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THE YOUNG ALASKANS ON THE TRAIL

BY

EMERSON HOUGH

AUTHOR OF
"THE YOUNG ALASKANS"
"THE STORY OF THE COWBOY"

ILLUSTRATED

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EMERSON HOUGH

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AROUND THE CAMP-FIRE

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I

TAKING THE TRAIL

It was a wild and beautiful scene which lay about the little camp in the far-off mountains of the Northwest. The sun had sunk beyond the loftier ridges, although even now in the valley there remained considerable light. One could have seen many miles over the surrounding country had not, close at hand, where the little white tent stood, the forest of spruce been very dense and green. At no great distance beyond its edge was rough and broken country. Farther on, to the southward, stood white-topped peaks many miles distant, although from the camp these could not be seen.

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It might have seemed a forbidding scene to any one not used to travel among the mountains. One step aside into the bush, and one would have fancied that no foot had ever trod here. There was no indication of road or trail, nor any hint of a settlement. The forest stood dark, and to-night, so motionless was the air, its silence was more complete than is usually the case among the pines or spruces, where always the upper branches murmur and whisper among themselves. Such scenes cause a feeling of depression even among grown persons who first meet them; and to-night, in this remote spot, one could not well have blamed the three young occupants of this camp had they felt a trifle uneasy as the twilight drew on toward darkness.

They were, it is true, not wholly new to camp life, these three boys—Rob McIntyre, John Hardy, and Jesse Wilcox. You may perhaps call to mind the names of these, since they are the same who, more than a year before, were cast away for some time on the slopes of

Kadiak Island, in the far upper portion of Alaska; from which place they were at last rescued in part by their own wits and in part by the watchfulness of their guardian, Mr. Hardy. The latter, whom all three boys called Uncle Dick, was a civil engineer who, as did the parents of all the boys, lived in the coast town of Valdez, in far-off Alaska.

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When Rob, John, and Jesse returned home from their dangerous adventures on Kadiak Island, they had been told that many a day would elapse before they would be allowed to take such chances again. Perhaps Uncle Dick never really told the parents of the boys the full truth about the dangers his young charges had encountered on Kadiak Island. Had he done so they would never have been willing for the boys to take another trip even more dangerous in many ways—the one on which they were now starting.

But Uncle Dick Hardy, living out of doors almost all the time on account of his profession as an engineer, was so much accustomed to dangers and adventures that he seemed to think that any one could get out of a scrape who could get into one. So it was not long after the return from Kadiak before he forgot all about the risks the boys had run there. The very next year he was the first one to plead with their parents, and to tell them that in his belief the best way in the world for the boys to pass their next summer's vacation would be for them to cross the Rocky Mountains from the Pacific side and take the old water trail of the fur-traders, north and east, and down the Peace River from its source.

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It chanced that Uncle Dick, who, like all engineers, was sometimes obliged to go to remote parts of the country, had taken charge of an engineering party then locating the new railroad bound westward from Edmonton, in far-off Northwest Canada. While he himself could not leave his employment to go with the boys across the Rockies, he assured their parents that he would meet them when they came down the river, and see that every care should be taken of them meantime.

"Let them go, of course," he urged. "You can't really hurt a good, live boy very much. Besides, it is getting to be so nowadays that before long a boy won't have any wilderness where he can go. Here's our railroad making west as fast as it can, and it will be taking all sort of people into that country before long. Here's a chance for the boys to have a fine hunt and some camping and canoeing. It will make them stout and hearty, and give them a good time. What's the use worrying all the time about these chaps? They'll make it through, all right. Besides, I am going to send them the two best men in Canada for their guides.

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"I wouldn't say, myself, that these boys could get across alone," he added, "because it's a hard trip for men in some ways. But in the care of Alex Mackenzie and Moise Duprat they'll be as safe as they would be at home in rocking-chairs."

"What Mackenzie is that?" asked Jesse Wilcox's mother of her brother, Uncle Dick.

"Well, he may be a relative of old Sir Alexander Mackenzie, so far as I know. The family of that name is a large one in the North, and there always have been Mackenzies in the fur trade. But speaking of the name, here's what I want to explain to you, sister. These boys will be going back over the very trail that good old Sir Alexander took when he returned from the Pacific Ocean."

"But that was a long time ago—"

"Yes, in 1793, while George Washington still was alive, and not so very long after the Revolutionary War. You know, Mackenzie was the first man ever to cross this continent, and this was the way he went, both in going west and coming east—just where I want these boys to go. They'll see everything that he saw, go everywhere that he went, from the crown of the continent on down clear to the Arctics, if you want to let them go that far.

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"I'm telling you, sister," he added, eagerly, "the boys will *learn* something in that way, something about how this country was discovered and explored and developed, so far as that is concerned. That is history on the hoof, if you like, sister. In my belief they're the three luckiest little beggars in the world if you will only let them go. I'll promise to bring them back all right."

"Yes, I know about your *promises*!" began Mrs. Wilcox.

"When did I ever fail to keep one?" demanded Uncle Dick of her. "And where can you find three sounder lads in Valdez than these we're talking about now?"

"But it's so *far*, Richard—you're talking now about the Peace River and the Athabasca River and the Arctic Ocean—why, it seems as though the boys were going clear off the earth, and we certainly would never see them again."

"Nonsense!" replied Uncle Dick. "The earth isn't so big as it used to be in Sir Alexander's time. Let them alone and they'll come through, and be all the more men for it. There's no

particular hardship about it. I'll go down with them in the boat to Vancouver and east with them by rail to where they take the stage up the Ashcroft trail—a wagon-road as plain as this street here. They can jog along that way as far as Quesnelles as easy as they could on a [Pg 7] street-car in Seattle. Their men'll get them from there by boat up the Fraser to the headwaters of the Parsnip without much more delay or much more danger, but a lot of hard work. After that they just get in their boats and float."

"Oh, it *sounds* easy, Richard," protested his sister, "but I know all about your simple things!"

"Well, it isn't every boy I'd offer this good chance," said Uncle Dick, turning away. "In my belief, they'll come back knowing more than when they started."

"But they're only boys, not grown men like those old fur-traders that used to travel in that country. It was hard enough even for them, if I remember my reading correctly."

"I just told you, my dear sister, that these boys will go with less risk and less danger than ever Sir Alexander met when he first went over the Rockies. Listen. I've got the two best men in the Northwest, as I told you. Alex Mackenzie is one of the best-known men in the North. General Wolseley took him for chief of his band of *voyageurs*, who got the boats up the Nile in Kitchener's Khartoum campaign. He's steadier than a clock, and the boys are [Pg 8] safer with him than anywhere else without him. My other man, Moise Duprat, is a good cook, a good woodsman, and a good canoeman. They'll have all the camp outfit they need, they'll have the finest time in the world in the mountains, and they'll come through flying—that's all about it!"

"But won't there be any bad rapids in the mountains on that river?"

"Surely, surely! That's what the men are for, and the boats. When the water is too bad they get out and walk around it, same as you walk around a mud puddle in the street. When their men think the way is safe it's bound to be safe. Besides, you forget that though all this country is more or less new, there are Hudson Bay posts scattered all through it. When they get east of the Rockies, below Hudson's Hope and Fort St. John, they come on Dunvegan, which now is just a country town, almost. They'll meet wagon-trains of farmers going into all that country to settle. Why, I'm telling you, the only worry I have is that the boys will find it too solemn and quiet to have a good time!"

"Yes, I know about solemn and quiet things that you propose, Richard!" said his sister. "But at least"—she sighed—"since their fathers want them to live in this northern country for a [Pg 9] time, I want my boy to grow up fit for this life. Things here aren't quite the same as they are in the States. Well—I'll ask Rob's mother, and John's."

Uncle Dick grinned. He knew his young friends would so beset their parents that eventually they would get consent for the trip he had described as so simple and easy.

And, in truth, this evening camp on the crest of the Rockies in British Columbia was the result of his negotiations.

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THE GATE OF THE MOUNTAINS

Whether Uncle Dick told the boys everything he knew about this undertaking, or whether their mothers realized what they were doing in allowing them to go so far and into a wild region, we shall be forced to leave as an unanswered question. Certainly they started with their Uncle when he left Valdez by steamer for Vancouver. And, finishing that part of their journey which was to be made by rail, wagon, and boat, here they were, in the twilight of a remote valley at the crest of the great Rocky Mountains; near that point, indeed, properly to be called the height of land between the Arctic and the Pacific waters. Moreover, they were for the time quite alone in camp.

"Well, fellows," said Rob at last, "I suppose we'd better get some more wood together. The men'll be back before long, and we'll have to get something to eat."

"How do you know they'll come back?" asked John dubiously.

"Alex told me he would, and I have noticed that he always does things when he says he is [Pg 11] going to."

“I don’t hear them, anyway,” began Jesse, the youngest, who was, by nature as well as by years perhaps, not quite so bold and courageous as his two young friends.

“You couldn’t hear them very far,” replied Rob, “because they wear moccasins.”

“Do you think they really can get the canoes out, carrying them on their backs all the way from where we left them?” asked Jesse.

“They’re very strong,” Rob answered, “and that work isn’t new to them. And, you know, they carried all our packs in the same way.”

“That Moise is as strong as a horse,” said John. “My! I couldn’t lift the end of his pack here. I bet it weighed two hundred pounds at least. And he just laughed. I think he’s a good-natured man, anyhow.”

“Most of these woodsmen are,” replied Rob. “They are used to hardships, and they just laugh instead of complain about things. Alex is quieter than Moise, but I’ll venture to say they’ll both do their part all right. And moreover,” he added stoutly, “if Alex said he’d be here before dark, he’ll be here.”

“It will be in less than ten minutes, then,” said Jesse, looking at the new watch which his mother had given him to take along on his trip. “The canoe’s a pretty heavy thing, John.” [Pg 12]

Rob did not quite agree with him.

“They’re not heavy for canoes—sixteen-foot Peterboroughs. They beat any boat going for their weight, and they’re regular ships in the water under load.”

“They look pretty small to me,” demurred Jesse.

“They’re bigger than the skin boats that we had among the Aleuts last year,” ventured John. “Besides, I’ve noticed a good deal depends on the way you handle a boat.”

“Not everybody has boats as good as these,” admitted Jesse.

“Yes,” said John, “it must have cost Uncle Dick a lot of money to get them up here from the railroad. Sir Alexander Mackenzie traveled in a big birch-bark when he was here—ten men in her, and three thousand pounds of cargo besides. She was twenty-five feet long. Uncle Dick told me the Indians have dugouts farther down the river, but not very good ones. I didn’t think they knew anything about birch-bark so far northwest, but he says all their big journeys were made in those big bark canoes in the early days.”

“Well, I’m guessing that our boats will seem pretty good before we get through,” was Rob’s belief, “and they’ll pay for themselves too.” [Pg 13]

All the boys had been reading in all the books they could find telling of the journeys of the old fur-traders, Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and others, through this country. Rob had a book open in his lap now.

“How far can we go in a day?” asked Jesse, looking as though he would be gladder to get back home again than to get farther and farther away.

“That depends on the state of the water and the speed of the current,” said the older boy. “It’s no trouble to go fifty miles a day straightaway traveling, or farther if we had to. Some days they didn’t make over six or eight miles going up, but coming down—why, they just flew!”

“That wouldn’t take us long to go clear through to where Uncle Dick is.”

“A few weeks or so, at least, I hope. We’re not out to beat Sir Alexander’s record, you know—he made it from here in six days!”

“I don’t remember that book very well,” said Jesse; “I’ll read it again some time.”

“We’ll all read it each day as we go on, and in that way understand it better when we get through,” ventured John. “But listen; I thought I heard them in the bush.” [Pg 14]

It was as he had said. The swish of bushes parting and the occasional sound of a stumbling footfall on the trail now became plainer. They heard the voice of Moise break out into a little song as he saw the light of the fire flickering among the trees. He laughed gaily as he stepped into the ring of the cleared ground, let down one end of the canoe which he was carrying, and with a quick twist of his body set it down gently upon the leaves.

“You’ll mak’ good time, *hein*?” he asked of the boys, smiling and showing a double row of white teeth.

“What did I tell you, boys?” demanded Rob. “Here they are, and it isn’t quite dark yet.”

The next moment Alex also came in out of the shadow and quietly set down his own canoe, handling it as lightly as though it were but an ordinary pack. Indeed, these two woodsmen were among the most powerful of their class, and well used to all the work which comes on a trip in a wilderness country.

As they stood now a little apart, it might be seen that both of the guides were brown-skinned men, still browner by exposure to the weather. Each of them had had an Indian mother, and the father of each was a white man, the one a silent Scot, of the Hudson Bay [Pg 15] fur trade, the other a lively Frenchman of the lower trails, used to horse, boat, and foot travel, and known far and wide in his own day as a good *voyageur*.

Indeed, two better men could not have been selected by Uncle Dick for the work now in hand. As they stood now in their shirt-sleeves, each wiping off his forehead with his red kerchief, they looked so strong and tall that the boys suddenly felt all uneasiness pass away from their minds. The twilight came on unnoticed, and in the light of the fire, freshly piled up with wood, the camp scene became bright and pleasant. It was impossible to feel any alarm when they were here under the protection of these two men, both of them warriors, who had seen encounters of armed men, not to mention hundreds of meetings with wild beasts.

“Well,” said Rob to Moise, “you must be tired with all that load.”

“*Non! Non!*” said Moise; “not tired. She’ll been leetle boat, not over hondred-feefty poun’. I’ll make supper now, me.”

“It was best to bring both the boats in to-night,” said Alex, quietly, “and easier to start from here than to push in to the lake. We load here in the morning, and I think there’ll be plain [Pg 16] sailing from here. It’s just as well to make a stream carry us and our boats whenever we can. It’s only a little way to the lake.”

“I thought you were never coming, Alex,” said Jesse, frankly, looking up from where he sat on his blanket roll, his chin in his hands.

The tall half-breed answered by gently putting a hand on the boy’s head, and making a better seat for him closer to the fire. Here he was close enough to watch Moise, now busy about his pots and pans.

“Those mosquito he’ll bite you some?” laughed Moise, as he saw the boys still slapping at their hands. “Well, bimeby he’ll not bite so much. She’ll be col’ here un the *montaigne*, bimeby.”

“I’m lumpy all over with them,” said John.

“It’s lucky you come from a country where you’re more or less used to them,” said Alex. “I’ve seen men driven wild by mosquitoes. But going down the river we’ll camp on the beaches or bars, where the wind will strike us. In two or three weeks we’ll be far enough along toward fall, so that I don’t think the mosquitoes will trouble us too much. You see, it’s the first of August now.”

“We can fix our tent to keep them out,” said Rob, “and we have bars and gloves, of course. [Pg 17] But we don’t want to be too much like tenderfeet.”

“That’s the idea,” said Alex quietly. “You’ll not be tenderfeet when you finish this trip.”

“Her Onkle Deek, she’ll tol’ me something about those boy,” said Moise, from the fireside. “She’ll say she’s good boy, all same like man.”

Jesse looked at Moise gravely, but did not smile at his queer way of speech, for by this time they had become better acquainted with both their guides.

“What I’ll tol’ you?” said Moise again a little later. “Here comes cool breeze from the hill. Now those mosquito he’ll hunt his home yas, heem! All right! We’ll eat supper ’fore long.”

Moise had put a pot of meat stew over the fire before he started back up the trail to bring in the canoe, when they first had come in with the packs. This he now finished cooking over the renewed fire, and by and by the odors arose so pleasantly that each boy sat waiting, his knife and fork on the tin plate in his lap. Alex, looking on, smiled quietly, but said nothing.

“Moise doesn’t build a fire just the way I’ve been taught,” said Rob, after a while.

“No,” added John. “I was thinking of that, too.” [Pg 18]

“He’s Injun, same as me,” said Alex, smiling. “No white man can build a fire for an Injun.

S’pose you ask me to put your hat on for you so you wouldn’t need to touch it. I couldn’t do that. You’d have to fix it a little yourself. Same way with Injun and his fire.”

“That’s funny,” said Rob. “Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” smiled Alex.

“He just throws the sticks together in a long heap and pushes the ends in when they burn through,” said Jesse. “He didn’t cut any wood at all.”

Moise grinned at this, but ventured no more reply.

“You see,” said Alex, “if you live all the time in the open you learn to do as little work as possible, because there is always so much to do that your life depends on that you don’t want to waste any strength.”

“It doesn’t take a white man long to get into that habit,” said Rob.

“Yes. Besides, there is another reason. An Injun has to make his living with his rifle. Chopping with an ax is a sound that frightens game more than any other. The bear and deer will just get up and leave when they hear you chopping. So when we come into camp we [Pg 19] build our fire as small as possible, and without cutting any more wood than we are obliged to. You see, we’ll be gone the next morning, perhaps, so we slip through as light as possible. A white man leaves a trail like a wagon-road, but you’d hardly know an Injun had been there. You soon get the habit when you have to live that way.”

“Grub pile!” sang out Moise now, laughing as he moved the pans and the steaming tea-kettle by the side of the fire. And very soon the boys were falling to with good will in their first meal in camp.

“Moise, she’ll ben good cook—many tams mans’ll tol’ me that,” grinned Moise, pleasantly, drawing a little apart from the fire with his own tin pan on his knee.

“We’ll give you a recommendation,” said John. “This stew is fine. I was awfully hungry.”

It was not long after they had finished their supper before all began to feel sleepy, for they had walked or worked more or less ever since morning.

Alex arose and took from his belt the great Hudson Bay knife, or buffalo knife, which he wore at his back, thrust through his belt. With this he hacked off a few boughs from the nearest pine-tree and threw them down in the first sheltered spot. Over this he threw a [Pg 20] narrow strip of much-worn bear hide and a single fold of heavy blanket, this being all the bed which he seemed to have.

“Is that all you ever had?” asked Rob. “I don’t think you’ll sleep well, Alex. Let me give you some of my bed.”

“Thank you, no,” said Alex, sitting down and lighting his pipe. “We make our beds small when we have to carry them in the woods. We sleep well. We get used to it, you see.”

“Injun man she’ll been like dog,” grinned Moise, throwing down his own single blanket under a tree. “A dog she’ll sleep plenty, all right, an’ she’ll got no bed at all, what?”

“But won’t you come under the edge of the tent?” asked Rob.

“No, you’re to have the tent,” said Alex. “I’m under orders from your Uncle, who employed me. But you’re to make your own beds, and take care of them in making and breaking camp. That’s understood.”

“I’ll do that for those boy,” offered Moise.

“No,” said Alex, quietly, “my orders are they’re to do that for themselves. That’s what their Uncle said. They must learn how to do all these things.”

“Maybe we know now, a little bit,” ventured John, smiling. [Pg 21]

“I don’t doubt it,” said Alex. “But now, just from a look at your bed, you’ve taken a great deal of time making your camp to-night. You’ve got a good many boughs. They took noise and took time to gather. We’ll see how simple a camp we can make after we get out on the trail. My word! We’ll have trouble enough to get anything to sleep on when we get in the lower Peace, where there’s only willows.”

“What do you do if it rains?” queried Jesse. “You haven’t got any tent over you, and it leaks through the trees.”

“It won’t rain so much when we get east,” said Alex. “When it does, Moise and I’ll get up

and smoke. But it won't rain to-night, that's certain," he added, knocking his pipe on the heel of his moccasin. "Throw the door of your tent open, because you'll not need to protect yourselves against the mosquitoes to-night. It's getting cold. Good night, young gentlemen."

In a few moments the camp was silent, except something which sounded a little like a snore from the point where Moise had last been seen.

John nudged his neighbors in the beds on the tent floor, and spoke in low tones, so that he might not disturb the others outside. "Are you asleep yet, Rob?" [Pg 22]

"Almost," said Rob, whispering.

"So'm I. I think Jesse is already. But say, isn't it comfy? And I like both those men."

III [Pg 23]

STUDYING OUT THE TRAIL

It must have been some time about five o'clock in the morning, or even earlier, when Rob, awakened by the increasing light in the tent, stirred in his blanket and rolled over. He found himself looking into the eyes of John, who also was lying awake. They whispered for a minute or two, not wishing to waken Jesse, who still was asleep, his face puckered up into a frown as though he were uneasy about something. They tried to steal out the other tent, but their first movement awakened Jesse, who sat up rubbing his eyes.

"What's the matter?" said he; "where are we?" He smiled sheepishly as the other boys laughed at him.

"A good way from home, you'll find," answered John.

The smell of fresh smoke came to their nostrils from the fire, which had been built for some time. So quiet had the men been about their work that they had left the boys undisturbed for the best part of an hour. They themselves had been accustomed to taking the trail even earlier in the day than this. [Pg 24]

"Good morning, young gentlemen," said Alex, quietly. "I hope you slept well."

"Well," said Jesse, grinning, "I guess I did, for one."

"You'll been hongree?" smiled Moise at the fireside.

"Awfully!" said John. "I could eat a piece of raw bear meat."

"So?" grinned Moise. "Maybe you'll seen heem before we get through, *hein*? She'll not been very good for eat raw."

"Nor any other way, according to my taste," said Alex, "but we'll see how we like it cooked, perhaps."

"Do you really think we'll see any bear on this trip?" asked Rob.

"Plenty," said Alex, quietly.

"Grizzlies?"

"Very likely, when we get a little farther into the mountains. We ought to pick up two or three on this trip—if they don't pick us up."

"I'm not worrying about that," said Rob. "We're old bear hunters."

Both the men looked at him and laughed.

"Indeed, we are," insisted Rob. "We killed a bear, and an awfully big one, all by ourselves up on Kadiak Island. She was bigger than that tent there; and had two little ones besides. Each of them was big as a man, almost. They get awfully big up there in Alaska. I'll bet you haven't a one in all these mountains as big as one of those fellows up in our country." [Pg 25]

"Maybe not," said Alex, still smiling, "but they get pretty near as big as a horse in here, and I want to tell you that one of our old, white-faced grizzlies will give you a hot time enough if you run across him—he'll come to you without any coaxing."

"This is fine!" said Rob. "I begin to think we're going to have a good trip this time."

“Grub pile!” sang out Moise about this time. A moment later they were all sitting on the ground at the side of the breakfast fire, eating of the fried bacon, bannock, and tea which Moise had prepared.

“To-day, Moise, she’ll get feesh,” said Moise, after a time. “Also maybe the duck. I’ll heard some wild goose seenging this morning down on the lake below there. She’s not far, I’ll think.”

“Just a little ways,” said Alex, nodding. “If we’d gone in a little farther to the west we might [Pg 26] have hit the lake there, but I thought it was easier to let the water of this little creek carry our boats in.”

“Listen!” said John. “Isn’t that a little bird singing?”

A peal of sweet music came to them as they sat, from a small warbler on a near-by tree.

“Those bird, he’s all same Injun,” remarked Moise. “He seeng for the sun.”

The sun now indeed was coming up in the view from the mountain ranges on the east, though the air still was cool and the grass all about them still wet with the morning dew.

“Soon she’ll get warm,” said Moise. “Those mosquito, she’ll begin to seeng now, too.”

“Yes,” said Rob, “there were plenty of them in the tent this morning before we got up. We’ll have to get out the fly dope pretty soon, if I’m any judge.”

“But now,” he added, “suppose we read a little bit in our book before we break camp and pack up.”

“You’re still reading Sir Alexander and his voyages?” smiled Alex.

“Yes, indeed, I don’t suppose we’d be here if we hadn’t read that old book. It’s going to be our guide all the way through. I want to see just how close we can come to following the [Pg 27] trail Mackenzie made when he crossed this very country, a hundred and eighteen years ago this very month.”

“Some say they can’t see how Sir Alexander made so many mistakes,” said Alex, smiling. He himself was a man of considerable intelligence and education, as the boys already had learned.

“I know,” said Rob, nodding. “For instance, Simon Fraser—”

“Yes, I know those Simon Fraser—he’s beeg man in the Companee,” broke in Moise, who very likely did not know what he was talking about.

Alex smiled. “There have always been Mackenzies and Frasers in the fur trade. This was a long time ago.”

“How’ll those boy know heem, then?” said Moise. “I don’t know. Some boy she’ll read more nowadays than when I’m leetle. Better they know how to cook and for to keel the grizzly, *hein*?”

“Both,” said Alex. “But now we’ll read a little, if you please, Moise. Let’s see where we are as nearly as we can tell, according to the old Mackenzie journal.”

“I’ll know where we ought for be,” grumbled Moise, who did not fancy this starting-place which had been selected. “We’ll ought to been north many miles on the portage, where [Pg 28] there’s wagon trail to Lake McLeod.”

“Now, Moise,” said Rob, “what fun would that be? Of course we could put our boats and outfit on a wagon or cart, and go across to Lake McLeod, without any trouble at all. Everybody goes that way, and has done so for years. But that isn’t the old canoe trail of Mackenzie and Fraser.”

“Everybody goes on the Giscombe Portage now,” said Moise.

“Well, all the fur-traders used to come in here, at least before they had studied out this country very closely. You see, they didn’t have any maps—they were the ones who made the first maps. Mackenzie was the first over, and he did it all by himself, without any kind of map to help him.”

“Yes, and when he got over this far he was in an awful fix,” said John. “I remember where it says his men were going to leave him and go back down the Peace River to the east. He wasn’t sure his guide was going to stick to him until he got over to the Fraser, west of here.”

“Yes,” said Rob, “and there wasn’t any Fraser River known by that name at that time. They all thought it was the Columbia River, which it wasn’t by a long way. But Sir Alexander [Pg 29] stuck it out, don’t you see. He was a great man, or he couldn’t have done it. I take off my hat to him, that’s what I do.”

And in his enthusiasm, Rob did take off his hat, and his young companions joined him, their eyes lighting with enthusiasm for the man the simple story of whose deeds had stirred their young blood.

Alex looked on approvingly. “He was of my family,” said he. “Perhaps my great-grandfather —I don’t know. He was a good man in the woods. You see, he went far to the north before he came here—he followed the Mackenzie River to its mouth in the Arctic Sea. Then he thought there must be a way across to the Pacific. Some one told him about the Peace River. That’s how he came to make the first trip over the mountains here. By rights the Fraser River ought to have been named after him, too, because he was the first to see it.”

“But he wasn’t the first to run it on out,” said John, who also had a good idea of the geography hereabouts, which he had carefully studied in advance. “It was Simon Fraser did that first.”

“Yes, they’ll both been good man, heem,” said Moise, his mouth full of bacon. “My wife, she’ll had an onkle once name Fraser an’ he’ll been seex feet high an’ strong like a hox— [Pg 30] those Fraser, yes, heem.”

“They must have been strong men,” said Alex, “and brave men as well.”

“Their worst time was getting west of here, wasn’t it?” asked John.

“Yes,” answered Rob. “The book says that when they tried to get down the Fraser they had a terrible time. Sometimes they had to carry their canoe through swamps and over hills. No wonder the men mutinied. Why, they lost all their bullets, and got everything they had wet. The men almost lost heart.”

Moise nodded. “I’ll onderstan’ that,” said he. “Sometime man get tired.”

“But you see now, Moise, why we wanted to come down here and go over this same ground and not to take the easy portage trail into Lake McLeod.”

“All same to me,” smiled Moise. “I’ll don’ care.”

“Of course, if we wanted to go through the easiest way,” assented Rob, “it would be simpler to go up through McLeod Lake. But you see, that’s something of a way above here. Finlay found that lake after Mackenzie came across, and they had a fort up there when Fraser came through eighteen years later. The Indians used to come to that fort and tell about the [Pg 31] salt water somewhere far to the west. They had brass and iron which they had got of white men somewhere on the Pacific—that was more than a hundred years ago. Fraser wanted to get across to the Pacific, but he followed the old Mackenzie trail across here. He started at the Rocky Mountain portage and went up into McLeod Lake, and stopped there for a while. But he didn’t start west and northwest, by way of Stuart Lake. Instead of that, he followed Mackenzie’s journal, just as we’re doing. He came into the little creek which leads into these lakes—where we’ll go down pretty soon. He came right across this lake, not a mile from where we’re sitting. Then he met Indians in here, who told him—just as Moise has told us—that the best and easiest way to get across would have been by way of McLeod Lake—the very place he had come from.”

“Well,” said Jesse, “I agree with Moise. It would be easier to go where we could have wagons or carts or something to take the boats over. Everything looks mighty wild in here.”

“Certainly, Jess,” said John, “that’s why we’re here. I expect that portage trail up there is just like a road.”

“Fur-traders made it first,” smiled Alex, “and then the miners used it. That was the way [Pg 32] white men came into the country east of the Rockies, in the far North.”

“How long ago was that?” asked John.

“There were a great many miners all along the Fraser as early as 1857. Ten years later than that, they came up the big bend of the Columbia. Many men were killed on the rapids in those days. But they kept on pushing in, and in that way they learned all these old trails. I expect some Fraser uncle or other of Moise’s has been across here many a time.”

“Seex feet high, an’ strong like a hox,” smiled Moise, nodding his head. “Heem good man, my onkle, yes, heem.”

“Well,” said Rob, as he bent over the book once more. “Here’s Sir Alexander’s story, and here’s a map I made myself. That way, to the west, is the little lake where the Bad River runs out to another river that runs into the Fraser. This lake drains into that little lake. There’s another lake east of here, according to the story; and when we get there we’ll strike a deep, clear creek which will take us pretty soon into the Parsnip River. From there it’s all downhill.”

“Yes,” said Alex, smiling, “considerably downhill.”

“It’s said there was a current westward in this middle lake,” began John. [Pg 33]

“Certainly,” Rob answered, “we are really now on Pacific waters.”

“How far is it across to the other lake?” asked Jesse.

“The portage is just eight hundred and seventeen paces,” replied John, promptly. “I remember that’s what Mackenzie wrote down.”

“Fraser in his journal calls it ‘between eight and nine hundred paces,’” said Rob. “Anyhow, that portage goes over the top of the Rocky Mountain range at this place—that’s the top of the divide. Nearly all these natural passes in the mountains run up on each side to a sort of flat place. Anyhow, when we get over that portage we’re on Peace River waters. In yonder direction the waters run into the Pacific. To the east they go into the Arctic. I’m ready to start now, and anxious to get over the height of land.”

“She’ll be downheel then,” laughed Moise. “All same roof on the house, maybe so.”

“You’re not scared, are you, Moise?” asked Rob, smiling.

“Moise, she’ll sweem all same feesh,” was the answer of the *voyageur*.

“We’re not going to do any swimming,” said Alex, quietly, “and not even any more wading than we have to. You see, our party is small, and we’re going over a trail that has already been explored. We travel light, and have good boats. I think we ought to have rather an easy time of it, after all.” [Pg 34]

“One thing,” broke in John, “that always makes me think less of these early explorers, is that they weren’t really exploring, after all.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Jesse. “You just said that Mackenzie and Fraser were the first to come across here.”

John shook his head vigorously. “No, they weren’t the first—as near as I can find out, the white men always had some one to tell them where to go. When Mackenzie was going north there was always some tribe or other to tell him where he was and what there was ahead. It was some Indian that told him about coming over this way to the west—it was Indians that guided him all the way across, for that matter, clear from here to the Pacific.”

“That’s right,” said Rob. “If some Indian hadn’t told him about it, he probably never would have heard about the creek which leads into these lakes where we are now. He had a guide when he came here, and he had a guide west of the Fraser, too—they never would have got through without Indians to help them.” [Pg 35]

“That’s true,” said Alex, not without a certain pride in the red race which had given him half his own blood. “The whites haven’t always used the Indians well, but without native help they could never have taken this northern country. The Beaver Indians used to hunt all through these mountains. It was those men who told Mackenzie how to get over here. He was told, weeks before he got here, that there was a carrying-place across the great hills to the western waters. As you say, young gentlemen, he had guides all the way across. So, after all, as we have only him and Fraser for guides, we’ll take a little credit to ourselves, just as he did!”

“Yes,” said Moise. “My people, she’ll own this whole contree. They’ll show the Companee how to take hold, all right. But that’s all right; I’m glad, me.”

“It looks a little tame,” grumbled John, “coming through here where those old fur-traders knew every foot of the country.”

“Well, we’ll see,” said Alex, rising, filling his pipe and tightening his belt to begin the day’s work. “It may not look so tame before we get through! But first,” he added, “we’ll have to see if we can get the boats to the open water of the lake. Come, it’s time to break camp now for the first day’s journey.” [Pg 36]

IV

[Pg 37]

THE GREAT DIVIDE

To boys as familiar with camp work as were Rob, John, and Jesse, the work of breaking camp in the morning was simple. In a few moments they had their tent down and rolled up ready to put in the canoe. Their beds also were rolled, each in its own canvas, and lashed with a rope. Their rifles, which, kept dry in their cases, had been placed under the edge of their blankets as they slept, were now leaned against the bed-rolls. Their knapsacks, in which each boy had his personal belongings, such as brushes, combs, underwear and spare socks, were very quickly made ready, and placed in order each with its owner's bed-roll. In a very few minutes they stood up and showed Alex that they were ready.

Meantime, Moise had put his pots and pans into the sack which served him as a cook's box. His flour and bacon he quickly got ready in their packages, and even before the boys were [Pg 38] done with their work he was carrying these parcels down to the first canoe, which was to serve as the cook's boat. The beds of Moise and Alex, simple as they were, required only a roll or two to be ready for the boats.

"We'll fix a system," said Alex, "so that we'll load each boat just the same every day. There's nothing like being regular when you're on the trail."

"I'll bet, Alex, she'll not be a harder boss than ol' Pete Fraser, my wife, he's onkle," declared Moise. "He'll make those men get up by two, three, in the morning an' track two, three hour before she'll eat breakfast, heem."

"Well, you see, we had to do a little reading this morning," remarked John.

"Surely, and to very good purpose," answered Alex. "You ought to keep track of the old journal day by day."

"Exactly," said Rob, "and I'm going to keep a journal of my own each day. We haven't got any sextant to take observations, but I've got all the maps, and I've got a compass—maybe we'll get out a Voyage of Discoveries of our own some day!"

