sitting up in the snow. Then he looked more closely at his brother, who was trying to say something, inarticulate, half laughing and half crying.

"Fred!" he cried, in amazement. "Is that you? What on earth are you doing here? Who's that with you? Peter Macgregor—and Maurice Stark!"

"We thought you might be dead!" Fred cried, and Peter and Maurice cut in alternately:—

"Heard you were sick with smallpox—"

"Came up to find you—"

"Came in on skates, and—"

"A gang of outlaws turned us out of the cabin—"

"Found your diamonds."

"I don't half understand it all," said Horace, "but I see that you fellows have acted like good friends. We can't get in the cabin, you say? Well, you've a camp somewhere, haven't you?"

They started for the camp in the snow, and on the way Fred gave his brother a somewhat incoherent account of what had taken place.

"You fellows certainly have acted like friends to me—like brothers, rather!" said Horace. "I'll never forget it, boys!"

And he shook hands with them all round.

"Not a bit!" said Maurice, in embarrassment. "We were hoping that you'd let us in on the ground floor of a diamond mine. Fred says there was a whole bagful of diamonds that you had hidden in the cabin. What do you suppose they're worth?"

"If they're all diamonds, perhaps a hundred thousand dollars," replied Horace.

"Gracious!" gasped Maurice, and said no more.

But Fred's attention had been fixed on the pack that his brother carried.

"What have you there, Horace?" he asked.

"Grub. Bacon, hardtack, tea, cold boiled beans. Why, I never thought of it, but you must all be as hungry as wolves. Well, there's enough for a square meal here, anyhow, and to-morrow we'll find some way of getting those rascals out of the camp."

They built up the camp-fire, and Horace got out his provisions, together with a couple of partridges he had shot late that afternoon. But Macgregor, as medical adviser, refused to let them eat as much as they wanted. A little tea and a few mouthfuls of meat were all he permitted them to have; he promised, however, that they should have a full meal in a couple of hours. He took the same ration himself; but Horace ate heartily.

"But where have you been since you left the cabin?" Fred asked.

"At a lumber camp on the Abitibi, about forty miles from here," Horace replied. "I've been convalescing."

"If we'd only known that there was anything of the sort so near," remarked Peter, "we'd have made for it ourselves."

"I stumbled on it by chance. However, I'd better explain in detail. As you seem to have heard, I came sick to this trappers' shack. I'd been in an Indian camp a week before, on the Nottaway River, where they had had smallpox, but I've been vaccinated four or five times, and never dreamed of danger. I didn't know what the matter with me was, in fact, till the red spots began to appear.

"Of course the trappers were badly scared, especially after one of them caught the disease and died. I can't tell you how sorry I was for that death. I suppose I wasn't to blame, but I felt somehow responsible.

"The Indian cleared out, and I couldn't blame him. But I couldn't afford to let the third man go. I was over the worst of it by that time, but I was as weak as a

kitten, and could hardly feed myself. If he'd deserted me I should have died. I offered him any sum of money if he would stick to me, and told him that I'd shoot him if I saw any sign of his making off.

"I couldn't have aimed straight enough to hit him at a yard just then, and I suppose he knew it. Anyhow, he disappeared one morning before I was awake. He didn't take much with him except his gun and ammunition.

"I was gaining strength fast, and I was able to stagger about a little. I could get water, and there was some grub in the shack. I knew that I must get out at once, lest snow should come. I stayed four days; then I took what grub I could carry, my rifle and a dozen cartridges, and started. I left all my specimens, notebooks and everything, for I didn't dare to carry an ounce more than I could help."

"But the diamonds? They didn't weigh many ounces," interrupted Maurice.

"I struck for the Abitibi," went on Horace, paying no attention to the question, "and I was so weak that I couldn't make much speed. I had been out five days, and my grub was pretty nearly gone, when I stumbled into the lumbermen. They treated me like real Samaritans, took me in and fed me, and I've been there convalescing ever since. Day before yesterday I started back here to get my things. I had to travel slowly, for I'm not overstrong yet, and I was hurrying on to get to the cabin to-night when you pounced on me."

"If you had only taken the diamonds with you!" Fred lamented.

"I did," said Horace. He looked at the boys with a smile, and then went on:—

"Those stones, my boy, that you saw in the cabin aren't diamonds. They are quartz crystals and rather curious garnets, worth a few dollars at the most. Here are the diamonds!"

He took a small leather pouch from an inner pocket; the boys jumped up in excitement to look. From the pouch he took a small paper package, unfolded it, and revealed nine small lumps, which ranged in size from a small shot to a large pea. They looked like lumps of gum arabic, but their edges and angles reflected brilliant sparks in the firelight.

"Those little things? Are they diamonds?" cried Fred, in some

disappointment.

"Little things? Why, if they were all perfect stones, they'd be worth a small fortune. Unfortunately, the biggest has a flaw in it that you can see even without cutting it, and some of the others are yellowish and off color. It will take an expert to say what they 're worth. But the great triumph is to have found diamonds up here at all."

"Yes, and there must be more where these came from," said Maurice, brightening. "If you've discovered the beds—"

"I haven't, though," Horace returned. "Three of these stones I bought from a camp of Ojibwas. The rest I found in the gravel of the creek-beds, mostly along the Nottaway River, but none of them within a quarter of a mile of another. Whenever I thought the gravel looked promising, I sifted some of it. But I didn't find a trace of the blue soil that always forms the diamond-beds; if there are diamond-beds up here, they must be somewhere beyond the region that we have explored."

"But they must be here somewhere," cried Peter, "and there must be more diamonds where you found those! I'll certainly come up here next summer and try my own luck."

"I've thought of doing so myself; that is, if this lot turns out to be any good. But getting back to town is the present problem, and we've got to consider how to recapture the cabin and your outfit of supplies."

"But not before we eat again," said Fred.

Macgregor, who was as famished as any of them, consented, and they prepared such a banquet as the three castaways had not seen since they left the cabin. It almost exhausted the supplies that Horace had brought, but it did them all a great deal of good. With a new feeling of being able to grapple with the problem, they settled down to consider the question of war.

"We might set fire to the cabin," Fred suggested, "and try to capture the fellows when they rush out."

"Out of the question," declared Peter, "for, even if it worked, the provisions would be burned up. I had thought of stopping up their chimney during the night.

The smoke would suffocate them in their sleep, and we could go in and drag them out insensible."

"I am afraid it would waken them first," said Horace. "We'd have them coming out with rifles. Now I'd been thinking that if we only had some of your formaldehyde fumigator we could get them under control very easily."

"So we could. A can of that stuff let through the roof would put them into a dead stupor without waking them. The only risk would be that of killing them all outright. There was a can of it left, too, but it's in the cabin."

"No, it isn't!" cried Fred. "I put it outside in a hollow tree, so as not to have the stuff in the house. I could get it in ten minutes."

"Fred, you're a diamond yourself!" Peter exclaimed. "If it's as you say, we'll have them out of that cabin in a jiffy."

"Shall we try it to-night?" Maurice asked.

"Why not? It's nearly midnight, and they must be asleep," said Horace. "I've no fancy for spending another night and day shivering here in the snow. Besides, we're out of grub."

After some consultation, they put on their snowshoes and tramped off toward the cabin. It was intensely cold, and very still and clear; a brilliant moon had come up over the pines.

Fred easily found the hollow tree in which he had hidden the disinfectant, and came back with the apparatus. There was an unopened tin of formaldehyde complete with its little lamp almost full of spirit.

For some time they reconnoitered the cabin cautiously. A faint glow shone through the skin window, but no sound either of man or dog could be heard within.

It would not be possible to introduce the fumigator through the door or window, and if it were lowered down the chimney, the draft would carry the gas out again. But Maurice recollected the hole he had patched in the roof; it could easily be opened again. He volunteered to set the "smoker" going.

This was really the most dangerous part of the undertaking, for a slight sound might bring out the ruffians, who would probably shoot without much hesitation. Maurice took off his snowshoes, and carrying the fumigator, plunged through the drifts toward the cabin.

Twenty yards away the party watched him from the thickets; Horace kept the door covered with his rifle. The snow had drifted so deep that Maurice climbed easily to the roof, crawled up the slope on hands and knees, groped about, and began to scrape away the snow.

A moment later, he drew out the deer-hide patch, peered down the hole, and then waved his hand reassuringly toward the woods. He struck a match, lighted the spirit lamp, and then lowered the can cautiously by a string about a yard long.

In another minute he was back with his friends. "They're dead asleep," he said, joyfully. "I could hear them snore. The formaldehyde began to smell strong before I let it down. How long shall we leave it?"

"We don't want to kill them," said Horace.

"No danger," Peter remarked. "The draft from the big chimney will keep clearing the air. I'd leave it till all the stuff is vaporized—say, a couple of hours. The only thing I dread is that some one may wake up; but then, he wouldn't know what the smell was, and the spirit flame is so pale that it's almost invisible."

They watched the cabin intently. All remained deathly quiet. It was very cold as they crouched there in the snow. Horace kept his rifle ready, but finally his vigilance slackened. They walked about to keep from freezing, talked in whispers, and still watched the silent hut.

Suddenly Horace clutched Fred's arm.

"Look!" he cried. "The cabin's on fire!"

CHAPTER VIII

A thin stream of smoke was rising from the hole in the roof of the cabin. From the chimney volumes of vapor had suddenly begun to pour out into the moonlight. The dim glow at the window now and then flared up brightly.

"That spirit lamp must have set fire to something. Those men will be burned to death. Come, we must try to get them out!" Horace cried.

They rushed together to the cabin door. It was barricaded on the inside; they battered it with kicks and blows for a good half-minute, and at last it yielded.

A gush of smoke and suffocating fumes burst out into their faces, and the boys staggered back. The inside of the cabin appeared to be all in flames, but it was so obscured by smoke that they could see nothing clearly.

With the opening of the door the fire seemed to burn more fiercely. It seemed impossible that anything could be alive in that place; but Fred shut his eyes and dashed blindly in.

He stumbled over the body of a dog, and kicked it outside the door. Choking with the smoke and the formaldehyde fumes, he took another step, and his foot struck something soft; it was the body of a man.

Fred stooped and tried to pick the body up by the shoulders. Suddenly through the smoke Peter appeared at his side, and helped him; together they got the man out and laid him down on the snow. He was one of the French Canadians, apparently lifeless.

"Is he dead?" gasped Fred to Macgregor, who bent over the prostrate form.

The medical student peered under the man's eyelids, and felt his wrist. "No," he said, "he'll come round all right in the fresh air. It's the smoke more than the gas."

Horace came out at that moment, dragging Mitchell's limp body. The red-bearded ruffian was alive, but unconscious; the boys placed him on the snow beside his companion. Then all four of them rushed into the cabin together, and succeeded in getting out the remaining two French Canadians.

"Now the dogs! We must get them out!" cried Peter. That was not hard to do, for the animals were lying close to the door.

The strong draft from the door to the chimney had by this time cleared the atmosphere a good deal, and the boys saw that the fire was burning chiefly among the couches of balsam boughs. The spirit lamp must have scorched through the cord by which it hung, and dropped into a heap of dry twigs.

The boys had no means of putting the fire out; the immediate need was to rescue the provisions. They rushed in again, and each dragged out an armful of supplies. They took a breath of fresh air, and then hastened in again. Fred was reaching for a slab of bacon, when suddenly something exploded almost under his hand.

He jumped back, almost fancying he had been shot at. *Crack! crack! bang!* went several other reports in quick succession, and this time he realized what it must be.

"Run! The ammunition's going off!" he shouted, and rushed for the open; as he ran, however, he caught up the piece of bacon.

Some of the rifle cartridges were exploding, one by one, and then two or three together, and suddenly, with a tremendous bang, a whole box seemed to go off.

Then the firing ceased, and after a short interval, the boys set to work again to get out more provisions. The cabin was stifling now from powder smoke, but they got what they could lay their hands on—a bag of flour, a quantity of canned stuff, a kettle, a rifle; soon a great heap of rescued supplies lay on the snow outside.

The flames, unable to ignite the solid logs of the cabin, were now dying; evidently they would soon burn themselves out.

Mitchell at this moment gave signs of returning life. He opened his eyes, stirred, and began to cough violently. They placed him in a more comfortable position, and at the same time took the precaution of tying his wrists and ankles securely with strips of deer-hide. The man seemed dazed; he looked at the boys in amazement, and did not utter a word.

Two of the French Canadians were also reviving, and the boys tied them up in the same way. The fourth was in bad shape, and it took vigorous rubbing to restore him to consciousness: if he had been neglected a little longer he might have died.

They laid the captives out in a row on a pile of hemlock branches, and lighted a roaring fire to keep them from freezing. Horace then went through Mitchell's pockets, and recovered the sack of stones that Fred had seen. He poured the glittering crystals into his hand, while Mitchell looked on in black disappointment.

"My friend," said Horace, "you've taken a vast amount of trouble, risked committing murder, and almost lost your own life for these pebbles. Here, I'll give them to you." He poured the crystals back into the pouch, and then flung the sack into the man's lap.

FLUNG THE SACK INTO THE MAN'S LAP
FLUNG THE SACK INTO THE MAN'S LAP

The outlaw looked utterly bewildered.

"Ain't them diamonds?" he exclaimed.

"Fool's diamonds," Horace replied. "Maybe you can get five dollars for the lot. If they were real diamonds, you might be a millionaire now."

Mitchell was evidently convinced, for he swore bitterly.

"I'm curious to know," Horace said, "how you came to hear that you might expect to find diamonds hereabouts?"

"One of these breeds," said Mitchell sullenly, "got it from a brother of his down by Hickson that a prospector had died here with a pocketful of shiny stones that he'd picked up. I've prospected some myself. I thought what these stones likely was, and I got together this crowd, and—"

"We know the rest," said Peter. "You came on the same false scent that we did." Then he turned to Horace, and whispered, "What in the world are we going to do with these fellows?"

Horace wrinkled his brows in perplexity, and shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

But whatever they did, they must first of all sleep. The fire in the cabin had indeed burned out, but the place was so charred and smoky as to be uninhabitable; so they built a huge camp-fire of logs on the snow. Here they all passed the night,—there was not much left of it,—and Peter, Fred, and Maurice took turns in staying awake in order to watch the prisoners.

The next morning the boys prepared a great breakfast from the recaptured provisions. They released the right hands of the captives, to enable them to eat; the men showed no hostile spirit. Mitchell only was sullen, as usual; the three French Canadians chattered gayly; they had quite recovered from their suffocation. Four of the dogs were lively, too; but one was dead.

After breakfast the boys inspected the cabin, and carried out the rest of the supplies. Most of these were badly damaged. All the blankets had been destroyed; the rifles were charred about the stocks, but could still be used; the kettles and tinware were not much injured; but the boys found only one box of cartridges that had not exploded. Mitchell's dog harness was burned to pieces. Both the sledges had been left outdoors, and were unhurt.

As they looked over the outfit, the boys discussed their plans. They agreed that they should start for home at once. They were all anxious to have the diamonds appraised, and there was not the slightest reason for remaining. But the question what to do with the prisoners perplexed them. They could not take them along, could not leave them bound, and did not dare to set them free and restore their weapons.

Finally, however, the boys found a way out of the difficulty. They divided the provisions and ammunition into two equal parts, and loaded their toboggan with one of them. Peter then cut the four men loose.

"We'll treat you better than you did us," he said. "We're leaving you half the grub, and there are some old deerskins here from which you can make a new dog harness. We'll carry your snowshoes with us for two miles down the river, and leave them there. We'll carry your rifles three miles farther, and leave them in a conspicuous place, too."

Then the boys set out on their homeward journey. One of the Frenchmen

immediately started after them in order to pick up the snowshoes and the rifles, but the boys soon left him far behind. They saw no more of any of the outlaw gang, although, for fear of an attack, they kept watch for the next two nights in camp.

