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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CANOE MATES IN CANADA; OR, THREE BOYS AFLOAT ON THE SASKATCHEWAN ***



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Canoe Mates In Canada

OR

*THREE BOYS AFLOAT ON
THE
SASKATCHEWAN*

By

ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

Author of
"THE HOUSE BOAT BOYS," "CHUMS IN DIXIE,"
"THE YOUNG FUR TAKERS," Etc.



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Canoe Mates in Canada

or

Afloat on the Saskatchewan

CHAPTER I.

A PLUNGE DOWN THE RAPIDS.

Kneeling in a "bullboat," fashioned from the skin of an animal, and wielding a paddle with the dexterity only to be attained after years of practice in canoeing, a sturdily-built and thoroughly bronzed Canadian lad glanced ever and anon back along the course over which he had so recently passed; and then up at the black storm clouds hurrying out of the mysterious North.

It was far away in the wilderness of the Northwest, where this fierce tributary of the great Saskatchewan came pouring down from the timber-clad hills; and all around the lone voyager lay some of the wildest scenery to be met with on the whole continent.

Here and there in this vast territory one might come across the occasional trading posts of the wide-reaching Hudson Bay Company, at each of which the resident factor ruled with the arbitrary power of a little czar.

It might be he would discover the fire of some Ishmaelite of the forest, a wandering "timber-cruiser," marking out new and promising fields for those he served, and surveying the scene of possible future bustling logging camps.

Otherwise the country at this time was a vast unknown land, seldom penetrated by human kind, save the Indian fur gatherers.

Considering that he was in so vast a wilderness this adventurous lad appeared to have scant luggage in his well battered bullboat—indeed, beyond the buskskin jacket, which he had thrown off because of his exertions, there did not seem to be anything at all aboard the craft, not even a gun, by means of which he might provide himself with food while on the journey downstream.

This singular fact would seem to indicate that he might have had trouble of some sort back yonder.

Indeed, the occasional glances which he cast over his shoulder added strength to this possibility; though the look upon his strong face was more in the line of chagrin and anger than fear.

Now and then he shook his curly head, and muttered something; and once a name passed his lips in anything but a friendly fashion—that of Alexander Gregory.

Swifter grew the current, giving plain warning to one so well versed as this lad must be in the vagaries of these mad rivers of the Silent Land that presently it would be racing furiously down a steep incline, with razoredge rocks on every side, apparently only too eager to rend asunder the frail canoe of the adventurous cruiser.

Still Owen Dugdale continued to ply the nimble paddle, weaving it in and out like a shuttle.

He kept to the middle of the river when it would seem to at least have been the part of wisdom had he edged his craft closer to either shore, so that he might, in time, make a safe landing in preference to trusting himself to the mercy of the wild rapids, in which his frail bullboat would be but as a chip in the swirl of conflicting waters.

Already had the vanguard of the storm swept down upon him.

An inky pall began to shut out the daylight, and when a sudden flash of lightning cleft the low-hanging clouds overhead the effect was perfectly staggering.

10

The roar of thunder that followed quick upon its heels was like the explosion of a twelve-inch gun as heard in the steel-jacketed turret of a modern battleship.

Again and again was the rushing river, with its grim forest-clad shores lighted up by the rapid-fire electric flashes.

All around crashed the loud-toned thunderclaps, rumbling and roaring until the whole affair became a perfect pandemonium; and brave indeed must be the soul that could gaze upon it without dismay and flinching.

It was just then, before the rain had begun to descend, and while the artillery of heaven flashed and roared with all the fury of a Gettysburg, that Owen Dugdale found himself plunging into the dangerous rapids, ten times more to be feared under such conditions than ordinary.

Possibly he may have regretted his rashness in sticking to the middle of the channel until it was too late to change his course; but apparently the solitary young Canuck was at the time in somewhat of a desperate frame of mind, and recked little what might be the result of his mad act of defiance to the combined powers of tempest and boiling rapids.

At least he showed no signs of shrinking from the consequences.

11

Beyond shifting his weight a trifle, as if to settle himself better for the desperate work that faced him, he remained just as before, on his knees.

Crouching amidships, lie held his paddle poised as if ready to thrust it into the swirling water at a second's notice, to stay the progress of the canoe as it lunged toward a threatening rock, or glided too near a roaring whirlpool, where disaster was certain to follow.

Owen Dugdale was no novice at shooting rapids, though never before could he have undertaken such a fierce fight as the one in which he was now engaged, for the combination of the elements made it simply appalling.

The stirring scene might have appealed to the instinct of an artist; but so far as the lad was concerned he had only eyes for the perils with which he was surrounded, and his whole soul seemed wrapped up in the prompt meeting of each emergency as it flashed before him.

A dozen times he would have met with sudden disaster but for the instantaneous manner in which his hand followed the promptings of his brain.

Even then it was a mighty close shave more than once, for the boat rubbed up against several snags in whirling past, any one of which would have sunk the frail craft had it been a head-on collision.

12

Once he had to paddle like a madman to keep from being sucked into the largest whirlpool along the course; which seemed to reach out eager fingers, and strive to the utmost to engulf him in its gluttonous maw.

Thanks to the almost incessant lightning, Owen was enabled to see these perils in time to take action, else he must have been speedily overwhelmed in the fury of the rushing waters.

While the time might have seemed an eternity to the brave lad who battled for his very life, in reality it could not have been more than a couple of minutes at most that he was shooting down that foamy descent, dodging hither and thither as the caprice of the rapids or the impetus of his paddle dictated.

Just below him was the finish of the dangerous fall, and as so often happens, the very last lap proved to be more heavily charged with disaster than any of those above, even though they appeared to be far worse.

Being a son of the wilderness, Owen Dugdale had probably never heard of the kindred terrors that used to lie in wait for the bold mariners of ancient Greece—the rock and the whirlpool known as Scylla and Charybdis—if they missed being impaled upon the one they were apt to be engulfed in the other—and yet here in the rapids of this furious Saskatchewan feeder he was brought face to face with a proposition exactly similar to that of mythology.

13

He strove valiantly to meet the occasion, and his sturdy sweep of the paddle did send him away

from the ugly pointed rock; but the last whirlpool was so close that he was not enabled to fully recover in time to throw his whole power into the second stroke; consequently his canoe was caught in the outer edge of the swirl, and before one could even wink twice it capsized.

This was not the first time Owen had met with such a disaster while shooting rapids and he had his wits about him for all of the confusion that surrounded him there.

His very first act was to clutch hold of the canoe, and throw all his energies into the task of avoiding the deadly suction of the whirlpool, for once he fell into its grip there must be only a question of seconds ere he reached its vortex and went under.

Fortune, aided by his own violent efforts, favored him, and as a result he managed to swim down the balance of the rapid, and reach the smoother waters below, still hanging on with a desperate clutch to his poor old boat, while his other hand gripped the paddle. 14

The canoe was full of water, but it did not sink, being buoyant enough to keep on the surface; but Owen found it as much as he could do to push the unwieldy thing along when he began to make for the nearest shore.

Exciting as this adventure had been, it was only an episode in a life such as he had spent up in this vast region, where the first lesson a boy learns is to take care of himself, and meet peril in any guise.

There was not the least doubt with regard to his ability to gain the nearby shore with his wrecked canoe, even if left to himself.

Nevertheless, when his ears caught the sound of encouraging shouts, and he realized that his perilous descent of the rapids had been witnessed by sympathetic eyes, it gave Mm a thrill to know that friends were near by, and waiting to assist him, if such were necessary.

But young Dugdale was an independent lad, accustomed to relying altogether upon his own endeavors, as one must always do whose life is spent in the heart of the Great Lone Land of the Far Northwest.

Hence, he kept on swimming with his boat until he could wade, and in this way came out of the river dripping, temporarily held in check by his misfortune, but not in the least dismayed. 15

Two figures hurried to meet him, though they arrived too late to give him a helping hand in effecting a landing.

Owen looked at them in amazement—he had at the most anticipated that those whose encouraging shouts had reached his ears while in the water must be some timber-cruisers who chanced to be camping at the foot of the rapids for the fishing to be found there; or it might be several of the halfbreed *voyageurs* employed by the Hudson Bay Company to carry furs from far distant posts to some station on the railroad; but he found himself gazing upon neither.

Two boys confronted him, neither of them much older than himself, and utter strangers at that.

Owen had never had a chum; and indeed, his life had been a lonely one, burdened by responsibilities that had made him much older than his years—his scanty associations had been with hardy lumbermen or *voyageurs*, so that the presence of this twain struck him as the most mysterious and remarkable thing in all his experience.

And they seemed so solicitous concerning his welfare, insisting upon taking hold of the boat and pulling the same clear of the water, that he almost began to fancy he must be dreaming. 16

"Now," exclaimed the taller of the two, when this job had been finished, "come right up to our tent, where we have a bully fire that will dry you off in a jiffy. And our coffee is just ready, too—I rather guess that'll warm you up some. Eli, it's lucky you made an extra supply, after all. Looks as if you expected we'd have company drop in on us. I'll carry the paddle—good you hung on to it, for it's a tough job to whittle one out, I know. Here we are, old chap, and believe me, you're a thousand times welcome!"

CHAPTER II.

17

THE CAMP UNDER THE HEMLOCKS.

Young Owen Dugdale's heart thrilled within him.

In all his life he could not exactly remember a single time when he had been thus warmly welcomed to any camp. Why, it was almost worth shooting the rapids and meeting with disaster to hear such words, and feel that every one was meant.

Who were these lads, and why were they here in this faraway land?

His astonished eyes fell upon the craft that had evidently carried them up the river from some hamlet, scores, perhaps hundreds, of miles away.

Such a dandy canoe Owen Dugdale had never dreamed existed in the whole wide world, for it was of varnished cedar, and with its nickeled trimmings, glistened there under the hemlocks in the flash of the lightning, and the glow of the protected campfire.

He seemed to feel somehow that this apparent calamity upon the river had been the "open sesame" for him to enter upon a new and perhaps delightful experience; rather a rough introduction perhaps, but then he knew only such in the range of his past.

18

And the delicious odor of that supper was enough to arouse the dormant appetite of one who had foresworn all cookery, one of these modern cranks determined to exist upon nuts and fruit, which our young friend of the bullboat certainly was not.

Both lads bustled about trying to make him comfortable near the cheery blaze, and then filling a pannikin with the canoeist's stew of corn beef, succotash and left-over potatoes, they invited him to set-to, nor wait for them a second.

Owen could not have restrained himself, once his nostrils became saturated with those delicious odors, and he started to eat like a starving chap; as indeed, he came very near being, seeing that he had not partaken of a mouthful of food for almost twenty-four hours, and then but scantily.

Then came a cup of such coffee as he had never before tasted, with condensed milk to mellow the same, and close at his hand was placed a package of crackers into which he was expected to dip as the humor seized him.

Boys never like to talk while hungry, and no matter how strong the curiosity on both sides might be, nothing was said beyond the usual courtesies necessary in passing things, until one and all declared themselves satisfied.

19

But, although their tongues were silent during this half-hour, their eyes did double duty, and Owen found a thousand things at which to wonder.

The canoe had been enough to excite his curiosity, but everything he saw about the camp was in keeping with such luxury.

The dun-colored tent was a beauty, and doubtless positively waterproof, for the rain that had been beating down ever since they commenced eating had found no inlet; and the fly over the fire sufficed to keep it from being extinguished.

He saw several warbags of the same kind of canvas, evidently used for the storage of clothes and provisions; and in addition there were a couple of guns, rubber ponchos, gray blankets that peeped out of two expensive sleeping bags, and a couple of black japanned boxes the contents of which he could not picture, unless they might be something in the way of surveyors' instruments; for Owen had once seen a party of these gentry running a line through the forest, and hence his vague application now.

These things had been taken in with a few glances around; but the two boys themselves occupied most of his attention, and he found himself trying to study out what they were—the taller one he understood immediately must be in command, for his whole appearance indicated it, while the shorter chap was of the calibre not unlike himself, bronzed from a life in the open, and with a cheery manner that drew the waif toward him from the start.

20

Both were dressed for business, with no unnecessary frills; and it was evident that if the leader of the mysterious expedition was possessed of unlimited means he also had enough common sense to deny himself luxuries when upon such a long cruise.

When every one declared that not another bite could be taken, Eli pulled out a pipe, being evidently addicted to smoking, and his comrade, finding that the newcomer had dried out pretty thoroughly, hunted up a spare jacket from one of the bags, which he insisted upon Owen donning, since the storm, now a thing of the past, had been followed by a cool wave that made the fire doubly pleasant.

"Now," said the tall lad, with one of his winning smiles, that drew Owen to him so wonderfully, "let's exchange confidences a bit, just as far as you care to go and no further. First of all my name is Cuthbert Reynolds, and I'm from across the border, a Yankee to the backbone; and this is Eli Perkins, also an American boy, a native of the lumber regions of Michigan, and with his fortunes bound up in mine."

21

"And I'm Owen Dugdale," said the other, knowing the pause was intended for him to break in with the mention of his name; "a native Canuck, and at home in this timber region—my parents were of Scotch descent I believe. And the first thing I want to say is that I'm mighty glad to be here with you just now. I was just about as hungry as a bear, and only for you I don't see what I could have done, after that ducking, for my matches must have been wet, and I would have gone to sleep hungry and cold."

The tall lad hastened to interrupt him, evidently not fancying being thanked for doing what was apparently the greatest pleasure in the world to him.

"Hold on, please; we understand all that. You're a thousand times welcome, and I tell you right

now nothing could have happened to please me better than meeting up with you. You can bet there's something besides chance in it. Now, naturally you're wondering what in the dickens two fellows of our stripe are doing wandering about up here in the Far Northwest like a couple of nomads.

22

"Well, perhaps when you learn the actual truth you'll wonder harder than ever how it is one of us has escaped landing in a lunatic asylum up to this time; but as some of my friends say to me, youthful enthusiasm is responsible for many queer things, and so long as my wonderful ambition is to copy after Stanley in the line of exploring, why, they don't worry.

"They say I have more money than I know what to do with, anyway, and if it must be blown in somehow, why, this is a harmless way of doing it, dangerous only to myself, and any other foolish chap whom I may influence to accompany me on my mad expeditions," and as he spoke he glanced affectionately in the direction of the homely, freckled but good-humored Eli, who returned the look with a grin and an emphatic nod of approval.

"Now, you see, Eli has been with the lumbermen all his life, and is as hardy as they make them. What he doesn't know about the woods isn't worth telling; and so we make a pretty good team, for I've picked up a little knowledge about camp life during my canoeing days in the East, and manage to fill in the gaps in Eli's education, along the line of woodcraft.

23

"I might as well make a full confession in the start, for you're bound to get on to my weakness if we see much of each other, and I hope we will. Ever, since I was knee-high to a grasshopper I've been inoculated with the exploring bee, read everything ever printed in that line, and pictured myself doing wonderful stunts like Livingstone and Stanley."

It was only to be expected then that when I was left my own master at the death of my father, I would pursue my hobby to the limit; and I rather guess I have been on the jump for two years. Haven't made myself famous yet, and a little of my enthusiasm in that line has dribbled away; but I'm just as determined to work in the field of research as ever; only age is beginning to tone down my earlier wild notions, and after this last and crowning folly I think I shall hitch up with some veteran who knows it all, and be content to work up from the ranks.

"I started out on this expedition with great notions of making such a trip as no man had ever before attempted, passing up a branch of the Saskatchewan, making a portage with the assistance of the Crees or Chippewas to some convenient branch of the Athabasca River, and voyage on to the lake of that name by fall, winter there perhaps at the Hudson Bay Post, and in the spring by means of the chain of lakes and rivers that I understand connect the Athabasca Lake with Hudson Bay, arrive at that vast sheet of water in time to be picked up by some whaler and carried home a winner.

24

"Makes you smile, I guess—well, it strikes me as funny, now that I've been navigating this country for several months, and only gotten this far; but when I laid out the trip it was a serious business for me, and I couldn't see anything but success ahead of me. I've had my fun, and I'm ready to call the game off. This is a man's work, I understand now, and I'm out of the exploring business for the time, only now that we're up so far Eli and myself want to see all we can of the country; and Eli has some notions in the line of discovering rich copper ledges that he means to work while wandering about this unknown land, eh, old man?"

In this boyish, familiar manner did he address his comrade, and Eli as usual laughed good-naturedly and nodded his head—evidently he had a fund of humor in his make-up that could not be disturbed by any amount of "joshing."

25

Cuthbert halted in his explanations; he did not hint at such a thing, but evidently it was up to Owen to tell something at least in connection with his presence in the neighborhood, and how he came to be rushing down the dangerous rapids at the time the storm broke, when it would appear the part of wisdom for one who knew the peril involved as well as he did, to land and portage around the troubled water.

The lad acted a little as though confused, not knowing just how much he should tell in connection with himself; but taking a brace he finally spoke up—Eli was adding some wood to the fire from a stock they had laid in dry when the storm was seen approaching, while Cuthbert busied himself in making his seat more comfortable, though in reality it was done in order not to appear to be noticing the coloring-up of the guest, about whom he seemed to realize that there was a bit of a mystery.

"I told you my name was Owen Dugdale, and that I had always lived up in this country. Well, that is hardly so, for when I was a little chap I remember being in Montreal with my parents for a spell; but they came back here and I've never gone out of the woods since.

26

"My mother taught me all I know, for she was a lady, and had been educated in a convent school in that city. My father was used to the life of the woods, and I learned everything connected with that from him. I lost my mother two years ago, and my father later. That's about all there is in connection with me. I—I had some trouble up the river at the post, and was making my way down with the intention of leaving this country forever when this accident happened. I'm glad it did happen, because it's thrown me in with two such good fellows. You'll be surprised when I tell you that I've never had a boy friend in all my life; and—well, it's mighty fine to be sitting here and talking with you both. I wish I could do something to return the favor, that's what."

"You can—stay with us a while, and let us have some of the benefit of your knowledge of the country. We'd like nothing better; and if you have no other place to go, why make a third member of the crowd. You have a boat, and as for grub and such, why, we're loaded down with it. Don't decide just now, but think it over and tell us in the morning. We won't take no for an answer, remember."

Owen turned his head away as if to look at something he fancied moved along the edge of the camp; but it was to conceal the tears that came unbidden into his eyes—the genuine warmth of this invitation stirred his heart, and as some resolution sprang into life he gripped his hands and set his teeth hard.

27

CHAPTER III.

COMRADES.

28

The young Canadian sat for a few minutes mute, as though turning over this proposition of Cuthbert's in his mind; then suddenly raising his eyes he looked his new friend straight in the face and said:

"That's awfully white of you, and I'm going to accept your invitation. I'll be only too glad to stay with you, for a time at least, and serve you as guide. And if you still persist in your determination to ascend the river further, to see all you can while in this country, who should know that region better than myself. Let come what will, I am going back!"

The impulsive American, after his kind, was bound to seal the bargain with a hearty handshake; and Eli, not to be outdone in the matter, also thrust out his broad "paw" as he called it, squeezing that of the other with a strength that made Owen wince a bit.

At the same time the observing Cuthbert could not but note the gritting of Owen's teeth when he declared that he was ready to go back into the country from which he had apparently just come; it would appear as though some recent experience up the river did not linger fondly in his memory, and that when he came paddling downstream in his battered old bullboat it might have been with the idea of quitting the country for good.

29

Naturally this aroused a little curiosity in the other's mind, though he was not addicted to this failing overly much.

What could there be in the depths of the wilderness to bring about this aversion on the part of young Dugdale?

If Cuthbert had allowed himself to ruminate upon this subject all sorts of suspicions might have been aroused; but he was by nature too frank and generous to judge a stranger before he had been given a chance to explain; and the more he looked in the face of the lad, and noted the calm depths of his gray eyes the stronger grew his conviction that Owen Dugdale, as he called himself, could not descend to anything wrong.

Some persons carry their character in their faces, and he was of the number. So Cuthbert made up his mind to chase all suspicion from his mind; if in his own time the Canadian chose to confide in him, well and good; until then he would forget what he had seen of first anxiety and then grim determination, stamped upon that young face.

Both of the would-be explorers were cast in somewhat of a merry mould, and it was impossible to be in their company long without partaking of their happy-go-lucky spirit.

30

To the sober Owen this was about as fine a thing as could ever have happened, for he found it utterly out of the question to ponder gloomily upon the bitter past while these two chaps were whipping jokes back and forth, and insidiously drawing him into the conversation, until greatly to his astonishment he even burst out into a hearty peal of laughter, the first expression of merriment that had sprung from his heart for many a day.

Perhaps a benign Providence had taken pity upon him, and was now bent on sending sunshine where hitherto there had been little save clouds and storm.

The more he saw of these cousins from over the line the better he liked them.

It was a favorite joke of Cuthbert's to compare himself with that wonderfully humorous character of Spanish literature, who took himself so solemnly even while he furnished merriment for everybody—Don Quixote, the Knight of La Mancha—this wild expedition into the depths of the Northwestern Unknown Land was now, in the originator's mind, about as weird and ridiculous a proposition as any of the adventures of the crazy knight; and he never tired of cracking broad jokes upon the subject.

31

Of course, as was natural, honest Eli must pose for the faithful squire, Sancho Panza; and long

since he had been told the whole story, so that he was now acquainted with most of the peculiarities of that worthy, and even at times managed to tickle his friend and employer by carrying out the idea in some manner.

Owen was not ignorant as to the facts, for it chanced that he had read the book, having found an old copy in his cabin home, the property of his mother; so that he was in a condition to enjoy the joke whenever there happened to be a reference made to the ancient couple.

The storm had long since passed away down the river, growling in the distance for quite a time; but gradually the stars came peeping out in the broad blue dome overhead, and while the woods dripped with the moisture the prospect for a good day on the morrow seemed propitious.

There was room in the tent for three, with a little good-natured crowding; and while Owen protested against intruding he was turned down instantly, and compelled to take his place.

32

Never in all his life had he been drawn to any one as he was toward these two big-hearted fellows from across the border; and when he lay down finally, after busying himself for half an hour about the fire, he felt like a new boy; such is the confidence generated in the human heart by comradeship.

Owen had intentionally chosen a position near the exit of the tent, for, seeing that he had spent his life under similar conditions, and it was second nature with him to attend to a fire during the night, he would not hear of either of his new friends attempting it.

In spite of his getting up several times between that hour and the breaking of dawn Owen slept sounder than he had done for many a day; he seemed to feel a new confidence in himself, as if matters had taken a turn for the better, and in this accidental meeting with his benefactors his fortunes had begun to assume a less gloomy aspect.

Once, as he was about snuggling down under the extra blanket which had been assigned to him he rested his head upon his hand, his elbow being on the ground, and surveyed the two sleeping lads, for the firelight crept through the opening of the tent, and revealed the interior.

It was difficult for him to believe that he had only known these good fellows a comparatively few hours; so strong a hold had they taken upon his heart that it seemed as though he must have met them in his dreams, for they appeared to be occupying a space in his affections that was theirs by right.

33

So the morning found them.

When Cuthbert awoke he discovered that the new addition to the exploring party was already busily employed in getting things ready for breakfast; whereupon there arose a friendly argument as to whose duty it was to hustle things for the morning meal.

This was finally settled by arranging matters so that the three of them could take turns about in the daily duties; and Owen chose to begin then.

The others were not adverse to letting him have a whack at the culinary department, for they had been going together for a long time now, and both had about exhausted their repertoire in the line of cookery, so that a change would really be a delightful diversion; for almost every camper has his favorite dishes upon which he prides himself, and when two such come together there is always more or less of a friendly rivalry to see which can outdo the other.

By degrees such a party comes to recognize the particularly strong points of each member, so that in the end they make a fine team, every one being a star in his favorite line.

34

Breakfast was eaten with more or less good natured chaff, such as boys will always indulge in, and older campers as well; for when in the woods it seems as if being brought close back to Nature makes children of us all, showing that it is only the care and worry of a strenuous battle for wealth or power that forces men to appear aged and serious.

After that came a portage, for the canoes and all the camp duffle had to be transported above the rapids.

Eli now seemed to notice for the first time that their new friend had virtually nothing but his boat and paddle, and loudly he bewailed the wretched misfortune that had caused everything to be swallowed up in the hungry maw of the swift rapids.

At this Owen smiled in a curious manner, and openly confessed that the only damage he had sustained besides getting wet, was the loss of his jacket; and he surely had little regret for that missing garment since Cuthbert had so kindly clothed him with a spare one of his own.

Eli may not have been as able to grasp the true significance of this frank declaration as his comrade; but even he realized that the subject must be a sore one with Owen, and that it was not wise to ask questions or seem curious, so he immediately turned to other matters.

35

Really, he could not be blamed for this wonder, since it was indeed a strange thing to meet with a wanderer in this vast territory so far from the outposts of civilization entirely destitute of the commonest necessities for comfort or the procuring of food—no blanket, cooking utensils, food, and even a gun missing—well, there surely lay back of this a story of unusual interest; and for one Eli hoped their new friend would soon take them into his confidence, at least so far that they might be able to help him.

After some hard work all the stuff was carried to a point above the rapids, where they could readily launch their craft without being carried down into the hungry maw of the swirling flood.

The river had risen somewhat after the rainstorm of the previous night, and evidently there would be no lack of water above; this is always a welcome fact to those who navigate toward the headwaters of rivers, since it is no sport to track canoes over almost dry beds of streams, making "shoes" for the boats in order to prevent their being torn by sharp rocks during the passage.