"Now, Moise," said Alex, "you're to go ahead with the cook-boat. You'd better take Mr. Rob for your bow paddler. I'll let Mr. John take the bow in my boat, and our youngest friend [Pg 39] here will go amidships, sitting flat on the bottom of the canoe, with his back against his bed-roll. The blankets and tent will make the seats. Of course, Moise, you're not to go too far ahead. It's always a good plan to keep in sight of the wangan-box and the cook's chest, when you're in the woods."

"All right," replied Moise, "I'll go slow with those boy all the time, yes."

"Well, we're not any of us scared yet," said John, stoutly, "and we won't be."

"I hope we'll get some white water to run," added Rob, his eyes shining. Jesse was the only one who seemed to be not wholly happy. The silence of the great hills about him, situated as they now were far from all human habitation, made him feel rather lonesome. He kept up a stout heart, however, and soon forgot his troubles when the actual bustle of the departure was begun.

"You'd better take the axes, Mr. Rob, and go ahead and cut out the way a little bit on this little creek," said Alex. "I'm afraid the boats won't quite clear."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Rob, and soon he and the other boys were making their way in among the tangled thicket, sometimes in and sometimes out of the water, chopping away the [Pg 40] branches so that the little boats could get through.

"Will they float, do you think, Mr. Rob?" called Alex.

"Like a bird!" answered Rob, as the first canoe, which was named the *Mary Ann*, soon took the water.

"Here comes the *Jaybird*!" cried Jesse, as they pushed the other canoe over the last foot or so of grass which lay between it and the water.

"Those boat she'll be all same like ducks," exclaimed Moise, admiringly. "I'll bet not even my onkle Pete Fraser he'll have better boat like those."

"Sir Alexander's boat was twenty-five or thirty feet long, all made out of birch-bark," said Rob. "Ours aren't much over sixteen feet."

“They had eight or ten men in their boats,” began John, “and the most we’ll have in either of ours will be three—that is, if you count Jess as a full-sized man!”

“Yes,” said Alex, “and they had a number of packs, each weighing ninety pounds. Now, all our packs won’t weigh a great deal more than that for each boat, counting in what we’re going to eat. We’ll have to get something in the way of meat as we go on through. Fine [Pg 41] boats these, and much better than birch-bark. Perhaps you may remember that Sir Alexander was having trouble to find good bark to mend his boats before he got in here. We’ll not need to trouble about that.”

“No,” said Rob, “we’ve got plenty of canvas, and rubber cement, and shellac, and tacks, and cord, and wire. We’ll make it through, even if we do have some little breaks.”

“I don’t think we’ll have any,” replied Alex in a reassuring way. “Moise, don’t you think your load settles your canoe just a little deeper than she ought to go?”

“*Non! Non!*” said Moise, in reply, casting a judicial look at the low freeboard of the *Mary Ann*. “She’ll go, those boat.”

“She’ll be getting lighter all the time,” ventured Jesse. “John gets awfully hungry, and he’ll eat a lot!”

They all laughed heartily at this reference to John’s well-known appetite. All were in good spirits when the real progress down the tangled creek began.

“*En roulant, ma boule, roulant!*” began Moise, as he shoved out his boat—the words of the old Canadian *voyageurs’* boat song, known for generations on all the waterways of the North.

“Better wait until we get into the lake,” smiled Alex. “I don’t think we can ‘roll the ball,’ as [Pg 42] you call it, very much in among these bushes.”

They moved on down now, pushing and pulling their boat when they could not paddle or pole it. Sometimes they had to force their way through an *embarras*, as the *voyageurs* call a pile of driftwood. The boys, however, only enjoyed this sort of work. They were wet, but happy, when, after some time passed in this slow progress, at last they saw the open waters of the lake fully before them.

“*En voyage, messieurs*,” cried Moise. “We begin!”

V

[Pg 43]

CROSSING THE HEIGHT OF LAND

Before our young trail-makers now lay the expanse of one of those little mountain lakes which sometimes are forgotten by the map-makers. The ground immediately about the edge of the lake was low, flat, and overgrown. Only a gentle ripple crossed the surface of the lake, for almost no air at all was stirring. Out of a near-by cove a flock of young wild geese, scarcely able to fly, started off, honking in excitement; and here and there a wild duck broke the surface into a series of ripples; or again a fish sprang into the air, as it went about its own breakfast operations for the day. It was an inspiring scene for all, and for the time the Young Alaskans paused, taking in its beauty.

“*Il fait beau, ce matin*,” said Moise, in the French which made half or more of his speech. “She’ll been fine morning this day, what?”

“Couldn’t be better,” assented Alex, who stood knee-deep at the edge of the lake, and who now calmly removed his moccasins and spread them on the thwart of the boat before he [Pg 44] stepped lightly in to take his place at the stern of the *Jaybird*. The boys noticed that when he stepped aboard he hardly caused the boat to dip to one side or the other. This he managed by placing his paddle on the farther side of the boat from him and putting part of his weight on it, as it rested on the bottom at the other side of the boat. All the boys, observing the methods of this skilled canoeman, sought to imitate his example. Presently they were all aboard, Rob in the bow of the *Mary Ann*, John taking that place for the *Jaybird*, with Jesse cuddled up amidships.

“Well,” said Alex, “here’s where we start. For me, I don’t care whether we go to the Pacific or the Arctic!”

“Nor me no more,” added Moise. “Only I’ll rather go downheel as upheel, me—always I’ll

rather ron the rapeed than track the boat up the rapeed on the bank. Well, *en roulant*, eh, M'sieu Alex?"

"*Roulant!*" answered Alex, briefly. Moise, setting his paddle into the water with a great sweep, began once more the old canoe song.

"Le fils du roi s'en va chassant
En roulant, ma boule!
Avec son grand fusil d'argent
En roulant, ma boule!"

So they fared on merrily, the strong arms of the two skilled boatmen pushing the light canoes rapidly through the rippling water. Moise, a strong and skilful paddler, was more disposed to sudden bursts of energy than was the soberer and quieter Alex, who, none the less, came along not far in the rear with slow and easy strokes which seemed to require little exertion on his part, although they drove the boat straight and true as an arrow. The boys at the bow paddles felt the light craft spring under them, but each did his best to work his own passage, and this much to the approval of the older men, who gave them instructions in the art of paddling. [Pg 45]

"You'll see, M'sieu Rob," said Moise, "these paddle she'll be all same like fin of those feesh. You'll pull square with heem till she'll get behind you, then she'll turn on her edge just a little bit—so. That way, you paddle all time on one side. The paddle when she'll come out of water, she'll keep the boat running straight."

The distance from their point of embarkation to the eastern edge of the little lake could not have been more than a couple of miles, for the entire distance from the western to the eastern edge was not over three miles. In what seemed no more than a few moments the boats pulled up at the western end of what was to be their first portage. [Pg 46]

"Now," said Moise, "we'll show those boy how a Companee man make the portage." He busied himself arranging his packs, first calling for the tent, on which he placed one package after another. Then he turned in the ends of the canvas and folded over the sides, rolling all up into a big bundle of very mixed contents which, none the less, he fastened by means of the strap which now served him as support for it all.

"I know how you did that," said Rob—"I watched you put the strap down inside of the roll."

"Yes," said Moise, smiling, "she'll been what Injun call tump-strap. White man he'll carry on hees shoulder, but Injun an' *voyageur*, she'll put the tump-band on her head, what? That's best way for much load."

Moise now proceeded to prove the virtue of his remarks. He was a very powerful man, and he now swung up the great pack to his shoulders, although it must have weighed much over a hundred and fifty pounds and included almost the full cargo of the foremost boat.

"Throw something on top of her," said Moise. "She'll been too light! I'm afraid I'll ron off, me." [Pg 47]

"Well, look at that man," said Jesse, admiringly. "I didn't know any man was so strong."

"Those Companee man, she'll have to be strong like hox!" said Moise, laughing. "You'll ought to seen heem. Me, I'm not ver' strong. Two, three hondred pounds, she'll make me tire."

"Well, trot on over, Moise," said Alex, "and I'll bring the boat. Young gentlemen, each of you will take what he can conveniently carry. Don't strain yourselves, but each of you do his part. That's the way we act on the trail."

The boys now shouldered their small knapsacks and, each carrying his rifle and rod, started after the two stalwart men who now went on rapidly across the portage.

Moise did not set down his pack at all, but trotted steadily across, and Alex followed, although he turned at the summit and motioned to Rob to pause.

"You'd hardly know it," said Rob, turning to John and Jesse, who now put down their packs, "but here we are at the top of this portage trail and the top of the Peace River pass. Here was where old Sir Alexander really turned toward the west, just as we now are turning toward the east. It's fine, isn't it?" [Pg 48]

"I'm glad I came," remarked John.

"And so am I," added Jesse; "I believe we're going to have a good time. I like those two men awfully well—they're just as kind, and my! how strong!"

Presently they all met again at the eastern edge of the dim trail. “I stepped it myself,” said John, proudly. “Both Sir Alexander and old Simon Fraser were wrong—she’s just six hundred and ninety-three paces!”

“Maybe they had longer legs than you,” smiled Alex. “At any rate, there’s no doubt about the trail itself. We’re precisely where they were.”

“What made them call that river the Parsnip River?” demanded Jesse of Alex, to whom he went for all sorts of information.

“I’ll show you,” said Alex, quietly, reaching down and breaking off the top of a green herb which grew near by. “It was because of the wild parsnips—this is one. You’ll find where Sir Alexander mentions seeing a great many of these plants. They used the tops in their pemmican. You see, the north men have to eat so much meat that they’re glad to get anything green to go with it once in a while.”

“What’s pemmican?” asked Jesse, curiously. [Pg 49]

“We used to make it out of buffalo meat, or moose or caribou,” said Alex. “The buffalo are all gone now, and, in fact, we don’t get much pemmican any more. It’s made by drying meat and pounding it up fine with a stone, then putting it in a hide sack and pouring grease in on top of it. That used to be the trail food of the *voyageurs*, because a little of it would go a good way. Do you think you could make any of it for the boys, Moise?”

“I don’ know,” grinned Moise. “Those squaw, she’ll make pemmican—not the honter. Besides, we’ll not got meat. Maybe so if we’ll get moose deer we could make some, if we stop long tam in camp. But always squaw make pemmican—not man.”

“Well, we’ll have to give some kind of imitation of the old ways once in a while,” commented Alex, “for though they are changed and gone, our young friends here want to know how the fur-traders used to travel.”

“One thing,” said John, feeling at his ankle. “I’ll be awfully glad when we get out of the devil’s club country.”

“Do you have those up in Alaska?” asked Alex.

“Have them?—I should say we have! They’re the meanest thing you can run across out of doors. If you step on one of those long, snaky branches, it’ll turn around and hit you, no matter where you are, and whenever it hits those little thorns stick in and stay.” [Pg 50]

“I know,” nodded Alex. “I struck plenty of them on the trail up north from the railroad. They went right through my moccasins. We’ll not be troubled by these, however, when we get east of the divide—that’s a plant which belongs in the wet country of the western slope.”

All this time Moise was busy rearranging the cargoes in the first boat, leaving on the shore, however, such parcels as did not belong in the *Mary Ann*. Having finished this to his liking, he turned before they made the second trip on the *Jaybird* and her cargo.

“Don’t we catch any of those feesh?” he asked Alex, nodding back at the lake.

“Fish?” asked John. “I didn’t see any fish.”

“Plenty trout,” said Moise. “I s’pose we’ll better catch some while we can.”

“Yes,” said Alex, “I think that might be a good idea. Now, if we had a net such as Sir Alexander and old Simon Fraser always took along, we’d have no trouble. Moise saw what I also saw, and which you young gentlemen did not notice—a long bar of gravel where the trout were feeding.” [Pg 51]

“We’ll not need any net,” said Rob. “Here are our fly-rods and our reels. If there are any trout rising, we can soon catch plenty of them.”

“Very well. We’d better take the rods back, then, when we go for the second boat.”

When they got to the shore of the middle lake, the boys saw that the keener eyes of the old *voyageurs* had noted what they had missed—a series of ripples made by feeding fish not far from the point where they had landed.

“Look at that!” cried Jesse. “I see them now, myself.”

“Better you’ll take piece pork for those feesh,” said Moise.

“I don’t think we’ll need it,” replied Rob. “We’ve plenty of flies, and these trout won’t be very wild up here, for no one fishes for them. Anyhow, we’ll try it—you’ll push us out, won’t you, Moise?”

Carefully taking their places now in the *Jaybird*, whose cargo was placed temporarily on the bank, the three boys and Moise now pushed out. As Rob had predicted, the fish were feeding freely, and there was no difficulty in catching three or four dozen of them, some of very good weight. The bottom of the canoe was pretty well covered with fish when at length, after an hour or so of this sport, Moise thought it was time to return to shore, where Alex, quietly smoking all the time, had sat awaiting them. [Pg 52]

“Now we’ll have plenty for eat quite a while,” said Moise.

“That’s all right,” said John. “I’m getting mighty hungry. How long is it going to be before we have something to eat?”

“Why, John,” said Rob, laughingly, “the morning isn’t half gone yet, and we’ve just had breakfast.”

VI [Pg 53]

FOLLOWING MACKENZIE

“Well,” said Alex, “now we’ve got all these fish, we’ll have to take care of them. Come ahead and let’s clean them, Moise.”

The boys all fell to and assisted the men at this work, Moise showing them how to prepare the fish.

“How are we going to keep them?” asked John, who always seemed to be afraid there would not be enough to eat.

“Well,” explained Alex, “we’ll put them in between some green willow boughs and keep them that way till night. Then I suppose we’ll have to smoke them a little—hang them up by the tail the way the Injuns do. That’s the way we do whitefish in the north. If it weren’t for the fish which we catch in these northern waters, we’d all starve to death in the winter, and so would our dogs, all through the fur country.”

“By the time we’re done this trip,” ventured Rob, “we’ll begin to be *voyageurs* ourselves, and will know how to make our living in the country.” [Pg 54]

“That’s the talk!” said Alex, admiringly. “The main thing is to learn to do things right. Each country has its own ways, and usually they are the most useful ways. An Injun never wants to do work that he doesn’t have to do. So, you’ll pretty much always see that the Injun ways of keeping camp aren’t bad to follow as an example, after all.

“But now,” said he at length, after they had finished cleaning and washing off their trout, “we’ll have to get on across to the other lake.”

As before, Moise now took the heavier pack on his own broad shoulders, and Alex once more picked up the canoe.

“She’s a little lighter than the other boat, I believe,” said he, “but they’re both good boats, as sure’s you’re born—you can’t beat a Peterborough model in the woods!”

The other boys noticed now that when he carried his canoe, he did so by placing a paddle on each side, threaded under and above the thwarts so as to form a support on each side, which rested on his shoulders. His head would have been covered entirely by the boat as he stood, were it not that he let it drop backward a little, so that he could see the trail ahead of him. Rob pointed out to Jesse all these different things, with which their training in connection with the big Alaskan sea-going dugouts had not made them familiar. [Pg 55]

“Have we got everything now, fellows?” asked Rob, making a last search before they left the scene of their disembarkation.

“All set!” said John. “Here we go!”

It required now but a few moments to make the second traverse of the portage, and soon the boats again were loaded. They found this most easterly of the three lakes on the summit to be of about the same size as the one which they had just left. It was rather longer than it was wide, and they could see at its eastern side the depression where the outlet made off toward the east. Again taking their places at the paddles in the order established at the start of the day, they rapidly pushed on across. They found now that this lake discharged through a little creek which rapidly became deep and clear.

“It’s going to be just the way,” said Rob, “that Sir Alexander tells. I say, fellows, we could take that boat and come through here in the dark, no matter what Simon Fraser said about Sir Alexander.”

They found the course down this little waterway not troublesome, and fared on down the winding stream until at length they heard the sound of running water just beyond. [Pg 56]

“That’s the Parsnip now, no doubt,” said Alex, quietly, to his young charges. Already Moise had pushed the *Mary Ann* over the last remaining portion of the stream, and she was floating fair and free on the current of the second stream, not much larger than the one from which they now emerged.

“*Voila!*” Moise exclaimed. “She’ll been the Peace River—or what those *voyageur* call the Parsneep. Now, I’ll think we make fast ride, yes.”

Jesse, leaning back against his bed-roll, looked a little serious.

“Boys,” said he, “I don’t like the looks of this. This water sounds dangerous to me, and you can’t tell me but what these mountains are pretty steep.”

“Pshaw! It’s just a little creek,” scoffed John.

“That’s all right, but a little creek gets to be a big river mighty fast up in this country—we’ve seen them up in Alaska many a time. Look at the snow-fields back in those mountains!”

“Don’t be alarmed, Mr. Jess,” said Alex; “most of the snow has gone down in the June rise. [Pg 57] The water is about as low now as it is at any time of the year. Now, if we were here on high water, as Simon Fraser was, and going the other way, we might have our own troubles—I expect he found all this country under water where we are now, and the current must have been something pretty stiff to climb against.”

“In any case,” Rob added, “we’re just in the same shape that Sir Alexander and old Simon were when they were here. We wouldn’t care to turn back, and we’ve got to go through. If they did it, so can we. I don’t believe this stream’s as bad, anyhow, as the Fraser or the Columbia, because the traders must have used it for a regular route long ago.”

“I was reading,” said John, “in Simon Fraser’s travels, about how they did in the rapids of the Fraser River. Why, it was a wonder they ever got through at all. But they didn’t seem to make much fuss about it. Those men didn’t know where they were going, either—they just got in their boat and turned loose, not knowing what there was on ahead! That’s what I call nerve. Pshaw! Jess, we’re only tenderfeet compared to those chaps!”

“That’s the talk!” commented Alex, once more lighting his pipe and smiling. “We’ll go [Pg 58] through like a bird, I’m pretty sure.”

“Yes,” said Moise, “we’ll show those boy how the *voyageur* ron the rapeed.”

“One thing I want to say to you young gentlemen,” resumed Alex, “not to alarm you, but to teach you how to travel. If by any accident the boat should upset, hang to the boat and don’t try to swim. The current will be very apt to sweep you on through to some place where you can get a footing. But all these mountain waters are very strong and very cold. Whatever you do, hang to the boat!”

“Yes!” said Rob, “‘don’t give up the ship,’ as Lawrence said. Sir Alexander tells how he got wrecked on the Bad River with his whole crew. But they hung to the canoe and got her out at the foot of the rapids, after all, and not one of them was hurt.”

“He didn’t lose a man on the whole trip, for that matter,” John added.

“Well, now, let’s see about the rapids,” said Rob again, spreading out his map and opening one of his books which he always kept close at hand. “Simon Fraser tells as day by day what he did when he was going west. They got into that lake we’ve just left, about noon. They must have poked up the creek some time, and very early that same morning. That was June [Pg 59] thirtieth, and on the same day they passed another river coming in from the west side—which must be between here and the outlet from McLeod Lake.”

“What does the map say about the other side of the stream?” asked John, peering over Rob’s shoulder.

“Well, on the twenty-eighth, as they were coming up they passed two rivers coming in from the east. That can’t be very far below here, and the first stream on the west side must be pretty close, from all I can learn. Below there, on the twenty-seventh, there was another river which they passed coming in from the east, and Simon says near its mouth there was

a rapid. He doesn't seem to mention any rapids between there and here—probably it had to be a pretty big one for him to take any notice of it. That's two or three days down-stream, according to his journal, and, as Alex says, it was high water, and they made slow time coming up—not as fast as Sir Alexander did, in fact."

"Plenty good water," said Moise, looking out over the rapid little stream with professional approval. "She's easy river."

"Then we ought to make some sort of voyage," said Rob. "You see, Sir Alexander took [Pg 60] thirty-four days coming up to this point from the place where he started, far east of the Rockies, but going downhill it only took him six days."

"That was going some," nodded John, emphatically, if not elegantly.

"But not faster than we'll be going," answered Rob. "You see, it took him a sixth of the time to go east which it needed to come west. Then, what they did in three days coming up, we ought to run in a half-day or less going down."

Alex nodded approvingly. "I think it would figure out something like that way," said he.

"So if we started now, or a little after noon," resumed Rob, "and ran a full half-day we ought to pass all these rivers which Simon mentions, and get down to the first big rapid of which he speaks. They were good and tired coming up-stream, but we won't have to work at all going down."

"Well, don't we eat any place at all?" began John again, amid general laughter.

"Sure," said Moise, "we'll stop at the first little beach and make boil the kettle. I'm hongree, too, me."

They did as Moise said, and spent perhaps an hour, discussing, from time to time, the features of the country and the probable time it would take them to make the trip. [Pg 61]

"The boat goes very fast on a stream like this," said Alex. "We could make fifty or sixty miles a day without the least trouble, if we did not have to portage. I should think the current was four to six miles an hour, at least, and you know we could add to that speed if we cared to paddle."

"Well, we don't want to go too fast," said Jesse. "We have all summer for this trip."

This remark from the youngest of the party caused the old *voyageur* to look at him approvingly. "That's right," said he, "we'll not hurry."

Moise was by this time examining the load of the *Mary Ann*, arranging the packs so that she would trim just to suit his notion when Rob was in place at the bow. Alex paid similar care to the *Jaybird*. The boats now ran practically on an even keel, which would give them the greatest bearing on the water and enable them to travel over the shallowest water possible.

"*En roulant?*" said Moise, looking at Alex inquiringly.

Alex nodded, and the boys being now in their proper places in the boats, he himself stepped [Pg 62] in and gave a light push from the beach with his paddle.

"So long, fellows," called out Rob over his shoulder as he put his paddle to work. "I'm going to beat you all through—if I'm bow paddle in the first boat I'll be ahead of everybody else. *En roulant, ma boule!*"

The *Mary Ann*, swinging fully into the current, went off dipping and gliding down the gentle incline of the stream. "Don't go too fast, Moise," called out Alex. "We want to keep in sight of the cook-boat."

"All right!" sang out Moise. "We'll go plenty slow."

"Now," said Alex to John and Jess as he paddled along slowly and steadily; "I want to tell you something about running strange waters in a canoe. Riding in a canoe is something like riding a horse. You must keep your balance. Keep your weight over the middle line of the canoe, which is in the center of the boat when she's going straight, of course. You'll have to ease off a little if she tilts—you ride her a little as you would a horse over a jump. Now, look at this little rough place we're coming to—there, we're through it already—you see, there's a sort of a long V of smooth water running down into the rapid. Below that there's a long ridge or series of broken water. This rapid will do for a model of most of the others, [Pg 63] although it's a tame one.

"In this work the main thing is to keep absolutely cool. Never try a bad rapid which is strange to you without first going out and getting the map of it in your mind. Figure out the

course you're going to take, and then hang to it, and don't get scared. When I call to you to go to the right, Mr. John, pull the boat over by drawing it to your paddle on that side—don't try to push it over from the left side. You can haul it over stronger by pulling the paddle against the water. Of course I do the reverse on the stern. We can make her travel sidewise, or straight ahead, or backward, about as we please. All of us canoemen must keep cool and not lose our nerve.

"Well, I'll go on—usually we follow the V down into the head of a rapid. Below that the highest wave is apt to roll back. If it is too high, and curls over too far up-stream, it would swamp our boat to head straight into it. Where should we go then? Of course, we would have to get a little to one side of that long, rolling ridge of white water. But not too far. Sometimes it may be safer to take that big wave, and all the other waves, right down the [Pg 64] white ridge of the stream, than it is to go to one side."

"I don't see why that would be," said Jesse. "I should think there would be the most dangerous place for a canoe."

"It is, in one way," said Alex. "Or at least you're surer to ship water there. But suppose you are in a very heavy stream like the Fraser or the Columbia. At the foot of the chute there is very apt to be some deep swells, or rolls, coming up from far down below. Besides that, there's very apt to be a strong eddy setting up-stream just below the chute, if the walls are narrow and rocky. Now, that sort of water is very dangerous. One of those big swells will come up under a boat, and you'd think a sledge-hammer had hit her. Nothing can stop the boat from careening a little bit then. Well, suppose the eddy catches her bow and swings her up-stream. She goes up far enough, in spite of all, so that her nose gets under some white water coming down. Well, then, she swamps, and you're gone!"

"I don't like this sort of talk," said Jesse. "If there's any place where I could walk I'd get out."

"I'm telling you now about bad water," said Alex, "and telling you how to take care of yourself in case you find yourself there. One thing you must remember, you must travel a [Pg 65] little faster than the current to get steerageway, and you must never try to go against your current in a rapid—the water is stronger than all the horses you ever saw. The main thing is to keep cool, to keep your balance, and sometimes not to be afraid of taking a little water into the boat. It's the business of the captain to tell whether it's best to take the ridge of water at the foot of the chute or to edge off from it to one side. That last is what he will do when there are no eddies. All rapids differ, and of course in a big river there may be a dozen different chutes. We always go ashore and look at a rapid if we think it's dangerous.

"Now, you hear that noise below us," he added, "but don't be alarmed. Don't you see, Moise and Rob are already past it? I'll show you now how we take it. Be steady, John, and don't paddle till I tell you. On your right a little!" he called out an instant later. "That's it! So. Well, we're through already!"

"Why, that was nothing," said Jesse. "It was just as smooth!"

"Exactly. There is no pleasanter motion in the world than running a bit of fast water. Now, [Pg 66] there was no danger in this, and the only trouble we had was just to get an inch or so out of the way of that big rock which might have wrecked us. We always pick a course in a rapid which gives us time to turn, so that we can dodge another rock if there's one on ahead. It usually happens pretty fast. You'll soon learn confidence after running a few pieces of white water, and you'll learn to like it, I'm sure."

Moise had turned his boat ashore to see the second boat come through, and after a moment Alex joined him at the beach, the canoes being held afloat by the paddles as they sat.

"She comes down fast, doesn't she, fellows?" asked Rob.

"I should say so!" called John. "I don't see how they ever got a big boat up here at all."

"Well, Sir Alexander says that this was part of the worst water they found," said Rob. "Sometimes they had to pull the boat up by hanging on to the overhanging trees—they couldn't go ashore to track her, they couldn't get bottom with their setting-poles, and of course they couldn't paddle. Yet we came down like a bird!"

The boats dropped on down pleasantly and swiftly now for some time, until the sun began to sink toward the west. A continually changing panorama of mountain and foothill shifted [Pg 67] before them. They passed one little stream after another making down from the forest slopes, but so rapid and exhilarating was their movement that they hardly kept track of all the rivers and creeks which came in. It was late in the evening when they heard the low roar of a rapid far on ahead. The men in the rear boat saw the *Mary Ann* slacken, pause,

and pull off to one side of the stream.

“That must be the big rapid which Fraser mentions,” commented John.

“Very likely,” said Alex. “Well, anyhow, we might as well pull in here and make our camp for the night. We’ve made a good day’s work for a start at least.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if it was a hundred miles from where we started down to the outlet of the McLeod River,” began Rob again, ever ready with his maps and books. “I think they call it the Pack River now. There is a sort of wide place near there, where the Mischinsinclia River comes in from the east, and above that ten or fifteen miles is the Misinchinca River, on the same side. I don’t know who named those rivers, but we haven’t passed them yet, that’s sure. Then down below the mouth of the McLeod is the Nation River, quite a good [Pg 68] stream, I suppose, on the west side. The modern maps show another stream called the Manson still farther. I don’t know whether Mackenzie knew them by these names, or whether we can tell them when we see them, but it’s all the more fun if we can’t.”

VII [Pg 69]

AROUND THE CAMP-FIRE

The point at which they ended their day’s voyage was a long sand-pit projecting out from the forest and offering a good landing for the canoes. They were glad enough to rest. Moise and Alex, who had paddled steadily all the afternoon, stepped out on the beach and stretched themselves.

“Let’s go back into the woods,” said Jesse. “We can’t sleep on these hard little rocks—we can’t even drive the tent-pegs here.”

“Well, Mr. Jess,” said Alex, “if you went back into the woods I think you’d come back here again—the mosquitoes would drive you out. If you notice, the wind strikes this point whichever way it comes. In our traveling we always camp on the beaches in the summer-time when we can.”

“Besides,” added Rob, “even if we couldn’t drive the tent-pins, we could tie the ropes to big rocks. We can get plenty of willows and alders for our beds, too, and some pine boughs.”

The long twilight of these northern latitudes still offered them plenty of light for their camp [Pg 70] work, although the sun was far down in the west. Alex, drawing his big buffalo knife, helped the tired boys get ready their tent and beds, but he smiled as he saw that to-night they were satisfied with half as many boughs as they had prepared on their first night in camp.

“I don’t suppose,” said Rob, “that Sir Alexander and his men made very big beds.”

“No, I’m afraid not,” replied Alex. “On the contrary, the canoemen always broke camp about four o’clock in the morning, and they kept going until about seven at night. Fifteen hours a day in and out of the water, paddling, poling, and tracking, makes a man so tired he doesn’t much care about what sort of bed he has.”

While the others were getting the tent ready Moise was busy making his fire and getting some long willow wands, which he now was making into a sort of frame.

“What’s that for, Moise?” asked Jesse.

“That’s for dry those feesh you boys’ll got this morning. Fine big trouts, three, four poun’, an’ fat. I’ll fix heem two, three, days so he’ll keep all right.”

“But we couldn’t stay here two or three days,” said John.

“We might do worse,” replied Alex. “This isn’t a bad camping place, and besides, it seems to [Pg 71] me good country to make a little hunt, if we care to do that.”

“It certainly would be a fine place for beaver,” said Rob, “if it weren’t against the law to kill them.”

“Yes, or other things also—bear or bighorns, I should think very likely.”

“I suppose there isn’t any law against killing bears,” said Rob, “but how about bighorns? I thought they were protected by law.”

“We’ll talk about that after a while,” Alex answered. “Of course, no one would want to kill

beaver at this time of year, no matter what the law was, because the fur is not good."

"I see by Sir Alexander's journal," continued Rob, "that it must have been along in here that they saw so much beaver work. There are plenty of dams even now, although it's a hundred years later than the time he came through."

"I suppose when we get down farther there are fewer creeks," said John, "and the rocks and trees are bigger. I don't know just where we are now, because the trees are so thick a fellow can't see out."

"Well," went on Rob, bringing out his map, and also that which was found in his copy of [Pg 72] *Mackenzie's Voyages*, "it must have been just about in here that Mackenzie met the first Indians that he saw in this country—the ones who told him about the carrying place, and about the big river and the salt water beyond it. They were the Indians who had iron spears, and knives, and things, so that he knew they had met white men off to the west. They had a big spoon which Mackenzie says was made out of a horn like the buffalo horn of the Copper Mine River. I suppose Mackenzie called the musk-ox buffalo, and very likely he never had seen a mountain-sheep."

"That's right," said Alex, "those Injuns used to make big spoons out of the horns of the mountain-sheep—all the Injuns along the Rockies always have done that. It seems strange to me that Mackenzie didn't know that, although at that he was still rather a new man in the north."

"You never have been in here yourself, have you, Alex?" asked John.

"No, and that's what is making the trip so pleasant for me. I'm having a good time figuring it out with you. I know this river must run north between those two ranges of mountains, and it must turn to the east somewhere north of here. But I've never been west of Fort St. [Pg 73] John."

"I don't like the look of this river down there," said Jesse, stepping to the point of the bar, and gazing down the stream up which came the sullen roar of heavy rapids.

"Those rapeed, she'll been all right," said Moise. "Never fear, we go through heem all right. To-morrow, two, three, day we'll go through those rapeed like the bird!"

"We can walk around them, Jesse, if we don't want to run them," said Rob, reassuringly. "Of course it's rather creepy going into heavy water that you don't know anything about—I don't like that myself. But just think how much worse it must have been for Sir Alexander and his men, who were coming up this river, and on the high water at that. Why, all this country was overflowed, and one time, down below here, all the men wanted to quit, it was such hard work. He must have been a brave man to keep them going on through."

"He was a great man," added Alex. "A tired man is hard to argue with, but he got them to keep on trying, and kept them at their work."

"Grub pile!" sang Moise once more, and a moment later all were gathered again around the [Pg 74] little fire where Moise had quickly prepared the evening meal.

"I'm just about starved," said John. "I've been wanting something to eat all afternoon."

They all laughed at John's appetite, which never failed, and Moise gave him two large pieces of trout from the frying-pan. "I'll suppose those feesh he'll seem good to you," said Moise.

"I should say they were good!" remarked Jesse, approvingly. "I like them better all the time."

"S'pose we no get feesh in the north," began Moise, "everybody she'll been starve."

"That's right," said Alex. "The traders couldn't have traveled in this country without their nets. They got fish enough each night to last them the next day almost anywhere they stopped. You see, sometimes the buffalo or the caribou are somewhere else, but fish can't get out of the river or the lake, and we always know where to look for them."

"The dorè, she'll be good feesh," continued Moise, "but we'll not got dorè here. Maybe so whitefeesh over east, maybe so pickerel."

"You remember how we liked codfish better than salmon up in Alaska when we were on Kadiak Island?" asked Rob. "I wonder if we'll like trout very long at a time?"

"Whitefeesh she'll be all right," Moise smiled. "Man an' dog both he'll eat whitefeesh." [Pg 75]

"Well, it's all right about fish," Rob remarked, after a time, "but how about the hunt we

were talking about? I promised Uncle Dick I'd bring him some bearskins."

"Black bear or grizzlies?" asked Alex, smiling.

"Grizzly."

"Well, I don't know about that," demurred Alex. "Of course I don't deny you may have killed a bear or so up in Alaska, but down here most of us are willing to let grizzlies alone when we see them."

"This white-face bear, he'll be bad," Moise nodded vigorously.

"Are there many in here?" asked John, curiously, looking at the dense woods.

"I don't know," Alex replied. "I've seen a few tracks along the bars, but most of those are made by black bear. Injuns don't look for grizzlies very much. I don't suppose there's over six or eight grizzly skins traded out of Fort St. John in a whole year."