None of the boys were in condition for fast travel, and the question of supplies was a serious one. Horace thought it best to make straight for the lumber camp where he had been so kindly received, and they reached it on the third day. Here they spent a couple of days in rest and recuperation, and were lucky enough to be able to buy enough beans, flour, and bacon to last them to the railway. Again they set off, and, after four days of hard tramping in bitter cold weather, they heard the whistle of a train, faint and far away through the trees.

They all yelled with joy. It was like a voice from home. They began to run, and in a short time they came to iron rails running north and south through the snowy forest. Following up the line, they found themselves at Ringwood, three stations north of Waverley, where they had gone in.

The next train took them down to that point, and they went back to the hotel, recovered their suit-cases, and put on town clothes again. It seemed a long time since they had passed that way before, and collars and cuffs were hard to wear. A great many curious eyes followed them about the little hotel.

"Find any gold?" the landlord asked them, in an offhand manner.

"No," said Maurice. If he had inquired about diamonds, the boys would have been puzzled what to say.

For the last time they packed their dunnage sacks on the battered toboggan, and shipped it to the city. They traveled on the same train themselves, and were in Toronto the next morning.

The boys parted with hearty farewells—Maurice going home, Macgregor to his rooms, and Horace accompanying Fred to his boarding-house, where he intended to find quarters for himself.

"And now for the great question!" said Horace, when they were once indoors. "Are the diamonds worth anything, or are they not? I can't think of anything else till I find out."

"Why, I thought you were sure—" began Fred.

"So I am—in a general sort of way. But I'm not a diamond expert, and I may be deceived. It's just possible that the things may not be real diamonds at all.

"But don't worry," he added, seeing his brother's startled face. "I'm pretty sure they 're all right. But I'm going to take them at once to Wilson & Keith's and get them appraised. They're the best diamond firm in the city, and they'll treat me honestly."

Horace dressed himself very carefully, took his little sack of jewels, and departed. He was gone fully three hours, and Fred waited in almost sickening impatience. At last he heard Horace's step on the stairs, and rushed out to meet him.

"What luck?" he cried eagerly.

"S-sh!" said Horace, drawing him back into the room. "It's all right. They're diamonds!"

"Hurrah!" Fred shouted wildly.

"They were awfully keen to know where I got them, but of course I wouldn't tell, except that it was in Ontario. They would have bought the lot, I think, but I wasn't anxious to sell at once. They wanted me to make a price, and I wanted them to make an offer, and both of us were afraid, I guess. However, they're going to take care of the stones for me and think it over."

"We must tell the other boys!" exclaimed Fred. "Can you make the slightest guess at what the stones are worth?"

"Hardly—at present. Maybe a thousand or two. Three of them are too small to be of any use at all, too small to be cut. The biggest has a bad flaw in it; it could be used only for cutting up into what they call 'commercial diamonds,' for watch-movements, and such things. Yes, give Peter and Maurice the news, certainly, but do it by word of mouth. Don't 'phone them. You don't know who may be listening.

"And be sure to warn them to keep the whole affair the closest kind of secret. Wilson & Keith are going to exhibit the stones in their show window, and you've

no idea what an excitement will be stirred up. We'll all be watched. People will try in every possible way to find out where we got them. The newspapers will be after the story, and there'll be all kinds of underhand tricks to trap us into letting out something. Not that it would do much good, for none of you know enough to be dangerous, but we don't want a dozen parties going up the Nottaway River next spring. We 're going there ourselves."

Fred promised secrecy, and presently found that his brother had hardly exaggerated the sensation caused by the little pile of dull stones on a square of black velvet in the jeweler's window, labeled "Canadian Diamonds." The newspapers were unremitting; Horace gave them a brief and circumspect interview, and thenceforth refused to add another word to his statement. He was besieged with inquiries. He had all sorts of proposals made to him by miners and mining firms. One group of capitalists made him an offer that he thought good enough to consider for a day, but he ultimately rejected it.

Fred had his share of glory too, as the brother of the diamond finder. It leaked out that Maurice and Peter had also been on the expedition, and they were so pestered with inquiries and interviewers that it seriously interfered with their collegiate work. But by degrees the excitement wore off, for lack of anything further to feed upon. The diamonds were withdrawn from exhibition, and the jewelers at last made up their minds to offer Horace seven hundred dollars for the lot.

It was rather a disappointing figure. Horace took his diamonds to Montreal and submitted them to two jewel experts there, who advised him that they were probably worth little more, in their uncut form. The cutting of them might develop flaws, or it might bring out unexpected luster; it was taking a chance.

Returning to Toronto, he announced that he would take eight hundred and no less; and after some arguing Wilson & Keith consented to pay that price. The boys had a grand dinner at a downtown restaurant that night to celebrate it. It was far from the fortune they had hoped to gain, but they still had great hopes of discovering that fortune.

"It's more than enough to cover the expenses of your trip into the woods this winter, and our next trip in the spring, too," said Horace, "for of course this eight hundred is going to be divided equally between us."

"Not a bit of it!" protested Mac. "You found the stones. They're yours. We won't take a cent of it, will we, Maurice?"

"I should think not!" Maurice exclaimed.

Horace tried to insist, but the two boys stood firm. At last he persuaded them to agree that the expenses of the expedition should be defrayed out of the diamond money. As for their coming trip next season, the matter was left to be settled later.

There was plenty of time to think of it, for it would be months before the woods would be open for prospecting.

CHAPTER IX

Nearly the whole winter was before them, but it was none too long a time to consider their plans. Horace had found diamonds, it is true, but they had been found miles apart, one at a time, in the river gravel. This is not the natural home of diamonds, which are always found native to the peculiar formation known in South Africa as "blue clay." Nobody had ever found a trace of blue clay in Ontario, yet Horace felt certain that the blue-clay beds must exist. They were the only thing worth looking for. To poke over the river gravel in hopes of finding a chance stone would be sheer waste of time. Hundreds of men had done it without lighting on a single diamond.

Horace was a trained geologist, and that winter he spent much time in study, without saying a word even to Fred as to what he was meditating. He pored over geological surveys, and went to Ottawa to consult the departmental maps at the Legislative Library. By slow degrees he was working out a theory, and at last, one February evening, he came into his brother's room.

"Just look at this, Fred, and see what you think of it," he remarked casually.

It was a large pen-and-ink map, skillfully drawn, for Horace was a practiced map-maker.

"It's the country of the Abitibi and Missanabie Rivers," Horace explained. "These red crosses show where I found my diamonds—see, in the Whitefish River, the Smoke River, and another river that hasn't any name, so far as I know. Right here is the trappers' cabin where you boys found me. My bones might have been up there now but for you, old boy!"

And he thumped Fred's back affectionately.

"If you hadn't come along when you did I'm pretty certain our bones would be there, anyway," said Fred.

"Well, let's hope we all saved one another. But see, most of these diamonds were found many miles apart. They didn't grow where I found them. They must have been washed down, perhaps from the very headwaters of the river. Now look at the map. Do you see, all these three rivers rise in pretty much the same region."

"So they do," said Fred, his eyes fixed on the paper. "Then you think—"

"The stones were probably all washed down from that region. The blue-clay beds, the diamond field, must be up there, somewhere within this black circle I've drawn."

Fred's heart began to throb with excitement.

"But some prospector would have hit on them before now," he said.

"I doubt if any prospector has ever gone in there. They say it's one of the roughest bits of country in the North, and no mineral strikes have ever been made in that region. I've never been up there myself. It's up in the hills, you see; the rivers are too broken for a canoe, and the ground is too rough to get over on foot, except in the winter. The Ojibwas hunt there in the winter, they say, and I dare say there's plenty of game."

"But if it's so rough to get into, how can we travel?"

"Oh, often those bad places are not so bad when you get there. I'd like to see the place I couldn't get into if there were diamonds there! We'll get into it somehow, for the diamond-beds must surely be there if they're anywhere. But there's no doubt it'll be a rough trip."

"Rough? What of that?" cried Fred. "If your theory is right we'll make our fortunes—millions, maybe! Of course you'll let me go, won't you? And Maurice, and Mac?"

"I couldn't manage without you. But mind, not a word to anybody else!"

They telephoned the other boys that day, and in the evening a meeting was held in Fred's room, like the previous time when the first expedition had been so hurriedly planned. But this was to be a different affair, carefully thought out and equipped for all sorts of possibilities.

"Of course you'll both be able to go?" said Fred.

"I certainly will," answered Peter. "I've lost so much time this winter already, with our other trip, and then having my mind on the diamonds and dodging newspaper reporters and things, that I've got hopelessly behind. My laboratory work especially has gone all to pieces. I'm bound to fail on next summer's exams, anyway, so I'm going to let it slide and make the trip, on the chance that I'll make such a fortune that I won't have to practice medicine for a living at all. How about you, Maurice?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything—if I could help it," Maurice replied. "I don't know, though, whether I can afford it."

Maurice's parents were not in rich circumstances, and Horace hastened to say —

"I'm paying for this expedition, you know, out of the diamond money. There'll be plenty, and some to spare."

"Well, it isn't exactly the cost," said Maurice, "but my father is awfully anxious for me to make an honor pass next summer. I couldn't afford to fail, and have to take another year at the work. I don't know, though,—I'll see. I'd be awfully disappointed if I had to stay out of it."

Under the circumstances they could not urge him to say more. As for Horace and Fred, they had very few family ties. Their closest relatives were an aunt and uncle in Montreal. The trip was quite in the line of Horace's profession, and Fred did not mind resigning the post he held in the real estate office. The firm was shaky; it was not likely to continue in business much longer, and he would be

likely to have to look for another position soon in any event. As they had feared, Maurice was obliged to announce his inability to go with them. His professors thought that an absence of two months would be a handicap that he could never make up. In the eyes of his parents the expedition was no more than a hare-brained expedition into the woods, that would cost a whole year of collegiate work. To his bitter disappointment, he had to give it up.

Fred and Macgregor at once began to train as if for an athletic contest. They took long cross-country runs in the snow and worked hard in the gymnasium. They introduced a new form of exercise that made their friends stare. They appeared on the indoor running track bent almost double; each carried on his back a sack of sawdust, held in place by a broad leather band that passed over the top of his forehead. Thus burdened they jogged round the track at a fast walk.

They were the butt of many jokes before the other men at the gymnasium discovered the reason for this queer form of exercise. It had been Horace's idea. He knew that there would be long portages where they would have to carry the supplies with a tumpline; and he also knew that nothing is so wearing on a novice.

Fred and Peter found it so. Strong as they were, they discovered that it brought a new set of muscles into play, and they had trouble in staggering over a mile with a fifty-pound pack; but they kept at it, and before the expedition started, Fred could travel five miles with a hundred pounds, and big Macgregor could do even better.

As soon as the ice on Toronto Bay broke up, they bought a large Peterboro canoe, which Horace inspected thoroughly. He was a skilled canoeman; Fred and Peter could also handle a paddle. When the ice went out of the Don and Humber Rivers, the boys began to practice canoeing assiduously. The streams were running yellow and flooded, and they got more than one ducking, but it was all good training.

They decided to start as soon as the Northern rivers were navigable, for at that early season they would escape the worst of the black-fly pest, and the smaller streams would be more easily traveled than when shallow in midsummer. Besides, they all felt anxious to get on the ground at once. But although the streams were free in Toronto, in the Far North winter held them

locked. It was hard to wait; but not until May did Horace think it safe to start.

Since Maurice was not going, the boys decided to take only one canoe. It was impossible to say how long they might be gone, but Horace made out a list of supplies for six weeks. It was rather a formidable list, and the outfit would be heavy to transport. They carried a tent and mosquito-bar, and a light spade and pick for prospecting the blue clay, besides Horace's own regular outfit for mineralogical testing work. For weapons they decided upon a 44-caliber repeating rifle and a shotgun, with assorted loads of shells. It was not the season for hunting, but they wished to live on the country as far as possible to save their flour and pork. Fish should be abundant, however, and they took a steel rod with a varied stock of artificial flies and minnow-baits.

It was warm weather, almost summery, when they took the northbound express in Toronto; but when Fred opened the car window the next morning, a biting cold air rushed in. Rough spruce woods lined the track, and here and there he saw patches of snow.

It was almost noon when they got off at the station that was a favorite starting-point for prospectors. Here they had to spend two days, for Horace wished to engage Indian packers to help them portage over the Height of Land. As it was early in the season, they had their pick of men, and obtained three French half-breeds, who furnished their own canoe and supplies.

The boys' canoe and duffel sacks had come up by freight. All was ready at last. The next morning they put the canoes into the water; the paddles dipped, and the half-dozen houses of the village dropped out of sight behind the pines.

The first week of that voyage was uneventful, except for hard work and considerable discomfort. It rained four days in the seven, and once it snowed a little. They were going upstream always, against a rushing current swollen with snow water. Sometimes they could paddle, more often they had to pole, and frequently they were forced either to carry, or else to wade and "track" the canoes up the current. The nearer they came to the head of the river, the swifter and more broken the stream became. At last they could go no farther in the canoes. Then came the long portage. In order to reach the head of the Missanabie River, which flowed in the opposite direction, they had to carry the canoe and over six hundred pounds of outfit for about twelve miles, across the Height of Land.

Here they camped for one night. At daylight next morning they started over the long portage, heavily burdened, and before the first hour had passed they were thankful that they had brought along the half-breed packers, who strode along sturdily under a load that made Fred stare. It is only fair to say, though, that the half-breeds were almost equally surprised at the performance of the boys, for their previous experience with city campers had not led them to expect anything in the way of weight-carrying. Thanks to their gymnasium practice, however, Fred and Macgregor were able to travel under a sixty-pound load without actually collapsing.

The trail was rough and wound up and down over rocky ridges, through tangles of swamp-alder and tamarack, but continually zigzagged up toward the hills. It was a chilly day; the streams had been rimmed with ice that morning, but after a few miles the boys were dripping with perspiration.

That was a killing march. If it had not been for their weeks of hard training the boys could never have stood up under it, and they had all they could do to reach the topmost ridge of the Height of Land by the middle of the afternoon.

Fred slipped the tumpline from his head, slung the sixty-pound pack on the ground, and sat down heavily on the pack.

"That part's over, anyway!" he gasped.

"There won't be anything much rougher, old boy," replied Horace, as he came up and threw off his own burden.

Staggering through the underbrush, slipping on the wet, mossy stones of the slope, came a queer procession. In front was a bronze-faced half-breed, bent double, with the broad tump-line over the top of his head, and a mountainous pack of blankets and food supplies on his back. Behind him came two more half-breeds, each with a heavy pack of camp outfit. Macgregor brought up the rear; he carried a Peterboro canoe upside down on his shoulders, and steadied it with his hands.

They all sat down on the top of the hill to rest. The three white boys, although trained athletes, were pretty well at the end of their strength; but the half-breeds seemed little the worse for their labor.

They were on the top of the Height of Land, which divides the flow of the

rivers between the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay. Behind them was the long, undulating line of hills and valleys they had just crossed.

Before them the land fell away sharply. In the clear May sunshine they could see for miles over the tree-tops until the dark green of the spruce and tamarack faded to a hazy blue. A great ridge showed a split face of gray granite; in the distance a lake glimmered.

About two miles away to the northwest a yellowish-green strip showed here and there through the trees. It was a river—one of the tributaries of the Missanabie, which was to take them North.

The descent on the other side of the ridge was almost as hard as the ascent had been. The northern slope was wet and rocky; in the hollows were deep banks of snow. The rocks were loosened by the frost, which made the footing dangerous. But it was only two miles now to the river, and they reached it in time to camp before dusk. The next morning they paid off the half-breeds, who returned over the ridges southward. The boys were left alone; the real expedition had begun.

The work now looked easy, but dangerous. The river was narrow, swollen; its tremendous current, roaring over rocks and rapids, would carry them along at a rapid pace. They would have to do some careful steering, however, if they did not wish to upset.