36

Owing to the current, which was particularly swift in the region of the rapids, they had to bend to the paddle with considerable vim when the start was eventually made; but the cruisers were young, and their muscles well seasoned by more or less hard work, so that they gradually drew away from the vicinity of Owen's mad voyage among the rocks and sucking whirls of the drop in the river; and the further they went the easier the paddling became.

The morning was cool and invigorating after the storm, so that it was not to be wondered at that our young friends felt joyous, and presently Eli broke out in a lumberman's "chanty" that he had picked up while in camp—Cuthbert joined in the chorus, and unable to withstand the seductive strains, Owen found himself also lifting his voice and adding volume to the merry sound.

CHAPTER IV.

37

THE THREE SMOKE SIGNALS.

Cuthbert was delighted when he heard the Canadian lad's voice, for he realized that it was one of rare sweetness as well as power; and being fond of singing, and knowing scores of college songs, he promised himself he would in good time teach them to Owen, for their voices would blend admirably, while Eli's had a certain harshness about it that rather swamped his own baritone.

And he was also aware that the *voyageurs* of the Canadian wilds have numerous French boating songs of their own, that are wonderfully adapted to the rhythm and swing of the paddle; possibly Owen would know some such, and might be induced to sing them on occasion, all of which would add to the delight of their advance over the waters, onward into further depths of the wilderness where mystery brooded and the unknown abounded, for them, at least.

They had managed to make a few miles, but the current was mighty difficult to buck up against, and when finally Cuthbert suggested that they take advantage of an alluring point where the trees hung over the water and the situation seemed especially adapted for a campfire, Eli greeted the proposal with a grunt of unaffected delight, while even the well seasoned Owen felt that something to eat would not come in amiss.

38

To most of us the time to eat is ever a welcome one, especially when we know there are good things in the larder; and with boys this thing of appetite is an ever present reality, and the point of sufficiency seldom reached.

Soon a cheery fire had been started, and Owen persisted in taking charge of the preparations for lunch, giving them a species of flapjack that neither had ever seen before, and which they pronounced fine.

Owen's eyes alone told that he appreciated their praise, for he uttered no word to betray the fact. He was a singularly quiet lad, and Cuthbert, who made it something of a fad to study human nature wherever he found it, felt certain that his past life had been mixed up with considerable of sorrow.

All that morning they had not met a solitary human being upon the river, and when Eli commented upon this, their new comrade assured them that it was no unusual thing to go for several days thus, especially at this time of year, when the Indians and halfbreeds who trapped for the fur company were hunting back in the forests, laying in venison to be "jerked" or dried for consumption during the winter months, when attending to their traps far up the small branches of the Saskatchewan, or the Athabasca.

39

In the spring the posts of the Hudson Bay Company are busy places, with these various companies of *voyageurs* and trappers coming in with their loads, for which they are paid, partly in cash and the balance in store goods. It is then that the resident factor has to exercise his wisdom in handling so varied an assortment of characters, and keeping them from getting into fierce fights, since they are bound to get hold of more or less liquor, and the closing of a successful season, with a period of rest before them, is apt to make them hilarious.

Cuthbert asked many questions along this line, being sincerely desirous of obtaining information at first hands; but while Owen answered readily enough, and explained any point that seemed a bit hazy to his listeners, it might have been noted that he did not offer to launch out into a voluntary description of life as it was to be seen at one of these posts—Cuthbert even fancied that the subject was not wholly pleasing to the lad, and came to the conclusion that whatever of

trouble Owen might have met with recently, it must have had some connection with one of these posts.

They were delayed for some time after eating, for Cuthbert was desirous of attending to some little thing that needed fixing about the canoe; and Owen, who had never set eyes on a cedar boat of this delicate character, willingly lent a hand to the accomplishment of the task, satisfied to just handle such a dainty wizard craft, which in his eyes, accustomed to canoes of birch, or even dugouts, and others made of animal skins, assumed the character of something almost too pretty to be touched.

They paddled for just about three hours that afternoon, and met one Indian in a birch bark canoe, shooting downstream.

Both Cuthbert and Eli greeted him heartily; but they noticed that he looked at their new companion in something of a strange manner, though not saying a word to Owen, who seemed to pay no attention to the copper-skinned voyager.

If the scowl upon the face of the lone paddler was any indication of his feelings, there could not possibly be any love lost between them; and noticing that one of the fellow's eyes seemed swollen, the idea thrust itself into Cuthbert's mind, ridiculous as it might seem, that possibly Owen might have had something to do with that catastrophe.

41

Cuthbert had kept his eyes on the alert for a good spot where they could pass the next night, and it lacked half an hour to sunset when he gave utterance to a shout, and pointed with his paddle at the shore ahead.

"There's the very place, boys, and it's no use going any further. Just an ideal spot to pitch the tent, and the background will make a dandy picture when I get my camera in focus on it in the morning, for the sun must rise, let's see, over across the river, and shine right on the front of the tent. I've been baffled so often in trying for that same effect that I don't mean to miss this opportunity if I can help it. So here's looking at you, and we'll head in, if you please."

Owen opened his mouth as if tempted to say something, but caught himself in time, and silently acquiesced, sending his boat shoreward with vigorous dips of the paddle that told how little his energy had been exhausted by the day's work.

It was a fine spot, too, and Eli was loud in his delight; though, knowing his capacity for stowing away food from long experience, Cuthbert was secretly of the opinion that much of his enthusiasm sprang from the fact that a halt just then brought dinner closer, rather than an artistic appreciation of the surroundings.

42

That had always been the "fly in the ointment" with those two strangely assorted companions—one of them was of a romantic disposition, and inclined to seeing the elements in a glorious sunset that appealed to his soul, while with Eli, it only meant that the following day would, in all likelihood, be a fine one.

And that was one of the reasons why Cuthbert welcomed the coming of Owen, for somehow he fancied that the young Canadian might be built along his own lines, and able to sympathize with him as the good-hearted but crude Eli never could, since it was not in his nature to go beyond the substantial and matter-of-fact.

Nevertheless, he was a "bully good fellow," as Cuthbert was wont to declare, and in time of stress and difficulty could be depended on to the utmost, being honest, willing and obliging, three necessary elements in a camping comrade that go far to make amends for any little shortage in artistic temperament.

The whole three of the cruisers were soon busily engaged, for there is always plenty for all hands to do when pitching camp, what with the raising of the tent, the making of a fireplace upon which coffee pot and frying pan will rest cozily, the digging of a ditch on the higher ground back of the shelter, if there seems the slightest possible chance of rain before morning—well, every one who has been there knows how the opportunities for doing something open up to a willing campmate, so there is hardly any use in enumerating them here.

43

When darkness finally fell upon them all these things had been taken care of, and they were in fine fettle for the stay, whether it be of long or short duration, even to a pile of firewood close at hand.

Supper was next in order, but that was a pleasure in which all insisted in taking a share in preparing as well as demolishing; and it was wonderful how speedily things were managed with so many cooks eager to assist the chef.

During their afternoon trip upstream they had trolled with a couple of lines back of the boat, and fortune had smiled upon them sufficiently to provide them with fish for the evening meal, which Owen cooked in the manner most favored in this region, where trout may be looked on as a common, everyday article of food, and not in the line of luxury.

Of course, there is no necessity to tell how perfectly delicious that dinner turned out to be, for every one knows that fish are at their best when eaten in the very spot they are taken from their native element; and that being placed on the ice for hours or days takes their delicate flavor away, and renders the flesh soft and crumbly and next to tasteless.

44

And Owen confessed that the cup of Ceylon tea which he drank was the first he had tasted for a year; and he also gave his companions to understand that he had been brought up by a Scotch mother to look upon tea as nectar fit for the gods.

After the feast they lay back and took life easy, all of them being actually too surfeited to think of such a thing as cleaning up the pots and pans for the time being, that little task being left until later, when they would possess more energy and ambition.

Eli apparently had something on his mind, and as he filled his pipe, preparatory to enjoying his customary after-dinner smoke, he opened the subject by remarking:

"I say, boys, did either of you notice that line of smoke down the river, just at the time we were heading for the shore? I was going to call your attention to it, but something that was said about the spot for this camp drew my attention, and I clean forgot it till now."

45

"I didn't notice anything—in fact, I was so much taken up with looking for a jolly place to bunk tonight that I reckon I never once glanced back. How about you, Owen?" asked Cuthbert, turning to the new comrade.

He knew the other had seen the smoke even before Owen spoke, because something like a flash spread over his swarthy face, though his eyes looked straight at Cuthbert without a sign of flinching.

"Yes, I saw it—in fact, I had turned my head a dozen times in the last half-hour, expecting something of the sort," he remarked, composedly.

"It wasn't a forest fire—not near dense enough for that; and yet it looked queer for a campfire—as near as I could make out there were several of 'em, all in a row, and climbing straight up like columns," declared Eli, wagging his head mysteriously.

"Just three," added Owen, gloomily, and yet with a gritting of his teeth that excited Cuthbert's curiosity more than a little.

"Three smokes in a row—I declare, that sounds like a signal; the Indians down in Florida always communicate in that way, and have a regular code, so that they can send long messages across the swamps and pine forests," he remarked.

46

"That's just what it was, a smoke signal; and the Cree Indian we met on the river sent it to others of his race upstream," observed the young Canadian.

Cuthbert immediately remembered that he had seen the lone paddler turn a look that was a mingling of surprise and displeasure upon Owen when the canoes passed in midstream, and his former thought that these two had met before, and that the husky lad might even have had to do with the mournful black eye of the aborigine, came back with added force just now; still, he was not the one to ask questions, and unless the other chose to take his new friends fully into his confidence, whatever the mystery that lay in his past must always remain so.

"Yes," went on Owen, bitterly, "it was meant to give notice to one who is interested in my movements that I had apparently changed my mind, and did not intend to leave the neighborhood as speedily as had been expected—that's all."

CHAPTER V.

THE FALSE CHART OF DUBOIS.

47

No more was said just then; but naturally enough both Cuthbert and Eli could not get the matter out of their minds. The duties of the hour had occupied their attention upon first landing—the pitching of the waterproof tent, gathering of fuel, and kindred occupations incident to getting things ready for the coming night, so that now they could take things easy.

Cuthbert had some sort of rude map of the region, which he had purchased from an old French-Canadian *voyageur* during earlier stages of his trip; he did not know how reliable it might prove to be, though thus far the young explorers had not found it amiss to any very great extent.

When he found a chance he meant to drag this document out from its place of hiding among the various charts of the Hudson Bay country which he carried along, and get Owen's opinion as to its trustworthy character.

This would give him an opportunity to renew his acquaintance with the lay of the land above, and in some way it might cause their strange new friend to open his heart, and take them more fully into his confidence with relation to his previous connections here.

48

Cuthbert was pretty positive that there was some sort of a Hudson Bay trading post on this same stream, situated in an isolated quarter—most of them went under the name of a fort, and indeed,

they were built to resist any attack that might be made upon them by Indians or disorderly half breeds; for there were at times vast quantities of valuable plunder held in these posts, in the shape of rare peltries, and the many things the trappers took in part payment for their winter's catch, so that a clean-out of a distant post would mean a serious loss to the great company that for scores of years had carried on this business of gathering the precious skins of silver foxes, lynx, badger, mink, otter, fisher, marten, opossum, beaver, bear, wolves and muskrats.

The meal was, as we have seen, soon prepared, and partaken of with that keen relish known only to those who live in the open.

As usual the boys had grouped themselves around the fire at the time the question of the smoke signals arose, each bent upon doing some individual task, that had been upon his mind; for it is the natural habit after dining heartily to desire to rest from strenuous exertion, and take up little matters that require possibly only the manipulation of the hands, or the action of the brain.

49

Eli seemed deeply interested in some specimens he had picked up close to their noon camp, and which held forth alluring promises of copper—it was the chief fad of his life to run across a lode of the valuable metal in this far-North country; and make his everlasting fortune that way; for in secret the Michigan lad hugged certain plans for future worldwide travel to his heart, all of which, while extremely visionary at present, would be easily possible when his "ship came home," and that rich copper deposit cropped up before his eager eyes.

Few boys there be who fail to have a hobby of some sort—with some it is the pretty general craze for stamp collecting, others go in for coins, autographs, birds' eggs, specimens of birds, weapons of worldwide people, rabbits, pigeons—well, the list is almost inexhaustible, when you come to think of it.

Cuthbert's weakness, as has already been seen, lay in the line of travel and exploration, and the chances were that as he grew older he would develop into a bona fide Livingstone or a Stanley, eager to see faraway lands where the feet of a white man had probably never before wandered, and the mystery of which he might be the very first to unearth.

50

With Eli it was copper, morning, noon and night; he asked a thousand questions about the ore, where it had been found, what the character of the rocks peculiar to the region, and all such things, making copious notes the while, until as his comrade Cuthbert said, he should be about one of the best posted fellows in that line in the country—still, up to this day he had not met with such a measure of success as to turn his head; though Eli was a most determined chap, and bound to hold on after the manner of a bulldog, once he had taken a grip.

Perhaps Owen also had his particular hobby; but if so the others had as yet been granted little opportunity of realizing what it was.

Given time and it would no doubt develop itself.

Cuthbert had a good deal of patience, and prided himself on his waiting qualities, so that he made little effort to hasten matters.

As he had planned, however, while he sat by the glowing fire, which felt very good on this cool night, he drew out the bunch of charts, and began to absorb himself in the maze of lines and figures, anticipating that when Owen saw what he had before him he must evince more or less curiosity concerning the same, and offer to pass upon their genuine value.

51

The Canadian lad sat for some time staring into the fire, as though lost in self-communion; and Cuthbert could easily imagine that affairs connected with his life in this country were engrossing his attention.

Many a sly look did Cuthbert flash over that way, for somehow there seemed to be a wonderful fascination about Owen's personality that appealed strongly to him, though he found it utterly impossible to analyze this feeling, in order to make out whether it was pure sympathy toward one who had evidently rubbed up against the hard places of life while to him had been given the "snaps;" or on the other hand if it might be the realization that in this waif of the Unknown Land his soul had discovered the mate or chum for which he had looked so long and so far—perhaps it might be a commingling of the two.

Twice had Owen risen, and the other imagined he was about to come around to his side of the fire to glance over his shoulder at the charts; but both times young Dugdale had simply stepped to the pile of wood and, taking up an armful, tossed it upon the dying blaze.

Cuthbert was beginning to fancy he would have to make a move himself to draw the other's attention to what he was doing, so wrapped up did Owen seem in his own personal affairs; when suddenly he discovered that those wonderfully keen gray eyes of the rover were glued upon the papers he held upon his lap.

52

Then it was that Owen did come around to his side of the fire, and the disturbed look upon his face gave way to a bright smile as he remarked:

"I didn't notice what you had there, before. I was so bound up in my own affairs. I suppose those are maps of this country you have; perhaps I could be useful in telling you whether they are accurate or not, for I rather guess I've picked up considerable information during these years of wandering in the woods here. If you don't mind me looking at them—"

"Why, to tell the truth that's just what I was wishing you would do, old chap, but I hated to break in on your brown study. Here's a supposed-to-be reliable chart of this region, which I paid a man a good sum to get up for me; but already I've found it more or less crooked, and have begun to lose confidence in its accuracy. Perhaps you could show up the faults, and set me right, so that if the time ever comes when I have to depend on the thing I won't get astray; for truth to tell it would be no fun to find oneself lost on these upper reaches of the great Saskatchewan. Sit right down here, and squint your optic over this set of hen-tracks, made by the halfbreed, Dubois."

53

"Dubois, you say—why, I know the fellow well. He ought to be able to make a decent map of this country, for he's spent many years roaming over it, though I think he was more concerned about stealing some honest trapper's pelts than anything else. Why, see here, he's made an awful botch of this thing right around this quarter, where he certainly knows every foot of ground. I suspect that the greasy old rascal had some object in misleading you—I wouldn't put it past him to plan so that you might be lost up here, when he and some companions just as unscrupulous as himself, would come on the scene and demand a big sum to get you out of the scrape. I know of several things he has done as bad as that," remarked Owen, with indignation in his voice.

So he began to point out the false lines in the map, and at Cuthbert's suggestion he erased the pencil lines and made new ones as he went along, so that at the end of an hour that particular chart was entirely changed, presenting so new an aspect that the explorer was aroused to declare that the miserable deceiver, Dubois, would hear something not to his liking in case they ever met again.

54

"This Hudson Bay post which you have marked on the river above us—what is the name it is known by—he did not identify it except as a station?" asked Cuthbert, putting a finger on the cross.

"Fort Harmony," replied Owen, with a twitch about the corners of his mouth that seemed to be along the sarcastic order, as if deep down in his heart the lad thought the name might be a misnomer, according to his own experience.

"I suppose it is something of a store, being so far up in the wilderness; and is in charge of—a factor, I believe they call the boss?" pursued Cuthbert.

"Oh, yes. He is a grizzled old Scotchman, Alexander Gregory by name, who has been in the employ of the company most of his life, and is known as their most trusted agent. He is believed to be very rich; but though he is scrupulously honest and knows how to drive those under him to their best abilities, he is a harsh, cold-blooded man, seeking no companionship, making no warm friends, and apparently bent only on accumulating wealth and doing his full duty to the company he has served so long a time."

55

Cuthbert could easily read the strong tinge of bitterness in the other's voice while he was thus talking, and he knew that whatever Owen's troubles might be, they were connected in some way with this man of iron, who for years had ruled after the manner of a despot in this distant country along the upper branches of the Saskatchewan.

He was glad to know even so much about the man Gregory, whom he found himself beginning to dislike most cordially, even though he had never as yet set eye on his grim face, just because he believed the other had abused Owen in some way.

Owen seemed to remember himself just there, and would say no more along those lines, though quite willing to talk as long as his friend wished in connection with the country, and the best route for them to follow.

Another half-hour passed thus in communion, and Cuthbert picked up considerable information that was apt to prove of benefit to him in the future—just how valuable he did not then suspect.

Eli had some time back given up his studies of the specimens he had found, and joined in the general conversation; and his views were usually as shrewd as they seemed quaint, for he possessed many of the traits generally accredited to the Yankee from Down-East; and a natural keenness had been further sharpened by his constant rubbing up against all manner of men in the great logging camps of the Michigan peninsula.

56

It was getting near the time for them to fix the fire for the night, and seek the shelter of their blankets, when Owen, whose hearing was phenomenally keen, held up his hand, and remarked, with some show of excitement:

"Somebody coming this way through the woods—not from the direction of the post, but the other way. Perhaps it would be just as well to be prepared, for you never know who to trust up here until he proves himself to be a friend!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TIMBER-CRUISER.

57

Neither of the boys whom Owen addressed showed any particular signs of alarm at his rather startling words, though Cuthbert quietly reached out and drew his faithful ally, the little Marlin repeater, somewhat closer, as though he felt safer thus; and Eli looked up to where the shotgun, which was his especial charge, leaned against an adjacent tree, within easy reach.

Both of them had been around considerable, and could not be considered green in the ways of the woods; and it is habit as well as disposition that makes men cool in the face of peril.

Plainly now the footfalls could be heard, for evidently the party approaching did not want to arouse suspicion on the part of the campers, and be met by a hostile shot.

His figure loomed up presently in the semi-gloom beyond the range of the firelight, and Cuthbert, when he first saw the tall, bulky form of the pilgrim, was of the opinion that no word could do the newcomer better justice than just the expression "loomed," for he was pretty much of a giant.

He was roughly dressed for the work of the woods, and carried a rifle of necessity, for a man would be several sorts of a fool who wandered about these wild parts without that mainstay to back him up, and lacking which he must of necessity starve in the midst of plenty.

Cuthbert looked keenly at the fellow's face, being, as has been said before, something of a reader of character.

He instantly decided that he did not fancy the man—not that he was on the surface other than a rough woods rover, with a laugh like the roar of a bull alligator, and a heartiness that seemed genuine enough; but something about his eyes caused the explorer to believe him double-faced.

Eli could not see deep enough for that, and was ready to take the fellow for just what he appeared, a big, rough-and-ready woodsman, full of coarse jokes, perhaps, but honest withal, a diamond that had never been chipped.

"Wall, bless my soul if it ain't three boys in camp here! Who'd a suspected sich a thing, away up in this kentry, too. Lots o' pluck to come so fur, fellers; how's the huntin' now, and I hopes as how ye ain't settin' up in business as rivals ter me, ha! ha! In course I seen yer blaze jest a ways back, an' thinks I, what's the use in bunkin' alone ternight, Stackpole, yer old timber-cruiser, when thar's companionable chaps near by who won't object p'raps ter sharin' ther fire with ye? So I tolddled along a little further, an' here I be. Jest say as I'm welcome, an' let me enjoy the hospertality o' the occasion. Thunder! but the blaze is mighty fine tonight, fellers. Guess it won't be far from frost by mornin' the way it is now. Hello! that you, Owen—well, who'd a thought I'd run acrost ye here; ain't set eyes on ye this long spell."

Owen made no reply, but there was a little curl to his upper lip that Cuthbert noticed, and he knew that the young Canadian held no very good opinion of the giant timber-cruiser.

The name Stackpole was not entirely unknown to Cuthbert, since it had been mentioned by several people when speaking of the Far Northwest and those who were to be met with there—and if his recollections were correct he was of the impression that the same Stackpole had been held up as an example of a somewhat lawless character, who made a pretense of cruising about looking for valuable timber in places where the lumbermen, soon to come, could float the logs down a river to a market; but who was suspected of other practices of a less honest character.

At any rate Cuthbert scented trouble of some sort, and was greatly disgusted in that the other had discovered their camp, as he had declared, by accident, for as yet there was no reason to suspect he had any design in joining them.

He hardly knew what to do in the matter, for it would seem to be the height of foolishness to warn Stackpole off, and refuse him the little favor he asked, of spending the night by their fire, to enjoy their company—people who roam the woods have peculiar ideas of hospitality, and it is a serious infraction of the unwritten rules to deny a wanderer the privilege of the camp for a night.

Surely they could stand his unwelcome presence for that short time; and if they maintained their usual custom of standing watch-and-watch alike, there would seem to be little chance of his doing them an evil turn.

Accordingly Cuthbert allowed his face to appear pleasant, as though he might even be delighted to have this wandering timber spy with them for a space, to enliven things a bit.

"Sit down and make yourself quite at home. You're right, it is getting sharp and I wouldn't be at all surprised to see signs of frost, the first of the season, in the morning. We're up here knocking about a little, partly to hunt, but mostly because I've a penchant, that is, a weakness for exploring out-of-the-way places. Stackpole, did you say your name was?—well, mine's Cuthbert Reynolds, this is my friend, Eli Perkins, and, you seem to know Owen, so I won't try to introduce him. Have you had supper—if not there's something in the pot that wouldn't taste bad if warmed up a bit?"

That was the way Cuthbert spoke, for he was naturally genial and generous, ready to divide anything he had with one in distress; only in this case he felt that it was along the line of casting pearls before swine, for that ugly little gleam in the corner of Stackpole's shifty eye warned him against trusting the fellow too far.

"That sounds good, and I'm goin' ter take ye up on the proposition, young feller. I ain't had ary

bite since noon, an' then 'twas a snack only. Coffee—why, I've plumb forgot how she tastes, fact, it's been so long since I had a cup. An' stew, my, that smells prime. Say, it was a mighty lucky streak that made me come along the river here, headin' fur the post. Thought I'd keep right along till I got thar, but 'twas tryin' business, an' I'd jest determined ter bunk down till mornin' when I ketched a glimpse o' this yer fire. Guess my old luck ain't petered out yit."

62

He was evidently something of a talker, and liked to hear the sound of his own voice; but Cuthbert was of the opinion that the presence of Owen had rather upset the big chap, and that some of this patter was intended to hide his confusion, and allow him to figure out his standing there.

The mystery surrounding Owen seemed to be growing deeper all the while, and the more these peculiar things came about the greater the desire on Cuthbert's part to help the Canadian lad by all means in his power.

He awaited his chance to see the other alone, so that he might ask a few pertinent questions concerning Stackpole.

This came in a little while, when, the coffee and stew having been warmed, the giant timber-cruiser was busily employed in disposing of the same.

Owen was down by the river's edge, apparently looking after the two boats, so they would be safe for the night—he never missed an opportunity to handle the wonderful cedar canoe, running his hands over its smooth sides, and admiring its beautiful lines, so that this was not a peculiar occupation for him.

Nevertheless, Cuthbert was rather inclined to believe that Owen wanted him to saunter over that way, in order that he might say something he could not well communicate in the presence of the unwelcome guest.

63

So he got up, busied himself with a few things for a minute or two, and then walked in the direction of the boats, conscious at the same time that Stackpole had his shrewd eyes fastened upon him; and he could imagine the sneer upon the boarded face of the woodsman, betraying how readily he saw through the little game.

"I imagine you know what sort of fellow he is, Owen. Now, I don't just fancy his looks, and even if you weren't here to tell me about him I'd keep an eye on Mr. Stackpole during his stay in camp," was what Cuthbert said in a low tone, as he sat down on the upturned cedar boat alongside his friend.