"Injuns no like for keel grizzly," said Moise. "This grizzly, he'll be chief. He'll be dead man, too, maybe. Those grizzly he'll be onkle of mine, maybe so. All Injun he'll not want for keel [Pg 76] grizzly. Some Injun can talk to grizzly, an' some time grizzly he'll talk to Injun, too, heem."

"Now, Moise," said Rob, "do you really think an animal can talk?"

"Of course he'll talk. More beside, all animal he'll talk with spirits, an' man, not often he can talk with spirits himself. Yes, animal he'll talk with spirit right along, heem."

"What does he mean, Alex?" asked Rob.

"Well," said Alex, gravely, "I'm half Injun too, and you know, Injuns don't think just the way white people do. Among our people it was always thought that animals were wiser than white men think them. Some have said that they get wisdom from the spirits—I don't know about that."

"Do you know how those cross fox he'll get his mark on his back that way?" asked Moise of Rob.

"No, only I suppose they were always that way."

"You know those fox?"

"We all know them," interrupted John. "There's a lot of them up in Alaska—reddish, with smoky black marks on the back and shoulders, and a black tail with a white tip. They're worth money, too, sometimes."

"Maybe Moise will tell you a story about how the fox got marked," said Alex quietly. [Pg 77]

"Oh, go ahead, Moise," said all the boys. "We'd like to hear that."

"Well, one tam," said Moise, reaching to the fire to get a coal for his pipe, and leaning back against a blanket-roll, "all fox that ron wild was red, like some fox is red to-day. But those tam was some good fox an' some bad fox. Then Wiesacajac, he'll get mad with some fox an' mark heem that way. He'll been bad fox, that's how he get mark."

"Wiesacajac?" asked Rob. "What do you mean by that?"

"He means one of the wood-spirits of the Cree Indians," answered Alex, quietly. "You know, the Injuns have a general belief in the Great Spirit. Well, Wiesacajac is a busy spirit of the woods, and is usually good-natured."

"Do you believe in him?" asked Jesse. "I thought you went to church, Alex?"

"The Company likes us all to go to church when we're in the settlements," said Alex, "and I do regularly. But you see, my mother was Injun, and she kept to the old ways. It's hard for me to understand it, about the old ways and the new ones both. But my mother and her people all believed in Wiesacajac, and thought he was around all the time and was able to [Pg 78] play jokes on the people if he felt like it. Usually he was good-natured. But, Moise, go on and tell about how the fox got his mark."

Moise, assuming a little additional dignity, as became an Indian teller of stories, now went on with his tale.

"Listen, I speak!" he began. "One tam, long ago, Wiesacajac, he'll be sit all alone by a lake off north of this river. Wiesacajac, he'll been hongree, but he'll not be mad. He'll be laugh, an' talk by heemself an' have good tam, because he'll just keel himself some nice fat goose.

"Now, Wiesacajac, he'll do the way the people do, an' he'll go for roast this goose in the

sand, under the ashes where he'll make his fire. He'll take this goose an' bury heem so, all cover' up with ashes an' coals—like this, you see—but he'll leave the two leg of those foots stick up through the ground where the goose is bury.

"Wiesacajac he'll feel those goose all over with his breast-bone, an' he'll say, 'Ah, ha! he'll been fat goose; bimeby he'll be good for eat.' But he'll know if you watch goose he'll not get done. So bimeby Wiesacajac he'll walk off away in the wood for to let those goose get [Pg 79] brown in the ashes. This'll be fine day—*beau temps*—an' he'll be happy, for he'll got meat in camp. So bimeby he'll sit down on log an' look at those sky an' those wind, an' maybe he'll light his pipe, I don't know, me.

"Now about this tam some red fox he'll be lie down over those ridge an' watch Wiesacajac an' those goose. This fox he'll be hongree, too, for he'll ain't got no goose. He'll been thief, too, all same like every fox. So he'll see Wiesacajac walk off in woods, an' he'll smell aroun' an' he'll sneak down to the camp where those goose will be with his feet stick out of ashes.

"Those thief of fox he'll dig up the fat goose of Wiesacajac, an' tase' it, an' find it ver' good. He'll ron off in the woods with the goose an' eat it all up, all 'cept the foots an' the leg-bones. Then the fox he'll sneak back to the fire once more, an' he'll push the dirt back in the hole, an' he'll stick up these foots an' the leg-bones just like they was before, only there don't been no goose under those foots now, because he'll eat up the goose.

"'Ah, ha!' says Mr. Fox then, 'I'm so fat I must go sleep now.' So he'll go off in woods a little way an' he'll lie down, an' he'll go to sleep.

"Bimeby Wiesacajac he'll look at the sun an' the wind plenty long, an' he'll got more [Pg 80] hongree. So he'll come back to camp an' look for his goose. He'll take hol' of those foots that stick up there, an' pull them up, but the foots come loose! So he'll dig in the sand an' ashes, an' he'll not found no goose.

"'Ah, ha!' say Wiesacajac then. He'll put his finger on his nose an' think. Then he'll see those track of fox in the sand. 'Ah, ha!' he'll say again. 'I'll been rob by those fox. Well, we'll see about that.'

"Wiesacajac, he'll follow the trail to where this fox is lie fast asleep; but all fox he'll sleep with one eye open, so this fox he'll hear Wiesacajac an' see him come, an' he'll get up an' ron. But he'll be so full of goose that inside of hondred yards, maybe feefty yards, Wiesacajac he'll catch up with him an' pick him up by the tail.

"'Now I have you, thief!' he'll say to the fox. 'You'll stole my goose. Don't you know that is wrong? I show you now some good manners, me.'

"So Wiesacajac, he'll carry those fox down to the fire. He's plenty strong, but he don't keel those fox. He's only going to show heem a lesson. So he'll poke up the fire an' put on some more wood, then he'll take the fox by the end of the tail an' the back of his neck, an' he'll [Pg 81] hold heem down over the fire till the fire scorch his back an' make heem smoke. Then the fox he'll beg, an' promise not to do that no more.

"'I suppose maybe you'll not keep your promise,' says Wiesacajac, 'for all foxes they'll steal an' lie. But this mark will stay on you so all the people can tell you for a thief when they see you. You must carry it, an' all your children, so long as there are any foxes of your familee.'

"The fox he'll cry, an' he'll roll on the groun', but those black mark she'll stay.

"An' she'll stay there till now," repeated Moise. "An' all the tam, those fox he'll be 'shamed for look a man in the face. All the tam you find cross fox, he'll be black where Wiesacajac hold heem over the fire, with his back down, but the end of his tail will be white, because there is where Wiesacajac had hold of heem on one end, an' his front will be white, too, same reason, yes, heem. Whatever Wiesacajac did was done because he was wise an' strong. Since then all cross fox have shown the mark. I have spoken."

Moise now looked around at his young listeners to see how they liked the story.

"That's what I call a pretty good story," said John. "If I had one more trout I believe I could [Pg 82] go to bed."

"Do you know what time it is?" asked Alex, smiling.

"No," said Rob. "Why, it's almost midnight," he added, as he looked at his watch.

"We've made a long day of it," said Alex, "almost too long. We don't want to be in too big a hurry."

"How far do you think we've come, Alex?" asked Jesse. "It seemed like a long way to me."

“Well I don’t know exactly, Mr. Jess,” said Alex, “because there are no roads in this country, you see, and we have to guess. But it must have been about noon when we got out of the last lake after we finished fishing. We’ve doubled on the portage, which made that something like a mile, and I suppose took about an hour. We fished about an hour, and it took us about an hour to clear out the little creek and go through a mile or so down to the main river. We’ve been running seven or eight hours pretty steadily. Maybe we’ve come thirty or forty miles, I don’t know.”

“Well, I know I’m tired,” said John, “and I can’t even eat another trout.”

VIII

[Pg 83]

A HUNT FOR BIGHORN

Alex allowed the boys to sleep late next morning, and the sun was shining warmly when at length they turned out of their tent and went down to the river for their morning bath. Heartily as they had eaten the night before, they seemed still hungry enough to enjoy the hearty breakfast which Moise had ready for them at the fire.

“Well, Alex, what’s the programme for to-day?” asked Rob; “are we going on down, or shall we stop for a hunt?”

“Whichever you like,” answered Alex. “We’re maybe getting into heavier water now, so I suppose we ought to be a little more careful about how we run down without prospecting a little.”

“How would it be for some of us to go down along the bank and do a little scouting?” asked John.

[Pg 84]

“A very good plan,” agreed Alex, “and Moise might do that while we others are doing something else.”

“Oh, you mean about our hunt,” broke in Rob. “Now, we were speaking about bears and sheep. We don’t want to break the game laws, you know.”

“Let me see your map, Mr. Rob,” said Alex. “I told you we’d talk over that after a while.”

“What’s the map got to do with game laws, Alex?”

“A great deal, as I’ll show you. You see, in all this upper country the laws made down at Ottawa and Edmonton govern, just as if we lived right in that country. We keep the game laws the same as any other laws. At the same time, the government is wise, and knows that men in this far-off country have to live on what the country produces. If the people could not kill game when they found it they would all starve. So the law is that there is no restriction on killing game—that is, any kind of game except beaver and buffalo—north of latitude 55°.”

“Well, what’s that got to do with our hunt?” asked Rob.

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“I was just going to explain, if you will let me see your map. As near as I can tell by looking at the lines of latitude on it, we must have been just about latitude fifty-five degrees at the place where we started yesterday. But we have been running north very strongly thirty or forty miles. While I can’t tell exactly where we are, I’m very positive that we are at this camp somewhere north of fifty-five degrees. In that case there is no law against our killing what we like, if we let the beaver alone; for of course, the buffalo are all gone from this country long ago.”

“Now, I wouldn’t have thought of that,” said Rob, “and I’m very glad that you have figured it out just that way. We agree with you that a fellow ought to keep the game laws even when he is away from the towns. In some of the States in the earlier days they used to have laws allowing a man to kill meat if he needed it, no matter what time of year. But people killed at all times, until there wasn’t much left to kill.”

“It ought to be a good hunting country here,” went on Alex, “for I don’t think many live here or hunt here.”

“Well,” said Rob, with a superior air, “we don’t much care for black bear. Grizzlies or bighorns—”

“Have you never killed a bighorn?”

"No, none of us ever has. They have plenty of them up in Alaska, and very good ones, and white sheep also, and white goats sometimes, and all sorts of bears and moose and things. [Pg 86] We've never hunted very much except when we were on Kadiak Island. We can all shoot, though. And we'd like very much to make a hunt here. There isn't any hurry, anyway."

"S'pose you'll got some of those sheep," ventured Moise, "he'll be best for eat of anything there is—no meat better in the world than those beeghorn."

"Well," said John, "why don't we start out to get one? This looks like a good country, all right."

"That suits me," added Rob. "Jess, do you want to go along?"

Alex looked at Jesse before he answered, and saw that while he was tall for his age, he was rather thin and not so strong as the other boys, being somewhat younger.

"I think Mr. Jess would better stay in camp," said he. "He can help Moise finish drying his fish, and maybe they can go down and have a look at the rapids from the shore. We others can go over east for a hunt. I've a notion that the mountains that way are better."

"It looks like a long way over," said Rob. "Can we make it out and back to camp to-day?"

"Hardly; I think we'll have to lie out at least one night, maybe more, to be sure of getting [Pg 87] the sheep."

"Fine!" said John; "that suits me. We wouldn't need to take along any tent, just a blanket and a little something to eat—I suppose we could carry enough." He looked so longingly at Moise's pots and pans that everybody laughed at him once more.

"All right," said Alex, "we'll go."

The old hunter now busied himself making ready their scant supplies. He took a little bag of flour, with some salt, one or two of the cooked fish which remained, and a small piece of bacon. These he rolled up in a piece of canvas, which he placed on his pack-straps. He asked the boys if they thought they could get on with a single blanket, and when they agreed to this he took Rob's blanket, folded it, rolled it also in canvas, and tied it all tight with a rope, the ends of his tump-strap sticking out, serving him for his way of packing, which was to put the tump-strap across his head.

"It's not a very big bundle," said he. "You young gentlemen need take nothing but your rifles and your ammunition. I don't need any blanket for a night or so. What little we've got will seem heavy enough before we get up there in the hills."

"Now, Moise, listen," he added. "You're to stay in this camp until we get back, no matter [Pg 88] how long it is, and you're not to be uneasy if we don't come back for two or three days. Don't go out in the boats with Mr. Jess until we get back. Give him three meals a day, and finish up drying your trout."

"All right," answered Moise, "I'll stay here all summer. I'll hope you get beeg sheep."

Alex turned, and after the fashion of the Indians, did not say good-by when he left camp, but stalked off. The two boys, rifle in hand, followed him, imitating his dignity and not even looking back to wave a farewell to Jesse, who stood regarding them rather ruefully.

They had a stiff climb up the first ridge, which paralleled the stream, when the boys found their rifles quite heavy enough to carry. After a time, however, they came out at the top of a high plateau, where the undergrowth was not very thick and tall spruces stood more scattered. They could now see beyond them some high, bare ridges, that rose one back of the other, with white-topped peaks here and there.

"Good sheep country," said Alex, after a time. "I think good for moose, and maybe caribou, too, lower down."

"Yes, and good for something else," cried Rob, who was running on a little in advance as [Pg 89] the others stopped. "Look here!"

"There he goes in his moccasins," said Alex. "Grizzly!"

"Yes, and a good big one, I should think," said Rob. "Not as big as a Kadiak bear; but see, his foot sinks a long way into the ground, and it's not very soft, either. Come on, Alex, let's go after him."

Alex walked over and examined the trail for a little while.

"Made yesterday morning," he commented, "and traveling steadily. No telling where he is

by this time, Mr. Rob. When an old white-face starts off he may go forty miles. Again, we might run across him or some other one in the first berry patch we come to. It seems to me surer to go on through with our sheep hunt.

“There’s another thing,” he added, “about killing a big bear in here—his hide would weigh fifty to seventy-five pounds, very likely. Our boats are pretty full now, and we’re maybe coming to bad water. There’s good bear hunting farther north and east of here, and it seems to me, if you don’t mind, that it might be wiser for us to hunt sheep here and bear somewhere else.”

“That sounds reasonable,” said John. “Besides, we’ve never seen wild bighorn.” [Pg 90]

“Come ahead then,” said Rob, reluctantly leaving the big bear trail. “I’d just like to follow that old fellow out, though.”

“Never fear,” said Alex, “you shall follow one just as big before this trip is over!”

Alex now took up his pack again, and began to move up toward the foothills of the mountains, following a flat little ravine which wound here and there, at no place very much covered with undergrowth. At last they reached the edges of bare country, where the sun struck them fully. By this time the boys were pretty tired, for it was far past noon, and they had not stopped for lunch. John was very hungry, but too brave to make any complaint. He was, however, feeling the effects of the march considerably.

“Well,” said he, as they finally sat down upon a large rock, “I don’t see any signs of sheep up in here, and I don’t think this looks like a very good game country. There isn’t anything for the sheep to eat.”

“Oh yes,” rejoined Alex; “you’ll find a little grass, and some moss among the rocks, more often than you would think. This is just the kind of country that bighorns like. You mustn’t get discouraged too soon on a hunt. An Injun may be slow to start on a hunt, but when he [Pg 91] gets started he doesn’t get discouraged, but keeps on going. Sometimes our people hunt two or three days without anything to eat.

“But now since you mention it, Mr. John,” he added, “I’d like to ask you, are you sure there are no signs of game around here?”

Both the boys looked for a long time all over the mountain-slopes before them. Rob had his field-glasses with him, and these he now took out, steadily sweeping one ridge after another for some time.

“I see, Alex!” he called out, excitedly. “I know what you mean!”

“Where are they?” called John, excitedly.

“Oh, not sheep yet,” said Rob, “but just where they’ve been, I think.”

“Look, Mr. John,” said Alex, now taking John by the arm and pointing across the near-by ravines. “Don’t you see that long mark, lighter in color, which runs down the side of that mountain over there, a mile or two away, and up above us?”

“Yes, I can see that; but what is it?”

“Well, that’s a sheep trail, a path,” said Alex. “That’s a trail they make coming down regularly from the high country beyond. It looks to me as though they might have a [Pg 92] watering place, or maybe a lick, over in there somewhere. It looks so good to me, at least, that I think we’ll make a camp.”

They turned now, under the old hunter’s guidance, and retraced their steps until they found themselves at the edge of timber, where Alex threw down his bundle under a tall spruce-tree whose branches spread out so as almost to form a tent of itself. He now loosened his straps and bits of rope from about the bundle, and fastened these about his waist. With remaining pieces of twine he swung up the package to the bough of the tree above the ground as high as he could reach.

“We don’t want any old porcupine coming here and eating up our grub. They almost gnaw through a steel plate to get at anything greasy or salty,” he explained. “We’ll call this camp, and we’ll stop here to-night, because I can see that if we go up to that trail and do any waiting around it will be too late for us to get back home to-night.”

Although no game had as yet been sighted, the confidence that it was somewhere in the country made the boys forget their fatigue. They followed Alex up the mountain-slopes, which close at hand proved steeper than they had looked for, keeping up a pretty fast pace, until finally they got almost as high up as the trail which Alex had sighted. This latter lay at [Pg 93]

some distance to the right of their present course, and a high, knife-edged ridge ran down from the hills, separating the hunters from the mountain-side beyond. Alex now turned to his young companions and said in a low tone:

“You’d better stay here now for a little while. I’ll crawl up to the top yonder and look over. If you see me motion to you, come on up to where I am.”

Rob and John sat down on a near-by rock and watched the hunter as he cautiously ascended the slope, taking care not to disengage any stones whose noise might alarm any near-by game. They saw him flatten out, and, having removed his hat, peer cautiously over the rim. Here he lay motionless for some time, then, little by little, so slowly that they hardly noticed he was moving, he dropped down over the rim, and, looking down over his shoulder, motioned to them to come on up.

When the boys joined Alex at the edge of the ridge they were pretty much out of breath, as they had hurried in the ascent. “What is it, Alex?” hissed John, his eyes shining.

“They’re over there,” said the hunter, quietly. “Five sheep, two good ones—one a very fine ram. Do you want to have a look at them? Be very careful—they’re up at the top of the slope, and haven’t come down over the trail yet. Be careful, now, how you put your heads over.” [Pg 94]

The two boys now slowly approached the crest, and, almost trembling with excitement, peered over. Alex following, laid a hand on John’s leg and another on Rob’s shoulder, for fear they would make some sudden movement and frighten the game. When at length the boys crawled back from the ridge they were very much excited. “What’ll we do now, Alex?” asked John. “They’re too far off to shoot.”

“Wait,” said Alex; “they’re going to come on down the trail. I think they water at some spring in the mountain, although I don’t know. In fifteen or twenty minutes they’ll be pretty close to us—inside of two hundred yards, at least, I should think.

“Now listen,” he continued to the boys, “and mind what I tell you. There are two rams there, and if we get them we need nothing more. I’ll not shoot unless I need to. Rob, you’ll take the ram which is farthest to the right, at the time I tell you to fire, and you, Mr. John, will take the other ram, no matter whether it’s the big one or the little one. Let the ewes alone. And whatever you do, don’t shoot into the flock—wait until each of you can see his animal ready for a distinct shot. If either of you misses, I’ll help him out—there’s three or four hundred yards of good shooting all up that mountain face. Now mind one thing; don’t have any buck fever here! None of that, do you hear me?” [Pg 95]

Alex spoke rather sternly this time, but it was with a purpose. He saw that the hands of both the boys were rather trembling, and knew that sometimes when a man is in that nervous condition a sharp word will have the effect of quieting and steadying him.

Rob looked at him quickly, and then smiled. “Oh, I see,” said he.

They were all talking in low whispers, so that they might not be overheard by the game, if it should come closer. “It’s no disgrace to have buck fever,” said Alex, in his low tone. “Injuns even get excited, and I’ve known old hunters to get buck fever right in the middle of a hunt, without any reason they could tell anything about. But now, when you’re steady enough, we’ll all crawl up once in a while and have a look.”

He kept a steadying hand on both the boys when a few minutes later they approached the rim of the ridge once more. By this time the sheep, which had not in the least taken alarm, were advancing rather steadily down the narrow path on the steep mountain face. The biggest ram was in advance, a stately and beautiful game creature, such as would have made a prize for the most experienced of hunters. It was all Rob could do to keep from an exclamation of delight at seeing these rather queer creatures so close at hand and unsuspicious of the hunters’ presence. [Pg 96]

Alex pulled them down once more, and sternly admonished them to be quiet. “Wait now,” he whispered, “one minute by the watch.”

When the minute, which seemed an hour in length, had elapsed, Alex put his finger on his lips for silence and motioned to each boy to see that his rifle was ready. Then cautiously they all pushed up once more to the edge of the ridge.

This time they saw all five of the sheep standing closely bunched together, two or three of them with their heads down. There seemed to be a slight moist place among the slate rocks where perhaps some sort of saline water oozed out, and it was this that these animals had visited so often as to make a deep trail on the mountain-side. Alex shook his head as Rob turned an inquiring glance at him, and the boys, who by this time were steady, did not [Pg 97]

shoot into the huddled band of sheep.

They lay thus for what seemed a long time, eagerly watching the game animals which were unconscious of any hunters' presence. One of the sheep, a yearling, began to jump up and down, bouncing like a rubber ball in its sportive antics, which almost made John laugh as he watched it. Turning to look at this, the smaller ram paced off to the right, followed now by the larger ram. Both creatures now, as if they had some sense of danger, stood with their majestic heads raised, looking steadily about and apparently scanning the air to catch the taint of danger. Thus they offered a good mark to the riflemen.

"Shoot!" whispered Alex, quickly; and almost as he spoke two reports rang out.

At the report of Rob's rifle the lesser ram, which was the one that stood to the left, fell as though struck by a hammer, shot through the shoulders and killed at once. The larger ram, which had fallen to John's lot, was not struck beyond a slight singe of the bullet along the [Pg 98] hair of its back. It sprang, and with incredible speed began to make its way up the opposite slope. The ewes also scattered and ran. Alex was on the point of using his rifle, when again John's piece rang out, and this time the great ram, hit fair by the bullet, fell and rolled over and over until it reached the bottom of the slope quite dead.

Both of the boys sprang to their feet and gave a wild whoop of exultation. They were trembling now, although they did not know it, and jabbered excitedly as they started on down the slope to their game. Alex followed slowly, calmly filling his pipe and smiling his approval.

"That's good work for young hunters," said he. "I couldn't have done better. Mr. John, you missed your first shot. Do you know why?"

"I know," said Rob. "He didn't allow for shooting downhill. A fellow nearly always shoots too high when he shoots at anything away down below him."

"Quite right," nodded Alex, "and a very common fault in mountain hunting."

"Well, I got him the next time," said John. "If you can see where your bullet goes you can tell how to shoot the next shot."

"They're two magnificent sheep," said Alex, admiringly, "and we've got to take out both [Pg 99] these heads, for they're too good to leave in the mountains. I suppose now we will have to do a little butchering."

He drew his great knife from his belt, and now in very skilful way began to skin, clean, and dismember the sheep, doubling back the half-disjointed legs and the hams and shoulders and throwing the separated pieces of meat on the skins, which were spread out, flesh side up, on the ground. He took out the shoulders and hams of each sheep and split the remainder of the carcass, detaching the ribs along the spine with blows of his heavy bladed knife. After a little he rolled up the meat of each sheep in its own hide, lashed it firmly with thong, and made it into two packs. The heads he next skinned out, showing the boys how to open the skin along the back of the neck, and across the head between the horns. He asked for their smaller and keener knives when it came to skinning out the ears, eyes and nostrils, but removed the scalp from each sheep without making a cut which showed through the skin.

"Now," said he at last, "when we get the meat trimmed off these skull-bones you'll have a couple of sheep heads that many a hunter would give hundreds of dollars to kill for himself. [Pg 100] They are going to be awkward to carry, though, I'll tell you that."

"How much would one of these rams weigh, Alex?" asked Rob.

"The biggest one a couple of hundred pounds, maybe," said Alex. "The green head, this way, might make fifty of that, I don't know. We'll have to make two trips down to the bivouac, that's one thing sure. Maybe we can lighten the heads by trimming out to-night."

"I'll tell you, Alex," said Rob; "if you can take one of the meat packs we'll take one of the heads between us. It's downhill from here to where we left the blankets."

"All right," answered Alex. "I could carry a couple of hundred pounds down here, I suppose, but there's plenty of time, as we aren't more than a mile from camp. So come ahead."

Proceeding in this way they finally did get all their meat down to the little bivouac they had made under the spruce-trees. They were very tired but happy by this time, and hungry as well, for now evening was closing down.

"I'll show you how to make a fire now," said Alex, "because you will see that we aren't over [Pg 101] sand or gravel in this camping place, as we are on the river."

He scraped away the bed of spruce needles and loose soil until he got down to the moist and sandy layer, with some rocks here and there projecting through.

“That’ll do, I think,” said he. “We won’t build a big fire, and we’ll have rocks under and around it all we can. You always want to remember that a forest fire is a terrible thing, and nearly always they come from careless camp-fires. You know the earth itself burns in a forest like this. Never allow a fire to get away, and never leave it burning. These are laws which we have to follow up here, or we get into trouble.”

IX

[Pg 102]

A NIGHT IN THE MOUNTAINS

“I believe I like it up here better than I do along the river,” said John, after they finally had their little fire going.

“Yes,” remarked Rob, “you can see out farther here. The mountains are fine. See how pink they are over where the snow is—the sun from the west makes it all like a picture, doesn’t it?”

“I never tire of the mountains,” said Alex, “and I’ve lived among them many years.”

“I’d like to be a hunter,” Rob began.

“Not to-day,” rejoined Alex. “Our people can’t make a living that way now. We have to buy things of the Company, and pay for them with our furs and robes. But we’ll be hunters for this time, sure, with meat in camp and two fine heads as well. I wish we could eat some to-night.”

“Why, why can’t we?” demanded John, who looked as though he could eat a good-sized piece quite raw.

[Pg 103]

“We could if we had to,” said Alex, “but the meat will be better if we let it hang over night. If we ate too much of the very fresh meat it might make us sick.”

“Men eat bear liver the day it is killed.”

“Yes, white men do, but not many Indians will eat bear liver at all. We can try some of the sheep liver, if you like, for I’ve brought it down in the packs. For that matter, it won’t hurt us maybe to try a little piece of meat roasted on a stick before the fire, the way the Indians cook. That, with a bit of bacon and some bannock that I’ll make, will do us, if we have a cup of tea. You see, I’ve a little can along which I got in Moise’s cook-bag.”

“I don’t see how you’re going to make bread,” began John, “for you haven’t got any pan.”

“No, Injuns don’t always have pans like white people,” said Alex, laughing, “but I’ll show you. I’ll use the flour-sack for a pan—just pour the water right in on the flour and mix it up in the sack. All outdoor men know that trick. An Injun would take a stick and roll around in that white dough and roast that dough ball before the fire along with his meat,” he said, “but I think by taking a slab of bark we can cook our bannock somehow, a little bit, at least, as though we had a pan to lean up before the fire.”

[Pg 104]

The boys found new proof of the old saying that hunger is the best sauce. For though their meal was really very frugal, they enjoyed it heartily, and having had a cup of tea, they forgot all about their fatigue.

The shadows were coming down across the near-by ridges when at length they turned to Alex inquiringly.

“We want to know where we’re going to make our beds.”

“Well, this big spruce-tree is a good enough tent for me—the lower branches spread out almost like an umbrella. We won’t keep much fire, but if I get cold in the night, not having any blankets, I’ll just make a little fire. You know, I don’t need to sleep as warmly as you do.”

“Well,” said John, “you ought to get under part of our blanket.”

“Then we’d all be cold. Keep some of the blanket under you, for that’s where the cold comes from, not from above. I may after a while push the ashes back from our fireplace and lie down on the ground where it has been made warm by the fire. Injuns sometimes do that

when they can't do any better. Mostly, however, we depend on keeping up a fire if it is very cold and we have no robe or blanket."

High up in the hills where they were it grew very cold at night, and the boys, shivering in their scanty covering, woke up more than once. Sometimes they would see Alex lying quite asleep, and again he would be sitting up smoking his pipe, leaning against the trunk of the tree. In some way, however, the night wore through, although they were glad when at length the sun came up and they could all stretch their cramped and stiffened limbs. [Pg 105]

"My eyes have got sticks in them," said John, rubbing at his face.

"And my hair pulls a little bit, too," Rob added. "I forgot to bring my comb, or even my tooth-brush."

"Well, one thing," said Alex, as he built up the fire. "We'll have some sheep meat for breakfast, all right. The animal heat will be all out of it now, and we'll have a hearty meal. We'll need it too, for it's quite a way down to camp, several miles, that's sure."

They finished their breakfast while the sun was still low over the eastern mountains, and presently began to think about the homeward march.

"They'll be wondering about us down there," said Rob, "and I'm mighty glad we've made our hunt and can get home so soon."

"We might not be able to do it again in a dozen hunts," said Alex. "Game isn't as abundant as it once was." [Pg 106]

"I should say not," said John. "When you read in the stories about Mackenzie and Fraser, and all those old fellows, they'll tell about seeing all kinds of game from the boat just as they went along."

"We'll do the same when we get out of the mountains," Alex replied; "but not buffalo and caribou any more. Bear and moose we'll be very apt to see.

"We'll double-portage these loads for one trip, at least," he resumed. "I'll make the first trip with one head on top of my pack, and if you can manage the other one for a little way I'll come back for the rest of the meat, and we'll go about half-way down toward the boats on our first trip. As you probably can't travel as fast as I can, I'm going ahead, but I'll blaze the trees as I go. Then I'll drop my load and come back to meet you. When you come to my first load you must stop there until I catch up with you again. As I'll be below you all the time, at first, there'll be no danger about your getting off the trail."

"No danger anyhow," said Rob. "We've often followed a trail that way."

Indeed, the young hunters proved themselves quite good woodsmen enough to follow Alex down the mountain face into the thicket of the plateau. He went almost at a trot, loaded as he was, and as the boys found the big ram's head a heavy load for them to carry between them on the stick, they met him as he was coming back up the mountains, when they themselves were not a great deal more than half-way down to the place where he had dropped his pack. [Pg 107]

"It's all plain," said Alex, "for I followed our old trail down the hill, and put a branch across two or three places so that you'll know when you're near the pack."

They found no difficulty in obeying his instructions, and so tired were they that it seemed but a short time before presently Alex joined them for a second time, carrying the remainder of the meat on his tump-strap.

"Now," said he, "we're a great deal more than half-way down to the boats. We won't come back for the second trip at all now, and we'll take our time with the loads. I'll send Moise up for one pack, which we will leave here."

"Suppose he doesn't want to come?" asked John.

"Oh, Moise will be glad to come. He's a good packer and a cheerful man. Besides, I suppose that would be his business as we look at it among our people. In the old times, when Sir Alexander came through, a hunter did nothing but hunt. If he killed a head of game the people around the post had to go out and get it for themselves if they wanted it brought in." [Pg 108]

"But how will Moise find this place?" asked John, anxiously. "I don't want to lose this head, I'll tell you that."

Alex laughed. "He'll come right to the place! I'll explain to him, so he'll know right where it is."

“Although he has never been here before?”

“Surely; one Injun can tell another how to go to a place. Besides, our trail will be as plain as a board-walk to him. He’s used to that kind of work, you see.”

All of this came out quite as Alex had said. They took their time in finishing their journey, but it was long before noon when they arrived at the boat encampment on the banks of the river, where they were greeted with great joy by Jesse and Moise. Then, although it was not yet time for lunch, Moise insisted on cooking once more, a plan to which John gave very hearty assent, and in which all the others joined.

After a while Alex and Moise, each smoking contentedly, began to converse in their own tongue, Alex sometimes making a gesture toward the mountains off to the east, and Moise nodding a quiet assent. After a time, without saying anything, Moise got up, tightened his belt, filled his pipe once more, and departed into the bush. [Pg 109]

“Are you sure he’ll find that meat?” demanded John, “and bring down that bighorn head?”

“He certainly will,” said Alex; “he’ll run that trail like a dog, and just about as fast. Moise used to be a good man, though he says now he can’t carry over two hundred pounds without getting tired.”

“Well, listen at that!” said Jesse. “Two hundred pounds! I shouldn’t think anybody could carry that.”

“Men have carried as much as six hundred pounds for a little way,” said Alex. “On the old portage trails two packets, each of ninety pounds, was the regular load, and some men would take three. That was two hundred and seventy pounds at least; and they would go on a trot. You see, a country produces its own men, my young friends.”

“Well, that’s the fun of a trip like this,” said Rob. “That, and following out the trails of the old fellows who first came through here.” [Pg 110]

“Now,” continued Alex, getting up and looking about the camp, “we have meat in camp, and fish also. I think perhaps we’d better dry a part of our sheep meat, as we used to the meat of the buffalo in the old days. We’ll smoke it a little, cutting it thin and spreading it in the sun. By keeping the fresh meat under boughs so the flies won’t get at it, it’ll stay good for quite a little while too. We don’t want to waste anything, of course.”

They were busy about their odd jobs in the camp when, long before they would have expected it, Moise came trotting down the base of the timbered ridge above the camp, and, still smoking and still smiling, tossed down the big bundle of meat and the other sheep-head on the ground beside the fire.

“By gosh! Those will be fine head!” said he. “If I’ll had this head in Winnipeg I’ll got hondred dollars for each one, me, maybe so. Now I’ll show you how for cook some sheep to-night after supper.”

“You mean at supper, don’t you?” asked Rob.

“*Non! Non!* We’ll eat supper, wait a while, then those sheep meat he’ll look good some more. I’ll show you.”