As the most skillful canoeman, Horace took the stern; Macgregor sat in the bow, and Fred in the middle behind a huge pile of dunnage.

For a quarter of a mile they shot down the river; then they had to land and make a fifty-yard carry. Another swift run in the canoe followed, and then another and longer portage.

It was like that for about fifteen miles. Then they caught sight of wider water ahead, and the little river poured into a great, brown, swift-flowing stream a hundred yards wide. It was the Missanabie.

During the rest of that day they ran over forty miles. The current carried them fast, and the river was so big and deep that it was seldom broken by dangerous rapids.

The country grew lower and less hilly; it was covered with a rather stunted growth of spruce, tamarack, and birch. Ducks splashed up from the water as the canoe came in sight; and when the boys stopped to make camp for the night they found at the river's edge the tracks of a moose.

It was wintry cold in camp that night, and there was ice in the pools the next morning. Shortly after sunrise the boys launched the canoe again, and it was not much more than an hour later when a sound of roaring water began to grow loud in their ears. With vast commotion and foam a smaller stream swept into the Missanabie from the southwest.

"Hurrah! I've been here before!" cried Horace. "It's the Smoke River. Up here real work begins."

"And up here," Peter said, gazing at the wild, swift stream, "is the diamond country."

CHAPTER X

The mouth of the Smoke River was so rough that the boys could not enter it in the canoe; and the dense growth of birch and willow along the shores would make portaging difficult.

"We'll have to track the canoe up," Horace decided.

They got out the "tracking-line"—a long, stout, half-inch rope—and attached one end of it to the bow of the canoe. Peter Macgregor harnessed himself to the other end, and started up the narrow, rocky strip of shore; Horace waded beside the canoe in order to fend her off the boulders. Fred, carrying the fire-arms and a few other articles that a wetting would have ruined, scrambled through the thickets.

The water was icy cold, but it was never more than hip-deep. Fortunately, the very broken stretch of the river was only a hundred yards long; after that, they were able to pole for a mile or so, and once indeed, the stream broadened so

much that they could use the paddles. Then came a precipitous cascade, then a difficult carry, and then another stretch of poling.

They had gone about five miles up the river when Horace, who had been watching the shores carefully, pointed to a tree and gave a shout. It was a large spruce, on the trunk of which was a blazed mark that looked less than a year old.

"It's my mark," said Horace. "I made it last August. Right here I found one of the diamonds."

"We must stop and do some prospecting!" cried Fred.

"No use," replied his brother. "I prospected all round here myself, and for a mile or so up the river. I didn't go any farther, but I've a notion that we'll have to go nearly to the head of the river to find the country we want."

On they went, shoving the canoe against the current with the iron-shod canoe poles. They had all been looking up the kind of soil in which diamonds are usually found, and now they closely observed the eroded banks on both sides of the river. According to Horace's theory, the river, or one of its tributary streams, must cut through the diamond-beds of blue clay. But as yet the shores showed nothing except ordinary sand and gravel.

Two miles farther the river broadened into a long, narrow lake, surrounded by low spruce-clad hills and edged with sprouting lily-pads. It was a great relief to the boys to be able to paddle, and they dashed rapidly to the head of the lake. There, rapids and a long carry confronted them! They had made little more than fifteen miles that day when finally they went into camp; they were almost too tired to cook supper. And they knew that that day's work was only a foretaste of what was coming, for from now on they would be continually "bucking the rapids."

The next day they found rapids in plenty, indeed. They seemed to come on an average of a quarter of a mile apart, and sometimes two or three in such close succession that it was scarcely worth while to launch the canoe again after the first portage. It was slow, toilsome work; they grew very tired as the afternoon wore on, and shortly before sunset they came to one of the worst spots they had yet encountered.

It was a pair of rapids, less than a hundred yards apart. Over the first one the

water rushed among a medley of irregular boulders, and then, after some ten rods of smooth, swift current, poured down a cataract of several feet. Huge black rocks, split and tumbled, broke up the cataract, and the hoarse roar filled the pine woods with sound.

"I move we camp!" said Fred, eyeing this obstacle with disgust.

"Let's get over the carry first and camp at the top," Peter urged. "Then we'll have a clear start for morning."

Fred grumbled that they would certainly be fresher in the morning than they were then, but they unpacked the canoe, and began to carry the outfit around the broken water, as they had done so many tunes that day. Once at the head of the upper rapid Horace began to get out the cooking-utensils.

"I'll start supper," he said. "You fellows might see if you can't land a few trout. There ought to be big fellows between these two cascades."

It did look a good place for trout, and Mac had an appetite for fishing that no fatigue could stifle. He took the steel fly-rod, and walked a little way down the stream past the upper rapid. Fred cut a long, slender pole, tied a line to it and prepared to fish in a less scientific fashion. As his rod and line were considerably shorter than Mac's, he got into the canoe, put a loop of the tracking-rope around a rock, and let himself drift for the length of the rope, nearly to the edge of the rough water. Hung in this rather precarious position, he was able to throw his hook into the foamy water just at the foot of the fall, and had a bite almost instantly, throwing out a good half-pound fish whose orange spots glittered in the sunlight.

Peter meanwhile was fishing from the shore lower down. The thickets were farther back from the water than usual, and he had plenty of room for the back cast. He was kept busy from the first, and when he had time to glance up Fred seemed to be having equally good luck.

But at one of these hurried glances his eye caught something that appalled him. The looped rope that held the straining canoe seemed to be in danger of slipping from its hold on the rock.

He shouted, but the roar of the water drowned his voice. He started up the bank, shouting and gesticulating, but Fred was busy with a fish and did not hear

or see. Horace was cutting wood at a distance. And at that moment the rope slipped free. The canoe shot forward, and before Fred could even drop his rod he was whirled broadside on into the rapid.

Instantly the canoe capsized. Fred went out of sight in the foam and water, and then Macgregor saw him floating down on the current below the rapid. He was on his back, with his face just above water, and he did not move a limb.

Mac yelled at him, but got no answer. Fred had not been under long enough to be drowned. He had evidently been stunned by striking his head against a rock.

Then Mac realized the boy's new and greater danger. Fred was drifting rapidly head first toward the second cataract, and no one could dive over that fall and live. The rocks at the bottom would brain the strongest swimmer.

Mac instinctively dropped his rod and rushed into the water. The strength of the swirling current almost swept him off his feet. It was too deep to wade, and he was not a good swimmer. He could never reach Fred in time. They would go over the fall together.

Fred was more than thirty feet from shore. Mac thought of a long pole, and splashed madly ashore again. He caught sight of his fishing-rod, with its hundred yards of strong silk line on the reel.

Fred was now about twenty yards above the cascade when Mac ran into the river again, rod in hand, as far as he dared to wade. He measured the distance with his eye, reeled out the line, waving the rod in the air, and then, with a turn of his wrist, the delicate rod shot the pair of flies across the water.

Mac was an expert fly-caster. The difficulty was not in the length of the cast; it was to hook the flies in Fred's clothing. They fell a yard beyond the boy's body. Mac drew them in. The hooks seemed to catch for an instant on his chest, but came free at the first tug.

Desperately Mac swished the flies out of the water for another cast. He saw that he would have time to throw but this once more, for Fred was terribly near the cataract, and moving faster as the pull of the current quickened. Mac waded a little farther into the stream, leaning against the current to keep his balance.

The line whirled again, and shot out, and again the gut fell across Fred's shoulders with the flies on the other side. With the greatest care Mac drew in the line. The first fly dragged over the body as before. The other caught, broke loose, and caught again in Fred's coat near the collar, and then the steel rod bent with the sudden strain of a hundred and fifty pounds drawn down by the strong current.

Mac knew that the rod was almost unbreakable, but he feared for his line. The current pulled so hard that he dared not exert much force. Fred's body swung round with his head upstream, his feet toward the cataract, and the current split and ripped in spray over his head.

The lithe steel rod bent hoop-like. There was a struggle for a moment, a deadlock between the stream and the line, and Mac feared that he could not hold it. The light tackle would never stand the strain.

Mac had fought big fishes before, however, and he knew how to get the most out of his tackle. With the check on the reel he let out line inch by inch to ease the resistance; and meanwhile he endeavored to swing Fred across the current and nearer the shore.

As he stood with every nerve and muscle strained on the fight he suddenly saw Horace out of the corner of his eye. Horace was beside him, coat and shoes off, with a long hooked pole in his hands, gazing with compressed lips at his brother's floating body.

There was not a word exchanged. Under the steady pull Fred came over in an arc of a circle, but for every foot that was gained Mac had to let out more line. His legs were swinging already within a few yards of the dangerous verge, but he was getting out of the center of the stream, and the current was already less violent.

Inch by inch and foot by foot he came nearer, and all at once Horace rushed forward, nearly shoulder-deep, and hooked the pole over his brother's arm. At the jerk the gut casting-line snapped with a crack, and the end flew back like a whip into Peter's face. But Horace had drawn Fred within reach, had gripped him, and waded ashore carrying him in his arms.

"I'll never forget this of you, Mac!" he ejaculated as he passed the medical student.

Fred had already come half to himself when they laid him on the bank. He had not swallowed much water, but had been merely knocked senseless by concussion with a boulder.

"What's—matter?" he muttered faintly, opening his eyes.

"Keep quiet. You fell in the river. Mac fished you out," said Horace.

Fred blinked about vaguely, half-attempted to rise and fell back.

"Gracious! What a head I've got!" he muttered dizzily.

They carried him up to the camp, put him on the blankets and examined his cranium. The back of his neck was skinned, there was a bleeding cut on the top of his head and a big bruise on the back, but Mac pronounced none of these injuries at all serious. While they were examining him Fred opened his eyes again.

"Fished me out, Mac? Guess you saved my life," he murmured.

"That's all right, old fellow," replied Peter; and then he gave a sudden start.

"The canoe!"

In the excitement over Fred's rescue they had entirely forgotten it. It had drifted downstream. If lost or destroyed they would be left stranded in the wilderness—almost as hopelessly as castaways at sea.

Without another word Mac began to run at full speed down the bank in the deepening twilight. If the canoe had drifted right down the stream, he might never have overtaken it, but luckily he came upon it within a mile, lying stranded and capsized. By the greatest good luck, too, it was not ruined. It had several bruises and a strip of the rail was split off, but it was still water-tight.

The next morning Fred was fairly recovered of his hurts, but felt weak and dizzy, so that not much progress was made. During the whole forenoon they remained in camp. Horace went hunting with the shotgun and got a couple of ducks. None of them felt much inclined for any more fishing in that almost fatal spot.

On the following day, however, Fred was able to take his share of the work again, and the party proceeded. That day and many days after were much alike. They tracked the canoe up long stretches of rough water, where two of them had to wade alongside in order to keep it from going over. They made back-breaking portages over places where they had to hew out a trail for a quarter of a mile. At night when they rolled themselves into their blankets they were too tired to talk. But the hard training they had undergone before they started showed its results now. Although they were dead tired at night, they were always ready for the day's work in the morning. They suffered no ill effects from their wettings in the river, and their appetites were enormous.

The supplies, especially of bacon and flour, decreased alarmingly. Although signs of game were abundant, they did not like to lose time in hunting until they reached the prospecting grounds; but a couple of days later meat came to them. They had reached the foot of the worst rapid they had yet encountered. It was a veritable cascade, for the river, narrowing between walls of rock, leaped and roared over fifty yards of boulders. The portage led up a rather steep slope. The three boys, each heavily burdened, were struggling along in single file, when Horace, who was in front, suddenly sank flat, and with his hand cautioned the others to be silent.

"S-s-h! Lie low!" he whispered. "Give me the rifle!"

Macgregor passed the weapon to him, and then he and Fred wriggled forward to look.

Eighty yards away Fred saw the light-brown flank of a doe, and beside her, partly concealed by the underbrush, the head and large, questioning ears of a fawn. The animals were evidently excited, for as Horace lowered his rifle, not wishing to kill a mother with young, they bounded a few steps nearer, and stood gazing back at the thicket from which they had come. The wind blew toward the boys, and the roar of the cataract had drowned the noise of their approach.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the thicket, and two young bucks burst from the spruces and dashed past the doe and fawn toward the boys. At the same instant the lithe, tawny form of a lynx leaped out. It struck like lightning at the fawn, but the little fellow sprang aside and bounded after its mother. The lynx gave a few prodigious leaps and then stood, with tufted ears erect, glaring in disappointment. It had all happened within a few seconds, and the deer were

disappearing behind some rocks and stunted spruces fifty yards to the right before the boys thought again of their need of meat.

At that moment, one of the bucks wheeled at the edge of the tangle behind which the other deer had passed. For an instant he presented a fair quartering shot.

"Shoot quick!" whispered Macgregor, excitedly.

As the repeater in Horace's hands cracked, the buck whirled round in a half-circle, leaped once, and fell.

Fred uttered a wild shout, slipped the tumpline from his head, and ran forward. He was carrying the shotgun and held it ready; but the buck, shot behind the shoulder, was virtually dead, although he was kicking feebly.

The lynx had vanished; there was no sign of the other deer. Only the rush of the water in the river-bed now disturbed the forest stillness.

The dressing of the game was no small task. It was late in the afternoon when the boys had finished it and had brought up the rest of their outfit to the head of the cataract. "Buck Rapids" they named the place. There was enough meat on the deer to last them for the next week at least. The slices they cut and fried that night, although not tender, were palatable and nourishing.

The weather had been warmer that day, and for the first time mosquitoes troubled them. The boys slept badly, and got up the next morning unrefreshed and in no mood to "buck the river" again.

"Why not stop here a couple of days and prospect?" Mac suggested at breakfast.

The proposal struck them all favorably. It was the real beginning of the search for fortune. Fred in particular was fired with instant hope, and immediately after breakfast he set out to explore the country north of the river; he intended to make a wide circle back to the Smoke River and to come homeward down its bank. He carried a compass, the shotgun, and a luncheon of cold flapjacks and fried deer meat. Horace went off to the south; Macgregor remained in camp, to jerk the venison by smoking it over a slow fire.

It was a sunny, warm day. Spring seemed to have come with a bound, and the warmth had brought out the black flies in swarms. All the boys had smeared themselves that morning with "fly dope" that they had bought at the railway station, but even that black, ill-smelling varnish on their hands and faces was only partly effectual. Great clouds of the little pests hovered round them.

Fred struck straight north from the river, and then turned a little to the west. He examined the ground with the utmost care. The land lay in great ridges and valleys, and he soon found that prospecting was almost as rough work as fighting the river. In the valleys the earth was mucky with melting snow water; on the hills it was rocky, with huge boulders, tumbled heaps of shattered stone, slopes of loose gravel; everywhere was a tangle of stunted, scrubby birch and poplar, spruce and jack-pine.

After half an hour he came upon a small creek that flowed from the northwest. With a glance at his compass, he started to follow it. For nearly three hours he plodded along the creek, digging into the banks with a stick and examining every spot where there seemed a chance of finding blue clay; but he found nothing except ordinary sand and gravel. At last, disappointed and disheartened, he turned back toward the Smoke River. After a mile or so he stopped to eat his luncheon, and built a smudge to keep the flies away; then he proceeded onward through the rough, unprofitable country.

But if he did not find diamonds, he came on plenty of game. Ruffed grouse and spruce partridges rose here and there and perched in the trees. He saw many rabbits, and there were signs where deer or moose had browsed on the birch twigs. Once, as he came over a ridge, he caught a glimpse of a black bear digging at a pile of rotten logs in the valley. The animal evidently had not been long out of winter quarters, for it looked starved, and its fur was tattered and rusty. The moment the bear caught sight of him, it vanished like a dark streak.

