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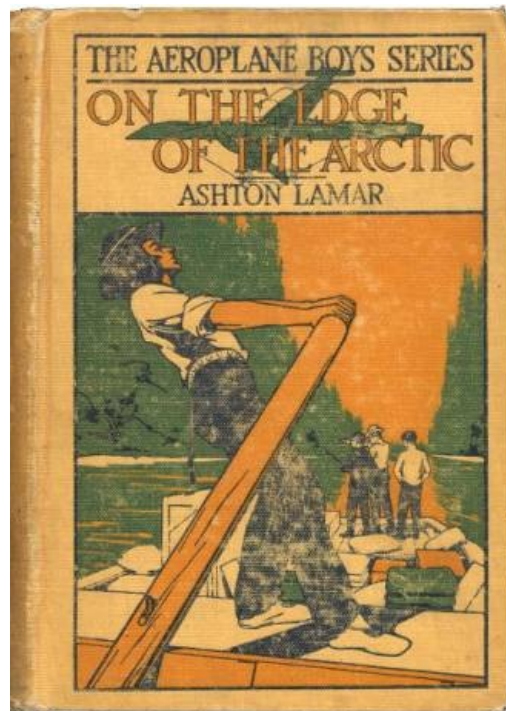
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The Aeroplane Boys Series

On the Edge of the Arctic

OR

An Aeroplane in Snowland



The *Gitchie Manitou* ready for its first flight in the Far North.

On the Edge of the Arctic

OR

An Aeroplane in Snowland

BY

ASHTON LAMAR



Illustrated by Norman P. Hall

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Chicago

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ON THE EDGE OF THE ARCTIC

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On the Edge of the Arctic OR An Aeroplane in Snowland

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING AN AIRSHIP AND COUNT ZEPT

This story, which is an account of the peculiar and marvelous adventures by which two Canadian boys—Norman Grant and Roy Moulton—achieved a sudden fame in the Arctic wilderness of the great Northwest, had its beginning in the thriving city of Calgary. The exact time was the big day of the celebrated "Stampede," Calgary's famous civic celebration. It was in July and among the many events that had drawn thousands of people to the new Northwestern metropolis, Norman and Roy were on the program as aviators and exhibitors of their new aeroplane.

These young men were born in Calgary and had lived eighteen years in that city. Since this almost covered the period of Calgary's growth from a trading post to a modern city, each young man had a knowledge of the wilderness and its romance that other boys could get only from history. This meant that they knew plainsmen, scouts, ranchmen, cowboys, hunters, trappers, and even Indians as personal friends. It meant also that they had a real knowledge of the prairies, the woods and even of the mountains. Their knowledge of these men and the land in which they lived was personal and did not come from the fanciful narratives of books of adventure.

Each boy was the son of a mechanic, men who had come into the Province of Alberta with the first railroads. And each boy was educated in all that a grammar school affords. The picturesque romance of the Northwest having been a part of the life of each, it might have been supposed that the ambitions of the two lads would have run toward mining or ranch life or even toward the inviting work of hunters or trappers.

To the gratification of their fathers, however, they fell in with the modern movement and turned toward mechanics. When the furore for aeronautics reached even far-away Calgary, the boys

found themselves passionately absorbed in all airship discoveries. Mr. Grant's position as a division mechanic of a great trunk railroad, and Mr. Moulton's "Electrical Supply Factory," gave the boys their starting point. Later, in Mr. Moulton's factory, an outbuilding was appropriated and in this place, with the approval and assistance of their fathers, the two boys finally completed an airship. This was but a spur to a renewed effort, and within a year, the boys attending school meanwhile, they finished their improved aeroplane. It was named the "*Gitchie Manitou*" or "Spirit of the Wind"—words taken from the Cree Indians.

The original ideas that resulted in this ingenious contrivance came mainly from the boys themselves. Yet they neglected no suggestions that they could find in the latest aeronautical journals. This wonderful machine was only locally known, but when the citizens of Calgary planned their local celebration, known as the "Stampede," there was knowledge among the promoters, of the just completed "*Gitchie Manitou*." It was fitting that this modern invention should be shown in contrast with all that was being collected to exhibit the past, so an arrangement was made with the young aviators to give a daily flight in the new airship.

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"It really isn't made for work of this kind," argued Norman to his companion when the suggestion was made to them, "but if it'll work in the winter in the wind and snow, as we've planned, I reckon we ought to be able to put it over in the park."

"Oh, it'll work all right," responded Roy. "But what if it does? I never quite figured out that we were to turn ourselves into showmen."

"Listen!" interrupted Grant at once. "You've got to show your goods first. It's just the place where we may meet people who will understand what it's good for."

"And even then what are we going to do?" asked Roy. "Sell it to some mail or stage contractor? To some one who works in the blizzard?"

The other boy shook his head: "I don't know," he answered slowly, "but it's certainly going to come in handy for some one. I don't know of any other machine that you can run in a snowstorm or that would be any good up here in the wilderness when the bad weather comes on. They're not going to pay us much for risking our necks, but I'm in favor of making a contract, just to see if some one doesn't come along who'll understand it."

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"Then," suggested Roy with a smile, "I suppose all that'll be left for us to do will be to sell it and go to work on another one."

"Oh, I don't know," answered young Grant slowly, "there aren't many aviators 'round here!"

"What do you mean?"

"We might get a job running it."

The other boy's eyes sparkled. "That settles it," he announced. "Let's sign up and do the best we can."

Calgary is to-day the little Chicago of the great Northwest. In the heart of it one may find the last of the old-time frontier life, while around and over this is all that makes a modern city. At this time the civic pride of the city had prompted its citizens to prepare an exhibit typical of that part of the country which, throughout Canada and the States, was also described in placards and vivid pictures as the "Stampede."

The main reason for this was that in the pushing westward of the refinements of civilization it was perhaps the last thing of its kind that could be celebrated on such a scale on this continent. The modern Provincial Fairground, lying well within the city limits of Calgary, was selected as the site of the performance. Here, when the "Stampede" finally took place, thousands of people made their way from the Western States and northwestern Canada. There were among them many theatrical producers, moving picture operators, and others especially interested in such a unique exhibit, from the far East. All could foresee possibilities that might never again be presented.

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It would bring together the last of the plainsmen, scouts, trappers, and many others who had been engaged in the conquest of the wilderness. This meant a strange mixture of the men who had made possible the romance of both western America and the wide Canadian Northwest. There were to be full-blood Indians, half-breeds, and that curious mixture of foreigners who had made their way through the fur-bearing North by way of frozen Hudson's Bay. The men would be there who had traveled through pathless woods, who had found and named rivers and who had scaled unknown mountain peaks—many of them in the leather coats and moccasins of old days.

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Where it was possible, these survivors of a period now gone were to bring with them the weapons of the frontier and the implements of camp life. There were to be stage coaches and freight wagons of the prairies, relics of the trail and the paraphernalia of the frontier.

The program of the Stampede included the exhibition of these people and their old-time life as well as it could be reproduced. Horses noted for their viciousness, Mexican bulls especially selected for their savageness, and the untamed range cayuse, were to exhibit the prowess of the horsemen. With these, the Indians and their families were to copy the life of the woods in the tepee and the movements on the trail.

Having concluded a contract to become participants in this unique affair, Norman Grant and Roy Moulton developed an interest in it that they did not know they possessed. To them most of it was an old story. But, having superintended the erection of an aerodrome on the edge of the

open field inside the race track, they were surprised at the interest they began to take in the many curious people who soon began to arrive and install themselves in tents and cabins.

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The exhibition was to last one week. On Monday morning of Stampede week, while the two boys were engaged in installing the aeroplane, Roy suddenly disappeared. He was gone over a half hour and when he returned, flushed with some new enthusiasm, he found his chum Norman much disgruntled. The machine had been set up before Roy left and he had stolen away while Norman was working with the engine.

"Everything all right?" asked Roy a little guiltily as he observed his companion seated on a box, a half scowl on his face.

"I guess so," answered Grant without a smile. "At least, I did all I could, *alone*."

"I didn't think there was much to do," exclaimed Roy apologetically. "I had something I wanted to do—I'd have asked you to go, but I didn't think you'd care. I've been to see those La Biche rivermen."

"Where's La Biche, and what rivermen?"

"Oh, you know, Lac la Biche, way up country, where the rivermen come from."

"I don't know anything about 'em—you mean 'scow men'?"

"Of course," answered Roy, taking off his coat. "I wanted to see 'em and I knew they got in last night. I've met all kind of Indians, but these old boatmen don't get down this way very often."

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"Why'd you think I didn't care?" asked the other boy. "If you mean a real old batteau steersman, I never saw one either. I reckon I'd have gone a few hundred yards to see one of 'em if he's the real goods. Since the steamboats came in, I thought they'd all played out. Are these fellows half-breeds or full-bloods?"

"Don't make any mistake about 'em!" responded Roy eagerly. "I've seen all kinds of Indians but these are some I never did see. They're all right, too. If there's anything about a canoe or a flatboat that they don't know, I guess nobody can tell it to 'em."

"They'll have a fine time doing any paddling or steering around here in this race track," suggested Norman gruffly. "How are they goin' to show 'em off? But what do they look like?"

"They're not wearing Indian togs much," explained Roy, taking a seat by his friend, "and I've never seen real old full-blood Indian rivermen, but I know these fellows look like 'em. But I'd change their names if I was going to put 'em on the program."

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"Don't sound Indian enough?" suggested Norman. "Full-bloods never do seem to have real Indian names. Seems like all the loafin' half-breeds take the best names."

"Anyway," went on Roy, "these men are John Martin, or old 'Moosetooth,' and William La Biche."

"Moosetooth and La Biche are all right," commented Norman. "Do they wear shoes?"

"No," explained Roy, "they're in moccasins—plain mooseskin wrapped around the ankles. You'd know 'em by that. And they both carry the Cree tobacco pouch, with the long tassels hanging out of their hip pocket—so they can find the pouch in the dark, I suppose."

"And black Stetson hats?" added Norman, "with big silver buttons all around the leather band?"

"Sure!" answered the other boy. "But you ought to see their arms. Neither one of 'em is big, but if you saw their arms you'd know how they swing those twenty-foot steering oars. I got a hankerin' after those fellows. Any man who can stand in the stern of an old Hudson Bay Company 'sturgeon head' and steer it through fifteen hundred miles o' rivers and lakes, clear down to the Arctic Ocean, and then walk back if necessary, has got it all over the kind of Indians I know."

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Norman looked at him a few moments and then got up and motioned him out of the aerodrome. He swung the big doors together, locked them, and then exclaimed:

"I don't care to get excited over every old greasy Indian that comes along but lead me to old Moosetooth."

Roy, who was well pleased over so easily placating his chum, at once led the way around the race track and through the fringe of tepees, tents and other shelters being erected for the housing of the fast gathering arrivals. At last he stood before a group of mooseskin tepees in which were gathered several families of Cree Indians. These people had been brought from the present famous Indian encampment on the shores of Lac la Biche, just south of Athabasca River, where it turns on its long northward journey to the Arctic Ocean.

It is the men of this region who are sought by the great fur companies, by adventurers and sportsmen and by all those traffickers who use the great riverway to the north. And it is from them that the skilled canoe men and the experienced flatboat steersmen are selected for the conduct of the precious flotillas on these northern waters.

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From Lac la Biche the veterans are called each year when the ice is gone out of the Athabasca, to take charge of the great Hudson's Bay Company's fleet of batteaux whose descent of the river means life to those who pass their winters in the far north. These things both boys knew, and hence their interest in Moosetooth Martin and old man La Biche.

"Here they are!" announced young Moulton as, without hesitation, he made his way through the

litter of the little camp where the women were already cooking the inevitable bannock.

Norman greeted each man and welcomed them to the camp. The Indians were beyond middle age and the dark face of each was seamed with wrinkles. Nothing in Moosetooth's yellow regular teeth warranted his name, however. This might better have been applied to La Biche, whose several missing teeth emphasized his few remaining ones.

The two men and others were squatted near the fire, each smoking a short black pipe. Some spoke English but there was little conversation. The boys turned to examine a couple of rare birch-bark canoes and the camp itself, but almost at once they were distracted by the appearance of a new spectator in the group already surrounding the camp. 21

This was a young man, not much beyond the two boys in age but older in expression. He had a foreign look, and wore a small moustache. Norman instantly noted that his face showed mild traces of dissipation. The stranger was tall and although slight in build seemed full of energy and somewhat sinewy in body. His clothes were distinctive and of a foreign cut. He wore smart riding gloves, a carelessly arranged but expensive necktie in which was stuck a diamond studded horseshoe. He was smoking a cigarette.

"Hello," he said to Norman. "Pretty classy boats these, eh?"

"Yes," responded the boy, "and pretty rare too. You don't see many of these around any more."

"I thought all the Indians used birch-bark boats in the North," commented the young man.

"No more!" explained Roy. "They ship cedar boats up to Herschel Island now. I haven't seen one of these bark boats for years. But these are the real stuff!" 22

"Do you live here?" asked the young man, drawing on his cigarette.

"Both of us have lived here all our lives," answered Roy, looking the unusual young man over carefully.

"Well, I'm a stranger," resumed the young man, proffering his cigarette case, which appeared to be of gold and bore a crest on it. When the boys declined he went on: "I'm going to live here now, however. I've just come from Paris. I'm Mr. Zept's son. You know him?"

The two boys straightened. Mr. Zept was one of the richest and most active citizens of Calgary. He was even ranked as a millionaire, having made his money with the other big horse ranchmen in that part of the world. He was a close friend of Norman's father and had been especially active in organizing the Stampede.

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Norman. "Everyone knows Mr. Zept. He's the big man in this show. I'm glad to know you. I am Norman Grant and my friend here is Roy Moulton."

"Oh, you're the fellows who are going to give the airship show," responded the young man with a marked interest. "I am glad to meet you. I'm Paul Zept. I'm just through school—in Paris. I've been living with my grandfather. Now I'm going to live here. My father wants me to go on one of his ranches. I like horses but I don't think I like ranches." 23

"Your father has some fine ones," suggested Roy.

"Yes, I know," answered the young man, "but I want to get out on the frontier. I thought this was the frontier." He smiled as he turned to wave his hand toward the skyscrapers and factory chimneys and suburban homes near by on the hills. "But this doesn't look much like it. I want to get out in the wilds—and that's where I'm going."

"Do you know what that means?" asked Norman with a smile in turn. "Do you know about the spoiled pork and bannock and mosquitoes?"

"I suppose you mean the rough part," answered the young man. "I've never had much of that but I want to try it. I want to get beyond civilization. I want to get where I can see things I can't read about. I'm tired of Paris and school and I want to see the real wilderness." 24

"It's gone!" interrupted Roy again with a laugh.

"All gone?" asked the young man with a peculiar look.

"Nearly all," exclaimed Norman; "unless you go a great ways from here. Unless," he continued, his smile broadening into a grin, "you can arrange to go home with Moosetooth here or La Biche."

"Well," responded the young man as he lit a new cigarette, "if that's true I think I'm going with them."

His tone was so positive and so conclusive that neither Norman nor Roy made any immediate comment. Moved by politeness they asked the young man if he would care to have a look at the airship. While Norman explained something about himself and his companion the three young men made their way back to the aerodrome. Before they reached it he had related their own small adventures.

Then young Zept had made them further acquainted with himself. Like his father he had been born in Austria and later had been sent to school in Paris. There, as Norman and Roy could see, he had received a more than ordinary education, part of which, as the boys afterwards learned, was devoted to music. They also learned later that although not a great singer he had a pleasing tenor voice. 25

Paul told them himself that he had devoted a great deal of time to horsemanship. This, he

explained, was doubtless due to the fact that his father had always engaged in the raising and selling of horses. The young man also explained to the boys that he had not only received the ordinary riding lessons but that he had also been trained under Austrian and Italian military riding masters. His interest in the coming "Stampede" was due largely to the exhibit of horsemanship that he expected to see.

"I can't see why you wouldn't like life on a horse ranch," commented Roy at last.

"No matter!" responded the young man. "I do like horses and I know it's going to be a jolly row with the governor but I've always had my own way and I don't think he'll stop me now. I think I'm going into the wilderness—even if I have to go alone. I've been riding horses all my life. Now I want to do something. The governor wants me to go in for making money. I want to *discover* something."

Again the two boys looked at each other without knowing just what to say. Their new acquaintance was certainly affable enough, but his education and his foreign bearing put him somewhat above the young men and they felt a certain reticence in his presence. Finally, as Norman unlocked the door of the aerodrome, it occurred to him to say:

"This wilderness idea is pretty fine at long range or in books, but it seems to be like some other things. If you've got the real hankering for it, rotten food and all the mosquitoes in the world won't keep you from it."

"You don't know it," broke in the young Austrian instantly, "but if we're going to live in the same town I might as well tell you that a lot of people call me 'Count Zept.' Of course I'm not a 'Count' and I don't know why they gave me the title, unless it's because I've never been good for much. Now I'm going to get rid of that handle to my name by showing my folks and others that I can do something besides ride horses. I'm going home with old Moosetooth and La Biche and stay there long enough to forget there's a place like Paris."

CHAPTER II

A CURIOUS STRANGER LEARNS THE OBJECT OF THE *Gitchie Manitou*

The announced flight of the young aviators Monday afternoon was delayed until the hour grew so late that this feature of the program was postponed until the next day. It was the old story of over-enthusiastic amateur assistants who persisted in giving unsolicited aid when the airship was being taken from the aerodrome. A young man who thought the machine had to be carried instead of being wheeled onto the starting field sought to lift the rear truss by means of the lateral rudder. In doing this, he punctured the oiled silk plane. After a futile attempt to sew the rent, Norman was forced to ask the police to clear their enclosure. When Mr. Zept, one of the committeemen, called and learned of the situation, he advised a postponement of the flight until the next afternoon.

"My son tells me," remarked Mr. Zept as he was about to leave the aerodrome, "that he had the pleasure of meeting you boys this morning. I'm glad of it. I hope you'll be friends."

"He's a fine young man," answered Norman. "You ought to be proud of him."

"All parents should be proud of their children," answered Mr. Zept with a sober face. "I've tried to give Paul a good education and I hope I've done the best for him. But I have never seen much of him and, in a way," he added with a smile, "I hardly know him as well as I do you boys."

"He's certainly enthusiastic," remarked Roy, "and—and impulsive," he added, hesitatingly.

"He really has some peculiar ideas," commented Mr. Zept. "But I suppose they're natural. I had peculiar ideas myself."

"Yes," suggested Norman, "he makes a great deal out of things that are old stories to us. If we didn't live here and know the West as well as we do, I suppose we would have the same romantic ideas."

Mr. Zept was just making his departure, but at this he paused.

"What do you mean?" he asked suddenly and with some concern in his voice.

"Oh, you know he's determined to see the real wilderness," laughed Roy. "He wants to get a taste of the life the story books describe. I told him it might not be such an appetizing meal but I imagine he's set on it."

"So I believe," answered Mr. Zept, "although it isn't what I had planned for him."

"By the way," he added quickly, "you young men know how little there is in indulging this longing for wilderness adventure. I hope if you have a chance you won't fail to impress upon Paul the facts as we know them. I want him to live at home now, with his mother and me. I'm afraid he's been too long away from us."

That evening the two young men could not resist the temptation to visit the downtown district where the hotels were crowded with visitors and the city was resplendent with unusual activity. Norman left Roy with some friends at the King George Hotel and went home at an early hour. When Roy called at Norman's house the next morning, on his way to the Stampede Grounds, he spoke of some new information he had picked up the night before.

"I found out last night," he began at once, "that everything isn't as sunshiny in the Zept home as it might be. Our new friend, the Count, I was told by some friends, got a pretty early start in the fast life of Paris. Mr. Zept wants Paul to stay at home a while, as I get it, to make some changes in him if he can."

"What do you mean?" asked Norman. "But I can guess it—it's in his face. And it isn't cigarettes either."

"Right," answered Roy. "We call it booze out here, but in the young man's circle in Paris I reckon it wouldn't be worse than wine. Anyway, they say, young as he is, that's one of his pleasures. He doesn't look to me as if drinking had ever bothered him much but, from what I hear, he's come to the point where his father thinks he's got to stop it if it's ever going to be stopped. He's only been in town a few days and they say he rides like a States' Indian. But this hasn't taken all his time. He's already in with the fast set here and you know, in a pinch there's people in Calgary who can give a pretty good imitation of high life in great cities."

"I can guess the rest," said Norman. "His father brought him out here to put him on a ranch. When he found that his son hadn't this idea, it rather upset certain plans."

"And he'd like us to put in a few knocks but I reckon that'll be some job. As far as I can see, it's young fellows like Zept who turn these hardships into glories. I've heard of kids like him who are really at home where there's no trail and whose idea of luxury is a canoe and a blanket and a piece of pork."

"Well," concluded Norman, "if I didn't have the aeroplane bug just now, I'd like to have a chance at the ponies and horses on one of Mr. Zept's big ranches. A canoe and a blanket are all right, but on a cold evening when the snow's spitting I don't think they've got anything on a chuck wagon and a good tent."

On the way to the show grounds, Roy went into further details of the gossip he had heard concerning young Zept's escapades, not only in Paris but in the south of France.

"One thing's sure," commented Norman at last, "wild as he may be about a lot of things, he ain't crazy about airships. That's saying something these days."

This remark was made because the Count, while showing a polite interest in the *Gitchie Manitou*, had not bubbled over with exuberance. The boys felt somewhat chagrined over this lack of enthusiasm until they recalled that to young Zept an airship was an old story, the young man having witnessed many flights by the most improved French monoplanes.

On this, the second day of the Stampede, about five o'clock Norman made a respectable if not very exciting flight. He was somewhat nervous and was glad when the exhibition was over, and had no sooner landed than he determined on the following day to attempt a more ambitious demonstration. On Wednesday and Thursday he added some thrills to his evening flight, making on the latter evening a landing in the shape of a corkscrew spiral that got for him special notice in the newspapers the next morning. It also got for him an admonition from his father, when the latter read this story, that a repetition of it would result in a breaking of his contract with the Stampede authorities.

"All right, father," conceded the young aviator, "but that ain't a marker to the possibilities of the machine. I haven't put over the real stunt yet."

"And what's that?" demanded his parent.

"I had planned, on the last day of the show, to make an ascent as high as one reservoir of gas would take me—and that means so high that you couldn't see me—and then make a volplane back to the ground without using the engine."

"Are you going to try that?" demanded his father sternly.

The boy looked at him and laughed.

"Probably not—now," he remarked, "although the show'd be over then."

"Try it," snapped his father, "and that'll be the last thing you'll have to do with your *Gitchie whatever-you-call-it*."

The next evening, which concluded the big day of the Stampede, twenty thousand people attended the long afternoon's program. When the aeroplane appeared for its fourth flight, an army of people surrounded the starting field. Warned by his father, Norman made a less dangerous exhibit, but one that was on the whole more interesting to the eager spectators. Having given illustrations of many of the tricks of show aviators, including the roll and the banking of racing machines on short circular courses, he made a journey out over the hills until the aeroplane was lost to sight. The enthusiasm that greeted his reappearance and the approach of the machine like a bird through the blue haze of the endless prairies, stirred the crowd as the more dangerous maneuvers had not. Before reaching the inclosure, the monoplane climbed about four thousand feet into the air and then volplaned gracefully toward one of the large exhibition buildings just in the edge of the grounds. When it seemed as if Norman was about to smash the *Gitchie Manitou* against the big green-roofed building, even Roy started and held his

breath. Then there was a quick spring upwards and, with the last momentum of the gliding monoplane, it lifted over the structure and settled upon the dust of the race track inclosure like a wide-winged bird.

When, escorted by ample police, the aeroplane had been wheeled into the aerodrome, the two boys immediately closed the doors and the officers dispersed the onlookers. It was late and there was not much trouble in doing this. When only a few persons were left in the vicinity, the doors were thrown open again and the car was trundled out to receive its after-flight examination. Norman, yet wearing his cap and jacket, had climbed into the cockpit to overhaul the rudder wires and engine valves; Roy was inspecting the body of the car, when the attention of both boys was attracted by a cheery salutation from a stranger.

"Good evening, young gentlemen," exclaimed a man who was unmistakably from the States. "I've been trying to have a look at your machine but I've only just now succeeded in evading the police. I hope I'm not in the way?"

Since there were few persons about, the boys smiled.

"Glad to see you," answered Roy. "Glad to see anyone if he comes alone. It's only the mob that bothers us."

The stranger smiled and lifted his hat in renewed greeting.

"I've been watching your flight to-day," he went on, directing his remark to Norman, "and I judge it must require some nerve."

"It requires a good machine and some little experience," responded Norman deprecatingly.

The man was a well-set-up, ruddy complexioned individual somewhat beyond middle age. His clothes might have been made anywhere in the East and yet, in spite of certain smart touches in them, the man wore a negligee shirt, a flowing black necktie and an abundance of hair that indicated an acquaintance with the freer costumes and manners of the West. A large diamond ring on his weatherworn and sinewy finger suggested that this jewelry was probably only worn on occasions. He had a good-natured countenance which unquestionably could easily show decision and force of character.

"Come in," remarked Roy, good-humoredly. "Sorry I can't offer you a chair."

"Seriously," retorted the stranger, "I've been watching you with more than mere curiosity. I have a special desire to know something about your airship if you can give me a few minutes."

Without questioning the man further, the two boys, glad enough of the opportunity, at once began an explanation of the craft that had in the last few days demonstrated its practicability. The stranger followed them intently, interrupting them now and then with questions, and showed a surprising interest in the elaborate description given him by the young aviators. Considering its origin, the aeroplane was a more than ingenious piece of work. In general it followed the stream lines of the modern French monoplane. Its distinguishing variation was a somewhat wider bulge in the forward part of its birdlike body.

While in most monoplanes this framework, to which the planes are attached, is made only wide enough to accommodate a narrow cockpit and the compact engine located in its apex, in this car the cockpit was almost double in size that of the average machine. So wide was it that two passengers might sit side by side. The flying planes of the car and its five-foot body gave the aeroplane an entire width of thirty-seven feet.

The planes were attached to the body proper by rigid flanges, reinforced by wires running from tip to tip of the planes, passing directly over the body, and not elevated on bracing chandelles. These wires were taut and made a part of the planes, much like reinforcing ribs. Beneath the planes three heavy wires ran from their forward tips to the bottom of the car.