“Are you going to tell us another story to-night?” asked Jesse, eagerly. [Pg 111]

“Yes, after supper I’ll tol’ you some more story,” assented Moise. “We stay here maybe two, three day now, so to-morrow I think we’ll be in camp. All right. To-night we’ll tell the story some more.”

X [Pg 112]

HOW THE SPLIT-STONE LAKE WAS NAMED

As Moise was even hungrier than John, there seemed no objection to eating another meal even before sundown. The evening came off fair and cool, so that the mosquitoes did not bother the campers. As the chill of the mountain night came on, the boys put on their blanket coats and pulled the bed-rolls close up to the fire, near which the men both sat smoking quietly. Already the boys were beginning to learn reticence in camp with men like these, and not to interrupt with too many questions; but at length Jesse’s eagerness to hear Moise’s story could no longer be restrained.

“You promised to tell us something to-night, Moise,” said he. “What’s it going to be?”

“First I’ll must got ready for story,” said Moise. “In the camp my people eat when they tell story. I’ll fix some of those sheep meat now.”

Borrowing his big knife from Alex, Moise now cut himself a sharp-pointed stick of wood, two or three feet long, and stuck one end of this into each end of the side of sheep ribs which lay at the meat pile. Finding a thong, he tied it to the middle of the stick, and making himself a tall tripod for a support, he suspended the piece of meat directly over the fire at some distance above, so that it could not burn, but would revolve and cook slowly. [Pg 113]

“Suppose in a half-hour I’ll can tell story now,” said Moise, laughing pleasantly. “No use how much sheep meat you eat, always you eat more!”

At last, however, at what must have been nine or ten o’clock at night, at least, perhaps later, after Moise had cut for each of the boys a smoking hot rib of the delicious mountain mutton, he sat back, a rib-bone in his own hand, and kept his promise about the story.

“I’ll tol’ you last night, young mens,” he said, “how about those Wiesacajac, the spirit that goes aroun’ in the woods. Now in the fur country east of the mountains is a lake where a rock is on the shore, split in two piece, an’ the people call that the Split-Stone Lake. Listen, I speak. I tell now how the lake he’s got that name.

“Wiesacajac, he’ll make hont sometime in that country, an’ he’ll come on a camp where all the men are out honting. Only two peoples is left in camp, same like you leave us two peoples here when you go hont. But these two peoples is little, one boy, one girl. The mens an’ womens all go hont in the woods and there is no meat in camp at all. The children were not old for hont or for feesh. Their papa an’ their mamma say, ‘Stay here.’ So they stay an’ wait. They have wait many days. Pretty soon now they’ll gone dead for starve so long. [Pg 114]

“Now Wiesacajac, he’ll come an’ stan’ by the fire, an’ see those little peoples. ‘Oh, Wiesacajac,’ they’ll say, ‘we’re ver’ hongree. We have not eat for many days. We do not think our peoples will come back no more. We’ll not know what for do.’

“Now, Wiesacajac, he’ll been always kin’. ‘Oh, now, my childrens,’ he’ll say, ‘this is bad news what you give me, ver’ bad indeed. You’ll make me cry on you, I’ll been so sorry for you. You’re on this lake where the win’ comes, an’ the country is bare, an’ there is no game.’

“He’ll look aroun’ an’ see nothing in those camp but one piece of swanskin, ol’ dry swanskin, all eat clean of meat. Then he’ll look out on the lake, an’ he’ll see a large flock of swans stay there where no man can come. Those swan will know the children was hongree, but they’ll not like for get killed theirselves. [Pg 115]

“Wiesacajac he’ll say, ‘My children, why do you starve when there’s meat there in front of you?’

“Those was child of a honter. ‘Yes,’ said those boy, ‘what use is that meat to us? It’s daylight. You know ver’ well you’ll not can come up to the swans.’

“‘Ah, ha! Was that so?’ said Wiesacajac. ‘Let me show you somethings, then.’

“So Wiesacajac, he’ll take those ol’ swanskin an’ put it on hees head. Then he’ll walk down in the lake an’ sink down till just the head and breast of those swanskin will show on the water. Wiesacajac, he’ll be good honter, too. He’ll sweem aroun’ in the lake foolish, but all tam he’ll come closer to those swan, an’ closer. Those swan she’ll be wise bird, an’ they’ll saw heem an’ they’ll say, ‘There’s one of us that we’ll not miss—what’ll he doing out there?’

“Then they begin to sweem toward Wiesacajac, an’ Wiesacajac begin to sweem toward them. Bimeby he’ll been right among ’em. Then these two hongree boy an’ girl on the camp they’ll holler out to each other, for they’ll see one swan after another flap his wing an’ jump for a fly, but then fall back on water, for he’ll can’t fly at all. [Pg 116]

“Wiesacajac, he’ll have some *babiche*—some hide string, aroun’ hees waist, an’ he’ll took it now an’ tie the feet of all those swan together, so all they’ll can do is to flap hees wing an’ scream an’ blow their horn like the swan do. At last he’ll got them all tied fast—the whole flock. But he’ll can’t hold so many swan down on the water. Those swan will all begin to trumpet an’ fly off together, an’ they’ll carry Wiesacajac with them. Now he’ll let them fly until they come right near where those two hongree boy an’ girl is sit, an’ going for starve. Then he’ll drop down an’ tie the end of hees *babiche* to a strong bush. *Voila!* Those whole flock of swan is tie’ fast to camp. None but Wiesacajac can do this thing.

“‘Now my childrens,’ say Wiesacajac, kin’ly, to those boy an’ girl, ‘you see, there’s plenty of meat in your camp. Go now, cook an’ eat.’

“So now those children go an’ keel a swan an’ skin it, an’ get it ready for cook. By this time Wiesacajac he’ll done make the fire. He’ll not want to set woods on fire, so he’ll build it by [Pg 117] those big rocks which always stood by that lake. Here they’ll cook the swan an’ eat all they want, same like we do the sheep meat here to-night. Those two childrens he’ll wish his parent was both there. He’ll say, they’ll not be hongree no more never. He’ll put some meat on a leaf for those ol’ people when they come back.

“Well, Wiesacajac, he’ll say bimeby, ‘Now I mus’ go. When those parent of yours come back, an’ they see those swan, they’ll not go for believe unless I leave a sign. To show them an’ the other people who has been here, an’ to show all the people who hont that it is wise never to get discourage’, but always to keep on trying when you are hongree or in trouble, I make some mark on this place, me.’

“So now Wiesacajac he’ll go down to the water, an’ he’ll come back with his two hands full of those water. Of course, you know Wiesacajac he’ll been much taller than any mans. So he’ll stoop just this way, one leg each side of those two rocks, right at this place. An’ from his two han’ he’ll let fall those water on those hot stone. Now, you know, if you’ll put water on hot stone, he’ll split. These two stone she’ll split wide open from top to bottom.

“You can see those stone there now. All the peoples know them, an’ call them the Split- [Pg 118] Stone Lake all the tam. An’ they all know Wiesacajac was there, an’ help the two childrens, an’ split those stone to leave it for a mark.

“I have finish.”

“That certainly is a good story,” said Jesse. “I like those stories you tell up here, for I’ve never heard any just like them. It makes you feel like you were out of doors, doesn’t it, fellows?”

“Yes,” said Rob, “but I’d like to ask you, Alex, do you really believe in all those stories about spirits—the Indian spirits? You know, you were telling me that you went to church.”

“Yes,” said Alex, “I do. The Company likes to have us go to church, and when we’re around the post we do. My mother was baptized, although she was an Indian woman. My father taught me to read the Bible. I believe a great deal as you do. But somewhere in me I’m part Injun.”

XI

[Pg 119]

LESSONS IN WILD LIFE

“Well, Alex,” said John, the morning after the sheep hunt, as they sat about the fire after breakfast, “it doesn’t look as though we’d saved much weight.”

“How do you mean, Mr. John?”

“Well, you said we couldn’t kill any grizzlies because the skins were too heavy. It seems to me that sheep heads are just as heavy as grizzly heads.”

“That’s so,” said Alex, “but the sheep were good to eat, and we couldn’t leave the heads in the hills after we had killed them. We’ll try to get them down in the canoe somehow. The sheep meat has been very useful, and I wish we had more of it. We’ll eat it almost all up in this camp, I’m thinking.”

“I suppose we’d better. That reminds me of a story my Uncle Dick told me,” ventured Jesse. “He said he was out fishing with a friend one time, and they wanted some grasshoppers for bait, and hadn’t any way to carry them. They had a jar of marmalade, so they sat down and [Pg 120] ate all the marmalade, and then they had a good place to keep their grasshoppers. I suppose if we eat all the meat up, we’ll have a place for the heads.”

They all laughed at Jesse’s story, but John admitted he would be sorry when all the bighorn mutton was gone, declaring it to be the best meat he had ever eaten. Rob expressed wonder at the way the meat was disappearing.

“I remember, though,” said he, “that Sir Alexander Mackenzie tells how much meat his men would eat in camp. They had a party of ten men and a dog one day, and they brought in two hundred and fifty pounds of elk meat. They had had a hearty meal at one o’clock that afternoon, but they put on the kettles and boiled and ate meat that night, and roasted the rest on sticks, and by ten o’clock the next day they didn’t have any meat in camp! What do

you think about that?”

“Maybe so to-night, maybe so to-morrow no more sheep!” grinned Moise, with his mouth still full.

“We’ll have to hunt as we go on down,” said Alex. “We’ll be in good game country almost all the way.”

Under the instructions of Alex the boys now finished the preparation of the sheep heads and scalps, paring off all the meat they could from the bones, and cleaning the scalps, which they spread out to dry after salting them carefully. [Pg 121]

“I was out with a naturalist one trip,” said Alex, “and he collected all sorts of little animals and snakes, and that sort of thing. When we wanted to clean the skeleton of a mouse or a snake, we used to put it in an ant-hill. There were many ants, and in a couple of weeks they’d picked the bones white and clean, as if they’d been sand-papered. I suppose we haven’t time for that sort of thing now, though.”

“Why couldn’t we boil the meat off?” suggested Rob.

“A very good plan for a skull,” said Alex, “excepting for a bear skull. You see, if you put the head of a bear in boiling water, the tusks will always split open later on. With the bones of the sheep’s head, it will not make so much difference. But we couldn’t get the horns off yet awhile—they’ll have to dry out before they will slip from the pith, and the best way is not to take them off at all. If we keep on scraping and salting we’ll keep our heads, all right.”

“How about the hides?” asked John, somewhat anxiously.

“Well, sheep hides were never very much valued among our people,” replied Alex. “In the mountain tribes below here the women used to make very white, soft leather for their dresses out of sheep hides. The hair is coarse and brittle, however, and although it will do for a little while as a bed, I’m afraid you young gentlemen will throw away the hides when you finish the trip.” [Pg 122]

“Well, all right,” said John. “We won’t throw them away just yet. Let’s spread them out and tan them. What’s the best way to do that?”

“The Injuns always stake out a hide, on the ground or on a frame, flesh side up,” said Alex. “Then they take one of their little scrapers and pare all the meat off. That’s the main thing, and that is the slowest work. When you get down to the real hide, it soon dries out and doesn’t spoil. You can tan a light hide with softsoap, or salt and alum. Indeed, the Injuns had nothing of that sort in their tanning—they’d scrape a hide and dry it, then spread some brains on it, work in the brains and dry it and rub it, and last of all, smoke it. In that way they got their hides very soft, and after they were smoked they would always work soft in case they got wet, which isn’t the case with white man’s leather, which is tanned by means of acids and things of that kind.” [Pg 123]

“I have tanned little squirrel hides, and ground-hog hides, and wildcat skins,” said Rob, “many a time. It isn’t any trouble if you once get the meat all scraped off. That seems to be what spoils a hide.”

“In keeping all our valuable furs,” said Alex, “we never touch them with salt or alum. We just stretch them flesh side out, and let them dry in the shade, not close to a fire. This keeps the life all in the fur. Alum makes the hair brittle and takes away the luster. For a big bear hide, if I were far back in the mountains, I would put lots of salt on it and fold it up, and let it stay away for a day. Then I would unroll it and drain it off, and salt it all over again; tamp salt down into the ears, nose, eyes, and feet, then roll it up again and tie it tight, with the fur side out. Bear hides will keep all right that way if you haven’t sunshine enough to dry them. The best way to keep a hide, though, is simply to scrape it clean and dry it in the sun, and after that fold it. It will never spoil then.”

“Alex,” ventured Moise, laughing, “you’ll talk just like my old woman about tan hides. Those business is not for mans.”

“That’s true,” said Alex, smiling. “In the old times, when we had buffalo, the women always tanned the hides. Hard work enough it was, too, with so heavy and coarse a hide. Now they tan the moose hides. I’ll show you, young gentlemen, lower down this river near the camping places on the shore spruce-trees cut into three-cornered shape. You might not know what that was for. It was done so that the women could rub their moose hides around these angles and corners while they were making them soft. They make fine moose leather, too—although I suppose we’d have to wait a good while before we could get Moise to tan one in that way!” [Pg 124]

“What makes them use brains in tanning the hide?” asked Jesse.

“Only for the grease there is in them,” said Alex. “It takes some sort of grease to soften up a hide after it has been dried. The Injuns always said they could tan a hide with the brains of the animal. Sometimes in tanning a buffalo hide, however, they would have marrow and grease and scraps thrown into a kettle with the brains. I think the main secret of the Injun tanning was the amount of hard work put in on rubbing the hide. That breaks up the fiber and makes it soft.

“But now, Moise,” resumed Alex, getting up and filling his pipe, “I think it is about time we [Pg 125] went down and had a look at those rapids below the camp. We’ve got to get through there somehow before long.”

“I don’t like this water in here at all,” said Jesse, looking troubled. “I could hardly sleep last night on account of the noises it made—it sounded just like glass was being splintered up under the water.”

“That’s gravel, or small rocks, slipping along on the bottom in the current, I suppose,” said Alex, “but after all this is not nearly so bad a river as the Fraser or the Columbia—you ought to see the old Columbia in high water! I’m thinking we’d have our own troubles getting down there in boats as small as these. In a deep river which is very fast, and which has a rough bottom, all sorts of unaccountable waves and swells will come up from below, just when you don’t expect them.”

“These rapeed in here, she’ll been all right,” said Moise. “No trouble to ron heem.”

“Well, we’ll not take any chances,” said Alex, “and we’ll in no case do anything to alarm our young friends.”

He turned now, and, followed by Moise, crossed the neck of the bend and passed on down the river some distance. The boys, following more slowly around the curve of the beach, [Pg 126] finally saw both Alex and Moise poised on some high rocks and pointing at the wild water which stretched below them for the distance of two or three hundred yards. Moise, who seemed to be more savage than Alex, made a wild figure as he stood gesticulating, a red handkerchief bound over his long, black hair, and his red sash holding in place the ragged remnants of his trousers. To the boys it seemed sure that the boats could not get through such water at all, but to their surprise the two men seemed not in the least concerned when at length they returned to the camp.

“It’s a little rough,” said Alex, “but there seems to be a good channel out in the middle, plenty of water. We’ll run the boats through all right without any trouble. We’ll go through light, and then portage the camp stuff across the bend after we get the boats below the rapids. Come on then, young gentlemen, and help us get ready. It may be interesting to you to see your first piece of real white water, although it isn’t very bad.

“As I figure it, then, Mr. Rob,” continued Alex, “we ought to have rather better water below here for a little while. What does your map say about that?”

“Well,” answered Rob, “it’s pretty hard to tell exactly, but taking the stories of Fraser and [Pg 127] Mackenzie together, we ought to be here about one hundred and fifty miles above the mouth of the Finlay. By to-morrow night, if we hurry, we ought to be at or below the McLeod Lake outlet. Dr. Macoun says in his government report that it is easy running in the late season from McLeod to the Finlay, about eighty miles; and I saw a letter once from Mr. Hussey, a friend of Uncle Dick’s, who made this trip lately, and he said there was not much bad water between the lake and the mouth of the Finlay. Below there—look out, that’s all!

“It took the Mackenzie party six or eight days’ plugging to get from there up to the carrying place,” he added, “but we’re going downhill instead of uphill. I should think we would have alternate stretches of quiet water here and there, but no very rough water from here on down for a while. With our small boats we probably cannot go so fast for a while now as they did with their big canoes. They could run bang through a big rapid where we’d have to portage.”

“Well,” said Alex, “I suggest that we spend the rest of this day in camp here, run the two canoes through, sleep here to-night, then portage below the rapids to-morrow morning and [Pg 128] make a straight run from there down. We don’t want to take too many chances.”

“That’s all right,” said Rob, “and we’ll help you pack the canoes.”

The men did not put very heavy loads in the canoes, but they took the sheep heads, and most of the heavier camp supplies, putting about half of these each in the *Mary Ann* and the *Jaybird*, themselves taking the *Mary Ann* for their first trip through the rapids.

While they were busy finishing their loading, the boys ran on down around the bend and got ready to see the first canoe take the rapids. When Jesse got fully within the sound and sight of the rolling, noisy water which now lay before them, he was very pale.

“What would we do, Rob,” asked he, “if the boat should be lost out there—we couldn’t ever get out of here alive.”

“I don’t think there is that much danger, Jess,” answered Rob. “But if there should be an accident, we have one boat left, and we’d not try to run her through. We’d let her down the edge of the rapids on a rope the best we could, a little at a time. That’s what Alex would do now if he thought there was any real danger.”

“Here they come!” shouted John. All three boys scrambled up on a high, jutting rock, where they could see the course of the boat. [Pg 129]

The *Mary Ann* swept around the curve gently and steadily, caught in the rapid down-set of the current. Moise was in the bow, Alex at the stern paddle, and both the men looked steadily ahead and not at either side. They saw the boat seemed to tip down at a sharp angle, but still go on steadily. Alex was following the long V which ran down in the mid-channel stream, on either side of which were heavy rocks and sharp, abrupt falls in the water. At the foot of this smooth strip they saw the bow of the boat shoot up into the air, then drop down to a more even keel. From that time on the *Mary Ann* was swept down swiftly, jumping up and down, part of the time almost hidden out of sight, and, as they thought, swamped in the heavy seas. To their delight, however, they saw the little craft emerge at the foot of the white water after a while and, taking advantage of the back current, swing gently alongside and up the shore toward where they stood at the foot of the main cascade. Both the men were smiling at their excitement.

“Well, what do you think about that?” asked John, in wonder. “I was sure they were gone, but they don’t seem to care at all.” [Pg 130]

On the contrary, Moise seemed to be very much pleased with the experience. Alex was smoking quietly. Neither said much when finally they came ashore close where the boys stood.

“That was great work,” said Rob. “It was beautiful!”

“These boat she’ll not tip over,” said Moise calmly. “She’s good boat. I s’pose could carry through maybe a hondred ton or so!”

“Well, maybe not *that* much!” smiled Alex, “but we’ve proved that the channel out there is practicable. We’ll go up now and bring down the other boat. First we’ll put this one high up on the bank, so that no rise in the stream can take it away, because we’re apt to need these boats before we get through.”

Suiting the action to the word, the two *voyageurs* now went back to the camp, and presently the boys once more saw the nodding and dipping little craft come around the bend. The *Jaybird* came through with quite as good fortune as had the *Mary Ann*. And soon the two canoes, lightly loaded, were lying side by side on the beach below the rolling water.

“That’s how we’ll did done it!” said Moise. “S’pose water will be bad, go where he’ll ain’t be so bad. No use for get tip over. S’pose he’ll be too bad, we’ll take a rope an’ let those boat down little bit to a time.” [Pg 131]

“Well,” said John, “we don’t want to show the white feather, but I suppose it’s just as well that you should take the boats through a bad place, and not trust to us—we might get rattled in the wrong place out there.”

“Yes,” said Rob, “it’s better to be too careful than not careful enough. I can see now what the boats will do, however, and I have more confidence than I have had at any time about our getting through the journey all right.”

“I can’t quite figure out, Mr. Rob,” said Alex, “just where we are. The maps don’t seem to look like the country, or the country like the maps.”

“According to my reckoning,” Rob answered, “we’re now about where Mackenzie was on June 9th. The day before that—which will be the day after this as we run down the stream—they had sight of a high, white mountain in the evening, off to the east, and there were mountains and valleys in full sight to the south. The valley was wide. That answers pretty closely to the description of this country here. In the morning of that day—which will be later on in the day for us as we go down—they saw a high, white bank on the east. We haven’t passed any such bank. They made seventeen miles of this water coming up. If we can locate that white bank, we ought to strike slacker water below there and then faster [Pg 132]

water still farther below, according to their story. On June 6th the water was so high and heavy that they had to pull up by the branches of trees, because they couldn't paddle or pole or track. As they were three days in making something like thirty miles, we ought to expect pretty fast work the next day or so below here. But of course they had high water, and we haven't."

"That seems to me good reasoning," said Alex. "We'll take it slow and easy, and if we hear a bad rapid we'll go ashore and look it out first before we run it. Not that I know even now just where that stream comes in from McLeod."

"We could find out by exploring," said Rob, "but I don't think we need do that. Let's go through on our own as much as we can. We want to stop when we get down into some good bear country anyhow—as soon as Moise and John have eaten up enough pork to make room in the boat!"

"They're making such a hole in the bacon now," said Alex, "that I'm afraid we'll have to stop and hunt somewhere to-morrow." [Pg 133]

"That'll suit us all right," boasted John. "Rob and I will stroll out and kill you almost anything you want to-morrow evening."

They all returned now to the camp, which had been left on the bar around the bend, and passed the night there.

"We'll have to be good *voyageurs* from now on," said Alex, when they turned in for the night, "and that means getting on the trail by four o'clock in the morning."

XII [Pg 134]

WILD COUNTRY AND WILDERNESS WAYS

By daylight of the following morning the boys were busy breaking camp and getting their luggage across the bend to the place where they had left the boats below the rapids. They found no very bad water for some little distance, although occasionally there were stretches with steep rocks where the water rippled along very noisily. Again they would meet wide bends where the paddles were useful.

They still were in a wide valley. Far to the east lay the main range of the Rockies, but the mountains were much lower than they are farther to the south. They kept a sharp outlook on both banks, trying to find some landmark which would tell them where they were, and at last, indeed, they found a high, white bank on the right-hand side, which they supposed to have been the one mentioned in the Mackenzie journal, although it was not exactly where Rob's map said it ought to be. They paused at this place for their first rest, and occupied themselves for a time figuring out, each according to his notion, a map of the country on ahead, which all admitted now was entirely strange to them. [Pg 135]

Alex and Moise agreed pretty closely in their description of the country below the Finlay, for they had friends who had made that trip numbers of times. As to the country between this place and the mouth of the Finlay, Rob seemed to be deferred to more than any one else, because he had read carefully and mapped out the country in accordance with the Fraser and Mackenzie journals and such narratives of later travelers as he could find, surveyors, traders, and prospectors.

"Now," said he presently, "if we should run down two or three hours farther we'd make say fifteen miles, and that ought to bring us about to the spot where Mackenzie climbed the tree to look out over the country. As near as I can get at it, that was pretty near the real divide between the eastern and western waters—that is to say, not far from where the small stream leads back to McLeod Lake, and the McLeod Lake portage across to the Fraser, the way the fur-traders went later on. That's the Giscombe portage route. It's a lot easier than the one we've taken, too." [Pg 136]

"Well, I don't see how they ever got boats up this way at all," said Jesse, looking with wonder at the swiftly moving current which passed at their feet.

"And just to think," said John, "they didn't know where they were at all, even as much as we do now; and we're pretty much lost, if it comes to that."

"Mackenzie, she'll been good man," said Moise. "Maybe so most as good man like my wife hees onkle, Pete Fraser."

“Well,” said Alex, “we can drop down a way farther and if we don’t meet bad water we’ll get into camp early.”

“‘Drop down’ just about describes it,” said Rob. “It’s like sliding downhill on a sled, almost, isn’t it? I’ll know more about the making of a big river than I ever did before.”

None the less the boys, who had gained confidence with every hour in the care of these skilled boatmen, felt less and less fear as they passed on down the sometimes tumbling and roaring stream which now lay before them. The water was not really dangerous for some distance now, and only in two instances did Alex go ashore and line the boats down at the edge of rapids, although time and again he cautioned Moise, who was something of a [Pg 137] daredevil in the canoe, not to undertake any run which looked in the least bad. Moise and Rob, of course, retained their position in the lead boat, the *Mary Ann*.

“I believe I’ll get the hang of it after a while,” said Rob, as they paused at the head of a rapid lying ahead of the two canoes. “The main thing is to map out your course before you go through, and then hang to it. You can’t take any too sudden turns, and you have to be careful not to strike on a rock—that’s the most dangerous thing, after all, except the big swells at the foot of a fast drop.”

Sometimes, when the shore was strewn with rocks alongside a rapid which interrupted the passing down of the boats, all of the party would be as much in the water as out, wading, shoving and pulling at the boats. They were pretty well chilled when, well on into the afternoon, Alex signified that it was time to make camp for the day.

“Better get out dry socks and moccasins, young gentlemen,” said he. “You’re not quite as tough as Moise yonder.”

Moise, happy and care-free, had not as yet started to make a fire, but was sitting on a rock playing earnestly at a jews’-harp which he carried in his pocket.

Jesse, idly prowling around in the “possible bag” in which Moise carried his personal [Pg 138] belongings, tipped out on the ground what looked to be a small chopping-bowl, or wooden dish. “What’s that, Moise?” said he, “and what are all these sticks tied up in a bundle here?”

“I suppose you’ll not know what’s those,” said Moise.

Jesse shook his head.

“That’s what Injun calls his game,” said Moise, laughing.

“His game—what’s that?”

“Those game she’ll been call platter game. All tam in winter Injun will play those game in hees house—he’ll play it here hondred year, two hondred year, I s’pose maybe.”

“I know!” broke in Rob, eagerly. “Mackenzie tells about that very thing. He says that two of his Indians got to fighting over a game of platter at the fort down below here. I wonder if that’s the same thing!”

“It is,” said Alex, “precisely the same. The Crees all play this, although so far as I know it isn’t known east of Lake Superior. Show him how to play, Moise.”

Moise now spread down one of the blankets on the ground and took his seat cross-legged at [Pg 139] the side of it, motioning to the boys to sit opposite. He now untied the greasy rag which wrapped up the bundle of sticks, and produced from it eight little pieces of copper, disks, red on one side and tinned or galvanized on the other. These he put in the pan or platter, and shaking them together, tossed them into the air, catching them again in the bowl, which he thumped on the blanket just as they fell.

“S’pose four white an’ four red’ll come out,” said he, “an’ I’m play’ with Alex. He’ll give me eight stick now, for I’ll win. So. Try heem again.”

This time the little disks fell irregularly, and Moise expressed his disgust.

“Five one kin’, three other kin’; no good!” said he. “She’ll have to come up two, four, seex, eight—the hard way for heem to come is all tam the way he’ll win. You see?” he continued on shaking and thumping the bowl and catching the little disks, and as he won or lost, Alex gravely handed him the little sticks, or counters, or received them back from him as the case might be.

This ancient gambling device of the Indians was very simple and the game was soon learned, but the knack of catching the disks in the pan proved quite difficult. John undertook it, with the result that he spilled every one of them out when they fell in the [Pg 140]

shallow bowl, much to the amusement of Moise.

“You’ll not been Injun,” said Moise. “If any of those pieces he’ll fly out of pan, then you have to give up the pan to the next man. You’ll make a loss that tam. All tam Injun he’ll play those platter game in the house at night,” continued Moise. “Two, four man, she’ll sit on blanket an’ play many hour. His woman she’ll cook meat on the fire. Another man he’ll sit an’ poun’ the drum. You’ll see my drum, I s’pose.”

He now fished out from under his bed one of the singular Cree drums, a shallow, one-sided circle of bent wood covered with tightly stretched moose skin. He showed them how the Indian drummer held this, straining it tight with thongs stretched from finger to thumb, and making the music by drumming with the fingers of the other hand.

“Injun he’ll use those drum sometam to pass time,” said Moise. “Sometam he’ll use heem for pray. S’pose I’ll want ver’ much for get moose—I’ll play on heem an’ seeng. S’pose I want for get grizzly ver’ much—then I seeng *ver*’ hard for get grizzly. S’pose you’ll seeng an’ play, always you’ll get those game, sure.”

“I don’t see what we’d do without you, Moise,” said John, who was continually rummaging around in Moise’s ditty-bag. “For instance, what’s this funny-looking knife you have here?” [Pg 141]

“That’s worth noticing,” said Alex. “You young gentlemen ought to get you one of those knives each before you leave the country. That’s what we call a crooked knife—you see, the end of the blade is turned up.”

“How do you use that sort of thing?” asked John, curiously.

“As any native Injun always uses a knife,” rejoined Alex. “You see how the handle is put on—well, an Injun never whittles away from him, but always pulls the knife toward him. You’ll see, too, that he never sharpens a blade on both sides, but puts all the bevel on one side—look at my big hunting-knife here—it’s only sharpened on one side, and the other is perfectly flat.”

“Well, what makes Indians do that way?” asked John, wonderingly.

“I don’t know,” said Alex, “except that they always have done so. You see, they use files rather than whetstones to sharpen their tools. Maybe they find it easier to put on an edge in this way. Anyhow, if an Injun is making a canoe or a pair of snowshoes, or doing any other whittling work, you will see him use one of these crooked knives, and he’ll always whittle toward him, with his thumb out at the end of the handle. I don’t know who first invented these crooked knives,” continued Alex, musingly, “but they’ve always been that way since my father can remember. As to this big buffalo knife, I suppose the Northwest Company or the Hudson Bay people invented that. They’ve been selling them in the trade for a hundred and fifty years or so.” [Pg 142]

“I suppose each country has its own tools and its own ways,” ventured Rob.

“Precisely.”

“I’ve been told,” Rob went on, “that that’s the way the Chinese use a knife or a saw—they pull it to them instead of pushing it away.”

“Well,” said Alex, smiling, “some people say that all of us Injuns came across the narrow salt water far to the northwest. You know, too, don’t you, that the Crees call themselves the First People?”

“They certainly were first in here,” assented Rob; “and, as we’ve said before, it’s hardly fair to call any white man a real discoverer—all this country was known long before a white man ever set foot in it.”

XIII [Pg 143]

THE CARIBOU HUNT

The supply of mountain mutton had lessened with alarming rapidity in this open-air work, which tends to give any man or boy a strong appetite. Moise looked rather ruefully at the few pieces which he still had hanging on his meat line near the camp.

“I’ll tol’ you this sheep she’s getting mighty scarce now pretty soon before long,” said he.

“Why not make a hunt, Alex?” asked Rob. “It looks like fairly good country, and you might be able to get something.”

“We might get a bear,” said Alex, “or possibly a moose. For all I know, the buffalo used to come this far back in from the east. It doesn’t look like sheep country just in here, however, because we have to go too far to get to the mountains.”

“How about caribou?”

Alex shook his head. “You mustn’t ask me,” said he. “This isn’t my country, and I’ve never been here before, nor seen any man who has been here. I know there are caribou in British Columbia, far to the north.” [Pg 144]

“Mackenzie talks about seeing reindeer in here.”

“Yes, I suppose he meant the black-faced caribou of the mountains, and not the regular barren-ground animal which goes in the big herds. It’s odd, but those early men didn’t seem to know all the animals on which they depended so much. Without doubt Mackenzie called the musk-ox some sort of buffalo, and he called these mountain caribou the reindeer. But we might get one for all of that. How would you like to go with me across the river, Mr. Rob, and make a little hunt?”

“Fine!” assented Rob, eagerly. “But how about the others?”

“I’ll tell you, Rob,” said John, who, to tell the truth, was just a little tired from the hard work of the day before; “you and Alex go across, and after a while Moise will take Jess and me out on this side a little way back. We’ll all meet here this evening.”

This plan was agreed to, and in the course of a few moments Alex and Rob were pushing across the river in the *Mary Ann*, equipped lightly for their first hunt after some game which Rob was eager to meet because it was new to him.

Once more they pushed through heavy undergrowth close to the river, traveled up a rather lofty bank, and found themselves in flatter country, beyond which at some distance rose some mountains. [Pg 145]

“I’ll bet you,” said Rob, “that this is just about where Mackenzie climbed the tree to look around—you can’t see much from the river down there, and his men were complaining about the hard work, and he didn’t know where he was. So he climbed a tree to have a look.”

“Well, Mr. Rob,” said Alex, “if you don’t mind, I’ll let you do the climbing, while I sit here and smoke. I’m not quite as light as I once was.”

“All right,” said Rob. And, divesting himself of his cartridge-belt and jacket, a little later he began to make his way up to the topmost branches of the tall spruce, breaking off the dead limbs as he slowly advanced upward.

Rob remained aloft for some moments, but at last descended and rejoined Alex.

“Now, what did you see, Mr. Rob?” inquired the old hunter.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Rob; “it’s hard to figure out exactly, of course. But Mackenzie talks about high mountains off to the northwest, and a parallel range of mountains running to the south, with a narrow valley between. That, of course, must be this river, and as near as I can tell, it must have been about here that he and Mackay and the Indian hunters took to the shore to spy out the way.” [Pg 146]

“And jolly well got lost, too, eh?”

“They certainly did—got lost from their boat for an entire day! I can imagine how they felt when they didn’t know whether the boat was above them or below them. Mackenzie says the mosquitoes about ate them up. They sent branches down the river to let the boatmen know they were above them. It wasn’t until night that finally they found the boat was far below them. I’ll warrant they were glad when they got together again. The truth is, the men were almost ready to turn back and leave Mackenzie where he was.”

“They’d have done that a dozen times but for his courage,” said Alex. “Well, now, what would you do, Mr. Rob, if you should get lost in the woods or mountains any time?”

“I’d try to keep cool,” said Rob, “but I’m not sure that I could. It’s a mighty bad feeling—I know what it is myself. What would you do, Alex, if you ever got lost in a storm, or anything of that kind?”