Fred found no trace that afternoon of blue clay, or, indeed, of any clay, but he happened upon something that caused him some apprehension. It was a steel trap, lying on the open ground, battered and rusted as if it had been there for some time. Scattered round it were some bones that he guessed had belonged to a lynx. Apparently the animal had been caught in the trap, which was of the size generally used for martens, had broken the chain from its fastening, and had traveled until it had either perished from starvation or had been killed by wolves.

Although rusty, the trap was still in working condition, and Fred, somewhat uneasy, took it along with him. Some one had been trapping in that district recently, perhaps during the last winter; was the stranger also looking for diamonds?

With frequent glances at his compass Fred kept zigzagging to and fro, and finally came out on the river again; but he was still a long way from camp, and he did not reach the head of the cataract until nearly sunset.

Horace had already come in, covered with mud and swollen with fly bites.

"What luck?" cried Fred, eagerly.

His brother shook his head. He had encountered the same sort of rough country as Fred; and to add to his troubles, he had got into a morass, from which he had escaped in a very muddy condition.

Then Fred produced the trap and told of his finding it and of his fears. The boys examined it and tested its springs. Horace took a more cheerful view of the matter.

"The Ojibywas always trap through here in the winter," he said. "The owner of that trap is probably down at Moose Factory now. Besides, the lynx might have traveled twenty or thirty miles from the place where it was caught."

In spite of the failure of the day's work they all felt hopeful; but they resolved to push on farther before doing any more prospecting.

The next morning they launched the canoe, and for four days more faced the river. Each day the work was harder. Each day they had a succession of back-breaking portages; sometimes they were able to pole a little; they hauled the canoe for hours by the tracking-line, and in those four days they traveled scarcely thirty miles.

On the last day they met with a serious misfortune. While they were hauling the canoe up a rapid the craft narrowly escaped capsizing, and spilled out a large tin that contained twenty-five pounds of corn meal and ten pounds of rice—their entire stock. What was worse, the cover came off, and the precious contents disappeared in the water.

About fifteen pounds of Graham flour and five pounds of oatmeal were all the breadstuffs they had left now, and they had to use it most sparingly.

But they were well within the region where Horace thought that the diamond-beds must lie. On the map it had seemed a small area; but now they realized that it was a huge stretch of tangled wilderness, where a dozen diamond-beds might defy discovery. Even Horace, the veteran prospector, admitted that they had a big job before them.

"However, we'll find the blue clay if it's on the surface—and the supplies hold out," he said, with determination.

The next morning each of the boys went out in a different direction. Late in the afternoon they came back, one by one, tired and fly-bitten, and each with the same failure to report. The ground was much as they had found it before, covered with rock and gravel in rolling ridges. Nowhere had they found the blue clay.

They spent two more days here, working hard from morning to night, with no success. The next day they again moved camp a day's journey upstream; that brought them into the heart of the district from which they had expected so much. The river was growing so narrow and so broken that it would be almost impossible for them to follow it farther by canoe. If they pushed on they would have to abandon their craft, and carry what supplies they could on their backs.

But they intended to spend a week here. They set out on the diamond hunt again with fresh energy. A warm, soft drizzle was falling, which to some extent kept down the flies.

Horace came back to camp first; he had had no success. He was trying to find dry wood to rekindle the fire when he saw Fred coming down the bank at a run. The boy's face was aglow.

"Look here, Horace! What's this?" he asked, as he came up panting. In his hand he held a large, wet lump of greenish-blue, clayey mud. Horace took it, poked into it, and turned it over. Then he glanced sympathetically at his brother's face.

"I'm afraid it isn't anything, old boy," he said. "Only ordinary mud. The real blue clay is more of a gray blue, you know, and generally as hard as bricks."

Fred pitched the stuff into the river and said nothing, but his face showed his disappointment. He had carried that lump of clay for over four miles, in the conviction that he had discovered the diamond-bearing soil.

Macgregor came in shortly afterward with nothing more valuable than two ducks that he had shot.

The boys were discouraged that evening. After the rain they could find little dry wood. It was nearly dark before Fred began to stir up the usual pan of flapjacks, and "Mac" set himself to the task of cutting up one of the ducks to fry.

They were too much depressed to talk, and the camp was quiet, when suddenly a crackling tread sounded in the underbrush.

"What's that?" cried Horace sharply. And as he spoke, a man stepped out of the shadow, and advanced into the firelight.

"*Bo' soir*! Hello!" he said, curtly.

"Hello! Good evening!" cried Fred and Mac, much startled.

"Sit down. Grub'll be ready in a minute," Horace added. Hospitality comes before everything else in the North.

"Had grub," answered the man; but he sat down on a log beside the fire, and surveyed the whole camp with keen, quick eyes.

All the boys looked at him with much curiosity. He was apparently of middle age, with a tangled beard and black hair that straggled down almost to his shoulders. He wore moccasins, Mackinaw trousers shiny with blood and grease, a buckskin jacket, and a flannel shirt. He was brown as any Ojibwa, and he, carried a repeating rifle and had a belt of cartridges at his waist.

"Hunting?" he asked presently, with a nod at the deerskin that was hanging to dry.

"Now and again," said Horace.

"Well, ye can't hunt here," said the man deliberately, after a pause. "Don't ye know that this is a Government forest reserve? No hunters allowed. Ye'll have to be out of here by to-morrow."

CHAPTER XI

The boys were thunderstruck at the stranger's assertion. They knew of several forest reserves in northern Ontario where timber and game are closely protected, but they had never heard of one in this district.

"I guess you're wrong," said Horace. "There isn't any Government reserve north of Timagami."

"Made last fall," the stranger retorted. "I ought to know. I'm one of the rangers. We've got a camp up the river, and we've been here all winter to keep out hunters and lumbermen."

Horace looked at him closely, but said nothing.

"Prospecting's allowed, isn't it?" Fred blurted out.

"Prospect all ye want to, but ye can't stake no claims."

"Where's the limit of this reserve?" asked Mac.

"Ten miles down the river from here. Ye'll have to be down below there by to-morrow night. Or, if ye want to stay, ye'll have to give up your guns. No guns allowed here."

"I suppose you've got papers to show your authority?" Mac inquired.

"'Course I have. They 're back at camp. Oh, ye'll get all ye want. Why," pointing to the fresh hide, "ye killed that there deer out of season. Ye've got the law agin ye for that."

"It was for our own food. You can kill deer for necessary supplies."

"Not on this ground. Now ye can do as ye like—give up your guns till ye 're ready to leave, or get out right away. I've warned ye."

The "ranger" got up and glanced round threateningly.

"If you can show us that you're really a Government ranger, we'll go," Horace said. "But I know the Commissioner of Crown Lands; I saw him before we started, and I didn't hear of any new reserve being made. I don't believe in you or your reserve, and we'll stay where we are till you show us the proof of your authority."

"I'll show you *this*!" exclaimed the man fiercely, slapping the barrel of his rifle.

"You can't bluff us. We've got guns, too, if it comes to that!" cried Fred.

"I've give ye fair warning," repeated the man. "Ye'll find it mighty hard to buck agin the Gover'ment, and ye'll be sorry if ye try it. Ye'll see me again."

Turning, he stepped into the shadows and was gone. The boys looked at one another.

"What do you make of it?" Peter asked. "Is he a ranger—or a prospector?"

"They don't hire that kind of man for Government rangers," replied Horace. "And I'm certain there's no forest reserve here. Why, there's no timber worth preserving. He's a hunter or a prospector, and from his looks he's evidently been in the woods all winter, as he said. Perhaps he belongs to a party of prospectors who found a good thing last fall, and got snowed in before they could get out."

"Hunters wouldn't be so anxious to drive us away," said Fred. "They must be prospectors. Suppose they've found the diamond fields!"

They had all thought of that. There was a gloomy silence.

"One thing's certain," said Horace, "we must trail those fellows down, and see what sort of men they are and where they 're camped. We'll scout up the river to-morrow."

They all felt nervous and uneasy that evening. They stayed up late, and when they went to bed they loaded their guns and laid them close at hand.

But the night passed without any disturbance, and after breakfast they set out at once to trail the ranger. They followed the river for about four miles, to a point where the stream broke through the hills in a succession of cascades and rapids; but although they searched all the landscape with the field-glass from the top of the hills, they saw no sign of man. Beyond the ridges, however, the river turned sharply into a wooded valley. They struggled through the undergrowth, found another curve in the river, rounded it—and then stepped hastily back into cover.

About two hundred yards upstream stood a log hut on the shore, at the foot of a steep bluff. A wreath of smoke rose from its chimney, but no one was in sight. Talking in low tones, the boys watched it for some time. Then they made a détour through the woods, and crept round to the top of the bluff. Peering

cautiously over the edge, they saw the cabin below them, not fifty yards away.

It looked like a trappers' winter camp. It was built of spruce logs, chinked with mud and moss. A deep layer of scattered chips beside the remains of a log pile showed that the place had been used all winter.

Presently a man came out of the door, stretched himself lazily, and carried a block of wood into the cabin. It was not the man they had seen, but a slender, dark fellow, dressed in buckskin, who looked like a half-breed. In a moment he came out again, and this time the ranger came with him. There was a third man in the cabin, for they could hear some one speaking from inside the shack.

For some moments the men stood talking; their voices were quite audible, but the boys could not make out what they were saying. The two men examined a pile of steel traps beside the door and a number of pelts that were drying on frames in the open air.

"These aren't rangers. They're just ordinary trappers," Mac whispered to Horace.

"They've certainly been trapping. But why do they want to run us out of the country?"

In a few minutes both men went into the cabin, came out with rifles, and started down the river-bank.

"They may be going down to our camp," Horace said, "and we must be there to meet them. We'd better hurry back."

The boys started at as fast a pace as the rough ground would allow. Owing to dense thickets, swamps, and piled boulders, they could not make much speed. In about twenty minutes Fred heard a sound of falling water in front, and supposed that they were approaching the river. He was mistaken. Within a few yards they came upon a tiny lake fed by a creek at one end and closed at the other by a pile of logs and brush. Curious heaps of mud and sticks showed here and there above the water. Horace uttered an exclamation.

"A beaver pond!" he cried. "That explains it all."

In a moment the same thought flashed over Fred and Macgregor. The killing

of beaver is entirely prohibited in Ontario; but in spite of that, a good deal of illicit trapping goes on in the remote districts, and the poachers usually carry their pelts across the line into the Province of Quebec, where they can sell the fur. Naturally, the trappers had resented the appearance of the three boys in the vicinity of the beaver pond; the men had no wish to have their illegal trapping discovered. It was the first beaver pond the boys had ever met with, and in spite of their hurry they stopped to look at it. They came upon two or three traps skillfully set under water, and one of them contained a beaver, sleek and drowned, held under the surface. Apparently the men intended to clean out the pond, for the season was already late for fur.

After a few minutes the boys hurried on. They met no one on the way, and they found everything undisturbed in camp; they kept a sharp lookout all day, but no one came near them.

On the whole, they felt considerably relieved by the result of their scouting. The lawbreakers had no right to order them off the ground. For their own part, the boys felt under no obligation to interfere with the beaver trappers.

"If we meet any of them again, we'll let them know plainly that we know how things stand," said Mac. "We'll let them alone if they let us alone, and I don't think there'll be any more trouble."

It rained hard that evening—a warm, steady downpour that lasted almost until morning. The tent leaked, and the boys passed a wretched night. But day came pleasant and warm, with a moist, springlike air; the leaves had unfolded in the night. The warmth brought out the flies in increased numbers. They smeared their skins with a fresh application of "fly dope," and with little thought for the fur poachers, started out again to prospect. All that day and the next they worked hard; they saw nothing of the trappers, and found nothing even remotely resembling blue clay.

The condition of their footwear had begun to worry them. The rough usage was beginning to tell heavily on their boots, which were already ripping, and which had begun to wear through the soles; they would hardly hold together for another fortnight. But the boys bound them up and patched them with strips of the deerskin, and kept hard at work.

In the course of the next two days they thoroughly examined all the country

within five miles of their present camp. On the evening of the second day they finished the last of the oatmeal, and Horace examined the remaining supply of Graham flour with anxiety.

"Just about enough to get home on, boys," he said, looking dubiously at his companions.

"But we're not going home!" cried Mac.

"The flour and beans'll be gone in another week, and we're a long way from civilization. Can we live on meat alone, Mac?"

"Pretty sure to come down with dysentery if we do—for any length of time," admitted the medical student reluctantly.

There was silence round the fire.

"We didn't start this expedition right," said Horace, at last. "I should have planned it better. We ought to have come with two or three canoes and with twice as much grub, and we should have brought several pairs of boots apiece."

He thrust out his foot; his bare skin showed through the ripped leather.

"Make moccasins," Mac suggested.

"They wouldn't stand the rough traveling for any time."

"What do you think we ought to do, Horace?" asked Fred.

"Well, I hate to retreat as much as any one," said Horace, after a pause. "But I know—better than either of you—the risk of losing our lives if we try to run it too fine on provisions. At the same time I do think that we oughtn't to give up till we've reached the head of this river. It's probably not more than ten or fifteen miles up."

After some discussion they decided that Macgregor and Fred should make the journey to the head of the river, carrying provisions for three days; that would give them one day in which to prospect at the source. Meanwhile, Horace was to strike across country to the northwest, to the headwaters of the Whitefish River, about fifteen miles away.

The next morning, therefore, they carefully cached the canoe, the tent, and the heavy part of the outfit, and started. They were all to be back on the third evening at the latest, whether they found anything or not.

Fred and Mac made a wide détour to avoid the hut of the trappers. They had a hard day's tramp over the rough country, but reached their destination rather sooner than they expected. The river, shrunk to a rapid creek, ended in a tiny lake between two hills.

The general surface of the country was the same as that which had already grown so monotonously familiar, except that there was rather more outcrop of bedrock. Nowhere could they see anything that seemed to suggest the presence of blue clay, and although they spent the whole of the next twenty-four hours in making wide circles round the lake, they found nothing.

The following morning they started back, depressed and miserable. If Horace's trip should also prove fruitless, the chances of their finding the diamonds would be slim indeed. The Smoke River made a wide turn to the west and north, and they concluded that a straight line by compass across the wilderness would save them several miles of travel, and would also give them a chance to see some fresh ground. They left the river, therefore, and struck a bee-line to the southeast. The new ground proved as unprofitable as the old, and somewhat rougher. The journey had been hard on shoe leather; Fred was limping badly.

Late in the afternoon the boys stopped to rest on the top of a bare, rocky ridge, where the black flies were not so bad as in the valleys. They guessed that they were about four or five miles from camp. The sun shone level and warm from the west, and the boys sat in silence, tired and discouraged.

"I'm afraid we're not going to make a million this trip, Mac," said Fred, at last.

"No," Peter replied soberly. "Unless Horace has struck something."

"It's too big a country to look over inch by inch. If there really are any diamond-beds—"

"Oh, there must be some. Horace found scattered stones last summer, you know. But of course the beds may be far underground. In South Africa they often

have to sink deep shafts to strike them."

Fred did not answer at once. He had taken out the field-glass that he carried, and was turning it aimlessly this way and that, when Mac spoke suddenly:—

"What's that moving in the ravine—see! About a hundred yards up, below the big cedar on the rock."

"Ground hog, likely," said Fred, turning the glass toward the rocky gorge, through which ran a little stream that lay at the base of the ridge. "I don't see anything. Oh—yes, now I've got 'em. One—two—three—four little animals. Why, they're playing together like kittens! They look like young foxes, only they're far too dark-colored."

Mac suddenly snatched the glass. But Fred, now that he knew where to look, could see the moving black specks with his unaided eye. Just behind them was a dark opening that might be the mouth of a den.

"They are foxes!" said Mac. "It's a family of fox cubs. You're right. And—and—why, man, they're black—every one of them!"

He lowered the glass, almost dropping it in his excitement, and stared at his companion.

"Fred, it's a den of black foxes!"

CHAPTER XII

"Black foxes!" cried Fred. "Mac, give me the glass!"