There were no flexing devices to manipulate the rear edges of the planes, but on the rigid frames of each plane was a lateral rudder manipulated by one lever standing in the forward part of the cockpit.

The stream lines of the body tapered birdlike to the horizontal rudder twenty feet in the rear. The truss work of the body was covered with diagonally crossing strips of veneer, so that, as a whole, with the rigid planes, the monoplane had a substantial appearance. This frame, covered with waterproof canvas, made the body of the car impervious to rain.

The two rudders at the rear of the body resembled in all ways the steering devices of the best modern air vehicles. A difference was found at once, however, in the fact that the rudders were heavily waterproofed and in that the steering wires passed the pilot's cockpit through the protected body of the car. There was nothing new in either the big single propeller fixed to the front of the body, nor in the Gnome engine that afforded motive power.

"We didn't make the engine," explained Norman. "It represents all the money Moulton and I have ever saved, some we haven't saved but expect to save, and all that we could borrow of our fathers. It's eighty horse power, came all the way from France, and if anything happens to it, we're bankrupt for life."

The stranger smiled with a curious sparkle in his eyes, rubbed his chin, and without direct answer, remarked:

"It doesn't seem an ordinary machine—looks more substantial than most of 'em."

Roy had secured a box, and placing it alongside the car he motioned their guest to mount.

"There is a difference," he began at once with new enthusiasm. "This machine is made for wind and weather. If any airship can make its way through blizzards, the *Gitchie Manitou* can. If it doesn't, it's a rank failure."

The guest gave a look at each boy, as if this was what he suspected.

"Look!" went on Roy. Springing into the cockpit, the two boys caught the sides of the cockpit framework and in a moment had drawn above their heads four light but strong frames of wood. When these met above their heads, they formed a curved and tightly-jointed canopy. The four frames were filled with small panes of glasslike mica. Within the canopy the inmates were as well protected from the elements as if they had been under a roof.

While the stranger's face flushed and his eyes grew wider, the boys unsnapped the frames and they fell back into place, disappearing within the sides of the cockpit.

"That isn't all," exclaimed Norman, and he pointed to two small, dark, metal boxes just in the rear of the two seats. "Look," he went on, as he also pointed to a small dynamo mounted just in the rear of the circular engine. "As long as the car's moving, these two little car heaters will not only keep us from getting frost bites but, in a pinch, we can cook on 'em."

"And here," added Roy, as he tapped a chestlike object on which the seats were mounted, "is where we get the stuff to do the trick. We can put gas enough in there to carry us three hundred miles. Back here," he went on, pointing to a nest of skeleton shelves adjoining the rear of the cockpit, "we can carry extra supplies of oil, gas, and food to carry us five hundred miles, if we ever get that far from home."

In what was little less than complete enthusiasm, the curious guest sprang speechless from the box, and took a few quick steps as if to arrange his thoughts.

"Don't think that's all," exclaimed the hardly less enthusiastic Norman as he vaulted from the novel pilot-cage. "I guess you see what we're driving at and why we called our machine *Gitchie Manitou*. You know that's Cree for—"

"I know," broke in the stranger; "Injun for 'Storm God'!"

"I thought it was 'God of the Winds,'" exclaimed Roy. "But names don't count. If they did, we should have called it 'The Snow King,' because that's where it ought to shine. See these landing wheels?" he urged. "Well, they're only put on for use around here. If this machine ever gets where it belongs it's going to have runners like a sled, where these wheels are. And I've got a theory that these are all it needs to make a trip where dogs and sleds can't travel."

The two boys, eager to continue their half-told description, paused for a moment. The stranger, his hat in his hand, seemed to be drinking in the story he had just heard, with an interest so profound that the puzzled boys could not grasp it.

"Young men," said the man at last, "I'm mighty glad to hear all this. I wish you'd let me do some talking myself for a few moments. Will you let me tell you something about myself? It won't take long. I hope," and he motioned the two boys to the seats on the box, "when I'm through, it will interest you." That it did, the next chapter will amply prove.

CHAPTER III

COLONEL HOWELL MAKES A NOVEL PROPOSAL

"My name is Howell," began the man; "Hill Howell," he went on, "and in the places where I'm best known I'm frequently called 'Colonel' Howell, but I don't get that title because I am a native Kentuckian. I secured it up in this part of the world—just why, I don't know. I'm not going to tell you the story of my life or of any remarkable adventures, because I'm only a plain business man. But I'll have to repeat to you some account of my experience in the Northwest before you understand why I'm so interested in your machine and in you young men.

"In Kentucky," resumed Colonel Howell, after he had helped himself to a cigar from his vest pocket, "we once thought we had oil. To prove how little we had, I spent my own small means and, while I got no oil to speak of, I got a considerable knowledge of this industry. This came just in time for me to make my way to Kansas. That was fifteen years ago. There I found not only oil but considerable return for my labors. It didn't make me a rich man, but it gave me all the money I needed.

"Then I discovered that I had considerable of the spirit of adventure in me and I started for the Klondike. Like many another mistaken prospector, I determined to go overland and down the Mackenzie River. With a small party I started down the Athabasca River from Athabasca Landing. I would probably have gone on and died in the wilderness, as most adventurers did who took this route, but when we had gone three hundred miles down the river and were just below the Big Rapids, at a place they call Fort McMurray, I caught the odor of oil again and the Klondike fever disappeared.

"When I saw the tar sands and the plain signs of oil in the Fort McMurray region, I separated from the party and stopped in the new oil region. There were a few prospectors in the vicinity and having got the oil mania again, I found I was not prepared to make more than a preliminary prospect. My former companions had consented to leave me but few provisions. I had to live practically alone and without adequate provisions or turn back towards civilization at once.

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"To the others in the field I discredited the possibilities of the region and set out on foot, with a single Indian as a guide, to make my way to Athabasca Landing. Here I planned to secure food and proper tools and machinery to return to Fort McMurray and develop what I believed would be a sensational sub-arctic oil region."

"I've heard about it," broke in Norman. "You pass Lac la Biche going there, don't you?"

Colonel Howell nodded and proceeded: "It was impossible to return to Athabasca Landing by canoe, as the river is too swift. For that reason I made a thirty-day trip on foot and reached the Landing with the winter well advanced.

"Here I found I could not get what machinery I needed and I put off my project until the next season when the ice had gone out of the river. I returned to the States and in the following July I went back to the Landing ready to go down the river once more. I took with me, from Chicago and Edmonton, well-boring machinery and ample provisions for a year's stay in the wilderness. At Athabasca Landing I found it impossible to buy proper boats and I lost considerable time in making two large flatboats patterned after the Hudson's Bay Company's batteaux."

45

"Sturgeon heads," exclaimed Roy. "I've always wanted to see one of them."

"That's what they call 'em," exclaimed the colonel. "I guess I don't need to describe them to you. Well, when they were completed, I loaded my machinery, quite a batch of lumber, and my flour and pork—I freighted all of this one hundred miles from Edmonton—and with three workmen, set out down the river with an Indian crew and a couple of old-time steersmen."

"Who were they?" broke in Roy, with apparently uncalled-for eagerness.

"The best on the river," answered the colonel. "Old Moosetooth Martin and Bill La Biche."

"Why, they're here on the ground!" almost shouted Roy.

"Yes," exclaimed Colonel Howell. "Do you know them? I'm on my way back to the Landing now. They're going with me again."

Roy's mouth was open, as if this was a statement not to be lightly passed over, but Norman stopped him with an impatient: "Go on, please."

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"I'll tell you about them later," the colonel added, as if to appease Roy. "They're both fine old Indians and I've been with them a good bit to-day. But even the best of them have their faults. You know, at the Grand Rapids these flatboats ought to be unloaded. Even then the best steersman is bound to lose a boat now and then on the rocks. Both Moosetooth and La Biche cautioned me against running the Rapids loaded, but as it would take a week to portage around the Rapids, I took a chance. Moosetooth got through all right, but La Biche—and I reckon he's the better man of the two—at least I had him on the more valuable boat—managed to find a rock and we were in luck to reach the bank alive.

"All my iron tubing and drilling machinery disappeared in the Rapids. There was no way to recover it and we went to Fort McMurray in the other boat. It carried my lumber and most of the provisions, but I couldn't work without tools. There was nothing to do but make the best of it and I left my three men to build a cabin and spend the winter in the wilderness while I went back on foot again to the Landing to buy a new outfit."

"Gee, that was tough," commented Norman.

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"You boys have lived in the Northwest long enough to have learned the great lesson of this country," explained Colonel Howell. "This is a region where you can't have a program and where, if you can't do a thing to-day, you can do it some other time. And, after all, it isn't a bad philosophy, just so long as you keep at it and do it sometime. They seem to do things slowly sometimes up in this wilderness land, but they always seem to do them in the end. I guess it's the Indian way. I notice they always drive ahead until they get there, although there may be a good many stops on the way."

"Then what?" persisted Roy.

"I had to come back to the States—that was the end of last season," continued the man, "and now I'm on my way again to reach the Athabasca. My outfit is in Edmonton, I hope. But this year I'll have a little less trouble. There's a railroad now between Edmonton and Athabasca Landing and I expect to get my equipment and my stores to the river in freight cars. I've been detained by other business and should have been in Fort McMurray by this time, as the ice goes out of the river late in May. And I have my boats this year that I bought before I left the Landing.

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"But when I tried to arrange for my old steersmen to pilot me down the river again, I found that energetic Calgary had beaten me to it. Moosetooth and La Biche are not the best boatmen on the Athabasca, but they are the ones I want. And I'm here, waiting for the show to close. They will go with me, and I suppose their families as well," added Colonel Howell with a grimace, "directly to Athabasca Landing, and in a week from now there is no reason why we should not be drifting down the big river again."

"Then your trouble'll begin again, won't it?" asked Norman.

Instead of answering, Colonel Howell sat in silence a few moments.

"There's a good deal I might say about the country I'm going into," he continued at last, "but I think you young men understand it pretty well."

"Pretty well up into the Barren Lands, isn't it?" asked Roy.

"The last of the wilderness before you reach the treeless plains," explained the colonel, "but as far as Fort McMurray the region is a vast trail-less extent of poplar and spruce. The winter comes in November and lasts until June. In that period, when the nights grow long, you have a pretty good imitation of the Arctic. There are Indians here and there and game abounds, but the white man passes only now and then. The dog and sled are yet the winter means of transportation and here you may find the last of the trappers that have made history in the great Northwest.

49

"Some of this region will undoubtedly in time provide farms, but as yet no farmer has learned how to use the rich black soil of its river lands in the short summer seasons. In time, powerful steamers will navigate the Athabasca and also, in time, there will be railroads. When they come," the speaker went on with a chuckle, "I hope to be able to supply them with oil. This at least is why, for the third time, I'm making my way into that little-known country."

"I hope you don't get dumped again," suggested Norman.

"How genuinely do you hope that?" asked Colonel Howell instantly and with renewed animation.

"Why, I just hope it," answered Norman, somewhat perplexed.

Colonel Howell hesitated a moment and then said abruptly: "You two boys are the best guarantee I could have against another accident. I want you to help me make a success of this thing. I've an idea and I got it the moment I saw your aeroplane to-day. Come with me into the wilderness."

50

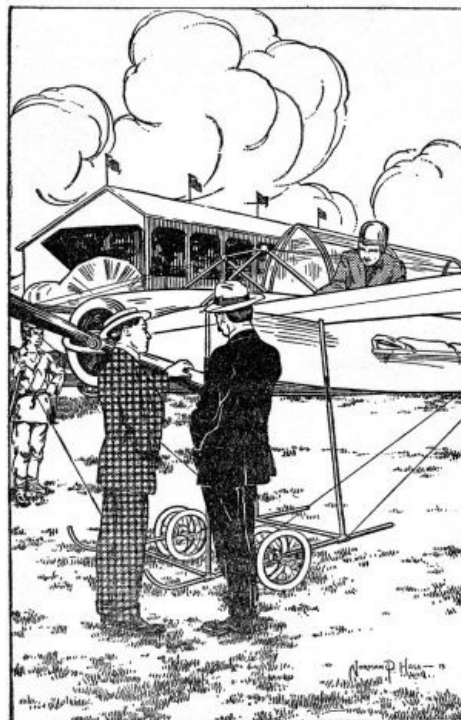
"Us?" exclaimed both boys together.

"Why not?" hastily went on the oil man. "Don't you see what I've been driving at? Don't you recall the two long trails I made back to civilization—a month each time? Think of this: When I leave Athabasca Landing, the only way by which I can communicate with the world behind me is by courier, on foot; from Fort McMurray this means a tramp of four weeks for me, and even to a skilled Indian it means three hundred miles through the poplar forest."

"And what could we do?" asked the breathless Roy.

"If what you tell me about your airship is true, you can make almost daily trips for mail. At least, it would be as easy for me to keep in touch with civilization as if I had a railroad train at my disposal," declared Colonel Howell springing to his feet.

"But we couldn't do that," began Norman. "Our fathers—"



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"I've an idea and I got it the minute I saw your aeroplane to-day."

"What's the use of all the energy you have expended on this machine?" demanded the man earnestly. "Is it a dream or do you believe what you have told me? I'm not a millionaire, but I'm sure I could make your services to me worth while. At least you don't need to hesitate on that score. I think you can do all you have said this machine can do. Anyway, I'll pay you well for making the attempt, and I'll undertake to get the consent of your fathers. Of course you can't go without that. Would you be willing to go if I can arrange this?"

52

"You bet your life!" announced Roy instantly.

"It's a pretty serious thing," began Norman, "and dangerous too—"

"Oh," broke in Colonel Howell, "then you'd rather have some one else try out your glass cage and electric stoves."

"But it's a long way from home," went on Norman, growing red in the face.

"No farther for you than for me," explained the colonel, still laughing. "And we'll all go to Fort McMurray on the flatboats. If you can't fly back you can at least do what I have done twice—walk."

"And Moosetooth and La Biche are going to run the boats?" asked Norman.

"They certainly are," answered Colonel Howell, "and if you're interested in those things, there'll be plenty of moose and bear and deer standin' on the river banks waiting for a shot."

Norman looked at Roy, who was almost a picture of disgust, and then, in self-defense, he said: "I'd like to go if the folks consent. As for that car, it'll do everything we've said and don't you forget that."

Colonel Howell, apparently taking this as a surrender, caught the two boys by their shoulders and exclaimed:

"It's gettin' late. Lock up your shop and let's go and see what your fathers think of my project."

Elated and nervous, the boys turned and, as if under a hypnotic spell, began to push the car into the aerodrome. And once inside the little building, with set lips, as if working his courage up to that point, Norman broke the silence by saying: "I was going to make my first trip to the States this winter."

"Next summer would be a better time. Why don't you go in style?" asked Colonel Howell. "We'll come out in the spring and we ought to have a comfortable enough home during the bad weather. You can't spend your money and when you get back home you can make your trip and go all over the States."

Both boys looked at him as if not knowing what to say next.

"I never hired any aviators," went on Colonel Howell, with his old smile coming back, "and I don't know the union price of aerial operators, but I'll give you your board and keep and three hundred dollars a month apiece while you're with me. How does that strike you?"

"I don't think we'll be worth it," were the only words that Roy could find to express his dazed feelings.

"But you don't know anything about that," said Colonel Howell promptly. "You might easily be worth a great deal more."

While the colonel spoke, he could not help noticing Norman's rapid calculation on the ends of his fingers.

"In April, that would be nine months," remarked Norman at last, "and that's twenty-seven hundred dollars. We could go to France on that, Roy," he added suddenly. "Let's lock up and go home."

In a few moments the excited aviators and the well-satisfied Colonel Howell emerged from the aerodrome just as young Count Zept ran up.

"Are you fellows going to stay here all night?" he exclaimed, almost out of breath. "I thought you told me you'd meet me at seven o'clock at the car. Father's been there for a half hour. We're waiting to take you home."

It was necessary at once to introduce Colonel Howell to young Zept. As the oil man heard the name, his face brightened anew.

"You're not the son of Jack Zept, are you?" the colonel asked as he grasped the young man's hand.

"John C. Zept is my father's name," answered the Count. "He's a horse ranchman. Do you know him?"

The colonel chuckled. "Of course," he answered hastily. "I met him on the upper Peace; shot sheep with him in '95. Forgot he lived here. If I can join you, I'd like to meet your father. You can put me down at the King George. I think," the smiling colonel added, turning to Norman and Roy, "that you boys had better go home, talk it over with your fathers, and I'll look you up a little later in the evening."

"Anywhere you like," exclaimed the young Count, "the machine's waiting. Father'll be glad to see an old friend."

Although it was well after seven o'clock, it was wholly light, for in Calgary in July dusk does not come until after ten o'clock. While Norman looked at his watch to confirm the delay, Colonel Howell remarked:

"It seems good to get back to long hours again. When we get up to Fort McMurray," and he chuckled, "you boys can read your newspapers, if you can find any, out of doors after eleven o'clock."

"Fort McMurray?" broke in young Zept. "Where's that?"

"Way up in the wilderness," responded Norman, laughing. "Looks as if we're going to beat you into the northland."

Instantly the young Count caught Norman by the arm and stopped him.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, his face a study in acute interest and surprise. 59

"Tell you later," answered Norman. "Your father's waiting."

Far from satisfied, the exuberant young Austrian followed the others to Mr. Zept's waiting car. He was not in error as to his father's annoyance. The old ranchman, a heavy cigar buried in the corner of his mouth, watched the approach of the party with a scowl. The moment he saw Colonel Howell, however, this expression politely changed. The ranchman did not at once recognize his old shooting friend but without waiting for an introduction he sprang with agility from his handsome motor.

It required but a word, however, for him to place the stranger and then the delay was forgotten. The joviality of the veteran horse raiser took the place of his petulance and, ignoring the young men, the old friends stood arm in arm for ten minutes recounting the past. The result was inevitable. After Colonel Howell had been catechised as to his present location and plans, he could not refuse an invitation to pass the remainder of his short stay in Calgary at the Zept home.

When the two men at last took the rear seat in the car, Norman and Roy in front of them, and Paul seated alongside the chauffeur, orders were given to drive to the King George. 60

Avoiding the traffic streets and trolley lines, the big car was turned south through the suburban hills. In the meantime, Paul had lost no opportunity to probe into the mystery of Norman's remark. In return, Norman had rapidly sketched an outline of Colonel Howell's proposition and of the present situation. Norman's rapid words seemed at first to have rather a depressing effect on young Zept, and then, when the whole idea had been put before him, his usual animation rose to what was almost excitement.

No sooner had the motor found its way into the broad suburban streets, than Paul almost sprang over the seat back and in a moment had located himself between his father and Colonel Howell on the rear seat.

"Father," he began impulsively, interrupting some old-time talk, "do you know that Mr. Grant and Mr. Moulton are going to Fort McMurray with Colonel Howell?"

These business details had not reached Mr. Zept, as he and his guest had not yet exhausted their old-time hunting experiences. The result was that Colonel Howell at once related what had taken place that afternoon, to all of which Mr. Zept gave earnest attention. Colonel Howell concluded by telling how he was to see the fathers of the boys that evening in an effort to consummate his deal. 61

"What do you think about it?" asked Colonel Howell with his usual smile, and looking at Mr. Zept.

The latter paused, as if in grave doubt.

"That's a hard question to answer," he said at last. "These young fellows ought to answer it best themselves. Their airship has given a pretty good account of itself. I did not understand that it was more than the ordinary flying machine, but if it is and they feel sure that it can do what they say it will, it seems to me that the whole thing is pretty much a business proposition. You've made a fine proposition to the young men, financially. If it wasn't for that, if you want me to speak frankly, I wouldn't approve their going into that part of the world simply as prospectors."

"It'd be great!" broke in his son.

"From your point of view, yes," answered his father, affectionately dropping his hand upon Paul's knee, "but you know, my boy, that you have a lot of impractical ideas about this corner of the world."

"I want to go too," persisted the young man, who in his eagerness seemed to have given little heed to his father's words. "Can't I go with you?" he went on, turning to Colonel Howell. 62

The latter looked somewhat perturbed. He had no answer ready just then and he needed none.

"You're taking men with you," went on Paul as he slid to the edge of the seat. "I'll go and work for you for nothing. You've got to have men on the river and I know I'm as good as any Indian, except Moosetooth of course." Everyone smiled except Mr. Zept. "And I know there are a lot of

things that I could do in camp. I wouldn't be any good about the airship, I know, but I can shoot and I know I can stand anything that anyone else can. I—"

"Young man," broke in Mr. Zept at last, "these gentlemen are going north on business. Colonel Howell is not heading a pleasure excursion and I doubt if he has any intention of making an asylum for amateur woodsmen. Let me tell you something: you've got to get on in the world and you only do that, as far as I've noticed, by having a purpose that has some reward at the end of it. Colonel Howell and these young men have a purpose and they'll probably profit by it. Playing Indian or wandering around on the Barren Lands shooting moose may be romantic enough and may be all you want in life, but it doesn't bring success as I count it."

63

"Your father's right, young man," suggested Colonel Howell; "success in life to-day is measured by money. If you want to succeed that way, stay where the money is to be found. I can prove it," he said, forcing a laugh. "Look at me. What little money I have, I'm dumping into the northern rivers. Then look at your father. He knew the same wilderness you're trying to break into, but he only goes there for pleasure. He had an idea and he came here and put it over. I don't know what it brought him, and maybe you don't. But I reckon you can easily find out by going through a list of bank directors in this town."

"He's a millionaire anyway," Roy exclaimed with some lack of diplomacy.

Mr. Zept did not seem conscious of this remark, for he sat very stern and hard of face.

"When the time comes, my boy, I will take you into this region that you are so full of. Just now, I have other plans for you. We'll talk these over later." Then, as if dismissing the entire matter, Mr. Zept began to point out to Colonel Howell the improvements of the city while the big machine sped toward the hotel.

64

Paul, with a sullen look on his face, settled back among the cushions, and Norman and Roy, awed by the decisive tones of the rich man, made no attempt at conversation.

Reaching the hotel, Colonel Howell alighted to prepare his luggage and see to telegrams and mail. Mr. Zept stopped with him while Paul took the young aviators to their homes. A short time later the motor picked up Mr. Zept and his guest and carried them to the Zept home.

Despite his general knowledge of his old friend's wealth, Colonel Howell was surprised at the sight of his host's home. This, less than a half a dozen squares from the hotel, occupied a city block and was a mansion resembling a French chateau, built of the yellow stone of the country. In addition to an attractive fence of stone and iron, the extensive yard was surrounded on all sides by a wind-break hedge of tall and uniform swamp cedars.

When the car dashed up the asphalt drive, Colonel Howell only turned toward his host and smiled. But while his elders alighted, under the porte cochere, Paul did not smile. Waiting for his father and their guest to disappear into the magnificent home, he sprang into the motor again and said to the chauffeur: "Drive to the King George Hotel."

65

At dinner that evening there was a message from young Paul, excusing himself on the ground of an engagement. When Mr. Zept heard this, he excused himself to telephone to the garage. When he rejoined his guest, his face was again stern and hard, for he knew what his son's engagement meant.

Dinner over, the ranchman and Colonel Howell made their excuses to Mrs. Zept and to Paul's young sister and retired to the library. Here Mr. Zept used no ceremony and at once confided to his old friend the greatest trouble of his life. He told how he had brought his son home from Paris because of his wayward ways and how he had found these even more pronounced than he feared.

"He isn't a bad boy," explained his father, "and the only trouble he has I think I can correct by home influence." He even explained where his son was at that moment and did not attempt to conceal his mortification. "It isn't in the blood," he went on, "but it's Paris and the opportunity he had there."

66

Colonel Howell had been deeply moved by his friend's talk, and when the latter used the word "opportunity," his sober face suddenly lit up.

"That's it," he exclaimed, "you've hit it. I think I can read the boy like a book. 'Opportunity' to go wrong is what did it. I've an idea. Cut out this 'opportunity' and I think you've solved the question."

"That's what I want to do," replied Mr. Zept, with a sigh, "and I've been trying to make his home take the place of the saloons, but," and he shook his head, "you see where he is now."

"All right," exclaimed Colonel Howell. "That doesn't need to discourage you. I think we'll have to send him where there isn't any Paris and where there aren't any cafes."

"What do you mean?" broke in the disturbed father.

"I mean up to Fort McMurray, where they'll put a man in jail if they find a drink of whisky on his person."

Mr. Zept sat upright and darted a look at his old friend.

"That's right," went on Colonel Howell. "When you leave Athabasca Landing, the fellow who tells you good-bye is a mounted policeman, and he doesn't shake hands with you either. If you've got a drop of whisky with you, you've got to have it inside of you. If you try to take whisky into that country, you've got to be smarter than the smartest policemen in the world."

67

The 'opportunity' is gone. And there's another thing," went on the aroused colonel. "If your boy thinks he's been robbed of something, when he finds he hasn't anything to drink, you can see yourself that he'll have plenty of other things to interest him."

The agitated ranchman sprang to his feet and took a quick turn around the room.

"Howell!" he exclaimed at last, as he returned and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, "this upsets every plan I have."

"Maybe they ought to be upset," rejoined the oil man.

"You're right," answered his friend thickly. "It's all pretty sudden and it's all a kind of a blow to me, but you're right. What can I do?"

"Easy enough," responded the other as he relit his cigar; "he wants to go with me. Let him have his way. I've never been called upon to attempt anything in the reform line and I don't think I will be now. Let your son join us and I think that'll be the end of what is causing you a good deal of misery. It isn't a case of curing him of the whisky habit. I believe he'll simply forget it."

"Will you take him?" suddenly asked Mr. Zept, his face a little white.

"Sure!" exclaimed Colonel Howell. "Call it settled and get this terrible fear off your mind. Paul's all right and I'll bet when you see him again he'll give an account of himself that'll make you proud."