“Sit down and build a fire,” answered Alex. “Go to sleep, take it easy, and wait till my mind [Pg 147]

got cool. Then when you're rested and all ready to go on, you nearly always know which is the right direction. You see, an Injun is a good deal like a dog, as Moise would say. But now suppose I should get separated from you in here—how would you get back to camp?"

"Well, you see," said Rob, "there is that high mountain on this side of the river, and there is one right opposite, far off on the east side. I know our camp is on the line between those two peaks. Of course I'd know the river was downhill, unless I wandered off over some other little divide. I'd just simply go downhill as straight as I could until I hit the river. Of course I couldn't tell, maybe, whether I was just above or below the camp. But I'd wait to see smoke, and I'd fire off my rifle, hoping that some one would hear me. Then I think I would not go very far from that place. I'd sit down and build a smoke, and wait."

"That would be the best way to do," Alex assented. "But do you know, simple as that seems, lots of grown men couldn't do it—they'd lose their heads and be just as apt to go west as east! Many a man has been lost in the wilderness simply because he got excited and scared [Pg 148] and didn't take it easy. Always remember that whenever you are in a wild country it isn't as dangerous as it seems to be.

"But come, now," he resumed, "I suppose we must get over in that flat country and see if we can find any sign of game."

"How do you hunt caribou, Alex? I don't know anything about it."

"That's hard to answer," rejoined the old hunter. "Of course you can take a trail if you can find it, and if it seems fresh. An Injun hunts moose by following the trail. But either a moose or a caribou has very keen scent, and if you follow straight on after them, and don't circle once in a while and pick up the trail again, you're not apt to come up with either one or the other. A caribou, however, is a strange animal—it isn't nearly as wild as a moose or a bighorn. A grizzly bear has very keen scent but very bad eyes, and I don't suppose a grizzly can see you half a mile at best. Now, a caribou has good eyes, ears, and nose, but he hasn't got any head. Sometimes he is very shy, and sometimes he'll stand and look at you, and let you keep on shooting. He seems to be full of curiosity, and wants to know what you're doing.

"We'll work on over a little at a time," he continued, "and maybe if we skirt around some [Pg 149] open meadows or glades we may see some tracks. Sometimes they come out in places like that to feed or stand around. A water-hole or little lake, too, is good for game usually. When an Injun knows he's in a country where game is moving or feeding he keeps pretty quiet and lets the game come to him rather than going to it."

The theories laid down by the old hunter seemed soon to work out fairly well, because they had not gone up more than a mile farther until they got into a country which showed considerable sign of moose and caribou, the latter in rather a fresh trail. As this led them to a sort of open, grassy glade, where other sign was abundant, Alex paused for a time in the hope that something might show from the heavy cover in which they had been traveling.

At last he quietly laid a hand on Rob's arm, and without making any sudden movement, pointed across the glade, which at that place was several hundred yards wide.

"Oh, I see them!" said Rob, in an excited whisper. "What funny-looking things they are—five of them!"

"Two stags, three cows," said Alex, quietly. "Too far to shoot. Wait awhile."

They drew back now into the cover of the surrounding valleys, where it is true the [Pg 150] mosquitoes annoyed them unspeakably, but where they remained with such patience as they could possess. The caribou seemed to be slowly feeding out from the opposite edge of the forest, but they were very deliberate and uncertain in their progress. The two watched them for the best part of half an hour.

"Too bad!" said Alex, at last, as he peered out from behind the tree which shielded them. "Four hundred yards at best."

Rob also ventured a look at this time.

"Why, there's only three," said he.

"Yes, the two stags went back into the woods."

"But we can't kill the cows," said Rob, decisively.

"Why not? They're just as good to eat."

"Maybe better," said Rob, "I don't doubt that. A young, fat cow is better meat than an old

bull any time, of course. But Uncle Dick said we mustn't waste anything, and mustn't kill anything except what had horns in this kind of game."

"Well," said Alex, "I don't much feel like going back to camp without any meat."

"Nor I. Let's wait here awhile and maybe the stag'll come out again."

This indeed proved to be the case, for in a few minutes the smaller stag did show at the edge of the wood, offering a dim and very uncertain mark at a distance of several hundred yards. Rob began to prepare his rifle. [Pg 151]

"It's too far," said Alex. "No Injun would think of shooting that far. You might only cripple."

"Yes," said Rob, "and I might only miss. But I'd rather do that than shoot at one of the cows. I believe I'll take a chance anyhow, Alex."

Adjusting his rifle-sights to the best of his knowledge, Rob took long and careful aim, and fired at the shoulder of the distant caribou, which showed but indistinctly along his rifle-sights. The shot may have come somewhere close to the animal, but certainly did not strike it, for with a sudden whirl it was off, and in the next instant was hidden by the protecting woods.

Now, there was instanced the truth of what Alex had said about the fickleness of caribou nature. The three cows, one old and two young ones, stood in full view in the open, at about half the distance of the stag. They plainly saw both Alex and Rob as they now stepped out from their cover. Yet instead of wheeling and running, the older cow, her ears standing out high and wide, began to trot steadily toward them instead of running away. Rob once more raised his rifle, but this time not to shoot at game, but only to make an experiment. He fired once, twice, and three times in the air; and even up to the time of the last shot, the old cow trotted steadily toward him, not stopping until she was within fifty yards of him. Here she stood staring wide-eyed, but at length, having figured out something in her own mind, she suddenly wheeled and lumbered off again, her heavy, coarse muzzle straight ahead of her. All three now shambled off and soon were lost to view. [Pg 152]

"Well, what do you think about that, Alex?" demanded Rob. "That's the funniest thing I ever saw in all my hunting. Those things must be crazy."

"I suppose they think we are," replied Alex, glumly; "maybe we are, or we'd have taken a shot at her. I can almost taste that tenderloin!"

"I'm sorry about it, Alex," said Rob, "but maybe some of the others will get some meat. I really don't like to shoot females, because game isn't as plentiful now as it used to be, you know, even in the wild country."

Alex sighed, and rather unhappily turned and led the way back toward the river. "It's too late to hunt anything more," said he, "and we might not find anything that just suited us." [Pg 153]

When at length they reached camp, after again crossing the river in the *Mary Ann*, twilight was beginning to fall. Rob did not notice any difference in the camp, although the keen eyes of Alex detected a grayish object hanging on the cut limb of the tree at the edge of the near-by thicket. John and Jesse pretended not to know anything, and Alex and Rob, to be equally dignified, volunteered no information and asked no questions.

All the boys had noticed that old hunters, especially Indian hunters, never ask one another what success they have had, and never tell anything about what they have killed. Jesse, however, could not stand this sort of thing very long, and at length, with considerable exultation, asked Rob what luck he had had. Rob rather shamefacedly admitted the failure which he and Alex had made.

"We did better," said Jesse; "we got one."

"You got one? Who got it?" demanded Rob. "Where is it?"

"There's a ham hanging up over there in the brush," answered Jesse. "We all went out, but I killed him."

"Is that so, John?" asked Rob. [Pg 154]

"It certainly is," said John. "Yes, Jesse is the big chief to-night."

"We only went a little way, too," said Jesse, "just up over the ridge there, I don't suppose more than half a mile. It must have been about noon when we started, and Moise didn't think we were going to see anything, and neither did we. So we sat down, and in an hour or so I was shooting at a mark to see how my rifle would do. All at once we saw this fellow—it wasn't a very big one, with little bits of horns—come out and stand around looking to see

what the noise was about. So I just took a rest over a log, and I plugged him!”

Jesse stood up straight, his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, a very proud young boy indeed.

Moise, strolling around, was grinning happily when at last he met the unsuccessful hunters.

“Those Jesse boy, she’ll been good shot,” said he. “I s’pose, Alex, you’ll not make much hunter out of yourself, *hein*?”

“Well,” said Alex, “we let some mighty good cow venison get away from us, all right.”

“Never mind,” said Moise, consolingly, “we’ll got fat young caribou now plenty for two—three days, maybe so.”

Rob went up to Jesse and shook him by the hand. “Good boy, Jess!” said he. “I’m glad you got him instead of myself. But why didn’t you tell us when we came into camp?” [Pg 155]

“Moise said good hunters didn’t do that,” ventured John, who joined the conversation. “How about that, Alex?”

“Well,” said the older hunter, “you must remember that white men are different from Injuns. People who live as Injuns do get to be rather quiet. Now, suppose an Injun hunter has gone out after a moose, and has been gone maybe two or three days. He’ll probably not hunt until everything is gone in the lodge, and maybe neither he nor his family is going to eat much until he gets a moose. Well, by and by he comes home some evening, and throws aside the skin door of the lodge, and goes in and sits down. His wife helps him off with his moccasins and hands him a dry pair, and makes up the fire. He sits and smokes. No one asks him whether he has killed or not, and he doesn’t say whether he has killed, although they all may be very hungry. Now, his wife doesn’t know whether to get ready to cook or not, but she doesn’t ask her man. He sits there awhile; but, of course, he likes his family and doesn’t want them to be hungry. So after a while, very dignified, he’ll make some [Pg 156] excuse so that his wife can tell what the result of the hunt has been. Maybe he’ll say carelessly that he has a little blood on his shirt, which ought to be washed off, or maybe he’ll say that if any one were walking a couple of miles down the river they might see a blazed trail out toward the hills. Then his wife will smile and hurry to put on the kettles. If it isn’t too far, she’ll take her pack-strap then and start out to bring in some of the meat. Every people, you see, will have different ways.”

“But the man who doesn’t kill something goes hungry, and his family, too?”

“Not in the least!” rejoined Alex, with some spirit. “There, too, the ‘First People’ are kinder than the whites who govern them now. Suppose in my village there are twenty lodges. Out of the twenty there will be maybe four or five good hunters, men who can go out and kill moose or bear. It gets to be so that they do most of the hunting, and if one of them brings in any meat all the village will have meat. Of course the good hunters don’t do any other kind of work very much.”

“That isn’t the way white people do,” asserted John; “they don’t divide up in business matters unless they have to.”

“Maybe not,” said Alex, “but it has always been different with my people in the north. If [Pg 157] men did not divide meat with one another many people would starve. As it is, many starve in the far-off countries each winter. Sometimes we cannot get even rabbits. It may be far to the trading-post. The moose or the caribou may be many miles away, where no one can find them. A heavy storm may come, so no one can travel. Then if a man is fortunate and has meat he would be cruel if he did not divide. He knows that all the others would do as much with him. It is our custom.”

XIV [Pg 158]

EXPLORING THE WILDERNESS

IF Rob, John, and Jesse had been eager for exciting incidents on their trip across the mountains, certainly they found them in plenty during the next three days after the caribou hunt, as they continued their passage on down the mountain river, when they had brought in all their meat and once more loaded the canoes.

Rob had been studying his maps and records, and predicted freely that below this camp

they would find wilder waters. This certainly proved to be the case. Moreover, they found that although it is easier to go down-stream than up in fast water, it is more dangerous, and sometimes progress is not so rapid as might be expected. Indeed, on the first day below the caribou camp they made scarcely more than six or eight miles, for, in passing the boats down along shore to avoid a short piece of fast water, the force of the current broke the line of the *Mary Ann*, and it was merely by good fortune that they caught up with her, badly [Pg 159] jammed and wedged between two rocks, her gunwale strip broken across and the cedar shell crushed through, so that she had sprung a bad leak.

They hauled the crippled *Mary Ann* ashore and discharged her cargo in order to examine the injuries received.

“Well, now, we’re giving an imitation of the early *voyageurs*,” said John, as he saw the rent in the side of the canoe. “But how are we going to fix her? She isn’t a birch-bark, and if she were, we have no bark.”

“I think we’ll manage,” Rob replied, “because we have canvas and cement and all that sort of thing. But her rail is broken quite across.”

“She’ll been good boat,” said Moise, smiling; “we’ll fix heem easy.” So saying, he took his ax and sauntered over to a half-dead cedar-tree, from which, without much difficulty, he cut some long splints. This they managed to lash inside the gunwale of the canoe, stiffening it considerably. The rent in the bottom they patched by means of their cement, and some waterproof material. They finished the patch with abundant spruce gum and tar, melted together and spread all over. When they were done their labors the *Mary Ann* was again *[Pg 160]* watertight, but not in the least improved in beauty.

“We’ll have to be very careful all the way down from here, I’m thinking,” said Alex. “The river is getting far more powerful almost every hour as these other streams come in. Below the Finlay, I know very well, she’s a big stream, and the shores are so bad that if we had an accident it would leave things rather awkward.”

None the less, even with one boat crippled in this way, Rob and John gained confidence in running fast water almost every hour. They learned how to keep their heads when engaged in the passage of white water, how to avoid hidden rocks, as well as dangerous swells and eddies. It seemed to them quite astonishing what rough water could be taken in these little boats, and continually the temptation was, of course, to run a rapid rather than laboriously to disembark and line down alongshore. Thus, to make their story somewhat shorter, they passed on down slowly for parts of three days, until at last, long after passing the mouth of the Pack River and the Nation, and yet another smaller stream, all coming in from the west, they saw opening up on the left hand a wide valley coming down from the northwest.

The character of the country, and the distance they had traveled, left no doubt whatever in [Pg 161] their minds that this was the Finlay River, the other head-stream of the Peace River. They therefore now felt as though they knew precisely where they were. Being tired, they pitched their camp not far below the mouth of the Finlay, and busied themselves in looking over their boats and supplies. They knew that the dreaded Finlay rapids lay only two miles below them.

They were now passing down a river which had grown to a very considerable stream, sometimes with high banks, again with shores rather low and marshy, and often broken with many islands scattered across an expanse of water sometimes nearly a quarter of a mile in extent. The last forty miles of the stream to the junction of the Finlay had averaged not more rapid but much heavier than the current had seemed toward the headwaters. The roar of the rapids they approached now came up-stream with a heavier note, and was distinguishable at much greater distances, and the boats in passing through some of the heavier rapids did so in the midst of a din quite different from the gentle babble of the shallow stream far toward its source. The boom of the bad water far below this camp made them uneasy.

“Well,” said Rob, as they sat in camp near the shore, “we know where we are now. We have [Pg 162] passed the mouth of the McLeod outlet, and we have passed the Nation River and everything else that comes in from the west. Here we turn to the east. It must be nearly one hundred and fifty miles to the real gate of the Rockies—at the Cañon of the Rocky Mountains, as the first traders called it.”

“It looks like a pretty big river now,” said Jesse dubiously.

“I would like to hope it’s no worse than it has been just above here,” said Rob, “but I fear it is, from all I know. Mackenzie got it in high water, and he only averaged half a mile an hour for a long time going up, along in here. Of course coming down we could pick our way better than he could.”

“We have been rather lucky on the whole,” said Alex, “for, frankly, the water has been rather worse for canoes than I thought it would be. Moreover, it is still larger below here. But that’s not the worst of it.”

“What do you mean, Alex?” inquired John.

“You ought not to need to ask me,” replied the old hunter. “You’re all *voyageurs*, are you not?”

“But what is it, then?”

“Look closely.”

They went to the edge of the beach and looked up and down the river carefully, also [Pg 163] studying the forking valleys into which they could see from the place where they were in camp.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Rob, “but it seems to me she’s rising a little!”

Alex nodded. “We’ve been in camp here three hours now,” said he, “and she’s come up a little more than an inch.”

“Why, how do you know that?” asked John.

“I set a stick with a notch at water-level when we first came ashore.”

“How did you happen to think of that?”

“Very likely the same thing which made Rob guess it.”

“Yes,” said Rob, “I saw that the Finlay water coming down seemed to be discolored. But at first I supposed it was the natural color of that river. So you think there has been a thaw?”

“Maybe some sort of rain or chinook over in there,” said Alex. “What do you think, Moise?”

Moise and Alex talked for a time in the Cree language, Moise shaking his head as he answered.

“Moise thinks there has been a little rise,” interpreted Alex. “He says that below here the [Pg 164] river sometimes cañons up, or runs between high banks with a narrow channel. That would make it bad. You see, the rise of a foot in a place like that would make much more difference than two inches in the places where the river is spread out several hundred yards wide. We know a little bit more about the river from here east, because we have talked with men who have been here.”

“I suppose we’ll have to wait here until it runs down,” said Jesse.

“Maybe not. If we were here earlier in the season and this were the regular spring rise we might have to wait for some time before we could go down with these boats. But the big flood has gone down long ago. There isn’t anything to hinder us as yet from dropping down and watching carefully on ahead as we go.”

Rob was again consulting his inevitable copy of *Mackenzie’s Voyages*.

“It took Mackenzie and Fraser each of them just eight days to get this far up the river from the west end of the Cañon of the Rocky Mountains,” said he. “Fraser must have built his boat somewhere west of the Rocky Mountain Portage, as they call it. That must be seventy-five miles east of here, as near as I can figure it from the Mackenzie story, but Uncle Dick’s [Pg 165] friend, Mr. Hussey, said it was one hundred and thirty miles—and only two big rapids, the Finlay and the Parle Pas. I wish we could run it every foot, because Mackenzie did when he came down. At least, he doesn’t say he didn’t.”

“It was done by the traders for a long time,” said Alex, “all but those two rapids and that cañon. There is no trail even for horses between Hudson’s Hope and Fort St. John, but that is easy water. They serve St. John now with steamboats, and the old canoe days are pretty much over. But, anyhow, there is the main ridge of the Rockies east of us, and we’ve got to get through it somehow, that’s sure. Back there”—he pointed up the valley down which they had been coming now for so long—“we were between two ranges of the divide. The Finlay yonder comes down out of some other range to the northwest. But now the doubled river has to break through that dam of the eastern rim. I suppose we may look for bad water somewhere. Look here,” he added, examining the map, “here are the altitudes all marked on by the government surveyors—twenty-five hundred feet above sea-level at Giscombe Portage, twenty-two hundred and fifty at Fort McLeod. I suppose it was about [Pg 166] three thousand feet where we started across. At the mouth of the Finlay it’s only two thousand feet—a big drop. But she drops nearly three hundred feet more to the west end of

the portage, and two hundred feet more at the east end. That's going downhill pretty fast—five hundred feet in less than one hundred and fifty miles—and some of it not very fast water."

"Well," ventured Rob, "why don't we drop down as far as we can, and if we get caught by a flood then stop and take a little hunt somewhere back in the hills? You know, we haven't got that grizzly yet you promised us."

"Sure enough," said Alex, with no great enthusiasm; for he did not relish the idea of hunting grizzly bear in company with such young companions.

"But we have come through good grizzly country already," ventured John.

"Very likely," Alex smiled. "I've seen considerable bear sign along the shores, as well as a good many moose tracks close to where we camped."

"If you think we're afraid to go bear hunting, Alex," Rob began, "you certainly don't know us very well. That's one of the reasons we came on this trip—we wanted to get a real Rocky Mountain grizzly."

"It is not too late," the old hunter rejoined, "and I shouldn't wonder if there was as good country east of here as any we've come to. The grizzly is a great traveler, anyhow, and is as apt to be found one place as another. At this time of year all the bears come out of the mountains and feed along the valleys on red willow buds and such things. They even swim from the shore to the islands, in search of willow flats. Besides, there are plenty of saskatoons, I don't doubt, not far back from the river. The bears ought to be down out of the high country by this time, and if you really care for a hunt, there ought to be plenty of good places below here." [Pg 167]

"It isn't dark yet," said Rob; "suppose we break camp and run down just a little farther this evening. If the flood comes in behind us, we're just that much ahead."

They acted on Rob's suggestion, and, passing rapidly on down the now slightly discolored water, they soon left the Finlay gap behind them. Their journey was but brief, however, for soon they heard the boom of the rapids below them.

"On shore, queek!" called Moise to Rob, who was in the bow of the leading boat.

XV [Pg 168]

IN THE BIG WATERS

The sound and sight of the Finlay rapids, at the head of which the leading boat now paused, gave Rob his first real idea of how wicked a great mountain river can be. He looked back to see whether the *Jaybird* and her crew were well warned of the danger. But Alex soon brought the other boat alongside at the landing place, on the south side of the stream, above the rapids.

"Well, here we are," said he. "Now you may see what some real rapids are. Those little ripples up above didn't amount to much."

"She looks pretty bad," said Rob. "Could anybody run a boat through there?"

"Old Sir Alexander probably did it, but he had a big birch-bark. I'd take it on with a good man and a good boat. We could very possibly even get one of these boats through if we were obliged to, but there is no use taking any risk. We can line down through the worst of it, or even run the boat ashore if we like." [Pg 169]

"Me, I'll rather ron the rapeed than walk on the bank with boat," said Moise.

"Never mind, Moise," said Alex, "we'll not have to walk far with her. We'll camp here to-night and look it over in the morning. It's always better to tackle rough work in the morning rather than in the evening."

The young travelers slept none too well that night. The sound of the rapids coming through the dark and the feeling of remoteness here in this wild mountain region proved depressing to their spirits. They were glad enough when at length toward dawn they heard Moise stirring about the camp. By the time they had their breakfast finished and camp broken Alex had already returned from a trip along the side of the rapids.

“It’s not so very bad,” said he, “although the river has come up an inch or so during the night. The whole rapid is about a quarter of a mile long, but the worst place is only a couple of hundred yards or so. We’ll drop down to the head of that strip on the line and portage around there.”

They followed this plan, loading the boats and dropping down for a short time, saving themselves all the portage work they could. In places the water seemed very wild, tossing [Pg 170] over the rocks in long, rolling waves or breaking in foam and spray. The boys scrambled alongshore, allowing Alex and Moise to care for the first boat when it became necessary for them to double up on each trip over the worst water. Part of the time they bore a hand on the line, and were surprised to see the strength of the current even on a boat without a load.

“You see,” said Alex, when at length they came to a place where the water seemed still more powerful and rough, and where it seemed necessary to haul the boat entirely from the water for a carry of some distance over the rocks, “it’s better to take a little trouble and go slow rather than to lose a boat in here. If she broke away from us we’d feel a long way from home!”

After they got the *Mary Ann* again in the water and at the foot of the rapids, the men went up after the *Jaybird*, while the boys did what they could toward advancing the cargo of the *Mary Ann*. In less than an hour they had everything below the rapids and saw plain sailing once more ahead of them. Moise expressed his disappointment at not being allowed to run the Finlay rapids.

“My onkle, she’ll always ron those rapeed,” said he. “S’pose I’ll tell heem I’ll walk aroun’, [Pg 171] he’ll laugh on me, yes!”

“That’s all right, Moise,” said Rob; “your uncle isn’t here, and for one, I’m glad we took it easy coming through here. That’s rough water either way you look at it, up-stream or down. But now,” he continued, once more consulting his maps and notes, “we ought to have a couple of days of good, straightaway running, with almost no bad water. It’s about seventy miles from here to the Parle Pas rapids. And speaking of *rapids*, they tell me that’s the worst place on the whole river.”

“That’s a funny name—why do they call them the Parle Pas rapids?” asked Jesse.

“Those were Frenchman words,” said Moise. “Parle Pas means ‘no speak.’ He’s a quiet rapeed. S’pose you’ll ron on the river there, an’ smoke a pipe, an’ talk, an’ not think of nothing. All at once, *Boum*! You’ll been in those rapeed, an’ he’ll not said a word to you!”

“Well,” said Rob, “the traders used to run them somehow, didn’t they?”

“Yes, my onkle he’ll ron them in beeg boat many tam, but not with leetle boat. She’ll jump down five, three feet sometams. Leetle boat she’ll stick his nose under, yes. My onkle he’ll [Pg 172] tol’ me, when you come on the Parle Pas take the north side, an’ find some chute there for leetle boat. Leetle boat could ron the Parle Pas, maybe so, but I suppose, us, we’ll let those boat down on the line because we’ll got some scares, *hein*?”

“It’s just as well to have some scares on these mountain rivers, Moise,” said Alex, reprovingly. “This water is icy cold, and if even a man got out into the rapids he couldn’t swim at all, it would tumble him over so. We’ll line down on the Parle Pas, yes, depend on that. But that’s down-stream a couple of days if we go slow.”

“When do we get that bear hunt, Alex?” asked John, who loved excitement almost as much as Moise.

“Almost anywhere in here,” answered Alex; “but I think we’d better put off the hunt until we get below all the worst water. No use portaging bear hides.”

“It looks like good bear country here,” said Rob. “We must be in the real Rockies now, because the mountains come right down to the river.”

“Good bear country clear to Hudson’s Hope, or beyond that,” assented Alex.

“All right,” said Rob; “we’ll have a good hunt somewhere when we get below the Parle Pas. [Pg 173] If we have to do any more portaging, we don’t want to carry any more than we can help, that’s true. And, of course, we’re going to get that grizzly.”

Having by this time reloaded the boats, they re-embarked, and passed merrily on down the river, which now seemed wholly peaceful and pleasant. The mountains now indeed were all about them, in places rising up in almost perpendicular rock faces, and the valley was very much narrower. They were at last entering the arms of the great range through which they later were to pass.

The character of the river changed from time to time. Sometimes they were in wide, quiet reaches, where they needed the paddles to make much headway. Again there would be drops of faster water, although nothing very dangerous. Relieved as they were now of any thought of danger for the next sixty or seventy miles ahead, this part of their journey seemed delightful in every way. They did not pause to hunt, and saw no game excepting one band of four timber wolves, upon which they came as they swept around a bend, but which hastened under cover before any one could get a shot. Once in a while they stopped at little beaches or bars, and almost always saw the trails of large game in the sand or mud. Always [Pg 174] they felt that now they were deep in the wilderness, and every moment was a pleasure to them.

They did not really know how far below the Finlay rapids they traveled that day, for continually they discovered that it is difficult to apply map readings to the actual face of a new country. They made no great attempt at speed, but sometimes drifted down-stream, the boats close together. Sometimes when the wind was fair Rob or John would raise the corner of a tent or blanket to act as a sail. Thus, idling and chatting along, they made perhaps forty miles down-stream before they made their next evening camp. The country seemed to them wilder now, since the bold hills were so close in upon them, though of course they knew that each day was bringing them closer to the settlements on the eastern side of the range.

That night was cold, and they had no trouble with mosquitoes. Feeling no need of hurry, they made a late start and idled on down the river through a very interesting mountain region, until the afternoon. Toward evening they began to feel that they might perhaps be near the dreaded Parle Pas rapids, and they approached each bend with care, sometimes going ashore for a prospecting trip which proved to be made only on a false alarm. They [Pg 175] had, however, now begun to learn the “feel of the water,” as the *voyageurs* called it. Rob, who was ahead, at length noted the glassy look of the river, and called back to Moise that he believed there were rapids ahead.

“Parle Pas!” cried Moise. “On shore, queek!”

Swiftly they paddled across, to the north side of the river, where presently they were joined by the other boat.

“She’s the Parle Pas, all right,” laughed Moise; “look at heem!”

From their place of observation they could see a long ridge, or rim, the water falling in a sort of cascade well out across the stream. There seemed to be a chute, or channel, in midstream, but the back-combing rollers below it looked ominously large for a boat the size of theirs, so that they were glad enough to be where they were, on dry land.

Moise was once more for running the boats through the chute on the north shore, but Alex’s cautious counsel prevailed. There was not more than thirty or forty feet of the very worst water, rather a cascade than a long rapid, but they discharged the cargo and lined both boats through light. This sort of work proved highly interesting and exciting to all [Pg 176] hands, and, of course, when superintended by such men as Alex and Moise had no great danger, although all of them were pretty wet when at length they had their boats reloaded at the foot of the rapids.

“I know how Sir Alexander got across the mountains,” said John. “He had good *voyageurs* to do the work! About all he had to do was to write the story each night, and he didn’t do that any too well, it seems to me—anyhow, when you come to read his story backward you can’t tell where you are very well.”

“That’s right,” said Rob. “I don’t much blame Simon Fraser for finding fault with Mackenzie’s narrative. But maybe if we had written the story they’d have found fault with us the same way. The same country doesn’t look alike to different people, and what is a mile to one man may be two miles to another when both are guessing. But anyhow, here we are below the ‘Polly’ rapids—as the traders call them to-day—and jolly glad we ought to be we’re safe, too.”

“Plain sailing again now for a while,” said Jesse. “Let’s see the map.”

They all bent over the different maps they had, especially one which Rob had made up from all the sources of information he had.

“Yes,” said Rob, “it ought to be about sixty miles of pretty good water now until we get to [Pg 177] the one place on this river which the boldest *voyageur* never tried to run—the Cañon of the Rocky Mountains, as the very first travelers called it.”

“Those map she’ll not been much good,” said Moise, pointing to the government maps of

which Rob had a store. “The only good map she’ll been made by the Injun with a stick, s’pose on the sand, or maybe so on a piece of bark. My onkle she’ll made me a map of the Parle Pas. He’ll show the place where to go through the middle on the Parle Pas. S’pose you’ll tell my onkle, Moise he’ll walk down the Parle Pas an’ not ron on heem, he’ll laugh on me, heem! All right, when you get to the Grand Portage sixty miles below, you’ll get all the walk you want, Alex, *hein*?”

Alex answered him with a pleasant smile, not in the least disposed to be laughed into taking any risks he did not think necessary.

“We’d better drop down a few miles farther before we make camp,” said he. “*En avant, Moise. En roulant, ma boule!*”

Moise turned to his paddle and broke into song gaily as they once more headed down the stream. They did not tarry again until the sun was behind the western ridges. The mountain [Pg 178] shadows were heavy when at last their little fire lighted up the black forest which crowded close in all around them.

“I think this is fine,” said Jesse, quietly, as they sat about the camp-fire that night.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for anything in the world,” said John; and Rob gave his assent by a quiet nod of satisfaction.

“I feel as if we were almost home now,” said Jesse. “We must have come an awfully long way.”

Alex shook his head. “We’re a long way from home yet,” said he. “When the Klondike rushes were on some men got up as far north as this place, and scattered everywhere, hoping they could get through somehow to the Yukon—none of them knew just how. But few of them ever got up this river beyond Hudson’s Hope, or even Fort St. John, far east of there. Some turned back and went down the Mackenzie, others took the back trail from Peace River landing. A good many just disappeared. I have talked with some who turned back from the mountains here, and they all said they didn’t think the whole world was as big as it seemed by the time they got here! And they came from the East, where home seems close to you!”

“Well,” said Rob, “as it’s probably pretty rough below here, and good grizzly country, why [Pg 179] not stop here and make that little hunt we were talking about?”

“All right,” said Alex; “I suppose this is as good a game country as any. We ought to get a moose, even if we don’t see any bear. In the old times there used to be plenty of buffalo this far to the west in the mountains. What do you say, Moise—shall we make a hunting camp here?”

“We’ll been got no meat pretty quick bimeby,” said Moise. “Maybe so.”

They were encamped here on a narrow beach, which, however, sheered up high enough to offer them security against any rise in the stream. They were careful to pull up the boats high and dry, and to secure them in case of any freshet. Used as they were by this time to camp life, it now took them but a few minutes to complete their simple operations in making any camp. As all the boys had taken a turn at paddling this day, and as the exciting scenes of the past few days had been of themselves somewhat wearying, they were glad enough to get a long night’s sleep.

Before Rob, the leader of the younger members of the party, had rolled up in his blankets Alex came to him and asked him whether he really cared to finish running the river, [Pg 180] provided they could get out overland.

“Surely we do,” said Rob at once. “We’ll go on through, as far as we can, at least, by boat. We don’t want to be modern and ride along on horseback until we have to. Mackenzie didn’t and Fraser didn’t! Nor do we want to go to any trading-post for supplies. We can get butter and eggs in the States if we want to, but we’re *hunters*! You show us a grizzly to-morrow, Alex, that’s all!”

“All right,” said Alex, smiling. “Maybe we can.”

XVI

[Pg 181]

THE GRIZZLY HUNT

“

Why, Alex, this land along the bayou here looks like a cattle-yard!" exclaimed Rob as early the next morning they paused to examine a piece of the moist ground which they had observed much cut up with tracks of big game.

There were four in party now, Moise alone having remained to keep the camp. For an hour or more now they had passed back toward the hills, examining the damp ground around the edges of the willow flats and alder thickets. From time to time they had seen tracks of bears, some large and some small, but at this particular point the sign was so unmistakable that all had paused.

"I don't know that I ever saw more sign on one piece of ground," admitted Alex. He spoke in a low tone of voice and motioned for the others to be very quiet. "The trouble is, they seem to be feeding at night and working back toward the hills in the daytime. On this [Pg 182] country here there have been six black bears and two grizzlies."

"Yes, and here's that big track again," said Rob. "He sinks in the mud deep as an ox, and has a hind foot as long as my rifle-stock."

"Six or eight hundred pounds, maybe," said Alex. "He's a good one. The other one isn't so big. They fed here last night, and seem to be working up this little valley toward the hills again. If we had plenty of time I'd be in favor of waiting here until evening, for this seems to be a regular stamping-ground for bear. What do you think, Mr. Rob?"

"Well," said Rob, "I know it usually isn't much worth while to follow a bear, but maybe it wouldn't do any harm in here to work on after this one a little way, because there doesn't seem to be any hunting in here, and maybe the bears aren't badly scared."

"Very well, that's what I think, too," said Alex; "but if this trail gets very much fresher I think it is just as well for all of us to keep out of the thicket and take to the open. Maybe we can find higher ground on ahead."

They passed on up, making cross-cuts on the trail and circling now and again through the willow flats as they advanced. Once in a while Alex would have to search a little before he [Pg 183] could pick up the trail, but always somewhere among the willows he would find the great footprint of the big bear. Often he showed the boys where the willows had been broken down by the bear in its feeding, and at some places it left a path as though a cyclone had gone through.