"Well, that's the whole thing in a nutshell—it's a wise thing to keep watch of that man when he's near anything valuable, for he's got a reputation for being light-fingered, and I know he's been accused of lots of mean things up in this country. Most men are afraid of him, for he can be an ugly customer in a scrap, and under that jolly laugh he has the temper of a devil. And to tell you the truth, he doesn't like me worth a cent. There's a story connected with it which I'll be glad to tell you at the first chance, that is if you care to hear anything concerning my wretched and unhappy past. I think we'd better act as if we didn't suspect anything, only let him see we are here. Perhaps he'll go away in the morning, but I don't believe that he's heading for the post, because there's been bad blood between him and the old factor for a long while; and I guess Mr. Gregory is the only man in all these parts Stackpole really has respect for."

64

All of this Owen muttered into the ear of his comrade, meanwhile keeping his eyes fastened upon the burly figure squatted in the camp beside the genial fire, and noting how often Stackpole's glance wandered suspiciously toward them, as if the fellow wondered what he, Owen, might be telling the young fellow, whom he had already decided, if he did not know it before, to be the ruling spirit of the expedition, and who evidently held the purse, a very important consideration in the mind of a man like the said Stackpole.

"Yes, when you get good and ready to tell me I'd consider it a privilege to know something more of your life here, old chap; and if anything I can do will be of benefit, you understand that you're as welcome to it as the sunlight after a week of rain," pursued Cuthbert; at which the other, overcome with emotion (for he had led a lonely life and never knew what it was to have the counsel of a genuine friend) and unable to express his feelings in words, simply allowed his hand to creep along the keel of the cedar canoe until it met that of the generous-hearted Cuthbert, when his fingers were intertwined with those of his new chum; nor were these latter loth to meet him half-way.

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There was a whole world of words in that eloquent handgrip, for soul spoke to soul; and the communion of interests that had been slowly drawing them together ever since their strange meeting was cemented then and there.

They busied themselves around the boats for a short time, more to make it appear that they had really sought the spot with the intention of fixing things cozily for the night than because there was need of their labor; and during the minutes that elapsed Cuthbert managed to ask numerous questions about Stackpole, for when he learned from Owen that in times past this fellow and the halfbreed Dubois, from whom he had secured the unreliable chart, had been boon companions, a disturbing thought was born in his mind that possibly there might have been more of design than accident in the coming of the timber-cruiser on this night.

The peace and charm that had up to this period marked the stay of himself and honest Eli in the

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wilderness seemed in a fair way to be dissipated; and who could say what sort of storm and stress lay before them—for one thing, he was glad that Owen had crossed his path, nor did he mean that the other should ever go out of his life again—come what would, he was bound to look forward to a future shared in common by both, whether in American wilds or some far-distant country where wonderful things were awaiting discovery.

CHAPTER VII.

OWL AND TIMBER WOLF.

When the two friends returned to the fire Stackpole was taking his ease and smoking furiously, Eli having possibly supplied him with tobacco of a brand far beyond any to which he may have been accustomed in his wanderings.

Evidently, no matter what his suspicions may have been, the gaunt timber nomad was resolved to seem quite at his ease; indeed, his was a nature not easily disturbed by possible trouble—he found the vicinity of the fire comfortable, and did not mean to forsake it in a hurry unless there was urgent reason for decamping.

Eli, in his wild life among the lumberjacks, had met with too many characters just like Stackpole, not to size the fellow up for just what he must be; and while he carried on in a seemingly friendly way, he was watching the other, with the idea of guessing his business in this particular region; for he judged that Stackpole seldom made a move without some suspicious object back of it.

When a lad is thrown upon his own resources at a very early age he soon learns to analyze people and their motives in a manner equal to a Sherlock Holmes, and Eli had always delighted in trying to read the various types to be met with in the wilderness.

Cuthbert was uneasy.

The presence of this hulking rover took away from all the pleasure of the camp, and he was provoked to think they should be compelled to entertain one who was not only a stranger, but possessed of an unsavory reputation.

Still, he had been in the woods enough to be aware that there is an unwritten law governing hospitality around the campfire; and no matter how unpleasant the presence of this timber-cruiser might be to him, he did not wish to appear in the light of a boor.

They were three to one, and having been forewarned they could keep a jealous eye on the said unwelcome guest so long as he remained; but Cuthbert vowed to himself that with the break of day, and the morning meal over, their paths must lie in opposite directions.

Stackpole was no fool, and it did not take him long to discover that each of the three lads kept his gun within reach of his hand all the time; which fact announced as plain as words could have done that they entertained suspicions concerning him, and did not mean to be caught napping in case he tried to make trouble of any sort.

Now, while Stackpole was a fellow equal to two if not three of the boys, with regard to physical abilities, death and the possession of firearms levels all such distinctions, and a bit of lead would sting just as much from one of their guns as if it had come from the weapon of a six-footer; hence, he made up his mind to walk a straight line while among the possessors of all this hardware.

His avaricious eyes wandered frequently toward the splendid Marlin repeater owned by Cuthbert, and the fact was very evident that he envied him the possession of such a dandy gun, compared with which his battered Winchester looked like "six cents," as Eli remarked to himself when he correctly gauged the meaning of those sly glances.

"He'll steal if he can, the skunk," muttered the young logger, shaking his head in his pet peculiar manner, which he always did when angered or puzzled.

And then and there Eli determined that he would not allow himself a wink of sleep that whole night; and that if Stackpole attempted any "funny business" he would round him up with a sharp turn.

They talked of many things while sitting there around the campfire; and the man managed to make himself fairly agreeable; for he certainly was mighty well posted in everything connected with the country Cuthbert, in his enthusiastic simplicity had come so far to explore; and had he been built upon a different plan, Stackpole might have proven a valuable man to tote along—he had penetrated further in the direction of Hudson Bay and the Arctic shores beyond than any other man in the Northwest Territory, and proved this by describing many of the things encountered by a well known explorer with whose work Cuthbert was quite familiar, and whose sole companion Stackpole claimed to have been.

There is something more than mere knowledge to be desired in a companion on a long tramp, and this is reliance in his fidelity, cheerful disposition, and readiness to shoulder at least half of the labor—without these qualities in a campmate much of the pleasure is missing.

Finally the boys began to find themselves yawning, for the day's toil had been severe, with a strong current in the river to buck against, and they had been up since peep of day.

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So they started to make preparations for sleeping.

The giant timber-cruiser watched them get their sleeping-bags ready, that is, Cuthbert and Eli, with more or less curiosity, for evidently he knew little or nothing about such Arctic necessities, even though he had accompanied an explorer for many hundred miles into the great unmapped region beyond Hudson Bay—at least he claimed to have done so.

Perhaps there was also a bit of envy in the looks he bent upon these evidences of comfort, for he could appreciate the value of such contrivances during a Northern winter, especially to a man whose business was apt to take him outdoors, regardless of the weather.

He had an apology for a blanket in his pack, and this he proceeded to spread upon the ground, selecting a spot close to the fire, where he could toast his feet while he slumbered, a favorite attitude with such nomads, as our young friends all knew.

Owen, of course, had his third of the tent, but it had been already arranged between the trio that all through the night one of them should stand guard, not because there appeared to be impending danger from without, but on account of the unwelcome guest they entertained at their fire.

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Not one of them grumbled, being built in a manner to meet such emergencies cheerfully, and wrestle with difficulties in the same spirit as they would accept favors, a splendid combination in woods chums.

No doubt Stackpole noticed that Owen, having made his bed ready, showed no disposition to occupy the same; but if he understood just why, he at least made no comment, in which he displayed his good sense.

He turned in "all standing," simply lying down, rolling himself up in his faded blanket, and with his pack-bag for a pillow, losing himself to the world, so far as the boys could tell; though they noticed that he had pulled his slouch hat so far down over his face that it was utterly impossible to see whether his keen eyes were closed or watching every movement of his entertainers.

Inside the tent our friends found a chance to confer, and thus a plan of campaign for the night was laid down.

Then Cuthbert and Eli crawled into their sleeping-bags, for the night was inclined to be frosty, and there is a world of comfort in these modern contrivances, under such conditions; while Owen walked down to the canoes, and with an arm thrown caressingly across the keel of the precious cedar craft began his long and lonely vigil.

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He thought nothing of such a little hardship, having been accustomed to the vicissitudes of the woods from childhood—to him the various sounds of the wilderness, after nightfall had come, were as familiar as the cackling of hens to a farmer's lad, and what was more to the point he read these signs so well that they one and all possessed a significance far beyond any surface indications.

But these forests of the Silent Land bear little comparison with the depths of a tropical jungle, or the dense growth of an African wilderness where a multitude of animals make the air vibrate with their roaring during the entire period of darkness.

Sometimes in the daytime not a sound can be heard save the moaning of the wind among the tops of the pines, or the gurgle of some meandering stream, all around being absolute silence, deep and profound.

At night it? is not quite so bad, for then the hooting of a vagrant owl, or it may be the distant howl of a prowling timber wolf, that gray skulker of the pine lands, is apt to break the monotony; but even in the midst of summer there is lacking the hum of insects and the bustle of woods life—at best one hears the weird call of the whip-poor-will, called by the Indians, the "wish-a-wish," or if near a marsh the croaking of gigantic bullfrogs.

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Owen apparently had many things to engage his thoughts as he kept watch and ward over the camp of his new-found friends; and judging from his repeated sighs his self-communion was hardly of a cheerful character, for several times the boy gritted his teeth savagely, and clinched his fist as though rebelling against some decree of fate that had temporarily upset his calculations.

Once a name escaped his lips, and it was that of the old factor in charge of the Hudson Bay trading post further up the river; and almost in the same breath he murmured the word "mother," tenderly, as though his thoughts had flown backward to happy scenes so greatly in contrast with his present forlorn conditions.

Nevertheless, Owen did not forget why he was on guard, not for a minute.

He had so placed himself when leaning his back against that adored cedar boat that he could

keep watch over the camp, and particularly that portion of it where Stackpole's elongated frame, rolled up like a mummy in his blanket, was to be seen.

So often did the eyes of the lad fall upon the recumbent timber-cruiser that the other could not have moved without attracting his notice.

Stackpole was apparently sleeping like a log, for ever and anon his stentorian breathing arose into something approaching a snore, that sounded tremulously, like a mysterious note from a harsh Eolian harp set in the wind.

Possibly, upon noting that Owen was to have the first watch the shrewd chap had made up his mind there would be nothing doing thus early in the night, his chances being better later on when the "greenhorn," as he erroneously denominated Cuthbert on account of his fine name and genteel appearance, had charge.

Thus time crept along, midnight came and went, with young Dugdale still holding the fort, as if he intended remaining there until dawn.

Once only did he detect a movement on the part of the suspicious party; and then Stackpole twisted about as though desirous of assuming a new position, and at the same time he raised his head and took a sweeping glance around, just as any woodsman might during the night, a habit born of eternal watchfulness; yet under the circumstances it was more or less suspicious to see how the fellow completed his hasty survey by a quick look in the direction of the boats, as if quite conscious of the fact that Owen was still there on guard.

He immediately dropped back, and presently was heard the same pulsating sound of asthmatic breathing, sometimes ending in a snort—if Stackpole was still awake and pretending sleep he knew how to imitate the real article right well, Owen thought, shaking his head dubiously.

If the Canadian lad thought to usurp the privilege of the others in extending his watch, he counted without his host, for Cuthbert came crawling out of the tent shortly after the time he had set.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CALL OF THE WILD.

First of all the explorer stopped by the fire and tossed several heavy bits of fuel upon the embers, doing this with the air of one who looked upon such an act as second nature.

Perhaps, if Stackpole were watching from under the shade of his hat brim, he might alter his opinion with regard to the novice act, and begin to understand that a fellow need not necessarily be raw to the ways of the woods because he possesses means, and chooses to supply himself with certain comforts that are apt to come in handy—the best of moccasins, a modern quick-firing rifle that carries a small bullet calculated to spread in mushroom shape upon striking the quarry and do the work of a gun of much larger caliber, a sleeping-bag, a compact kerosene stove for the inevitable wet time in camp when the wood will not burn—a veteran is apt to turn up his nose at such innovations, and growl that the simple life suits him as it did his forebears; but, when the rainy spell arrives he is just as willing to cook upon the little stove he derided as the next one; and of a cold night, with the wind howling around like a fiend, give him an opportunity to snuggle down inside that cozy bag which had excited his contempt, and ten to one you will be hardly able to divorce him from it at dawn.

Cuthbert had tried both ways, and, like the sensible chap he was, decided that a man would be a fool to choose the old method with its lack of comfort when able to afford these modern luxuries.

He stalked over to the boats, trailing his gun along, as Owen saw with grim pleasure, for it told him Cuthbert had not changed his mind with regard to the character of their guest, and would undoubtedly keep a close eye on Stackpole while his watch lasted.

The other dropped down beside him, with a few words of greeting.

Owen thought he detected a slight movement of the recumbent form, and believed Stackpole must be awake—he made no effort to sit up and look around, which in itself was somewhat suspicious, for a veteran of his caliber must have so educated his faculties that not a movement, however slight, could take place in a camp where he was sleeping without his knowing it.

The boys sat there and conversed in low tones for quite a long spell; indeed, Cuthbert had to almost drive Owen to the tent, so contented did the Canadian lad seem to be in his company—lonely enough had his life been since the loss of those he held dear, and there was something infinitely precious to him in the cheery radiance of this optimistic Yankee who had crossed his path at a period when he desperately needed a friend.

Cuthbert settled himself down for a good siege when finally he had seen the other crawl into the tent, for he was not to arouse Eli, who slept like a log, until it was after three by his little silver watch.

He had made up his mind that if this pilgrim to whom they had given shelter and food as become generous campers, showed any disposition to pilfer he would treat him in a summary manner, and chase him into the woods, just as any rascal should be made to decamp; and the fact of Stackpole's gigantic figure made not a particle of difference in his calculations.

Whatever the fellow may have planned to attempt during the silent watches of the night, his nerve evidently failed him, for he did not venture to make the least move; possibly the combination of these three determined-looking lads awed him more than he could care to admit, or it might be he had other schemes up his sleeve whereby the same end could be accomplished without taking so much risk—at any rate Cuthbert sat his watch out, and after fixing the fire again, aroused Eli, who in turn sauntered over to the boats, carrying his patron's cherished gun, which he as dearly loved to fondle as a girl might a kitten.

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And if Stackpole saw this, as he evidently must under the shelter of that hat brim, he knew it would be a signal for trouble with a big T if he tried any queer business with these wideawake lads.

Cuthbert was almost positive he heard him give a disgusted grunt as he settled back for another snooze, and they heard nothing farther from him until morning, when he arose, yawning and stretching his huge bulk, as though he had been dead to the world from the moment he lay down.

They treated him decently and gave him an abundance of breakfast, which the big timber-cruiser gulped down with the eagerness of a hungry wolf; for it had been a long day since he tasted such delicious bacon and coffee with flap-jacks to "beat the band," as Eli said, made by Owen, who had proved to be superior as a cook to either of his new friends, the gift being a legacy from his mother, he confessed.

Nevertheless, there was an air of restraint about their associations with the woodsman, which he could not but feel, and therefore he made up his bundle soon after, saying he must be on his way, and while they were engaged in stowing the tent he took his departure, grunting some sort of thanks for the many favors he had received at their hands.

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If what Owen told them of the fellow's nature was actually so, this generosity on the part of the young explorer would not count for a row of pins when occasion arose whereby the temptation came to Stackpole to appropriate some of the expensive outfit his envious eyes had gloated over during his stay with them.

Our friends did not hasten their departure, for they wished to let him have a long lead; for he had left the camp going in a direction that, if persisted in, would land him at Fort Harmony in due time.

Owen had not changed his mind since the preceding night, when he asserted so positively that it was his opinion, judging from what he knew of the relations existing between this rover of the mighty woods and the chief factor of the region, Stackpole would hardly turn up at the post, since there had long been bad blood between these men, and the cruiser was too shrewd to put himself in the power of so strenuous an enemy as the grim old Scotch trading master, who ruled affairs in this stretch of country as though he were king.

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"I think he only started in that direction to blind us; and that after going a mile or less he will break off the trail and head where he was aiming for last night when he saw our fire, and thought there might be something worth picking up here, or else keep watch of our movements," said Owen, as he pulled the cords tight around the bag that held the waterproof tent, while the others were doing the same duty for the smaller bags in which food and extra clothes had been thrust.

Cuthbert chuckled as though greatly tickled.

"Well, if that was his hope, I'm afraid he was bitterly disappointed in his calculations, that's all. We kept him under cover, all right, and perhaps he's mentally kicking himself now over having wasted so many hours peeping out from under that hat brim when he might just as well have been snoozing."

Eli professed to be greatly disappointed, for he remarked dejectedly:

"Thought I might get a chance to try your gun, and I had just made up my mind like which leg I'd pepper if he tried to sneak anything away. Well, p'raps we may run across the critter again, and I'll just keep it in mind that it was the left leg I chose—he's got somewhat of a limp in the right one now, and you see that'd sort of even things up. I don't like to see a lopsided feller nowadays."

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"Yes, I believe you're something of a philanthropist, Eli, always looking out to do somebody good, even if you have to force it into them with a hypodermic syringe or a shotgun. For my part, I don't care if we never set eyes on old Stack again, for I fancy the fellow mighty little. There is something about his eyes that goes against my grain, a shifty look that you see in a wolf. He's welcome to all he stowed away, but I hope he doesn't fancy he has a standing invitation to drop in frequently to supper."

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPER LORE.

While the other two boys were finishing the packing of their stores Owen had wandered up the bed of a creek that joined the river at a point just above the site of their late camp.

He had evidently noted something that aroused his interest, for the others noticed him peering closely at the banks and examining a number of things.

"Now what in the world do you imagine he sees?" asked Eli, who was possessed of a good lively streak of curiosity in his composition, and could not observe these things without commenting on the same.

"I was wondering somewhat along that vein, myself, and had come to the conclusion that Owen's trapping instinct has been aroused by certain signs of the furry game for which every man in this region is always on the alert. Nothing else I can think of would interest him so," returned Cuthbert.

"Well, here he comes back again, and from the smile on his face I imagine he wants us to take a look, too."

"I'd just like to, for I've heard so much about the fur business since striking this wild country that it seems a shame not to be better posted. I know a lynx from a common everyday bobcat, and can tell an otter when I see it; but there are a thousand or two little things connected with the trade of a trapper that are just so much Greek to me. You notice I've been pumping him every chance I got, and perhaps he sees an opening to make a demonstration. We're in no big hurry today, and I'd be only too willing to hold over a bit if I could add to my pump of practical knowledge."

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"Me, too," echoed Eli, who, although a woods dweller all his life, had never made a practice of taking furs; and unless one goes into this business at first hand the result is always disappointing.

One week with an everyday trapper along the lines of his traps will do more toward giving a novice a fair insight into the strange business of outwitting the cunning bearers of fur coats than all the guides ever written.

For once Cuthbert had made a bullseye guess.

When Owen reached them he was holding some little object up for observation.

"Do you know what that is, boys?" he asked.

Both of them took a good look.

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"Looks like a bunny's paw," said Eli, dubiously.

At this Cuthbert laughed.

"Down in my section of Old Virginny the coons like to get rabbit's foot for a charm; it is said to keep the evil spirits away, especially if taken from a graveyard rabbit. Can it be possible there are fellows up in this benighted region of the same mind? But that is not a rabbit's foot, I think, Owen," he said.

"What then?" asked the Canadian.

"I don't know for certain, but if I made a guess I should say mink."

"Good enough for a hap-hazard guess. Mink it is, and the little animal just gnawed it off himself, last night, for you can see it is quite fresh."

"Gnawed it off himself, did you say? What in the world would he be fool enough to do that for?" demanded Cuthbert looking closely to see whether the other gave any signs of joking, but failing to find any.

"Well, for one thing, he could not find anybody to do it for him."

"Oh! and was it so very important that Mr. Mink should drop one of his little footsie-tootsies in that way? Is it the habit up here for these animals to go around on three legs?"

"No; but you see he was silly enough to believe that it was better to go along the balance of his natural life with three feet rather than to give up his nice soft pelt to grace the back of some lady in Montreal or New York or London," returned Owen, gravely, twirling the little reminder around between his fingers, and looking at it as though he believed it could tell a sad story if only it were gifted with the power of speech.

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"Now I see the reason. The mink had been caught in a trap, and after twisting and turning until it had torn its leg fearfully, as is seen right there, in desperation it finished the amputation itself; not that it was afraid of decorating some high born dame's back, but because it was threatened with starvation if it sat there in the trap indefinitely. How's that, brother?" he declared.

"About as near the facts as any one could come, for that is just what happened to our poor little friend here. He'll have to hobble around on three legs for the balance of his natural life; but that's better than knocking under now. And, of course, some trapper, an Indian, probably, is out a valuable skin through his carelessness."

"But how does it come that more of the little beasts, all of them, in fact, don't do the same thing? I should think it would be necessary to guard against it," remarked the Virginian. 88

"That is just it. I said this trapper was out a skin through sheer carelessness, for it is a slovenly way of trapping to let a nice mink like that get away. If you care to step this way with me I'll show you something which perhaps neither of you have ever seen before, and is worth remembering."

They were only too willing, for already what Owen had said was arousing much curiosity within their minds, and they could not bear to let a chance to have this gratified pass by without taking advantage of the same.

He jumped down into the gully through which the little creek ran, coming from the hills far away, and winding in and out through the timber, often being fairly choked with brush, so that an expert would find it difficult to make headway.

Still, down near its mouth it was more open, and they could wander along for quite some distance without great effort.

The banks were sloping in places, and rather inclined to be precipitous in others, but at no place more than half a dozen feet in height.

After going up for some little distance Owen stopped.

"Here is where our little friend lost his foot and there is the trap that helped to take it off," he said, pointing to a rusty Newhouse No. 2 that was lying in full view, chain and all, by the edge of the water. 89

Stooping over Cuthbert saw that the jaws were marked with a stain, and bits of fur, proving the truth of Owen's assertion.

"Sure as you live it did, and there was no surgeon's fee for that amputation, either. Now go on and tell us why this happened, and what is to prevent it being the rule, rather than the exception," he said eagerly.

"First of all, I must explain how mink are located, and something of their habits, or you will not understand. They are nearly always found along the banks of a small stream that empties into a larger, just as in this case.

"The female mink have settled places of abode, while the male are rovers, and roam up and down the creek for a distance of about two miles in either direction. Now, when a trapper has made up his mind that a certain stream is the home of a considerable number of mink he comes out in the early fall, some time before the regular trapping months open, and gets things ready for his season.

"Along the edge of the little bluff near the water line he digs holes about three feet back into the bank and some nine inches across the front, throwing water about the place to kill the scent of his presence, and a little driftwood in and around the hole, so that it will seem natural to the suspicious animal. 90

"These holes are made about a hundred feet apart, and are then left for a couple of weeks, and when you go back to set your traps you will be surprised to discover that almost every hole shows marks of mink having gone in and out, searching for mates.

"When they set the traps it is the regular thing to fasten the end of the chain out just so far in the water, where it is deep enough to drown the mink; once the trap snaps upon the leg of the animal its instinct causes it to spring into the creek, and being weighed down by the trap, it is soon drowned; this saves needless suffering, does not injure the fur, and prevents the mink gnawing off its own foot in the mad desire to escape."

"Say, that's mighty interesting, now," declared Eli, bending down to examine the trap again; "I didn't know there was so much to the pesky business—had an idea all you had to do was to find where the animals held out, stick a trap there, and go out the next day and grab your fur."

Owen laughed heartily at this.

"I'm afraid such a trapper would not get enough mink, otter, fox, or even muskrat skins to buy his tobacco in a season. Why, these little varmints are just chain lightning when it comes to cleverness, and they can sometimes outwit the smartest old trapper who ever drew breath. There are a thousand secrets connected with the business, and no one man carries them all. Many of these have been handed down from some of those old fellows who used to spend their lives trapping for the Hudson Bay and the Northwest Fur Companies at the time these two were great rivals over the whole of the fur country. You'd find it a most interesting subject if you ever chose to dig into it. Of course, I've picked up quite a few of these secrets and can do my share of a season's work, though it never did appeal to me strongly enough to carry it on as a business. If you went along up this stream you'd find a dozen traps or more, some of them perhaps with a mink or, it might be, an otter in their jaws, but always drowned. Now, I'm going to leave this foot 91

just where I found it. This man ought to be more careful. In the eyes of a first class worker it's a sign of poor business to find a foot in a trap. Perhaps he'll take warning and improve his methods. I hope so, for I don't like the idea of a number of these poor little beasts hopping around on three legs for the balance of their lives."

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"I can see that nature never intended you for a trapper, Owen," remarked Cuthbert, sagely; "for you have too much sympathy in your composition. I imagine a man has to harden himself to all such things before he can become a successful fur gatherer; but then it is necessary that there should be some people follow such an occupation, else what would all our lovely girls do for wraps? After all, the taking of furs does not compare in cruelty with the shooting of herons and other birds by the tens of thousands, just to pluck an egret or plume and toss the body away. That is a cruel deed that ought to make every woman blush who ever wears an egret on her hat or bonnet. But what you've been telling us is mighty interesting, do you know? I am determined to learn all I can about this strange business while here on the spot. Nothing like getting things at first hand. Are other animals taken in the same way?"

"To some extent. Whenever it is a water animal they are drowned when caught. Even beaver have to be treated that way."