But the boy's father was not so easily assured. "Howell," he said in a nervous tone, "you've done something for me this evening that I don't think I'll ever forget. I don't often talk about money, but I'm a rich man. From what you've told me, I can see you're yet working pretty hard. You may have plenty of money but no matter as to that. I know it takes a lot of money to do what you're doing. I'm not doing this to show my appreciation of what you're willing to do for me, but it looks as if you're the only real friend I have in the world. Let me put some money into this venture with you—I don't care how much—but I've an interest in your project now—"

The Kentuckian was on his feet in a moment. "Jack," he began without any show of resentment, "I've got all the money I'll ever need in this world. It's fine of you to say what you have, but now I'm going to make you a new proposition. I'm willing to take your boy and treat him as my own son but I'll have to put one condition on it."

The ranchman only looked his surprise. A wave of his hand indicated that any condition would be met.

"I want him to go with me but I'll only take him as my guest."

"Hill," said Mr. Zept, after looking his friend directly in the eye, "I knew from the moment we first made camp together up on the Peace, that you were the real stuff. I haven't any way to thank you."

"Let's compromise on another of those cigars," laughed Colonel Howell, "and then, if it is agreeable to you, and I can have the use of your car for a short time, I have some business of my own."

After a few moments with his hostess, Colonel Howell departed in the motor. As soon as he was out of his host's hearing, he ordered the driver to take him to the King George Hotel. Still puffing his new cigar, the oil man entered the hotel and made a quick examination of the bar room. The person he was looking for was apparently not in sight. Nodding his head to an occasional acquaintance, Colonel Howell made his way downstairs to the fashionable cafe.

He did not obtrude himself, but called the head waiter and after a question, took out his card and scribbled a line on it. A few moments later, in the lobby of the hotel, he was joined by young Count Zept, who explained that he had been dining with a few friends. Colonel Howell motioned him to a seat and gave no sign of noticing the boy's flushed face and somewhat thick speech.

He had spoken hardly a dozen words to the excited young man, when the latter seemed to throw off his condition as if it had been a cloak. He even discarded the cigarette he was smoking. Then the colonel resumed his talk with the young man and for several minutes spoke very earnestly in low tones.

As he concluded, the young man sat sober and tense.

"Colonel Howell," he said, "I'll do it. I understand everything. You have given me the greatest chance of my life."

"Then," came the cheery and quick rejoinder of the Kentuckian, relighting his cigar, as he appeared to be always doing under any stress, "we'll begin right away. This is a business proposition and we're all business people. We haven't any time to lose. I want you to go home and begin to pack your kit. The machine is outside. I think your father would like to talk to you."

"I'm ready now," came the quick response. A moment later the Zept motor was on its way home.

It had been an eventful day for the millionaire ranchman and his son Paul, as well as for Norman Grant and Roy Moulton, to whom it had opened up possibilities that they could scarcely yet realize. It was now Colonel Howell's mission further to enact the role of a magician and to see if the plans he had outlined were to bear fruit for the young aviators.

"We'll be waiting to hear," announced the young Count, as he alighted and gave the chauffeur directions for finding the Grant and Moulton homes, "and I want to know the news to-night."

"I'll be disappointed if it isn't good news," responded the Kentuckian, "but don't you worry about that. We're going anyway. You see your father right away and he'll begin to plan your outfit. We're going to leave, the airship with us I hope, at three o'clock Monday afternoon."

It was half past nine when the oil prospector reached the Grant home. The evening there had been one resembling preparations for a funeral. Colonel Howell's offer had fallen on the Grant family with no sign of joy in anyone except the son. Dazed by the dangers which, to Norman's family, overshadowed all possible advantages, small time was lost in calling Mr. and Mrs. Moulton into the conference. After the arrival of the latter, it had been a debate between the two boys, their parents, and several sisters, with no apparent possibility of reaching a decision. 73

Even the appearance of Colonel Howell did not seem to help matters very much, but the formalities having worn off and the prospector having been invited to give his version of his own plans, the possibilities began to brighten for the young men. In the process of argument, even the somewhat hesitating Norman had talked himself into a wild eagerness to be allowed to go.

Roy was so impatient that he stuttered. The different effect of Colonel Howell's explanation was undoubtedly due to the fact that he emphasized the great possibilities of the business part of the trip. Roy had sought to win favor by expatiating on the ease with which the *Gitchie Manitou* was to overcome the perils and privations of the almost Arctic region. 74

Norman had also grown hoarse in demonstrating the entire safety of their aircraft. But their patron seemed to dismiss these arguments as matters needing no discussion. Rather, he drew a picture of the opportunities to be presented to the boys in seeing the new land, of what he called the comforts of their snug cabin and of the advantages that must come to all young men in becoming acquainted with the little-known frontiers of their country. He said little of the immediate pecuniary reward, but said enough to have both fathers understand just what this was to be.

Both Mr. Grant and Mr. Moulton had had their share of roughing it on the frontier and neither seemed to welcome the sending of their children against the privations that they had endured.

While the discussion dwindled into indecision, Colonel Howell, as if in afterthought, repeated in substance his talk with Mr. Zept, omitting of course some of the unfortunate details, all of which, however, were already well known to those present.

Mr. Zept was the leading citizen of Calgary, an influential and important man. He was also a character whom most men in that part of the country were proud to count as a friend. Among those of her own sex, Mrs. Zept occupied about the same position. When the flurry of questions concerning Mr. Zept's determination to send his son as a member of the party had died somewhat, it was perfectly plain that both Mrs. Grant and Mrs. Moulton had new thoughts on the proposition. 75

"Is he going as a workman?" asked Roy impulsively.

"Oh, he'll do all he's called upon to do," answered Colonel Howell, taking advantage of his opening, "but I really didn't need any more help. He's going because his father thought it would prove an advantage to him. In fact," continued the colonel, "Mr. Zept was kind enough to want to contribute to our expenses because his son was to be with us. But as I told my old friend, I was not running an excursion, and I have invited the young man to go as my guest."

"And he's paying us nearly three thousand dollars to do what the Count was willing to pay for," exclaimed Norman, as a clincher. "What have you got to say to that?" he added almost defiantly, addressing his mother. 76

"But he won't have to go up in a flying machine," meekly argued Mrs. Grant.

Norman only shrugged his shoulders in disgust. "There won't be any more danger in that," he expostulated, "than I've been in all week."

Colonel Howell turned to Mr. Grant, who held up his hands in surrender. Then he looked at Mr. Moulton. The latter shook his head, but the debate seemed to be closed.

"I guess they're able to take care of themselves," conceded Mr. Grant.

"I started out younger," added Mr. Moulton.

"I'm planning to leave at three o'clock Monday afternoon," announced the Kentuckian, with his most genial smile, "and we'll have a car ready for the machine Monday morning."

The conference immediately turned into a business session to discuss immediate plans and the outfit needed by the newly enlisted assistants. In this the mothers took a leading part, seeming to forget every foreboding, and when Colonel Howell left, the two families were apparently as elated as they had been despondent on his arrival.

The next day's performance at the Stampede was more or less perfunctory, so far as the young aviators were concerned, and was only different from the others in that Roy accompanied Norman in the exhibition flight. 77

Colonel Howell, after a day of activity in the city, was present when the flight was made. No time had been lost by the boys in arranging for their departure, and mechanics in Mr. Grant's railroad department had been pressed into service in the construction of three crates—a long skeleton box for the truss body of the car, another, wider and almost as long, to carry the dismantled planes, and a solidly braced box for the engine. The propeller and the rudders were to go in the plane crate. These were promised Sunday morning, and Norman and Roy took a part of Saturday for the selection of their personal outfits. Over this there was little delay, as the practical young men had no tenderfoot illusions to dissipate.

The kind of a trip they were about to make would, to most young men, have called for a considerable expenditure. But to the young aviators, life in the cabin or the woods was not a wholly new story. Overnight they had talked of an expensive camera, but when they found that young Zept was provided with a machine with a fine lens, they put aside this expenditure, and the most expensive item of their purchases was a couple of revolvers—automatics. 78

Norman already owned a .303 gauge big game rifle, but it was heavy and ammunition for it added greatly to the weight to be carried in the airship. With the complete approval of Colonel Howell, he bought a new .22 long improved rifle, which he figured was all they needed in addition to their revolvers.

"It's a great mistake," explained Colonel Howell, who had met the two boys at the outfitting store just before noon, "for travelers to carry these big game high-powered rifles. The gun is always knocked down, is never handy when you want it, and the slightest neglect puts it out of commission. You take this little high-powered .22, put it in a bag, throw a few cartridges in your pocket, and you'll get small game and birds while you're tryin' to remember where the big gun is."

"That's right," answered Roy. "Grant and I were up in the mountains a year ago, back of Laggan. We weren't hunting especially, but I was carryin' the old .303. Up there in the mountains we walked right up on as fine an old gold-headed eagle as you ever saw. I was going to shoot, when I recollected that this wasn't a deer four hundred yards away. If I'd shot, I'd have torn a hole through that bird as big as your hat. If I'd had this," and he patted the smart looking little .22, "somebody would have had a fine golden-headed eagle." 79

Colonel Howell had few suggestions to make, but while he was in the store, he selected a small leather-cased hatchet and an aluminum wash-pan.

"Don't laugh," he explained. "Just take the word of an old campaigner and keep these two things where you can put your hands on 'em. You can get along in the wilderness without shootin' irons—or I can—but you'll find this tin pan a mighty handy friend. If your wise friends laugh at your luxury just wait, they'll be the first ones to borrow it. You can cook in it, wash in it, drink out of it, and I've panned for gold with 'em. It's the traveler's best friend."

The outfitter was busy enough displaying his wares, of which he had a hundred things that he urged were indispensable, but he was not dealing with States tenderfeet, and the volume of his sales was small. In it, however, the boys finally included two heavy Mackinaw jackets, two still heavier canvas coats reinforced with lambs' wool, two cloth caps that could be pulled down over the face, leaving apertures for the eyes, and two pairs of fur gauntlets, mitten-shaped, but with separate fore-fingers for shooting. 80

The boys made these purchases on their own account, and then Colonel Howell asked permission to make them a present. He selected and gave each of the boys a heavy Hudson's Bay blanket, asking for the best four-point article.

"They'll last as long as you live," explained the oil man, "and when you don't need 'em in the woods for a house or tent or bed, or even as a sail, you'll find they'll come in handy at home on your couch or as rugs."

Each boy had his own blankets at home, but at sight of those their new friend gave them their eyes snapped. Roy selected a deep cardinal one and Grant took for his a vivid green, both of which had the characteristic black bars.

"These look like the real things," exclaimed Roy, with enthusiasm.

"An Indian will give you anything he owns for one of 'em," chuckled the colonel. "The tin pan is a luxury, but you've got to have these. If you learn the art of how to fold and sleep in 'em, you'll be pretty well fixed." 81

Colonel Howell did not seem to be worrying about his own outfit, and when he left the boys his work for the day was probably financial.

By the middle of Sunday afternoon, the *Gitchie Manitou* had been safely stored in its new crates, and then, with a small tool chest and a hastily-made box crowded with extra parts, had been loaded on a large motor truck and forwarded to the railroad yards. The remainder of the day was utilized by the young aviators in compactly packing their personal belongings, and in the evening the two young men had dinner at the Zept home. The young Count, whom they had not seen since the day before when he accompanied Colonel Howell at the closing exercises of the Stampede, was present and nervously enthusiastic.

After dinner the three boys went to Paul's room where Grant and Roy were astonished at the

elaborateness of their friend's outfit. Paul had not confined himself to those articles suggested by his practical father but had brought together an array of articles many of which were ridiculously superfluous.

He had worked so seriously in his selection, however, that it was not a laughing matter. So his new friends hesitated to tell him that half of his baggage was not necessary. Therefore they said nothing until Paul, having proudly exhibited his several costumes, his new leather cases for carrying his camera, field glasses, revolvers, and two guns, noticed the lack of approval on their faces.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "out with it. I couldn't help getting them, but I know I don't need all this stuff. You fellows know. Throw out what I don't need. I bought a lot of it in Paris, but don't mind that. I'm not going to take a thing that I can do without."

Greatly relieved, Norman and Roy fell to work on the elaborate assortment and in a short time had but little more left in the heap than one man could carry.

"What's this?" asked Roy, as they reached a soft leather roll about the size of a big pillow, carefully strapped.

"It's my blankets," explained Paul, opening the flap and exhibiting two soft fleecy articles. "They're from London."

"Well," exclaimed Norman positively, "you give them to your sister for her picnics. Then you go down to-morrow morning and get a four-point Hudson's Bay blanket, fourteen feet long, pay your twelve dollars for it, get a strap to hang it on your back, and I reckon you'll have about all you need."

A little later, when Paul's father and Colonel Howell visited the room and Paul good-naturedly explained what his friends had done, Mr. Zept laughed.

"I told you all that," he exclaimed, "but I guess it was like the advice of most fathers. These young men know what they're doing. Hill," he said, turning to his guest, "I guess you haven't made any mistake in signing up these kids. There's a lot they may have to find out about the wilderness, but it looks to me as if they weren't going to have very much to unlearn."

The next morning was a long one. The baggage car secured by Colonel Howell for the aeroplane crates was soon loaded. Then nothing remained to be done except, as Colonel Howell put it, "to line up my Injuns."

Moosetooth and La Biche were yet in camp at the Stampede Grounds. The boys, including Count Zept, accompanied Colonel Howell to the Grounds about noon. Here the oil prospector was able to change his program somewhat, and much to his gratification.

Colonel Howell knew that his old steersmen were accompanied by quite a group of relatives but he did not know the exact extent of the Martin and La Biche families. They were all in charge of a man from Athabasca Landing, who was of course under contract to return the Indians to that place. Colonel Howell had thought it would be necessary to look after the immediate relatives of Moosetooth and La Biche, but when he found that the women and children belonging to these men would just as soon return to the North with their friends, he was able to arrange that the two old river men might precede the main party and accompany him alone.

The Indian makes very little ceremony of his farewells to the members of their families and after Colonel Howell had talked a few moments with them the dark-skinned boatmen announced themselves ready. The matter of luncheon seemed to worry neither Moosetooth nor La Biche. Each man had an old flour bag, into which he indiscriminately dumped a few bannock, some indistinguishable articles of clothing, and relighting their pipes, were ready to start for Fort McMurray.

It was the first ride either Indian had ever had in an automobile, but the quick run back to the city seemed to make no impression upon them. Leaving the taciturn Crees in the baggage car, well supplied with sandwiches, fruit, and a half dozen bottles of ginger ale, the others once more headed for the Zept home. In two hours the expedition would be off.

CHAPTER VI

THE EXPEDITION STRIKES A SNAG IN EDMONTON

At three o'clock the fast express pulled out of the big depot at Calgary on its way to Edmonton, then the northern limit of railroad transportation on the American Continent. A part of the train was the sealed baggage car carrying the airship. In the day coach, with their bags in their laps, and still stolid of face, sat Moosetooth Martin and old La Biche. For the moment their pipes reposed in their vest pockets. Each was eating an orange. Far in the rear of the train, Colonel Howell's little expedition was making itself comfortable in a stateroom. Somewhat to the surprise of the younger members of the party, Mr. Zept had joined them.

The corners of the stateroom and the near-by vestibule of the car were crammed with the personal belongings of those headed for Fort McMurray.

Even in the excitement of leaving and the farewells to the members of their families and friends, neither Norman nor Roy failed to notice that the young Count's face again bore the flush that did not come from exertion. Mr. Zept's face also bore the look that the boys had come to know, the expression that they could not fail to connect with the indiscretions of his son.

If Colonel Howell saw these things, nothing about him indicated it. Having divested himself of his coat, he put himself at once in charge of the party, and was full of animation.

Within a few moments young Zept left the stateroom, without protest from his father, and the two boys partly lost themselves in a close view of the country through which they were passing.

"Things are changing very fast in this region," explained Mr. Zept, motioning to the irregular hill-dotted country, in which patches of vegetation alternated with semi-arid wastes. "See how irrigation is bringing the green into this land. Ten years ago, for fifty miles north of Calgary, we called this The Plains. It's all changing. It's all going to be farms, before long. You'll be surprised, however," he continued, addressing the boys. "Long before night we'll run out of this onto the green prairies. Long before we get to Edmonton, we'll be in some of the best farming land in the world. And it goes on and on, more or less," he added with a faint smile, "a good deal farther than we know anything about—maybe as far as Fort McMurray," he concluded.

"There isn't any reason why Fort McMurray can't be a Calgary some day," replied Colonel Howell; "that is, when the railroads start towards Hudson's Bay."

"You'll have to have some land too," suggested Mr. Zept. "If you just had a few good prairies and some grass lying loose around up there, that'd help."

"How do you know we haven't?" answered the colonel.

"I don't," exclaimed Mr. Zept. "If you have, just send me word. We might start a few horse ranches up there."

As the train sped on and all had adjusted themselves to the limits of their little room, after a time Mr. Zept spoke again: "I wish I had the time to go up there with you," he began, "but of course, that's impossible. I'm going to see you away from Edmonton in good shape. By the way," he remarked, "I've been wondering just how you're going to find things up there, after a year's absence. You say you left three men there. What are they doing?"

"Well," answered Colonel Howell, "they're all on the pay roll. One of 'em's an Englishman from Edmonton, and two of 'em I brought from the gas fields of Kansas. The Kansas men have worked for me for several years."

"Must have had a pretty easy job, with nothing to do but punish your provisions all winter," suggested Mr. Zept.

"Don't you think it," exclaimed his friend. "They had plenty of work cut out for them. In the first place they had to build a cabin, and they had the tools to make a decent one—tar paper for a roof too. I don't care for bark shacks. Then I'm taking a boiler and engine up this time and we can probably use a lot of firewood when we get to drilling. They can put in a lot of time cutting dry cordwood."

"They doing any prospecting?" asked the ranchman.

"They couldn't do much except look for signs," answered Colonel Howell. "And, of course, if they have any extra time, the Kansas men have been in the business long enough to know how to do that. They might save me a lot of work when I get up there, if they're on the job," concluded Colonel Howell.

"A good deal like grub-staking a man, isn't it?" asked Mr. Zept.

"Not much," retorted the oil man with decision. "They're all on my pay roll and they're all working for me. There isn't any halves business in what they find, if they find anything. It all belongs to yours truly—or will, when I prove up on my claim."

"What are the names of the men?" asked Roy with sudden curiosity.

"The Edmonton man I don't know very well," answered Colonel Howell. "He is a kind of a long range Englishman and I think his name is Chandler. The other men are Malcolm Ewen and Donald Miller. Ewen and Miller are good boys, and I know they'll give me a square deal, whether Chandler sticks or not."

In spite of the general conversation, Norman fancied that Mr. Zept's annoyance did not grow less, and it was not hard to conclude that this was due to Paul's absence. Finally both Norman and Roy excused themselves to visit the observation car. They really wanted to find Paul. He was not in the rear car, which fact the young men learned after describing their companion to the colored porter, who smiled significantly when he announced that Paul had left the car some time before.

The young men then went through the train and at last found the Count in jovial companionship with Moosetooth and La Biche. It was plain that both the Indians had been drinking, but there was no liquor now in sight, and the three were enjoying their pipes and their cigarettes. The Count had discovered that the Indians knew more French than English, and he was in high conversation with them. The boy himself was even more jovial when he greeted Norman and Roy with hearty slaps on the back.

For some moments the visitors attempted to join in the conversation between the Indians and Paul, but the conditions were such that the young aviators soon lost interest and they invited young Zept to return to the stateroom for a game of cards.

"Not now," protested the Count, dropping into a seat opposite the Indians again. "My friends here are great Frenchmen. They have been telling me about the Barren Lands. Besides," and he frowned a little, "I didn't know the governor was coming. I don't think I ought to see him just now. He ain't much for this sort of thing."

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"What sort of thing?" asked Norman somewhat brusquely.

"You know," answered the Count. "I was just telling the boys good-bye. I'll be all right in a little while, and then I'll come back."

"You aren't fooling anyone," broke in the quick-tongued Roy, "and I think Colonel Howell wants to see you."

Count Zept's laugh ended and he at once arose and followed the young men back to the stateroom. His reappearance seemed to ease his father's mind, and when the three young men and Colonel Howell began a game of auction the incident seemed almost forgotten.

At six o'clock, the superintendent of the dining car came to announce to Colonel Howell that his special table was ready, and the party went in to dinner.

When this elaborate meal was concluded, an hour and a half later, the warm afternoon had cooled and the train was well into the fertile farm land that distinguishes the great agricultural regions south of Edmonton. Somewhat after ten o'clock, the long daylight not yet at an end, the journey came to a close in the city of Strathcona. They had reached the Saskatchewan River. Loading their baggage into two taxicabs, they made a quick trip across the river to Edmonton and the King Edward Hotel.

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It was with a feeling of happiness that Norman and Roy found themselves on what is now almost the frontier of civilization. Their joy did not lie in the fact that hereabouts might be found traces of the old life, but that they were at last well on their way toward their great adventure.

Rooms were at once secured and Mr. Zept and Paul immediately retired. Norman and Roy lingered a while to learn from Colonel Howell the next step.

"The crates will come across the river early to-morrow morning," he explained, "and we'll catch the Tuesday train at eight thirty for Athabasca Landing. We'll be there to-morrow evening. Turn in and get a good night's sleep."

It was no trouble for the boys to do this, and at seven o'clock the next morning they were waiting for their friend and patron in the office. When he appeared he was in company with Mr. Zept and Paul, having apparently just aroused them.

"Well, boys," he began, using his perpetual smile, "we've struck a little snag. But remember the philosophy of the country—what you can't do to-day, do when you can. It's the train!"

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"What's the matter?" exclaimed Norman.

"Well," explained Colonel Howell, "you know they're just finishing the railroad and I was told that the trains are running to Athabasca Landing. They were running a passenger train about twenty-five miles out, but beyond that there hasn't been anything but a construction train. There's a new Provincial Railway Commission and it decided only the other day that no more passengers could be carried. The road hasn't been turned over yet by the contractor and they're afraid to let anyone ride on the construction train. We could get as far as the passenger train goes and there we'd be stalled. Looks like I'd have to do some hustling."

"You can go in an automobile," suggested young Zept, who apparently had secured some information about the country.

But Colonel Howell shook his head. "There are only two automobiles in that service and they're both stuck somewhere in the mud between here and the Landing. Besides, that wouldn't do us much good. I find that my two carloads of oil machinery are yet in Edmonton and then there's the airship crates."

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"Can't we carry it all by wagon?" asked Norman.

"Hardly," responded the colonel. "It'd make a caravan. We might get through in good weather but the trail is impassable now. We've got to go by train."

"And can't!" commented Roy.

"Not to-day," laughed Colonel Howell, "but the season's young yet. There'll be another train starting out day after to-morrow. We'll have to turn up something. Meanwhile, let's have breakfast."

This meal over, Norman and Roy accompanied Colonel Howell out into the city. As they well know, Edmonton was the town from which all were forced to take their start into the northern country and, as the colonel had already discovered, they soon confirmed the fact that transportation facilities were in a chaotic condition. A stage was to leave that day, but its passenger facilities were wholly inadequate, and what there were had been engaged for many days.

The first visit of the investigators was to the offices of the Hudson's Bay Company, that great trading institution which is at once the banker and the courier for all travelers in the great

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Northwest. Although altogether obliging, at the present time the Company was helpless. The agent thought he might arrange for teams, but it would require several days. Then Colonel Howell visited the offices of the railroad contractors, where he ascertained definitely that passage on the construction train was out of the question.

"Maybe we'll have to stay here until the mud dries," laughed Colonel Howell.

The two boys almost groaned.

"But something may turn up," continued Colonel Howell, "and I'll be enough to look after things. You boys had better take a run over town. If I don't see you at noon, I'll see you at dinner this evening."

The boys returned to the hotel, found that Mr. Zept and his son had finally gone out with friends, and they put in the rest of the day inspecting the lively young city.

Colonel Howell's acquaintances were not confined to the Northwest—he also had friends in Winnipeg. After leaving the contractors' offices, he went to the Dominion Telegraph Building and sent this message to a business friend in Winnipeg: "Please see the Canada Northern officials and tell them that I am stranded in Edmonton with a party of friends and would like to get to Athabasca Landing." 97

In two hours, he was called up at the hotel by the general superintendent of that road, located in Edmonton, who said he had just been ordered by the Winnipeg officials to extend every facility to Colonel Howell and his friends in their advance to Athabasca Landing.

"We're running a mixed train to a little village twenty-five miles out from Edmonton," explained the superintendent, "and when it goes again, Wednesday morning, I'll put an extra car on this train. Meet me that morning at eight thirty, at the depot, and I will escort you personally as far as this train goes. Then I'll arrange to have your car attached to the construction train. There has never been a passenger car in Athabasca Landing. You can have the distinction of finishing your journey in the first passenger car to touch the great rivers of the Mackenzie Basin."

Colonel Howell proceeded at once to the superintendent's office, expressed his gratitude at the courtesy shown, and arranged that the other cars containing his outfit and the airship should be carried through at the same time. 98

When the members of the party returned to the hotel late in the afternoon, and received the news of the happy solution of their difficulty, congratulations rained on Colonel Howell. The boys had a new respect for the influence of the man with whom they were casting their fortunes and who had so little to say about himself.

The effect was a little bit different on the Count, who had rather persisted all day in a theory of his own that automobiles were the things to be used. He had canvassed liveries and accosted chauffeurs, but he had made no practical advance in securing help of this kind.

"Our own private car!" was one of Norman's outbursts. "That'll be great."

"And the first one into the North!" added Roy. "That's greater yet. And it gives us another day in Edmonton."

"Which isn't very great," commented the Count. "I've seen all I want to of this place. It's nothing but banks and restaurants. What's Athabasca Landing like, Colonel Howell?" he added a little petulantly.

"Oh, the Landing's nothing but saloons and the river, and beyond it," he added significantly, "there's nothing but the river." 99

At seven o'clock that evening, Mr. Zept and Colonel Howell with the three boys attended a baseball game, leaving it at nine thirty in full daylight.

"To-morrow is vacation," explained Colonel Howell, as they separated for the night, "and Wednesday at eight thirty we'll board our private car."

CHAPTER VII

A TEMPESTUOUS VOYAGE TO ATHABASCA LANDING

During their stay in Edmonton, the two Indian rivermen had been living royally in a lodging house near the depot. Early on the morning of the departure, Colonel Howell rounded up his old employees and when the mixed freight and passenger train backed up to the depot, the party was ready to board it. It was with satisfaction that all saw two Chicago & North Western freight cars, which Colonel Howell identified as those containing his oil outfit, and next to the extra passenger coach, the special baggage car.