Having established it in his mind that the bear was steadily advancing deeper back into the valley they were following, Alex at last left the willow flats and made for the side of the depression down which a little stream was coming, striking into the hills at the place where the valley finally narrowed to a deep coulée. Here they advanced slowly and cautiously, taking care to be on the side where the wind would favor them most, and once in a while Alex still dropped down to the foot of the coulée in search of sign or feeding-ground. As they advanced, however, the course of the stream became more definite and the moist ground not so large in extent, so that it became more difficult to trail any animal on the drier ground. A mile farther on, none the less, in a little muddy place, they found the track of the giant bear, still ahead of them. It had sunk eight inches or more into the soft earth, and a little film of muddy water still was trickling into the bottom of the track, while at its [Pg 184] rim little particles of mud still hung loose and ragged.

Alex's eyes now gleamed with eagerness, for he saw that the bear was but a little distance ahead. He examined closely the country about to see whether the big grizzly was alone, and to his relief found no sign of the smaller bear.

"I'm not afraid of them both," said he, in a low whisper to Rob, "but sometimes it's easier to get up to one bear than it is to two, and I notice it's nearly always the small one that gives the alarm."

The big grizzly, however, still was traveling steadily at times. They could not locate him in this thicket, and, indeed, a little farther on found where, apparently but a few moments earlier, he had left this coulée and crossed a little ridge, apparently intending to change his course entirely. This was disappointing, but Alex whispered to the young hunters not to be disturbed, for that possibly the bear might lie up or go to feeding in some other ravine not far on ahead.

"You'd better wait here, I think," said he at last, as they approached the top of a little ridge, where evidently another coulée came down.

He began slowly to climb toward the top, from which he could get a view of the other side. [Pg 185] Almost as soon as he raised his head above the summit he pulled it back again. Quickly he dropped down to where the others stood.

“Is he there?” asked Rob, eagerly.

Alex nodded. He looked at the faces of all the boys. Not one of them was pale, and every one seemed only eager to go ahead. Slowly standing and watching them for a time, at length the old hunter turned, silently motioning them to follow him.

What Alex had seen when he peered over the top of the ridge was nothing else than the big bear feeding in the bushes which lay some sixty yards ahead and below, where the ground was moister. When at length the boys, however, reached the same place and gazed over eagerly they saw nothing at all at first.

Rob turned to whisper a question to Alex, but even as he did so he felt John clutch him by the arm. Then as they all looked on ahead they saw the great bear rise once more on his hind legs high above the bushes. He was so close they could see his blocky head, his square nose, and even his little piggish eyes. Slowly the grizzly turned a little bit from side to side, nodding his head and whining a little all to himself, as he started once more to reach out and break down the tops of the bushes toward him in his great arms. [Pg 186]

It was at that instant that the rifle of Alex rang out, and he called to the others hurriedly, “Shoot! Shoot!”

He needed not to give such counsel, for every boy there had almost at the same instant fired at the giant grizzly which stood below them. He fell with a great roar, and began to thresh about in the bushes. No sight of him for a moment could be obtained. All four now sprang erect, waiting eagerly for the crippled game to break cover. John and Rob even started down the slope, until Alex called out to them peremptorily to come back. As a matter of fact, three of the four bullets had struck the bear and he was already hurt mortally, but this could not be determined, and Alex knew too much to go into the cover after a wounded grizzly.

THE BEAR BROKE COVER WITH A SAVAGE ROAR

The bear itself heard them shouting, and, having located the presence of an enemy, now broke cover with a savage roar, limping as best he could in a vain endeavor to get up the slope and to attack his enemies. But again and again the rifles spoke, and an instant later the great bear dropped down and rolled limp at the bottom of the slope, almost back into the bushes from which he had come. [Pg 187]

“He’s dead now, all right!” said Alex, even as he held out his hand to restrain his young companions once more from rushing in on their game. “Some one hit him in the head that last time. I’m thinking the hide won’t be good for much, for he must be shot full of holes by now!”

Such indeed proved to be the case. The high-power rifles, fired at close range, with hands excited yet none the less fairly accurate, had done their work in such fashion as might have finished three or four bears instead of one even as large as this one proved to be.

Alex turned once more to note the conduct of his young friends as they gathered at the side of the dead bear. He smiled a little bit grimly. Whereas their faces had lately been flushed and eager, they now were just a little pale, and he saw that they all were disposed to tremble as they stood.

“We’re well out of that,” said he, quietly. “That’s bad as the Parle Pas. Of course the odds

were in our favor, but with a bear of this size any man or any party is well out of it when they get him down. But here's your grizzly, young gentlemen."

"My, isn't he a whale!" said Jesse. "There's plenty of meat, I should think." [Pg 188]

"Yes, we've killed him," said Alex, "but what good is he to us? Grizzlies aren't good to eat, even when they are feeding on berries, as this one is."

"Never mind," said Rob; "this is a pretty good robe, I want to tell you, even if it is only in August. It is finer and closer than our Alaska bears; see how white on the shoulders and face. I believe he's about as ugly a customer, too, as most of our big Alaska bears, that live on fish."

"Yes," said Alex, "he's what you call a bald-face, and whether there's any truth in it or not, Injuns always say that these white-faced bears are the most savage. Look at his claws—they're white too. All of them perfect, however, which shows that he hasn't been digging among the rocks very much, but has been feeding in low country for quite a while. I suppose Moise would call this bear his cousin, and I doubt if he'd want to help skin him. But that's what we've got to do now, and it's no easy job either."

"We'll all help," said Rob.

"Well, you'd better go and help by finding some sort of rock for a whetstone," said Alex, "for I see I have left my file down in camp. There's nothing in the world takes the edge off [Pg 189] the best steel like skinning a big bear—the hide is like sandpaper inside."

"Here's something," said Jesse, picking up a flat stone, "and maybe we can sharpen the knives on it."

They all fell to work now, each with his own hunting-knife. Alex, of course, did most of the work, first ripping down the tough hide with his big buffalo knife, along each leg and up the middle of the body. Then giving each of the boys a leg, and himself keeping clear of the eager knife blades, they all began the work of skinning off the hide.

"Skin it close," said Alex, "and don't leave on much meat. The Injuns never skin a bear hide close, for the women like the fat, it seems, and they do all the scraping in camp. But this hide is so big that I'm not anxious to carry any more weight on it than I have to—I should not wonder if it would weigh seventy-five to a hundred pounds, the best we can do."

At last, however, they had the great hide free from the carcass, with the footpads and long claws attached, and the scalp all skinned carefully free from the skull at eyes, ears, and nose. Rob insisted on taking the skull also, although Alex demurred.

"We'll carry it, Alex," said he. "This is a splendid robe, I'm telling you, fine color, and not [Pg 190] worn nearly as badly as I should have expected in the summer-time. We're going to have a rug made out of it for Uncle Dick's house, and we want the skull, too. We'll carry that down the hill."

"All right," said Alex; "I'll have plenty to do with the rest of this old fellow."

He rolled the green hide into a pack, which he lashed tightly with some thongs, and once more using his belt as a pack-strap, which he rested on the top of his head, he managed to get under the weight of the green hide, and started off at a half trot, following the nearest valley down to the river where their camp was pitched.

Strong as the old hunter was, at times even he was willing enough to set down his pack and rest awhile, and to smoke a pipe. The boys, who were carrying his rifle and also making shifts at carrying the heavy bear skull, themselves were willing enough to join him when he stopped. At last, however, they got to the top of the bank under which their camp was pitched.

"Listen!" said Rob. "There's some one talking."

Alex nodded. They stepped up to the top of the bank and looked over.

XVII [Pg 191]

THE YOUNG ALASKANS' "LOB-STICK"

They saw sitting near the fire three men beside Moise, all of them Indians or half-breeds.

They were all of them talking and laughing eagerly, certainly not showing very much of the so-called Indian reserve, at the time the hunters peered over at them. Yet occupied as they were, their senses were always alert. One of them heard a twig snap, and turned his face to the bank.

Alex said nothing, but kicked over the edge of the bank the big rolled hide of the grizzly; after which, silently and with proper dignity, all the hunters, old and young, advanced down the bank and across the beach toward the fire. No one said anything until after the rifles were all lined up against the blanket rolls and the pipes of the men had been filled once more. Moise at length could be dignified no more, and broke out into a loud series of French, English, and Cree terms, all meant to express his delight and approval at the [Pg 192] success of the hunt. The three breeds also smiled broadly and nodded approvingly, once in a while saying a word in their own tongue to one another. They did not, however, seem to ask any questions regarding the hunt as yet. Alex spoke a word or so to Moise.

“She’s been my cousin,” said Moise, pointing indifferently to all three of the new-comers. He also pointed to their means of locomotion, a long and risky looking dugout which lay at the beach.

“He’ll gone on up the river,” said Moise, “from Hudson’s Hope.”

“Well, when they go,” said Alex, “I suppose you’ll have to give them something to eat, as you seem to be doing now. Only please don’t part with quite all our supplies—we’re going to need a little tea and flour for ourselves before we get out of here. You can tell these men there’s plenty of game in this part of the country, so they can easily make a hunt if they like.”

“Sure,” said Moise, “I’ll dream last night you’ll catch grizzly this time. But how we’ll go to put heem in boat, *hein*? S’pose we put that hide in canoe, she’ll sink unless we eat up all the grub pile.”

Alex told Moise to unroll the bear hide so that it might dry as much as possible. He then set [Pg 193] all of them at fleshing the hide, a task none of them seemed to relish. Afterward, he also added some sort of counsel in the Cree language which presently resulted in the three visitors tightening up their belts, taking their solitary rifle, and passing out of sight in the bush at the top of the bank.

“Where are they going?” asked John, curiously, of Moise.

“She’ll say she’ll go after bear meat,” said Moise. “Not got much meat, for she’ll ain’t seen much moose yet.”

“Well, they’re welcome to that grizzly meat,” grinned Alex. “I didn’t think they’d eat it. They must be starving. Make them up a little package of tinned stuff, Moise, and put it in their boat. I think we’ll need about all the bacon we’ve got, and they can use the fat of the bear better than we can. Give them some tea, and a little flour too. What do they say about the river below here at the big cañon?”

“Says bad water,” said Moise. “She’ll rose perhaps four, three, two inches to-day, maybe so, here, and that’s all same so many foots in the cañon. She’ll say best way to do is to take portage trail and leave those boat on west end of those cañon.”

“Yes, but we want to get our boats through,” said Alex, “although it must be a dozen miles [Pg 194] anyhow by way of the carrying trail, and not too good at that.”

“He’ll say,” resumed Moise, “s’pose we take those boat through to the big mountain—through big water, ver’ wide, with many islands—we’ll come on a place where boats can go up the bank, if plenty men carry them up. Then she’ll been ten mile, eight mile, to some place below the mountain. All the tam she’ll say best way is to go by horse, on the north side of the river, on the police trail from Fort St. John, s’pose we’ll could find that trail, an’ s’pose we’ll had some horse.”

“What do you say, Mr. Rob?” asked Alex. “We ought to get our boats down. Shall we haul out at the west end, or try for Hudson’s Hope?”

“I’d be in favor of getting down as far as we can,” said Rob. “We can reach the head of the mountain in a couple of days. I’m for moving on down and taking a chance on the rest of it! Of course we’ll have to portage the cañon somehow.”

“That suits me,” said John. And even Jesse, the youngest of the three, was all for continuing the journey as originally planned.

“All right,” said Alex, “I’m with you. We’re learning the game now, certainly, and I don’t [Pg 195] think we’ll find this part of the river any worse than it has been up above. There isn’t

anything bad marked on the map, anyhow, for quite a way."

At about this time, as they were all busied about the camping place, the boys noticed Alex and Moise step a little apart and begin to converse in low tones. From their looks and gestures, the boys gathered that the men were speaking of something in which they themselves were concerned, in just what way they could not tell. Presently Moise smiled and nodded vigorously. Approaching the camp-fire, he took up his short-handled ax and slung it at his back by a bit of thong. Then he stepped over to the tallest and straightest pine-tree which grew close to the water's edge thereabout. Active as a cat, he soon had climbed the lower branches, where, without pausing, he began to hack off, close to the trunk, every branch within his reach. Having done so, he climbed yet higher up and repeated the operation, as though it were his purpose to cut off nearly all the branches to the top of the tree. At first the boys thought he was gathering boughs for the beds, but as they were almost ready to break camp they could not understand this.

"Let's go up and help him, fellows!" exclaimed John. [Pg 196]

Alex restrained them. "No, you mustn't do that." John stopped rather abashed.

"You see," explained the old hunter, "you are concerned in this, so you must not help."

"I don't understand—" began John.

"Well, the truth is, we are going to give you a celebration. In short, we are making a monument for you young gentlemen, all of you."

Rob broke into the conversation. "A monument? But we're not dead, and aren't going to be soon!"

"This is a monument of the Far North. It is not necessary to die. We are making you what we call a 'lob-stick,' or 'lop-stick.'"

"I never heard of anything like that."

"Very likely not. Nor do I suppose there is one this far to the west, although there are some which we may see down the Peace River. Had Mackenzie and Fraser got their dues, each of them would have had a 'lob-stick' somewhere in here. Probably they were too busy in those days. But if either of them had had a 'lob-stick' made for him it would very likely be standing to-day. In that case every man who went past on the river would know why it had been given."

The boys were very much excited over this and demanded of Alex that he should explain more precisely these matters. [Pg 197]

"Well," said the old hunter, kindly, "each country has its own ways. When I was in London with General Kitchener I went to Westminster Cathedral, and saw there engraved in brass the names of men who had done deeds worth commemorating. It is our way in this country also to perpetuate the memory of deeds of goodness or of bravery, anything which is remarkable and worth remembering. Here and there along the Peace River, and far to the north on the Athabasca, you will see a tree trimmed like this, different from the others, and noticeable to all passers-by. Perhaps one tells where a man has saved the life of another man, or where a party have divided their food until all starved, or where some great deed was done, such as a fight with some animal. Any great event in our history we may keep in mind in this way. When the men go by on the river they think of that. We believe it may make their hearts stronger, or make them more disposed to do good or brave things themselves. It is our custom."

"But what have we done to deserve this?" demanded Rob.

"Moise and I and those other men who were here have the right to decide in regard to that," said Alex. "We would not be foolish enough to leave a 'lob-stick' for any light reason. To us it seemed that you were brave, considering your years, in facing the grizzly this morning as you did; also, that you are brave to undertake this trip, young as you are, and with us whom you did not know, across this wild country, which daunted even Mackenzie and Fraser in the old days. Having met in council, Moise and I have determined to do this. We think there is no other 'lob-stick' on the river above here, and that there is not apt to be." [Pg 198]

By this time Moise had lopped off all the branches of the tree except the top ones, which stood out like an umbrella. Descending from stub to stub, he now trimmed off all the remaining branches clear to the ground. As Alex had said, the tree stood straight and unmistakable, so that any *voyageur* on the river must notice it.

Rob took off his hat, and the others did the same. "We do not know how to thank you for

this honor, Alex and Moise," said he, "but we will try never to do anything which shall make you ashamed of us. If we do, you may come and cut down this tree."

"I believe it will stand," smiled Alex. "Not many men pass here in these days, but by and by [Pg 199] every man who does come here will know where this tree stands and why it was made a 'lob-stick.' They will measure distances by it on the river. And always when the *voyageurs* pass, or when they camp here near the tree, they will know your story. That is the way history is made in this country. I think that a hundred years from now, perhaps, men will know your story as well as you do that of Mackenzie and Fraser, although theirs was written in books. This is our custom. If it pleases you, we are very glad."

Hats still in hand, the boys now stepped up one by one and shook hands with Alex and Moise. When they left this camp they looked back for a long time, and they could see their commemorative tree standing out tall, slender, and quite distinct from all the others. No doubt it stands there to-day just as it was left in the honor of our young *voyageurs*.

XVIII

[Pg 200]

BAD LUCK WITH THE "MARY ANN"

Alex now went down to the boats and began to rearrange the cargo, from which the boys saw that in his belief it was best to continue the journey that evening, although it now was growing rather late. Evidently he was for running down ahead of the flood-water if any such should come, although it seemed to all of them that after all they need have no great fear, for the river had risen little if any since morning.

They determined to put the big bear hide in the *Mary Ann*, and shifted some of the burden of that boat to the *Jaybird*, folding up the long hide and putting it at the bottom of the canoe under the thwarts, so that the weight would come as low as possible. When the *Mary Ann* had received the rest of her necessary cargo she showed most of her bundles and packages above the gunwale, and Alex looked at the two boats a little dubiously, even after Moise had carried down to the dugout of his cousins such of the joint supplies as even his liberality [Pg 201] thought proper.

"We'll try her, anyhow," said Alex, taking a look up the river, which came rolling down, tawny now, and not white and green in its colors. So saying, they pushed off.

They must, at this camp, have been somewhere between twelve and twenty miles east of the mouth of the Parle Pas rapids, and they had made perhaps a dozen miles more that evening when they began to come to a place where again the mountains approached the stream closely. Here they could not see out at all from their place at the foot of the high banks which hedged them in. At nightfall they encamped in a wild region which seemingly never had known the foot of man. The continuous rush of the waters and the gloom of the overhanging forests now had once more that depressing effect which sometimes is not unknown even to seasoned *voyageurs*. Had they been asked, the young travelers must truthfully have replied that they would be glad when at last the mountains were passed and the prairie country to the eastward reached.

On the next day they continued among the high hills for several hours, although at length the river expanded into a wide reach which gave them a little free paddling. In such [Pg 202] contractions of the stream as they met it seemed to them that the rocks were larger, the water deeper, and each hour becoming more powerful than it had been. Advancing cautiously, they perhaps had covered thirty miles when they came to a part of the stream not more than three hundred yards wide, where the current was very smooth but of considerable velocity. Below this the mountains crowded still closer in to the stream, seeming to rise almost directly from the edge of the banks and to tower nearly two thousand feet in height.

"We must be getting close to the big portage now," said Rob to Moise, as they reached this part of the river.

"Yes," said Moise, "pretty soon no more water we'll could ron."

Moise's speech was almost prophetic. In less than half an hour after that moment they met with the first really serious accident of the entire journey, and one which easily might have resulted disastrously to life as well as to property.

They were running a piece of water where a flat rapid dropped down without much

disturbance toward a deep bend where the current swung sharply to the right. A little island was at one side, on which there had been imbedded the roots of a big tree, which had [Pg 203] come down as driftwood. The submerged branch of this tree, swinging up and down in the violent current, made one of the dangerous “sweepers” which canoemen dread. Both Rob and Moise thought there was plenty of room to get by, but just as they cleared the basin-like foot of the rapid the *Mary Ann* suddenly came to a stop, hard and fast amidships, on a naked limb of the tree which had been hidden in the discolored waters at the time.

As is usual in all such accidents, matters happened very quickly. The first thing they knew the boat was lifted almost bodily from the water. There was the cracking noise of splintering wood, and an instant later, even as the white arm of the tree sunk once more into the water, the *Mary Ann* sunk down, weak and shattered, her back broken square across, although she still was afloat and free.

Rob gave a sudden shout of excitement and began to paddle swiftly to the left, where the bank was not far away. Moise joined him, and they reached the shore none too soon, their craft half full of water, for not only had the keel to the lower ribs of the boat been shattered by the weight thus suspended amidships, but the sheathing had been ripped and torn [Pg 204] across, so that when they dragged the poor *Mary Ann* up the beach she was little more than the remnant of herself.

The others, coming down the head of the rapid a couple of hundred yards to the rear, saw this accident, and now paddled swiftly over to join the shipwrecked mariners, who luckily had made the shore.

“It’s bad, boys,” said Rob, hurrying down to catch the prow of the *Jaybird* as she came alongside. “Just look at that!”

They all got out now and discharged the cargo of the *Mary Ann*, including the heavy grizzly hide, which very likely was the main cause of the accident, its weight having served to fracture the stout fabric of the plucky little boat. When they turned her over the case looked rather hopeless.

“She’s smashed almost to her rail,” said Rob, “and we’ve broken that already. It’s that old grizzly hide that did it, I’m sure. We lit fair on top of that ‘sweeper,’ and our whole weight was almost out of the water when it came up below us. Talk about the power of water, I should say you could see it there, all right—it’s ripped our whole ship almost in two! I don’t see how we can fix it up this time.”

Moise by this time had lighted his pipe, yet he did not laugh, as he usually did, but, on the [Pg 205] contrary, shook his head at Alex.

“Maybe so we’ll could fix heem,” was all he would venture.

“Well, one thing certain,” said Rob, “we’ll have to go into camp right here, even if it isn’t late.”

“Did you have any fun in the other rapids above here?” asked John of Rob.

“No,” said Rob; “it was all easy. We’ve run a dozen or twenty a lot worse than this one. Not even the Parle Pas hurt us. Then I come in here, head paddler, and I run my boat on a ‘sweeper’ in a little bit of an easy drop like this. It makes me feel pretty bad, I’ll tell you that!”

They walked about the boat with hands in pockets, looking gloomy, for they were a little bit doubtful, since Moise did not know, whether they could repair the *Mary Ann* into anything like working shape again.

Alex, as usual, made little comment and took things quietly. They noticed him standing and looking intently down the river across the near-by bend.

“I see it too,” said Rob. “Smoke!”

The old hunter nodded, and presently walked on down the beach to have a look at the [Pg 206] country below, leaving Moise to do what he could with the broken boat. The boys joined Alex.

Presently they saw, not far around the bend, a long dugout canoe pulled up on the beach. Near by was a little fire, at which sat two persons, an old man and a younger one. They did not rise as the visitors approached, but answered quietly when Alex spoke to them in Cree.

XIX

[Pg 207]

NEW PLANS

"These men say," interpreted Alex, as he turned to the boys, "that it's sixteen to twenty miles from here to the end of the portage out of the hills, across the north bank, which cuts off the thirty miles of cañon that nobody ever tries to run. They say for a little way the river is wide, with many islands, but below that it narrows down and gets very bad. They're tracking stuff up-stream from the portage to a surveyors' camp which depends on their supplies. They say they will not sell their canoe, because they couldn't get up-stream, but that if we can get east of the portage there's a man, a sort of farmer, somewhere below there, who has a boat which perhaps he would sell."

"What good would that do us?" demanded John. "A boat twenty or thirty miles east of here across the mountains isn't going to help us very much. What we want is a boat now, and I don't see how we can get along without it. Won't they sell their canoe?"

"No, they don't want to sell it," said Alex; "they say they're under employment, and must [Pg 208] get through to the camp from Hudson's Hope on time. We couldn't portage a dugout, anyhow. But they say that we can go on up there with them if we like, and then come back and go around by the portage. What do you say, Mr. Rob?"

Rob answered really by his silence and his tight-shut jaw. "Well," said he, "at least I don't much care about turning back on a trail. But we'll have to split here, I think, unless we all go into camp. But part of us can go on through by the river, and the rest come on later. Maybe we can *cache* some of our luggage here, and have it brought on across by these men, if they're going back to Hudson's Hope."

"That sounds reasonable," said Alex, nodding. "I believe we can work it out."

He turned and spoke rapidly in Cree to the two travelers, with many gestures, pointing both up and down the stream, all of them talking eagerly and at times vehemently.

"They say," said Alex at last, "there's a place at the foot of the high bank above the cañon head where two or three men might be able to get a boat up to the carrying trail, although the landing is little used to-day. But they say if we could get across to the east end of the [Pg 209] cañon they could send men down by the trail after that other boat. They don't think we can get our boat across. They say they'll find us in a few days, they think, somewhere on the portage. They ask us if they can have what's left of our canoe. They say they'll take two dollars a day and grub if we want them to work for us. They don't say that no man could make the portage below here, but don't think we could do it with our crew. Well, what do you say now, Mr. Rob?"

"Why, it's all as easy as a fiddle-string," said Rob. "I'll tell you how we'll fix it. Jess, you and Moise go with these men on up to the surveyors' camp, and back down to Hudson's Hope—you can take enough grub to last you around, and you know that water is easy now. Alex and John and I will still have enough grub to last us through to the east side of the Rockies—we're almost through now. It might be rather hard work for Jess. The best way for him is to keep with Moise, who'll take good care of him, and it's more fun to travel than to loaf in camp. For the rest of us, I say we ought to go through, because we started to go through. We all know where we are now. Moise will bring the men and supplies around to meet us at [Pg 210] the east side. Even if we didn't meet," he said to Jesse, "and if you and Moise got left alone, it would be perfectly simple for you to go on through to Peace River Landing, two or three hundred miles, to where you will get word of Uncle Dick. There are wagon-trails and steamboats and all sorts of things when you once get east of the mountains, so there's no danger at all. In fact, our trip is almost done right where we stand here—the hardest part is behind us. Now, Jess, if you don't feel hard about being asked to go back up the river, or to stay here till these men come back down-stream, that's the way it seems best to me."

"I'm not so anxious as all that to go on down this river," grinned Jesse. "It isn't getting any better. Look at what it did to the old *Mary Ann* up there."

"Well, the main thing is not to get lonesome," said Rob, "and to be sure there's no danger. We'll get through, some time or somewhere. Only don't get uneasy, that's all. You ought to get around to us in a couple of days after you start on the back trail. How does it look to you, Alex?"

The old hunter nodded his approval. "Yes," said he; "I think the three of us will take the *Jaybird* loaded light and run down to the head of the mountain without much trouble. I [Pg 211] don't hear of anything particularly nasty down below here until you get nearly to the gorge. I think we had better hire these two breeds for a time, put them on pay from the time they

start up the river with Moise and Mr. Jess. They say they would like to go with Mr. Jess for their 'bourgeois'—that's 'boss,' you know. They also say," he added, smiling, "that they would very much like to have some sugar and tea."

After a time Alex rose, beckoned to the two breeds, and they all went back up the beach to the place where Moise by this time was building his camp-fire and spreading out the cargo of the *Mary Ann* to dry.

The two breeds expressed wonder at the lightness of the boats which they now saw, and rapidly asked in their language how the party had managed to get so far across the mountains with such little craft. But they alternately laughed and expressed surprise when they lifted the fragments of the *Mary Ann* and pointed out the nature of the injury she had sustained.

"Those man'll been my cousin, too," said Moise, pointing to the new-comers. "She'll been glad to see us, both of her. Her name is Billy and Richard. Ole Richard, his Injun name was been At-tick—'The Reindeer.' Also she'll say," he added, "she'll ain't got some tea nor sugar. *Allons!* I think maybe we'll eat some dish of tea." [Pg 212]

Soon they were seated on the ground, once more eating tea and bannock, piecing out their meal, which, by the way, was the third during the day, with some of the dried caribou meat which they had brought from far above.

"They'll ask me, my cousin," said Moise at last, his mouth full, "what we'll take for those busted canoe."

"What do you say, Mr. Rob?" asked Alex.

"I don't see how it's going to be worth anything to us," said Rob, "and it will take us a long time to patch her up at best. Tell them we'll give them what there is left of the *Mary Ann* if they'll take good care of Jess on the way around on the trail. And we'll pay them two dollars a day each besides."

When Moise had interpreted this speech, the older of the two breeds, who did not speak any English, rose and gravely shook each of the boys by the hand, then not saying anything further, he rose, took his big buffalo knife from its sheath, and proceeded to finish the distribution of the unfortunate *Mary Ann*, it being his plan evidently not to float her again, but to reduce her to a portable package which could be taken away in their other canoe, the dugout, on the beach below. [Pg 213]

"Well, there goes the *Mary Ann*," said John, sadly. "He is evidently going to make some kindling wood for himself."

"My cousin she'll say this boat must be took up to camp, where womans can work on heem," explained Moise. "He'll say he'll patch up those boat fine, for all the ribs she'll be bent all right an' not bust, and he'll make new keel an' new side rails—oh, you wait! Maybe so nex' year you'll come here you'll see those boat *Marie H'Ann* just so fine like she never was."

Whatever might have been the future plans for the *Mary Ann*, she soon resembled nothing so little as a Peterborough canoe. The old man calmly proceeded to separate the framework at bow and stern, so that he could crush the two sides of the canoe together after removing the ribs, which also he proceeded to do, one by one. Finally he had a pile of ribs and some broken splints which he laid carefully on the beach. Then he doubled back the splintered skin of the canoe, throwing away very little indeed of the fractured woodwork. At last he grunted some rapid words to the younger man, who seemed to be his son or a member of his family.

"My cousin she'll say he can took those boat in dugout all right down the river," said Moise. "She'll said to me also we'll go on Hudson's Hope with heem." Moise pointed to Jesse. Alex nodded and explained further the plan which had roughly been sketched out before that time by Rob and himself. In a little time the younger Cree had returned and poled the big dugout around the bend up to the place where they were now in camp. With some excited talk on the part of both, they now took the wreck of the *Mary Ann* and carried it up the bank to await their return. In different places along the great cottonwood dugout they added such supplies as Moise thought was right. The other supplies they then *cached*, and put over all the robe of the big grizzly, flesh side out, and heavily salted, weighting the edges down with heavy stones. [Pg 214]

The freeboard of the dugout was very slight when Jesse took his place, but seemed quite enough to satisfy the requirements of these *voyageurs*. The old man sprang into the stern of the dugout and motioned to Jesse to find a seat amidships. Meantime Moise was fixing up a

towing collar, which he attached to the line. It became apparent that the plan was for him and the younger breed to double on the tracking line, the old man remaining astern to do the steering.

"That's the way we get up a river in this country," said Alex to Rob, who was watching all this with interest. "I would bet they would do twenty-five miles a day with that rig they've got there—they go almost at a trot whenever there's an open bit of beach. When there is none, they pole or paddle." [Pg 215]

"I don't see how they do it," said Rob. "None of them have got anything on their feet but moccasins, and those men there have only pieces of moccasins at that. I should think the rocks would cut their feet in bits!"

"Well, you know, Moise and his 'cousins' are all 'same like dog,' as he would say," smiled Alex. "Your feet get used to it in time. These men have never known anything better, so they have got adjusted to the way they have to make their living. I doubt if they would wear hard-soled shoes if they had them, because they would say the soles would slip on the rocks. They're in the water about as much as they are out of it when they are tracking a boat up-stream. That's the way this country was conquered for the white men—by the paddle, pole, and tracking line."

"You forget Uncle Dick's way," chimed in John.

"How do you mean?"

"Railroads."

"Yes," said Alex, sighing, "they're coming some day, that's sure. But even the surveyors and engineers had to travel this way, and I think you will find even in the country where the wagons are it's quite a way from here to home." [Pg 216]

"Well, here we go," said Rob, after a time. "We mustn't waste daylight, you know."

By this time Jesse was looking very serious. Naturally he relied very much upon Moise, but he disliked to leave his friends, and especially to say good-by to Alex, on whom they all seemed to depend very much.

"It's the right thing to do, Jess," said John, after a time. "So far as that is concerned, you'll have it just as safe and a good deal easier than we will, in all probability. We'll meet you in a week or so at most."

"So long, then!" said Jesse, bravely waving his hand.

"So long!" said Rob and John. They waved their caps to one another, as each boat now began its way, the *Jaybird* carrying three passengers, and the long dugout, under the tracking line, taking what remained of the expedition of our *voyageurs*, who now separated for the time to take different directions on the stream they had followed thus far.

XX [Pg 217]

THE GORGE OF THE MOUNTAINS

For a time after the boats parted the crew of the *Jaybird* said very little as they pursued their way down-stream. The accident to the *Mary Ann* made them all thoughtful, and Rob was very careful in his position as bow paddler for the remaining boat. As the craft was pretty well loaded, Alex also was cautious. They took their time when they struck the head of any fast water, went ashore and prospected, and once in awhile lined down the boat instead of undertaking to run a fast chute. In spite of their additional caution, they ran mile after mile of the great river, until finally they felt themselves approaching the great eastern gate of the Rockies, whence there breaks out upon the lower country of the great Peace River the Unjingah, or Unjigab, as the natives formerly called it.

"Now," said Alex, at last, as he steered in along shore, "I think we'll stop and take a look around." [Pg 218]

They had been expecting the entrance to the actual gorge of the river now for the last three or four miles, for they had passed into the wide space, six or eight hundred yards in extent, described as lying above the cañon entrance, where the river, falling through a narrow passageway in the rocks, is condensed to a quarter of its average width.

The fatigue of the steady travel of the trip now began to show its effect upon them all, and the boys were quite ready to go into camp. Rob and John undertook to prepare the supper, and soon were busy arranging a little fireplace of stone, while Alex climbed up the bank to do some prospecting farther on.

"How does it look, Alex?" inquired Rob, when he finally returned. Alex waved a hand as a sign of his ignorance. "Hills and woods," said he. "Not so much spruce, but some pine and poplars, and plenty of 'bois picard'—what you call 'devil's club' on your side of the Rockies. I didn't know it grew this far east. I don't see how Mackenzie's men got up from below with a thirty-foot birch-bark," he added, after a time. "They must have come through something on this course, because they could not have taken the water very much below here, that's sure." [Pg 219]

"Is there any trail at all, Alex?" asked John.

"We've landed almost at the trail—just enough to call a trail for a foot man. It isn't used much to-day, that's sure. Pretty steep. Sandy farther up."

"Could we carry the boat through, do you think?" Rob looked anxiously up at the lofty bank which rose above them. Perhaps there was a little trace of stubbornness in Rob's make-up, and certainly he had no wish to abandon the project at this stage.

"We might edge her up the bank a little at a time," said Alex, "snubbing her up by the line. I suppose we could pass it from stump to stump, the same as *voyageurs* had to with their big birch-barks sometimes."

"We'll get her up somehow to-morrow," said Rob, "if you say it's possible."

"Then there'll be some more hills," smiled Alex; "eight or ten or twelve miles of rough country, I suppose."

"Time enough to trouble about that to-morrow, Alex. Sit down and have a cup of tea."

They still had one or two of their smoke-dried trout and a bit of the half-dried caribou which they had brought down with them. On the whole they made a very fair meal. [Pg 220]

"Try some of my biscuits, Alex," suggested John. "I baked them in the spider—mixed the dough all by myself in the sack, the way Moise does. Aren't they fine?"

"You're quite a cook, Mr. John. But I'm sorry we're so nearly out of meat," said Alex. "You can't travel far on flour and tea."