"But these animals live under the water, don't they? Then how can they be so easily drowned?" asked Cuthbert; but immediately adding: "Of course, I know they have to come to the surface at stated intervals to breathe. I suppose the trap holds them down beyond their allotted time, and then they suffer, just as a fellow might after a minute had passed. Now, foxes are caught on the land—are they ever know to gnaw their foot off to get free?"

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"Oh, yes. Trappers look more closely to their fox traps, you see, for they are always hoping to catch a silver, and that means a fortune," said Owen.

"I suppose by that you mean a silver or black fox. I have heard they were worth a big sum of money, and quite rare. What do the pelts bring as a usual thing?" asked Cuthbert.

"I believe as high as two thousand dollars for one fur, but that must have been a mighty fine one. I knew one man who received eight hundred, and I suppose the fur trader who bought it from him sold it again for a thousand anyway. Some men have been lucky enough to take several silvers during the whole of their trapping lives, while others have waited for forty years and never caught a single one. But every fur gatherer lives in hopes, even the Crees and Ojibwas indulging in these anticipations that may never be realized. It is the highest priced skin to be found ashore. A sea-otter may bring more, but I doubt it."

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"You've seen the pelts then?" asked Eli, whose eyes were sticking out at this intelligence, for it seemed to him just then that a brisk trade in silver foxes was even more to be desired than a copper mine.

"Oh, yes, often, at a post where they were brought in. Some are only seconds or thirds and worth far less than a first class article. I remember one case that was pretty rough. A trapper had a beautiful skin, that would have brought him a little fortune; but when the factor came to examine it he found it almost worthless on account of being torn by a charge of shot at close quarters."

"That was a shame," declared Cuthbert, who was eagerly listening to all these remarks on the subject of trapping; "but if silver fox pelts are so very valuable I should think some enterprising fellow with an eye to business would start a farm and raise them for the market."

"Just what I was going to say. There would be big money in the deal if a fellow had the right ground, and bought a pair to begin with," exclaimed Eli.

"It's easy enough to get the ground. Others have succeeded to some extent with red foxes, though at first they lost every one, for the cunning rascals burrowed under the fence; but a way was found to prevent that by digging down a yard, filling it with stones, and running a heavy wire mesh back several feet. Of course the foxes kept on burrowing along the fence, but seemed to lack sense enough to start in five feet back so as to avoid the obstruction. Their cunning has a limit, and beyond that they're as stupid as any animal."

95

"But how about the silvers—what is the obstacle that stands in the way of making such a fox farm a success? Perhaps they refuse to breed in captivity—I've heard of animals acting that way, even skunks at times," said the Virginian.

"No trouble in that line particularly, I believe. The great obstacle to success lies in the fact that the silver fox is not a distinct type at all, but a freak," smiled Owen.

"A freak—that is, it can't be depended upon to reproduce its like?"

"Never does, in fact. From a pair of silvers you will get red foxes, that's all. It's been proven again and again, and yet I've heard of several parties with more money than brains starting a silver fox farm. Don't you ever allow yourself to be tempted to put cold cash into such a game, either of you," continued the young Canadian, tossing the severed foot of Mr. Mink down by the cruel trap that had been instrumental in relieving the poor animal of his useful extremity.

96

The trapper would find it there, and understand just what had happened, doubtless profiting by his blunder and setting the trap right next time.

All might have been avoided had he staked the end of the chain far enough out in the water, so

that the animal when caught would have been drowned by the weight of the steel trap.

Cuthbert seemed loth to give over questioning the boy who knew about the various ways of circumventing these cunning little varmints of the wilds; he found himself deeply interested in the matter and could not hear enough on the subject.

To his mind there must ever be a halo of romance connected with the lives of those old-time French-Canadian voyageurs who, in early days, used to paddle all the way from Montreal to Fort William on the northern shore of the "big water," Superior, to collect the great and valuable bundles of pelts brought in to the post in the Spring by the many trappers connected with the company, some of them white, but mostly full-blood Indians or halfbreeds speaking French.

97

He had read considerable of their doings before making this trip into the region of the mighty Saskatchewan, being desirous of posting himself on the subject; but interesting as it may have seemed then, when seated in his luxurious apartment in a New York hotel, it was doubly so now that he was on the ground.

Why, these very woods must have witnessed many a scene such as those described, and he could easily picture the flotilla of batteaux moving up or down the river, propelled by the muscular arms of the husky voyageurs, while upon the still air rang out their famous Canadian boat songs.

It thrilled him to even think of it, and the surroundings assumed a new aspect in his eyes; perhaps those days were gone, never to return, and the trappers of today might prove to be merely ordinary Indians, or such rascally fellows as Stackpole and Dubois; but Cuthbert did hope that once at the post he might be able to hear some of the songs that have come down from the old days, filled with the romance of the pines, the birches, the larches, and the hemlocks that hung over those early pioneer camps in the wilderness.

"I'd like to ask you one thing," said Eli, as they slowly walked back in the direction of the camp.

98

"All right. A dozen if you like, and I'll be only too glad to answer them if I can. There are some things that even a fellow who has spent years up here, and kept his eyes and ears open all that time, couldn't answer. Go on, Eli," said Owen promptly.

"I've taken a few animals myself over in the Peninsula, but not having had any advice I guess I bungled the job somewhat. Anyhow, they said down in St. Louis, where I sent my bunch, that they were misfits, and I suppose it must have been so, if a fellow was to judge from the size of the check they sent on. Since then I've been told that all animals can't be skinned alive. Is that so? I just sliced 'em down, and peeled off the jackets in the best way I could. Of course I knew enough to have thin boards to fasten the pelts to when drying, and they seemed to be all hunk when I shipped 'em; but somewhere I biffed it. Now, what d'ye s'pose was wrong with my work?"

Owen smiled as if he knew instinctively.

"When they said the furs were misfits they meant that you had not taken them off the right way. Some skins have to be cased, that is removed entire, or turned inside out, and not cut down the belly first, which injures their sale. All skunk, marten, mink, fox, 'possum, otter, weasel, civet, lynx, fisher and muskrat have to be treated this way. Other animals should be cut open, such as the beaver, wolf, coyote, 'coon, badger, bear and wild cat. They cut off the tails only of such chaps as have a rat-like appearance—'possum and muskrat. In all other cases the tail is a part of the fur, and a valuable one, too, as I have found out to my cost. The bone is of course taken out, which can be done with only a small split."

99

"All this is mighty interesting to me," remarked Cuthbert.

"You can just bet it is. What else, Owen? Is there any difference about the way skins are fastened to the drying boards? I might have blundered there too, and that would help make a misfit, eh?" ventured Eli, grinning.

"Well, it would, without a doubt. It is just as well for any young trapper to get thoroughly posted on these subjects before he tries to take any fur, or all his work during the winter may go for nothing. I've seen packs of pelts ruined by just that thing—they were cased the wrong side out and could not be remedied. Some have to be cased with the fur side out, and others with the pelt exposed to the air. Those that are better with the fur out are fox, weasel, lynx, fisher, otter, marten and wolf. The others must have the pelt outward so that the air can get to it in plenty. And then again some trappers spoil their catch in part by drying near a fire or in the sun. The best way is to hang them in the open air in the shade, and let them have plenty of time, making sure to clean them thoroughly of all fat and bits of meat."

100

"There's one thing that strikes me about this business, and the more I hear about it the firmer grows my conviction that after all the taking of furs and curing the same is an art. Who'd think there was so much that is interesting in the capture of wild animals, and preparing their skins for the market. Then again I suppose these big houses that buy in bulk have ways of handling the furs that increases their value a great deal. The fur we see on the shoulders of our fine ladies has mighty little resemblance to the pelt the poor trapper brings in to the post, and trades for tobacco, powder and shot, tea, sugar, coffee and such indispensables, not to mention whiskey," suggested Cuthbert, wisely.

At this Owen shrugged his shoulders.

"There you have me. I have a limit to my knowledge, and it stops with the capture and drying of the pelts. What takes place after they get in the hands of the dealer I know nothing about, only that they have mighty cute ways of dyeing many of the cheaper grades, and calling them something else. A skunk would not sell for as much under its own name as some high sounding one; for you know there is always an unpleasant association connected with the skunk."

101

"You just bet there is," avowed Eli, heartily, as with the conviction of one who knows whereof he speaks; "it associated with me for a whole week once, up in a lumber camp, and by ginger, it was the only thing that would associate with me till my new clothes came along and I could bury the old ones. After that my curiosity about the cunning little striped beast that used to slink across the tote road was satisfied, and whenever I saw one I'd give a whoop that could be heard a mile away and run for my life! They got to know that yell, and whenever any of the boys heard it they'd laugh and say: 'There's that fool Eli huntin' polecats again.' But I wasn't, not by a jugful; I was giving him a wide berth, and taking off my hat to him in the bargain. Oh! ever since that day I've had the greatest respect you ever heard tell of for the ornery little critters."

By this time they had arrived at the mouth of the little creek, and climbed out upon the upper level.

102

"I'd think the fur bearing animals would be pretty well cleaned out along here, so close to the post," remarked Cuthbert, still harping on the subject.

"They are as a rule; but when a place is let alone a few years they increase again; and I guess that's what has happened here. In the last fifty years this creek may have been cleaned out a dozen or two times, and then let alone for a spell to grow up again. This year it's being gone over again, and from certain signs I noticed, the trapper is reaping quite a little harvest. He was an Indian, too," said the other.

"I suppose you can tell from signs whether a white man or an Indian is working along a stream; no doubt they have different ways of doing things. I thought the only way to know was to look at the moccasin tracks, as an Indian toes in, while a white man walks with his toes out," pursued Cuthbert.

Owen laughed as though pleased.

"That's an old and exploded theory. Why should a white man brought up in the wilds toe outward, as though he wore shoes? With moccasins on his feet, and used to them from a baby, he walks just like a red. But there are many ways of telling whether it is a white or Indian at work. Only long practice will do this. I could not explain it, but if the chance comes I'll promise to show you what I mean."

103

And with this they rested content, having learned considerable about the art of fur gathering and curing in this little talk.

CHAPTER X.

104

MAGIC IN THE BERRIES.

The sun was just peeping above the horizon, but the air still remained chilly after the long night; to husky boys this amounted to little, and as soon as the camp was abandoned they would soon warm themselves up with paddle exercise, for it was no childish work battling against that swift current.

"Anyhow, it was a mighty comfortable camp," remarked Cuthbert, as they moved away, and his eyes rested fondly upon the scene of their last night's experience; so it ever is with those who live the life in the open, for the unconscious things appeal to their affections, and a staunch boat, a favorite paddle, a gun, knife, belt hatchet, or even the spot where they found comfort and built their shrine at which they temporarily worshiped, the campfire, arouses emotions in their hearts that cannot be fully appreciated by those not of the mystic guild.

Owen led the way in his bullboat.

He was more than usually silent after his talk over the trap and the poor little mink's foot up the creek, and Cuthbert wondered what it might be that affected him—could the coming of Stackpole have had anything to do with it—the idea was not impossible, for he had evidently known the gaunt timber-cruiser before, and if the story of the boy's sad past were known the gigantic woodsman might occupy a place in it.

105

Still, upon reflection, Cuthbert was of the opinion that there must be another reason for his thoughtfulness this morning.

He remembered what hints Owen had let fall concerning the old factor connected with the Hudson Bay post, and that there had been trouble between them; many things gave Cuthbert the

opinion that the other had been fleeing from the region at that time they made his acquaintance so strangely, not in terror, but rather in anger, and he felt sure strange happenings had been taking place at the post on the day preceding the storm.

If so, then it was the fact that he must evidently soon face the stern factor again that disquieted Owen so; the way in which he tried hard to throw off his morose mood, and answer the sallies of his comrades in a spirit of frolic proved that he was fighting against his nature, and had laid out a course which he was determined to tread, no matter what pain or distress it brought in its train.

At any rate, it would soon appear what ailed the lad, and Cuthbert, greatly as he wished to know Owen's story, had too much delicacy to influence him in the telling; he had promised to open his heart to this new and sympathetic chum, and all would come when the spirit moved. 106

About an hour after leaving camp they suddenly came upon two bullboats that were descending the river swiftly, in each of which a trio of Cree Indians sat or knelt, wielding the paddles after the deft manner of those with whom the art has become second nature.

Cuthbert did not anticipate any trouble from these fellows, who were evidently in the employ of the fur company; but he was keen to notice how they took the presence of the young Canadian in the company of strangers, realizing that they must in all probability know him, and be acquainted with whatever of trouble had hovered around him of late.

Just as he expected, they seemed surprised at sight of Owen, and hasty words were passed among them; but they made no motion to interfere with the forward progress of the two boats, and answered the civil salutation of Cuthbert with a series of "how-hows" until the current had swept them past; but it might have been noticed that not once did their shrewd black eyes leave the figure of the young Canadian squatted in his old boat, and sweeping his spruce blade back and forth methodically, as he urged his craft against the stream. 107

"They know him all right, and are more than surprised to see him with a party of strangers, heading upstream. Now, I wonder if they were sent out to look for a fellow of his description? Gee, but this is a conundrum, all right," whispered Cuthbert to his fellow paddler, at which Eli grunted and nodded assent.

The young Canuck guide in the lead did not so much as turn his head after the boats containing the Indians had passed, but continued to dip his paddle in and out with the methodical rhythm so characteristic of the voyager who has spent his life amid these scenes.

No so Cuthbert, whose curiosity had been excited in connection with the untutored sons of the wilderness—ever and anon he twisted his head around so that he could secure a survey of the river below; and on such occasions Eli kept his eager eyes on the face of his comrade, knowing full well that should there be anything happening he would discover it reflected there.

About the fifth time Cuthbert turned thus he gave vent to a little exclamation, whether of satisfaction or annoyance it would have been difficult to say, and immediately whispered to Eli: 108

"They're coming all right, just as I expected, old fellow. That proves my idea correct, and that they had been sent out from the post, to find what had become of the youngster. He knows they are coming after us just as well as I do, but he's too proud to give them a single look. I like his grit, and between you and me, he's going to show us something before long. I'm in a fever to set eyes on that same old Tartar, Alex Gregory. Already I seem to dislike him immensely, and possibly I'll end by hating him good and hard. He's more than a little to blame for Owen's troubles, whatever they may be. Say nothing, Eli, but keep your eyes open."

"What if the copper-skinned critters attack us—I've got my gun handy, and I give you my word there'll be the very old dickens to pay if they start rough-housing it with us," answered the young logger; and it was not in a boastful spirit that he spoke, for Eli usually showed a modest disposition; only he, too, had taken a great fancy to the new chum who had been sent to them by such a freak of fortune, and Cuthbert's intimation that the other must be the victim of oppression rather riled him.

"Oh, I have no idea they will try any funny business; they know we are armed, and besides they have their orders from the head boss. You'll find that they only mean to tag after us, keeping on our heels until sure we mean to go to the post. These chaps possibly saw that smoke signal the other Cree we met downstream sent up, and they knew Owen was somewhere around. You noticed that they just stared at him all the time, and paid little attention to us. Well, let it go at that; we'll be apt to know a heap more than we do now when another day comes along. One thing I'll wager a lot on, and that is he's worth sticking to through thick and thin, eh, Eli?" ventured the explorer, earnestly. 109

"You bet!" was the laconic but expressive answer he received, and Cuthbert, who knew the logger so well, understood all that was implied.

Eli also glanced back just before they turned a bend, and as there was quite a little stretch of clear water back of them ere the stream twisted its way around a big bunch of birch trees that stood like sentinels on a projecting knoll, he was able to see the two bullboats come around the curve, and follow grimly in their wake, the occupants evidently making no effort at speed, for had they chosen they could have given our youngsters a warm proposition in the way of a race, their muscles being inured to the monotonous labor of the paddle. 110

Cuthbert began asking questions of Owen, who allowed the other boat to gain a position alongside, so that conversation might be the more easily carried on. Thus he learned that, proceeding leisurely they would readily make the Hudson Bay post ere nightfall; had there been any reason for haste this time might have been shortened by several hours; but it suited all of them to arrive around the sunset hour.

Having an abundance of time they went ashore at high noon, built a fire and had quite a healthy little lunch, washing it down with a pot of coffee, the delightful aroma of which must have reached the nostrils of the Cree paddlers who had drawn their boats ashore just below, for the wind lay in that quarter.

Cuthbert expected to hear from those who were playing this comical game of tag, and, indeed, he had purposely caused the coffee to boil madly in order that the appetizing scent might be wafted with the breeze; consequently when Eli declared one of the Indians was advancing toward the fire, the explorer grinned as though he might be patting himself on the back over having accomplished a rather pretty piece of strategy.

111

The fellow came directly up to where they sat finishing their meal.

Cuthbert did not altogether like his looks, but then he realized that he was hardly capable of judging a good Indian from a bad one, since he had only a limited experience with the natives—what appeared to be a scowling phiz to him might seem only the natural expression to be found upon the dusky faces of these Saskatchewan dwellers of the woods, when viewed by Owen.

As he drew near the Indian made certain mysterious motions with his hands, which Cuthbert understood must be the peace signs, and he began to imitate the other, not wishing to be outdone in politeness.

"How," said the copper-colored intruder, with a rising inflection.

"How," repeated Cuthbert, in just the same tone of voice.

"You camp boss?" pursued Mr. Lo, keenly eyeing the young fellow, as though he might be dubious concerning this fact.

"Well, perhaps you might call me that, seeing this is my outfit; but just say that I'm an Easy Boss, and let it go at that. Now, what can I do for you?" remarked the explorer, who was as yet unknown to fame, but who had aspirations.

112

"Huh, you got um coffee—we smell um good—can stand no more—s'pose you give Injun drink, him be glad, much so—no have coffee many moons—set um up in other alley—how?" was what followed, much to the amusement of both Cuthbert and Eli, for evidently the fellow had seen a bowling alley in Winnipeg, or some other city.

"Well, I like your nerve, my copper-colored friend, which I see you carry with you all the time; but after all I don't know that I can blame you asking, for the smell of good coffee is enough to set any chap wild. What is your name, may I humbly inquire?" ventured Cuthbert, keeping a very straight face, though he could hear Eli chuckling, and wanted to laugh outright himself; for it was evident that while music is said to have "power to soothe the savage beast," the aroma of the subtle coffee bean in the process of cooking seemed capable of subjugating the savage man himself, and bringing him to "eat humble pie," as Eli put it.

"Name all same Springing Elk—son of Chief Wolf-killer, him same head of Crees on big river Saskatch. You say we have coffee—ugh, much good, and we not forget," and not waiting to receive additional assurance he raised his hand to his mouth and gave vent to a series of sharp barks or yelps that must have been an eagerly awaited signal conveying good news to his mates, for immediately the whole bunch started for the campfire of the three boys.

113

Cuthbert, in an aside, asked Owen if they need fear any danger from the Crees; but the young Canuck shook his head in the negative, answering back:

"Not at all. The only failing they have is a weakness for appropriating anything that strikes their fancy, when they think no one is looking, and I think we can avoid that by being on guard all the time until we embark again. They are crazy about coffee, and would go to great trouble to get a drink of the stuff."

Nevertheless, Eli, though hearing what was said, did not feel disposed to take any great stock in the pacific intentions of the heathen; he had read stories of their treacherous nature, and heard men speaking so derisively about the "only good Indian being a dead Indian," that he felt it his bounden duty to maintain a watchful eye upon the sextette while they were present, all the while keeping his gun in his clasp, ready to meet any emergency that might arise.

But then Eli had led a hard life, and there was considerable excuse for his suspicious nature—we are often creatures of circumstances and environment, and his school had been the rough logging camps, where the worst that is in men usually crops out.

114

Cuthbert busied himself in making a new pot of coffee, an operation which the group of bucks watched with glistening eyes; and when a little later the steam began to pour out from the nozzle of the pot, and the aroma struck their olfactory nerves, really several of them could not stand it, but had to walk away, those more masterful standing on one foot and snuffing the air, while their expressions in anticipation would have done credit to so many children.

They each had two big tin cups of the decoction, steaming hot, and undefiled by either sugar or condensed milk, showing that they possessed the proper taste for the beverage of the gods, according to the ideas of those who grow the royal berry, and know how it should be drunk.

Cuthbert had accommodated the untutored sons of the forest partly because he had a warm heart, and again with the half-formed idea that possibly his little party might benefit from the act in the future—frequently the old saying of "bread cast upon the waters returning after some days" comes true.

115

Still, there was a limit to his indulgence; and he certainly did not intend to allow this thirsty crowd of skin-hunters to become regulation camp-followers; his supply of coffee would not long stand the strain, even if his patience did.

So as soon as the last cups were drained of every drop of the delicious fluid the boys captured the same, deposited them in the receptacle where they belonged, thrust this into the cedar canoe, and then Cuthbert, as master of ceremonies, cried out:

"Yo-ho, all aboard!"

In another minute the canoes of the expedition began to cleave the waters, headed upstream.

The Indians also tumbled into their boats, nor were they longer satisfied to hang back one or more hundred yards as formerly—that elixir had quite captured their hearts, and they scrambled to keep in close proximity to the magical "floating coffin," as they denominated the cedar canoe, as if they could scent future feasts along the line of that which they had just enjoyed.

Cuthbert laughed over the situation more than a few times, and declared that he need fear no evil from the copper-faced denizens of the timber country so long as a shot remained in their locker—a grain of Java in their caddy.

116

But the Indians after a while struck a faster gait and vanished around a bend above, nor did they see them again for several days, when they arrived at the trading post.

They paddled leisurely, with Owen leading the way as before, for being familiar with the region he would know how to time matters so that they should reach the vicinity of the post.

As the afternoon waned Cuthbert could see that the other was struggling with some strong emotion, and he understood that it must be connected with the return trip he was making to the post, which he had evidently abandoned for good at the time of his hasty run down the river.

He fancied that Owen might take occasion to give them some inkling as to how matters stood with him here, for he had promised to reveal the secret of his lonely life at the first favorable opportunity; but somehow he did not appear to be in the humor just then, being wrapped up in his own gloomy reflections.

'Well, it could not long be delayed now, and Cuthbert, being built along the lines of a patient and philosophical lad, felt that he could wait.

CHAPTER XI.

A BREAK IN THE CHAIN.

117

About the middle of the afternoon Cuthbert's eye caught a situation on the shore that seemed to appeal particularly to him as a place where he would like to spend a night in camp.

He was subject to these little freaks, and hated to pass an ideal camping spot after a certain hour of the day; indeed, Eli could recall many experiences along this order.

Nor was the Virginia lad loth to explain the reason wherefore.

It seemed that in cruising down some river in the States on a certain winter, with a single companion, he was playing Scullion to the Cook of his more experienced comrade; and consequently what the other said generally went.

The Cook was of a most ambitious disposition, and desirous of making just as much time each day as though their lives depended on reaching a certain city in the Southland by a settled date—and yet they had the whole winter before them, with time to kill.

Many a time and oft, as Cuthbert reminiscently remarked, they had come upon a delightful looking spot for a camp an hour or less before dark, and he found the inclination strong within him to go ashore, rest up, get the tent pitched, and be ready for a night's campaign before the curtains were drawn shut.

118

But that sort of thing did not fit in with what the boss of the expedition considered proper; and consequently they must utilize the hour of daylight that remained in pushing forward.

As a result, when darkness actually compelled their going ashore they frequently had to put up with mean accommodations and suffer for hours.

The lessons that are brought home to us by bitter experience are the ones that remain the longest; and Cuthbert had never forgotten the bitterness of spirit that haunted him on that cruise.

He had learned his lesson thoroughly, and two things stood out above all others as the right and proper course for an intelligent cruiser to do—never pass a fine site for a camp when the afternoon sun was more than half way down its course; and upon starting out in the morning always manage to get a good breakfast, as there could be no telling when another meal would come along.

119

Eli was willing to go ashore, as usual, and Owen made no comment.

So the boats were drawn up on the shingle, and the little party disembarked.

Cuthbert had made no mistake about the location, for it was a charming spot, and the view out on the river absolutely unique; since with little effort one could see both up and down for a long distance.

And others had in times gone by utilized this same ground as a stopping place; for there was to be seen a fireplace made of stone in just the proper spot, where the prevailing wind would fan the blaze as the meal cooked.

In camping there are scores of little wrinkles which come perfectly natural to the experienced hand, but are totally unknown to the novice; the only way to learn is to ask questions just as boldly as though claiming Missouri for one's native State.

Cuthbert had one particularly favorite dish, which every now and then he insisted upon foisting upon his comrades; and from the way Eli's eyes glistened whenever he saw the Virginia canoeist starting to make preparations looking toward this compound it might be surmised that the infliction was not unbearable and could be endured about every day in the week.

120

He called it the Homeric kabab, and claimed that it had been handed down from the days of the old Grecian writer and philosopher; which, if true, proved that Homer knew a delicious thing when he tasted it.

It surely was a thing to conjure with.

Having made ready a glowing bed of coals, he set up two notched sticks at either end, and across this hung a strong withe of willow or some other wood, strung with inch pieces of meat, whether lamb, beef, venison or rabbit it mattered not, since the state of the larder must decide that matter; but it was of the utmost importance that alternating with each bit of meat there should come a strip of eggplant or onion, or both, if so fortunate as to have them.

This withe was to be kept turning, spit-fashion, until its weight of provender was deliciously browned and sending forth an aroma that would make the mouth of a wood nymph water. After that all that was needed was to give thanks and partake.