A mist was falling and it was not cheerful. It was time for Mr. Zept to take his leave. For some moments he and Colonel Howell spoke apart and then, without any special word of admonition

to his son, he grasped the hand of each boy in turn.

"I hope you'll all be friends," was his general good-bye, "and that you'll all stand by each other. Good-bye. Colonel Howell is my friend and I advise all of you to do just as he tells you. Take care of yourselves," and with no further words, the rich ranch owner helped the little party to load its baggage into the express car. 101

There were many curious people at the depot, among whom, not the least conspicuous, were Moosetooth and La Biche. Men from the frontier and a dapper young mounted policeman all came to speak to the two Indians.

With most of the passengers either hanging out of the car windows or jammed together on the platforms—for at the last moment, Colonel Howell had readily given his consent to the superintendent that he might also throw open the special car to the general public, as far at least as Morineville, the end of the passenger run—the creaking train crawled around a bend, and while the boys and Colonel Howell waved a farewell to Mr. Zept, the journey northward on the new road began.

The privacy of the special car at once disappeared. The unusual jam was due to the impassable condition of the stage trail. Into the special car there came not only hunters and traders, but many women and children who had prevailed upon the railway officials to help them forward on the last stage of their journey into the river land. 102

As the pitching train made its way slowly beyond the city limits, Norman, Roy and Paul also found themselves on the platform, ready for the first sight of a new country. They were looking for sterile plains. Instead, they found black land freely dotted with clumps of trees, with walls of wild flowers on each side of the track. Magnificent strawberries almost reddened the ground, while, by the fences, the ripening Saskatoon berry gave the first positive sign of the new vegetation of which they were to see so much.

For three hours the train crept forward, stopping now and then at little stations, and at last reached the considerable settlement of Morineville. Here, Colonel Howell expected to meet the construction train to which the special car was to be attached, and from this point they were to make the remainder of their journey of seventy-five miles to Athabasca Landing as the sole passengers of their car.

But bad news awaited the travelers. The construction train had not arrived but it was expected during the afternoon. The superintendent, taking leave of his guests, left orders that their car should be forwarded on the returning construction train and at noon he left on the passenger train for Edmonton. Colonel Howell's car was switched onto a spur and then began a wait for news of the construction train. 103

An affable telegraph operator did what he could to appease the anxious travelers. By telephone he learned that the expected train had not yet made half the journey between Athabasca Landing and Morineville, and in that distance had been off the track four times. On the operator's suggestion, the adventurers made their way to the village for dinner and then returned to their car and spent the afternoon in hearing from time to time that the construction train was off the track again.

"Promises well for a night ride!" suggested Roy.

"It doesn't mean anything," explained Colonel Howell. "They just slap down an iron frog and run on again. Don't get scared about that."

When time for supper arrived, the agent gave it as his judgment that the train couldn't get in before midnight and, in that event, that it certainly would not go back until the next morning. Being assured by this employee that in case his theory was not correct he would send them word, the party abandoned their car to have supper and sleep in a little French hotel. 104

The supper was bad and the beds were worse. Norman and Roy longed for their new blankets and the woods, and slept with difficulty. Some time, about the middle of the night, the two boys heard the strident shriek of a locomotive. They at once rushed to Colonel Howell's room, eager to make their way back to the depot, but recalling the operator's promise, the prospector persuaded them to go to bed again and when it was daylight they all awoke to find no train in sight. But the operator was waiting for them and ate breakfast with the party.

"She come in with a busted cylinder," he exclaimed, "and they had to go to Edmonton to get 'er fixed. But she'll be back this morning sometime and you'll have a nice ride to the Landing." Then he laughed. "That is, if you can pull a heavy passenger coach over them tracks."

It was eleven o'clock when the old-fashioned engine reappeared but any motive power seemed good enough and when the little Irish conductor read his orders, he cheerfully busied himself in making the passenger car and the three other cars a part of his train. The spirit of discontent disappeared and once again the northbound expedition was on its way. 105

Until twelve o'clock that night, the indefatigable little Irishman pushed his heavy train, which included many cars of long-delayed freight, over the new tracks, which alternately seemed to float and sink into the soft sand and muskeg. Four times in that journey some one car of the train slid off the track and just as often the energetic crew pulled it back again. Once the accident was more serious. When the piling-up jarring told that another pair of wheels were in the muskeg and the train came to a crashing stop, it was found that the front axles of the car had jammed themselves so far rearward that the car was out of service. But again there was little delay. With two jack screws, the little Irishman lifted the car sideways and toppled it over.

Coupling up the other cars, the train proceeded.

At six o'clock in the evening supper was found in the cook car of a construction camp. It did not grow dark until eleven o'clock, and by this time, Colonel Howell and his friends were beginning to get a little sleep curled up on the seats of their car. An hour later, having creakingly crossed a long trestle, the strange train, still bumping and rattling, made its way along the even newer and worse track which led into Athabasca Landing. 106

There were neither depot nor light to make cheer for the tired travelers. With the help of Moosetooth and La Biche and a few half-breeds, the considerable baggage of the party was dumped out onto the sand of the new roadway and then, all joining in the task, it was carried across the street to the new Alberta Hotel. For the first time the boys discovered that there was almost a chill of frost in the air; in the office of the hotel a fire was burning in a big stove and from the front door Colonel Howell pointed through the starlight to a bank of mist beyond the railroad track.

"There she is, boys," he remarked.

"You mean the river?" exclaimed Roy.

"Our river now," answered their elder. "There's plenty of room here and good beds. Turn in and don't lose any time in the morning. We've got nothing ahead of us now but work. And remember, too, you're not in the land of condensed milk yet; you'll have the best breakfast tomorrow morning you're going to have for many a day." 107

Moosetooth and old La Biche had already disappeared toward the misty riverbank.

Dawn came early the next morning and with almost the first sign of it Norman and Roy were awake. From their window they had their first sight of the Athabasca. A light fog still lay over the river and the three-hundred-foot abrupt hills on the far side. Had they been able to make out the tops of these hills, they would have seen a few poplar trees. A steep brown road that started from the end of a ferry and mounted zigzag into the fog, was the beginning of a trail that at once passed into a desolate wilderness. They were within sight of the endless untraveled land that reached, unbroken by civilization, to the far-distant Arctic.

Beneath the fog the wide river slipped southward, a waveless sheet moving silently as oil, and whose brown color was only touched here and there by floating timber and the spume of greasy eddies.

"Not very cheerful looking," was Norman's comment.

"No," answered Roy, "she's no purling trout-brook; she couldn't be and be what she is—one of the biggest rivers in America."

The boys dressed and hurried through the new railroad yards to the muddy banks of a big river. The town of Athabasca Landing lay at their backs. The riverbank itself was as crude and unimproved as if the place had not been a commercial center for Indians and fur men for two hundred years. 108

To the left there was an exception, where, close on the riverbank, white palisades inclosed the little offices and warehouse of the Northern Transportation Company. Just beyond this, a higher and stronger palisade protected the riverbank from the winter ice jam. To the right and down the river a treeless bank extended, devoid of wharves and buildings. Opposite the main portion of the town, in this open space, a steamboat was approaching completion on crude ways. Near this there were a few ancient log cabins, used for generations by the Hudson's Bay Company as workshops and storehouses.

Three blocks to the west and in the heart of the new city the old historic H. B. Company was then erecting a modern cement and pressed brick store, probably at the time the most northern expression of civilization's thrift. Still farther to the south the river swerved in a bend to the east and lost itself beyond a giant sweep of hills. Not the least suggestive objects that came within the two boys' hasty view were a few Hudson's Bay flatboats, moored to the bank and half full of water to protect their tarred seams. In craft such as these, Norman and Roy, with their friends, were now about to venture forth on the river flowing swiftly by them, and not even the new steamboat was as attractive as these historic "sturgeon heads." 109

Also, in the far distance, on the riverbank where it curved toward the east, the young adventurers could make out the thin smoke of camp fires where a few tents and bark shacks marked the settlement of the river Indians. Here they knew Moosetooth and La Biche had passed the night.

Colonel Howell's prediction as to the breakfast was fully confirmed. After this, real activity began at once. Norman and Roy knew that they had reached the end of civilization, and had already abandoned city clothes. Both the boys appeared in Stetson hats, flannel shirts, belts, and half-length waterproof shoes.

Colonel Howell made no change other than to put on a blue flannel shirt. The young Count made a more portentous display. When he rejoined the others after breakfast, he wore a soft light hat, the wide brim of which flapped most picturesquely. His boots were those of a Parisian equestrian, high-heeled like those of a cowboy, but of varnished black leather. His clothing was dark, and the belted coat fitted him trimly. 110

Colonel Howell left at once to give orders about the placing of his cars, and Norman and Roy were dispatched to the Indian camp to find Moosetooth and La Biche, who were to go a short

distance up the river and bring the waiting flatboats down to a point opposite the freight cars. This duty appeared to interest young Zept and he cheerfully joined the other boys in their task.

Opposite the new steamboat they passed a larger and noisier hotel, in front of which were collected many curious people of the country, many of whom were lazy-looking, slovenly-garbed half-breeds.

Young Zept was full of animation, spoke jovially to any one who caught his eye and, although it was early in the day, suggested that his young friends stop with him in the bar room. But Norman and Roy's whole interest was in the task before them and when they saw the Count abruptly salute a red-jacketed mounted policeman who was standing in the door of the hotel, they hurried on without even the formality of declining Paul's invitation. 111

By the time the old steersmen had been found, the Count was out of their minds. Although the riverbank was sticky with mud, there was an exhilarating crispness in the air and the river fog had now disappeared. Led by the two Indians, the boys made their way a half mile up the river. Here, on a high clean bank, stood the big red river warehouse of the H. B. Company. Among the willow bushes opposite it was a fleet of new "sturgeon heads," and just below these, two boats that had been put aside for Colonel Howell.

From among the bushes near the warehouse the two Indians produced a pump and then for two hours took turns in drawing the water from the half submerged boats. Just before noon, Moosetooth taking his place in the stern of the rear boat with a small steering oar, La Biche loosened the craft and Norman and Roy were on their first voyage in the historic flatboat of the Athabasca.

It was curious to note the skill with which the veteran riverman allowed the current to carry his boats on their way, and the ease with which they were finally drawn in to the bank opposite the freight cars. 112

Roy proposed to secure a shovel for cleaning out the mud, but old La Biche laughed.

"The sun," he said, "he goin' do dat."

Near the landing, as the boys returned to the hotel, they discovered a thing they had not noticed in the morning. A grizzled "Baptiste," as Norman liked to designate each Indian, was busy with a draw knife, a chisel and a maul, finishing steering oars. These enormous objects resembled telegraph poles, being of pine timber, slightly flattened at one end to resemble the blade of an oar, and at the other end cut down into long handles that the user might clasp with his two hands.

When the Indian had roughly trimmed these giant oars, with the help of an assistant, who in the meantime seemed to have no other duty except to puff his charred black pipe, the old "Baptiste" balanced the piece of timber on a rock. Carefully testing the spar, in order to get the exact point of equilibrium, the oar maker then made a rectangular hole through the six inches of timber. The two boys understood. 113

At the rear of each flatboat a steel pin extended seven or eight inches above the woodwork. When this pin was thrust through the hole in the oar, the great sweep hung almost balanced, and the steersman who used it to guide the unwieldy craft forced the blade of the oar back and forth against the current with the force of his body. The boys found it almost impossible to lift one of the oars.

"I can see now," panted Roy, as he looked over the tree-like sweep, "where experience comes in."

CHAPTER VIII

COUNT ZEPT MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN AT THE LANDING

At the noon meal, Count Zept reported that Athabasca Landing was certainly a live town. He explained that he had met the most important man in town, the sergeant of the mounted police, and that he had been introduced to many of the influential merchants. He had examined the store of the Revillon Freres and was somewhat disappointed in his inability to secure a black fox skin which he had promised to send to his sister.

The Revillon Freres being the well-known rival of the Hudson's Bay Company, young Zept in his disappointment had also gone to the Hudson's Bay store, but there he had been equally unsuccessful, although at both places he saw plenty of baled skins. Colonel Howell laughed.

"My dear boy," he explained, "furs do not go looking for buyers in this part of the world. Inexperienced travelers seem to have the idea that Indians stand around on the corners waiting to sell fox skins. Skins are getting to be too rare for that now and, believe me, the fur companies get their eye on them before the traveler can. And the companies pay all they're worth." 114

"Anyway," remarked the Count, "I can get a small eighteen-foot canoe for a hundred and 115

twenty-five dollars. Don't you think I'd better buy one? The H. B. Company has some fine ones—the kind the mounted police use. I was looking for a bark one.”

Even the boys smiled at this and Colonel Howell laughed again.

“Indians don't trouble to make bark canoes any more,” he answered. “That is, when they can buy a good cedar boat. And next to his blanket, the Indian prizes his wooden boat above his family. But don't bother about a canoe. Moosetooth has one that we'll carry down the river with us and I've got a good one at the Fort. Don't buy *anything*. I'm buying enough for all of us.”

But the Count could not resist the temptation and later in the day, when the boys saw him, he and the sergeant of police were each wearing a highly embroidered pair of mooseskin gauntlets that Paul had found in a trading store.

Paul had been in the company of this new friend most of the day and it was apparent that they had been to the big hotel more than once.

After dinner, the unloading of the drilling machinery, the engine and the airship crates began. It was a task that Colonel Howell soon assigned to his young assistants, who had under their direction a few paid laborers and many more volunteer laborers who were more curious than useful. When Colonel Howell turned over this task to Norman and Roy, he returned to the outfitting stores and devoted himself anew to the purchase of supplies.

On the morning of the second day the loading of the boats began. Each of these was over thirty feet long and could hold an immense amount of freight. It was generally planned that all of the drilling machinery, the engine, and some lumber were to go in La Biche's boat, and that the provisions and the airship were to be carried in Moosetooth's batteau. In the end of each boat there was a little deck the width of the narrowing end of the boat and about six feet long.

While the boats were moving, the decks in the rear were devoted wholly to the use of the steersmen, who required all the space as they occasionally shifted the position of their giant sweeps. On the forward decks the passengers must sleep and unless they disposed themselves on the cargo, find sitting room during the day. There was neither house nor tent for protection. A charcoal brazier was provided, on which at times on the stern deck some cooking might be done. But in the main, unless the night was clear and good for running, the boats were to be tied up while supper and sleep were had on the shore.

A part of the equipment of each boat was six heavy oars. These were for use by the Indian crew when from time to time it was necessary to cross quickly over the broad river to escape rapids or other obstructions. As these things were revealed to the young aviators, they grew more and more anxious for the hour of departure.

When Colonel Howell's outfit began to reach the riverbank the next morning, Moosetooth and La Biche had part of their men on hand to assist in the loading. It was a motley group, moccasined in mooseskin with their straight black hair showing defiantly beneath their silver-belted black hats. Mostly they wore collarless checked flannel shirts and always from the hip pocket of their worn and baggy trousers hung the gaudy tassels of yarn tobacco pouches. Most of them were half-breeds, young men eager to show the smartness of a veneer of civilized vices. But this did not bother Colonel Howell, for Moosetooth and La Biche were alone responsible and these two men well enacted the roles of foremen. Sitting idly on the bank, cutting new pipes of tobacco or breaking twigs, with slow guttural exclamations they directed the work to be done.

The loading began and proceeded wholly without order. For this reason the prospector suggested that the airship crates be left until the last. Bags of flour, of which there were fifty, were dumped in the bottom of the boat where the mud and water were sure to spoil part of the flour.

“But that's the way they do it,” explained Colonel Howell. “It's the method of the river Indians. They're doing the work now and don't make suggestions or try to help them. They'll resent it and think less of you for it.”

While this work was going on, young Zept appeared from time to time and seemed to be interested but he as continually absented himself.

Loading went forward slowly. Deliveries of stores were made several times during the day, but there was an entire lack of snap and the Indians took their time in stowing things away. Colonel Howell was absent most of the day and in the middle of the afternoon the two boys took their first opportunity to look over the town.

Reaching the main street, they were not surprised to see the young Count, mounted on a lively looking pony, dash along the main thoroughfare. It was hard to tell whether the ease and surety with which young Zept rode or his flapping Paris hat attracted more attention. As the boys waved their hats to him and he gracefully saluted, they noticed that he must have been riding for some time. The pony was covered with perspiration and its nostrils were dilated. As the rider passed an intersecting street in the heart of the town, the little animal made a turn as if preferring another route. The Count threw it on its haunches and headed it on down the street at renewed speed.

A little later, having visited the post office, Norman and Roy came out just in time to see young Zept whirling his exhausted mount into a livery stable. When the boys reached this, they found the proprietor, who from his sign was a Frenchman, and Paul in a heated argument. It was in vociferous French and in the course of it the boys saw young Zept excitedly tear a bill from a roll of money in his hand and hurl it on the floor of the barn. The proprietor, hurling French

epithets at his customer, kicked the money aside.

Norman pushed his way between the spectators and with assumed jocularly demanded to know the cause of dispute. In broken English, the liveryman exclaimed:

"He is no gentleman. He kills my horse. For that he shall pay two dollars more."

"Well, what's the matter?" went on Norman laughing. "Isn't that enough? There's your money," and he picked up a Canadian ten-dollar bill and handed it to the owner of the pony.

"His money is nussing," retorted the pony owner. "He is no gentleman."

The absurdity of this must have appealed to young Zept. Perhaps the presence of his two companions somewhat shamed him.

"Don't have a row," broke in Roy. "The colonel's sure to hear of it."

The Count turned again to the excited Frenchman and began another torrent of apparent explanation, but it was in a different tone. He was now suave and polite. As he talked he held out his hand to the proprietor of the stable and smiled.

"He's been drinking again," whispered Roy to Norman, a fact which was quite apparent to the latter.

Then to the surprise of both boys, with Norman still holding the money in his hand, the excited Frenchman grasped his customer's hand, and he and Paul hurried from the barn. A block away, the disturbed Norman and Roy saw the two men arm in arm disappear behind the swinging door of the big hotel bar room. Ascertaining the amount of their friend's bill from one of the stable employees, Norman paid it and he and his companion left.

That evening, Norman handed Paul five dollars he had received in change and the incident was closed.

For three more days the loading of the scows continued slowly. It finally became apparent that the little flotilla would set out Saturday evening. In these days Count Paul's manner of life was so different from that of the boys that they did not see a great deal of him. Now and then he was on the river front, but more frequently he was a patron of the livery stable, and even in the evening he was frequently not in the hotel when Norman and Roy retired.

His acquaintance with the mounted policeman put him much in that man's company. This officer, always in immaculate uniform, was very English in appearance, and he wore a striking tawny moustache. Being in charge of the local police station, as the sergeant, he was the highest police authority in that district. As the boys noticed him on the street at times, gloved and swishing his light cane, they were surprised at the open signs of his indulgence in drink. But what surprised them even more, knowing as they now did of the arrangement between Paul's father and Colonel Howell, was the colonel's apparent indifference to young Zept's conduct.

"I have a theory," said Norman to his friend at one time. "You know Colonel Howell told us he wasn't taking Paul in hand to act as his guardian. I think he's letting him go the pace until he gets him where he'll have to quit what he's doing. Then it's going to be up to Paul himself. If he doesn't make a man of himself, it'll be his own fault."

"I think a good call-down is what he needs," answered Roy, "and the colonel ought to give it to him."

"I reckon he thinks that isn't his business," commented Norman. "It's certainly not ours. I reckon it'll work out all right."

"Like as not this is Paul's idea of roughing it in the wilds," suggested Roy.

"Then there's hope," answered his chum. "He'll be out of the swing of this in a few days and when he learns what the real thing is, if he likes it and takes to it, he'll forget this kind of life."

Finally the evening for the departure arrived. There was no fixed hour, but Colonel Howell's party had an early supper at the hotel and then a gang of Indians carried their newly packed equipment to the boats. All these articles were dropped indiscriminately as the Indians felt disposed, and soon after six o'clock Norman and Roy were ready for the long voyage. Count Paul had turned his camera over to the young aviators and their first step was to make a number of snaps of the boats and their crews.

Then, piling their rifles and their new blankets in the bow of Moosetooth's boat, the boys took station on the riverbank, prepared to embark at any moment.

In keeping with the methods that they had found common, it was then discovered that parts of the provisions had not yet arrived. Colonel Howell and Paul had not accompanied the boys directly to the boats. Even after a wagon had arrived with the last of the provisions, and these had been distributed by the Indians on the high heaped cargo, there was yet no sign of their patron. Nor was Count Zept anywhere to be seen.

The Indian wives of the crew sat around their little tepee fires, but between them and their husbands passed no sign of emotion or farewell; this, in spite of the fact that no one on the boats might expect to return for several weeks.

It began to grow cooler and finally the night fog began to fall over the swift brown river.

As the sun began to grow less, the barren hills on the far side of the river turned into a dark palisade. Finally Colonel Howell appeared. He had been engaged in settling his accounts and a

merchant who came with him spent some time in checking up goods already aboard the scow. But when Colonel Howell learned that the Count was not present he strolled away almost nonchalantly.

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"It's the way of the North," almost sighed Roy. "Nothing goes on schedule in this part of the world."

"Why should it?" grunted Norman. "When your journey may mean a year's delay in getting back, what's a few minutes more or less in starting out?"

It was far after nine o'clock and the sun was dropping behind the southern hills—the air chillier and the fog deeper, when Paul finally appeared. His boisterous manner was all the testimony needed to indicate how he had spent the evening.

With him was his friend, the sergeant of police. He had undoubtedly been with his new comrade to celebrate the departure, but the dignified officer, being now in the field of duty, gave few signs of personal indiscretions. For the first time he was formally presented to all and in a courteous and high-bred manner extended to the voyageurs his good wishes for a safe voyage.

Before the representative of the law, each Indian at once sprang to his feet and lifted his hat. And to each of these in turn the uniformed policeman answered in salute. When it seemed to Norman and Roy that there would be no end to the long delay, Colonel Howell also reappeared. With a nod of his head to all, he spoke quickly in the Cree language to his steersmen.

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Old Moosetooth grunted a command and the men ran to the hawsers holding the scows against the current. Then Moosetooth and La Biche, without even a look at their unconcerned families sitting stolidly in the gloom on the riverbank, took their places in the stern of each boat. Each began, as he leaned on his oar, to cut himself a new pipe of tobacco and Colonel Howell turned to the policeman.

"Sergeant," he remarked, "I think we are ready. Will you examine the outfit?"

The tall sergeant bowed slightly and with a graceful wave of his hand, stepped to the edge of one of the nearest scows. With a cursory glance at the mixed cargo of boxes, barrels and bags—hardly to be made out in the twilight—he turned and waved his hand again toward Colonel Howell. Then, quite casually, he faced the two steersmen.

"Bon jour, gentlemen," he exclaimed and lifted his big white hat.

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Colonel Howell and his friends took the sergeant's hand in turn and then sprang aboard the boat. While the two steersmen lifted their own hats and grunted with the only show of animation that had lit their faces, the ceremony of inspection was over and the long voyage was officially begun.

CHAPTER IX

THE SONG OF THE VOYAGEUR

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Hardly seeming to move, the deeply laden scows veered more and more into the current, until at last the swift flow of the river began to push them forward. But even before La Biche's boat, which was ahead and farthest from the shore, was fully in the grasp of a swirling eddy, the bronzed steersman, his pipe firmly set in his teeth, hurled his body on the steering oar and plunged the far end of it against the oily current.

At the same moment Moosetooth dropped his own oar and almost instantly both boats straightened out before the onrushing waters. It was a moment long waited for by Norman and Roy, and at the time no thought was given to any arrangements for comfort. The boys threw themselves on the forward deck, their sweaters close about their throats against the chilling fog and the cool breeze, while Colonel Howell sat muffled in his overcoat on the edge of the deck.

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Such events in the history of the Northern rivers were in the old days momentous. Their only ceremony had been the parting "Bon jour" of the policeman.

"In the old days," suggested Norman, "in the days that our friend Paul would have loved, the voyageurs had a song for a time like this."

"The riverman's song of farewell," spoke up young Zept with animation. "I wish I knew one."

Almost instantly, those on the fast-receding shore heard from the boat the soft notes of some one in song. Under the conditions, whatever the words and the air, they floated back as many of those left behind had heard the old voyageur take his leave. But this song came from neither of the weatherworn steersmen, nor from the stolid members of their half-breed crew. Count Zept, his hat in his hand and the cool river wind paling his flushed face, had mounted to the top of the cargo and was singing something he had learned in far away lands. The fascinating tenor of his voice carried far over the river.

Even out of the hidden heights on the far side of the current, the strains of the song came back

with a melancholy pathos. Perhaps the young singer himself was moved. But to those who listened, it wafted over the waters as for two centuries the voyageurs into the unknown north had celebrated the setting out of the long voyage that might have no return. None in the boat spoke to him, but as he went on, repeating the lines, and his voice gradually dropping lower and lower, the boats, lost in the fog and darkness, swept into the great bend, and the stragglers on shore turned and left the river.

Although he did not realize it then, Paul Zept's impromptu tribute in farewell marked the great turning point in his life.

Three hundred miles of dangerous water lay before the travelers and their valuable outfit. On this part of the voyage the river ran wide and deep. At the suggestion of the steersmen, it was at once decided to make no landing that night but to take advantage of the easy going, as the cold wind would soon sweep the fog away. Strongly touched by the air of Paul's song, which the singer laughingly explained was a song without words, as he had made it up mainly from snatches of Italian opera, the words of which he could not recall, Norman and Roy got Paul on the rear deck and began to prepare for the night. The assistance of one of the crew was necessary to prepare the blankets in an expert manner. Before midnight Colonel Howell and the three young men, snugly wrapped in their new "four points," found no trouble in losing themselves to the world without.

Long before the sun showed itself above the high poplar-crowned hills that lined each bank of the Athabasca, Norman and Roy had slipped out of their blankets. It was their first view of an absolute wilderness. The boats were still drifting silently forward, with no sign of life except in the erect forms of Moosetooth and old La Biche, who were yet standing against their long steering oars as they had stood through the night. Neither of them gave salutation, Moosetooth's dripping oar following in silence now and then a like sweep of his companion's blade in the water ahead.