"Black, all right," Macgregor said. "Four of them, black as jet. See the fur shine! I can't see the old ones. There, I believe I saw something move just inside the burrow! Anyhow, all the cubs are going in."

He handed the glass to Fred, who raised it to his eyes just in time to see the black, bushy tail of the last cub disappear into the hole.

"Black foxes!" he said, in an awed whisper. "Four of them! Why, Mac, they're worth a fortune, aren't they?"

"And probably two old ones," said the medical student. "A fortune? Rather! Why, in London a good black fox pelt sometimes brings two or three thousand dollars. The traders here pay only a few hundreds, but if I had a couple of good skins I'd take them over to London myself."

"But we haven't got them. And we've no traps."

"One of us might watch here with the rifle for the old ones. I could hit a fox from here, but the bullet would tear the skin awfully."

"Yes, and it's too late in the spring now for the fur to be any good, I'm afraid," said Fred.

"Not first-class, that's a fact," Mac admitted sadly. "But what can we do? We can't wait here all summer for the cubs to grow up."

"Let's go down and take a look at the den," Fred proposed.

"Better not. If the old foxes get suspicious they'll move the den and we'll never find it again. I think we'd best go quietly away. This is too big a thing for us to take chances on."

They took careful note of the spot before they left, and in order to make assurance doubly sure, Mac blazed a tree every ten paces or so until they struck the river again.

They had followed the river downward for about two miles when they saw the smoke rising from their camping-ground. Hurrying up, they found that Horace had come in already. He had brought out the supplies and was frying bacon.

"What luck?" cried Fred, forgetting the foxes for a moment in his anxiety to hear the result of Horace's trip.

"None," said Horace curtly. He looked tired, dirty, and discouraged. "I went clear to the Whitefish—nothing doing. But what are you fellows grinning about? What did you find at the head of the river? You haven't—it isn't possible that

you've hit it!"

"No, not diamonds," said Mac. "But we 've found something valuable." And he told of their discovery of the black foxes. "But the problem is how to get them," he finished. "The only way I can see is to shoot them at long range."

"Shoot them! Are you crazy?" exclaimed Horace, who was even more stirred by the news than they had expected. "Never! Catch 'em alive! They're worth their weight in gold."

"Alive! I never thought of that!" exclaimed Fred.

"Why, their fur is no good now. Besides, suppose you did get a wretched thousand dollars or so for the pelts—what's that? Why, down in Prince Edward Island a pair of live black foxes for breeding was sold for $45,000."

"Gracious!" gasped Fred.

"Down there every one is wild about breeding fur. A big syndicate has a ranch that's guarded with watchmen and burglar alarms like a bank. Their great trouble is to get the breeding stock, and they'll pay almost any price for live, uninjured black foxes. If we could manage to catch this pair of old ones and the four cubs without hurting them, they ought to bring—I'd be afraid to guess how much! Maybe a hundred thousand dollars! Kill them? Why, you'd kill a goose that laid golden eggs!"

"That's right! I've heard of those fox ranches, of course," said Mac, "but I didn't think of them at the moment. A hundred thousand dollars! But how on earth can we catch them? We might dig the cubs out of their den, but we couldn't get the old ones that way. If we only had a few traps!"

"Why, there's that trap I found in the woods!" exclaimed Fred suddenly.

They had all forgotten it; they had dropped the trap into the dunnage, and had not seen or thought of it since. Now, however, they eagerly rummaged it out, and examined it critically.

It was badly rusted, but not broken. Mac knocked off the dirt and rust scales, rubbed it thoroughly with grease, and set it. When he touched the pan with a stick the jaws snapped. The springs were a little stiff, but after they had been

worked several times and well greased, the trap seemed to be almost as good as new.

"We should have three or four of them," said Peter. "Having only one trap gives us a slim chance. But suppose we do get them, what then?"

"Why, we'll have to have some sort of cage ready in which to carry them; then we'll make all the speed we can back to Toronto," replied Horace.

"And give up the diamond hunt?" cried Mac, in disappointment.

"What else can we do, anyhow?" replied Horace. "The flour is almost gone and we're almost barefoot. And see here, boys," he went on, earnestly, "I hate to admit it, but I'm afraid my calculations were wrong on these diamond-beds. I thought it all out while I was coming home from Whitefish River. Somewhere up here in the North there must be a place where those diamonds came from—but I'm beginning to believe it isn't in this part of the country. You see, the geological formation is all different from the kind where diamond matrix is ever found. Those stones I picked up may have been traveling for a thousand years down one creek and another. They may have come down in the glacial drift. I was altogether too hasty, I see now, in assuming that they originated in one of the rivers where I found them.

"They may have come from a river a hundred miles away. Or perhaps from deep underground. We should have made a study of the geological structure of this whole North Country, the direction of the glacial drift, and everything. Then we should have come in here prepared to travel a thousand miles and stay all summer, or for two summers, if necessary."

"Hanged if I'll give it up," said Mac stubbornly. "However," he added, "we must certainly try to catch these black diamonds, and we can keep on prospecting at the same time."

They uncached their outfit, pitched the tent again, and prepared supper; meanwhile they talked of the foxes until they reached a high pitch of enthusiasm. Even Mac admitted that the black foxes bade fair to be as profitable as a small diamond-bed would be. As for Fred, it was almost with relief that he let the diamond hunt take second place in his mind. The continual strain of labor and failure had robbed the search for the blue clay of much of its fascination.

Early the next morning they paddled up the river to the point where Mac's blazed trail came down to the shore, and set out to reconnoiter the den. After half an hour's tramping across the woods they reached the rocky ridge; through the field-glass they scrutinized the lair, which was about two hundred yards away.

Not a hair of a fox was in sight, but the burrow looked as if it could be opened with spade and pick. Horace thought they ought to do that first of all; in that way they could capture the cubs before there was any possible danger of the old foxes' moving the den.

On their way back to camp, Mac stopped at a marshy pool and cut a great armful of willow withes.

"It's lucky that I once used to watch an old willow worker making baskets and chairs," he said. "I'll see if I've forgotten the trick of it. We've got to make a cage, for we'll need one the instant we capture one of those cubs."

He made a strong framework of birch, with bars as thick as his wrist, which he notched together, and lashed with deer-hide. Then he had the framework of a box about three feet long, two feet wide, and two feet deep, through which he now began to weave the tough, pliable withes.

He did not altogether remember the trick of it, and he had to stop frequently to plan it out. He worked all that afternoon, and continued his labor by firelight. He did not finish the cage until the middle of the next forenoon. It was rough-looking, but light, and nearly as strong as an iron trunk, and had a door in the top.

All that remained for them to do now was to catch the game. They ate a hasty luncheon, and carrying the cage, the trap, the axe, the spade and pick, two blankets, and the guns, started back along Mac's blazed trail. So great was their eager hurry that they stumbled over roots and stones.

Clambering down the ravine, they cautiously approached the foxes' den. The opening to the burrow was a triangular hole between two flat rocks. From it came a faint odor of putrid flesh. The ground in front was strewn with muskrat tails, small bones, and the beaks and feet of partridges and ducks. From the rocks Fred picked off two or three black hairs.

The boys looked into the dark hole and listened intently. They could not hear

a sound, but they knew that the cubs, at any rate, must be within. Mac cut a sapling, trimmed it down and sharpened one end of it; with that as a lever the boys loosened the rocks at the entrance of the burrow, and rolled them aside. The burrow ran backward and downward into the ground, but there seemed to be nothing in their way now except earth, gravel, and roots. Horace picked up the spade and began to dig; occasionally he had to stop to cut a tree root or pick out a rock. Meanwhile, Peter and Fred stood close behind him, ready to stuff the blankets into the hole in case the occupants should try to bolt.

They uncovered the burrow for about four feet; then they had to dislodge another rather large stone. There seemed to be a large, dark cavity down behind it. When they stopped to listen, they could hear a slight sound of movement in the darkness, and a faint squeaking.

"They're there," said Horace; "not a yard away. Now who's going to reach in and pull 'em out?"

Macgregor volunteered at once; he crept up to the hole and cautiously thrust in his arm. There was a sound of scrambling inside and a sharp squeal. Mac, with a strained expression on his face, groped about with his hand inside the hole.

When he withdrew his arm, there was blood on his hand, but he held by the neck a little jet-black animal with a bushy tail, as large as a kitten.

"Open the cage—quick!" he cried.

Fred held the door up, and Mac dropped the cub in. For a moment the animal rushed from side to side, and then crouched trembling in a corner.

"Nipped me on the thumb," said Mac, examining his hand. "They've got teeth like needles. But the old one doesn't seem to be there now, and I can easily get the rest."

He fished the second out without being bitten, and caged it safely. But his hold on the third cub could not have been very secure, for the little creature managed by struggling frantically to squirm out of his hand. It turned over in the air, landed on its four feet, and darted swiftly away.

The boys shouted in dismay. Fred flung himself sprawling upon the cub; but

it evaded him like lightning, and bolted into the undergrowth. It would have been useless to pursue it.

The boys were greatly chagrined.

"It was my fault," said Peter, in disgust. "But it can't be helped now, and there's another to come out."

He had trouble in getting hold of the last of the cubs. Twice he winced with pain as the animal bit him, but at last he hauled it into view. It was a little larger than the others; it scratched and bit like a fury, and nearly broke away before they got it into the cage.

The boys gathered round and gloated over their prizes. With their glossy jet coats, bushy tails, prick-eared faces, and comical air of intense intelligence, the cubs were beautiful little creatures; but they were all in a desperate panic, and huddled together in the farthest corner of the cage.

"If we can only get them home in good condition they should be worth fifteen thousand," said Horace. "But I'm much afraid they won't live unless we can get the mother to travel with them. But now that we have the cubs it should be rather easy to catch her, and maybe the father, too."

They set the cage back into the hollow made by the ruined burrow, and laid spruce branches over it so that it was well hidden. Then they wrapped the jaws of the trap with strips of cloth so that they would not cut the fox's skin, and set it directly in front of the cage. Finally they scattered dead leaves over the trap. The cubs themselves would act as bait.

"A fox never deserts her young," Horace said. "She's sure to come back to-night, probably along with her mate, to carry off the cubs, and we've a good chance to catch one or both of them."

It seemed dangerous to go away and leave that precious cageful of little foxes at the mercy, perhaps, of the beaver trappers; perhaps prowling lynxes or wolves. However, the boys had to take the risk. As to the trappers, they had seen nothing of them for so long that they had little fear of them.

They went back to camp and tried to pass the time; but they could talk of nothing except black foxes. Fred conceived the idea of using their stock to start a

breeding establishment of their own, and Macgregor was elaborating the plan, when suddenly he stopped with a frown.

"Is it so certain that the parents of those cubs are black?" he asked. "I've heard that black foxes are an accident, a sport, and that the mother or father is very often red."

"That's something that naturalists have never settled," replied Horace. "Some think that the black fox is a distinct strain, others that it's merely a 'sport,' as you say. However, when all the cubs in the litter are pure black, I think it's safe to assume that the parents are black also."

It was scarcely daylight the next morning before the boys were hurrying along the blazed trail again. Shaking with suppressed excitement, they approached the ravine of the foxes. When they came in sight of the den and the cage their anticipation was succeeded by bitter disappointment. The trap was undisturbed. Nothing had been caught. The cubs were still in the cage, as frightened as ever.

But they found that one at least of the old foxes had visited the place, for the dry leaves were disturbed; there were marks of sharp teeth on the willows of the cage, and inside the cage were the tails of a couple of wood mice. Unable to get her cubs out of the cage, the mother had brought them food.

It seemed too bad to take advantage of her mother love, but as Horace remarked, all they desired was to restore her to her family; once on the fox ranch, she would be treated like a queen.

They put the cage farther back and piled rocks round it, so that it could be approached only by one narrow path. In the path they placed the trap, and again covered it carefully with leaves.

The cubs had to be left for another night, and the boys had another hard day of waiting. None of them had the heart to try to prospect. Macgregor went after ducks with the shotgun; the others lounged about, and killed time as best they could. They all went to bed early, and before sunrise again started for the den.

It was fully light when they came to the hill over the ravine, and as they sighted the den, a cry of excitement broke from all three of them at once.

From where they stood they could see the cage, and the crouching form of a black animal beside it, evidently in the trap. And over the beast with the dark fur stood a man in a buckskin jacket, with a club raised to strike.

CHAPTER XIII

Fred and Mac, who were carrying the guns, fired wildly at the man at the trap; they took no aim, for their only purpose was to startle him and to keep him from killing the fox. When the shots rang out, the man straightened up, saw the boys rushing down the hill toward him, and dropped his club. Stepping back, he picked up his rifle, and as they dashed up, held it ready to shoot.

Fred gave a whoop when he saw that the animal in the trap was really a black fox; moreover, it was the mother fox. Her black coat was glossy and spotless.

Horace turned to the man. "Let that fox alone!" he cried. "That's our fox!"

"Yours? It's my fox!" retorted the man angrily. "Why, that's my trap!"

"I don't believe it; we found it in the woods. Anyway, you can have the trap if you like, but the fox is certainly ours. We've been after her for some time."

"Me and my pardners have been after this fox all winter," declared the trapper. "Now that we've got her we 're going to keep her—you can bet on that."

He made a movement toward the fox.

"None of that!" cried Mac, sharply, and snapped a fresh cartridge into the rifle chamber.

"You would, would you?" cried the trapper, and instantly covered Peter with his gun. Fred had reloaded the shotgun, and he covered the man in his turn.

So for a moment they all stood at a deadlock.

"Put down your guns!" said Horace. "A fox pelt isn't worth killing a man for,

and this pelt's no good, anyway. It's too late in the season. We're going to take this fox away with us alive. Stick to your beavers, for you can't steal this animal from us—and you can bet on that!" he added, with great emphasis.

"You might shoot one of us, but you'd have a hole in you the next minute," said Mac. "You'd better drop it, now, and get out!"

The trapper glared at them with a face as savage as a wildcat's. For a second Fred really expected him to shoot. Then, with a muttered curse, the man lowered his gun.

"You pups won't bark so loud when I come back!" he snarled. Then he turned, and started away at a rapid pace.

"Bluffed!" Fred exclaimed, trembling now that the strain was over.

"He's gone for the rest of his gang!" Mac cried. "Quick, we've got to get out of here!"

"Yes, and far away, too," said Horace, "now that we've caught the mother fox. We should never have got the male, anyway. Let's get this beauty into her box."

The black fox was indeed a beauty, but there was no time to admire her. Snarling viciously, she laid back her ears and showed her white teeth. Her hind leg was in the trap, but did not appear to have been injured by the padded jaws.

Horace cut two strong forked sticks, with which the boys pinned her down by the neck and hips. Fred opened the jaws of the trap; Mac picked the fox up firmly by the back of her neck, and in spite of her frantic struggles, thrust her into the cage.

Horace and Mac then seized the box, one at either end, and started toward the river; Fred carried the guns and kept a sharp lookout in front. The cage of foxes was not heavy, but it was so clumsy that the boys had hard work carrying it over the rough ground. After stumbling for a few rods, they cut a long pole and slipped it through the handles in the ends of the cage. After that they made somewhat better progress, although even then they could not travel at a very rapid pace.

"If those fellows have a canoe," panted Mac, "they'll be down the river before

we can get to camp!"

"You may be sure they'll do their best," said Horace. "These foxes are probably worth ten times their winter catch. We'll have to break camp instantly and make for home as fast as we can."

They went plunging along through the thickets, and up and down the rocky hills; it was well that the cage was strong.

After more than an hour of this arduous tramping they heard the rush of the river. "We'd best scout a little way ahead before we go any farther," Horace declared.

They set down the cage, crept forward to the river and reconnoitered the bank. Their canoe was where they had left it, concealed behind a cedar thicket, and no other canoe was in sight up or down the river. Horace swept the shore with the field-glass.