When Owen has his first taste of this favorite canoeist's dish his eyes told of the keenest enjoyment.

Plain fare had been his portion most of his life, and it was a question of quantity more than quality with his folks; appetite made up for a lack of delicacies, and doubtless with that as a background even common corn pone may assume the properties of a Delmonico planked steak.

121

Eli had seemed to be as hungry as usual when they landed; but having finished his task of erecting the tent he had picked up Cuthbert's splendid repeating Marlin and said something about taking a little stroll, with a hope that perchance he might sight game worthy of a shot.

Cuthbert had made no remark, for he knew that it was a weakness on the part of his comrade to get off now and then with that gun, just for the sake of handling it, and feeling for a short period that he owned the whole world.

It afforded the Virginia lad great pleasure to know that he had it in his power to bring joy to honest Eli's heart; and while he valued the gun, even its loss would not have caused a single cloud to cross his brow.

He was gifted with a splendid nature, and never so happy as when conferring pleasure upon some one else.

By the time supper was all ready Cuthbert remembered that the boy from Michigan had not yet turned up.

122

"Do you remember having heard a shot some time back?" he asked Owen.

"Yes, but it was pretty far away, further than Eli could have gone, I think; though now that you speak of it the report did come from up the wind, and that was the direction he took on starting out. Are you anxious about him?" replied the other, turning around from the job that had been occupying his attention, and which was connected with placing hemlock browse under the blanket he meant to use when the time to lie down arrived, as well as alongside the sleeping bags

of his two companions.

"Why, no, I don't think there's any reason for that. Eli had been accustomed to roaming the woods all his life, for he was brought up in the lumber camps; and it would be funny if he went and lost himself up here, where the forest is so open. I was just thinking how fond he is of my pet dish, and what a disappointment it would be to him if you and I developed such ferocious appetites as to lick the platter clean before he showed up. But I reckon there's plenty all around, and we'll try and keep his share warm. Pull up here on this log, Owen, and try that platter. The coffee is ready too, ditto the hard-tack."

123

And with keen appetites the two certainly did ample justice to the meal.

By hard-tack Cuthbert really meant the regular ship biscuit used on all sailing vessels along the seashore and the lakes—there are two brands; one a bit more tasty than the other, and this is supposed to be for the officers' mess; but in a pinch both fill the bill admirably, as myriads of canoeists are willing to testify with upraised hand.

When supper had been finished, and both lads were ready to cry out enough, it was dark.

And still no Eli.

Even then Cuthbert did not worry, for he had the utmost confidence in the woodsman qualities of his stocky chum, and could not believe that anything serious had happened to him.

Perhaps he had wandered far afield, and chancing upon a deer a mile or more from camp had secured his venison; under such conditions it would require some time to cut the animal up, and then "tote" what he wanted of the meat over the intervening territory.

Nevertheless, he looked around at every sound as if hoping to see Eli stalking into camp, with a proud look on his homely phiz, and a burden of fresh meat upon his shoulder.

124

Now it was a playful and venturesome 'coon that prowled around in the vicinity of the camp, hoping to pick up some titbits from the supper of the strange bipeds who periodically occupied this favorite site; then again it might be a mink come up from the river to investigate what all this illumination meant; but as the minutes passed Eli remained only conspicuous by his absence.

Owen had occupied himself in rubbing up several steel traps which the boys had brought along, thinking they might prove useful in some way; but which, having been neglected, were inclined to be very rusty.

This was a familiar thing in the hands of the Canadian lad, for many a time in the days long gone by he 'tended a line of traps in the country where fur grows longest and best, and mink, otter, muskrat, fisher, marten, skunk and even raccoon and opossum skins bring a good price.

Cuthbert never lost an opportunity to acquire information, when he could obtain it at first hand, and hence as they sat beside the fire, watching the rosy flames dance and play at tag, he put many more questions to the backwoods boy concerning the secrets of the profession, and learned various new things that up to this time he had never dreamed existed.

125

So it is that in knocking about one may discover how limited a vocabulary has been their portion; and observation with a traveler means a widening of the horizon that broadens the mind.

Owen was free to explain the numerous methods of capturing the wary wild animals of his native land; and it gave him the keenest pleasure to satisfy this desire for knowledge on the part of the new chum who had been so good to him.

He told of the astonishing care that was needed in order to circumvent the wise and sharp-scented mink; how the traps were so arranged, as Cuthbert had seen, that the animal upon being caught would jump into the water, where the weight of the trap would drown the captive; otherwise the little fellow in desperation might gnaw his foot off and escape, to be a cripple the rest of his days, like the one whose foot they had handled that morning; what bait was used to attract him to the vicinity of the trap, for an artificial scent has been found marvellously effective in arousing the mating instinct of the animal and causing him to venture in places which otherwise he might avoid—all these and many other things did Owen talk about as he handled the rusty traps; and Cuthbert sat there entranced, drinking in the mysterious knowledge that trappers have learned through succeeding generations, and handed down to their successors.

126

So the time passed, and yet there was no sign of Eli.

Cuthbert finally sat up straight, and a look of growing concern could be seen upon his fine manly face as he said:

"There's no use talking, my boy, I'm really afraid something has happened to Eli Perkins. He couldn't get lost if he tried, and the fact that he's not here makes me think he's tumbled into trouble with a big T. Now, the question is what can we do about it?"

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE TRACK OF ELI.

Owen tossed the trap aside.

Evidently he had been expecting some such remark from the other and was not at all surprised at being called on for assistance.

"I think that if anything has happened to Eli we can lay it to that ungrateful dog, Stackpole," he remarked, frowning a trifle, as if his memories of the timber-cruiser were not of the most pleasant character imaginable.

"You don't like that fellow one little bit, I can see; and do you know the thought struck me when I saw him curl his lip on seeing you with us that at some time in the past you two must have been at loggerheads," observed Cuthbert.

"Which is true, every word of it. If you had looked closer you might have noticed a little notch in the fellow's left ear. I was the cause of that, and it happened some years ago, when I was much smaller than I am now, and less able to take care of myself. But I was born in the woods, and brought up with a rifle in my hands, so that I learned early in life to shoot straight."

"Yes," interrupted Cuthbert, "I saw that you were a dead shot when you tried my pet Marlin and brought down that hawk on the wing. I thought I had some little ability in that line myself, but when I saw you trim that buccaneer of the air so easily as if you were not half trying, I gave up thinking myself in it. But please go on, Owen." 128

"Where we lived was a lonely section. My father had offended some one high in authority marrying my mother, and he felt this influence more or less all his life; but I did not mean to speak about that just now, only to explain how it was we chanced to be so far removed from other people.

"Once in a while some wandering timber-cruiser like Stackpole would drop in on us, and you can understand that as a general thing they were mighty welcome, for they brought us news of the outer world.

"But if there was one man I detested, it was Stackpole, and he had often riled me as a kid, by his leering ways, and his sneaking method of hanging around when my father was out looking after his traps.

"I don't know what put it into my head, but somehow I seemed to finally believe the fellow had been actually sent up into the wilderness by some one high in authority at the post just to annoy my father and bring him to his knees, which nothing had been able to do in the past." 129

"So I came to follow Stackpole when he did not dream I was around, and pretty soon I found that he was trying to steal my father's stock of furs during his absence, having arranged it with a halfbreed Cree to pull his chestnuts out of the fire, and avoid responsibility.

"I had been afraid that his evil eye had been turned upon my pretty mother, so that, after all, it was something of a relief to find that he only wanted to take the bundle of valuable furs that would mean a living for us during the next summer; but I've never believed anything else than that he was sent there by old Alexander Gregory to reduce us to a state where my parents would have to knuckle down, swallow their Scotch pride, and accept favors at his hands, something father had sworn he would die before doing.

"Well, I caught the rascal in the act of carrying the furs off, though he always swore that I wronged him, and that he had in reality rescued them from a thief of a Cree who had snatched the lot; but I notched his ear with a shot, and put another in his right leg—you remember Eli noticed that he had a decided limp on that side." 130

"They had to nurse the old villain all through his spell, and he never forgave me for the double dose I gave him, though pretending it was all right, and that, thinking as I did, I had done the proper thing. Stackpole kept shy of our place after that, but I knew he would never forgive me, and if the time ever arrived when he could get even he would take the chance gladly. That was why I kept an eye on him all the time he was with us, and warned you to look out, for the fellow is really a thief, and has a bad reputation all over the region of the Saskatchewan."

"And you really think he may be the cause of Eli staying away? After we treated him so well, too. The skunk has no gratitude in his make-up, then, that's all I can say. Catch me giving him another cup of our lovely Java; it's like casting pearls before swine," declared the other, disgusted.

"Of course," continued Owen, "there is always a chance that Eli may have gotten twisted in his bearings. Any fellow might do that under stress of excitement, no matter what his knowledge of woodcraft may be. I've been there myself, and as all my life was spent in the timber I ought to be free from such a trouble if any one might. So, perhaps it would be wise, before we try to sally out and look for signs of our comrade, to shoot off a gun a few times, and see whether he makes any" 131

reply. What do you say?

"Just what I was about to propose myself. Three shots is the usual signal, but with Eli's shotgun we can only knock out two. Nevertheless, here she goes."

So saying he blazed away with both barrels, allowing a margin of a few seconds to occur between the shots.

Then both lads bent their ears and listened carefully.

The night breeze was sighing among the pines and hemlocks, but it carried no answering sound to their waiting ears.

When several minutes had gone by Cuthbert thrust a couple more shells into the barrels of the gun and once more let go.

Again silence alone repaid their anxious attention.

If the missing one heard those signal shots he was in no condition to reply, and that would mean, of course, that he must be in trouble.

Cuthbert looked at his friend.

"It doesn't seem to be of any use. After that I can't doubt but what something uncomfortable has happened to Eli. He's a jolly fellow, and I think the world of him. If any harm came to pass I'd feel wretched, for it was my foolish idea that brought him up here," he said disconsolately.

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"Oh, I wouldn't feel that way about it. A fellow like Eli must run a certain amount of risk, no matter where he is. If he wasn't here he'd be logging, and taking his life in his hand every hour, with trees falling in the wrong direction, log jams occurring in the spring rise and the lumber jacks risking death in the effort to free the king-pin that holds the jam. Oh, no, Eli has no fault to find with the way you've treated him; indeed, he's had a snap, and knows it. But we must be doing something, if you feel too anxious to wait until morning."

"It must now be ten o'clock, and that would mean many hours. Can anything be done in the night? How could we follow his trail without a hound? What wouldn't I give to have a good dog just now, such as my old Bunker down home in Virginia. You take charge, and order me around as you see fit. I'm ready to do anything."

Owen smiled, and thought what a fine thing it was to have a chum built along these lines; the conviction that Cuthbert would be just as anxious if it had been he who was lost carried with it a thrill of pleasure he had never known in all his life before.

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"Why, of course we can follow his trail slowly by the aid of that hunting jacklight of yours. Suppose you get it going, while I attend to some other things. If we abandon the camp even for a while it might be wise to hide the boats, especially yours; for that lovely creation would tempt almost any wanderer to carry it off. And your stores would be very acceptable to some of these chaps who live on roasted navy beans for coffee and hard tack with their venison."

So saying the young Canadian busied himself.

In ten minutes he had thoroughly hidden all their possessions, and in such a clever way it would never be suspected that such things could be lying around loose in the bushes beyond.

Meanwhile Cuthbert had fastened the jack to his hat and lighted the same.

On some occasions in the past he had shot deer by means of this same little lantern, though its use is now frowned down on in many states, since what appears to be a mean advantage is taken of the innocent deer when they come down to drink at the lake or stream, and stare at the strange glow upon the water, allowing the sportsman to push close enough to make dead sure of his quarry.

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Now it would not have been carried needlessly all this way into the wilderness if it was destined to prove valuable in following the trail of the missing Eli.

Although Cuthbert had not voiced his worst fear, he was thinking that possibly poor Eli might be lying somewhere in the vast woods badly injured; for there were various ways in which such a thing could come about.

He knew nothing could have happened on account of the rifle, for his faith in that marvel of the gunmaker's craft was unbounded; but Eli was inclined to be a bit clumsy, and might have stumbled into some hole, striking his head and rendering himself unconscious; or there was a chance that he had wounded a stag which had thereupon charged vigorously upon him, as wounded bucks are apt to do; so that Eli, not being accustomed to working the mechanism of the repeating rifle, might have been caught napping and tossed down.

Well, they were now off, and would know something about the matter ere long, for the tracks of the young hunter were plainly marked, as seen in the light of the jack.

Owen must have had considerable experience in this thing of following a trail, for he picked it up in a wonderful fashion; that is, it seemed so in the eyes of his companion, who was quite willing to keep at his side and bring the illuminating qualities of the little lantern to bear.

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Finally, thinking that it would be best that Owen had the jack upon his hat, he insisted on turning it over to him, contenting himself from that moment with falling in behind, carrying the shot gun in the hollow of his left arm, and with finger upon a trigger.

They walked for an hour in this way, and never once did Owen seem to be in doubt.

Such clever ability to follow tracks in the night time was an education to Cuthbert, always ready to learn new things; and he watched the manner in which it was done, wondering if he could ever in the course of years possess the sagacity that seemed to come so naturally to his friend.

In and out among the great trees they wound their way, just as Eli must have done when wandering along, watching for a sight of game ahead.

Now they came to where he had evidently struck some sign, for he bent down as he advanced, Owen showing the other just how he knew this from the marks; since three times had Eli dropped to his knee, only to rise again and go on, eager to get still closer to the quarry.

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Finally Owen paused and pointed.

"Here he fired—only one shot," he declared, and picked up the brass jacket of a long cartridge that had been ejected from the repeater when Eli worked the combination.

Cuthbert looked anxiously about.

"I don't see him lying anywhere around, that's one thing that pleases me," he said, in a relieved tone.

"No, he rushed forward—see, here are his tracks, and yonder the remains of the deer he shot. But Eli is not here. Something happened to him. Give me five minutes and I'll tell you what it was," declared the woods boy, soberly.

CHAPTER XIII

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

137

When Eli Perkins left the camp on that memorable afternoon with Cuthbert's fine rifle on his shoulder, he did have a card up his sleeve, so to speak.

Not that Eli was not intent on securing game for the pot, and meant to keep an eye out for anything in the shape of a deer that he could bag; for he had long desired to shoot that dandy gun, the envy of his soul, and as yet the opportunity to use it on a gallant stag had not been forthcoming, though he had often carried it forth when the time seemed propitious.

But Eli had been looking around ever since they landed, and it was his settled conviction that the country in that section had all the color of a copper region.

Copper was Eli's little god.

He eternally dreamed of some day finding a ledge of such incredible richness as would make all previous discoveries sink into utter insignificance; and from his delightful share of the profits from the mine he meant to satisfy that yearning for seeing foreign lands; for long had he looked forward to the time to come when he could visit Egypt, Turkey, Russia, Germany and all those countries he had read so much about.

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His only prospect of ever getting there, in his mind, lay in this discovery of copper, and copper haunted him day and night.

Cuthbert knew all about his yearning, and in his own mind had long since arranged it so that Eli would share his next trip abroad; but the other knew not what luck was awaiting him and so he kept thinking of this happy find, and his eyes were constantly on the watch for "signs."

And now more than ever before he was convinced that he must be in a country where there was undiscovered copper veins.

That no one has as yet stumbled upon them did not strike the lad as strange, for he knew that those who stalked through this wilderness were, for the most part, ignorant trappers or Indians, who would not know the value of a find if they fell over the richest outcropping ever found.

Eli had studied up the subject in his leisure hours for some years past, and was fully posted on all that pertained to its various branches.

So while he was walking ahead and looking with one eye for big game his other optic was on the alert for any signs of an outcropping of the rich metal that had been given the place of honor in his heart.

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This accounted in some measure for his eccentric advance; for many times he turned aside to bend low over some suspicious spot where his keen eye had detected symptoms of a deposit.

Although disappointment came again and again Eli never despaired, for he was certain he would sooner or later come upon that which he meant to have, and the delay, while aggravating, could not crush his spirits.

Twice later on he found reason to believe he was getting nearer the object of his ambition, for the signs were certainly growing stronger; and thus he was being lured further and further away from the camp.

Then came the moment when he sighted the deer through the bushes, and all his hunter instinct was aroused by the sight.

He began to creep forward, his finger upon the trigger of the gun, and a sense of delicious uncertainty thrilling his nerves.

Just as the observant Owen later on declared, he did get down on one knee several times, intending to shoot; but finding that the deer had not shown any indication of alarm, he had concluded to advance a bit further, in order to make doubly certain.

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Eli knew that he was sure of that buck, for he had perfect faith in his own abilities as a marksman, when within such short range; and as for the quality of Cuthbert's pet rifle, that went unquestioned.

Finally he took a quick aim and fired.

It had been the report of his gun that floated away back to the camp, and was heard by his two comrades about half an hour before dark.

Eli deliberately pumped another cartridge into the chamber with one speedy movement of his hand, as he had done many times in practice, and then ran forward to where he had last seen the deer.

He knew full well that it had gone down in a heap, for he had seen as much while he was in that instant placing the rifle in condition for further work; and hence he was not in the least surprised to find the noble animal kicking its last when he arrived upon the spot.

Eli was not an enthusiastic hunter; indeed, as a usual thing, he had been pretty well satisfied to let Cuthbert do most of the shooting and fishing of the trip; but when it came to disposing of the cooked product while they sat around the camp fire, he was right in the game, for Eli's one weakness was his appetite, and he never seemed to have enough.

He placed the rifle against a neighboring tree, and, drawing his hunting knife, proceeded first of all to bleed the deer, after which he started to work cutting it up, for it was too heavy by long odds to think of trying to carry the whole carcass to camp, now more than a mile distant.

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So busily engaged was he in this work that he paid not attention to what was taking place around him, and consequently did not see the shadowy figure that came flitting from tree to tree like a wraith of the great pinelands, finally reaching the oak against which Eli had leaned his gun.

Then a gnarled hand was stretched out and eagerly seized upon the beautiful little Marlin, which was quickly withdrawn from view.

Just then Eli was startled to hear a gruff "Ahem" from a point in front of him, and glancing up hurriedly from his work he discovered a man standing leaning on a long-barreled rifle and surveying him with a sneer on his face.

It was the same fellow who had bunked with them and drank their elegant Java with such gusto—Stackpole, the timber-cruiser.

Eli had not liked his looks when he was in camp, and he certainly saw no reason to change his mind concerning the fellow now, for Stackpole did have a piratical appearance when he scowled or looked scornful.

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Instinct compelled Eli to reach out his hand for his gun, even while not removing his eyes from the interloper with the evil cast of features.

When his groping hand failed to connect with the rifle he was compelled to turn his head quickly and saw, to his dismay, that the gun no longer occupied the spot where he had placed it.

At the same moment a second man stepped into view, having his own rifle hung over his shoulder with a strap, while the repeater belonging to Cuthbert was resting in his grimy hands.

Eli recognized this worthy immediately, nor was he very much surprised to see him there, since Owen had declared it to be his belief that they might run across him sooner or later.

He remembered how they had met him some weeks earlier, and also how he had made up that chart for Cuthbert, for a consideration, which since that time had proven so very unreliable, and which the Canadian lad pronounced utterly worthless.

It was Dubois, the greasy woods-ranger, fit comrade for the ungainly and grinning Stackpole.

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He stood there looking at the boy and nodding his head.

"Well, well, if it ain't Eli Perkins alive and in ther flesh! Who'd ever a thort tew see yer up hyer? I allowed thet p'raps yer boys mighter come part way, but it does beat all how some fools air taken keer ov. Thank yer kindly fur this yer purty little gun, Eli. Reckon I kin soon git ther hang o' the way ye work thet pump bizness. Anyhow, I'm willin' ter larn. Hold on, now, jest keep yer distance, er somethin' not down on ther bill'll happen ter ye, boy!" was the way Dubois addressed him.

Of course, Eli felt angry, but he saw that they had him trapped neatly enough, and he was not the fool the other would try to make out.

At least he had had considerable experience with just such fellows as these and knew how far one could go in conducting negotiations with their breed.

Eli had a streak of caution and also a bit of cunning in his make-up; doubtless he had found need of both in his dealings with the huskies to be met with in the Michigan lumber camps, where brute strength counts for more than education.

It evidently behooved him to play "lame duck," just as the mother mallard does in order to deceive the wandering egg hunter, and lead him away from her nest.

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So Eli simply chose to look foolish, and stood there grinning and saying not a word.

He was a good hand at playing the game of "wait," and perhaps in time his chance would come to knock up their hand, and call the deal.

"I see yer hev cut up ther deer all hunky-dory, Eli. Now, sence we old fellers is a bit troubled with rheumertism s'pose ye shoulder ther bag o'game an' come erlong wid us. My ole friend Dubois hes got er shack not werry far off, an' we kin hold our hungry feelin's in till we git thar. Up she goes, boy, an' don't yer dare ter scowl at me like thet again, less ye wanter feel ther toe o' my moccasin. Wy, I've sliced a feller's ears orf fur less'n thet. I'm a holy terror wen I'm riled up, ain't I, Dubois?" said Stackpole.

And this was the man whom they had entertained at their camp and given the best meal of his whole life!

Eli made a note of the fact for future reference.

There would perhaps come a day of reckoning, and the account, however long, could be adjusted.

He took up the pack of meat and followed Stackpole, while Dubois walked along a little distance behind.

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Perhaps it was accidental, this meeting with the two woodsmen, but Eli doubted it, preferring to believe that they had been watching him ever since he left the camp, with the idea of effecting his capture should the opportunity arise.

With such men this was not a difficult thing to do.

What puzzled him, however, was the trouble they were taking on his account.

If it was simply that coveted gun they wanted, why not turn him adrift after securing possession of the firearm, rather than make a prisoner of him; surely they could not be doing this for the mere sake of compelling him to "tote" the venison to their camp, for that would be slipping up on a point, since he must know where they held out and could carry the information to Cuthbert when released.

Now had it been the young Virginian who was captured, he could readily understand their reason, for Cuthbert had money in abundance, and would pay a round sum to be set at liberty; but who under the sun cared whether he, Eli Perkins, lumber-jack from the Michigan pine woods, were free or a prisoner, living or dead?

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And poor Eli was wrestling with these puzzling questions as he trudged wearily after Stackpole; nor did he seem to get any nearer a solution, though approaching the matter from all sides.

Darkness overtook them while they were still tramping through the woods, having covered some miles since leaving the spot where the deer was shot.

And then by degrees Eli began to guess what they had in view in holding him.

It would be only natural for the two worthies to try and hide their trail when thus passing through the woods and bound for the place where according to Stackpole the other had some sort of a dugout or shack.

To the surprise of Eli not only did they fail to take any precautions in this respect but on the contrary actually seemed to leave as plain a trail as possible.

It took Eli some time to understand the meaning of this, and then it broke upon him like a thunderclap—these fellows were laying a trap, and expected Cuthbert to walk into the same just as the fly enters the web of the spider.

Of course in due time Cuthbert and Owen would feel it necessary to look him up, and as the latter was a good trailer they would follow the course now being taken by himself and his captors,

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follow it until the door of the trap was sprung shut, making them also prisoners.

Eli grunted his disgust when he saw all this spread out before him.

Eli was so utterly helpless to prevent it.

And while he walked he was busying his mind in the endeavor to invent some clever scheme whereby he might get the better of the twin rascals and turn the tables upon them.

But Eli did not possess a very brilliant mind and suggestions came slowly to him; all his life he had been in the habit of allowing some one else do his thinking for him, and when thrown upon his own resources he found it difficult to fully grasp the situation and conjure up any possible remedy.

At the same time he was stubborn by temperament and not given over to despair, no matter how black the circumstances seemed.

Perhaps presently things might take a turn; all he wanted was to keep his eyes about him, and his wits sharpened, so that if the occasion arose he would be in shape to reap the benefit.

Stackpole must have been joking when he said the shack was close by, or else they had purposely made a circuit in their walk, for it was a full hour before they arrived at their destination.

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Whoever had originally built the cabin in the wild section where the rocks cropped up amid the stunted trees, it had evidently been abandoned many years, until of late Dubois took possession of the same.

A light through what seemed to be a window without glass was the first indication they had that they were approaching the end of the trail; Eli showed some sign of interest when he saw this, for it meant that there might be another member of the party, and his curiosity was excited.

Could it be possible that there was a regular league of these lawless rovers of the great timber belt, organized to prey upon their fellows, and eager to milk such prizes as Cuthbert Reynolds would prove to be, if once he fell into their clutches?

If so, this could hardly be their headquarters, for it was too near the Hudson Bay post; and from what he had heard about the stern old factor, he would never allow such an organization to get a footing within his territory—if he was a martinet and a stickler for fealty to the company, he was also an honest man, with a hatred for rascality that made him the terror of evil doers.

Stackpole brushed open the door and strode within.

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"Follow yer leader, kid," ordered the man in the rear, and accordingly Eli passed over the threshold.

Once within, the boy was ordered to prepare supper, and knowing the folly of resistance he obeyed.

All the time he was on the watch for a chance to do something that would render the guns of the timber cruisers useless. They were both old style rifles of the breech-loading type, and given a chance Eli knew how to fix them so that it would require the assistance of a gunsmith to place them in serviceable condition again.

Once Dubois went out and called to Stackpole, evidently desirous of conferring with his partner over something he did not wish the boy to overhear.