"Won't there be any game in the river below the Rockies?" asked Rob.

"Oh yes, certainly; plenty of bear and moose, and this side of the Peace River Landing, wherever there are any prairies, plenty of grouse too; but I don't think we'll get back to the prairies—the valley is over a thousand feet deep east of the mountains."

"Alex, how many moose have you ever killed in all your life?" asked Rob, curiously.

"Three hundred and eighty-seven," answered Alex, quietly.

The boys looked at each other in astonishment. "I didn't know anybody ever killed that many moose in all the world," said John.

"Many people have killed more than I have," replied Alex. "You see, at times we have to hunt for a living, and if we don't get a moose or something of the kind we don't eat."

"And how many bear have you ever killed, Alex?" [Pg 221]

"Twenty-odd grizzlies I have killed or helped kill," said Alex. "We rarely hunt them alone. Of black bear I don't know how many—we don't count them at all, there are so many of them in this country. But now I suppose pretty soon we will have to go over on the Hay River, or the Liard, farther north, to get good hunting. The farms are bringing in mowing-machines and threshing-machines into this country now. The game can't last forever at this rate."

"Well, I'm glad we made our trip this year," said Rob.

"We haven't made it yet!" smiled Alex. "But I think to-morrow we'll see what we can do."

They made an early start in the morning, their first task being that of trying to get the *Jaybird* up the steep face of the bluff which rose back of the camp, on top of which the trail, such as it was, made off through the shoulders of the mountains in a general course toward the east, the river sweeping in a wide elbow, thirty miles around, through its wild and impassable gorge, far to the south of them.

Taking a boat, even a little one, overland is no easy task, especially up so steep an ascent as this. Powerful as was the old hunter, it was hard enough to make much progress, and at times they seemed to lose as much as they gained. None the less, Alex was something of a general in work of this sort, and when they had gained an inch of progress he usually managed to hold it by means of snubbing the boat's line around the nearest stump or rock. [Pg 222]

"That's awfully strong line, isn't it?" said Rob. "You brought that over with you—we didn't have that in our country. We use rope. I was noticing how thin the line was which those two breeds had on their dugout yesterday."

"That's the sort they use all through the trade in the North," answered Alex. "It has to be thin, or it would get too waterlogged and heavy. You'll see how long it needs to be in order that the men on shore can get it over all the rocks and stumps and still leave the steersman headway on the boat. It has been figured out as the right thing through many years, and I have seen it used without change all my life."

"Well, it hasn't broken yet," said Rob. "But I think we had better piece it out by doubling it the best we can. We don't want to break it up at this work."

Little by little, Alex lifting the main portion of the weight, and the boys shoving at the stern the best they could, they did edge the *Jaybird* at last clear to the top of the bank, where finally she sat on level keel on a little piece of green among the trees. [Pg 223]

While they were resting John idly passed a little way to one side among the trees, when, much to his surprise, he almost stepped into the middle of a bunch of spruce-grouse. These foolish birds, although perhaps they had hardly seen a white man in all their lives, did no more than to fly up in the low branches of the trees. Alex called out in a low tone to John to come back. Then he fumbled in his pockets until he found a short length of copper wire, out of which he made a noose, fastening it to the end of a long stick.

"Now, Mr. John," said he, "there's lunch and supper both if you can get it. Let's see how good you are at snaring grouse."

John cautiously stepped up under the tree, expecting every minute that the birds would fly. Yet to his amazement they sat there stupidly looking down at him. Cautiously he raised the pole among the lower branches of the tree, and at length managed to slip the noose fairly about the neck of the nearest bird, when he gave it a jerk and brought it down fluttering. Passing from one side of the tree to the other, he repeated this, and soon had four of the fat, young birds in his possession—a feat which interested John in more ways than one, for, as has been indicated, he was very fond of good things to eat. [Pg 224]

They left the birds at the top of the bank, and, turning, brought up in a trip or so all the remainder of their scanty amount of baggage from the waterside below.

"I suppose it might be a good plan, now, to make a trip over to the east," said Alex, "and see what we can see."

They found after a long investigation that the trail, as nearly as they could trace it, soon swung away quite a distance from the course of the stream, rising steadily for three miles to a sort of high bench. It held this for several miles, finally approaching a steep slope and dropping sharply toward the level of the water, which was much lower than at the head of the cañon.

They discovered the eastern end of the portage to be close at the foot of a high and precipitous bank back of which grew scattered clumps of poplar-trees. This journey, which only Alex made throughout, took them several miles from the place where they had left the *Jaybird*, and they were tired enough by the time they had returned to their supplies. They made no further progress on that day. Alex told them they would find water at only one place on the portage, so they must camp here in any case for the night. [Pg 225]

XXI

[Pg 226]

THE PORTAGE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

"We might just as well do what we can toward getting across," said Alex the next day, "because now we know what there is ahead of us. I'd just as soon portage the boat a little way, at least, because it will only have to be done when Moise and the two breeds come to help us. Come ahead, then."

He swung the *Jaybird* up on his broad shoulders, and started off up a trail none too good at best. The boys, one on each side of the stern of the boat, helped all they could, and thus they made considerable progress, resting and carrying again and again, so that by noon the *Jaybird* was high and dry, and far enough indeed from the stream which had brought her on so long a journey.

In short, they kept at this work, doubling back to portage the cargo, and making a mid-way camp at the water, but always edging both their boat and their baggage farther on over the trail, until in the course of three days they actually finished the difficult portage, twelve [Pg 227] miles in length, alone, one man and two boys! This feat would have been impossible for any man less powerful and determined than Alex, and even he admitted himself to be very weary when at length they paused not far from the scattered buildings of the old port of Hudson's Hope.

They were now on the eastern side of the Rockies, and the river which they had been following here took on yet a different character. It had dropped down rapidly in the thirty miles of the cañon, and ran in a wide flood, some hundreds of yards across, rapid and indeed violent, but still steady in current, between banks which rose sharply to a thousand feet in height on either side. It was easy to be seen why the earlier traders thought they were among mountains, even before they reached the Rockies, because from the river they really could not see out over the country at all.

At the top of the steep bank above the river they left their boat and most of their supplies, with the intention of waiting until the arrival of the rest of their party. Meantime they paid a visit to the half-abandoned trading-post. There were only two or three log houses, where small stocks of goods sometimes were kept. There really were two posts here, that of the [Pg 228] Hudson Bay Company and of Revillon Frères, but it seemed that only the Hudson Bay post was occupied in the summer-time. Whether or not the trader in charge had any family or any associate they could not tell, but on the door of the log building they found a written notice saying that he was gone out bear hunting, and did not know when he would return.

"Well, this isn't much of a settlement, young gentlemen," said Alex, laughing, as he saw their plight. "But I think we can get through with what supplies we have and not trouble the Company at all."

"I always thought there was a good trail from here to St. John," said Rob. "At least, it's marked on the map."

"Not much of a trail!" said Alex. "I worked with the Mounted Police making trail from St. John as far as Half Way River. But the trail cuts across the corner there, and goes on up to Fort Grahame, on the Finlay River. The real highway here is the river yonder—it's easy water now all the way to St. John—that is, it will be if we can get a boat. I don't see any chance of one here, and can only hope that Moise and his 'cousins' can find that dugout down below here somewhere."

"If we were on the river down there, you wouldn't know there was any post here at all," [Pg 229] said Jesse. "You can't see any buildings."

"No," said Alex; "they're too high up on this bench. You can see the buildings at St. John as you go by, because they are close to the river, and so you can at Dunvegan. I don't imagine, however, we'll want to stop anywhere except in camp this side of Peace River Landing. It'll be fine from here down."

"My!" said John, "that certainly was hard work, portaging over that twelve miles there. They ought to have horses and carts, I should say."

"Hard to use 'em in here," smiled Alex. "As it is, it's better than trying to run the cañon. No one ever did get through there, so far as ever I heard."

"Yes," said Rob, "Sir Alexander Mackenzie must have come up through the cañon, according to his story. That is, he must have followed the big bend around, although, of course, he had to take his boat out and carry it through the roughest kind of country. That was worse than our portage here, and no man can tell how they made it through, from all you can learn through his story about it. You see, they didn't know this country then, and had to learn it as they went. If they had hit that cañon a month later on their journey the [Pg 230] men wouldn't have stood it—they'd have mutinied and killed Mackenzie, or have left him and started home."

Not caring yet to undertake their embarkment below the portage, they now strolled around here and there, intending to wait until their friends caught up with them. Off to the east they could see, from among the short, choppy hills, a country which seemed for the most part covered with continuous growth of poplars, sometimes broken with glades, or open

spaces.

“I’ve never been west of the Half Way River,” said Alex after a time, “but I know right where we are. We could almost throw our boat on the deck of the steamboat from this bank if we were as far east as St. John.”

“No steamboat for ours until we get to Peace River Landing,” said Rob.

“That’s right,” John assented. “We’ve come through this far, and we can finish the way we started—that is, if the other fellows catch up with us all right, and we get another boat. How long since we left them? I’ve sort of lost track of the time.”

“Fifth day,” said Rob. “It’s about time they were coming.”

His prediction was fulfilled that evening, when, as they were preparing the camp-fire for their supper, they heard a loud shout from the trail back of them. [Pg 231]

“Who’s that, Alex?” demanded John.

But even as he asked he had his answer. Such excited gesticulations, such cries of welcome, could come from no one but Moise.

XXII [Pg 232]

EAST OF THE ROCKIES

The two boys ran rapidly to meet Moise, and overwhelmed him with questions asked all at once.

“How’s everything?” demanded Rob, “and where’s Jesse?”

“Oh, those boy, she’ll been all right,” said Moise. “She’ll be on camp seex, h’eight mile below here, up above, maybe so. My cousins Billy and At-tick, come through with us—they’ll portage half-way to-day.

“But, *mes amis*,” broke out Moise; “there’s your boat! How you’ll got her through? S’pose you take wings an’ fly over those rock, *hein*? *Mon Dieu!*”

“We couldn’t wait any longer, Moise,” said Rob, “and we thought we had better be busy than idle. It was hard work, but Alex carried her over, and we didn’t have much left to pack except our rifles and ourselves.”

“Then you’ll not need any mans for help on the portage? All right. We’ll get some boat below.” [Pg 233]

“How far is it back to your camp, Moise?” demanded John.

“Maybe five, seex mile, maybe more—I’ll not keep track of heem.”

“Can we go back there to-night with you? I’d like to see Jess. May we go, Alex?”

“If you like,” answered the old hunter, quietly. “I’ll stay here and sleep, and if you care to, you can sleep there. I don’t doubt you will be glad to see your friend again, and he’ll be glad to see you.”

Tired as the boys had been, they were now so excited that they forgot their fatigue, and trotted along close to Moise as he now turned and struck a steady pace back on the portage trail. It was quite dark when at last they came out on a high bank above a level, at which a camp-fire was glowing. John and Rob put their hands to their mouths and gave a loud “Halloo!” They saw the smaller of the three figures at the fire jump to his feet. Then came the answering “Halloo!” of Jesse, who came scrambling up to meet them as they hurried down.

“You’re safe, then,” said Jesse. “Oh, but I’m glad you got here all right.”

“We’re glad to meet you safe and sound, too,” said Rob. “Yes, we finished the trip—we even carried our boat through by ourselves, and she’s there now on the bank of the stream, ready to go on down.” [Pg 234]

“That’s fine,” said Jess. “These two men, the cousins of Moise, have been as nice as you please. They said they could fix up the *Mary Ann*, and they were very glad to have her—there she is, all in a bundle. They are taking her across in sections. It was hard work getting

up the river, for it was all dirty and high. But we made it—I think we worked eighteen hours a day all the way round. Moise is a hustler, all right, besides being a cook."

"So is Alex a hustler, you may depend," rejoined Rob. "We couldn't have two better men. Well, here we are, together once more, safe and sound."

"What's the programme now, Rob?" asked John.

"We're to sleep here to-night—although it doesn't seem as though we'd have very many blankets," answered Rob. "And then in the morning I suppose Moise would better go and help Alex get the boat down to the river. But where's the other dugout we were to have, Moise?"

Moise talked awhile further with the two reticent breeds. [Pg 235]

"My cousin Billy, he'll say there's old man about five, seex mile below there, an' he'll got dugout," he said at last. "He'll say twenty dollar for dugout."

"That's cheaper than Peterboroughs," said Rob, smiling. "Anyhow, we've got to have it, because you can't buy canoes in shops here on the Peace River. You tell these two men, Moise, to go down there in the morning and have the old man, whoever he is, bring his canoe up as soon as he can to the port. We'll meet, I should say, about noon to-morrow, if all goes well. And as we're now through the worst of it and seem to have pretty fair weather yet, I shall be surprised if we don't get quite a bit farther east inside of the next twenty-four hours."

"Then hurrah for Uncle Dick!" said John. "He's somewhere down this river, and maybe it won't be so very long before we run across him."

"Hurrah! for all those boy also!" smiled Moise. "Pretty lucky, *hein*?"

XXIII

[Pg 236]

THE LAND OF PLENTY

Rob's plans were approved by Alex and Moise, and worked out so well that by noon of the next day the entire party had reassembled at the rendezvous. The *Jaybird* was the first boat to be loaded, the men getting her down the steep bank with small delay and taking a rapid run of a couple of miles or so down the river soon thereafter. After a little time they concluded to wait for the other men who had gone down the river-bank to secure the dugout of an old Indian, who, it seems, was known as Picheu, or the Lynx.

"I don't know about a dugout, Moise," said Rob. "There may be bad water below here."

"No, not very bad water," said Moise. "I'll ron heem on steamboat many tam! But those dugout she'll been good boat, too. I s'pose she'll been twenty foot long an' carry thousand pound all right."

"Well," Rob answered, "that will do us as well as a steamboat. I wonder why the old *voyageurs* never used the dugout instead of the birch-bark—they wouldn't have had to mend it so often, even if they couldn't carry it so easily." [Pg 237]

"I'll tell you, fellows," said Jesse, who was rather proud of his overland trip by himself, "the fur trade isn't what it used to be. At those posts you don't see just furs and traps, and men in blanket-coats, and dog-trains. In the post here they had groceries, and axes, and calico dresses, and hats, just like they have in a country store. I peeked in through the windows."

Alex smiled at them. "You see," said he, "you've been looking at pictures which were made some time ago perhaps. Or perhaps they were made in the winter-time, and not in the summer. At this season all the fur packets have gone down the trail, and they don't need dog-trains and blanket-coats. You ought to come up here in the winter-time to get a glimpse of the old scenes. I'll admit, though, that the fur-posts aren't what they were when I was a boy. You can get anything you like now, from an umbrella to a stick of toffy."

"Where?" asked John, suddenly, amid general laughter.

"The toffy? I'm sure we'll find some at Peace River Landing, along with plows and axes and sewing-machines, and all that sort of thing!" [Pg 238]

"But the people pay for them all with their furs?" inquired Rob.

“For the most part, yes. Always in this part of the country the people have lived well. Farther north the marten have longer fur, but not finer than you will find here, so that they bring just as good prices. This has always been a meat country—you’ll remember how many buffalo and elk Mackenzie saw. Now, if the lynx and the marten should disappear, and if we had to go to farming, it still would be the ‘Land of Plenty,’ I’m thinking—that’s what we used to call it. If we should go up to the top of these high banks and explore back south a little bit, on this side of the Smoky, you’d see some of the prettiest prairies that ever lay out of doors, all ready for the plow. I suppose my people some time will have to use the plow too.”

“Yes,” assented Rob, “I remember Mackenzie’s story, how very beautiful he found this country soon after he started west on his trip.”

“My people, the Crees, took this country from others long ago,” said Alex, rather proudly. [Pg 239] “They came up the old war-trail from Little Slave Lake to the mouth of the Smoky, where the Peace River Landing is now. They fought the Beavers and the Stoneys clear to the edges of the Rockies, where we are now. They’ve held the land ever since, and managed to make a living on it, with or without the white man’s help. Some of us will change, but men like At-tick, the old Indian who brought Jess across the trail, and like old Picheu, below here, aren’t apt to change very much.”

John was once more puzzling at the map which the boys had made for themselves, following the old Mackenzie records. “I can’t figure out just where Mackenzie started from on his trip, but he says it was longitude 117° 35′ 15″, latitude 56° 09′. Now, that doesn’t check up with our map at all. That would make his start not very far from the fort, or what they call the Peace River Landing to-day, I should think. But he only mentions a ‘small stream coming from the east,’ although Moise says the Smoky is quite a river.”

“Most people think Mackenzie started from Fort Chippewayan,” said Alex, “but as a matter of fact, he wintered far southwest of there, on the Peace River, somewhere between three [Pg 240] hundred and four hundred miles south and west of Fort Vermilion, as I gather from the length of time it took him to get to the edge of the Rockies, where we are now. He mentions the banks getting higher as he went south and west. When you get a couple of hundred miles north of the Landing the banks begin to get low, although at the Landing they’re still almost a thousand feet high above the water-level, at least eight hundred feet, I should say.”

“Well,” said Rob, “we know something about this country ourselves now, and we’ll make a map of it some time, perhaps—a better one than we have now.”

“Yes,” said Jesse, “but who can draw in that horse-trail from Hudson’s Hope to the head of the steamboat transport? I’d like to see that trail!”

“I suppose we could get on the steamboat some time before long if we wanted to,” said John.

“No,” said Alex, “hardly again this summer, for she’s made her last trip with supplies up to Fort St. John by now.”

“We don’t want any steamboat, nor anything else,” said Rob, “except to go on down on our own hook, the way we started. Let’s be as wild as we can!”

“We’re apt to see more game from here down than we have any place on the trip,” said [Pg 241] Alex. “You know, I told you this was the Land of Plenty.”

“Bimeby plenty bear,” said Moise. “This boy Billy, he’ll tol’ me ol’ Picheu he’ll keel two bear this last week, an’ he’ll say plenty bear now all on river, on the willows.”

“Well, at any rate,” said Alex, “old Picheu himself is coming.”

“How do you know?” asked Jesse.

“I hear the setting-pole.”

Presently, as Alex had said, the dugout showed its nose around the bend. At-tick and Billy, Jesse’s two friends, were on the tracking line, and in the stern of the dugout, doing most of the labor of getting up-stream, was an old, wrinkle-faced, gray-haired and gray-bearded man, old Picheu himself, in his time one of the most famous among the hunters of the Crees, as the boys later learned. He spoke no English, but stood like some old Japanese war-god on the bank, looking intently from one to the other as they now finished their preparations for re-embarking. He seemed glad to take the money which Rob paid him for the dugout and shook hands pleasantly all around, to show his satisfaction.

The boys saw that what Moise had said about the dugout was quite true. It was a long craft, [Pg 242]

hewed out of a single log, which looked at first crankier than it really was. It had great carrying capacity, and the boys put a good part of the load in it, which seemed only to steady it the more. It was determined that Rob and Moise should go ahead in this boat, as they previously had done in the *Mary Ann*, the others to follow with the *Jaybird*.

Soon all the camp equipment was stowed aboard, and the men stood at the edge of the water ready to start. Their old friends made no comment and expressed little concern one way or the other, but as Rob turned when he was on the point of stepping into the leading boat he saw Billy standing at the edge of the water. He spoke some brief word to Alex.

“He wants to say to Mr. Jess,” interpreted Alex, “that he would like to make him a present of this pair of moccasins, if he would take them from him.”

“Would I take them!” exclaimed Jesse; “I should say I would, and thank him for them very much. I’d like to give him something of mine, this handkerchief, maybe, for him to remember me by.”

“He says,” continued Alex, “that when you get home he wishes you would write to him in [Pg 243] care of the priest at St. John. He says he hopes you’ll have plenty of shooting down the river. He says he would like to go to the States when he gets rich. He says his people will talk about you all around the camp-fire, a great many times, telling how you crossed the mountains, where so few white men ever have been.”

“I’ll tell you what, boys,” said Rob, “let’s line up and give them all a cheer.”

So the three boys stood in a row at the waterside, after they had shaken hands once more with the friends they were leaving, and gave them three cheers and a tiger, waving their hats in salutation. Even old Picheu smiled happily at this. Then the boys sprang aboard, and the boats pushed out into the current.

XXIV [Pg 244]

THE WHITE MAN’S COUNTRY

They were passing now between very high banks, broken now and then by rock faces. The currents averaged extremely strong, and there were at times runs of roughish water. But gradually the stream now was beginning to widen and to show an occasional island, so that on the whole they found their journey less dangerous than it had been before. The dugout, although not very light under the paddle, proved very tractable, and made a splendid boat for this sort of travel.

“You’d think from the look of this country,” said John to Alex, “that we were the first ever to cross it.”

“No,” said the old hunter, “I wish we were; but that is far from the truth to-day. This spring, before I started west to meet you, there were a dozen wagons passed through the Landing on one day—every one of them with a plow lashed to the wagon-box. The farmers are coming. If you should stop at Dunvegan you’d hardly know you were in Mackenzie’s old [Pg 245] country, I’m afraid. And now the buffalo and the elk are all gone, where there used to be so many. It is coming now to be the white man’s country.”

“You’ll have to come up to Alaska, where we live, Alex,” said John. “We’ve got plenty of wild country back inside of Alaska yet. But even there the outside hunters are killing off the bear and moose mighty fast.”

“Yes,” said Alex, “for sport, for their heads, and not for the meat! My people kill for meat alone, and they could live here forever and the game would still be as thick as ever it was. It’s the whites who destroy the new countries.”

“I’m beginning to like this country more and more,” said Jesse, frankly. “Back in the mountains sometimes I was pretty badly scared, the water roared so much all the time. But here the country looks easier, and the water isn’t so strong. I think we’ll have the best part of our trip now.”

At that instant the sound of a rifle-shot rang out from some point below them on the river. The dugout had just swung out of sight around the bend. “That’s Rob’s rifle!” exclaimed John.

“Very likely,” said Alex. “Bear, I suppose.”

The crew of the *Jaybird* bent to their paddles and presently passed in turn about the sharp bend and came up alongside the dugout, which lay along shore in some slack water. Rob was looking a trifle shamefaced. [Pg 246]

“Did you miss him?” asked John, excitedly.

“Well,” said Rob, “I suppose you’d call it a miss—he was running up the bank there about half a mile away. You can see him going yet, for that matter.”

Sure enough, they could, the animal by this time seeming not larger than a dog as it scrambled up among the bushes on the top of the steep precipice which lined the bank of the river.

“He must have been feeding somewhere below,” said Rob, “and I suppose heard us talking. He ran up that bank pretty fast. I didn’t know it was so hard to shoot from a moving boat. Anyhow, I didn’t get him.”

“He’ll was too far off,” said Moise. “But those boy she’ll shoot right on his foot all the time. I think she’ll hit him there.”

“Never mind, Mr. Rob,” said Alex. “We’ve got plenty of river below us, and we’re sure to see more bear. This river is one of the best countries for black bear there is this side of the Hay or the Liard.”

Both boats proceeded at a leisurely pace for the remainder of this stage, no one being anxious to complete the journey to the Peace River Landing any earlier than was necessary, for the journey down the river was of itself interesting and pleasant. All the landscape continued green, although it was late in the summer. The water, however, was now less brilliant and clear than it had been in the mountains, and had taken on a brownish stain. [Pg 247]

They encamped that night at a little beach which came down to the river and offered an ideal place for their bivouac. Tall pines stood all about, and there was little undergrowth to harbor mosquitoes, although by this time, indeed, that pest of the Northland was pretty much gone. The feeling of depression they sometimes had known in the big mountains had now left the minds of our young travelers, and they were disposed, since they found themselves well within reach of their goal, to take their time and enjoy themselves.

“Moise, tell us another story,” demanded Jesse, after they had finished their evening meal.

“What kind of story you’ll want?” inquired Moise.

“I think we’d rather have something about your own country, about animals, the same as you told us back in the mountains, perhaps.” [Pg 248]

“Well,” said Moise, “I’ll told you the story of how the ermine he’ll got the end of his tail black.”

XXV [Pg 249]

HOW THE ERMINE GOT HIS TAIL BLACK

“Long tam ’go,” said Moise, “before my onkle he’ll been born, all peoples lived in the woods, and there was no Companee here for trade. In those day there was no tobacco an’ no rifle—those was long tam ’go—I don’ know how long.

“In those tam all the people he’ll talk with Wiesacajac, an’ Wiesacajac he’ll be friendly all tam with these peoples. All the animal that’ll live in the wood he’ll do all right, too. Only one animal he was bad animal, and those was what you call wissel (weasel). This wissel is what you call ermine some tam. He’ll be mighty smart animal. In summer-tam, when grass an’ rock is brown, he’ll go aroun’ brown, sam as the rock an’ the leaf. In summer-tam the wissel he’ll caught the hare an’ the partridge, an’ he’ll live pretty good, heem.

“Now, in the winter-tam most all the animals in the wood he’ll go white. Those hare, he’ll get white just same color as the snow. Those *picheu*, those lynx, he’ll get gray, almost white. The ptarmigan, he’ll get white, too, so those owl won’ see heem on the snow; an’ the owl he’ll get white, so nothing will see heem when he goes on the snow. Some tam up north the wolf he’ll be white all over, an’ some fox he’ll also be white all same as the snow. [Pg 250]

“But the *Cigous*, or wissel, he’ll stay brown, with white streak on his neck, same like he’ll been in the summer-tam. When he’ll go on the hont, those rabbeet, she’ll saw *Cigous* come,

an’ he’ll ron off, so *Cigous* he’ll go hongree.

“Now, *Cigous* he’ll get this on his min’, an’ he’ll sit down one tam an’ he’ll make a pray to Kitchai-Manitou, an’ also to Wiesacajac, an’ he’ll pray that some tam he’ll be white in the winter-tam, the same as the snow, the same as those other animal, so he’ll catch the meat an’ not go hongree.

“‘Oh, Wiesacajac,’ he’ll pray, ‘what for you’ll make me dark this a-way, when I’ll been hongree? Have pity on me!’

“Well, Wiesacajac, he’ll been kin’ in his heart, an’ he’ll hear those *Cigous* pray, an’ he’ll say, ‘My frien’, I s’pose you’ll not got any meat, an’ you’ll ask me to take pity on you. The reason why I’ll not make you white like other animal is, you’ll been such thief! Oh, *Cigous*, s’pose [Pg 251] you’ll go live two week all right, an’ not steal, an’ not tell any lie to me, then I’ll make you white, all same like other animals.’

“‘Oh, Wiesacajac,’ say *Cigous*, ‘it’s ver’ hard to be good for two week an’ not steal, an’ not tell lie. But I’ll try to do this thing, me!’

“Now, in two week all the family of *Cigous* he’ll not got anything to eat, an’ he’ll almost starve, an’ he’ll come in out of the woods an’ sit aroun’ on the village where the people live. But all the people can see *Cigous* an’ his family because he’ll all be brown, an’ he’ll show on the snow, plain.

“Now, *Cigous* he’ll got very hongree, an’ he’ll got under the blanket in the lodge where the people live. Bimeby he’ll smell something cook on the fire. Then he’ll go out in the bush, an’ he’ll pray again to Wiesacajac, an’ he’ll say, ‘Oh, Wiesacajac, I’m almost white now, so I can get meat. But it’s ver’ hard tam for me!’

“Wiesacajac, he’ll tol’ heem to go back in an’ not lie an’ not steal, an’ then see what he’ll got.

“*Cigous*, he’ll been happy this tam, an’ he’ll go back on the lodge an’ smell that cooking some more. He’ll not know it, but by this tam Wiesacajac has made heem all white, tail an’ [Pg 252] all. But *Cigous* he’ll smell something cook in the pot, an’ he’ll say, ‘I wonder what is cook in that pot on the fire.’

“He’ll couldn’t stan’ up high to reach his foots in the pot, so he say, ‘Ah, ha! My tail he’s longer than my foots. I’ll stick my tail in the pot, an’ see what is cook that smells so good.’

“Now, *Cigous* not know his tail is all white then. But Wiesacajac, he’ll see *Cigous* all the tam, an’ he’ll turn the meat in the pot into pitch, and make it boil strong; so *Cigous* when he’ll stick his tail in the pot, he’ll stick it in the pitch, an’ when he’ll pull out the end of his tail, the end of it will be all black!

“Then *Cigous* he’ll go out on the snow, an’ he’ll look aroun’, an’ bimeby Wiesacajac he’ll seen heem an’ he’ll say, ‘Ah, *Cigous*, what’s on your tail, because I’ll see it is all black on the end?’

“*Cigous* he’ll turn aroun’ an’ ron aroun’ an’ aroun’ on a reeng, but all the tam he’ll see the black spot on his tail, an’ it won’t come off.

“‘Now, *Cigous*,’ says Wiesacajac, ‘I’ll been good spirit, else surely I’ll punish you plenty for stealing when you tol’ me you’ll be good animal. Already I’ll made you white, all but your tail. Now that the people may always know you for a thief, you an’ all your family must have [Pg 253] black spot on tail in the winter-tam. I would make you black all over, *Cigous*, but I have take pity on your family, who must not starve. Maybe so you could caught meat, but all the tam your tail will mark you for a thief!’

“From that time,” said Moise, concluding, “the ermine, *Cigous*, has always been a good honter. But always he’s brown in the summer-tam, an’ in the winter-tam he isn’t not quite white. That is because he is such thief. I know this is so, because my onkle she’ll tol’ me. I have finish.”

XXVI

[Pg 254]

TRAILING THE BEAR

“I’ll tell you what,” said John, in the morning, as they still lingered at their pleasant camp; “we’re not apt to have a much nicer stopping place than this, so why not make a little

hunt, and come back here to-night?”

“Not a bad idea,” said Alex.

“What’s the best way to plan it out?” asked John. “Ought we to go by boats down the river, and then come back here?”

“I would suggest that Moise and Rob take the dugout and go down the river a little way,” replied Alex, “and that you and I and Jess climb to the top of the bank, taking our time, to see if we could find any moose sign, or maybe a bear trail in the country back from the river. In that way we could cover both the top and bottom of the valley. We might find a grizzly higher up, although we are out of the grizzly country here by rights.”

This plan suggested by Alex was followed out, and at no very late hour in the morning camp was deserted by our travelers, whose hunting spirit seemed still unabated. They did not meet again until almost dusk. Alex and his companions found no fresh game trails on the heights above, and, in short, concluded their hunt rather early in the afternoon and returned to camp, where they remained for some hours before at length they saw the dugout, which the boys had christened *The Plug*, slowly making its way up the river. [Pg 255]

John and Jesse, themselves pretty tired from their long walk, summoned up energy enough to go down to the beach and peer into the dugout. They saw no sign of any game. They did not, however, ask any questions, for they were learning the dignity of Indian hunters. Alex looked at Moise, but asked him no question. He noticed that Moise was whistling, and apparently not very unhappy, as after a time he went about making his evening fire.

“So you didn’t get any bear, Mr. Rob?” said Alex at last.

“No, not quite,” said Rob, “but I ought to have got one—I had a pretty fair shot, although it was rather dark where the bear was standing.”

Alex spoke a few words to Moise in the Cree language. [Pg 256]

“Never mind,” said he to Rob at length. “We’ll get him to-morrow very easily.”

“So Moise said to me; but I don’t see how he knows. The bear started off as though he weren’t hit at all. He came down to the edge of the wood at a high bank and looked right at us when we were pulling the boat up the stream. You know, the canoe is rather teetery, but I shot as well as I could, and thought I hit him. He turned around, and I shot at him again. But he didn’t stop. Moise thought we had better come on in because it was so late.”

“Sure,” said Moise, “I’ll tol’ those boy he’ll shoot those bear two tam, once in the front an’ once in the back. With those rifle, he’ll not go far. To-morrow we’ll catch heem easy.”

“He was a big bear, too,” said Rob, “although not as big as our grizzly—just a black bear, that’s all. I don’t like to cripple any animal and then lose it.”

“I don’t think we’ll lose this one,” said Alex, reassuringly.

The judgment of the old hunters proved to be correct, for on the next day, when all hands dropped down the river to the point where Rob had shot at the bear, it was not five minutes before they found the trail where a considerable amount of blood showed that the bear had been badly wounded. At once they began to follow this trail back into the high country away from the river. [Pg 257]

Alex did not ask any questions, and there was little talk between him and Moise. Moise, however, took the lead on the trail. Alex did not even carry his rifle, but loitered along, picking berries and enjoying himself, after his own fashion.

“Keep close up to Moise, young gentlemen,” he said. “This bear, although only a black bear, is apt to be very ugly if you find him still alive. If he comes for you, kill him quick. I doubt, however, very much whether he will be alive when we come up with him.”

“How do you know about that, Alex?” demanded John.

“It’s our business to know about such things,” answered Alex, smiling.

All the boys now could see where the bear had scrambled up the bank, and where it had gone through the bushes on its way to the forest, leaving a plain blood trail on the ground.

“Moise will lead on the trail,” said Alex. “He’s more Injun than I am. In some ways I can beat him, in others he can beat me. He is one of the best trailers on the river.” [Pg 258]

Moise now was a different man from the talkative companion of the camp. He was very silent, and advanced cautiously along the trail, his eyes studying every record of the ground

and cover which had been left by the wounded animal. Once in a while he pointed silently to a broken bush or to a drop of blood. After a while he stopped and pointed to a tree whose bark was ripped off.

“Heem awful mad,” whispered Moise. “S’pose you’ll seen heem here, he’ll fight sure. He’ll bite all the tree an’ fight the bush.”

After a while Alex showed them a deep excavation in the soft dirt.

“He’ll dig hole here an’ lie down,” said Moise. “Plenty mad now, sure!”