"Nothing in sight," he reported. "We may have time to pack our outfit and get off, after all. Possibly those fellows haven't a canoe."

They quickly launched the canoe, and put the cage of black foxes amidships; Fred sat behind it in order to hold it steady. Horace took the stern paddle, and Peter the bow.

The river ran swift and rather shallow, but there were no dangerous rapids between them and camp. They swept down the current, and in a few minutes the tent came in sight. Horace took up the glass again, but he could see no sign of the trappers. They paddled on, intending to land at their usual place, but when they were scarcely twenty yards from the tent, Fred uttered a suppressed cry.

"Look! A canoe—lower down!" He spoke barely loud enough for his brother to hear him. He had caught a glimpse of the bow of a birch canoe, which was thrust back almost out of sight behind a willow clump below the campground.

"Run straight past!" Horace commanded, instantly. "Dig in your paddle, Mac!"

The canoe shot forward, and at doubled speed swept by the tent. As they passed it a man rose from behind a thicket and yelled hoarsely:—

"Stop, there! Halt!"

Bang! went a rifle somewhere behind them, and then the rapid *crack! crack! crack!* of more than one repeater. A bullet clipped through the sides of the canoe, fortunately well above the water-line. Another glanced from a rock, and hummed past them.

As the boys whirled by the ambushed birch canoe, Fred snatched up the shotgun, and sent two loads of buckshot tearing through its sides.

"That'll cripple them for a while!" he cried.

Bang! A better-aimed bullet dashed the steering paddle from Horace's hands. The canoe swerved, and heeled in the current. Horace snatched the extra paddle that lay in the stern, and brought the craft round just in time to prevent it from upsetting. As the paddle that had been hit floated past, Fred picked it up; it had a round hole through the handle.

The canoe was a hundred yards from the tent now, and was going so fast that it offered no easy target to the men behind, who, however, still continued to shoot. Another bullet nicked the stern. Glancing over his shoulder, Fred saw the three trappers running down the shore, and firing as they ran. But in another moment the canoe swept round a bend in the river, and was screened from the trappers by the wooded shore.

"Keep it up! Make all the speed you can!" cried Horace.

Down the fast current they shot like an arrow. As they went round another curve, they heard the roar of rushing water ahead; a short but turbulent rapid confronted them. There the river, foaming and surging, dashed down over the black rocks; the shore was rough and covered with dense thickets. The boys remembered the hard work they had had making a portage here on the way up; but there was no time to make a portage now.

"Down we go! Look sharp for her bow, Mac!" Horace sang out.

The rush of the rapid seemed to snatch up the canoe like a leaf. Fred caught his breath; the pit of his stomach seemed to sink. There was a deafening roar all around him, a chaos of white water, flying spray, and sharp rocks that sprang up and flashed behind. Then, before he had recovered his breath, they shot out into

the smooth river below.

Six inches of water was slopping in the bottom of the canoe, but they ran on without stopping to bale it out. For over half a mile the smooth, swift current lasted; then came another rapid. It was longer and more dangerous than the other, and the boys carried the canoe and the foxes round it. They would not risk spilling the precious cage, and for the present they thought that they had outrun their pursuers.

For another mile or two they descended the river, until they came to another carry. They made the portage, and stopped at the bottom to discuss their situation and make their plans. They had escaped the trappers, indeed, and they had the foxes; but except the canoe, a blanket, the guns, and the light axe that Mac had at his belt, they had nothing else. "I guess this settles our prospecting, boys," said Horace. "What are we to do now? Shall we go on, or—"

"Or what?" Fred asked, as his brother stopped.

"I hardly know. But here we are, without supplies, and at least a hundred and fifty miles from any place where we can get them. We all know what a hard road it is, and going back it'll be up-stream all the way, after we leave this river."

"Do we have to go back the way we came?"

"Well, instead of turning up the Missanabie River when we come to it, we might go straight down it to Moose Factory, the Hudson Bay Company's post at the mouth; but if we did that, these foxes would never live till we got back to Toronto. It would be too long and hard a trip for them."

"That settles it. We don't go that way," said Mac. "Surely we can get home in ten or twelve days the way we came, and we ought to be able to kill enough to live on during that time."

"How many cartridges have we?" asked Horace dubiously.

Macgregor had nineteen cartridges in his belt, and there were six more in the magazine of the rifle. Fred had only ten shells in his pockets, and the shotgun was empty. They had left the fishing tackle at camp, but luckily they had plenty of matches.

"If we can get a deer within the next day or so, or even a few ducks or partridges, we may make it," said Horace. "But I've noticed that game is always scarce when you need it most. Now if we turned back and tried to recover our outfit, we should certainly have to fight the trappers, and probably we'd be worsted, for they outmatch us in weapons. One of us might be killed, and we'd be almost certain to lose the foxes."

"Trade these foxes for some flour and bacon? I'd starve first!" said Fred.

"So would I!" cried Macgregor. "But we won't starve. We didn't starve last winter, when we hadn't a match or a grain of powder, and when the mercury was below zero most of the time, too."

"Well, we'll go on, if you say so," said Horace. "It's a mighty dangerous trip, but I don't see what else we can do."

"Forward it is, then!" cried Fred.

"And hang the risk!" exclaimed Mac, springing up to push the canoe into the water.

"Do you think those men will really follow us, Horace?" asked Fred.

"Sure to," replied his brother. "It'll take them a few hours to patch up their canoe, but they 're probably better canoemen than we are, and we'll have to work mighty hard to keep ahead of them."

Fred was more optimistic. "They'll have to work mighty hard to keep up with us," he said, as they launched the canoe.

Going down the river was very different from coming up it. The current ran so swiftly that the boys could not add much to their speed by paddling; all they had to do was to steer the craft. The water was so high that they could run most of the rapids, and stretches that they had formerly toiled up with tumpline or tracking-line they now covered with the speed of a bullet.

Toward noon Fred became intolerably hungry; but neither of the others spoke of eating, and he did not mention his hunger. Mac, in the bow, put the shotgun where he could easily reach it, and scanned the shores for game as closely as he could; but no game showed itself. They traveled all day without seeing anything

except now and then a few ducks, which always took wing while still far out of range.

At last they came to "Buck Rapids," where they had shot the deer. The river there was one succession of rapids, most of which were too dangerous to run through. It was the place where, on the way up, they had made only four miles in a whole day; and they did not cover more than ten miles this afternoon.

When they came to the long, narrow lake on the lower reaches of the river, the sun was setting. They were all pretty much exhausted with the toil and excitement of the day.

"I vote we stop here," said Mac. "There'll be a moon toward midnight, and we can go on then. We ought to get some sleep."

"I'm too hungry to sleep," said Fred.

"Well, so am I," Mac admitted. "But we can rest, anyway."

So they drew up the canoe and lighted a fire, partly from force of habit and partly to drive away the mosquitoes. They carefully lifted the fox cage ashore.

"We've nothing for them to eat," Horace said anxiously, "but they ought to have water, at any rate."

The difficulty was that they had nothing to put water into. Mac made a sort of cup from an old envelope, and filled it with water, but the animals shrank away and would not touch it. Feeling sure, however, that they must be thirsty, the boys carried the cage to the river, and set one end of it into the shallow water. For a few minutes the mother fox was shy, but presently she drank eagerly; then the cubs dipped their sharp noses into the water.

The boys spread their only blanket on a few hemlock boughs and lay down. Although they were so thoroughly tired, none of them could sleep. Fred's stomach was gnawed by hunger; he was still much excited, and in the rush of the river he fancied every minute or two that he heard the trappers approaching.

They lay there for some time, talking at intervals, and at last Mac got up restlessly. He threw fresh wood on the fire, in order to make a bright blaze; then from an old pine log close by he began to cut a number of resinous splinters.

When he had collected a large handful of them, he went down to the canoe, and tried to fix them in the ring in the bow of the craft.

"What in the world are you doing?" asked Fred, who had got up to see what Peter was about.

Peter hammered the bundle of splinters home. "If we don't get meat in twelve hours we won't be able to travel fast—can't keep up steam," he said. "There's only one way to shoot game at night, and that's—"

"Jack light," said Horace, who recognized the device. "It's a regular pot-hunter's trick, but pot-hunters we are, and no mistake about that. I only hope it works."

CHAPTER XIV

Here where deer were plentiful and hunters scarce, Mac's jack light should prove effective. Sportsmen and the law have quite properly united in condemning killing deer by jack light; but the boys felt that their need of food justified their course.

After adjusting the torch, Mac cut a birch sapling about eight feet long, and trimmed off the twigs. Bending it into a semicircle, he fitted the curve into the bottom of the canoe, close to the bow; then he hung the blanket by its corners upon the projecting tips of the sapling, and thus screened the bow from the rest of the canoe.

As it had already become dark, and the shores were now black with the indistinct shadows of the spruces, Fred and Horace set the canoe gently into the water. When it was afloat, Mac lighted the pine splinters, which crackled and flared up like a torch.

"You'd make a better game poacher than I, Horace," he said. "You take the rifle, and I'll paddle."

Horace accordingly placed himself just behind the blanket screen, with the

weapon on his knees. Mac sat in the stern, and Fred, who did not want to be left behind, seated himself amidships.

"Keep a sharp lookout, both of you," Mac said. "Watch for the light on their eyes, like two balls of fire."

The canoe, keeping about thirty yards from shore, glided silently down the long lake. The "fat" pine flamed smoky and red, and it cast long, wavering reflections on the water. Once an animal, probably a muskrat, startled them by diving noisily. A duck, sleeping on the water, rose with a frantic splutter and flurry of wings. Then, fifty yards farther, there was a sudden splash near the shore, then a crashing in the bushes, and a dying thump-thump in the distance.

Horace swung his rifle round, but he was too late. The deer had not stopped to stare at the light for an instant. A jack light ought to have a reflector, but the boys had no means of contriving one.

Unspeakably disappointed, they moved slowly on again. They started no more game, and at last reached the lower end of the lake. Here Mac stopped to renew the torch, which had almost burned out.

Then they turned up the other side of the lake, on the home stretch. No living thing except themselves seemed to be on the water that night. The shore shoaled far out. Once the keel scraped over a bottom of soft mud. Lilies grew along the shore, and sometimes extended out so far that the canoe brushed the half-grown pads.

Suddenly Fred felt the canoe swerve slightly, and head toward the land. Horace raised the rifle. Fred had seen nothing, but after straining his eyes ahead, he made out two faint spots of light in the darkness, at about the height of a man's head. Could it be a deer? The balls of light remained perfectly motionless.

Without a splash the canoe glided closer. Fred thought that he could make out the outline of the animal's head, and clenched his hands in anxiety. Why did not Horace shoot?

Suddenly a blinding flash blazed out from the rifle, and the report crashed across the water. There was a splash, followed immediately by a noise of violent thrashing in the water near the land.

Fred and Mac shouted together. With great paddle strokes, Mac drove the canoe forward, and at last Horace leaped out. The others followed him. The deer was down, struggling in the water. It was dead before they reached it. Horace's bullet had broken its neck.

"Hurrah!" Fred cried. "This makes us safe. This'll last us all the way home."

It was a fine young buck—so heavy that they had hard work to lift it into the canoe. Far up the lake they could see their camp-fire, and they paddled toward it with the haste of half-starved men.

Without stopping to cut up the animal, they skinned one haunch and cut off slices, which they set to broil over the coals. A delicious odor rose; the boys did not even wait until the meat had cooked thoroughly. They had no salt, but the venison, unseasoned as it was, seemed delicious.

The food gave them all more cheerfulness and energy. The prospect of a hard ten days' journey did not look so bad now. At any rate, they would not starve.

"I wonder if the foxes would eat it. They ought to have something," said Fred, and he dropped some scraps of the raw venison into the cage.

As he stooped to peer more closely at the animals, he made a startling discovery. During their absence on the hunt, the mother fox had been gnawing vigorously at the willow cage, particularly at the rawhide lashings that bound the framework together. She had loosened one corner, and if she had been left alone for another hour, she might have escaped with her cubs. It gave the boys a bad fright. Mac refastened the lashings with strips of deer-hide, and strengthened the cage with more willow withes. But the boys realized that in the future one of them would have to stand guard over the cage at night.

The foxes refused to touch the raw meat.

"I didn't expect them to eat for the first day or two," said Horace. "Don't worry. They'll eat in time, when they get really hungry."

"Let's get this buck cut up," said Mac. "It'll soon be moonrise, and we must be moving."

In order to get more light for their work, they piled pitch pine on the fire; then

they hung the deer on a tree, and began the disagreeable task of skinning and dressing the animal. When they had finished, they had a good deerskin and nearly two hundred pounds of fresh meat.

They would gladly have slept now, but the sky was brightening in the east with the rising moon, and there was no time for rest. No doubt the trappers were on their trail, somewhere behind them. Hastily the boys loaded the foxes and the venison into the canoe, and as soon as the moon showed above the trees paddled down the lake. They soon found that the moonlight was not bright enough to enable them to run rapids safely, and they consequently had to make frequent carries. Between the rapids they shot swiftly down the current, but the river was so broken that they made no great progress that night.

Northern summer nights are short, and soon after two o'clock the sky began to lighten. By three o'clock the boys could see well, and they went on faster, shooting all except the worst stretches of rough water. Shortly after six o'clock they came out from the Smoke River into the Missanabie.

"Stop for breakfast?" asked Mac.

"Not here," said Horace. "We must be careful not to mark our trail, especially at this point. They won't know for sure whether we turned up the Missanabie or down, and they may make a mistake and lose a lot of time. A canoe doesn't leave any track, and we mustn't land until we have to."

Now the hard work of "bucking the river" began again. The Missanabie had lowered somewhat since the boys had come down it, but it still ran so strong that they could not make much progress by paddling. Their canoe poles were far back on the Smoke River, and they did not dare to land in order to cut others, for in doing so they would mark their trail.

Straining hard at every stroke, they dug their paddles into the water; but they made slow work of it. The least carelessness on their part would cause them to lose in one minute as much as they had gained in ten.

A stretch of slacker water gave them some respite; but then came a long, tumbling, rock-strewn rapid.

"We'll have to portage here," said Mac.

"It'll be a long carry," Horace said. "We'd lose a good deal of time over it. I think we can track her up."

Mac and Horace carried the cage of foxes along the shore to the head of the broken water, and Fred carried up the guns. Returning to the foot of the rapid, they prepared to haul the canoe against the stream. Luckily the tracking-line had always been kept in the canoe. Horace tied it to the ring in the bow, took the end of the rope and, bracing himself firmly, waded into the water; Macgregor and Fred, on either side, held the craft steady.

The bed of the river was very irregular. Sometimes the water was no more than knee-deep; sometimes it reached their hips. The water was icy cold, and the rush and roar of the current were bewildering. Once Mac lost his footing, but he clung to the canoe and recovered himself. Then, when halfway up the rapid, Horace stepped on an unsteady stone and plunged down, face forward, into the roaring water.

As the towline slackened, the canoe swung round with a jerk against Macgregor, and upset him. Fred tried to hold it upright, but the unstable craft went over like a shot.

Out went the venison and everything else that was in her. Fred made a desperate clutch at the stern of the canoe, caught it and held on. As the canoe shot down the rapid, he trailed out like a streamer behind it. He heard a faint, smothered yell:—

"The venison! Save the meat!"

Almost before he knew it, Fred, half choked, still clinging to the canoe, drifted into the tail of the rapid. He found bottom there, for the water was not deep, and managed to right the canoe. By that time Macgregor had got to his feet, and was coming down the shore to help Fred. They were both dripping and chilled; but they got into the canoe, and poling with two sticks, set out to rescue what they could.

They must, above everything else, recover the venison, but they could see no sign of it. Some distance down the stream they found both paddles afloat, and they worked the canoe up and down below the rapid. On a jutting rock they found the deerskin. Finally they came upon one of the hindquarters floating sluggishly almost under water. They rescued it joyfully; but although they

searched for a long time, they found no more of the meat.