Eli saw his chance, and though his heart seemed to be in his mouth, he carried out his hastily formed plan.

Stackpole had taken the repeating rifle with him, as if not fully trusting the prisoner. But Eli could wait. Besides, he was hungry, and that was his venison, so he felt entitled to some of it.

While they ate the two men occasionally joked the boy in their rough way. But Eli only grinned, knowing that his time had almost come.

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"Now git a hustle on and clar up the muss, younker!" said Stackpole, as he lighted his pipe.

Eli coolly snatched up the little Marlin repeater. He heard the angry cries of the men as they reached for their own guns.

Then Eli laughed.

"The joke is on you, Stackpole. Couldn't shoot them guns in a week, for I doctored 'em all right. Stand back now or take the consequences, you!"

They were cowed by the sudden and complete change. Neither of them dared move a hand even when Eli opened the door of the cabin, having slung some of the venison across his shoulder.

"Next time, gents, don't leave a timber boy alone in a cabin with your guns," he remarked, and waving his hand mockingly he closed the door.

Five minutes later one of the men ventured to open the door, when a gun sounded, and the bullet struck so close to him he slammed the barrier shut again.

Then Eli hurried off, having taken his bearings. Half an hour later he discovered the glow of the

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little headlight torch, and to the delight of his chums hailed them.

Although Cuthbert and Owen were indignant at the action of the timber cruisers, they thought best to let the incident pass. No doubt the men would leave the country now, since they must fear lest their unlawful act get to the ears of the old factor and cause them trouble.

So our three boys returned to the camp and spent the remainder of the night in peace.

CHAPTER XIV.

WITHOUT AUTHORITY.

Several times during the late afternoon of this day they heard gunshots ahead, and from this judged that they were drawing very near the post; which, like all such important places belonging to the great fur company, must present quite an animated appearance with trappers and hunters, whites, Indians and halfbreeds, coming and going.

Few went downstream, since the points of interest and profit were further up in the wilderness; which accounted for the fact of their having seen only a couple of boats during the whole afternoon, one of these being manned by some *voyageurs* belonging to the post, for they wore picturesque uniforms, consisting of leather coats lined with flannel, belts of scarlet worsted, breeches of smoked buckskin, and moose moccasins, and carried shawls of Scotch plaid, as well as fur caps with ear-flaps for the cold weather that was liable to visit the Northwest country at any day now—at the bow of the large boat floated the well-known blue and white flag of the Hudson Bay Company, showing that this craft had undoubtedly carried a load of supplies to the post, and was now taking back to civilization packages of belated furs that had been brought in by trappers from the Arctic regions.

Cuthbert knew considerable about this vast concern which has had almost a monopoly of the fur-gathering business in America for two centuries—really it dates back to 1670, when a license to trade in furs in the Hudson Bay region was granted to an English company.

Knowing that he would be likely to come in contact with the agents of this corporation during his travels in the Saskatchewan country, Cuthbert had taken pains to learn all he could about what history had to say of their doings; and he found that in the far past they had been merciless and unscrupulous in their dealings with their employers; though, of course, much of this high-handed style of conducting business is not tolerated nowadays.

The shadows were beginning to gather as the canoes rounded a bend in the stream, and the post stood out before them in the clearing, with the last glow in the western sky as a background.

The Union Jack had been hauled down with the setting of the sun, for at these posts along the distant border something of military discipline has to be maintained, lest those in charge find their rough wards and employes breaking loose from their authority; for they have to deal with reckless spirits at times, and, of course, liquor frequently brings about trouble, just as in logging camps and all similar places.

Their coming had undoubtedly been signaled long before they arrived within hailing distance of the fort, for there was quite a crowd down at the landing to see them come in, a mixture of whites, natives and halfbreeds, all of them no doubt connected in some manner with the great fur company.

Some of these gave a noisy greeting to a boat load of Indians landing about the same time as our friends, after the custom of their kind, boisterous, but good-natured; but Cuthbert noticed that not one had a word to say to his little party; which pleased him very much, since he had worried over what they should do if the crowd proved unruly.

He understood from what Owen had let fall that the old factor ruled his camp with a rod of iron, and that there was not a man who dared go against his expressed wish—doubtless he had given his followers to understand that they were to keep aloof, and let him do the honors of the occasion.

So our young friends shoved their boats upon the shelving beach, sprang out, and pulled the canoes up far enough to keep them safe from the current of the river; Owen had already told them that a code of honor existed at the post, and whatever they left in the boat would be perfectly safe, for should so much as a trap be stolen, the vigilant factor would visit the thief with punishment of a drastic nature—his Scotch blood would not stand for such a breach of hospitality.

They knew that it was their duty to seek an audience with the commander of the post immediately, explain their mission to these wilds, and, if it could be done in a diplomatic manner, ingratiate themselves in his favor by making him some sort of a present—Owen had hinted that

the factor's one weakness was a love for tea, which he used at every meal with quite as much pleasure as the veriest old maid gossip at a sewing circle; and as luck would have it this happened to coincide with a leaning of his own, for he had made sure to fetch considerable of the very finest that money could purchase in New York—Ceylon, Young Hyson and Orange Pekoe.

Hence, when he told Eli that it was up to them to make a bee-line for the headquarters of the factor, and announce their arrival, his first act was to gather up a package he had prepared, consisting of a pound each of the several kinds of tea carried by the expedition. 156

Thus armed and equipped, he sallied forth, under the belief that he was able to propitiate the powers that be, without a single carnal weapon, and loaded only with a gentle persuader.

Owen had pointed out the position of the lodge where the factor had his office as well as his habitation; and indeed, even had they not a friend at court, it would have been easy to determine the location of this, since it turned out to be the largest building within the stockade, and in front of which arose the tall pole that had evidently held the Union Jack up to sunset.

No one followed them, but various were the curious glances cast in that direction by the many personages who had a connection with the busy post.

At the door stood a man, who appeared to be a guard, for he carried a rifle, and stirred at their approach, as though it might be his business to make inquiries of those who asked for an audience with the "little czar" within.

"Is the factor, Mr. Gregory, in?" asked Cuthbert, pleasantly.

"He is—walk right inside," came the reply, and they obeyed. 157

The office of the trading post was a sight to Cuthbert, who had often read of such a place, but never as yet, set eyes on one; a thousand articles seemed to be crowded into the apartment, so that there was little spare room on either side of the passage leading straight up to the great desk, where the factor held his court, flanked by account books that doubtless would have been rich reading to anyone interested in figures connected with the prices paid the Indians for furs.

Through a door Cuthbert could see an adjoining room that was evidently used for a general audience chamber in the wintry season, perhaps a bunkroom also, for it had an enormous stove that was well calculated to warm things when started.

Only a cursory glance did he bestow upon these inanimate things, for his attention was immediately wrapped up in the lone figure sitting back of the big desk, the factor of the whole region, Alexander Gregory, the mysterious man whose past seemed to be connected in some way with that of their new Canadian chum, Owen Dugdale.

Cuthbert rather prided himself on his ability to read faces, and it was in this spirit that he approached the Scotch resident boss.

He saw a bearded face, with the sandy hue thickly sprinkled with gray—a face marked with strong individuality, and passions such as were common in the days of the Bruce and the Wallace of whom we read; indeed, just such a sturdy character as he had expected to discover in this strange man of the Northwest, judging from all the stories he had heard. 158

And yet he quickly discerned a bit of a twinkle in the corners of those cold gray eyes that told Cuthbert the other was not wholly a man of iron—there was another vein to his character not often seen by his fellows, but which could be played upon by touching the right chord, if one but knew what that was.

In that one moment of time Cuthbert knew that here was a man worthy of his best efforts in the line of study, and that perhaps before he quitted this faraway post on the frontier he would be able to see the strong elements constituting Alexander Gregory's make-up unmasked.

Cuthbert was something of a diplomat, and he knew just how best to address a man of authority whom he desired to placate; accordingly he gave his name as well as that of his companion, told of the folly that had brought him to the wilderness, and that he desired to see a genuine trading post of the great company, now that he found himself in the neighborhood, and that he was pleased to meet the factor, of whom he had heard so many things in connection with the building up of the company's trade. 159

Alexander Gregory listened, and it might be noticed that his face seemed to relax a trifle of its grim aspect; when the precious packets of tea were placed before him on the desk he could not refrain from smiling, and thrusting forth his hand, with words of warm welcome that quite tickled the young diplomat, for he knew that he had won a point in the game.

CHAPTER XV.

SCENTS A MYSTERY.

160

Alexander Gregory was a Scotchman, but he had spent most of his life in the Canadian bush, and while there was a distinct "burr" in his manner of speech, he very seldom used any of that broad dialect so characteristic of his race; and then generally when much excited.

He seemed particularly amused at the harum-scarum idea that had tempted our young explorer to these distant fields, for few men knew more about the fearful difficulties awaiting the venturesome nomad in those lonely wastes beyond than did the veteran factor, since many a time and oft he had roamed toward the arctic circle in search of new opportunities, and had the humor seized him he could have told thrilling stories of what he had seen and endured there.

Seldom did he have the chance to interview so fresh and interesting a character as Cuthbert, for his work brought him into daily contact with only rough, strenuous men, and in time this had undoubtedly hardened his own nature more or less.

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He asked many questions and examined the lad's charts with interest.

Just as Owen had done he condemned the map made by the halfbreed, Dubois, and declared that the fellow had undoubtedly purposely deceived him, with some object in view that could only be guessed.

"That's just what Owen said," exclaimed Cuthbert, without stopping to think, and no sooner had the impulsive words passed his lips than he remembered that this was supposed to be a tabooed name in the hearing of the old factor, though just why he had no means of understanding.

Involuntarily he looked up hastily as if to see what effect the mention of Owen's name had on his host, but he only discovered a slight start, followed by a flitting frown, and then a grim smile.

"Oh, he did, eh?" he remarked, quietly; "well, it would seem that the fellow has some sense about him, which I had begun to doubt, after he refused to meet me half way in burying the bitterness of the past. But speaking of this Dubois, he is a rascal beyond any doubt, and he appears to have entered into some sort of partnership with Stackpole, a fellow of his own stripe, though hardly as bold in his way of doing things. These scoundrels have been playing fast and loose for a long time in this region, but the worst they've been guilty of up to the present has been the robbery of traps. Still, they have the spirit in them to attempt almost any unlawful game, once the opportunity offers, and I suppose they thought it had appeared in you. I've about made up my mind that the time has come to drive them out of the region, or hand them over to the mounted police, who will see to it that they are put in jail. In this region we often have to take the law in our own hands, you understand, lad. Aye, I've seen some desperate things done in my day, and more often than I like they come up before my mind in the still watches of the night. Mine has been a rough life of it, taken altogether, and not an enviable one. It is anything but a paradise up here when the long winter settles down. But it is the only life I know, and has its charms to a man of my nature, though there be times when I have longings for civilization and all that it carries with it."

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The factor sighed as he spoke in this meditative way, and Cuthbert could read between the lines, knowing what a wasted life it must seem to look back upon, with the monotony broken only by scenes of violence, when Indians went upon the warpath or halfbreeds became rebellious, as during the great uprising along the Saskatchewan, when the ugly front of war made this region its battle ground.

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Eli was awed by the frown of the factor, and hardly spoke a word unless addressed in person; but he, too, felt considerable curiosity concerning the relation of Owen to this grim personage, and spent much time in propounding questions to himself with the object of finding out the truth.

On the whole Cuthbert was impressed rather favorably.

He believed that Mr. Gregory, while appearing to be a forbidding character, was less of an ogre than surface marks would indicate; indeed, Cuthbert rather took a fancy to the old chap, and could, in a measure, realize how he must have yearned for the pleasures of that outer life from which his fate barred him.

He made up his mind to question Owen at the first opportunity and learn what it was that stood between this czar of the wilderness and himself, for the mystery not only piqued his imagination, but he began to feel that his new-found friend might, in some way, be managing his case unwisely, and that the advice of a sympathetic comrade would prove of value in the matter.

You see, Cuthbert was a bit shrewd and already suspected something of the truth, for he could see through a millstone that had a hole in the center, and it had flashed upon him suddenly that there was more than an accidental resemblance between the young Canadian lad and this stern master of the post.

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Now, it chanced that the American, while devoted to his chosen profession of wandering through countries where the foot of a white man had never before trod, had other traits of character, and like most fellows, liked to dabble in a bit of a mystery, especially when he thought he could see a chance to improve the conditions surrounding a friend of his, and accordingly he puckered up his lips as though about to whistle, though no sound escaped him, and inwardly he was saying something after the nature of this:

"By George, I believe I have it now—this old martinet, who rules the whole country of the Saskatchewan with a rod of iron, and Owen are related somehow or other, and in the past there must have been trouble between the two branches of the family—the Scotch are famous for such things, and can hate just as hard as they can love. Here's a pretty kettle of fish. Owen's being knocked out of something that is his by rights, and I'm going to turn my talents to account so as to see that he gets all that's coming to him. What relation could Aleck bear a youngster like Owen but that of grandpa, eh? Why, it promises to be about as good as a play. But I mustn't let on that I've guessed the riddle, for I don't understand why they're at daggers' points—what has Owen done—why did he skip down the river without even his gun? H'm, there's lots to unravel even here, and perhaps I'd better get Chum Owen to confide in me before I go any further."

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The factor was plainly eager to test the virtues of his new tea, for he put a kettle of cold water on the stove, thereby proving that he was an adept at the art of brewing the fragrant herb, since it requires fresh water, brought to a boil, and not stale stuff, to extract the delightful aroma and flavor.

Cuthbert took the hint, though Mr. Gregory asked the lads to stay and drink a cup with him, a common enough invitation across the big pond, though altogether unknown among Americans, whose invitations are apt to include something stronger.

When they declined he bade them consider themselves asked to dine with him later on that evening, but Cuthbert saw an opportunity to put in an entering wedge and reluctantly said that they would have to decline, since they had a comrade and would not feel like leaving him alone.

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The factor opened his mouth as if to say something and Cuthbert expected that he meant to include Owen in his invitation, but he simply nodded his head, smiled whimsically, and bent over to look at the fire.

So they passed out.

Eli was completely muddled up with regard to the state of things, for he had not the shrewdness of his companion, and as yet saw no reason to suspect that there was a relationship between those who were so antagonistic.

He meant to make friends with some of the halfbreeds who lounged about the post, and by asking questions anticipated getting close to the truth; perhaps his way, while less elevated than the plan of Cuthbert, might bring results in a more speedy manner.

They found Owen where he had promised to await them, which was in a corner of the stockade, just outside the main enclosure—a rather secluded place, which the other evidently knew quite well.

He had the tent up, and was arranging things for comfort, just as though unaware how long their stay might be.

Owen asked no questions, but he looked curiously into Cuthbert's face, as if he might discover something there; but the other had decided to wait for a more fitting opportunity ere springing the question he had in mind.

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Some of the loungers gathered around.

They were naturally curious concerning the outfit of the young explorer, for he carried things such as they had never in all their lives seen; some of these were apt to excite the ridicule of such old and rough campaigners, accustomed to looking upon the earth as their bed, and the canopy of heaven as their roof; but when in lieu of a cooking fire Cuthbert set up his little "Jewel" kerosene stove, and in less than ten minutes had water boiling furiously, when he could make a big pot of coffee, the remarks in French patois were almost wholly favorable to the little brass contraption, as both the Americans knew; for these fellows recognized how handy such an affair must prove on a wet day when it was almost impossible to find dry wood to burn, and some warm drink was needed to tone up the system.

But it was ludicrous when the coffee began to boil to see those chaps elevate their noses and begin to sniff the fragrance as only wretched beings may who have long been strangers to the delicious decoction.

Evidently they had been told by the three Indians how the boys had treated them to a cup of the beverage, and they made bold to hover about in the hope that history would repeat itself.

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Nor were they disappointed.

Cuthbert was too shrewd a general to miss so good an opportunity to make many friends out of these rough spirits; so, after the campers had enjoyed their cup apiece and eaten some supper, Cuthbert deliberately filled the aluminum receptacle, added condensed milk, with sugar, and then gravely presented it to the fellow whom he judged was the boss of the outfit, a big, raw-boned French-Canadian *voyageur*, with a beard like a pirate.

His eyes almost danced with delight, and he allowed the aromatic compound to gurgle down his capacious throat slowly, while he held back his head to gaze upward toward the first stars that had appeared in the blue arch overhead.

Twice he stopped and looked at his companions with a smirk, unable to refrain from tantalizing

them; and it was ludicrous to see the way in which they scowled and shook their heads ominously—had it been any one but this strapping leader he might have found himself in trouble very soon.

However, in good time they one and all had a chance to taste and enjoy the results of Cuthbert's brewing; and he realized that his act had been a masterstroke so far as making friends of the gathering was concerned—the insidious coffee bean had proven more mighty than an army in changing the current of their thoughts.

And yet Cuthbert, who saw everything, could not help but notice that not one of these men of the post said anything to Owen, though all of them, from time to time, cast curious glances his way, as though he might be a puzzle they could not solve.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LITTLE WITCH.

After that the post loungers had the good sense to leave our young friends alone, though when they sauntered away most of them either thanked Cuthbert in a courteous French manner for his little treat, or else waved a hand to him, with a broad grin that stood for the same thing in the rough ways of their class.

Still, Owen asked no questions concerning what they had seen and heard when at the office of the old factor; it looked as though he were determined to exhibit not a sign of curiosity, no matter how much he would like to hear all.

So Cuthbert took it upon himself to relate much that had been said, even to the remark made by Mr. Gregory with relation to Owen himself—watching out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other turn rosy red and then grit his teeth firmly, as though repressing his feelings.

"Evidently he will have to be drawn out, for I can see that nothing tempts him to open up of his own free will; and yet he said a while back that he meant to confide his story to us. Now, this thing has gone quite far enough, and if we are to be Owen's best friends and chums it's only right that we know who and what he is, and also how he and the Big Mogul have fallen out. So here goes while the coast is clear, and no stragglers around."

So saying, Cuthbert turned to the Canuck and, smiling, said:

"Owen, my boy, you promised to tell us something about your troubles when an opportunity came. Now, I said then that I didn't want to intrude on your private affairs, but you insisted that we had a right to know; and since we've taken you into the combine as a fellow chum, and you're going to wander with me over a good part of this old planet in time, why, if it's just the same to you, I wouldn't mind hearing all you've got to say now. I confess your coming to this place has excited my curiosity, old chap, because I realize that there's been trouble of some sort between you and Aleck over yonder. Now, he strikes me as not so bad a tyrant as I had somehow imagined, and perhaps the matter might be patched up between you. Remember, we don't want to hear anything that you'd prefer to keep secret—just tell us as much or as little as you think fit. You know we stand ready to give our full sympathy, and back you up to the limit. Now, hit it up, my boy."

Owen drew a big breath, as though he had to nerve himself to speak of these things to strangers; for he had hugged his troubles to his own breast these many years, and they had evidently become sensitive subjects with him.

But the ready sympathy which he saw upon the countenances of his comrades was a new sensation to the lonely lad, and he had no further hesitation about opening his heart to them.

"Don't make any mistake in the start, boys, for the trouble that lies between Alexander Gregory and myself can never be patched up, though if he had his way it would be. But I can never forget that his iron will embittered the whole of my poor mother's life. I've seen her cry many the time, and under my breath I cursed that hard-hearted old Scotchman, who, because his daughter married a man against whom he chanced to have a spite, refused to forgive. He's a cold-blooded monster, that's what he is, and I would tell him so to his face."

"I suspected that he bore that relationship to you—grandfather—there's considerable about your faces that gives the secret away," remarked Cuthbert.

"I may look like him in face, but thank Heaven I'm a true Dugdale in my feelings. I know you'll forgive me if I make the story short, because it rouses up the old feelings inside, and sad memories always make me hate him more and more.

"After my mother and father died, which was less than a year ago, he heard of it somehow, and has tried to make up with me ever since, sending messages with letters, asking me to come and live with him; but his repentance came too late, for she was not here to know that he was sorry;

and I utterly refused to even hold any correspondence with the man who would have let his own child go hungry or freeze to death because she would not come and ask his forgiveness, something my father would never hear of.

"Well, what do you think, finding that I wouldn't come to him of my own free will, this domineering ruler of the Saskatchewan sent a party of his halfbreeds up to the region where I was trapping and kidnapped me outright—yes, I was carried a prisoner in their boat to this post, and actually confined in a cabin as if I had been guilty of a crime. He had the nerve to send me word that it had all been done without his knowledge, his men thinking they were doing him a favor, and that he would see me in the morning, when he hoped explanations might bring about an understanding between us—if I persisted in my determination to have nothing to do with him, I would then be at liberty to depart.

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"I never so much as sent him an answer, I was so furious at being dragged to his post like a wretch who had robbed traps; but during the night I found a way to escape from the cabin, and taking an old canoe, I fled down the river. The rest you know already. That is my story in a nutshell, boys. I could talk for hours, and even then fail to tell you all I've gone through since I was a little shaver, for I soon learned the sad story of my mother, and how she had suffered because her father refused to forgive.

"My father was only a timber-cruiser, a man with little education, but an honest man at that. He was never able to make much more than a living, and we have many times gone hungry, while he was storing up treasures year by year, to be lavished upon his one other daughter, who married to please him. But we'd rather died there in the bush than ask a favor of him, my dad was that proud, and hated Alexander Gregory so for his injustice.

"You understand now what I risked in coming back here; but when I reasoned it all out in cold blood I saw that he could not keep me against my will, for he's never been appointed my guardian that I know of; so I determined to come, and stick with you, no matter what happened."

175

"You mentioned another daughter—is she with him still?" asked Cuthbert, who had a reason for the question.

"No, I understand that she was also taken away several years ago; her husband turned out to be a bad man, and had to get out of the country, because Mr. Gregory had sworn to shoot him on sight for good reasons. So, you see, that stubborn will of his, that wanted to bend everything his way, has not brought him very much of happiness. Still, it's just what he deserves, and I'm not sorry one bit."

"Did the other daughter have any children?" pursued Cuthbert.

"I don't know; but what makes you ask?" said Owen, raising his eyes quickly, to look his comrade in the face.

"Because, unless I am very much mistaken, I heard a girl's laugh in that big cabin where he has his home, a merry laugh that somehow made me feel as if I wanted to join in with a ha-ha of my own. If that is so she's your cousin, Owen."

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That was indeed a master stroke on Cuthbert's part, and well played, too.

Owen looked startled.

"Cousin—a girl—related to me," he muttered, as if unable to quite grasp the immensity of the thing; then a flush crept over his swarthy face, as though the new thought was more or less pleasing to him; for, poor lad, he had of late believed himself to be utterly alone in the big world, saving this hard-hearted grandfather, whom he refused to recognize.

This gave him new food for reflection; and the young philosopher who had shot the shaft fancied that the intelligence might have more or less influence in determining his future relations with the factor—the human heart craves sympathy above all things, and this can seldom come so well from strangers as from those of the same family—blood is ever thicker than water.

Owen went about the preparations for the night, arranging the cots for his two comrades, and his own humble blanket bed; but evidently he was wrapped in deep thought, and Cuthbert believed he had set a current in motion that was bound to have much influence over the other's future.

If he could only arrange to have Owen meet the owner of that merry laugh, he fancied the rest would be easy.

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With this idea in his mind he sauntered in the direction of the factor's headquarters, half-meaning to secure another interview with the other, at which, perhaps, matters might be threshed out, and light let in where all was darkness now.

He changed his mind, however, when he saw that Mr. Gregory was busy with some of his employes, who had come down the river in a big batteau while the boys were eating their supper, and evidently had brought news of considerable importance, since they immediately sought an interview with the chief; and when Cuthbert glanced in through the open door their heads were close together over some sort of a map which one of them was explaining.

Nevertheless, Cuthbert could not refrain from keeping his eyes about, in the hope that by a lucky chance he might discover the one who laughed; and just as he was about to turn back to the

camp of his friends he did catch a sound that immediately fastened his attention, only instead of merriment, it was rather a lugubrious little song, sung half under the breath—a song that possibly had the power to bring before the mind of the singer the face of the dear mother who had taught her to sing it, a song that affected even Cuthbert as he stood with bowed head and harkened.

Presently the sound ceased, and he heard a flutter near by, when looking that way he caught a glimpse of a little figure passing into the rear of the cabin; as the door was open he could see what appeared to be a girl of some six or seven, slight of figure, and with the golden hair and the face of an angel.

Cuthbert laughed to himself as he looked, for he was thinking of his friend Owen, and what a change would come over him when he made the acquaintance of this little fairy of the wilderness.

He now sauntered over to where some of the trappers and *voyageurs* had a fire, at which they had evidently cooked their supper earlier in the night and about which they were now reclining, smoking pipes, and exchanging stories connected with the wild life led by all.

No one paid any particular attention to the lad, save to give him a place at the fire and offer him a tobacco pouch, which, of course, he declined, saying to the amazement of these inveterate smokers that he had never learned the art of indulging in the weed.

He understood enough of the French *patois* to follow what was said, and felt more or less interest in the weird tales they spun concerning the astonishing wonders of the Great Lone Land, which he, in his audacity, had been tempted to venture into alone, bent on exploration—he realized now that it would surely have proven his tomb had he been allowed to proceed thither, convoyed only by the faithful Eli, who was ready to follow him to the uttermost parts of the earth without question.