Not arousing their companions, the two boys perched themselves where Paul had sung the night before and, shivering in the new day, began to drink in the scene before them.

What they saw at that moment was a picture repeated for nearly two weeks to come. Although drifting at the rate of four miles an hour, much time was lost while the boats made their way back and forth across the river, and although it was but three hundred miles to Fort McMurray, there was constant delay in camps ashore, and at the beginning of the Grand Rapids a week was lost in portaging the entire cargo. Colonel Howell did not welcome another lost outfit and he was quite satisfied when both Moosetooth and La Biche took their empty scows safely through the northern whirlpool.

Rising almost from the water, the hills, little less than mountains in height, ran in terraces. Strata of varicolored rock marked the clifflike heights and where black veins stood out with every suggestion of coal, the young observers got their first impression of the mineral possibilities of the unsettled and unknown land into which they were penetrating.

The first deer which they observed standing plainly in view upon a gravelly reef aroused them to excitement. But when Moosetooth, not speaking, but pointing with a grunt to a dark object scrambling up the rocky shelf on the other side of the river and the boys made out a bear, Roy sprang for his new twenty-two.

"Nothin' doin'," called Norman in a low tone. "That's where we need the .303 and of course that's knocked down."

"Well, what's the use anyway?" retorted Roy, resuming his seat. "I can see there's going to be plenty of this kind of thing. And besides, you can bet our friend here isn't going to stop for a bear, dead or alive."

From that time on, although they did not find animals so close together again, they saw eagles, flocks of wild geese floating ahead of them on the river, and three more deer. And continually the magnificent hills, hanging almost over the river, gave them glimpses of vegetation and objects new to them.

"I'm glad I came," remarked Norman, "but I wonder how this country looks when winter comes."

"You know how this river'll look," answered Roy. "It'll be a great, smooth roadway and a lot of people waitin' now to get back to civilization will make it a path for snowshoes and dog sleds."

"Some trip up here from Fort McMurray," suggested Norman.

"You said it," exclaimed Roy. "But the colonel won't have to make it on foot this winter—not with the old *Gitchie Manitou*, and this ice road to guide us."

He looked with longing at the crates of the airship, the two smaller ones of which took up one side of their own scow, while the others were lashed diagonally on top of the crate in the forward boat. The two boats had kept their relative positions throughout the night.

Just as the sun began to gild the water in their wake, Paul stuck his nose out of the blankets. All had slept in their clothes during the night, Colonel Howell having promised them a chance at their pajamas on the following evening. There was no dressing to be done and when Paul joined his companions all made preparation to souse their faces over the edge of the boat.

"One minute," exclaimed Norman. He dug among his baggage and in a short time reappeared with the aluminum basin.

"Non! Non!" came from the statuelike figure of old Moosetooth. Then he pointed to the abrupt cut bank of the river a few hundred yards ahead and called something in the Cree language to La Biche. The latter nodded his head and in turn called aloud in the Indian tongue.

Instantly from between the pipes and crates on the forward boat a dozen half-breeds crawled sleepily forth. One of these, with a coil of rope, sprang into the bow of the forward scow, and another similarly equipped took his place in the rear of La Biche, as if ready to spring on the second scow when opportunity presented. Both boats were headed for the cut bank.

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The commotion aroused Colonel Howell, and while he gave a nod of approval, the scows drifted in under the sweep of the steersmen's oars where the deep water ate into the tree-covered shore.

As La Biche's boat touched the bank and the second scow ran forward, the two half-breeds scrambled onto the roots of the trees and before the scows could bump away into the stream once more, they had been skillfully snubbed around the trunks of the nearest trees, a third Indian springing from the forward boat onto Moosetooth's craft and making fast a line thrown him from the shore. Then while the two boats bumped and struggled to turn their free ends into the current, the other Indians, with the skill of long experience, swiftly transferred hawsers from the free ends of the scows to other trees.

"Whew!" shouted Paul, after the first excitement was over. "Whatever we're going to do, I hope'll be short and sweet," and he waved his arms violently about his head.

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The close vegetation of the shore was alive with mosquitoes.

"Don't worry about these," laughed Roy. "This is the breeding place of the best mosquitoes in the world. Don't fight 'em—forget 'em."

Colonel Howell, near by, exclaimed:

"Don't worry, young men. Mosquito time is about over. You won't see many of them after the end of July."

"By the way," interrupted Norman, "what day is this? Is it July yet?"

"That's another thing you don't need to worry about," went on Colonel Howell with a chuckle. "When the mosquitoes have gone, you'll know that July is gone, and then we won't have anything to trouble us till the ice comes."

"Bum almanac," commented Roy. "Mostly gaps, I should say."

"Not so much," continued the colonel still laughing. "It isn't as much of a gap between the mosquitoes and ice as you might think. But it's breakfast time. We've got two cooks with us, one for the crew and one for the cabin passengers. You'd better take your morning dip and then, if you like, you can take the canoe and pull over to that gravel reef. You won't find so many mosquitoes there and you can stretch your legs."

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The boys put off their swimming until they had reached the island, where they had the satisfaction of arousing a young buck from the poplar underbrush, and the mortification of trying to catch it by chasing it toward the mainland in a canoe. An Indian fired at the deer from one of the scows, but it made the river bank in safety and disappeared in the bush.

"There, you see," announced Roy at once. "The twenty-two would have been all right, but you've got to have it with you."

The colonel's prediction was true and the three young men had a dip in the shallow water off the island that was certainly bracing. When they returned to the shore they found both cooks in full operation a few hundred yards from the scows and on the open riverbanks.

The difference in the output of the cooks was considerable, but satisfactory to each party served. The colonel's party was making the best of fresh eggs, fresh butter and new bread and a beefsteak, which would be their only fresh meat for many days. The crew, out of a common pan, helped themselves to boiled potatoes and fried pork, to which each man appeared to add bannock from his own home supplies. The Indians drank tea.

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"Gentlemen," remarked Colonel Howell, as he lifted a tin of steaming coffee, "here's to a friend of civilization—delicious coffee. We will know him but a few days longer. He will then give way to the copper kettle and tea."

"How about fresh eggs and beefsteak?" laughed Paul.

"Eggs, my dear sir, have always been a superfluous luxury patronized mostly by the infirm and aged. As for beefsteak, it cannot compare with a luscious cut of moosemeat, the epicurean delight of the Northwest. It is a thing you may not have at the Waldorf, and a delicacy that not even the gold of the gourmet may lure from the land of its origin."

"How about bear meat?" asked Roy, recalling with some concern his lost opportunity in the early dawn.

"Rather than starve, I would eat it," responded Colonel Howell, "and gladly. But to it I prefer rancid salt pork."

In such badinage, the leisurely stop passed while the boys finished their first meal in the wilderness, topping it off with the luscious red raspberries that were just in perfection all around the camp.

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That day the boats drifted fifty miles, luncheon being eaten on the rear deck. A night landing

was made on a gravelly island to escape as far as possible the many mosquitoes. Tents were not erected but alongside a good fire the blankets were spread on the soft grass beneath the stunted island trees and with mosquito nets wrapped about their heads all slept comfortably enough.

Where the Indians slept no one seemed to know. When the boys and their patron turned in as dark came on, at eleven o'clock, the half-breeds were still eating and smoking about their removed camp fire. In this manner, with no accidents, but with daily diversions in the way of shooting, venison now being one of the daily items of food, the voyageurs at last reached the Grand Rapids.

From this place, for sixty miles, a tumultuous and almost unnavigable stretch of water reached to the vicinity of Fort McMurray, the end of their journey. The greatest drops in the water and the most menacing perils were encountered at the very beginning of the Rapids, where for half a mile an irregular island of rock divided the stream. On one side of this the river rushed in a whirlpool that no craft could attempt. On the other side, and the wider, skilled boatmen had a chance of safely conducting light craft through the many perils. Here it was necessary that both boats should be unloaded and the entire outfit be portaged to the far end of the island.

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But travel on the river was so important that those concerned in it had, many years before, constructed a crude wooden tramway which, repaired by every newcomer, was available for use in transporting the heavy freight.

Permanent camp was made at the head of the island when this arduous task began. It had taken four days to load the boats and seven days were spent on the island in getting the cargoes of the two boats to the far end. The sixth day fell on a Sunday, when no Indian does any labor. On the afternoon of the next day Moosetooth and La Biche made their spectacular races down the Rapids. Not a boy of the party that did not entreat Colonel Howell to let him go with the first boat, but in his refusal their patron was adamant. The only man to accompany each boat as it started on its flight was an experienced member of the crew who sat on the bow with a canoe practically in his lap. He was ready to launch this any moment to rescue the steersman, but both attempts were engineered by the veteran river men with no other bad results than the shipping of a great deal of water.

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Paul posted himself opposite the most dangerous point and made pictures of the tossing boats and their bareheaded pilots as long as they were in sight.

Then came the laborious task of reloading the boats, but under Colonel Howell's direct attention, this operation now took far less than four days. Within ten hours' travel from the foot of the Rapids, the boats rounded a bend at three o'clock the next afternoon and came in sight of a lone cabin on the bare and rocky shore of the river.

"Look in the trees behind it," exclaimed Colonel Howell.

Like a gallows, almost concealed behind a fringe of poplar trees, stood the familiar lines of an oil derrick.

"I'm sorry they haven't got a flag out," remarked Colonel Howell, "but that's the place. All there is of Fort McMurray is just beyond."

CHAPTER X

PAUL AWAKENS TO THE SITUATION

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At first Colonel Howell's camp appeared to be deserted, but as the boats made in toward the shore and the crew began shouting, two men appeared from the cabin. These were Ewen and Miller—Chandler was not in sight.

The new log cabin with its flat tar-paper roof, glistening with its many tin washers, and with a substantial looking chimney built against one end, had a satisfactory look. In addition, several large ricks of cordwood standing at the edge of the clearing gave sign that the men had not been idle during the spring. At the same time, there were many evidences of a lack of thrift to be seen in the debris left from the cabin building.

No arrangements had been made for a boat landing and Colonel Howell's canoe was lying carelessly against the steep bank. Both Norman and Roy felt somewhat disappointed. While neither was bothered with the romantic ideas usually attached to the woodland cabins of fiction, each had expected a smarter camp. Nor were they very favorably impressed with the two men who appeared on the bank. They were not exactly tidy in appearance and their figures and faces suggested that they had spent a winter of comparative ease among the colonel's stores.

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"Where's the Englishman?" was Colonel Howell's salutation, as he and his friends sprang ashore.

"Over at the settlement," answered Ewen, as he jerked his thumb down the river. "There wasn't

much doing here and he went over there a few days ago to visit some friends."

"A few days ago," exclaimed the colonel, as his eyes made a survey of the littered-up clearing. "He might have put in a little time clearin' out these stumps."

"We just got through cuttin' the wood," broke in Miller as he and Ewen shook hands with their boss, "and we just got the finishin' touches on the cabin. We didn't know when to expect you."

Colonel Howell, followed by his men and the new arrivals, scrambled up the bank and, with no great show of enthusiasm, began a close examination of the new cabin and its surroundings. Nor were the boys any more impressed with the structure, which, inside, showed very little ingenuity. It had been made for the use of four men—seven were going to crowd it. After Colonel Howell had inspected the derrick, he returned and seated himself on a stump.

"When's Chandler comin' back?" he asked abruptly. Without waiting for a reply, which neither of his men seemed able to give him, he added: "One of you fellows had better take the canoe and go and get him this afternoon—that is, if he wants to come back."

There was some irritation in his tone that showed everyone that things were not exactly to his liking.

"It's only two miles," remarked Ewen showing some alacrity, "and I'll go by the trail."

When he had gone, Colonel Howell turned to Miller, whose unshaven and somewhat bloated face told that he had not lost any flesh during his stay at the camp.

"Miller," he said, "go down and take hold of these scows. We've got to get this stuff up here on the bank and under some protection. I don't want these Indians on my hands any longer than necessary. Keep 'em at it until midnight, if necessary, and then make up an outfit for 'em tomorrow and let 'em hit the trail."

"What are you going to do with the boats?" asked Roy.

"We're going to use 'em to make a cabin big enough for our new family," answered the colonel, smiling perfunctorily. "This one's all right for our cooking and eating, but it doesn't appeal to me as a bunk house. I think we'll add another room. The season's getting away from us and we can't afford to lose any time."

The man Miller had already shown signs of great activity when Colonel Howell suddenly called him back.

"On second thought, Miller," he said, rising and throwing off his coat, "I think you'd better tackle the cabin first. There's a lot of truck in there that ought to be in a storehouse and it's got a kind o' musty smell. Open all the windows and clean out the place. We've got to sleep in there to-night. When you've done that, get that kitchen stuff and use some river water and sand on it. Looks like an Indian shack in the middle o' winter. Young men," he went on, again forcing a smile, "I reckon it's up to us to get this gang busy."

There was nothing in this that discouraged Norman and Roy and even Paul seemed interested in the unloading of the boats. Before this was begun, however, Moosetooth spoke in an undertone to Colonel Howell and, shrugging his shoulders, the prospector waved his hand.

"All right," he exclaimed, "they'll work the better for it. Feed 'em. Four meals a day—that's the least that any half-breed demands."

While Colonel Howell and the crew began getting the two scows broadside along the bank, the Cree cooks unloaded the two cook outfits and the grub boxes. The laborious task of hoisting the crates and boxes of the rest of the cargo up the treacherous bank had hardly begun when the cooks, disdaining the fireplace within the cabin, had their fires going in the open clearing.

Within an hour the Indians were devoting themselves to a filling supper and a little later Colonel Howell and his assistants made a hasty meal of tinned roast mutton, pickles, Indian bannock, and tea. All about was confusion. The personal baggage of the newly arrived had been assembled just without the cabin door and Miller and a couple of the crew were beginning to carry in balsam boughs, on which, in their blankets, the colonel and his friends were to pass the night.

No attempt was made, further than Miller's crude efforts, to make the inside of the cabin more inviting. A big fire of rotten wood had been started near by, as a mosquito smudge, but all were too busy to give these pests much attention.

While the Indians were at supper, Ewen returned with Chandler.

The latter arrived with much effusiveness, but his greeting by Colonel Howell was rather curt.

"Of course you'll remember this," the colonel remarked, "when it comes to settling."

Chandler changed his attitude instantly. His expression and speech showed that he was not sober.

"I'm ready to settle now," he retorted, as his eyes swept over the growing heaps of the many boxes, barrels, bags and crates that littered the shore.

"I think I am too," remarked Colonel Howell, "when it suits me. Meanwhile, you're off the chuck roll. Get out of camp and when you're in a proper condition and can show me what you've earned, come back!"

The tall and emaciated Englishman drew himself up and glared at Colonel Howell.

"Get out!" exclaimed the latter in a tone that was wholly new to the three boys.

"I'll go when I get my money!" mumbled Chandler, half defiantly.

Without more words, Colonel Howell shot out his right arm and caught the man by his shoulder. He whirled Chandler and sent him sprawling on the trail.

The man's defiance was gone. "My pay's comin' to me," he whimpered, "and I've worked hard for it."

"We'll see about that," snapped the oil man, "when the time comes."

As if dismissing the incident from his mind, he turned toward the scows.

"Look out!" exclaimed the three boys, almost together, but their warning was hardly needed. As Colonel Howell turned, the sinewy form of old Moosetooth had thrown itself upon the crouching Englishman. The two men sank to the ground and there was a surge forward by those near by. Then the Indian tore himself from the partly helpless Chandler and struggled to his feet. In his hand he held Chandler's short double-edged knife. With indistinguishable imprecations and his arms waving in the air, the Englishman disappeared within the fringe of poplar trees.

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Excited, but with no excuse for asking questions, the boys turned and, with Colonel Howell, resumed the task of getting their cargo ashore. Old Moosetooth looked at the knife, placed it inside his belt and began cutting a fresh pipe of tobacco.

"Life in the wilds!" remarked Colonel Howell, as he and the boys regained the scows. "A lazy man's bad enough, but a booze fighter doesn't belong in this camp."

"Where could he get anything to drink up here?" asked Norman, a little nervously.

"Tell me!" responded Colonel Howell. "That's what we all want to know. Anyway," he went on, "we've done our part towards cutting it out. There isn't a drop of it in this outfit."

When he could do so without attracting attention, Norman glanced at Paul. The latter as quickly averted his eyes and plunged with greater energy into his share of the work.

These events had taken place just before the "cabin passengers" had been called to supper. Efforts were being made to forget the Chandler episode and Colonel Howell especially was talkative and jolly. Paul was just the opposite. At last, when the cook had left them with their tea, the young Austrian seemed to become desperate. Norman and Roy were just about to leave the cabin when Paul stopped them, more and more embarrassed.

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"I want to say something, boys," he began. Then he turned to his host and, the perspiration thick on his face, added suddenly: "Colonel Howell, I don't know how to say it, but I've got to tell you. I lied to you the other night in the hotel at Edmonton. You didn't ask me to stop drinking, but you talked to me pretty straight, and that's what I meant to do. Well I didn't stop—I just put it off, a little. I didn't do the right thing back at the Landing. I knew it then, but I knew I was going to stop when I came up here and I just put it off a little longer."

The colonel made a half deprecating motion, as if it embarrassed him to listen to the young man's confession.

"I thought it was all right," he said, as if to somewhat relieve Paul's embarrassment, "and I knew you meant to stop. Of course we knew what you were doing, but you're pretty young," concluded the colonel with a laugh.

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Norman and Roy each gave signs of an inclination to relieve Paul's embarrassment and Norman especially showed concern. But he and his friend remained silent.

"We'll let that all be bygones," suggested Colonel Howell, "and here's to the future—we'll drink to what is to come in Canada's national beverage—black tea reeking with the smoke of the camp fire."

A laugh of relief started round, as Paul's three companions hit the table with their heavy tin cups, but in this the young Count did not join.

"That ain't it," he blurted suddenly. "That was bad enough, but I've done worse than that."

The colonel's face sobered and Norman's eyes turned toward the heap of personal belongings just outside the cabin door. Paul's trembling arm motioned toward these boxes and bags.

"I've got a case of brandy out there and I've got to tell you how I've lied to you."

"Hardly that!" protested Colonel Howell. "You hadn't spoken to me of it."

"No, I didn't," confessed Paul, his voice trembling, "but I just heard you say we hadn't anything like that with us and I might as well have lied, because I had it."

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"Did that sergeant of police know this?" broke in Roy. "I thought he examined everything. He certainly said we were all right."

"Yes, he knew it," answered Paul, "but he isn't to blame. Don't think I'm making that an excuse."

Colonel Howell sat with downcast eyes and an expression of pain on his face.

"Why did you do it?" he asked in a low tone at last. "Did you mean to hide it from me?"

"No, no," exclaimed his young guest. "I don't know why I did it. I don't want it. I'm going to quit all that. That's why I came up here. You know that, Colonel Howell—don't you believe me?"

But Colonel Howell's face now bore a different expression.

"My friend," he remarked after a few moment's thought, "I may have done wrong to ask your father to let you come with us. I thought you knew all the conditions. If this is a life that is not going to interest you, you'd better go back. The Indians will be returning to-morrow or the next day and you won't find it such a hard trip."

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Paul gulped as if choking and then sprang from the table. From the baggage outside he extracted a canvas-bound box, his own name on the side. While his companions sat in silence he hurled it on the floor at their feet and then, with a sweep of his knife, cut the canvas from the package. With a single crush by his heavy boot, he loosened one of the boards of the cover. Carefully packed within were a dozen bottles of expensive brandy. Paul caught one of them and appeared to be about to smash it on the edge of the table. The colonel raised his hand.

"Stop!" ordered his host. "Are you going back or do you want to stay with us?"

"Colonel Howell," almost sobbed the young man, "I'd give anything I have or can do for you if you'll let me stay."

"There's only one condition," answered Colonel Howell, and he no longer attempted to conceal his irritation. "If you're not strong enough to do without that kind of stuff, you're not welcome here. If you are, you are very welcome."

"I'll throw it all in the river," exclaimed Paul, chokingly.

"Which would prove nothing," announced Colonel Howell. "Put that bottle back in the box and nail it up. When you want it again, come and tell me and I'll give you the case and an escort back to the Landing."

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The episode had become more than embarrassing for Norman and Roy and they arose and left the room. Paul's face was buried in his hands and his head was low on the table. Fifteen minutes later, the young Count and the oil man made their appearance, both very sober of face.

At midnight when the last of the cargo had been unshipped, when the Indians had been fed again and when the white men had had a late supper of bannock and Nova Scotia butter and fresh tea, and when Colonel Howell and the boys had spread their heavy blankets on the fresh balsam, in Paul's corner of the cabin lay the box that had brought him so much chagrin. Not once during the evening had the humiliating incident been referred to by those who participated in it.

CHAPTER XI

PREPARING CAMP FOR WINTER

155

Colonel Howell being a far from hard taskmaster, especially in his dealings with the Indians, it was not until the morning of the second day that Moosetooth and La Biche led their men out of camp on the three-hundred mile tramp to Athabasca Landing. But the beginning of work in the camp did not await their departure. Colonel Howell took time to explain his plans so far as they concerned his young friends, and the morning after the arrival of the boats work at once began with the regularity of a factory.

The things to be done included a substantial addition to the present cabin, to be made in the main out of the straight poplar timber. The roof of this was to be of sod and the new bunk house formed a "T" with the old cabin. A clay floor was packed within and on this a board floor was made of some of the inside timber from one of the scows. New timber and poplar posts were used to make the bunks, which, packed heavily with shredded balsam, soon provided clean and fragrant sleeping berths. Colonel Howell had learned of a sheet-iron stove to be had in the McMurray settlement, and this was to be installed before cold weather arrived.

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The other cabin was renovated and thoroughly cleaned. A provision storehouse was added in the rear, and the clay fireplace was enlarged and extended into the room. This work under way, Norman and Roy, assisted by Paul, undertook to construct a rough but adequate aerodrome. The open space in front of the cabin was not sufficient for a landing and a large part of the clearing in the rear of the cabin was leveled for the airship shed. To decrease the size of the structure, it was also made in "T" shape, the extension for the tail of the machine reaching back toward the cabin, for the new shelter faced away from the cabin so that there might be no obstacle in starting and landing the machine.

In spite of its simple character, the boys made elaborate sketches for this shed and used in the main small uniform poplar trees easily carried on their shoulders. The entire frame of the building was made of this timber. The front of it was to be made of the colonel's three enormous tarpaulins. The sides and top being of heavy hemlock bark, this feature of the work required many days and it was often tiresome.

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In the three weeks that this work went on, Colonel Howell appeared to be in no hurry to resume

his prospecting. The boys learned that the old Kansas oil men had not been wholly idle in this respect and that they had located several good signs, all of which Colonel Howell took occasion to examine.

The boys also learned that the best prospects were not those found where the derrick had been erected. From their experience, the men who had been left in camp strongly urged another location in a dip of land farther inland.

"It's as good a surface sign as I ever saw," Colonel Howell explained to the young men. "It's a rock cut, but there's enough tar floating loose to show that there's oil mighty close. But there's no use getting excited about it and tapping a gusher. We'd only have to cap it and wait for the tank cars. Everything around here is prospective, of course. All we can do is to cover the field and establish our claim. And I guess that's a good winter's job."

"Ain't you goin' to work this derrick?" asked Paul, indicating the one erected near the camp. 158

"Looks like there might be gas around here," was the colonel's laughing response. "We'll sink a shaft here an' maybe we can find a flow of natural gas. That'd help some when she gets down to forty below."

It was surprising how all these preparations consumed time. It was nearly the end of August when these plans had been worked out and with the setting up of the *Gitchie Manitou* in its novel aerodrome and the storing away of its oil and gasoline in a little bark lean-to, the camp appeared to be ready for serious work.

For a week Ewen and Miller had been setting up the wood boiler and engine for operating the derrick. From the night he unceremoniously left camp, Chandler, the Englishman, had not been heard from.

Each Sunday all labor ceased in camp and Ewen and Miller invariably spent the day, long into the night, in Fort McMurray. The boys also visited this settlement, which had in it little of interest. There was no store and nothing to excite their cupidity in the way of purchases. They heard that Chandler had gone down the river, but the information was not definite and, although Colonel Howell left messages for his discharged employee, the man did not reappear and sent no word. 159

Colonel Howell's other workmen, Ewen and Miller, were not companionable and did not become comrades of the boys. Now and then, in the month's work, Norman and Roy had heard Colonel Howell freely criticize them for the method of their work or for some newly omitted thing they had failed to do during the winter.

When the stores and supplies had been compactly arranged in the rear of the living room and the new storehouse, the cabin and its surroundings seemed prepared for comfortable occupancy in the coldest weather.

The only man retained out of the river outfit was a Lac la Biche half-breed, a relative of Moosetooth, who was to serve both as a cook and a hunter. At least once a week, the entire party of young men went with Philip Tremble, the half-breed hunter, for deer or moose. This usually meant an early day's start, if they were looking for moose, and a long hike over the wooded hills to the upland.

One moose they secured on the second hunt and to the great joy of the boys Philip brought the skin of the animal back to camp. The antlers, being soft, were useless. This episode not only afforded a welcome change in meat which, as Colonel Howell had predicted, could not be told from tender beef, but it sadly interfered with the work on the aerodrome. 160

When the Indian had prepared a frame for dressing the skin and lashed the green hide with heavy cord between the four poplar sides and had produced a shaving knife from somewhere among his private possessions, the boys fought for the opportunity to work upon the hide.

For almost two days, Norman, Roy and Paul, by turns, scraped at the muscle, sinews and fat yet adhering to the skins until at last their first trophy shone as tight and clean in the sunshine as a drumhead. Philip had also brought, from the upland, the animal's brains tied up in his shirt. In the tanning process he then took charge of the cleaned skin and buried it until the hair had rotted, and in this condition the outside of the skin was also cleaned. Then came a mysterious process of scouring the skin with the long preserved brains.

At Colonel Howell's suggestion, and with the complete approval of the boys, this part of the process was carried on at some distance from the cabin. Thereafter, when the weather was clear, Philip exposed the skin to the smoke of a smouldering fire, devoting such time as he had to rubbing and twisting the hide while it turned to a soft, odorous yellow. 161

Before the real winter began, the skin, which is the wealth of the Canadian Indian, began to make its appearance in strong moccasins, which were usually worn around the fireplace and often in bed.