They had left the axe in the canoe, and it was now somewhere at the bottom of the river. They could better have spared one of the guns, but they were thankful that their loss had been no greater.

"If we had left the foxes in the canoe," said Fred, "they'd have been drowned, sure!"

Horace had waded ashore, and now had a brisk fire going. Fred and Macgregor joined him, and the three boys stood shivering by the blaze, with their wet clothes steaming.

"We're well out of it," said Horace, with chattering teeth. "The worst is the loss of the axe. It won't be easy to make fires from now on."

Once more the problem of supplies loomed dark before the boys. They had nothing now except the haunch of venison, which weighed perhaps twenty-five pounds; unless they could pick up more game, that would have to last them until they reached civilization. However, they were fairly confident that they could find game soon, and meanwhile they could put themselves on rations.

"We've marked our trail all right now," said Mac. "These tracks and this fire will give it away. We may as well portage, after all."

Their clothing was far from dry, but they were afraid to delay longer. None of them felt like trying to wade up the rapid again, and so they carried the canoe round it. At the head of the portage they cut several strong poles to use in places where they could not paddle.

They soon found that without the poles they could hardly have made any progress at all; and even with them they moved very slowly. About noon they landed, broiled and ate a small piece of venison, and after a brief rest set out on their journey again.

By five o'clock they were all dead tired, wet, and chilled, and Mac and Fred were ready to stop. Horace, however, urged them to push on. He felt that perhaps the beaver trappers were not many miles behind. After another day or two, he said, they could take things more easily, but now they ought to hurry on at top speed.

Just before they were ready to land in order to make camp, three ducks splashed from the water just in front of the canoe. Fred managed to drop one of them with each barrel of the shot gun. Thus the boys got their supper without having to draw on their supply of venison; but the roasted ducks proved almost as tough as rawhide and, without salt, extremely unpalatable. But they were all so hungry that they devoured the birds almost completely; they put the heads into the willow cage, but the foxes would not touch them.

For three hours more they pushed on up the river, tired, silent, but determined. At last it began to grow dark. The boys had reached the limit of their endurance, for they had had no sleep the night before. They landed and built a fire. It was hard work to get enough wood without the axe, but fortunately the night was not cold.

Exhausted as the boys were, they knew that one of them would have to stand watch to see that the foxes did not gnaw their way out of the cage, and that the trappers did not attack the camp. They drew lots for it; Macgregor selected the short straw and Fred the long one, and they arranged that Mac should take the watch for two hours, then Horace, and lastly Fred.

The mosquitoes were bad, and there were no blankets, but Fred seemed to go to sleep the moment he lay down on the earth. He did not hear Horace and Mac change guard at midnight, and it seemed to him that he had scarcely done more than close his eyes when some one shook him by the arm.

"Wake up! It's your turn to watch!" Horace was saying.

Half dead with sleep, Fred staggered to his feet. Moonlight lay on the forest and river.

"Take the rifle," said Horace. "There's not been a sign of anything stirring, but keep a sharp eye on the foxes."

Horace lay down beside Mac and seemed to fall asleep at once. Fred would have given black foxes and diamonds together to do likewise, but he walked up and down until he felt less drowsy. The foxes were not trying to get out, and he saw that they had gnawed the duck heads down to the bills.

He sat down against a tree, close to the cage, with the loaded repeater across his knees. For some time the mosquitoes, as well as the responsibility of his

position, kept him awake.

Every sound in the forest startled him; through the dash of the river he imagined that he heard the sound of paddles. But by degrees he grew indifferent to the mosquitoes, and his strained attention flagged. Drowsiness crept upon him again; he was very tired. He found himself nodding, and roused himself with a shock of horror. He thought that he would go down to the river and dip his head into the water. He dozed while he was thinking of it—dozed and awoke, and dozed again.

Then after what seemed a moment's interval he was awakened by a harsh voice shouting:—

"Hands up! Wake up, and surrender!"

CHAPTER XV

Half awake, Fred made a blind snatch at the rifle that had been across his lap. It was gone.

The sky was bright with dawn. Ten feet away stood three men with leveled rifles. Horace and Mac were sitting up, holding their hands above their heads and looking dazed.

"I said you pups wouldn't bark so loud next time," remarked one of the newcomers. It was the man that had pretended to be a ranger. With him was the slim, dark fellow whom they had seen outside the trappers' shack, and the third was a tall, elderly, bearded man, who looked more intelligent and more vicious than the others.

None of the boys said anything, but Horace gave Fred a reproachful glance that almost broke his heart. It was his fault that this had happened, and he knew it. Tears of rage and shame started to his eyes. He looked about desperately for a weapon. He would gladly risk his life to get his companions out of the awkward scrape into which his negligence had plunged them. But the ranger had taken the

boys' rifle, and the half-breed had picked up the shotgun.

With a grin of triumph the trappers went to the fox cage, peered at the animals, and talked eagerly in low voices. The boys watched them in suspense. Were they going to kill the foxes?

Presently two of the men picked up the cage and carried it down to the river. The light was strong enough now so that Fred could see the bow of a bark canoe drawn up on the shore. They put the cage into the canoe. Then the half-breed laid his rifle and the stolen shotgun beside it, and paddled down the river. The other two men lifted the boys' Peterboro into the water.

"You aren't going to rob us of our firearms and our canoe, too, are you?" cried Horace desperately. "You might as well murder us!"

"Guess you won't need the guns," said the third trapper. "You've got grub, I see, and we durstn't leave you any canoe to foller us up in."

The two men pushed off the Peterboro and followed the birch canoe down the river at a rapid pace. In two minutes they were out of sight round a bend.

There was a dead silence. Fred could not meet the eyes of his companions. He turned away, pretended to look for something, and fairly broke down.

"Brace up, Fred!" said his brother. "It can't be helped, and we're not blaming you. It might have happened to any of us."

"If you'd been awake you might have got shot," said Mac, "and that would have been a good deal worse for every one concerned."

But Fred was inconsolable. Through his tears, he stammered that he wished he had been shot. They had lost the foxes, they were stranded and destitute, and they stood a good chance of never getting out alive.

"Nonsense!" said Mac, with forced cheerfulness. "We were in a far worse fix last winter, and we came out on top."

"The first thing to do is to have some grub," added Horace. "Then we'll talk about it."

Looking with calculating eyes at the lump of meat, he cut the slices of venison very thin. There was about twenty pounds left. They roasted the meat he had cut off, and ate it; then Horace unfolded his pocket map and spread it on the ground.

They were probably forty miles from the Height of Land. It was twelve miles across the long carry, and at least forty more to the nearest inhabited point—almost a hundred miles in all. There was a chance, however, that they might meet some party of prospectors or Indians.

"It's terribly rough traveling afoot," said Horace. "We could hardly make it in less than two weeks. Besides, our shoes are nearly gone now."

"And that piece of venison will never last us for two weeks!" cried Macgregor.

"Oh, you can often knock down a partridge with a stick," said Horace.

"If we only had a canoe!" Mac exclaimed, with a burst of rage. "I'd run those thieves down if I had to follow them to Hudson Bay!"

They all agreed on that point, but it was useless to think of following them without a canoe. The boys would have all they could do to save their own lives; a hundred-mile journey on foot across that wilderness, without arms and with almost no provisions, was a desperate undertaking.

"Well, we've got no choice," said Horace, after a dismal silence. "We must put ourselves on rations of about half a pound of meat a day, and we'll lay a bee-line course by the compass for the trail over the Height of Land."

He marked the course on the map, and the boys studied it in silence. The sun had risen by this time, but the boys were not anxious to break camp and start on that journey which would perhaps prove fatal to all of them. They lingered, talking, discussing, hesitating, reluctant to make the start.

Fred had not contributed a single word to the discussion. He had barely managed to swallow a little breakfast, and was too miserable to join in the talk. He knew how slim their chances were; he imagined how the party would struggle on, growing weaker daily, until—

If only they had a canoe! If only they could run the robbers down and ambush them in their turn! And as he puzzled on the problem, an idea—an inspiration—flashed into his mind.

He bent over, and studied the map intently for a second.

"Look! Look here!" he cried, wildly. "What fools we are! We can overtake those fellows—catch 'em—cut 'em off before they get anywhere—and get back our grub, and the foxes, and the canoe—everything—why—"

"What's that? What do you mean?" cried Horace and Mac together.

Fred placed a trembling finger on the map.

"See, this is where we are, isn't it? Those thieves will go down here to the mouth of the Smoke River, and turn up it to their camp. They didn't have much outfit with them; so they'll go back to their shanty. It's about fifty miles round by the way they'll go, but if we cut straight across country—this way—we'd strike the Smoke in twenty-five miles, and be there before them."

"I do believe you've hit something, Fred!" Mac exclaimed.

In fact, the Smoke and the Missanabie Rivers made the arms of an acute angle. Between twenty and thirty miles straight to the northwest would bring them out on the former stream somewhere in the neighborhood of "Buck Rapids."

"Let's see!" calculated Horace hurriedly. "They can run down to the mouth of the Smoke in a few hours from here. After that it'll be slower work, but they'll have the portage trails that we cut, and they ought to get up beyond the long lake by this evening. Can we get across in time to head 'em off?"

"We must. Of course we can!" Fred insisted. "It's our only chance, and you both know it. We never could get home with our boots gone, and with the food we have, but this venison will last us across to the Smoke."

"Patch our boots up with the deerskin!" cried Mac. "We'll ambush 'em. We'll catch 'em on a hard carry. Only let me get my hands on 'em!"

"Then we haven't a minute to lose!" said Horace.

"Let's be off!" cried Fred, springing up.

First of all, however, they repaired their tattered boots by folding pieces of the raw deerhide round them and lashing them in place with thongs. It was clumsy work at the best; but Mac rolled up the rest of the hide to take with him, in case they should have to make further repairs.

Horace consulted the map and the compass again, and picked up the lump of venison, which, with the deerskin, constituted their only luggage. In less than half an hour from the time Fred had hit upon his plan they were off, running through the undergrowth on the twenty-five-mile race to the Smoke River.

None of them knew what sort of country the course would pass over. The map for that part of the region was incomplete and no more than approximately accurate, so that the boys were not at all sure that their guess at the distance to the Smoke River was correct. But they did know that now that they had started on the race, their lives depended upon their winning it. Fred took the lead at once, tearing through the thickets, tripping, stumbling.

"Easy, there!" called Horace. "We mustn't do ourselves up at the start."

Fred slackened his pace somewhat, but continued to keep in front. For nearly a mile from the river the land sloped gently upward through dense thickets of birch. Then the birches thinned, and finally gave way to evergreen, and the rising ground became rough with gravel and rock. The slope changed to undulating billows of hills, covered with stone of every size, from gravel to small boulders, and over it all grew a stubbly jungle of cedar and jack-pine, seldom more than six feet high.

It was a rough, broken country, and the boys had to slacken their pace

somewhat; to make things worse, it presently began to rain. First came a driving drizzle, then a heavy downpour, with a strong southwest wind. The rocks streamed with water, and the boys were drenched; but the heavy rain presently settled again to a soaking drizzle that threatened to continue all day.

Through the rain they struggled ahead; sometimes they found a clear space where they could run; sometimes they came upon wet, tangled shrubbery that impeded them sadly. They kept hoping for easier traveling; but those broken, rocky hills stretched ahead for miles. At last the trees became even more sparse, and the boys encountered a whole hillside covered with a mass of split rock.

Over this litter of sandstone they crawled and stumbled at what seemed a snail's pace. They were desperately anxious to hurry, but they knew that a slip on those wet rocks might mean a broken leg.

A rain-washed slope of gravel came next; they went down it at a trot, and then encountered another hillside covered with huge, loose stones. They scrambled over it as best they could, and ran down another slope; then trees became more abundant, and soon they were again traveling over low, rolling hills clothed in jack-pine scrub.

With marvelous endurance Fred still held the lead. He went as if driven by machinery, with his head down and his lips clenched; he did not speak a word. He was supposed to be the weakest of the party, but even Macgregor, a trained cross-country runner, found himself falling farther and farther behind.

At eleven o'clock Horace called a halt. The rain had almost stopped, and the boys, lighting a small fire, roasted generous slices of venison. There was no need of sparing the meat now. Either plenty of food or death was at the end of the journey.

No sooner had they eaten it than Fred sprang up again.

"How you fellows can sit here I can't understand!" he exclaimed, nervously. "I'm going on. Are you coming?"

Mac and Horace followed him. The land seemed to be sloping continually to lower levels; the woods thickened into a sturdy, tangled growth of hemlock and tamarack that they had hard work to penetrate. They presently caught a glimpse of water ahead, and came to the shore of a small, narrow lake that curved away

between rounded, dark hillsides. They had to go round the lake, and lost two or three miles by the détour. As they hurried up the shore a bull moose sprang from the water, paused an instant to look back, and crashed into the thickets. It would have been an easy shot if they had had the rifle.

Round the end of the lake low hills rose abruptly from the shore. After scrambling up the slippery slope of the hills they reached the top, and saw ahead of them an endless stretch of wild hills and forests; there was not a landmark that they recognized.

Horace guessed that they had come about fifteen miles. Mac thought that it was much more. They agreed that they had broken the back of the journey, and that if their strength held out, they could reach the Smoke that day.

"Suppose we were—to find the diamond-beds now!" said Mac, between quick breaths.

"Don't talk to me about diamonds!" said Horace. "I never want to hear the word again."

On they went, up and down the hills, through the thickets and over the ridges; but they no longer went with the energy they had shown in the morning. With every mile their pace grew slower, and they were all beginning to limp. Fred still kept in front, with his face set in grim determination. About the middle of the afternoon Horace came up with him, stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, and looked into his face.

Fred's eyes were bright and feverish. His face was pale and spotted with red blotches, and he breathed heavily through his open mouth.

"You've got to stop!" said his brother firmly. "You're going on your nerves. A little farther, and you'll collapse—go down like a shot."

"I—I'm all right!" said Fred thickly. "Got to get on—got to make it in time!"

But Horace was firm. First they built a smudge to keep off the flies; then they made fresh repairs to their shoes; and finally they stretched themselves flat to rest. But in spite of their fatigue, they were too highly strung to stay quiet. They knew that a delay of an hour might lose the race for them. After resting for less than half an hour, they got up and went plunging through the woods again.

They believed now that the Smoke River could not be more than five or six miles away. From every hilltop they hoped to catch sight of it, or at least to see some spot that they had passed while prospecting.

But although all the landscape seemed strange, they doggedly continued the struggle. The sun was sinking low over the western ridges now; toiling desperately on, they left mile after mile behind, but still the Smoke River did not come into sight. At last Macgregor sat down abruptly upon a log.

"I'd just as soon die here as anywhere," he said.

"You're right. We'll stop, and go on by moonrise," said Horace. "Grub's what we need now."

"Why, we're almost at the end! We can't stop now!" Fred cried.

"We won't lose anything," said his brother. "The trappers will be camping, too, about this time. If we don't rest now we'll probably never get to the Smoke at all."

Staggering with fatigue, he set about getting wood for a fire. Mac and Fred helped him, and when they had built a fire they broiled some of the deer meat. Fred could hardly touch the food. Horace and Macgregor ate only a little, and almost as they ate they nodded, and dropped asleep from sheer fatigue.

Fred knew that he, too, ought to sleep, but he could not even lie down. His brain burned, his muscles twitched, and he felt strung like a taut wire. Leaving his companions asleep, he started to scout ahead. He went like one in a dream, hardly conscious of anything except the overwhelming necessity of getting forward. His course took him over a wooded ridge and down a hillside, and at last he came upon a tiny creek. Stumbling, sometimes falling, but always pushing on, he followed the course of the creek for a mile or two; suddenly he found himself on the shore of a large and rapid river, into which the creek emptied.

Furious at the obstacle, he looked for a place where he could cross the river.