Presently, when he had broken the ice by becoming a little familiar with his neighbor on the right, a rather pleasant-faced fellow in the picturesque uniform of the Hudson Bay Company, he ventured to ask about the sweet little singer, whose voice had charmed his ear; and, as he suspected, it turned out that she was a child of the factor's younger daughter, her name, Jessie (which was Scotch enough to please Cuthbert's romantic fancy) and that she had always been at the post, a gleam of sunshine, for whom any of them would willingly have died.

Cuthbert was more than pleased with his discoveries, for he believed that it would, after all, not be so very difficult to bring about some sort of a reconciliation between the young Canadian and his ancestor, the old factor, whose heart had lost much of its flinty nature long since under the ministrations of this little golden-haired witch, and was really hungering to remedy his conduct of the past as far as possible.

If he did nothing more than joining these two, Cuthbert could congratulate himself that his mission to the great Saskatchewan region had not been in vain.

He hunted Eli up at once, determined to form some sort of plan whereby such a desirable end might be attained.

Fortunately, Eli was alone in their tent, and when the other questioned him before speaking, not wishing Owen to hear them discussing his affairs, Cuthbert learned that the third member of the party had gone out quite a while before, saying that he would return by the time they were thinking of retiring.

Cuthbert fancied that it was the mention of the little cousin that had affected him so; perhaps even at that moment Owen was hovering about the headquarters of the factor, in the hope of getting a glimpse of the owner of the sweet voice.

So Eli was placed in possession of all the facts as learned by his chum, and as of old they discussed the situation, for while the boy from the lumber regions lacked the education and polish that were Cuthbert's birthright, he did possess a shrewd mind and had homely ideas of what was good and true—this had been the very thing that attracted the Virginian to him in the start, and the more he saw of Eli the stronger grew his affection, until it bade fair to become another David and Jonathan relationship.

On his part Eli was more excited than usual, because he had made a discovery during his friend's absence, which was to the effect that certain specimens of ore which he had somehow managed to pick up and thrust into his pockets while in the woods were very rich with a greenish mineral which Eli knew well enough to be virgin copper, and he felt convinced that he had at last struck the bonanza for which he had so long been searching—a genuine copper lode.

When they had partly arranged their intended plan of action and fixed matters so that on the morrow they could open the game, the two young conspirators began to get ready for turning in.

There was certainly no need of keeping watch here, for they were in the stockade bounds of the fort and within a biscuit toss of the factor's headquarters; surely no prowler would dare molest them here, and if he did there would always be the chances of his running up against a 30-30 from the forceful little Marlin repeater that must discourage his sneaking propensities.

Once they had heard a great disturbance around on the other side of the main building, with many loud excited voices chiming in, but Cuthbert, believing that the affair did not concern them

and was probably only a dispute among some of the unruly employes of the trading company, restrained the impulsive Eli, who was for bolting out and learning the cause of the fracas.

Where could Owen be?

Surely the boy would not sneak away, after so boldly accompanying them to the Hudson Bay post—he had as much as promised to stick by them up to the time they expected to return to civilization, and if Cuthbert was any judge of human nature Owen Dugdale was not the one to go back on his word.

And it was very unlikely that anything could have happened to him off in the dense forest, where he was so much at home—the men connected with the post were now aware that the factor frowned upon such a thing as kidnapping one who showed the utmost reluctance to visit his relative, and consequently they would leave him severely alone from this time on, and as for the timber cruiser, he knew the bond of blood existing between the lad and the stern old factor, and with the inevitable consequences staring him in the face if he raised his hand again toward Owen, he would not dare arouse the ire of Alexander Gregory for anything.

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CHAPTER XVII.

SEEN THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR.

184

Owen Dugdale had been more deeply affected by what his friend had said about the little witch of the fort than even Cuthbert suspected.

Somehow the lonely lad had never conceived of such a possibility as having a cousin to love, and when he heard of it for the first time he was staggered by the change this seemed to make in affairs.

Unable to properly ponder over the matter within the tent where Eli would naturally be wanting to ask ordinary questions that must disturb his mental scrutiny, he determined to go by himself and spend an hour or so threshing matters out once and for all.

This hatred for the old factor had become so much a part of his nature that he was able to only see one side of the case, and for the first time in his life he found himself beginning to entertain a slight suspicion that he had purposely blinded his eyes to facts that might present a different aspect to things.

Memories of his sainted mother arose to haunt him; perhaps the incident of little Sallie and her conception of her "duty" by her brute of a father, just because she had promised the mother who was gone to watch over him, had awakened these thoughts afresh, for Owen, too, had promised to try and overcome his hard feelings for the old factor, though as yet without making any progress.

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Still, tonight he seemed to be in a more amiable mood than for a long time.

Before his mind arose the last scene, when he knelt beside his widowed mother, and heard her whispered prayer that he might grow up to be a noble man, free from the accursed Gregory spirit that had helped to make her own life unhappy.

Had he made an earnest effort that way?

Owen felt conscience-stricken when he remembered that he never once thought of his angel mother without a feeling of bitter animosity toward the unrelenting parent who had driven her forth when she married against his will.

And now a new factor had been sprung upon him in the shape of this cousin!

Who was she and what could she be like?

He knew there had been another daughter, just as he had told Cuthbert, who had married the man her father picked out, only to suffer as all ill-used wives do; until matters went too far and Alexander Gregory had driven him out of the region.

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This daughter then had enjoyed all that money could secure for her during the few years she lived after her child came, so that the little one must be looked upon as the heiress of all the old factor's wealth; and he was said to have accumulated much of this world's goods during his life on the Saskatchewan.

But this interested Owen not a particle, for he was quite free from any desire to share in the old man's money.

Whoever this girl might be, she was welcome to all the factor possessed, for he would never touch a penny, he was bound.

It made him writhe a little to think, however, that the child of one daughter was rolling in wealth, so to speak, while he, the only issue of the other marriage, was like the foxes and had hardly more than a hole wherein to lay his head.

Still, she was a girl, while he as a hardy boy felt no need of comfort—given a gun and some provisions and he feared not the desolate places of the Great North Land; he had wrested many of Nature's secrets from her bosom and could hold his own in the blizzard's blast as well as the animals.

But he must get by himself to think all this over and fight the battle again, this time for good and all—it might make a difference if there were some one else besides the stern old factor, in whose veins ran the same blood; yes, that was something he had never considered before.

187

So muttering some sort of an excuse to Eli he had wandered forth into the night.

He, too, had heard of the arrival of the batteau from above, and catching some casual words that were dropped knew there was trouble ahead for the immediate future, since a company of rival fur gatherers had swooped down upon ground that came within the jurisdiction of the Fort Harmony post, though often in dispute, and refused to leave when threatened by the agents of Gregory.

That might mean bloody war, for it so happened once in a while; and in times past scenes of violence had marked many a meeting of these rival companies.

Even this fact did not interest Owen to any extent just now.

At another time he might have felt his pulses thrill with eagerness, for having spent his whole existence in this region, he was naturally impregnated with the spirit that dominated the lives of those who depended upon the gathering of furs for their living, and Owen besides had inherited some of the Gregory combativeness.

188

He was thinking of that cousin and feeling an eagerness he could not overcome to set eyes on her for himself.

What was she like?

If she looked at all a Gregory he felt sure he could never care for her, since his feeling of intense dislike toward Alexander the factor was too deep-rooted to be easily cast out.

What was to hinder his wandering around near the big house used as an office and storeroom as well as the residence of the factor?

If Cuthbert had done so without attracting attention surely he could, and perhaps he might also be favored with just a little glimpse of the girl.

Even while allowing himself to be lured into this sort of thing by some strange feeling within, Owen was curling his lip sarcastically at the idea of his ever being reconciled to the grandfather who had ruined the lives of his parents, making them so much harder and bitter than would otherwise have been the case.

But with all his animosity toward Dugdale, the timber cruiser who had won the heart of his favorite child, the factor had not been able to fully mar their lives, and Owen knew that true love had reigned in that humble cabin far away beyond the jurisdiction of old Gregory up to the time death took the father and husband away.

189

Presently he found his footsteps had carried him near the large building and he avoided the office end, as he did not wish it to appear that he was at all curious concerning the grave news brought in by the scouts who had come with the batteau from the upper reaches of the river.

It was in the hope of hearing the same voice which had attracted Cuthbert that brought him close to the rear of the building, where the wing was used as a home by Mr. Gregory.

Lights abounded in various parts of the house, which, being built for the most part of huge logs, weatherbeaten from long years of service, but still substantial, gave evidence of being a comfortable abode; and it was not long ere Owen felt a thrill pass through his being as he caught a sudden burst of childish song, which ceased almost as quickly as it had begun, as though the singer just had to give utterance to her buoyant feelings in such little snatches of music.

Eagerly he waited, hoping that she would again lift up her sweet voice, for it had sounded like the trill of birds in the woodland to his enraptured ear.

Years had passed since this lad had heard a little child's voice in song; or, indeed, any music, for his mother's sad life had not been conducive to merry feelings, and one has to be at least fairly happy to sing.

190

And when the child again broke forth and caroled a little French lullaby, as though singing to her dolly, Owen stood there, nervously opening and closing his hands, as though enthralled beyond measure.

When the song had died away he could no longer resist the temptation to feast his eyes upon the singer.

This would not be difficult to do, for the door was open, and all that seemed necessary was for

him to move still closer and bend forward.

He did not fancy being seen in such an act, no matter how honorable his intention, for these rough dwellers in the wilds have a peculiar code of their own, and spying of any kind is severely frowned down upon.

Nevertheless he could not let the opportunity pass unimproved; and so Owen began to move forward, trying to keep beyond the strongest path of light that flowed from the open door.

When he thrust his head forward and saw the interior of the room he stood there as if frozen into a pillar of ice.

191

If the spectacle of that little witch with the golden locks had held Cuthbert spellbound, imagine how it affected this lad, who knew he was looking on the only close relative he had in the wide world, saving the factor—who did not count, anyway. He felt as though he could not tear himself away, there was something so fascinating about the small maid and her cunning ways, as she rocked her dolly and went through all the necessary operations required to put a real flesh and blood baby to sleep.

And what made it all the more entrancing to Owen was the unmistakable fact that it seemed to him he must be looking upon the face of his own dearly loved mother when she was a child; for the sister's little one had, as is often the case, resembled the one so much in her anxious mind, rather than herself.

Looking thus upon such a charming picture, was it strange that Owen found himself thinking along certain lines that up to now he would have cast from him with scorn, as an evidence of weakening?

Cuthbert had made no mistake when he concluded that, sooner or later, through the means of this little peacemaker, must the vendetta existing between Owen and his grandfather be brought to a close.

192

When she had laid her doll carefully down and stroked it gently, just as a real mother might do with her sleeping babe, the child tiptoed about the room, casting many an anxious glance toward the crib, as though fearful lest she awaken the inanimate bundle reposing there—it was so natural that Owen could not smile, even while he was feeling a sudden yearning to know this charming little relative at closer quarters.

In that time he stood there all danger of his wanting to fly once more from the stockade vanished forever; and he even wondered whether his grandfather may not after all have had some such scheme in mind in inviting him to visit him, believing that the presence of this midget, and the fact that she was his own true cousin, would have a wonderfully soothing effect upon the truculent spirit of the boy.

Now she approached the door, as though either drawn by some subtle spirit, or a desire to glance out at the heavens to see what the weather might be.

Owen dared not move for fear lest such action must attract the very attention he was seeking to avoid; so he stood there as though he might be a post, and awaited the outcome with mingled feelings of anxiety and delight.

193

It was not long in coming, the discovery.

He felt, rather than saw, her gaze fall upon him, and she seemed to stand there in some vague sense of terror at first, as though fearing that the eavesdropper might mean her harm—afterwards Owen understood why she should have this feeling better than he did just then, but it pained him to think that his presence should bring fear to her gentle little heart, and so he smiled.

Although he did not know it himself, when Owen smiled, his face took on an expression that must have given confidence to a skeptic, for as is the case with all persons naturally grave, his countenance was lighted up with the sudden burst of radiance that sprang from his very soul.

The child saw it and immediately her fear seemed to take flight, and she even smiled back at him.

"Come in, boy, and see my new dolly," she said, eagerly; and that was an invitation Owen Dugdale could not have declined under any conditions.

So he who had sworn never again to set foot under the roof of the resident factor walked into his house only too willingly.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

OWEN FINDS HIMSELF A PRISONER.

The little girl, with that wonderful intuition that leads children to know who are in full sympathy with their hearts, seemed to need no other guide than that one look into his smiling face, and she was ready to trust him fully. Owen held out his hand impulsively.

"I am your cousin, Owen Dugdale. Perhaps you may have heard of me; and I want to say I'm awful glad to make your acquaintance, Jessie Ferguson. I didn't know I even had a cousin until just a short time ago this night; and I came out on purpose to see what you were like. Look! I carry a picture of my mother in this little waterproof case fastened around my neck. That is what she looked like when she was a very little girl; and you are her image. I'm glad I came back here now; something seemed to whisper to me that it was best, and I know it was her dear spirit speaking to my heart."

The child took the little locket and glanced at the face it contained, at the same time uttering a cry of delight.

"Why, it is my picture. But you said it was your mother—that must have been my Aunt Jessie! And you are my cousin, then? I have heard grandpapa speak of you. But you don't look bad, and he said—" and there she suddenly stopped, while Owen's face flushed angrily with a sudden wave of resentment.

"What did he say—I want you to tell me?" he asked imperiously.

"I wish I hadn't spoken—he said you were a willful, headstrong boy—there; but I think he didn't know you," she answered, clinging to his hand in a confiding way that gave Owen the joy of his life.

With that he laughed, this time aloud.

"I guess he knows the Gregory spirit all right. I am headstrong; yes, and willful, too, for I wouldn't be a Gregory otherwise. But don't let us talk any more about that. Show me your new dolly. I don't know anything about dolls, and never had one in my hands in all my life, for you see we didn't have a little girl in our home, and the neighbors were miles off. But I'd like to know your dolly. I heard you singing her to sleep. Ain't you afraid all this talking might wake her up?" he went on.

"Oh, no. She sleeps so soundly you see. I can do anything with her and she never cries. There, take her for a little while, Cousin Owen. How funny it is to know a real and true cousin. I never met one before; but I wanted to. I get awful lonely sometimes, for you see it's only me and grandpapa at the table; and he is so busy he can't play much with a little girl like me. Won't you stay here and be my real cousin? I don't think I'd mind it much if there was only somebody like you to talk with me. I get so tired being alone; and dolly won't answer me; she lets me do all the talking."

This ingenuous manner of speech, perhaps a trifle oldish in its way for a wee lassie of less than eight, acted like magic upon the heart of the desolate boy, who had known no home ever since his mother passed over to the Far Beyond; he then and there mentally vowed that he would settle this business before he turned in that night; and it was already a foregone conclusion as to what his decision must be—he could not bear the thought that he would never see this little fairy again.

"I'll think of it, Jessie—you'll let me call you cousin, won't you?" he said.

"Why, of course; we are cousins, ain't we? And you must be sure to say you'll stay, because I know grandpapa wants you; he told me so. He is getting old, and we worries a lot about me, just as if anybody would want to run away with a poor little child like me; but I heard him say that if Owen was only here to be with me he'd feel so much more contented. So you see you must stay, because grandpapa wants you to, and I want you ever so much, and dolly—don't hold dolly that way, boy. All the blood will run to her head, poor thing. I'll show you how you must do it," and like a wise little mother she took the imperiled one in her arms, held her close to her heart and began crooning so sweetly that Owen was enraptured more than ever. Here was a revelation, and it had come upon him as suddenly as a shooting star bursts upon the vision of the night watcher, and goes swiftly speeding down the heavens amid the spangled hosts of other worlds.

Owen had not felt so happy in the whole course of his life, for he saw before him a wonderful change in his miserable existence, and a future home amid surroundings so pleasant that he could hardly believe it could be meant for him.

Having quieted the imaginary disturbed dolly she tucked the object of her anxious care into its crib, as if doubting the expediency of allowing her in the clumsy grip of this newly found cousin until he had been given a few lessons on the way to hold little girls' babies.

"Now," she said, having patted the clothes that covered the object of her solicitude with a careful hand, "we can talk a little, if you will be sure not to speak too loud. Grandpapa often wakes her when he comes in, his voice is so awful gruff; but then he never means to and is always so sorry. He grabs us both up, but he kisses me more than he does my poor dolly."

Owen thought grandpapa was a very sensible old man, after all, and that given the opportunity he believed, indeed, he knew, that he would show the same partiality.

He was not quite ready to face the old factor as yet; before that came about he wanted to be by

himself and look the matter calmly in the face, so as to decide once and for all, though deep down in his soul the boy knew that this self-scrutiny must be pretty much of a farce, since he would never be content to go away now and see this cunning little fairy cousin no more.

Still, he did not want Alexander Gregory to come in suddenly and find him there, so he considered that, having made the acquaintance of Jessie, he had better leave.

If she chose she could tell the old man of his visit and that would break the matter gently, so that when it came time for Owen to face his grandfather the factor would be prepared to extend the olive branch, if so inclined.

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"Now I must be going, Cousin Jessie; I'm glad to have made the acquaintance of your wonderful dolly, but more than that to know you, and I hope to see you again tomorrow. Kiss your dolly for me when she wakes, won't you?" he said, with another of those smiles that had quite won the heart of the demure little maid.

"Why, of course, if you give me one for her," she remarked, without the slightest affectation, and as if it were the most natural thing for one cousin to thus salute another on parting.

Well, he did, with the greatest pleasure he had ever known without any exception, and if the kiss were a bit bunglingly given that could be excused on the plea of lack of experience.

And with the pressure of those rosebud lips against his went the last lingering gleam of Owen's former resolution to hold resentment against the factor, because of his harsh treatment of the mother whose memory he treasured.

So he went out again into the night air, but it was no longer the same Owen as of yore who looked up to the star-bedecked sky—many a time and oft he had found sighs welling from his heart as he contemplated the heavens and speculated upon what little of hope the future held for him; but now he was thrilled with joy and peace such as he had never known.

200

He sauntered around for a time trying to collect his thoughts, but there were so many things to distract his attention within the great stockade that he concluded it would be advisable to walk outside, where he could be really alone with his reflections.

Before doing so, however, he could not resist the temptation to steal back once more for another glimpse of the little fairy under the factor's roof, so that he could carry the picture with him while he settled the momentous question.

Perhaps he felt a vague sense of its all having been a dream, and wished to thus reassure himself as to the reality.

Be that as it might, some subtle power took him back to the vicinity of the door through which he had first caught his glimpse of Jessie, the flower of Fort Harmony. For the first time he believed the post to be well named, after all.

All seemed to be quiet in that part of the stockade, and as he did not wish any one to see what he was doing, Owen carefully made out to avoid contact with such of the habitues of the post who might still be wandering about.

201

Thus he came to where he could look through the still open door.

The child was there, and seemed to be holding her precious dolly in her arms as she rocked to and fro in a little chair; and Owen smiled to see that every now and then the diminutive maid would bend down and kiss the inanimate face with the greatest vigor.

Perhaps she was keeping her word and giving dolly the salute this new and "awfully nice" cousin had left for her.

The picture was something worth while carrying with him as he went out to commune with his thoughts and decide on his future.

Owen was just about tearing himself away, much against his will, when he became aware of a strange thing.

Apparently some one else was hovering around that darkened part of the stockade with the express purpose of peeping in at the door and feasting their eyes on the pretty picture disclosed, for he discovered a head between himself and the opening and which certainly did not belong to the old factor by any means.

The man wore a skin cap and must belong to the brigade of trappers working for the company, else why should he be here; but what right had he prowling around at the back of the factor's dwelling at this time of night?

202

Owen felt indignation taking hold of him, and this was increased tenfold when to his surprise he saw that the individual was actually beginning to glide noiselessly through the doorway.

It may be all very right for a *cousin* to do this, especially when invited by the little lady of the room to enter and make the acquaintance of her new doll, but in another it must appear a crime.

So Owen stood there, quivering with suspense and indignation, hardly knowing what he ought to do under the circumstances.

Who was this individual and by what right did he dare to enter here?

When the light fell upon his face Owen saw that so far as he was concerned the other was a stranger, and a man with gray streaks in his beard; but that put the boy no wiser than before.

Unconsciously Owen began to advance closer to the open door, as if he believed it might devolve upon him to act as the child's protector, although in one sense it seemed ridiculous to suspect that danger could menace her, here in the domain of her grandfather, the factor, whose word was law.

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The man glided forward and seemed to speak to the child, for Owen saw her turn and survey him wonderingly; then it seemed as if she shrank back when the man put out his arms, still speaking in a wheedling tone, and Owen could see Jessie shaking her little head in a decided negative in answer to his questions—evidently the intruder was well known to her, but at the same time she seemed to have no good opinion of him, and again and again repulsed his advances, each time more decidedly, until the man lost all discretion and proceeded to show a different side to his nature.

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CHAPTER XIX.

FOR SO IT WAS WRITTEN.

Without warning the man suddenly sprang forward and seized the child in his arms; evidently fearing lest she scream and betray his presence, he instantly clapped one hand over her mouth.

She struggled desperately, but was as an infant in his clutch; and turning, he started to leave the room, evidently expecting to be able to get out of the stockade without being seen, since the hour to close the big gates would not arrive for some little time.

Owen, bursting with indignation and anger, sprang to intercept the man, who up to this very moment had not been aware of the fact that his attempt at kidnapping had been witnessed.

When he felt the hands of the boy upon him the fellow uttered a low but venomous oath, and seeing that he could not defend himself against this enemy with both his hands employed in holding the child, who had now swooned in her terror, he dropped little Jessie to the floor and turned upon his antagonist like an enraged lynx.

Owen was only a half-grown lad, but he had lived a strenuous life, and his muscles were developed to a point where he was almost equal to a man in strength, so that it was no weakling the fellow tackled when he thus fiercely tried to tear himself free so that he could escape ere the factor or some of his minions arrived upon the scene, attracted by the sound of the scuffle.

205

He struggled desperately, but Owen still clung to him like a leech, bent upon holding him until help came, for he believed this wretch should be punished for his vile attempt to kidnap the sweet child.

Finding that he was having more trouble to break away than he had expected the man resorted to other means of influencing the boy besides brute strength.

"Let go of me, you fool! I am that child's father, Angus Ferguson, d'ye hear? Is it a crime for me to want to see my own? Let go, or by heaven I'll murder you, boy. I know you—I heard the men talking about you, Owen Dugdale, and ye should be the last to try and hold me for that devil, Alexander Gregory. Let go, I say! Do ye not hear them coming? Shall I kill ye here and now?" he cried, hoarsely, as he put forth all his great power to break the other's hold.

Yes, Owen did hear them coming, men on the run, men who were calling out to each other and to the factor to hasten; and he was more than ever determined that this wretch should not escape.

206

What if he were the father of little Jessie, she and her mother had long ago repudiated him, and his mission here could not but menace the child with evil.

No matter who he was, he must remain to give an account of his intentions to the czar of the region around the Saskatchewan.

So Owen continued to hang on, harkening not to the grumbled threats of the desperate man with whom he wrestled.

All the other now considered was escape, and to that end he was exerting every atom of strength he possessed; twice had he brought his clenched fist into contact with the boy's head; but at such close quarters the blow was not nearly so effective as it would have otherwise been, and at any rate, it only caused him to clench his hands the more rigidly, until it seemed that, like the grip of the bulldog, only death could make him let go.

And it was thus they were found when several men belonging to the company rushed in at the

door, headed by the factor himself.

They precipitated themselves upon the struggling couple immediately and tore them apart, the factor staring hard first at Owen and then at the other, who was breathing hard from his exertions, yet glaring in rage at the grizzled Scotchman.

One look Gregory took at the figure of little Jessie on the floor and he seemed to comprehend the whole of the man's iniquity.

"Angus Ferguson here! And ye would have kidnapped the child given to me by the court's decree, ye villain! It's nae gude ye would have been intendin' to the wee bairn. I thought ye dead ere now, but its scotched and not killed ye must hae been by that forest fire twa year back. But now I'll see to it that ye do no mair harm in this section. I hae got ye whar I want ye at last, ye contemptible dog," exclaimed the factor, unconsciously in his excitement reverting back in some degree to his brogue.

"Can ye blame the fatherly instinct that urged me to come here, knowing as I did that I took my life in my hand?" growled the other, sullenly.

"Fatherly instinct be hanged. Ye never knew what it was in the past. Always hae ye been a rogue, with a double tongue in your head. Fatherly instinct, in faith, I hae a gude idea ye meant to carry off the child, if naething more than to stab me, whom ye hate like poison?" said Gregory, and his words burned like a scorpion's sting, for the man burst out into a string of oaths.

"And I would have succeeded if it hadn't been for this meddling young fool, this son of the daughter you thrust out of your flinty heart. He held me here, curse him! I defy you, Gregory! Do your worst with me. Not another word do you get out of me now," and he shut his teeth hard as if the tortures of the Inquisition might not force him to speak.

The factor shot one look at Owen, a look that was benign, even full of hearty thanksgiving, and it was evident that by his act of that night the lad had fully bridged the gulf that had lain between them; he held the whip hand now, and it would be his grandfather who would be suing for forgiveness ere another sun had gone down.