From somewhere in the outfit a calendar had made its appearance, and this had found a lodging place in the front of the fireplace. The morning that Colonel Howell made a mark on September 1, with a bit of charred stick, he remarked:

"Well, boys, the postman seems to have forgotten us. What's the matter with running up to Athabasca and getting our mail? A piece of beef wouldn't go bad, either. How about it?"

So intense had the interest of Norman and Roy been in the hundreds of things to be done in camp that the aeroplane, although not out of mind, was not always foremost in their thoughts.

No reply was needed to this suggestion. Instantly, the proposition filled the air with airship talk. This first trip had been discussed many times. It required no particular planning now.

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"I like to travel about fifty miles an hour," exclaimed Norman, "and it's three hundred miles to the Landing. We'll leave to-morrow morning at five o'clock and land on the heights opposite the town at eleven. One of us'll go across in the ferry—"

"Both of us," broke in Roy. "There's no need to watch the machine—everybody's honest in this country."

"Let me go and watch it?" asked Paul, who was now the constant associate of the other boys in their work and pleasures.

"Not this time," answered Norman. "It isn't exactly a bus, you know. We can take care of it all right."

"Then we'll have dinner at the good old Alberta," suggested Roy with his features aglow, "do our errands, and start back about three o'clock. It's a cinch. With the river for our guide, we ought to give you a beefsteak about nine o'clock."

"And don't forget a few magazines," put in Paul.

This flight, which began promptly on time the next morning, after an early breakfast of toasted bannock, bacon and the inevitable tea, which Philip never spoiled with smoke, however, was made with all the ease of the exhibitions at the Stampede.

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The *Gitchie Manitou* was wheeled out of the hangar for a thorough inspection. Then the boys climbed in and the engines were started. With a wave of the hand they were off.

For a short time after the yellow-winged monoplane had mounted and turned south and westward over the vapory river, the boys had a new sensation. The rising fog started air currents which for a time they did not understand. Perhaps Norman's hand was a little out of a practice and at times Roy showed nervousness.

When Norman finally guessed the cause, he mounted higher and took a course over the uplands where, as the sunshine cleared the atmosphere, the *Gitchie Manitou* became more easily manageable. The line of vapor rising from the river some distance on their left was sufficient guide. This at last disappeared in turn and Norman threw the car back on its old course.

Once again above the river, whose brown, oily surface now shone clearly beneath them, Roy especially busied himself with the many attractions of the stream. Animal life was plentiful and, despite Norman's renewed protests, his companion insisted now and then in fruitlessly discharging his rifle at small game.

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They made better time than fifty miles and made a safe landing on the heights opposite Athabasca some time before eleven o'clock. What had seemed to them, from Athabasca, to be an uninhabited bluff, was now found to contain several poor cabins. Afraid to leave the car alone near those who would certainly be curious, Norman decided to stay with the monoplane and Roy undertook to visit the town across the river. But dinner at the Alberta was eliminated and Roy, in addition to his mail and meat and magazines, was to bring back luncheon for both the aviators.

Norman accompanied him to the brow of the hill and saw him scramble down the winding road to the ferry landing below. Here, also, he saw him wait nearly a half hour before the cumbersome gravity flatboat put out from the other shore, and then he devoted himself to picking and eating Saskatoon berries, with which the hills were covered.

It was two o'clock when Roy returned, burdened with packages. For an hour Norman had been asleep in the invigorating hill air. Roy had certainly gone the limit in the matter of meat. He had two roasts and six thick steaks and, what was more to his own taste, he proudly displayed a leg of lamb. His mail, of which there seemed to be a great deal for everyone, he had tied in one end of a flour sack. In the other end he had six loaves of fresh bread. On his back in another bag he had a weight of magazines.

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"I thought we'd take what we could," he began, "and I guess it's a good thing we came when we did. Somebody's been pounding telegrams in here for several days for Colonel Howell. I got a half dozen of 'em and I sent all he gave me. I got off some messages to the folks, too, but I wonder what the colonel's so busy about."

"This ain't the only iron he has in the fire," answered Norman drowsily. "But where's our own eats?"

Roy dumped his bags and bundles on the grass and then began to explore his own capacious pockets. From one he took a can of salmon and from another a box of sardines.

"And here's the lemon for 'em," he explained, producing it from his shirt pocket. "Help yourself to the bread."

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"Is that all?" complained Norman. "I'll bet a nickel you had dinner at the Alberta!"

"All but this," went on Roy, and he began unbuttoning the front of his flannel shirt. "It feels kind of soft."

While Norman watched him, he extracted a greasy bag, flat and crumpled, and tore it open to expose what was left of an originally fine hot raisin pie.

His companion turned up his nose in disgust.

"I fell down on the hill," explained Roy, "but if you don't want it, don't bother. It's just a little squashed. I'll eat it all right."

Norman began to straighten out the crumpled pieces with his finger, when his chum added, with some exultation: "And these."

Then, from within his unbuttoned shirt, he began to unload a dozen large sugar-coated doughnuts.

As Norman's mouth began to water, and he turned to the bread bag, a new odor caught his nostrils.

"What's this?" he exclaimed, pulling another greasy bag from among the bread loaves.

"Oh, I forgot," sputtered Roy, a part of one of the doughnuts already in his mouth; "that's some baked ham I found at the butcher shop. I guess that's some eats."

"Didn't you get any pop?" was Norman's only answer, a look of added disgust spreading over his face.

Roy turned, with a startled look: "I couldn't carry any more," he answered a little guiltily, "but I drank a couple o' bottles myself."

"I knew I'd get stung if I let you go!" growled his companion.

Norman looked at him with indignation. Then, having already appropriated a doughnut, he mounted quickly on the side of the car and sprang down again with the aluminum basin in his hand.

"Now you go down to the river and get me a drink. You've had it soft enough."

The return trip was almost a duplicate of the morning flight. In this, however, the aviators were able to follow the stream itself, and they flew low, protected from the evening breeze by the river hills. The ride did not seem long, and the boys were particularly interested in another view of the Rapids, which they had been unable to study in the morning flight. Not a single human being, going or coming, had they seen on the long stretch of river.

In Athabasca, Roy had learned that their boat crew had not all returned, but that La Biche and Moosetooth had reached town and that both were already serving as pilots on the new Hudson's Bay Company steamer that had been launched in their absence and was now making its first trip up the river. They were almost passing the oil camp when the sound of a shot attracted their attention and then, guided by Paul's worn and faded hat, they banked and landed in the rear of the aerodrome at ten minutes of nine.

CHAPTER XII

BREASTING A BLIZZARD IN AN AIRSHIP

When Roy turned over his half dozen telegrams to Colonel Howell, the two boys saw that the messages were of some significance. A little later they saw their patron reading them a second time. But when the beefsteak supper was served he seemed to have forgotten business. But that was only his way. When the prospector had reached his after-dinner cigar, he said abruptly:

"So you say everything went all right!"

"Like taking a buggy ride," answered Norman. "Don't you want us to go oftener? If it wasn't for using up the gas, there isn't any reason why we shouldn't meet each mail stage."

"I'm glad o' that," answered Colonel Howell, smiling. "I'd like to have you take a telegram over for me in the morning and wait for an answer."

"Don't you think I can go in this time?" asked Paul at once.

The other boys gave him no heed for a moment.

"We could go to-night," volunteered Norman, "if you like."

"That wouldn't do any good," answered the colonel. "You probably couldn't get the operator. I'll be more than satisfied if you duplicate to-day's trip—except as to the meat," he added. "We've enough of that for some days."

Paul sat in suppressed excitement.

"I don't want to butt in," he urged in the pause that followed; "but I want to help all I can. You don't need to be afraid—"

The boys could not resist a glance toward the bunk house door, where they well knew that Paul's embarrassing box still stood intact. And both Norman and Roy flushed.

"You can go," announced Norman instantly. "You won't be afraid!"

"Only afraid of disappointing Roy," answered the elated Paul.

The latter was disappointed, but he gave no sign of it and when he smiled and waved his hand, the thing was settled.

"I've been holding an option on a fine piece of oil property near Elgin, Kansas," the colonel began in explanation, "and I had forgotten that the limit was about to expire. Several of these telegrams are from my agent, who tells me we must have the property. The telegrams are now over three weeks old and I've just got two days in which to get word to him to buy."

"Write your message to-night," suggested Norman, "for we'll get away a little earlier in the morning, since we've got to wait for an answer."

The second flight to Athabasca Landing was of course Paul's first experience in an airship. For some time he was subdued and Norman could see his tense fingers gripping the edge of the cockpit. But when assurance came to him, he made up for his preliminary apprehension and was soon taking impossible pictures of the far-away hills and trees beneath him.

Reaching the landing place on the Athabasca Hills, Paul at once said:

"I s'pose you'd feel better if you looked after the telegrams yourself. I'll stay with the machine."

This was the program Norman had outlined but when the suggestion came from the young Austrian himself, Norman had not the courage to humiliate his companion with such a plain indication of his fear. Without hesitation, he answered:

"What are you talking about? Nothing like that now! Besides, I want to look over the engine. You go and attend to things—I'll be here when you get back."

A little after twelve o'clock, a boy arrived from the other side of the river, carrying Norman's dinner in a basket. The messenger was from the Alberta Hotel and he also carried a note from Paul announcing that no answer had yet been received to Colonel Howell's telegram.

As the afternoon wore slowly away, Norman became more and more apprehensive. It was nearly six o'clock when Paul came in sight, breathless and exhausted from his rapid climb up the hill. Norman could not resist a sigh of relief when he saw that the delay was not due to any new indiscretion of the young Austrian.

"I don't blame you," panted Paul, "and I bet you've been sweating blood. I don't deserve anything else, but you're going to save a lot of time if you'll just forget what I used to be. I ain't going to make any promises, but I'll show all of you that I'm not what you all thought I was."

Norman only smiled, but he gave his young friend a look of sympathy. Then he announced a little variation in the general plan.

"We're so late now that it's goin' to be dark before we get back and a little further delay won't do any harm. Just back of the new H. B. Company store I remember there's quite an open space on the other side of the town. We're flying pretty light and I think we'll cross the river, make a landing there, and get a couple of tins of gasoline. We want an extra supply on hand."

This flight was easily accomplished but it involved an experience that Norman had not anticipated. Having made a safe landing, while he visited the trading post and arranged to have oil delivered at once, nearly everyone in Athabasca Landing seemed to learn of the arrival of the airship. When he came riding back to the monoplane, in the delivery wagon, the *Gitchie Manitou* was the center of a mob of curious people. The sergeant of police was there, as well as the people from the hotel. It was impossible to leave at once. Politeness demanded decent replies to many inquiries but Norman almost felt repaid when he noted that this was the first meeting during the day between Paul and his old friend, the Mounted Policeman.

Yet, in the midst of the general greeting, the boys finally took their leave. As they swung over the city and the river, the mist was beginning to rise from the latter. For a part of the return trip at least, Norman knew that he would have to resort to his compass or to the guidance of the varying air currents that marked the river course at night.

For several days in the latter part of August there had been nightly frosts. Then there had been a short spell of warm weather and this night the boys could see that cool weather was rapidly approaching. As the monoplane winged its way into the gathering gloom and the crisp evening passed into dusk, the body of the *Gitchie Manitou* grew wet with cold dew. After dark, this began to turn into frost. Paul was able to wrap a light blanket about himself, but Norman, with no relief present, stuck to his post, protected only by his gloves and sweater.

As it was impossible to make out the course of the river from any distance, he had to defy the air currents in the rather hazardous light between the high river banks. It was far from the even flight made during the day in the sunlight, and again Norman could see his companion gripping the edge of the cockpit. There was little conversation, and in order to divert his companion, Norman manufactured a job for Paul by assigning to him the duty of watching the engine revolution gauge and the chronometer.

As Paul flashed the bulbs, throwing their little shaded lights on these instruments, and sang out the reading every few moments, Norman could not resist a smile. He read both instruments each time as quickly as his assistant.

About eleven thirty, the sun having now wholly disappeared, Norman's long-waiting ear caught the unmistakable roar of the head of the Grand Rapids. From this place, he had a compass bearing to Fort McMurray, and he could have predicted their arrival at the camp almost within minutes.

"You can take it easy now," he suggested to Paul. "We're practically home."

When the roar of the Rapids finally ceased, the river fog cleared somewhat and, with the help of the stars, the outline of the river became plainer below.

"How much longer?" asked Paul in a tired tone.

"We've been coming pretty slow," was Norman's cheery response. "We'll hit her up a bit. It's forty miles to the camp, but we'll save a little by cutting out the big bend. See if I ain't there in three-quarters of an hour."

"I'd think they'd have a light for us."

"If they're all asleep," answered Norman.

But they were not asleep. Some apprehension on the part of even Roy had kept him and the colonel wide awake. When it grew dark and the monoplane had not returned, he made a fire of cordwood and during the long evening renewed it constantly. At half past one the *Gitchie Manitou* concluded its second successful trip.

The answer brought to Colonel Howell, in response to his telegram, appeared to be highly satisfactory to that gentleman. As he read it in the light of Roy's poplar wood signal fire, he remarked:

"I told you young men that you didn't know how much you might be worth to me. If I hadn't made good on that option, there's no way to tell what I might have lost. I wouldn't let go the deal I made to-day for twenty-five thousand dollars."

"I'm sorry I didn't have anything to do with it," exclaimed the benumbed Paul, "but I'm glad I got a ride at last."

Colonel Howell opened his mouth as if to make reply and then checked himself with a smile. The words behind his lips were: "And a month ago you'd have probably spoiled any deal you had a finger in."

"You had as much to do with it as anyone," Norman suggested aloud. Then he laughed and added: "But you mustn't work so hard. Look at your hands."

Paul opened his yet clenched fingers and held them before the snapping blaze. The palm of each hand bore traces of blood.

"That's where I lifted her over the high places," he said with a laugh of his own. "But look, it's dry. I ain't been doing it for some time."

This night was the real beginning of the colder weather. When they were able, in late July, Ewen and Miller had sacrificed a few potatoes out of their store to plant a patch of this vegetable. During August the little garden had thriven and was at last in full bloom. But this night, to the keen disappointment of all, the creamy blossoms fell a victim to the first blighting frost. From now on, while the days were even sunnier and often quite warm, the nights rapidly grew colder and each morning there were increasing frosts.

For two weeks preliminary to the removal of the derrick to the better prospect, the arm of the drill pounded ceaselessly up and down all day. There were small accidents that frequently delayed the work, but no result other than dulled drills and the accumulation of promising-looking sand and rock.

The hunting trips also continued and moose now became very plentiful. Philip, the cook and hunter, did not always accompany the boys on shooting trips, as the half-breed had joined Ewen and Miller in the work on the well.

The airship was safely housed, as if for the winter. The third week in September came in with a lessening in the daily sunshine. A haze began to hang over the river valley and a murkiness now and then took the place of the keen and clear atmosphere. The evenings had grown so cool that considerable attention was being given the fire in the living room.

On an evening such as this, while Colonel Howell and his young assistants stood on the riverbank, watching the red sun turn to silver gray, Colonel Howell exclaimed:

"By our calendar, the fall's coming along a little early. And judging by the trees over there and the nip in the air, we're going to have some weather before long. Maybe not for several days, but it's on its way. Before it gets here, why not make another trip to the Landing and see if there's anything at the post office?"

"All letters ready at five in the morning," announced Norman impulsively. "Mail for Athabasca Landing, Edmonton, Calgary and points south leaves at that time."

"Better bring a little more beef this time," suggested the colonel with a laugh, "and anything else that looks tasty and you've got room for."

"I guess I've had all that's coming to me," suggested Paul. "Don't think I'm afraid. Whenever you want a helper," he went on, addressing Norman, "don't fail to call on me."

"I guess we won't make many more trips this season!" put in Roy, but in that he was mistaken. The trip made the next day was memorable, but two more that were to be made later were more than that, and the last one was certainly ample justification for Colonel Howell's daring introduction of the monoplane into these silent places of the North.

Shortly before five o'clock the next morning, in spite of an ominous gray sky and a new sound of

the wind in the trees, Norman and Roy were off on their three hundred mile flight. They planned a short stay at the Landing and upon reaching camp again before the shortening day was at an end. They carried in the cockpit their Mackinaw jackets and their winter caps. Philip also prepared a cold luncheon to be eaten on the return trip, thus saving time at the Athabasca stop.

Early on their outward flight, for a time the red sun made an effort to get through the clouds, but after nine o'clock had wholly disappeared and the temperature began to fall. An almost imperceptible fine dry snow appeared, but it was not enough to interfere with the conduct of the machine. When a landing was finally made at the old place in the bend of the river, although the day was dreary enough, only the chill atmosphere and a few traces of snow gave premonition of possible storm.

This time Norman made the visit across the river and he was not gone much over an hour and a half. To facilitate the delivery of his stores, which were considerable, he pressed a horse and wagon into service and a little after twelve o'clock Roy was glad to see his companion reappear in the delivery wagon. The spitting snow had begun again. No time was lost in luncheon this day, but the fresh meat, eggs and butter and a few fresh vegetables were quickly stored in the rear of the cockpit.

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There were no telegrams this time, but a larger quantity of mail with considerable for the boys, some of which Norman had examined. At twelve thirty o'clock everything was in readiness. On the wind-swept heights it was now cold. Before mounting into the cockpit the boys put on their winter caps, Mackinaw jackets and gauntlets.

Then, elevating the front protecting frame, they started the *Gitchie Manitou* on its return flight, the wind and snow already smiting its resonant sides in a threatening manner.

The young aviators had little to say concerning the situation. They were not alarmed and could not afford to be, as their surroundings were mild compared with the conditions that the unique monoplane had been made to overcome. And yet they were now beyond theorizing, and it looked as if before the day was done they were to prove the merits or weaknesses of their much-lauded craft.

"I'm glad of one thing," suggested Roy, a little later; "we're going to have daylight all the way back."

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"I hope so," answered Norman, but not very confidently.

"We ought to be there by seven o'clock!" retorted Roy.

"That's all right," said Norman in turn, "but I've seen snow in the daytime so heavy that it might as well have been night."

"Anyway, as long as we don't lose the river," suggested Roy, "we can't go far wrong. And the compass ought to help some."

"A compass is all right to keep you in a general direction," answered Norman, "but the best of them, in a three hundred mile run, won't land you at any particular street number."

"I think," suggested Roy again, a little later, "that we might as well put up these shelters and have something to eat."

By this time the wind had died somewhat and the volume of the snow had increased. It was falling so heavily that the top of the car was white. Norman's silence giving approval, Roy managed to elevate the protecting sections, which in turn immediately began to be plastered with soft flakes. Almost at once part of the section on the lee side, which by good chance happened to be the one next to the river, was lowered again that the pilot might get a clear view. Then Roy opened Philip's bag of food.



"Don't shoot," he protested. "What's the use?"

The aviators had both tea and water, but they drank only the latter and made no attempt to use the heating apparatus.

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At four o'clock the increasing snowfall was beginning to give the machine some trouble, and yet it was plowing its way steadily through the air and neither boy was more than apprehensive. Soon after this the snow ceased suddenly and the wind rose as quickly.

"We're losing some of our extra cargo anyway," announced Roy, as the first gusts tore some of the accumulated snow from the weighted planes.

"And we're losing some considerable gas," added Norman. "I hope we don't have to buck this wind very long—it's coming dead ahead." It was just then, the gloom merging into dark, that the alert Roy exclaimed:

"Look; a bunch o' deer!"

The car was crossing the snow-flecked river and flying low. Norman raised himself and made out, in the edge of the timber below them, a group of deer.

"Don't shoot," he protested. "What's the use?"

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But his admonition was too late. Roy's twenty-two had already sounded. However, nothing but a bullet was lost. When the monoplane had passed swiftly on its way, the placid and apparently unmoved animals stood gazing after the airship.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE LAND OF CARIBOU, MOOSE AND MUSK OX

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Within another hour, the first storm of the season had turned into a blizzard. With the provisions they had on hand the boys would have made a landing to get what protection they might from the blinding snow and the now-piercing wind had they dared. They had not yet changed the landing wheels of the monoplane for their novel snow runners and they realized that a new start in the rapidly increasing snow was practically hopeless.

Working directly ahead into the gale had so reduced their speed that Norman had adopted a series of long tacks. He did this in spite of the fact that for miles at a time it took him from the river valley, which he was now locating mainly by the wind eddies he had learned to know. There was no use turning on the searchlight, as it merely gave them a little longer view into the deep gray emptiness before them.

Thoroughly appreciating their danger, the boys also recognized that a panic of fear would not help them. If the car should become unmanageable, they would make the best landing they could and, half burying the monoplane in the snow, would await in the protected cockpit the breaking of the blizzard and a new day.

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"Anyway," announced Roy at one time, "while I ain't exactly stuck on being here and it ain't as cheerful as I thought it would be, you got to say this, the *Gitchie Manitou* ain't falling down any."

No attention was given to supper and it did not get so cold but that the heavy clothing and enclosed cockpit—for they had long since been forced to put up all the sections—were ample protection for the young men. Seven o'clock, by which time they had expected to be in camp, came, as did eight and nine. It was now long after dark and, while the storm had abated somewhat, there was still a heavy wind and plenty of snow.

For hours the boys had been simply following the compass. They had not caught the roar of the Grand Rapids and felt themselves practically lost. By their calculation, and allowing for a head wind, they had concluded that they would have covered the three hundred miles by ten o'clock. If at that time they could make out no signal light, they had decided to come down on the upland and go into camp for the night.

Their calculation was purely a guess but it was not a bad one. Some time after half past nine both boys made out in the far eastern sky a soft glow.

"I thought it had to be a clear night for the Aurora Borealis," suggested Roy, conscious that his companion had also seen the same glow. For a time Norman made no response but he headed the machine directly toward the peculiar flare and ceased his tacking.

"That's no Aurora," he said at last. "I think the woods are on fire."

For ten minutes, through the thinning wind-tossed snowflakes, the *Gitchie Manitou* groaned its way forward.

"I wonder if it ain't a big signal fire for us," suggested Roy at last.

"It's a big blaze of some kind," answered Norman.

Through the obscuring snow, the nervous aviators had located the light many miles in the distance. Now it began to rise up so suddenly before them that they knew it had not been very far away. Yet they could not make up their mind that it was a signal fire. It did not at all resemble a blaze of that kind.

"Well, don't run into it, whatever it is," shouted Roy a few minutes later as a tall spire-like shaft of yellow light seemed almost to block their progress.

But Norman was already banking the machine, and the flying car responded while the wonder-struck boys gazed open-mouthed.

"It's the camp," Norman yelled just then as a little group of shadowy buildings seemed to rise up out of the snow.

"They've struck gas!" blurted Roy, as he sprang to his feet. "The men have struck gas and it's a gusher!"

Even as he yelled these words, the aviators heard a quick fusilade of shots and as the car darted onward were just able to catch sight of shadowy forms running about within the glare of the burning gas well. The sight was enough of a shock to Norman to throw him off his guard and the snow-weighted car careened wildly toward the earth. Roy attempted to spring to his companion's assistance and realized almost too late that this would be fatal. While the perspiration sprang to Roy's chilled face, Norman's presence of mind returned and he threw the car upward and into equilibrium again.

Then, straining every nerve, he made a wide detour but while his brain acted, the muscles of his hands and arms seemed suddenly paralyzed. The car dropped slowly and safely in the midst of the clearing, and when it touched the snow the landing chassis caught and the airship stopped as if in collision with a wall. Both boys lunged forward and when Roy got to his feet he found Norman curled up among the steering apparatus, cold and motionless.

It was a good half hour later when the young aviator had been revived. His first inquiry was about the *Gitchie Manitou*. When he learned that this was apparently little injured and had already been backed into the aerodrome, he gave more evidence of his all-day's strain by again relapsing into unconsciousness on the cot that had been improvised for him before the fire in the living room.

The more fortunate Roy was able to relate their adventures and hear the details of the gas gusher's discovery that night. Within the protected clearing, the storm had been more of a heavy downfall of snow and less of a blizzard. Anxious to move the derrick before winter was fully upon them, Colonel Howell and his two men had persisted in working the drill all day. When the gas vein was unexpectedly tapped late in the afternoon, the drill pipes had been blown out and the escaping gas, igniting from the near-by boiler, had consumed the derrick. Fortunately, the tubing and drills had been forced through the derrick and were saved.

The engine house had also caught fire, but this had been pulled down and it was thought that the engine and boiler were undamaged. These details were discussed while Roy ate a late supper and drank with more relish than ever before his tin of black tea. Norman was so improved by morning that he was early astir, eager for a view of the still roaring volume of gas. He found that Colonel Howell had also taken advantage of the first daylight to inventory the possible damage.

While the twisting yellow flame of the uncapped well was less inspiring as day broke, the roar of the escaping flame fascinated the young aviator.

"It's a gusher, and a dandy," explained Colonel Howell as he and Norman stood close by it in the melting snow. "But I think we're prepared for it and we'll try to cap it to-day."

All else, the clearing, the camp structures and the banks of the river, were peaceful and white under the untracked mantle of new-fallen snow. The wind had died out and the gas camp at Fort McMurray stood on the verge of the almost Arctic winter. 193

The excitement attendant upon the wonderful discovery and the attempt made at once to control the fiery shaft again interfered with Colonel Howell's real plans of active prospecting. For days the experienced oil men made futile efforts to extinguish the gusher and to cap the shaft. When they were of no assistance in this work, Norman and Roy overhauled the airship and substituted the ski-like runners in place of the aluminum-cased rubber-tired landing wheels.

It seemed as if every trader, trapper and prospector within fifty miles visited the camp. A week after the discovery, somewhat to the surprise of all, although apparently not so much to Ewen and Miller, the long missing Chandler appeared at the clearing late one evening. If he had any apology to make to Colonel Howell, the boys did not hear it. But he was sober enough this time and somewhat emaciated. He had come to settle with his old employer and explained his long delay in doing this by saying: "I knew my money was good any time," and that he had been trapping farther down the river. 194

He lounged about the camp the greater part of the day and even volunteered his services in the still unsuccessful attack of the flaming gas. But Colonel Howell seemed without any interest in his offers. The man was invited, however, to eat in the camp and spend the night there.