It was too deep for him to wade across it, and too swift for him to swim it. He hurried up the bank, looking for a place where he could ford it, and at last came to a stretch of short, violent rapids.

He was about to turn back when he caught sight of axe marks in the undergrowth. Some one had cut a trail for the carry round the rapid. He stared at the axe marks, and then at the river. Suddenly his dazed brain cleared.

He recognized the spot. He recognized the trail that he himself had helped to cut. He had found the Smoke River!

CHAPTER XVI

Fred never quite knew how he got back to camp after he had found the river. He found his companions still sound asleep, but it did not take him long to rouse them and to tell them the news.

"I couldn't see any tracks on the shore. I don't think any one has passed," Fred said.

In less than a minute the boys, wild with joy, were hurrying through the woods again. It was almost dark when they reached the river; peering close to the ground they examined the trail carefully, to make sure that the trappers had not already passed.

The heavy rain had washed the shores, and no fresh tracks showed in the mud. The men had not been over the portage that day, and they could hardly have passed the rapids without making a carry. They had evidently camped for the night at some point below, and would not come up the river until morning.

After piling up some hemlock boughs for a bed, the boys lay down, and dropped into a heavy sleep. Now that the strain was over, Fred slept, too. In fact, for the last quarter of an hour he had hardly been able to stay on his feet.

In the gray dawn Horace awakened them. They were stiff from their thirty-mile race of the day before, and their feet were swollen. Hot food—especially hot tea—was what they longed for; but they were afraid to make a fire, and they had to content themselves with a little raw venison for their breakfast.

Horace thought that they could make their ambush where they were as well

as anywhere else. The portage was about thirty yards long, and the narrow trail passed over a ridge and ran through dense hemlock thickets. If the trappers came up the trail in single file, carrying heavy loads, they could not use their rifles against a sudden attack.

The boys armed themselves each with a hardwood bludgeon; then they ensconced themselves in the thickets where they could see the reaches of the river below—and waited.

An hour passed. It was almost sunrise, and there was no sign of the trappers on the river. The boys grew nervous with dread and anxiety. The tree-tops began to glitter with sunlight. It was almost six o'clock.

"Could they have gone some other way?" asked Fred uneasily, staring upstream.

At that very moment Macgregor grasped his arm and pointed down the river. Two small objects had appeared round a bend, half a mile below. They were certainly canoes, making slow headway against the stiff current, but they were too far away for the boys to make them out plainly. Minute by minute they grew nearer.

"The front one's a Peterboro!" said Mac. "There's one man in it, and two in the other. I think I can see the fox cage."

Without doubt it was the trappers. The young prospectors slipped back through the thickets, almost to the upper end of the trail, and concealed themselves in the hemlocks.

"Above all things, try to get hold of their guns!" said Horace.

For a long while they waited in terrible suspense. They could not see the landing, nor at first could they hear anything, for the tumbling water of the rapids roared in their ears. After what seemed almost an hour, stumbling footsteps sounded near by on the trail, and the bow of the Peterboro hove in sight. A man was carrying it on his head; he steadied it with one hand, and in the other grasped a gun—Horace's repeating rifle.

When he was almost within arm's reach, Mac sprang and tackled him low like a football player. The trapper dropped the gun with a startled yell, and went

over headlong into the hemlocks—canoe and all.

Horace leaped out to seize the gun that the man had dropped. Before he could touch it, the second trapper rushed up the trail with his rifle clubbed. Fred struck out at him with his bludgeon. The blow missed the fellow's head, and fell on his arm. Down clattered the rifle, discharging as it fell. The trapper made a frantic leap aside, and disappeared into the bushes.

As Fred snatched up the rifle, he caught a glimpse of the third trapper, the wiry half-breed, hastening up the path.

"Halt! Hands up!" shouted Horace, raising the repeater.

The man stopped, fired a wild shot, turned and bolted back toward the landing. Fred and his brother rushed after him; they reached the landing just in time to see him leap into the birch canoe, which still held the fox cage, shove off, and digging his paddle furiously into the water, shoot down the stream.

"After him! The canoe! Quick!" shouted Horace.

They dashed back. The man that Fred had struck was nowhere to be seen. Macgregor had pinned his antagonist to the ground, and seemed to have him well subdued.

"Never mind him, Mac!" Fred cried. "Pick up that canoe in a hurry! One of the scoundrels has got away with the foxes!"

All three of them seized the canoe and rushed it down to the landing. There they found the shore strewn with articles of camp outfit where the men had unloaded the canoes.

"Load it in, boys!" cried Horace. "Take what we need. We're not coming back."

They pitched an armful or two of supplies into the canoe. Fred's shotgun was there, and several other articles that the boys recognized as their own. The rest was a fair exchange for the outfit that they had abandoned in their tent.

They shoved the canoe off. The half-breed had gained a long lead by this time. He was nearly a quarter of a mile ahead, paddling frantically; he did not

even stop to fire at the boys. But there were three paddles in pursuit, and the boys began to gain on him noticeably. More than two miles flashed by, and then the roar of rapids sounded ahead.

"Got him!" panted Mac. "He'll have to land now."

Round another bend shot the birch canoe, with the Peterboro three hundred yards behind, and now the broken water came in sight. It was a long, rock-staked chute, and the boys thought it would be suicidal to try to run it. But the half-breed kept straight on in mid-channel.

"He's going to try to run through!" Horace cried. "He'll drown himself and the foxes!"

The boys yelled at him; but the next instant the man's canoe had shot into the broken water. For a moment they lost sight of him in a cloud of spray; then they saw him half-way down the rapids, going like a bullet. With incredible skill, he was keeping his craft upright.

The boys drove their canoe toward the landing, and still watched the man. When he was almost through the rapids, they saw his canoe shoot bow upward into the air, hang a moment, and then go over.

Shouting with excitement, they dragged the canoe ashore, picked it up, and went over the portage at a run. Far down the stream they saw the birch canoe floating on its side, near the fox cage. They had just launched the Peterboro at the tail of the rapids, when they saw something black bobbing in the swirling water.

It was the head of the half-breed. He was swimming feebly, and when they hauled him into the canoe, was almost unconscious. He had a great bleeding gash just above his ear, where he had struck a rock; but he was not seriously injured. The boys paid little attention to him, but hastened to rescue their treasure. When they came up with the birch canoe, they found that the fox cage had been lashed to it with a strip of deerskin, and, to their great relief, that the foxes were there, all four of them, alive and afloat.

They got the cage ashore as quickly as possible. The foxes were dripping with water, but looked as lively as ever. To all appearances, the ducking had not hurt them.

The canoe itself had not come off so well. It had a great rent in the bottom, and Horace stamped another hole through the bow. Then the boys examined their new outfit. From their own former store they had a kettle, a frying-pan, a box of rifle-cartridges, and a sack of tea. They had taken from the trappers' supplies half a sack of flour, a lump of salt pork, two blankets, and two rifles.

The half-breed had recovered his wits by this time; sitting on the bank, he glared savagely at them.

"You'll find your partners waiting for you up the river," Horace said to him. "We've got what we need, and you'll find the rest of your kit on the shore where you unpacked it. As for your rifles—"

He picked them up and tossed them into six feet of water. "By the time you've fished them out and mended your canoe I guess you won't want to follow us. If you do, you won't catch us napping again, and we'll shoot you on sight. *Savez*?"

The half-breed muttered some sullen response. The boys loaded the fox cage into the Peterboro, got in themselves, and shot down the river again in a fresh start for home. They left the trapper sitting on the rock, glaring after them.

Now that the strain was over and the fight won, the boys felt utterly exhausted. They kept on at as fast a pace as they could, however, and reached the Missanabie River a little after noon. There they stopped to cook dinner.

Once more they had hot, black *voyageurs'* tea, and fried flapjacks, and salt pork. It seemed the most delicious meal they had ever eaten; but when they had finished, they felt too weary to start up the Missanabie, and reckless of consequences, they lay down and slept for almost two hours.

Then they continued their journey with double energy, and made good progress for the rest of the day.

They were entirely out of fresh meat, and had nothing whatever to give the foxes, but fortunately Mac shot three spruce grouse that evening. They dropped the heads of the birds into the cage; the foxes devoured them with a voracity that indicated that the trappers had fed them nothing. Early the next morning Horace by a long shot killed a deer at the riverside.

It was a rough journey up the Missanabie, but not nearly so hard as the trip up

the Smoke River had been. For eight days they paddled, poled, tracked, and portaged, until they came at last to the point where they had first launched the canoe.

The "long carry" over the Height of Land now confronted them. It is true that they had by no means so much outfit to carry now, but, on the other hand, they had no packers to help them. They had to make two journeys of it, and, as a further difficulty, one of the boys had to remain with the fox cage. As they reached the top of the ridge on their first journey, Macgregor turned and looked back over the wild landscape to the northwest.

"Somewhere over there," he murmured, "is the diamond country."

"Shut up!" exclaimed Horace, in exasperation.

"I never want to hear the word 'diamond' again," added Fred.

They left the foxes together with the rest of their loads at the end of the "carry," and Fred remained to guard them, while Peter and Horace went back for the remainder of the outfit. While they were gone Fred noticed that one of the cubs was not looking well. It refused to eat or drink; its fur was losing its gloss, and it lay in a sort of a doze most of the time. Plainly captivity did not agree with it.

Horace and Peter were much concerned about its condition when they came back. None of them had any idea what to do; in fact it is doubtful if the most skilled veterinary surgeon could have prescribed.

"The real trouble is their cramped quarters, of course," said Horace. "We must get home as quickly as possible, and get them out of this and into a larger cage. Some of the others will sicken if we don't look sharp."

They made all the speed they could, and, now that they were fairly on the canoe route south of the Height of Land, they felt that they were well toward home. It was downstream now, and portages grew less and less frequent as the river grew. They did not stop to hunt or fish; the paddled till dusk, and were up at dawn. They felt that it was a race for the life of the valuable little animal, and they did not spare themselves. Two days afterward, late in the afternoon, they came to the little railway village that had been their starting-point.

The cub seemed no better—worse, if anything. There was a train for Toronto at eight o'clock that night. The boys hurried to the hotel where they had left their baggage, and changed their tattered woods garments for more civilized clothing. There was time to eat a civilized supper, with bread and vegetables and jam,—almost forgotten luxuries,—and time also to send a telegram to Maurice Stark.

They carried the cage of foxes to the hotel with them, for they were determined henceforth not to let the animals out of their sight for a moment. The unusual spectacle of the three boys with their burden attracted much attention, and when the contents of the cage became known, nearly the whole population of the village assembled to have a look.

The crowd followed them to the depot, and saw the foxes put into the baggage-car. They had secured permission for one of them to ride with the cage and stand guard, and the boys took turns at this duty. The other two tried to snatch a few hours of rest in the sleeper; but the berths seemed stifling and airless. Accustomed to the open camp, they could not sleep a wink, and were rather more fatigued the next morning than when they had started. It was still four hours to Toronto, but they reached the city at noon. Macgregor was standing the last watch in the baggage-car, and as Fred and Horace came down the steps of the Pullman they saw Maurice Stark pushing through the crowd.

"What luck?" Maurice demanded anxiously, lowering his voice as he shook hands. "Did you find the—the—?"

"Not any diamonds," replied Fred, with a laugh. "But we brought back some black gold. Come and see it."

They went forward to the platform where the baggage was being unloaded. Macgregor was helping to hand out the willow cage. It looked strangely wild and rough among the neat suit-cases and trunks.

"What in the world have you got there?" cried Maurice, peering through the bars.

Fred and Horace were also looking anxiously to learn the condition of the sick cub.

"Why, he's dead!" exclaimed Fred, in bitter disappointment.

"Yes," said Mac; "the little fellow keeled over just after I came on guard. I didn't send word to you fellows, for I knew there was nothing to be done."

The rest of the family were alive and looked in good condition. The boys had already decided what they would do immediately, and, calling a cab, they drove with the foxes to the house of a well-known naturalist connected with the Toronto Zoölogical Park. He was as competent as any one could be, and he readily agreed to take care of the foxes till they should be sold.

Naturally, however, he declined to be responsible for their safety, and Horace at once attempted to insure their lives. No insurance company would accept the risk, but after much negotiation he at last managed to effect a policy of two thousand dollars for one month, on payment of an exorbitant premium. He was more successful in getting insurance against theft, and took out a policy for ten thousand dollars with a burglar insurance company, on condition of a day and night watchman being employed to guard the animals.

It was plain that the foxes were going to be a source of terrible anxiety while they remained on the boys' hands. Horace at once telegraphed to the manager of one of the largest fur-breeding ranches in Prince Edward Island, and received a reply saying that a representative of the company would call within a few days.

The man turned up three days later, and inspected the foxes in a casual and uninterested way.

"We'd hardly think of buying," he remarked. "We've got about all the stock we need. I was coming to Toronto just when I got your wire, and I thought I'd look in at them. What are you thinking of asking for them?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," said Horace.

The fur-trader laughed heartily.

"You'll be lucky if you get a quarter of that," he said. "Why, we bought a fine, full-grown black fox last year for five hundred. Your cubs are hardly worth anything, you know. They 're almost sure to die before they grow up."

"Professor Forsythe doesn't think so," replied Horace.

"Well, I'm glad I saw them," said the dealer. "If I can hear of a buyer for you

I'll send him along, but you'll have to come away down on your prices. You might let me have your address, in case I hear of anything."

"It doesn't look as if we were going to sell them!" said Fred, who was not used to shrewd business dealing. "Perhaps we can't get any price at all."

Horace laughed.

"Oh, that was all bluff. I saw the fellow's eyes light up when he saw these black beauties. He'll be back to see us within a day or two."

Sure enough, the man did come back. He scarcely mentioned the foxes this time, but took the boys out motoring. As they were parting he said carelessly, "I think I might get you a buyer for your foxes, but he couldn't pay over fifteen thousand."

"No use in our talking to him then," replied Horace, with equal indifference.

That was the beginning of a series of negotiations that ran through fully a week. It was interspersed with motor rides, dinner parties, and other amusements to which the parties treated one another alternately. The Prince Edward Island man brought himself to make a proposal of twenty thousand, and Horace came down to thirty-five thousand, and there they stuck. Finally Horace came down to thirty.

"I'll give you twenty-five," said the furbreeder at last, "but I think I'll be losing money at that."

"I'll meet you halfway," replied Horace. "Split the difference. Make it twenty-seven thousand, five hundred."

Both parties were well wearied with bargaining by this time, and the buyer gave in.

"All right!" he agreed. "You'll make your fortune, young man, if you keep on, for you 're the hardest customer to deal with that I've met this year."

The dealer went back next day to the east, taking the foxes with him, and leaving with the boys a certified check for $27,500. It was not as much as they had hoped to clear, but it was a small fortune after all.

"Comes to nearly seven thousand apiece," Fred remarked.

"Not at all," remonstrated Maurice. "I don't see where I have any share in it."

"Oh, come! We're rolling in money. You must have something out of it. Mustn't he, Horace?"

They knew that Maurice really needed the money, and it was not by his own will that he had failed to go with the expedition. In the end he was persuaded to accept the odd five hundred dollars, but he refused to take a cent more. The remainder made just nine thousand dollars apiece for each of the three other boys.

"I've lost a year's varsity work," said Peter, "but I guess it was worth it. Nine thousand is more than I ever expect to make in a year of medical practice. Besides, we know there are diamonds in that country. Horace found them. Why can't we—"

"Shut up!" cried Fred.

"Take his money away from him!" exclaimed Horace. "I don't want to hear any more of diamonds."

"—And why can't we make another expedition," continued Peter, "and prospect for—" But Fred and Horace pounced on him, and after a violent struggle got him down on the couch.

"Prospect for what?" cried Fred, sitting on his chest.

"Ow—let me up!" gurgled Mac. "Why, for—for more black foxes!"

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