"Fatherly love ye say, Angus Ferguson? I do not believe it. There was another motive that brought ye here the night. My scouts hae told me that ye were with the crowd that camps on our land, and so I know ye are hand and glove with those who are at war with me. It was as a spy ye came here to see what we meant to do. If it were war times ye should meet death for such an act; as it is, the law has a claim on ye, and I'll do my best to see that it is satisfied. Ye shall be kept close in the dungeon under this house until I have a chance to send ye to the headquarters of the mounted police. Men, take him away and see that he is properly searched before ye leave him. I would not put it past the scoundrel to fire the house and burn us all in our beds if so be he could."

While some of the hardly trappers were dragging the prisoner away to confine him according to the directions they had received, Gregory bent over the form of the little girl, whom he took tenderly in his arms and kissed with a passion that told of the hold she had upon his heart.

Jessie was coming to and opened her blue eyes at this moment, shrinking closer to her grandfather and hugging her arms about his neck; then she peeped timidly around as if in search of the bad parent who had tried to get her to desert this precious home she loved so well.

Owen, seeing that she was unharmed, turned to leave, but her eyes caught sight of him and she called his name.

"Cousin Owen, please get my dolly for me; she's afraid to be alone," she said; and obediently the lad stepped forward to obey, while old Gregory smiled to see that the little queen of the post had found another loyal subject who was ready to cater abjectly to her petty whims.

"Boy," he said, as Owen flashed him a glance ere going out; "I must see you in the morning. You must not think of going hence, for here you belong to this little girl and to me! Stay with us; let us show by our love what sorrow for the past has done for me. Your act this night has bound you to us in chains that must not be lightly broken. Owen, lad, you will find that the old iron spirit can be easily bent now. Do not leave us; we need you, both Jessie and I."

Owen felt a lump in his throat, and tears in his eyes, which seemed to him such a childish sensation that he could not bear they should notice it; so abruptly wheeling he dashed from the room. But as he went he heard that sweet childish voice calling after him:

"Cousin Owen, say you will stay, please; we want you, dolly and me!"

He was shaking with the emotion that had almost overpowered him and yet his boyish heart seemed to be filled with satisfaction and delight over the way all things had come about.

That strong and desperate man had not been able to make him yield an inch, and yet here he was ready to fall down and admit himself a prisoner, simply because a child had called him "cousin."

He felt that he could not go back to the tent while in such a disturbed state of mind, and accordingly wandered away to where he might be alone, with the quiet stars looking down upon him from above.

How many times in the past had he stood under this same starry heavens and wrestled with the problems that beset his way; but never with the tingling sensation of new-found happiness that

now filled his whole being.

As he stood there in the stillness some distance away from the outer walls of the grim stockade Owen seemed to feel that the spirit of his gentle mother was with him again, and he knew she would approve of the resolve he had made since learning about the cousin, of whose existence up to now he had never known.

And while he stood there a star swept like a glorious meteor across the wide expanse of the night sky, filling his soul with awe, for it seemed to him as though he had thus been given a sign from heaven that his course met with approval there among the shining ones above.

Long he stood there and pondered, not that he had need to take himself to task, because his course was already mapped out, but the gates of the past had been opened by these discoveries, and he could in imagination see his mother walking about these scenes she had so often described to him, a fair young girl, with golden hair and blue eyes, so like the cherub who was doubtless still in the loving arms of her doting grandfather, the stern czar of the Hudson Bay post. 212

So had it all come out right, events being guided by some mysterious power that shaped them to the best end, and Owen was satisfied.

When he finally turned about, since the hour was getting very late, and started to once more enter through the gates which would soon be closed, he heaved a sigh, but not of anxiety or grief; rather did his spirit rejoice that the long battle with his better nature was over at last and that the right had won out.

How wonderful were the ways of Providence after all, and how small must the plans of mortal man seem in comparison; he had been brought back to the post really against his will, and yet see what had come of it; already had he been enabled by his presence to save the sweet child from falling into the hands of her unscrupulous father, and thus won the heart of the old factor as he could have done in no other way. 213

And Owen had not a single regret as he turned in at the gate, and headed for that corner of the stockade where the tent that was to serve them as a shelter had been erected earlier in the evening.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TENT DWELLERS.

Somehow Cuthbert could not get to sleep.

He was constantly thinking of Owen and his fortunes, weaving castles in the air that might be fulfilled, providing the sturdy young Canuck could be convinced that it was right and proper for him to become reconciled with his grandfather, and let bygones be forgotten.

So an hour or two passed.

Cuthbert finally arose and cast his blanket aside, for he had not made use of his sleeping bag on this night.

Stepping out of the tent he looked around; the night was fair and not a sign of trouble could be detected in atmosphere or sky, for the heavenly monitors shone overhead with their usual brilliancy, and there was not much of a tang in the drowsy night wind.

Cuthbert thought it suspiciously quiet, knowing how it often grows calm before a storm.

Really he was beginning to feel worried a bit about the non-appearance of Owen, when he caught the soft sound of footsteps and the object of his solicitude appeared close by.

"Hello, keeping watch?" he asked, a little surprised to find one of his companions up and looking around. 215

"No, I just happened to wake up, and not finding you in the shack, crept out to take a peep around, and see if there was any sign of your coming. I had begun to fear our mutual friends, Stackpole and Dubois, might have waylaid you, old fellow; but now I see I was wrong. You've been taking a bit of exercise, no doubt—didn't get enough on our way here, eh? It did me up, all right, and I was glad to drop down and rest. Now you're in camp I'll resume my nap," answered Cuthbert, leaving it to the other as to whether he wanted to explain.

Owen seemed a trifle confused, but he was a straightforward fellow and without a trace of guile in his make-up.

"To confess the truth, Cuthbert, I hung around for a long time to get a glimpse of that little

cousin you spoke of, and fortune was kind enough to let me see her several times. Just as you say, she looks like a fairy and somehow made me think of a picture I have of my mother when she was young. I had quite a little talk with her, too, which made it very pleasant. And while I'm about it I might as well own up that the sight of her, together with the thoughts swarming into my mind, caused me to finally wander off into the woods, where alone I could fight the whole thing out and come to such a conclusion as the mother I loved would have had me do. It's been a hard tussle, I tell you, but I think I've won out," he said, with a quiver in his voice, and it was easy to see that the lad had been recently racked by emotions that for some time he had succeeded in keeping under restraint.

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Cuthbert understood better than words could have told him what the nature of that battle under the stars must have been, and to show his sympathy for this new but dear chum he impulsively thrust out his hand and gripped that of Owen.

"I'm awful glad to know it—say no more, old fellow, for I can give a pretty good guess how it turned out. Come, tumble into your blankets and get some of your beauty sleep. There's another day coming, when I hope all of these twists and misunderstandings may be smoothed out and everything look bully. Now, crawl in and feel for your nest—it's on the side to the right, first blanket."

"Wait a bit," said Owen, "there's something else you ought to know. Perhaps you heard all that racket awhile ago. Well, I was partly the cause of that," and then he went on to tell the wondering Cuthbert what a strange thing had occurred while he was still lingering near the room that held Jessie Ferguson.

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The Virginia lad was also pleased, because he knew the reconciliation could not be much longer delayed, and presently he lay down once more to sleep.

Owen was accustomed to turning in all standing, as a sailor would say—that is, with simply pulling off his boots or moccasins, whichever he chanced to be wearing, for a life in the woods does not allow of the customary preparations for bed; even the other two boys only removed their outer garments, though when the weather had been milder Cuthbert had indulged in the delight of pajamas; but the first frost had chilled his ardor in that line, and he had gradually come to copying Eli, who had the habits of the loggers of the great Michigan woods and waived all ceremony.

When ten minutes had passed Cuthbert fancied from the regular breathing that came from the spot where the Canadian lad lay that he was far along the road to the Land of Nod, and giving a satisfied grunt, he himself turned over, to let himself slip away on the tide.

Those who spend much time in the woods, in camps are restless during the night, and rarely sleep through without once or twice arousing, lifting their head to listen through habit or caution, or even crawling out to renew the fire.

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True, there was no need of these things now with our boys, but nevertheless Cuthbert seemed to rest under the impression that it would not be a good thing to break a settled habit, and so about one o'clock in the morning he poked his head out of the tent to take a perfunctory look around, just as an old and tarry sailor, from habit, jerks his head up while passing along the street of a city, not so much to survey the skyscrapers that tower above him, but from sheer habit of glancing aloft at the shivering sails of the old hooker upon which he labors twenty hours of the day.

He found that the sky was covered with clouds, and there was beginning to be quite some wind—indeed, it may have been a corner of the tent which was whipping monotonously in each rising gust that had aroused him.

Anyhow, he bent down and secured the flapping end, so that it would not awaken the others with its antics, after which he took another survey of the situation and again crawled under cover, convinced that by the dawn they might anticipate a storm of some kind.

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It was a bit pleasant to know that they were now in such a decent sort of shelter and could keep quite dry, no matter how the rain came down, and if it so happened that the first real touch of winter was sprung upon them, why surely it would not be hard to keep cozy, with plenty of wood to burn and a storehouse so close at hand, from which any amount of provisions could be obtained, since he possessed the "open sesame" in the way of cash.

He thought he heard Owen move as he crawled back into the tent again, but was not quite positive, and he did not want to arouse both of the others, in case they were asleep, by asking questions.

The last he remembered after that for some time was of lying there and listening to the increasing moan of the wind among the tops of the great hemlocks that stood close by the corner of the stockade; it seemed after a time like a lullaby soothing him to sleep, for Cuthbert was too old a hand at this sort of game to allow himself to grow nervous over the coming of a little whirl, such as this no doubt would prove to be.

Then he lost consciousness and slept heavily, unmindful of the wind, the mournful hoot of a great northern owl in the dead tree nearby, or even the howls of big gray timber wolves grown bold with the nearness of winter.

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CHAPTER XXI

AT DEAD OF NIGHT.

Some one, violently shaking him, brought Cuthbert once more to his senses, and he aroused to the fact that it was Eli, who kept shouting in his ear:

"Wake up—wake up, there's the dickens to pay—pile out and help, old man—they need us bad—get up, I say, get up!"

That was certainly quite sufficient to thoroughly arouse any one, no matter if he had been a sluggard, and surely Cuthbert could never be called that; so, with a toss of the blankets, he scrambled to his feet; then, remembering that he was in his socks, he hastened to snatch up his boots and pull them on.

All this only took a few seconds of time, but during the brief period Cuthbert was dazed with the awful clamor that was making the welkin ring without, for it seemed as though every known sound had been accumulated to help carry out the idea that Gabriel was blowing his last trumpet, with the end of the world close at hand.

He knew men were shouting madly, and from the voices it was plain that those who thus gave tongue were both Cree Indians and Canadian *voyageurs*, for the latter had gone back to their French tongue with the advent of excitement—then it struck the Virginia lad that another sound which he had heard was very much along the line of the roaring flames, and immediately the conviction forced itself upon him that in some manner the forest close by had been fired, perhaps by some enemy of the factor, such as Dubois or Stackpole, and that there was danger of the conflagration leaping the barrier and attacking the houses within the compound.

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No sooner had he thrust his nose outside the tent than he gave utterance to an exclamation of mingled surprise and consternation.

It was a fire all right, but not of the species he had suspected—the roaring sound was produced by the wind whipping the flames into the angry flood, but it was hewn timber, not erect trees, that were ablaze, one of the houses, in fact, with an end a seething mass of flames.

Cuthbert knew not what to think, save that possibly some enemy had done this; but he was quick to lend his aid to save whatever the contents might be.

Accordingly he hastened in that quarter.

Already he had discovered that while he slept a storm had swept down upon the region of the Saskatchewan, and was howling through the forest and over the waters with demoniac glee, though as yet not a drop of rain had fallen, or a flake of snow descended, though one or the other must come in time.

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But that mad breeze was a bad thing for a fire, since it would whip the flames until they tore loose from all human control, to carry ruin in their train.

Cuthbert was not alone in his rush toward the burning building, since from various directions human figures were to be seen centering in that quarter, for the employes of the fur company were certainly loyal and willing to do all that men might in order to save property or lives.

At first Cuthbert imagined that it was the storehouse, and while the burning of its contents might cause some inconvenience, there was still time to replenish the stock before winter set in fully, so that it seemed to be only a question of a money loss at the most.

But as he advanced, his eyes trying to pierce the cloud of smoke that hung all about the burning building, he began to sense the import of the wild cries that were being uttered about him, a Cree shouting to a *voyageur*, or it might be one of the French halfbreeds to a fellow, and as the nature of their shouts broke in upon his intelligence, he felt a new thrill of alarm.

224

It was not the store building, but the residence portion that was afire, and Cuthbert remembered like a flash that the little cousin of Owen had her quarters there, as well as the old factor.

He looked around hurriedly, expecting to see both close by, but to his horror failed to do so.

What could it mean—where was the sturdy head of the post, the Scotchman, who, despite his age, had seemed to the boys so like an oak—was it possible, after all, there could be something fiendish back of this conflagration, and that Alexander Gregory had been first of all stricken in his house before the match was applied?

It was an awful thought, enough to make Cuthbert's blood run cold, but before he could communicate his fears to any one he heard a roar as of a lion, and saw the factor come tumbling through smoke and flame—he rolled over upon the earth once or twice, while the Virginia lad fairly held his breath in suspense, fearing that the valiant old chap might have received his death

wound while battling with the flames; then, to the delight of Cuthbert, the factor struggled to his feet and began to hobble around as if he had a broken leg, meanwhile shouting out orders in that foghorn voice that made men spring to obey.

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But the little one. Where was she? The factor evidently believed Jessie must have come forth some time back, for he was not ordering the men to *try* and save the stricken building, but to devote their energies toward keeping the flames away from the storehouse.

Even as Cuthbert watched as in a dream he saw the factor try to walk, but immediately fall down, to be assisted to his feet again by a couple of the men.

Then came a flying figure up to his side—it was Owen, who had once vowed never to speak to this relative again so long as he lived, but whom Cuthbert knew had just recently repented of this resolution and was ready to meet his grandfather half way in the morning.

He seemed to seize upon the old man and shout something at him—just what it was Cuthbert could not hear, so furious was the whoop of the wind and the roar of the sweeping flames; but he guessed it to the dot, for he knew beyond a doubt that the Canadian lad was demanding to be told where the girl slept, for she had not been seen since the fire broke out.

Old Gregory became a frantic man on the spot, for his whole life was wrapped up in the little fairy; he tried to rush forward himself, but went down in a heap, struggled to his knees, with Owen gripping his arm fiercely and continuing to shrill that question into his ear, until at last in despair the old factor thrust out his hand and with quivering finger pointed at the end of the burning domicil, being utterly unable to frame a single word, speech failing him.

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It was quite enough for Owen.

Like an arrow shot from the bow he sped straight into the smoke and flame.

Cuthbert gave a gasp and feared he had seen the last of his new chum, but he felt a thrill of admiration because of the daring act—it was worth while to realize that his first estimation of the Canadian lad had been correct, and that when the occasion called for an exhibition of valor Owen had risen to meet it in a way that must excite admiration among all men who honored true bravery.

The picture was one that would never fade from the mind of Cuthbert—leaning up against one of the palisades Alexander Gregory seemed turned into stone, as he watched the spot where the lad had vanished, wringing his hands in the intensity of his anxiety—twice he made a spasmodic movement as though intending to hobble forward and plunge into that vortex of fierce flame himself, but each time a groan was forced from his lips when he discovered that his leg was really useless, the sprain being serious.

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Cuthbert wished he knew of something that he could do to assist, but since the other had vanished there was no sign, and to simply follow after him would mean a triple tragedy, an altogether useless sacrifice.

Eli was at his elbow and together they pushed as close to the burning walls as possible, eagerly scanning the windows above for the first sign of Owen and meanwhile shouting at some halfbreeds, who were staggering under the weight of a ladder which they had found close by and guessed might be useful in some sort of an emergency.

Cuthbert held his breath.

He really had very little hope of ever seeing his new friend again, for there did not seem to be one chance in a dozen for any one to issue forth from that fiery furnace alive, since this was not the day of miracles.

It was like an age to him, though in all probability but a minute had really crept by since Owen vanished through the doorway, and yet during that interval the fire had gained more headway, despite all efforts of the gathered employes of the Hudson Bay Company to smother it with water, pumped through a hose and by means of an old hand engine kept against just such an emergency.

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A hand gripped Cuthbert's arm and turning his head quickly he found that it was Eli who had thus unconsciously caught hold of him—possibly the tremendous excitement had weakened the backwoods lad, so that he clutched at support; but he was staring upward toward one of the windows, as though some movement might have caught his attention there.

His campmate naturally enough cast his eyes in the same quarter, as if sudden hope had sprung into existence; but it was to see the flames shoot out of the window in a manner that must have utterly precluded the possibility of Owen making an exit there.

Cuthbert groaned aloud, filled with dismay—it was a horrible thought thus thrust upon his mind, for there is something unusually agonizing in a death by fire; and it seemed as though the last chance had gone when the demon of the flames thrust his grinning visage out of that window.

Then Eli gave vent to a sudden shout close to his ear, so that he heard what was said even above the frightful roar of the wind and crackle of flames:

"The roof—look up yonder over the eaves—hurra, he's got her—bully for Owen, I say!" was what Eli shrieked.

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Wonderful to say, the brave Canadian lad had indeed pushed out through some sort of trap or scuttle in the sloping roof, the presence of which seemed to be unknown to him; and just as Eli had declared, he was carrying a little limp figure in his stout and willing arms, none other than his cousin Jessie, the darling of the old factor's heart.

Cuthbert was stricken dumb for the moment, it all seemed so like the hand of Providence directing things so that the wandering boy might come into his own.

Gregory gave out a cry that was more like a roar of exultation, for he had been down in the depths of despair, and the sight of his lissome lassie still in the land of the living acted like a spur upon him—he stretched out his arms in the direction of those upon the roof, and again endeavored to hasten toward them, only to fall over once more helpless upon the ground.

Then Cuthbert awoke to the fact that while his chum had done a bold thing, and for the moment cheated the flames of their intended sacrifice, he was not yet safe, for all around the flashing tongues of fire gathered for a last effort at accomplishing the dread work, so that the twain above seemed hemmed in.

So Cuthbert shouted to those who carried the hose, and forced them to turn the stream of water upon one spot where the fire was weakest; rushing at those who were staggering forward bearing the ladder, he seized hold of the blessed thing and urged them to raise it against the wall at that particular point.

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CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

Eli was determined to be in the game, too, and while his chum was thus engaged in creating a chance for the escape of the two upon the roof, the boy from the timber region hustled several men forward, bearing armfuls of pelts that others had just drawn from the lower floor of the house—they were especially costly skins, and the lot might be worth a duke's ransom; but at the moment, with those two precious lives in peril, to the anxious factor they were as dross, and he would only too willingly have stood the loss of the whole kit could he by this means have saved the one so dear to his old heart.

With these Eli meant to fashion some sort of buffer, that would break the fall should the couple above find themselves compelled to jump; and it was a splendid scheme to be formed on the spur of that dreadful moment, one that Cuthbert never could forget, or cease to praise.

Meanwhile, he was pretty busily employed at his own affair, placing the ladder against the building, and directing those who had held the hose to keep the stream of water chasing up and down that particular quarter.

Owen could not see everything that was being tried; but he knew fairly well what they intended he should do, and once assured of the presence of the ladder, he did not hesitate about using the same.

What if the fiery fingers did snatch after him as if furious at being cheated of their prey—the blessed stream of water, cold with the frosty breath of the approaching winter, showered about him, and saved them both from even a serious burn.

Cuthbert was waiting at the foot of the ladder, ready to spring up and render quick assistance if it was necessary; but Owen still remained in possession of his powers, and gripped the little girl securely in his arms.

It was as if a new life had suddenly opened up to the lonely lad—this one whom he had saved from the deadly gas and fire was his own kith and kin, daughter of his mother's sister; and the very touch of the girl's senseless form was able to send a thrill of exultation through him.

Cuthbert did not attempt to take the burden from him, for he understood just what it meant for Owen to bring the girl to her grandfather by himself; so he fell in behind, calling to the men to desist with their stream, to turn it upon the storehouse, while others gathered up the costly skins that had been thrown down with such good intent.

Alexander Gregory had struggled to his feet again—little did he heed the pains that accompanied his sprain, even though the misadventure crippled him for the time being, and rendered it difficult to stand without help; for his attention was wholly taken up with that still little form that Owen was hugging in his stalwart and affectionate arms.

Jessie had been almost smothered by the smoke; but her rescuer, knowing how perilous such a thing might be, had been careful to wrap something around her head, so that after that the atmosphere reached her less permeated by noxious gases; and when Owen gained the ground she had so far recovered as to struggle enough to free her head from this enveloping mantle, and

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make a movement as though desirous of being released.

But Owen, partly overcome himself by the smoke he had taken into his lungs, did not fully understand, and staggering up to the old factor he held out his burden, gasping:

"Here she is, grandfather, safe and sound!"

Cuthbert held his breath, and then suddenly gave vent to a shout of joy; for just as he hoped, even if he did not wholly expect it to occur, the factor, wild with delight and thankfulness, simply stretched his arms and gathered into his embrace both girl and lad. 234

Owen was a wanderer no more; but had found his own in the heart of his grandsire. It was a splendid ending to the little forest drama, and Cuthbert was the happiest fellow on the face of the earth at that moment; for he had in the short time he had known Owen grown to feel very warmly toward the manly young Canadian, and nothing that could have happened to himself might have given him one-half the pleasure that this final scene did.

Eli was a demonstrative chap, and he just squatted down on the spot and cried for very joy; while he did not know the satisfaction of a home himself, still he could rejoice over the fact that his friend had ceased to belong to the grand order of nomads.

There was still considerable to do, in order to keep the fire within bounds, for while the living quarters of the factor had gone too far to be saved, there remained other buildings, some containing stores of great value, and unless the employes of the company were smart the post would be practically wiped out.

So Cuthbert led them to the assault, and fought fire as valiantly as ever any member of an engine company in a crack tournament could have done in order that his town might win the grand prize offered. 235

The hose proved valuable enough; but only for the assistance of the wind possibly there might have been another story to tell when the fire finally ceased its mad antics through lack of fuel—it chanced that the breeze was blowing away from the other buildings, and while the stockade caught, it could be easily extinguished.

Of course the factor had met with quite a serious loss; but he seemed to care mighty little about this, since his precious darling had been spared; as far as the other things went they could be easily duplicated before the rigor of winter had fully settled down upon the Saskatchewan country, and he was well able to stand the penalty in dollars and cents.

Then there was the pride he took in the valiant rescue work of Owen; his eyes were continually turning toward the lad with a softened light in their depths, and it was evident that his heart had become exceedingly tender with respect to this wandering son of his daughter.

He several times called Owen to him to ask if he were certain that he had not received serious burns while within the blazing house; to Cuthbert it was plain that this was in part a subterfuge to have the other near him, since his sprained ankle prevented him from moving about. 236

When morning came he would have a heart-to-heart talk with the lad, and never again must there be a cloud allowed to rise between them—these three were all that were left of the family, now, and they must stick together.

The factor told Cuthbert what might be done to insure them some degree of comfort during the remainder of the night, and with the assistance of the other lads he saw that it was carried out.

An hour later the excitement had all died away; the spot where the house of the factor had stood only contained a pile of ruins, still smouldering, with an occasional tongue of fire shooting upward; but ere dawn this was fully extinguished by a fall of rain.

They never fully settled how the fire had caught; it may have been an accident, but there were those who believed that the prisoner had taken a hint from Alexander Gregory's bitter words and really fired the house; at any rate he had disappeared utterly, whether finding safety in flight or meeting death in the flames none could say. 237

Mr. Gregory was well enough inside of a week to accompany the boys down the big Saskatchewan to the nearest town where he could obtain those supplies which were needed to replace what the fire had devoured; they had a fine time of it swinging along with a couple of great batteaus, manned by the French-Canadian *voyageurs*, who sang their boat songs as they rowed, and made things merry around the fire at night time.

Cuthbert and Eli hated to part from the chum who had so quickly won his way to their hearts, and they readily promised to come back again to this charming country, when another year rolled around—Eli had his mind set upon working that copper mine, and Cuthbert had promised to see that the necessary capital was secured with which to provide all the paraphernalia such as is used to advantage—if his chum was of the same mind after he had roamed around the world with him.

Owen's little cousin had accompanied grandpa to town, since a "woman's judgment" was considered essential in choosing some of the household effects; and the last glimpse our twain had of dear old Owen, the erstwhile lad, was standing with his arm about Jessie, while the proud factor beamed upon them both, and waved his hat with just as much enthusiasm as the 238

youngsters.

Eli after all never found a chance to develop his copper mine, but with such a chum as Cuthbert ever with him there promised to be small need of his looking to that source as a means of travel; together they have seen nearly all the countries on the map of the world, and at present are doing South America.

Stackpole and Dubois had sense enough to cruise in other timber than that surrounding the trading post.

So Cuthbert after all had found much pleasure in the great Saskatchewan region, even though he failed to map out a new route to Alaska, or learn any of the wonderful secrets hidden in the wide stretches of barrens between the country of the Crees and the Chippewas, and the lonely Hudson Bay.

Many times would his memory go back to the scenes that embraced Owen, the stern old factor, and sweet little Jessie; and again he would live over those days and nights when they were "Canoemates in Canada."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CANOE MATES IN CANADA; OR, THREE
BOYS AFLOAT ON THE SASKATCHEWAN ***

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