When the boys retired, Colonel Howell, the visitor, and Ewen and Miller were still smoking before the big fire. The next morning the boys slept late and when they responded to Philip's persistent call to breakfast, they found that Chandler had eaten and gone. Colonel Howell was awaiting the boys, Ewen and Miller being already at work on the blazing well, and he seemed to have something on his mind.

"Would there be any great danger," he began at once, addressing Norman, "in making a short flight in your airship in weather like this?"

"This isn't bad," volunteered Roy. "It's only a few degrees below zero. There's a good fall of snow for our runners and there hasn't been any wind since the blizzard."

"Well," resumed Colonel Howell, almost meditatively, "it seems a shame for us to be livin' here in what you might call luxury and folks starving all around us. Look at this," he went on, and he led the three boys near one of the windows where a large Department of the Interior map of northern Alberta was tacked to the wall. "Here's Fort McMurray and our camp," he began, pointing to a black spot on the almost uncharted white, where the McMurray River emptied into the Athabasca. Then he ran his finger northward along the wide blue line indicating the tortuous course of the Athabasca past Fort McKay and the Indian settlement described as Pierre au Calumet (marked "abandoned"), past the Muskeg, the Firebag and the Moose Rivers where they found their way into the giant Athabasca between innumerable black spots designated as "tar" islands, and at last stopped suddenly at the words "Pointe aux Tremble." 195

"That's an Indian town," went on Colonel Howell, "and it's about as far south as you ever find the Chipewyans. It isn't much over a hundred miles from here and Chandler says there ain't a man left in the village. Pretty soon, he thinks, there'll be no women and children left. Maybe he's making a pretty black picture but he says all the men have gone over toward the lake hunting. They've been gone over two weeks and the camp was starving when they left." 196

The colonel, with a peculiar look on his face, led the way back to the breakfast table.

"These Indians are nothing to me," he went on at last, "and all Indians are starving pretty much all the time, but they die just the same. But somehow, with plenty of pork and flour here and this great invention here right at hand from which nobody's benefitting, it seems to me we must be pretty hard-hearted to sit in comfort, stuffing ourselves, while little babies are dying for scraps that we're throwing in the river. I——"

"Colonel," exclaimed Roy at once, "you've said enough. Get up what you can spare and we'll have bannocks baking in that settlement before noon."

"I don't want to get you into another blizzard," began the colonel, yet his satisfaction was apparent.

"Don't you worry about that," broke in Norman. "I think we feel a good deal the same way about this. Besides, aren't we working for you?" 197

"Nothing like that!" expostulated the oil prospector. "This isn't an order."

"I'll help get the stuff ready," began Paul, "for I know that's all I can do. Is this Chandler trapping near there?" he went on, as he gulped down the last of his tea.

"Says he's been helping them," explained Colonel Howell, "but he couldn't have done much, judging by his appearance."

"Is he going back there?" asked Roy curiously.

"He didn't say," answered Colonel Howell slowly. "But he's got his money now and I imagine he won't go much farther than Fort McMurray. I don't care for him and I don't like him around the camp. He's too busy talking when the men ought to be at work."

It was an ideal winter's day, the atmosphere clear and the temperature just below zero. There

was no cause for delay and while Norman made a tracing and a scale of the route, Paul and Roy drew the *Gitchie Manitou* into the open. Colonel Howell and the half-breed cook had been busy in the storehouse, arranging packets of flour and cutting up sides of fat pork. Small packages of tea were also prepared, together with sugar, salt and half a case of evaporated fruit. The only bread on hand was the remainder of Philip's last baking of bannock.

"See how things are," suggested Colonel Howell, when these articles were passed up to Roy, "and if they're as bad as Chandler says, we'll have to send Philip out for a moose. These things'll carry 'em along for a few days at least."

The look on the young Count's face was such that Norman was disturbed.

"Paul, old man," he said, "I know you'd like to go with us and we'd like to have you. But we've got more than the weight of a third man in all this food. I hope you don't feel disappointed."

"Well, I do, in a way," answered Paul, with a feeble attempt at a smile, "but it isn't just from curiosity. I envy you fellows. You're always helping and I never find anything to do."

"You can help me to-day," laughed Colonel Howell. "I'm going to cap that gas well or bust it open in a new place. I'll give you a job that may make both of us sit up and take notice."

"Come on," exclaimed Paul, seeming instantly to forget the mission of the machine. "I've been wanting a finger in that pie from the start."

"Good luck to you," called out Norman, as he sprang aboard the monoplane, and the colonel caught Paul laughingly by the arm and held him while Norman threw the big propeller into sizzling revolution.

The powerful car slid forward for the first time on its wooden snowshoes. As it caught the impulse of the great propeller, it sprang into the air and then dropped to the snow again with the wiggling motion of an inexperienced skater. Then, suddenly responding again to the propeller, it darted diagonally toward a menacing tree stump; but Norman was too quick for it. Before harm could result, the planes lifted and the airship, again in its native element, hurled itself skyward steadily and true.

It was an exhilarating flight. For the first time the boys got a bird's-eye view of Fort McMurray and were surprised to find that the main settlement drifted down to the river in a long-drawn-out group of cabins. Few people were in sight, however, and all the world spread out beneath them as if frozen into silence. The big river continued its course between the same high hills and, as the last cabin disappeared, the boys headed the *Gitchie Manitou* directly for the top of the hills, where the plains began that led onward and onward until the sparse forests finally disappeared in the broken land of the Barren Grounds. And on these, not much farther to the North, they knew that caribou and moose roamed in herds of thousands, and that the musk ox, the king of the Northland big game, made his Arctic home.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE CABIN OF THE PARALYZED INDIAN

No sooner had the monoplane begun to disappear over the northern hills than the impatient Paul demanded the attention of Colonel Howell.

"Colonel," he began, "I'm almost ashamed to even make the suggestion, but I've been watching the men at work on the gusher. They don't seem able to get a plug into the pipe or to put a cap on the end of it, even with the rigging they've managed to set up."

"We seem to be at the end of our string," laughed Colonel Howell. "But laymen frequently make suggestions that never occur to professionals. Have you an idea?"

"Not much of a one," answered Paul diffidently, "but I learned one thing in school—I think it was in what you call 'Physics.'"

"Speak out," laughed Colonel Howell. "We've utilized all our own ideas; that is, all but one, and I don't like that. I suppose we can dig a pit around the pipe and smother the blaze. But that's goin' to be quite a job, and I'm not sure it would work."

"A pit!" exclaimed Paul. "Now I've got it. They used to tell me, when you strike a force you can't handle, try to break it up into parts."

Colonel Howell looked up quickly.

"We don't need a pit," went on Paul, "but something like a trench. Let's dig down alongside the pipe until we're ten or fifteen feet beneath the ground and then tap the tube and let some of the gas out where it won't do any harm. If we can't drill a hole, we can rig up a long-handled chisel and punch an opening. When the gas rushes out, down there in the trench, maybe it won't catch fire for a few minutes and it's sure to shut off a good deal of the pressure at the mouth of the tube. If it does, maybe we can get the cap and the regulator on the top. Then we can plug the

opening below. It'll leak, of course, but the regulator'll fix things so we can use the gas at least."

Colonel Howell thought a moment and then slapped the young man on the back. Without a word, he hurried to the two workmen and in a few moments Ewen and Miller had begun digging into the frozen ground. Colonel Howell's orders were for them to make a trench about four feet wide and extending toward the river about twenty feet. It was to be twenty feet deep alongside the pipe and in the form of a triangle, the long side to incline toward the river. This was to facilitate the removal of the gravel and dirt and to afford a path to the deep side of the trench where it touched the gas tubing.

"Five feet from the bottom," explained the enthusiastic Paul, "we'll put a shelf across the trench and we'll work from this, so that when a hole is made in the pipe no one will be in danger from the rush of gas."

"That's right," added Colonel Howell. "All the gas can't get out through the new opening, but enough of it ought to escape to make it possible to work on the top opening. But we'll hardly finish the ditch before the boys get back?"

"Hardly," smiled the happy Paul. "They ought to be here before dark."

While Ewen and Miller were busy with picks and shovels, Colonel Howell and Paul devoted themselves to improvising the long wooden handle for the chisel to be used in cutting the pipe. But the workmen had not finished the trench when night came and, to the surprise of Colonel Howell and Paul, the *Gitchie Manitou* had not returned. This fact especially disturbed Colonel Howell and Paul because soon after noon the bright day had ended and the afternoon had passed with lowering clouds and other evidences, including a decided drop in the temperature, that a bad night was approaching.

The northward flight of the aviators had been made without any premonition of this change. After the monoplane had reached the high ground, Norman could not resist a temptation to make his way some miles back from the river, where the boys could see that the sparse timber grew very much thinner and that within five miles of the river the timberland disappeared altogether in a wide prairie or plain. Still farther to the east, they could make out irregular elevations on the plain, which appeared to be treeless ridges.

"I wish we had time to go over there," remarked Roy, "for we may never get back this way and I'd like to have had one good look at the caribou lands."

But the general nature of this treeless, barren waste had been ascertained and Norman brought the swift car back on its flight toward the river. Colonel Howell had explained to them that the Indian village they were seeking was one hundred miles from the gas camp. As it was not certain that Pointe aux Tremble could be easily made out from a distance, it was necessary to keep careful watch of the chronometer and the propeller revolution gauge.

The flight over the picturesque banks of the great river was now getting to be an old story to the boys and protected as they were in the inclosed cockpit, the journey proceeded with only occasional comment. They had left the camp at nine twenty-five o'clock, having set the engines at fifty miles, and, allowing for their detour, at a quarter after eleven o'clock Roy arose and began to use his binoculars. But either the reputed distance or the boys' calculations were wrong, for it was not until a quarter of twelve o'clock that they caught sight of a few cabins scattered along the riverbank within a fringe of poplar trees.

It was necessary to find a suitable landing place and both aviators busied themselves in this respect with no great result. What clearing there was seemed to be full of tree stumps and large brush. The car, having passed over the few cabins of what seemed to be a deserted village, with no living thing in sight, it was necessary to make a turn to look for a landing place in the vicinity. In doing this, Norman made a wide swing.

The only naturally open place was some distance to the east. Without consulting Roy, he made for this white glare of snow. As the monoplane dropped toward the wide opening, Roy made a desperate dive toward the floor of the cockpit and, before Norman learned the situation, his chum was pulling its new mooseskin jacket from the .303 rifle.

"It's a moose!" shouted Roy, "and a dandy. Gi' me a shot at it. I've got to shoot something from the machine."

"I thought there wasn't any game around here," answered Norman, trying in vain to get his eyes above the cockpit.

"I guess the hunters have all gone too far," answered Roy breathlessly. "Anyway, there's a dandy bull right out there in the open. Give me a shot at it."

As he spoke, he dropped one of the front sections and pointed to one side of the basin-like opening among the spruce trees. The moment Norman caught sight of the animal, which stood with its forefeet together, its head erect, and its immense spread of antlers reared almost defiantly, he brought the machine directly toward the animal. There was a heavy discharge from Roy's rifle, but no sign that his shot had gone home.

"Try him again," laughed Norman. "He's big as a barn."

But while Roy pumped a new shell into place, the erect animal suddenly stumbled and then with a snort whirled and sprang toward the trees. This time when the rifle sounded the great antlers seemed to rise higher and then the moose lunged forward on its head and began kicking in the snow. Norman, gazing at the struggling animal, brought the monoplane to the wide drifts of

snow.

"You get out and finish him," he exclaimed as the *Gitchie Manitou* came to a jolting stop. "It's getting colder. I'm going to put some alcohol an' glycerine in the radiator. This isn't a very good place to freeze up."

"Why not wait till we get over to the camp?" asked Roy as he dropped one of the side sections.

"We've got enough of a load now," answered Norman as he began to prowl around among the extra supplies. "There isn't much snow among the trees. We'll take all we can carry of this fresh meat and go to the camp on foot. There's no place to land there, anyway."

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Closing the machine, the two boys soon quartered the moose, and leaving a part of the carcass in the lower limbs of a spruce tree, shouldered the remainder and made their way toward the Indian village. The snow and their heavy load made this a panting task and in the mile walk they paused to rest several times.

When they finally reached the edge of the Indian settlement and broke their way through the last of the trees, they found before them a picture that had escaped them from the airship. In the distance lay the deserted looking cabins but, nearer by and as if seeking protection among the scrub spruce, rose a single tepee. Before it stood two men and two squaws.

"They must have seen us," panted Roy, as he and Norman advanced, bending low under their burdens. "They seem to be watchin' for us."

In fact, one of the men had his arms outstretched. The cheerless group was made even more so by a small, almost blazeless fire, in the thin smoke of which was suspended a black kettle.



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"They must have seen us," panted Roy as he and Norman advanced.

"No wonder they let a moose almost stick his nose in camp," was Norman's comment. "The men seem to be as old as Methuselah."

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There was nothing dramatic in the arrival of the boys, for the Indians spoke no English and gave not the least sign of gratitude when the quarters of the moose were thrown on the ground. Both the women sank on their knees and one of them eagerly bit into the raw flesh. After vainly attempting to talk to the men, Norman pointed to a knife in the belt of one of them and then at the freezing flesh on the ground.

While the boys watched them, this aged and emaciated Chipewyan also dropped on his knees and hastily cut off four strips of flesh. Without any attempt at cooking these the starving group attacked them voraciously in their raw condition. After a few moments, the boys took the other quarter and, motioning toward the other cabins, started toward them. They decided, if they found no younger men, to take the two old men back to the monoplane and deliver to them their other provisions.

Having reached the first cabin, the boys at once discovered that Chandler had not overstated the camp condition. Neither in this filthy structure, nor in any but one of the other half dozen did they find anyone but women and children. In each cabin there was heat in plenty, but signs of food were wholly missing. In each place the air was foul, and half-clad children made the situation pitiable. In one fortunate cabin, the children were chewing shreds of skin.

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Still unable to find anyone who could speak English, the boys continued their work of rescue by cutting off a generous piece of moose and then continuing their investigation. Having reached

the last cabin, which differed in no respect from the others, Norman and Roy came across a surprise that was a shock to them. Swinging open the door, without warning, they entered a chill interior that was reeking with new odors. A small fire burned in one corner and before it, on a pallet of worn and greasy blankets, lay the distorted figure of a man. He was the sole occupant of the almost dark room.

While the boys hesitated, choking with the rancid and stifling odors about them, they saw the figure turn its head with an effort. Then they saw that it was a man of about middle age, who was almost completely paralyzed. He could move neither his legs nor his body, but with the use of his elbows, he was just able to turn the upper part of his body. 213

He did not resent the intrusion but he did not give the young men the least sign of welcome. In his left hand rested a charred stick. With this he was able to reach the little fire at his side, in front of which was piled a heap of small sticks and branches—his firewood.

The fireplace and chimney, which was also inside the cabin, were made of clay and occupied the corner of the uninviting apartment. Near the fire stood a smoke-begrimed frying pan in which there was a piece of black meat of some kind. On the dirty clay hearth was a tin basin, in which were a few ounces of soiled looking meal or flour.

"The man's paralyzed," remarked Norman in an undertone. "But at that he seems better off than the rest."

"He ain't starvin', at least," answered Roy. "But we'd better give him his share of moose."

He spoke to the man and was surprised to receive a grin in return. It meant that the invalid did not understand. But the moment they offered the meat to the almost-helpless man, they were glad to see that he had the full use of his arms and fingers. Reaching for a knife that lay under him, he began to cut off pieces of fat with celerity. These he ate without cooking. 214

The close cabin was so crowded with articles of various kinds that the boys could not resist an examination before they took their leave.

"Somebody's been livin' here besides this man," exclaimed Roy at once. He pointed to the opposite corner of the cabin where there were indications that some one had had a bunk. Then in the other end of the room they found the cause of the heavy odors. Hanging from the rafters were several dozen skins, stretched tightly on trappers' boards, and in various states of curing. There was also a collection of steel traps, a dog sled and a jumbled mass of dog harness.

Curing skins was not exactly a novelty to either of the boys but they knew a valuable skin from an ordinary one and they could not resist the temptation to look for a possible silver fox. They soon decided that the trapper who might have collected these furs was one of no great experience. Roy pointed to the skins, then made signs to the Indian as if to ask if the skins belonged to him. The man grinned in silence and punched up his little fire. Roy was examining one of the stretched hides when he suddenly called to Norman and pointed to a name written with indelible pencil near the bottom of the board. 215

"Well, what do you think of that?" exclaimed the astonished Norman.

The two boys were looking at the scrawl which was plainly "E. O. Chandler."

"There you are!" exclaimed Roy. "Here's where our friend made his headquarters. No wonder he knew that the Indians were starving."

There was a light tapping on the floor and the paralyzed and speechless Indian pointed toward the corner of the room where there were signs of a bunk. In the gloom the boys went to this place. But they noticed nothing in particular until the prostrate Indian again lifted his stick upward. And then, shoved in a crevice between the logs, they saw a soiled and crumpled envelope. Taking it to the window, they read plainly enough the address—"E. O. Chandler, Fort McMurray." There was no postmark but in the upper left hand corner was this printing—"Hill Howell, Contractor, Centralia, Kansas."

"It's one of the envelopes that Colonel Howell has down in camp," exclaimed Roy.

"Yes," answered Norman slowly, "and I'll bet you it's a message that either Ewen or Miller wrote to Chandler after he left us." 216

"Do you think we ought to read it?" asked Roy, his fingers grasping the greasy envelope as if itching to extract the enclosure.

"I reckon it's none of our business," answered Norman, as if with some regret, "but I'll bet it concerns Colonel Howell and I believe we ought to take it to him."

Roy turned toward the Indian and made signs of putting the letter in his pocket. If this meant anything to the helpless man, he gave no sign other than the same peculiar grin. Roy put the envelope in his pocket and, making signs of farewell, the two boys left the cabin.

The conditions that the young aviators had just encountered had not sharpened their appetites. But again in the fresh air, they decided to use speed and complete their mission and, incidentally, to have a little tea and some bannock at the airship.

At two of the cabins where they had seen the strongest women, they stopped and made signs for the squaws to follow them. At the tepee in the edge of the woods they found the two old men and the two women huddled around a fire on the inside of the tepee, with every sign of having gorged themselves upon the food given them. In the kettle outside, chunks of the moose were stewing under a now brisk fire. This entire party was also enlisted and Norman and Roy made their way back to the snow basin in the woods. Without delay they passed out all the supplies to the Indians who had accompanied them, showed them the remainder of the moose and made signs that these should be distributed equally among all. With every expression of pleasure, but none of gratitude, the six Indians took instant departure.

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"It's three o'clock," announced Norman, when this had been done. "Now for a little camp fire out here in the snow, some tea and a piece of bannock, and we'll make a record trip back home."

Unaware of the disastrous discovery they were soon to make the two boys took a leisurely rest.

"It's the only time I miss a pipe," remarked Roy as he sat behind a snow bank with his feet toward the cheery blaze.

"Well, if ever I begin," said Norman in turn, "I'll never try to manipulate any of this plug smokin' stuff. I'll go to the States for a mixture of some kind and not try to shave down the brick of hydraulic-pressed tobacco that the half-breeds use."

After a long loaf before the fire the boys made preparations to return.

"Looks a little like the blizzard day," remarked Roy, "and it's certainly getting some colder. I hope the wind won't come up. If it does, I hope it comes out of the north."

219

While he spoke, the two boys took hold of the frame of the monoplane to pull it out onto the smooth snow and head it south. The airship had been resting upon what seemed to be a little ridge. Pulling the chassis from this rise in the snow, they were both astounded to find the body of the car shift to one side and sink into the snow.

Both sprang to that side of the car and Norman, running his hand along the wooden landing ski, gasped with astonishment when he found the long runner broken sharply in the middle.

"That's fine!" he shouted. "This runner's out of business!"

Roy ran to the rear where the car had stopped and found underneath the snow a rocky ledge.

"She hit this!" he exclaimed. "Can't we tie her up?"

Norman was plainly in doubt but they cleared away the surrounding snow and found that, instead of a single break, a section of the runner had been shattered. Two jagged ends of wood extended into the soft snow.

"If you'll find any way to fix them," exclaimed Norman, "maybe we can get a start. But it looks to me as if we'd have to make a new runner."

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"Nonsense!" exclaimed Roy, beating his numbing hands together. "We can fix 'er."

The two boys made this attempt and, as often as they thought they had patched up the shattered ski and mounted into the car in attempts to make a start, the patched strip of wood would part and the chassis would lunge again into the snow.

After a half hour of attempts of this kind, Roy recalled the dog sled in the distant hut of the paralyzed Indian and, in desperation, after four o'clock, for it was now getting desperately cold, he secured Norman's consent to a trip back to the Indian's cabin and the securing of at least a part of the sled to patch up their machine.

The winter days were now growing short and when Roy hurried away into the gray woods night was fast coming on. Nor did he find an easy task before him. In the end it was necessary to pay the paralytic twenty-five dollars before he could secure possession of the sled. As he made his way back to his waiting companion, he had to stick to the trails that they had previously made, for in the woods darkness had already come.

At the airship camp he found Norman had put in his waiting time in collecting a pile of fallen timber. It was now so cold that this served a double purpose—they needed the warmth and it served to illuminate the vicinity.

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The benumbed Roy also found tea ready and, better yet, a generous piece of moose meat frying in the edge of the fire. These, with some broken bannock heated in the fat of the meat, gave the boys a welcome supper. Then, piling new wood on the fire, they began again the task of repairing the chassis. Here they were handicapped by the darkness, as they were afraid to get the monoplane and its reservoirs of gasoline too near the blazing camp fire.

Finally they solved this difficulty by starting the engine and using one of their adjustable light bulbs, which they hung over the side of the car. Yet the cold had become so intense, although it was a dry Arctic cold, that the work went forward only by stages, the boys being forced to stop

and warm their hands from time to time at the camp fire.

When the new moon showed through the dark border of spruce trees and the brilliant northern stars pierced the black sky, the young aviators were ready for another trial. It was eight o'clock. This time they packed the snow for a hundred yards in front of the chassis of the car, and then, arranging their few blankets in the cockpit and refreshing themselves with some newly-made hot tea, exhausted and nervous, they climbed aboard. Putting on all their power and holding their runners steadily to the packed snow, they again started the *Gitchie Manitou*. 222

While the runners were yet gliding over the evenly-packed snow drifts, there came an ominous jar on the side of the repaired ski and Norman instantly threw the planes upward. It was a chance for, if the car settled again, the new runner would probably give away. In its gathering momentum, the airship drifted snowward again while both boys gulped. Then as if guiding itself, it sprang upward once more.

"It's all right!" shouted Roy, "but we had a close call. If we have to come down again we'll never get up."

"When we land again," added Norman, his mouth dry, "it'll be in the gas camp."

In a few minutes the airship was over the Athabasca River again, which was now vaporless and white beneath them.

"It's cold, all right," was Roy's comment at this moment. "I think there's ice on the river." 223

In spite of the increasing coldness, the *Gitchie Manitou* made its way without trouble toward the distant camp. There was no wind and, although the boys computed the temperature outside at not less than twenty below zero, the interior of the little cockpit soon became cozy enough. The heating appliances had been connected with the dynamo and Norman at times even complained of the heat. After the first hour of flight, both boys began looking for the flare of the gas well. When this at last came in sight, the car was headed directly for it. At that time both boys agreed that the river beneath was covered with ice from shore to shore.

"Anyway," said Norman, as the gas well came into full view, "looks as if Paul didn't succeed in capping the gusher to-day."

To warn their friends of their arrival, the boys threw on their searchlight, and the arrival back of the aerodrome was unmarked, except by the vociferous welcome accorded by the alarmed occupants of the camp.

Another supper was awaiting the relief expedition and for some time all were busy with the cause of the delay and the details of the condition of the Indian encampment. Unquestionably there would have to be another visit to the camp to ascertain at least the result of the hunting expedition. 224

Strangely enough, before the matter of Chandler's letter was reached, the discussion reached the work on the gas well that day. When Roy suddenly recalled the episode of the discovery in the paralyzed Indian's cabin he started to produce the letter, but hesitated because both Ewen and Miller were present. In his discussion with Norman on the way back, it had been decided that the letter had probably been written by one or the other of these men and that its appearance might cause embarrassment. Both Ewen and Miller had been very curious about the settlement at Pointe aux Tremble, but they had asked no questions that connected Chandler with the place.

When the hour grew late and Colonel Howell proposed retiring to the bunk room where the iron stove was red hot, since neither Ewen nor Miller gave signs of turning in, Roy put off the matter of the letter until later. When the three boys sought their bunks, Ewen and Miller still lingered in the big room, and Colonel Howell was asleep.

"Time enough in the morning," suggested Norman. 225

In the morning, however, Colonel Howell and Paul with Ewen and Miller were up and at work before Norman and Roy were astir. The weather had not moderated but Colonel Howell was anxious to bring the work on the gusher to a close. Ewen and Miller attacked the frost hardened ground before breakfast and this work had now reached the point where Paul could help in removing the heavy clods.

When the young aviators joined their friends at breakfast, Ewen and Miller were present again and the letter was not exhibited. Then all hurried out to complete the work of attempting to control the gusher. The regulator and the ordinary apparatus to connect it with the mouth of the pipe, together with the smaller tubes and their valves that were to be attached above the regulator, were all in place. In the end, Colonel Howell proposed, with still smaller pipes, to lead part of the gas into the fireplace and the bunk house stove.

At eleven o'clock the perspiring men in the trench announced this part of the work completed. Then it required only a few minutes to brace a narrow platform about five feet above the bottom of the trench, next to the tube, and all paused for a short rest before making the final experiment. At last the men took their places near the roaring gusher and, at Paul's request, he was given the opportunity to use his well-muscled arms in swinging the sledge, Colonel Howell taking his place on the platform in charge of a long-handled chisel. 226

The duties of Norman and Roy were to assist the two workmen in manipulating the chain pulley, by which the first tap was to be forced on the open end of the pipe. This of course was pierced with holes, so that the pressure beneath it might not be altogether shut off. This was to be

forced down upon the steel drill tube, after which the regulator was to be similarly attached to the threads of the preliminary cap. The situation was hazardous for all. There was danger that the out-rushing gas in the trench below might explode when it rose and came in contact with the roaring blaze above. But it was hoped that the work might be done so quickly that this would not result.

When Ewen had laid out his apparatus about the mouth of the tube with all the care of a surgeon preparing for a hasty operation, and Paul and Colonel Howell had taken their position on the scaffold far below, Ewen suddenly shouted:

"Ready!"

A heavy blow resounded in the narrow pit. Then another, and another, and a new roar broke out below. Dropping their tools, Colonel Howell and Paul fled up their improvised ladder and when they reached the surface they saw the workmen and Norman and Roy, their faces distorted with effort and their clothes almost scorching, bend to the task before them. The escaping gas was still roaring and the flames were leaping sideways.

Norman and Roy were almost flat on the ground, hanging on to the pulley chain. The first cap was in place and, with a long wrench, Ewen was twisting it onto the thread. A new volume of gas was already rolling from the pit, while from the incline opposite the mouth of the new opening, gravel and clods of earth were shooting riverward like the sparks of a Bessemer furnace. Paul threw himself on the ground with the other boys and added his strength to theirs in holding the cap in place. All seemed to forget the possibility of a new explosion.

There was a hoarse shout from Ewen and the boys released the pulley chain while Miller slapped the regulator between the guide rods. As the three young men again threw themselves upon the chain and forced the regulator into place, the crucial moment had arrived. The controlling valve of the regulator was open, of course, and as the rushing gas was again concentrated into one stream, a new fiery jet shot upward. But the lateral streams had been controlled and again Ewen applied the wrench to thread the regulator to the first cap. Once he failed and then the threads caught. With a yell of victory the veteran gas man threw himself against the long wrench again.

"You've got 'er!" exclaimed Colonel Howell as he sprang to Ewen's side and joined him in screwing the regulator into place. Even before he spoke there was a renewed roar in the trench beneath and a new volume of gas poured upward.

"Fill 'er in!" shouted Paul. "The big rocks first." And then, while the newly confined gas still shot upward through the regulator in a screaming stream of fire, six pairs of hands, including those of the energetic Philip, hurled a collected heap of rocks to the bottom of the trench and around the new opening.

"This ain't goin' to stop the flow," explained Colonel Howell to Norman and Roy, as all panted in their work, "but it's Paul's idea, and I think he's put it over."

"Now for the dirt!" shouted Paul, who was leading in the work. With shovels and pieces of board, the excavated material was rapidly dumped into the trench. With each new shovelful of material, the escape of gas from the trench became less and the roar from the open regulator became more deafening. When at last only an odor of gas escaped from the newly packed trench, Paul exclaimed:

"Plenty of water dumped in here ought to make a solid cake of ice around the opening and that ought to fix us till spring anyway."

"The cleverest idea you've yet given us!" exclaimed Colonel Howell, as all paused for breath. "Now, go over and finish your job. Turn off the regulator."

Proudly enough, Paul sprang to the roaring gusher and gave the protected valve wheel a few quick turns. Instantly the flow was shut off and silence followed. The young Austrian had made good.

Many other mechanical details had to be seen to but the great problem had been solved and all were elated. The main work accomplished, Colonel Howell and the young men retired to the cabin, where, as soon as the excitement over Paul's victory had somewhat subsided, Roy produced the letter he had found in the cabin of the paralyzed Indian. Colonel Howell, having heard the explanation of the finding of the letter, without any hesitation and evidently without any qualms of conscience, drew out the enclosure. The letter was an illiterate scrawl.

"Mr. Chandler," it began, "we have decided our answer is this. Mebbe you are right and we three have done all the work here, but Colonel Howell has always been on the square. If you think you are intitled to go to Edmonton and make a claim for this property, we don't. It's been a perty hard job, but we been paid for it and don't think we have no claim fur a title to this claim. Besides, this ain't no time to try to go to Edmonton and get out papers. If we was goin, we'd wait till the river froze and take a dogsled. When you get your money you can go if you like. Like we promised you, we wont say nothin. So long as Colonel Howell treats us square we're goin to stick. So no more at present.

Ewen and Miller."

The message was dated August 10th and was evidently a reply to some proposition made by Chandler after he was kicked out of the camp. While Colonel Howell read it, his face was very sober. Then he read it aloud to the boys and tossed it on the table while he lit a new cigar. All sat in silence for some time and then Norman said:

"I guess Chandler must have changed his mind too. He was here yesterday morning."

"But the river's frozen now," suggested Roy quickly. "What does this mean, Colonel Howell?" went on Roy, his curiosity overcoming him.

The colonel took a long draw on his cigar and at last found his old-time smile.

CHAPTER XVI

ROY CONDUCTS A HUNT

"At first," he said, "it looked simple enough. So far as this letter is concerned, I'm not bothered. That is, I'm not afraid of Ewen and Miller. But Chandler's proposition is another matter. It's plain enough that he wanted our men to join him and go to Edmonton and file papers on this claim. But that isn't as ridiculous as it appears. You know," he said, "Mr. Zept asked me if I hadn't grubstaked these fellows. If they could make it appear that I had, then part of this claim would belong to them. And if they all got together and swore that I had, I don't know how I could prove that they were working for me on wages. Even if our own men would testify for me that this was my claim, if Chandler should happen to file his papers, this would cloud my title. Besides," went on the colonel, "Chandler is a naturalized Canadian and you know the mining laws up here are not made to favor the outsider. A foreigner such as I am, when he's working in these unsurveyed districts, can only stake out his claim, wait for the survey and then buy the property. Chandler would have it all over me if he set up the claim of a native, especially ahead of me."

"I don't think he's gone," suggested Paul, "for he ate breakfast here yesterday morning."

"And it's somewhere between two hundred and fifty and three hundred miles between here and the land office," exclaimed Norman.

"It would be interesting to know whether he has gone," answered Colonel Howell.

"Why not ask Miller or Ewen?" broke in Roy. "They might know something about him."

Colonel Howell shook his head: "They'd better know nothing about the letter," he answered at last. "It was written a long time ago."

"You mean they may have changed their minds?" asked Norman.

"I don't mean that," answered Colonel Howell, his face again sober, "but they had the matter under consideration once. I don't suspect them. I'll just keep my eyes open and say nothing. If they are all right they might get sore and leave me."

"Do you mind," asked Roy, "if I go out and do a little investigating? Chandler may be over to Fort McMurray."

The colonel thought a moment and then answered:

"That won't do any harm. All of you might go hunting this afternoon over in that direction—if it isn't too cold."

Eagerly enough the boys accepted the suggestion. Protected by their heavy clothing and carrying the camera and their skin-protected rifles, they found the trip to the settlement only exhilarating. At Fort McMurray the temperature, which was twenty-two below zero, did not give much trouble so long as the wind did not blow. To those whom they met, the boys talked of being on their way to the hills for moose. But later they determined not to venture upon the highlands, deciding to make a detour in the timber on their way back for a possible deer.

They had no trouble in getting trace of Chandler. In the cabin of a white prospector, where Chandler was well known, they picked up the latest town gossip. This was that Chandler, who yet seemed to have plenty of money, had hired Pete Fosseneuve, a half-breed, only two days before to take him back to his trapping camp at Pointe aux Tremble.

"He's been working there all fall," explained their informant, "and Fosseneuve has a team of six fine dogs. He paid Pete a lot of money to take him back to his camp night before last. They ought to be there to-morrow some time."

This statement allayed the suspicion directed against the dissolute Englishman and the young men made an early return to the camp.

"I'm glad I didn't say anything to Ewen and Miller," commented Colonel Howell, when he learned that Chandler had gone still further into the woods. "Now we'll get to work on our prospecting in earnest."

When the controlled gas had been piped into the cabin, in spite of the cold weather, Ewen and Miller at once went to work building a new derrick near the best prospect and sledging the boiler and engine to that location. In this work nearly a week went by, the boys finding little to do. The weather seemed settled into a cold spell in which the thermometer ranged at noonday

about twenty below.

It was at this time that a long suppressed ambition of Norman and Roy came to the surface. They wanted a real hunting trip. The three young men were natural lovers of the open and curious about animal life in the wilderness. But, so far, none of the younger members of the camp had really had an opportunity to test himself amid the rigors of a northern winter.

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Colonel Howell finally consented to their leaving on a hunting expedition that would give them at least one over-night camp in the snow. This was on the condition that Philip should accompany the shooting party and that it should not proceed over a day's march from camp.

The plan of the hunt was really Roy's. He prepared the provisions and was accepted as leader of the party.

"It wouldn't be any trouble to equip ourselves like tenderfeet," he explained to Colonel Howell, "and to make a featherbed trip of this. But we're going to travel like trappers."

The hunt was to be for caribou back over the hills in the direction of the Barren Lands. In the end Colonel Howell agreed that the party might advance two days' travel into the wilderness but that it must return to camp on the evening of the fourth day.

Less than an hour's preparation was necessary and when Philip and the three boys left camp one morning, the expedition had little appearance of the usual, heavily laden winter hunters. Each member of the party was on snowshoes, and behind them they drew a small sled containing their camp equipment. It was hardly more than a packload for a strong Indian but the sled was taken in the hope that it might bring in a return load of fresh meat.

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Philip and Norman carried rifles carefully protected in mooseskin cases. Paul carried nothing but his camera and an automatic revolver. Roy took the first turn at the sled. The morning was fair but cold, and the bright sun had no effect upon the snow-laden trees.

When the enthusiastic hunters reached the Fort McMurray settlement just below the camp they left the river and struck inland. Within an hour they had passed through the pines and poplars fringing the river and had reached the summit of a "hog-back" range of hills beyond which there was known to be a little valley running at right angles to the course of the river.

When the four travelers reached the top of the "hog-back" and saw the frozen snow-covered valley before them, like children out for a lark, Philip no less active than the others, they coasted into the valley. Until the sun was high above them they made their way along the frozen creek toward the head of the wide defile. About noon, camp was made, tea was brewed and, partly behind the protection of a little frozen waterfall, bannock and cold meat were added to the hot tea. No time was lost in cooking.

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With faces and ears protected by their heavy caps, and with heavy mittens to guard their fingers against frost bite, not one of the party complained of the intense cold.

"It's all right," explained Philip, "unless the wind comes up, and if it does we'll have to go into camp."

But in the valley no wind arose to make any trouble. The party set forward to reach the head of the valley before time to go into camp. They did this by three o'clock and then, mounting an elevation and passing through a thin fringe of dwarf pines, the boys found themselves on a wind-swept plateau where the snow clung with difficulty.

They had seen plenty of deer, rabbits and small game during the day but had done no shooting. They were after caribou or moose. The first look over the desolate plateau, where not even trees broke the landscape, was far from inviting. As the sun began to go down and little was to be seen other than a few rocky irregularities and a thin covering of snow with drifts here and there like white islands, camp prospects were not as inviting as they had seemed in the valley behind them.

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"Come on," exclaimed Roy, as the party paused on the edge of the heights. "This begins to look like the real thing."

"Maybe some moose," was Philip's rejoinder. "No moose track on de valley below."

"Hear that?" exclaimed Roy. "Everybody get busy. I reckon we can't go any farther inland tonight than that heap o' rock way over there." He pointed to a barren elevation on the already darkening horizon. "You hunters," he added, indicating Norman and Philip, "ought to spread out and look for game tracks in the swales to the right and left. But don't go too far. Work your way in toward those rocks before night. You'll find us there. Come on, Paul," he added with unusual enthusiasm, considering that it was rapidly growing colder in the open country, "there's probably no wood over there. You and I'll get some here and meet the hunters at the rock pile."

While Norman and the Indian started out, Roy loosened the axe and drew the sled back into the pine scrub to look for fallen timber. This was a tedious process and it was even more of a task to load the firewood onto the sled.

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"The tent'll fix us all right," explained Roy as he backed against the wind and began to dump his firewood on the snow. "But first we've got to make a camp site. Take off your snowshoes."

Where the wind had been cutting over the tops of the rocks a sort of vacuum had been formed behind the ridge and into this the snow had been piled up to a depth of four or five feet. With a snowshoe, each boy tackled this bank. Soon they had dug a pit in it about ten by ten feet. By throwing the loose snow around the edge of this they created a wall about seven feet high.

"Now I'll show you a trick I read about," exclaimed Roy.

From the pine grove on the edge of the plateau he had dragged the slender trunk of a poplar tree about twelve feet long. This he now threw over the opening in the snow, making a sort of a ridge pole, and then with Paul's assistance unrolled the tent and spread it across. While Paul held the edges of the somewhat awkward canvas in place on top of the snow wall Roy piled snow on the ends of the canvas and just as it was too dark to see more the excavation was thoroughly roofed except in one corner where the irregular canvas did not fit.

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"We need that for a chimney opening anyway," exclaimed Roy.

Before a fire could be started, however, there was the sound of a rifle off to the south, to which Paul responded with a pistol shot. Then the camp makers carried their wood into the snow house and while Paul attended to their scanty food supply and arranged the sleeping bags as rugs on the crisp snow floor, Roy started a fire. The blaze emphasized the darkness without and, realizing that their companions had no signal, the two boys split up a torch with the axe and carried it outside where, while they could keep it alight, it might serve as a beacon.

But this was not necessary. Both the Indian and Norman came in, guided by Paul's revolver shot. Neither reported signs of game. Both were elated over the house which was already so warm within that the heavy coats and mittens could be discarded.

"I s'pose supper's all ready," exclaimed Norman after he had got his numbed limbs warmed.

"No," answered Roy, "I've just been waiting for you so we could have it all fresh and hot. I'm going to prepare it myself and everything's going to be in trapper style. It won't be much but it's all you need and it's according to the rules and regulations. I've already got my hot water. Now I'll get the bannocks ready."

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"Didn't you bring those I made for you?" asked Philip, the camp cook and hunter.

"I prefer to make 'em myself," answered Roy, "just as the Indians make 'em in the woods."

Philip smiled and Norman and Paul looked somewhat disappointed but neither made objection.

"Here's my flour," explained Roy who had already rolled up his sweater sleeves and produced an old flour bag with a few pounds of flour in the bottom of it. "I mixed the baking powder with the flour before we left camp so as to save time," he explained.

"Seems to me we've got all night," interrupted Norman. "They don't do that to save time—you're mixed. They do that to save carrying the baking powder in a separate package."

"Anyway," retorted Roy, "it's the way real trappers do."

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He had rolled the sides of the sack down to make a kind of receptacle at the bottom of which lay his flour. Then with a piece of wood he pried off the top of the tea kettle and was about to pour some boiling water onto the flour when Philip with a grunt stopped him.

"Non," exclaimed the Indian. "You spoil him."

Over Roy's feeble protest the Indian scooped up snow and deposited it in the boiling water until the fluid was somewhat cooler. Then he passed the kettle to the waiting Roy who began to mix his Indian bread. But had Philip allowed Roy to proceed in his generous application of water, his proposed bannocks would have resulted in flour paste. In the end, because Roy had to get his pork ready, the volunteer cook permitted Philip to finish the fashioning of a bannock as big as the frying pan,—the only cooking utensil that Roy had thought necessary to bring with them.

"Now," exclaimed Roy, as he deposited a generous piece of salt pork in the frying pan, "I'll show you how the hungry trapper makes a supper fit for a king."

As the pork began to sizzle in the pan those who were eagerly watching the amateur cook saw the piece separating into thin sections.

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"You see, that's what we trappers always do," explained Roy rather proudly. "You can't slice pork when it's frozen solid. I sliced my pork before we left camp this morning."

By this time the rashers of pork were swimming about in the hot fat like doughnuts in bubbling lard.

"It certainly smells all right," exclaimed Paul, as the appetizing odor from the frying meat filled the snow cave. "Hurry up and give us a piece."

Roy made no reply but busied himself stirring the bits of meat with the point of his knife.

"Is the bread ready?" the cook asked, turning to Philip.

The Indian only pointed to the big ball of dough flattened out like a gigantic pancake and ready for the skillet.

There upon Roy seized the handle of his frying pan, shifted the skillet to one side and, resting it on the snow, began to flip the bits of salt pork onto the snow floor.

"Here, what are you doing?" shouted Norman.

"You don't eat those scraps," announced Roy positively. "The only good in pork is the fat and the fat's all in the skillet. We trappers give these scraps to the dogs—only we ain't got any dogs."

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"Well I'll be a dog all right," exclaimed Norman and as fast as Roy flipped the brown rashers out with his knife point Norman and Paul grabbed them up.

"There ain't any need of doin' that," snorted Roy. "I tell you there ain't any good in those things

and it's against all the rules anyhow. You'll get all the fat you want when our bannock's done."

"Well, then, why don't you start it?" asked Paul. "I suppose it'll take it an hour to cook. And your fat's getting cold anyway."

"That's where you show your ignorance," retorted Roy. "I suppose you fellows think I don't know my business. If I'd put that bannock right into this hot fat it would have fried like a doughnut. I've got to get this grease soaked up in my bread. That's why I'm lettin' the grease get cool."

With this he took the flat looking loaf from the Indian's hands and slipped it into the already nearly full frying pan. But Roy knew his limitations. As he lifted the pan back upon the coals and the grease began to sizzle and snap he knew that he had exhausted his culinary knowledge.

"Here," he said to the Indian, "you can watch this while it cooks."

With a smile the Indian took the handle of the pan, shook it deftly a few times, lifted the edge of the dough with skilled fingers and then settled the pan upon a bed of coals just outside the heart of the fire and, squatted by its side, carefully watched the baking. Meanwhile, Norman and Paul were crunching bacon scraps while Roy was mopping his perspiring brow with the sleeve of his sweater.

"If that's all we're going to have," broke in Norman, "I want to go home."

But that was all they did have. The conscientious Roy, who had given the subject much consideration, had carefully refrained from bringing any luxuries other than tea and a little sugar. But by the time the bannock was done—and the Indian knew how to cook it—the three boys had become so hungry that the Indian bread was eaten ravenously. Then the party crept into their sleeping bags at an early hour and passed the night without discomfort.

Philip took charge of the camp in the morning and before the boys crept out of their bags he served each of them with a cup of hot tea. When the boys looked outside of their snow tent it seemed hardly dawn and yet it was after eight o'clock. Philip shook his head and announced prospects of bad weather. There was no sun and, although it was no colder than it had been the day before, there was a gloom over all that suggested a storm.

Not one of the boys would have suggested it but the Indian did not hesitate to warn them that they should return to the camp at once.

"I don't know how I would vote on this question," said Norman, "if we'd had proper provisions. But I don't propose to live three more days on the *ghost* of salt pork. And, besides, we've got plenty of moose meat in camp. I'm not so keen about going to the Barren Lands as I was."

This was why late that afternoon Colonel Howell was both surprised and glad to see his young friends trot into camp.

CHAPTER XVII

THE *Gitchie Manitou* WINS A RACE

Norman and Roy soon became restless and after a few days' idleness asked Colonel Howell for permission to make their delayed visit to the Pointe aux Tremble Indian camp. The day set for this second relief expedition promised a continuation of clear dry weather. Almost duplicating their last provisions, the monoplane got away at dawn. At the last moment, Paul was substituted for Roy, and he and Norman made an uneventful flight directly up the river. This time a landing was made at the foot of the bluff on the smooth ice of the river. The provisions were distributed and then the two boys visited the cabin of the paralytic Indian.

"Chandler probably will be out running his trap line," suggested Norman, "but he may be at home."

Within the cabin they found only the Indian. To Norman's surprise, the rusty traps still hung on the wall, with no sign of having been touched since he and Roy visited the cabin. Norman's observing eye at once examined the other parts of the room.

In the bunk corner there was absolutely no change. He would have sworn that Chandler had not slept in the place since he returned. A sudden suspicion coming into Norman's mind, he walked to the bunk corner of the room and pointed to the crevice from which they had taken the letter. The Indian grinned. Then Norman pointed to the curing boards, made motions with his hands to indicate a man of about Chandler's build and other pantomimes of inquiry. The Indian responded with his usual grin, then shook his head. Norman's jaw dropped.

"Paul," he exclaimed, "we're a lot of chumps. Chandler never came back to this camp. He hired the best dog team in this part of the world and while we were all asleep he's been hurrying to Edmonton. He's had seven days' start, and the way these dogs travel, he'll cover that distance in jig time. Come on," he almost shouted, "we've got something to do now besides feeding lazy

Indians. The hunters are back, anyway, and there won't be any starving around here. We've got to get back to Colonel Howell as fast as the airship'll go."

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Philip's supper was awaiting the return of the *Gitchie Manitou*, but its serving was long delayed. For an hour the conference that took place immediately upon the safe housing of the monoplane continued while each participant contributed his views. The conclusion was inevitable. Colonel Howell must proceed to Edmonton at once. There was a discussion as to whether this perilous flight should be made to Athabasca Landing, where Colonel Howell would have to make the last hundred miles of journey by train, or whether the trip through the Arctic skies should be made by compass directly to Edmonton.

Finally it was decided, in view of the comprehensive charts that they had of the intervening country, that the latter should be the program, even if it were necessary to make a landing on the way.

"The trains from Athabasca Landing," concluded Colonel Howell at last, "run only three times a week, and I'm not sure of the schedule."

"Then," announced Norman, "we'll do it by *Air Line*. We can make it, if you want to trust me."

"I think it's worth while," laughed the colonel.

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"You haven't much time," broke in the excited Roy. "They've had good hard snow, and this half-breed's got a great team, I understand. If they made forty miles a day, and I've heard o' them doing that, you'll have to get a hustle on you."

"We leave to-night," announced Norman, springing to his feet. "Philip!" he called.

Colonel Howell, with a disturbed look on his face, interrupted:

"Couldn't we leave in the morning—early?" he suggested. "I think I'd rather ride by daylight."

"You'll feel more comfortable by night," laughed Paul, "and you don't need to miss your sleep. Norman won't have any use for you."

The discussion did not close for some time after this and when supper was finally served, the last detail had been arranged. The meal proceeded without any sign of the momentous event to follow. At its conclusion, Colonel Howell turned to Ewen and Miller and said, almost nonchalantly:

"Boys, I'm going to leave you for a few days. Your friend Chandler is on his way to Edmonton to make trouble for me."

Both men looked startled and Ewen exclaimed:

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"What's that?"

"The same thing he wanted you boys to do and in which you wouldn't join him."

"What do you mean?" Miller managed to ask.

"What you wrote him a letter about," answered Colonel Howell calmly. "I read that. But," he went on, as both men gave new signs of alarm, "I'm goin' to forget it. Do you men want to go on working for me as you have in the past?"

Flushed faces made any other answer unnecessary.

"All right," continued Colonel Howell, "then that's settled. But I want you to get Chandler out of your systems. You can stay here. To show you that I trust you, I'm going to leave you in the camp again."

Immediately, activity began; Norman and Roy working on the *Gitchie Manitou*, the half-breed preparing supplies, and Colonel Howell making notes and getting papers together on the still littered table.

On an air line, the young aviators estimated the distance across country at about two hundred and seventy miles. After a consultation it was decided to proceed at the rate of about thirty-five miles an hour. This meant eight hours in the air. As there was no need of reaching the distant city before eight o'clock, it was agreed to start at midnight. At seven o'clock, all preparations having been made, Norman turned in for a few hours' sleep.

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Colonel Howell devoted some time to his private arrangements and spent the remainder of the evening discussing the flight with the other occupants of the cabin. Norman being sound asleep at twelve o'clock, the others agreed not to arouse him for another hour, considering the work he had done that day. But at one o'clock new activity began.

A match was again applied to the gas well and the monoplane was whirled out into the spectacular illumination. There could be only a brief handshake all around. Then, without a slip, the monoplane was off in the light of the waning moon.

Least of all did the voyagers suffer from the keen cold. With a plentiful store of gasoline, the heaters were at once started but in a short time Colonel Howell asked Norman to shut off one of them. The passenger had been assigned the duty of watching the engine gauge and recording it, together with the chronometer record. Norman did not find this necessary but it was a check upon his own observations and a safeguard against errors in noting their progress.

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It was too dark for the colonel to feel any sense of apprehension. As there was no wind, the conditions were ideal for an aerial flight, and Norman having once shaped his course, the powerful car sped on its way as if sliding downhill. In time the monotonous whir of the

propellers appeared to have its effect upon Colonel Howell, and Norman caught him dozing more than once. He then explained to his passenger that his observations were no longer necessary and persuaded Colonel Howell to wrap up in his blanket and go to sleep.

When the passenger aroused himself, about five o'clock, Norman asked him to make some tea and see what Philip had prepared in the way of food. It was his only way of relaxing under the strain and he ate heartily. Later, Colonel Howell again pulled his blankets about him and did not stir until the gray of the winter dawn was in the air. The moon had long since disappeared but the stars were brilliant.

When the land beneath came into view, the oil prospector took his place in front of the port section for his first view of the world from the clouds. Then day came and the east grew red. No settlement was yet in sight, but as the golden sun began to glisten on the snow-weighted trees, Colonel Howell gave an exclamation.

"There's the railroad!" he shouted. "We're crossing it."

"Just after eight o'clock," muttered Norman, as he craned his neck to make out the land beneath. "We're certainly this side o' the town and we'll take to the tracks."

With this, he brought the steady airship about and began to follow the rails, which were now plain enough below. For another quarter of an hour, the monoplane made its way steadily to the south and then a sudden blur broke the landscape in the distance.

"There she is," remarked Norman, almost casually. "Don't forget your packages and bundles."

At nine o'clock Colonel Howell and Norman were eating breakfast at the Royal George Hotel. At half past ten they were leaving the big new Provincial Capitol Building. The colonel had filed his claims and had his papers safely in his pocket. A little later, entering the busy hotel office once more, Norman hastily caught his patron's sleeve. Seated in front of the hotel fireplace, as if gratefully drinking in its warmth, was the worn and emaciated Chandler. By his side was Fosseneuve the half-breed, already far gone in intoxication.

Colonel Howell stepped forward, as if about to speak to the defeated man. Then he paused.

"Can't do any good," he exclaimed in an undertone to Norman. "We got there first. And he might have beaten us at that if he hadn't stopped here in the hotel too long. We'll take the afternoon train down to Calgary for a day's visit. Then, when you're ready, we'll go back to the boys."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ON THE EDGE OF THE ARCTIC; OR, AN
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