They kept on after the trail, following it deeper into the forest and higher up the slope, minute after minute, for a time which seemed short, but which really was over an hour and a half in extent. Moise still remained silent and not in the least excited, and Alex still continued to pick his berries and eat them leisurely as he followed along in the rear. Once they lost the trail on an open hillside covered with wintergreen plants, and the boys thought the hunt was over. Moise however, swung around like a hound on the trail, clear to the [Pg 259] other side of the hill, and in the course of a few minutes picked up the spoor again when it struck softer ground beyond. They passed on then, moving upward deeper into the forest for some minutes, until at length Moise turned about.

“About five minute now, we’ll found heem,” said he, quietly.

“How does he know, Alex?” demanded Jesse, who was farther to the rear.

“Easy enough,” answered Alex. “He says the bear has lain down ten times now, and he would not do that unless he was very weak. He would travel as far as he could. Now he is lying down very often. I’m sorry, but I don’t think we’ll get any fight out of this bear. Moise thinks you’ll find him dead.”

Surely enough, they had hardly gone another hundred yards before Moise, stepping back quietly, pointed through an opening in the bushes. There, lying before them in a little glade, lay a vast, black body, motionless.

Rob grounded his rifle-butt, almost in disappointment, but later expressed his satisfaction.

“Now, boys, I got him,” said he, “and I guess it’s just as well he didn’t have to wait till now for us to come. But speaking of trailing, Moise, you certainly know your business.” [Pg 260]

“Oh yes,” said Moise, “every man in this country he’ll mus’ know how to trail, else he’ll go hongree some tam. My onkle she’ll taught me how for follow trail.”

“Well,” said Alex, “here’s some more meat to get down to the boat, I suppose, and we need meat badly, too. We ought not to waste it, but if we take it all on board we’ll have to hurry to get down to Peace River Landing with it, because it is more than we can possibly eat.”

The two older hunters now drew their big buffalo knives and fell to work skinning and dismembering the carcass of the bear, the boys helping as they could. It was plainly the intention of Alex and Moise to make one trip with meat and hide.

In order to carry the green bear hide—always a slippery and awkward thing to pack—Moise now showed a little device often practised, as he said, among the Crees. He cut two sharpened sticks, each about a couple of feet in length, and placing these down on the hide, folded the hide around them, so that it made a sharp, four-cornered pack. He lashed the hide tightly inside these four corners, and then lifting it up and down, smilingly showed the [Pg 261] boys that the green hide now would not slip, but would remain in place, thus making a much better pack. He slung his belt at the corners of the pack, and then motioned to Alex to throw up on top of his pack one of the hams of the bear which had been detached from the carcass. When Moise got his load he started off at a trot, taking a course different from that on which they had come.

Alex in turn used his belt and some thongs he had in making a pack of the remainder of the meat, which, heavy as it seemed, he managed to shoulder, leaving the boys nothing to carry except the skull of the bear, which they had expressed a wish to retain with the robe.

“Do you suppose we’ll ever get to be men as strong as that?” asked Rob in a whisper, pointing to the solitary figure of the breed now passing rapidly down the slope.

“I didn’t know anybody was so strong,” admitted Jesse. “They must be pretty good men, I’m thinking.”

“But which way are they going?” asked John. “Do you suppose they’re lost?”

“We’ll follow and see,” answered Rob. “They seem to know their own way pretty well.”

They now kept Alex in sight, and in the course of about fifteen or twenty minutes came up with Moise, who was sitting down, resting his back against the root of a tree. [Pg 262]

“I suppose you’ll know where we are now?” he asked of Rob.

Rob shook his head. “No, I don’t recognize the place.”

Moise pointed with a thumb to a point just back of the tree. Rob stepped over, and gazing down, saw a deep hole in the ground.

“Why, I know!” said he. “This is one of the holes the bear dug—one of the first ones, I should think.”

“Oh, I see, you cut across-lots and didn’t follow the back trail.” John was as much surprised as Rob.

“No,” said Alex, “we saved perhaps half a mile by coming straight across, for, you see, the bear was wandering all around on the hillside as he was trying to get away. You’ll find the boats are directly below us here, and not very far away.”

“This,” said Rob, “seems to me pretty wonderful! You men certainly do know how to get along in this country. I’d never have thought this was the direct course, and if I had been in there alone I certainly would have followed the bear’s trail back—if I could have found it.”

Yet it all came out quite as Alex and Moise had planned, for in less than ten minutes more they scrambled down the steep bank to the rocky beach where the two boats lay. The men distributed the hide and meat between the two, covering up both with green willow boughs. [Pg 263]

“Now,” said Alex, “for a fast run down this river. We’ve got more meat than we can use, and we must get to the Landing.”

XXVII [Pg 264]

THE END OF THE OLD WAR-TRAIL

It is possible to make twenty-five miles a day with pole and tracking-line against a current even so strong as that of the Peace River. Twice or thrice that distance down-stream is much easier, so that no greatly difficult journey remained ahead of our travelers between their last camp and the old Hudson Bay post known as Peace River Landing, which perhaps Moise would have called the end of the old war-trail from Little Slave Lake—the point near the junction of the Peace and Smoky rivers which has in it so much strategic value, whether in war or in peace. The two boats, pausing only for the briefest possible encampments, now swung on down, day after day, not pausing at the ultimate western settlements, St. John and Dunvegan, but running on down, between high and steep banks, through a country clean and beautiful with its covering of poplar growth. At last, well wearied with steady paddling, they opened up a great “V” in the valley, so that they knew they were at the junction of the Smoky and the Peace, and hence at the end of this stage of their journey. [Pg 265]

It was evening at the time of their arrival, and Rob was much for finishing the journey that day, yet yielded to the wish of Moise, who thought it would be better to camp some few miles above the town, although almost within sight of the great ferry which here crosses the main river from the wagon trail of the north bank.

“We’ll must go in like real *voyageurs*,” insisted Moise. “We’ll not look good to go in to-night —too much tire an’ dirt.”

In the morning Moise appeared at the breakfast table attired in his best. He had in some way managed a clean shave, and now his long, black hair was bound back with a gaudy handkerchief, his old shirt replaced by a new and bright one, and his old moccasins discarded for a pair of new and brilliantly beaded ones, so that in all he made a brave figure of a voyageur indeed. Alex also in a quiet way had followed the lead of Moise. The boys themselves, falling into the spirit of this, hunted through their war-bags for such finery as they could compass, and decked themselves out in turn with new moccasins, new gloves, and new kerchiefs for their necks. Moise looked on them all with the utmost approbation. [Pg 266]

“It’s the best for return like some *braves hommes*,” said he. “Well, *en avant*!”

They all bent gaily to the paddles now, and sped down the flood of the great stream until at length they sighted the buildings of the Hudson Bay post, just below the ferry. Here, finishing with a great spurt of speed, they pulled alongside the landing bank, just below

where there lay at mooring the tall structure of the Hudson Bay steamboat, *Peace River*, for the time tarrying at this point. Moise rolled his paddle along the gunwale, making the spray fly from the blade after the old fashion of the *voyageurs* ending a journey, and the boys followed his example. Many willing hands aided them to disembark. A little later they found themselves ready for what seemed apt to be one of their last encampments.

A tall breed woman stood at a little distance up the bank, silently awaiting their coming. Moise pointed to her with no great emotion.

“He’s my womans,” said he. “He’ll fix the camp for us an’ take care of those meat, yes.”

MOISE AT HOME

Moise and his wife met, undoubtedly glad to see each other, though making no great show at the time. Pretty soon the breed woman came down and lifted the bear hides and the meat from the boats. [Pg 267]

“She’ll fix up the hides for you, all right,” said Alex, quietly. “As we don’t need the meat, and as I don’t live here, but a hundred miles below on Little Slave, I think we had better give Moise all of the meat for himself and his people—he probably has fifty or more ‘uncles’ and ‘cousins’ in this village. Meantime, I think it might be well for us to make a little camp over here in the cottonwoods just back of the lodges.”

They saw now on the flat between the river and the Company post quite a little village of Indian conical tepees, from which now came many Indians and half-breeds, and a multitude of yelping dogs.

The boys, aided by one or two taciturn but kindly natives, who seemed to know who they were, and so lent a hand without any request, soon had their simple little camp well under way. At about this time they were approached by a stalwart man wearing the cap of the Hudson Bay Company’s river service.

“I’m Saunders, of the Hudson Bay Company,” said he, “and I suppose you’re the nephews of Mr. Wilcox, an engineer, who has gone down the river?” [Pg 268]

“Yes, sir,” said Rob; “we have just come down, and we expected to meet him below here.”

“I have a letter for you,” said Captain Saunders. “Mr. Wilcox came up from Little Slave awhile back, and went down to Fort Vermilion with us on our last trip—I’m the captain of the boat over yonder. He asked me to bring you down to Vermilion on our next run. I suppose the letter explains it all.”

“Yes, sir,” said Rob, after reading it and handing it to the others. “That’s about the size of it. We thought our trip was ended here, but he asks us to come on down and meet him at Fort Vermilion! It seems a long way; but we’re very glad to meet you, Captain Saunders.”

They all shook hands, and the grizzled veteran smiled at them quizzically.

“Well, young gentlemen,” said he, “I hardly know what to think about your trip, but if you really made it, you’re lucky to get through in as good shape as you have.”

“We had a perfectly bully time, sir,” said Rob. “We lost one of our boats west of the cañon, but we got another this side, and we’re all safe and sound, with every ounce of our property along.” [Pg 269]

“You have the best of me, I must admit,” said the Hudson Bay man, “for I have never been west of St. John myself, although we make the Dunvegan run regularly all the time, of

course. They tell me it is pretty wild back there in the mountains."

"Yes, sir," said Rob. "The water's pretty fast sometimes; but, you see, we had two good men with us, and we were very careful."

"You had pretty fair men with *you*, too, didn't you, Alex?" smiled Saunders, as the tall half-breed came up at that time.

"None better," said Alex, quietly. "We caught a grizzly and a black bear, not to mention a caribou and a couple of sheep. They seem to me natural hunters. I'm quite proud of them—so proud that we gave them a 'lob-stick,' Captain."

"And quite right, too," nodded Saunders.

"Oh, well, of course we couldn't have done any of those things without you and Moise," said Rob. "Anybody can shoot a rifle a little bit, but not every one could bring the boats out of such water as we have had."

"Well, now, what do you want to do?" resumed Saunders, after a little. "Here's the *Peace River* steamer, and you can get a room and a bath and a meal there whenever you like. Or [Pg 270] you can stay here in your tent and eat with the factor up at the post beyond. I would suggest that you take in our city before you do much else."

"When were you planning to leave for Vermilion, Captain Saunders?" inquired Rob.

"Some time to-morrow morning, as soon as we get plenty of wood from the yard across the river. It's about three hundred and fifty miles to Vermilion down-stream—that is to say, north of here—but we run it in two or three days with luck. Coming up it's a little slower, of course."

"If you don't mind, sir," said Rob at length, "I think we'd rather sleep in our tent as long as we can—the steamboat would be very nice, but it looks too much like a house."

Saunders laughed, and, turning, led the way through the Indian villages and up toward the single little street which made the village of Peace River Landing, ancient post of the Hudson Bay. Here he introduced the young travelers, who at once became the sensation of the hour for all the inhabitants, who now thronged the streets about them, but who all stood silent and respectful at a distance.

They found the Hudson Bay post, as Jesse had said, more like a country store than the fur- [Pg 271] trading post which they had pictured for themselves. They saw piled up on the shelves and counters all sorts of the products of civilization—hardware of every kind, groceries, tinned goods, calicoes, clothes, hats, caps, guns, ammunition—indeed, almost anything one could require.

John was looking behind the counters with wistful eye, for the time ceasing his investigation of the piles of bright new moccasins.

"I don't see any, Alex," said he, at last.

"Any what, Mr. John?"

"Well, you said there'd be toffy."

Alex laughed and beckoned to the clerk. When John made known his wishes, the latter ran his hand in behind a pile of tobacco and brought out a number of blue-covered packages marked "Imperial Toffy."

"I think you will find this very nice, sir," said he. "It's made in the old country, and we sell quite a bit of it here."

John's eyes lighted up at this, and, if truth be told, both of the other boys were glad enough to divide with him his purchase, quantities of which he generously shared also with the Indian and half-breed children whom he presently met in the street.

"I don't see but what this is just the same as any other town," said he at length, his mouth [Pg 272] full.

They were received with great courtesy by the factor of the Hudson Bay Company, who invited them to have lunch with him. To their surprise they found on the table all the sorts of green vegetables they had ever known—potatoes, beans, tomatoes, lettuce, many varieties, and all in the greatest profusion and excellence.

"We don't encourage this sort of thing," said the factor, smilingly pointing to these dishes of vegetables, "for the theory of our Company is that all a man needs to eat is meat and fish.

But just to be in fashion, we raise a few of these things in our garden, as you may see. When you are at Vermilion, moreover, although that is three hundred and fifty miles north from here, you'll see all sorts of grain and every vegetable you ever heard of growing as well as they do twelve or fifteen hundred miles south of here."

"It's a wonderful country, sir," said Rob. "I don't blame Alex and Moise for calling this the Land of Plenty."

"Moise said that the old war-trail over from the Little Slave country used to end about here," ventured John.

The factor smiled, and admitted that such was once said to have been the case. [Pg 273]

"Those days are gone, though, my young friend," said he. "There's a new invasion, which we think may unsettle our old ways as much as the invasion of the Crees did those of the Stoneys and Beavers long ago. I mean the invasion of the wagon-trains of farmers."

"Yes," said Rob, "Alex told us we'd have to go to the Liard River pretty soon, if we wanted any moose or bear; but anyhow, we're here in time, and we want to thank you for helping us have such a pleasant trip. We're going to enjoy the run down the river, I'm sure."

XXVIII

[Pg 274]

STEAMBOATING IN THE FAR NORTH

Captain Saunders finished the operation of getting wood for the *Peace River* by ten o'clock of the next morning, and as the steamer once more came alongside the steep bank at the landing the hoarse note of her whistles notified every one to get ready for the journey down the stream. The boys, who had passed the night in their tent with Alex—Moise having gone to his own tepee for the night—now began to bestir themselves before going aboard the steamer.

"What are we going to do with all our things, Alex?" asked Rob.

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Why, our tent and the skins and trophies and blankets and everything—we won't need them on board the boat, will we?"

"No, sir, and the best way will be to leave them here."

"What! In our tent, with no one to care for them? You know, Moise is going with us, as I understand it."

"Everything will be perfectly safe right there in the tent, if only you tie the flaps so the dogs can't get in," answered Alex. "You see, it's only white men that steal in this country—the Injuns and breeds won't do that. Until the Klondike pilgrims came through here we didn't know what theft was. I can answer for these people here. Everything you leave will be perfectly safe, and, as you say, it will be less bother than to take this stuff along on the boat." [Pg 275]

Rob motioned to his companions, and they stepped aside for a little while.

"What are we going to do about the stuff we've got left over, fellows?" asked he. "Of course, we've got to get down by wagon as far as Little Slave, and we'll need grub enough, if Uncle Dick hasn't got it, to last us two or three days. But we won't boat, and we've got quite a lot of supplies which I think we had better give to Moise—they have to charge pretty good prices for everything they sell at the store up here, and maybe Moise will like this stuff."

"That suits me," said John, "and I think it would be a good idea. Give Moise all the meat and such supplies as we don't need going out."

"And then, how about the boats?"

"Well, old Picheu sold us the dugout, and I don't suppose he'll ever get down here any more, and we certainly couldn't take it out with us. I'm in favor of making Moise a present of that. He seems to like it pretty well." [Pg 276]

"A good idea," said Rob. "And how about the *Jaybird*? Wouldn't it be fine to give that to Alex!"

Both the other boys thought this would be a good idea, and they accordingly proposed these plans to Alex before they went aboard the steamer.

The old hunter smiled with great pleasure at their generosity. “I don’t want to rob you young men,” said he, “and without doubt you could sell both of those boats here if you liked. But if you want us to keep them, they will be of great value to us. Moise hunts up and down the river all the time, and can use the dugout. I live on Little Slave, and hunt miles below here, but I have plenty of friends with wagons, and they’ll take the *Jaybird* across for me. I’ll keep her as long as she lasts, and be very glad indeed.”

“Well, then,” said Rob, “I don’t see any reason why we shouldn’t go aboard. I’m almost sorry, too, because it seems to me as though we were pretty near to the end of our trip now.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said the old hunter to him. “Some of the best bear country on this river [Pg 277] is below this point, and unless I am very much mistaken, you will probably see a dozen or two bear between here and Vermilion.”

On board the steamboat the boys found a long table spread with clean linen, comfortable bunks with linen sheets, something they had not seen for a long time, and a general air of shipshapeness which did not seem to comport with a country so wild and remote as this. Each was assigned to a room, where he distributed his belongings, and soon they were all settled down comfortably, Alex and Moise also having rooms given to them, according to the instructions which Uncle Dick had sent up to the Company.

During the last few minutes before the mooring-lines of the boat were cast loose all the party stood along the rail watching the breed deck-hands carrying aboard the remainder of the boat’s cargo. Rob expressed the greatest surprise at the enormous loads which these men carried easily from the storehouse down the slippery bank and up the steep gang-plank. “I didn’t think such strong men lived anywhere in the world,” said he. “I never saw anything like it!”

“Yes,” said Alex, “there are some pretty good men on the river, that’s true. The man who [Pg 278] couldn’t shoulder three hundred pounds and get it aboard would be back of the first rank.”

“Three hundred pounds!” said Rob. “That’s pretty heavy, isn’t it?”

“*Non! Non!*” broke in Moise. “She’s no heavy. On the trail those man he’ll take three packets, two hundred seventy poun’, an’ he’ll trot all same dog—we’ll both told you that before. My onkle, Billy Loutit, he’ll carry seex hondred poun’ one tam up a heell long tam. He’ll take barrel of pork an’ ron on the bank all same deer.”

Rob turned a questioning glance on Alex, who nodded confirmation. “Men have been known to carry four or five hundred pounds considerable distances on the portage,” said he. “It isn’t best for them, but they’re always rivaling one another in these feats of strength. Saunders here, the captain, used to carry five hundred pounds in his day—all the salt pork and boxes you could rake up on top of him. You see this is a country of large distances and the seasons are short. You talk about ‘hustling’ down in the cities, but I suppose there never was a business carried on which ‘hustled’ as long and hard as the old fur trade a hundred years ago. That’s where these men came from—from fathers and grandfathers who were [Pg 279] brought up in the work.”

At last the steamer cast loose her mooring-lines and stood off for midstream with a final roar of her whistles. A row of Indians and breeds along the bank again gave the salute of the north with a volley of rifle-fire. They were off for the last lap of their long journey down the great river, this time under somewhat different circumstances from those under which they had begun their journey.

The boys rapidly explored the steamboat, and found her a comfortable side-wheeler, especially built for this river work, with powerful engines and abundance of room on her lower deck for heavy cargo. Her cabin-deck provided good accommodations for passengers, and, all in all, she was quite a wonderful vessel for that far-off country, in their belief.

“I found something down below,” said John, coming up the companion-stair after a time.

“What’s that?” asked Jesse.

“Bear hide nailed on the side of the boat, by the wood-pile below. The engineer killed it a week ago up the river. About every one on the boat has a rifle, and they say they get bears every trip. I think we had better have our guns ready all the time. They say that old [Pg 280] Showan, the pilot in the pilot-house up above, only keeps his job on this boat because he gets such fine bear hunting all the time.”

“Well, he’ll have to beat us,” said Rob, stoutly.

“Alex,” inquired Jesse, after a time, “how many bear did you ever see on this river in one day?”

“I wouldn’t like to say,” answered Alex, “for we don’t always count them. I’m told that one of our passengers counted twenty-eight in one afternoon right on this part of the river where we are now. I’ve often seen a dozen a day, I should say.”

“You’re joking about that, Alex!” said Rob.

“Wait and see—I may show you pretty soon,” was the answer.

The boys, always ready enough when there was game to be seen, secured their rifles and took their stand at the front rail of the cabin-deck, ready for anything which might appear.

“I don’t see how you can shoot off this boat,” said Jesse, trying to sight his rifle. “It wobbles all the time when the engine goes.”

Alex gave him a little advice. “I think you’ll find it better to stand with your feet pretty close together,” said he, “and keep your hands as close together as you can on your rifle, too. Then, when you catch sight of your mark as you swing by, pull, and don’t try to hold dead on.” [Pg 281]

For some time they saw nothing, and, leaning their rifles against the cabin walls, were talking about something else, when all at once they heard the whistle of the steamer boom out above them. At about the same time, one of the deck-hands at the bow deck below picked up a piece of plank and began to beat loudly with it upon the side structure of the boat.

“What’s the matter?” asked Rob. “Has everybody gone crazy, Alex?”

“No; they’re just trying to beat up the game,” said Alex, smiling. “You see that island below? It nearly always has bears feeding on it, where the berries are thick. When the boat comes down above them the men try to scare the bears out into the river. Just wait a minute, and perhaps you’ll see some of the strangest bear hunting you ever heard of in your life.”

Almost as he spoke they all heard the crack of a rifle from the pilot-house above them, and saw the spit of a bullet on the water many hundreds of yards below them.

“I see him,” said Rob, “I see him—there he goes! Look at that little ripple on the water.” [Pg 282]

“Yes,” said Alex, quietly, “there was one on the island, as I supposed there would be. He is swimming off now for the mainland. Too far yet, I should say. Just take your time, and let Showan waste his ammunition.”

It was all the boys could do to hold their fire, but presently, since almost every one else on the boat began to shoot, Alex signaled to his young charges to open up their battery. He knew very well that the rifles they were using were more powerful than the carbines which made the usual arm in that country.

“Be careful now, young men,” said he, “and watch where your bullets go.”

For the first few shots the boys found the difficulty which Jesse had prophesied, for shooting from an unstable platform is always difficult. They had the added advantage, however, of being able to tell where their bullets were falling. As they were all firing close together, and were using rifles of the same caliber, it was difficult to tell who really was the lucky marksman, but, while the little triangle of moving water still seemed two or three hundred yards below the boat, suddenly it ceased to advance. There lay upon the surface of the water a large oblong, black mass.

“Through the head!” said Alex, quietly. “I don’t know which one.” [Pg 283]

All the deck-hands below began to laugh and shout. The captain of the boat now came forward. “I don’t know which one of you to congratulate,” said he, “but that was good work. Now my men will have plenty of meat for the trip down, that’s sure.”

He now passed down to the floor of the deck, and under his instructions one of the deck-hands picked up a long, stout pole which had a hook fastened on the end of it.

“Look down there below now, young gentlemen,” said Alex, “and you’ll see something you never will see anywhere but here. We gaff a bear here, the same as you do a salmon.”

This literally was true. The engineer now shut off his engines, and the great boat drifted

slowly down upon the floating body of the dead bear, with just steerageway enough to enable the pilot to lay her alongside. At last the deck-hand made a quick sweep with his gaff-hook, and calling two of his fellows to hold onto the pole with him, and so stopping the tremendous pull which the body of the bear made on the pole, they finally succeeded in easing down the strain and presently brought the dead bear close alongside. Then a noose was dropped over its neck and it was hauled aboard. All this time the boys were excitedly [Pg 284] waiting for the end of their strange hunt, and to them this sort of bear hunting seemed about the most curious they had ever known.

The deck-hands now, in obedience to a word in their own language from the captain, rapidly began to skin and quarter the dead bear.

Moise explained to them that his young hunters wanted the skin saved for them, with the claws and the skull, so that they were more particular than they usually are in skinning a bear which they intend to eat. Truth to say, the carcass of this bear scarcely lasted for the rest of the voyage, for black bear is a regular article of diet for these people, although they will not often eat the grizzly.

These operations were scarcely well advanced before once more the whistle began to roar, and once more the rifle-fire began from Showan's place up in the pilot-house. This time they all saw a big bear running up the bank, but perhaps half a mile away. It made good speed scrambling up over the bare places, and was lost to sight from time to time among the bushes. But it had no difficulty in making its escape unhurt, for now the boys, although they fired rapidly at it, could not tell where their bullets were dropping, and were unable to correct their aim.

"I don't care," said Rob, "if it did get away. We've got almost bears enough now, and [Pg 285] besides, I don't know whether this is sportsmanlike or not, shooting bears from a boat. Anyhow, when an animal is swimming in the water and can't get away, I don't see the fun in killing it. Let's wait on the next one and let the pilot shoot it."

They did not have half an hour to wait before they saw that very thing happen. The whistles once more stirred the echoes as they swung down to a group of two or three islands, and this time two bears started wildly across the channel for the mainland. Rob and his friends did not shoot at these, but almost every one else did. One escaped unhurt, but another, although it almost reached the bank, was shot dead with a bullet from Showan's rifle. Once more the manœuvers of the gaff-hook were repeated, and once more a great black bear was hauled on board. In fact, they saw during the afternoon no less than six full-grown bears, none of which got away unsaluted, but only two of which really were "bagged," as Alex called it, by the men with the gaff-hook.

XXIX

[Pg 286]

A MOOSE HUNT

The great flues of the *Peace River* devoured enormous quantities of the soft pine fuel, so that soon after noon of the second day they found it well to haul alongshore at a wood-yard, where some of the employés of the company had stacked up great heaps of cord-wood. It was the duty of the deck-hands to get this aboard the boat, an operation which would require perhaps several hours.

"You might prefer to go ashore here," said Alex, "while we're lying tied up. We'll blow the whistle in time to call you in before we cast off."

As Alex did not think there would be any hunting, he concluded to remain on the boat, but Moise volunteered to walk along the beach with the boys, to explain anything they might see, and to be of assistance in case they should happen to meet with any game, although no one suspected that such would be the case, since the arrival of the boat had necessarily made considerable disturbance.

"Maybe so we'll seen some of these mooses somewhere," said Moise after a time. "You'll [Pg 287] seen his track on the sand all along."

"That's so," said Rob. "They look just like cattle, don't they? I should think all the game in the country must be coming down into this valley to see what's going on. Here's a wolf track, too, big as a horse's foot, almost. And what are all of these little scratches, like a cat, on the beach, Moise?"

“Some beevaire, he’ll sweem across an’ come out here. He’ll got a house somewhere, I’ll s’pose. Plenty game on this part of the river all tam. Plenty meat. My people he’ll live here many year. I got some onkle over on Battle River, an’ seven, five, eight cousin on Cadotte River, not far from here. All good honter, too.”

“I can believe that, Moise, after seeing you,” said John.

The happy-go-lucky Moise laughed light-heartedly. “If she’ll don’ hont on this land, she’ll starve sure. A man he’ll mus’ walk, he’ll mus’ hont, he’ll mus’ portage, he’ll mus’ trap, he’ll mus’ walk on the track-line, an’ know how for paddle an’ pole, else he’ll starve sure.”

They walked on down along the narrow beach covered with rough stones, and showing only here and there enough of the sand or earth to hold a track. At length, however, Moise gave a sharp word of caution, and hurriedly motioned them all to get under cover at the bank. [Pg 288]

“What is it, Moise?” whispered Rob, eagerly.

“Moose!” He pointed down the bank. For a long time the boys could discover nothing, but at last they caught sight of a little splash of water four or five hundred yards below, where a trickling stream entered the main river at a low place.

“He’ll stood there an’ fight the fly, maybe so,” said Moise. “Ha-hum! Why he’ll don’ see us I don’ know, me. Why the boat he’ll not scare heem I’ll don’ know, me, too. How we’ll get heem I don’ know, me. But we’ll try. Come!”

The boys now found that Moise was once more turned hunter, and rather a relentless and thoughtless one at that, for he seemed to pay no attention to the weakness of other members of his company. They scarcely could keep him in sight as he made his way through the heavy cover to an upper bench, where the forest was more open. Here he pointed to the steep slope which still rose above them.

“We must make surround,” said he, in a whisper. [Pg 289]

Not so bad a general was Moise, for, slight as was his chance to approach so wary an animal as a moose under these conditions, he used the only possible plan by which success might have been attained.

The little trickle of water in which the moose stood at the beach below came down out of a steep *coulée*, which at the point where they stood ran between deep banks, rapidly shallowing farther up the main slope. Fortunately the wind was right for an approach. Moise left John at a rock which showed on an open place pretty well up the hill, and stationed Jesse a little closer to the *coulée*. Moise and Rob scrambled across the steep slopes of the ravine, and hurried on as fast as they could go, to try to get below the moose in case it should attempt to take the water. Thus they had four rifles distributed at points able to cover the course of the moose should it attempt to escape up the bank, and close enough to hear it if it passed beneath in the forest growth.

Rob and Moise paused only long enough partly to get their breath before Moise motioned to Rob to remain where he was, while he himself hastened to the right and down toward the beach.

For some time the half-breed hunter remained at the edge of the cover, listening intently. Apparently he heard no sound, and neither he nor Rob could detect any ripple on the water showing that the moose was going to undertake escape by swimming. Thus for a time, for what indeed seemed several minutes, all the hunters continued in their inaction, unable to determine upon a better course than simply to wait to see what might happen. [Pg 290]

What did happen was something rather singular and unexpected. Suddenly Rob heard a rifle-shot at the left, and turning, saw the smoke of Jesse’s rifle, followed by a second and then a third report. He saw Jesse then spring to his feet and run up to the slope, shouting excitedly as he went and waving his cap. Evidently the hunt was over in very unexpected fashion. Moise, Rob, and John also ran up as fast as their legs and lungs would allow them.

They saw lying almost at the head of the *coulée*, which here had shallowed up perceptibly, a great, long-legged, dark body, with enormous head, tremendously long nose, and widely palmated antlers—the latter in the velvet, but already of extreme size.

For a time they could hardly talk for fatigue and excitement, but presently each could see how the hunt had happened to terminate in this way. The moose, smelling or hearing Moise when he got on the wind below, at the edge of the cover, had undertaken to make its escape quietly under the cover of the steep *coulée* down which it had come. With the silence which this gigantic animal sometimes can compass, it had sneaked like a rabbit quite past Rob and almost to the head of the *coulée*. A little bit later and it might have [Pg 291]

gained the summit and have been lost in the poplar forest beyond. Jesse, however, had happened to see it as it emerged, and had opened fire, with the result which now was obvious. His last bullet had struck the moose through the heart as it ran and killed it almost instantly.

“Well, Jess,” said Rob, “I take off my hat to you! That moose must have passed within a hundred yards of me and I never knew it, and from where you killed him he must have been three hundred yards at least.”

“Those boy she’ll be good shot,” said Moise, approvingly, slapping Jesse warmly on the shoulder. “Plenty meat now on the boat, *hein*?”

“When I shot him,” said Jesse, simply, “he just fell all over the hill.”

“I was just going to shoot,” said John, “but I couldn’t see very well from where I was, and before I could run into reach Jesse had done the business.” [Pg 292]

“Well,” said Moise, “one thing, she’ll been lucky. We’ll make those deck-hand come an’ carry in this meat—me, I’m too proud to carry some more meat, what?”

He laughed now as he began to skin out and quarter the meat in his usual rapid and efficient fashion.

They had finished this part of their work, and were turning down the hill to return to the steamer when they were saluted by the heavy whistle of the boat, which echoed in great volume back and forth between the steep banks of the river, which here lay at the bottom of a trough-like valley, the stream itself several hundred yards in width.

“Don’t hurry,” said Moise; “she’ll wait till we come, an’ she’ll like plenty moose meat on his boat.”

All of which came out as Moise had predicted, for when they told Captain Saunders that they really had a dead moose ready to be brought aboard the latter beamed his satisfaction.

“That’s better than bear meat for me!” said he. “We’ll just lie here while the boys go out and bring in the meat.”

“Now,” said Rob to his friends, as, hot and dusty, they turned to their rooms to get ready for dinner, “I don’t know what you other fellows think, but it seems to me we’ve killed about all the meat we’ll need for a while. Let’s wait now until we see Uncle Dick—it won’t be more than a day or so, and we’ve all had a good hunt.” [Pg 293]

XXX [Pg 294]

FARTHEST NORTH

As they had been told, our travelers found the banks of their river at this far northern latitude much lower than they had been for the first hundred miles below the Landing. Now and again they would pass little scattered settlements of natives, or the cabin of some former trading-station. For the most part, however, the character of the country was that of an untracked wilderness, in spite of the truth, which was that the Hudson Bay Company had known it and traded through it for more than a century past.

By no means the most northerly trading-posts of the great fur-trading company, Fort Vermilion, their present destination, seemed to our young friends almost as though it were at the edge of the world. Their journey progressed almost as though they were in a dream, and it was difficult for them to recall all of its incidents, or to get clearly before their minds the distance back of them to the homes in far-off Alaska, which they had left so long ago. [Pg 295] The interest of travelers in new land, however, still was theirs, and they looked forward eagerly also to meeting the originator of this pleasant journey of theirs—Uncle Dick Wilcox, who, as they now learned from the officers of the boat, had been summoned to this remote region on business connected with the investigation of oil-fields on the Athabasca River, and had returned as far as Fort Vermilion on his way out to the settlements.

When finally they came within sight of the ancient post of Fort Vermilion, the boys, as had been the case in such other posts as they previously had seen, could scarcely identify the modest whitewashed buildings of logs or boards as really belonging to a post of the old company of Hudson Bay. The scene which they approached really was a quiet and peaceful one. At the rim of the bank stood the white building of the Company’s post, or store, with a

well-shingled red roof. Beyond this were some houses of the employés. In the other direction was the residence of the factor, a person of considerable importance in this neighborhood. Yet farther up-stream, along the bank, stood a church with a little bell; whereas, quite beyond the scattered settlement and in the opposite direction there rose a [Pg 296] tall, two-story building with projecting smoke-stack. Rob inquired the nature of this last building, which looked familiar to him.

“That is the grist-mill,” said Captain Saunders to him. “You see, we raise the finest wheat up here you’ll find in the world.”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Rob, “but I couldn’t really believe it, although we had good vegetables away back there at Peace River Landing.”

“It’s the truth,” said Captain Saunders; “yonder is the Company’s wheat-field, a hundred acres of it, and the same sort of wheat that took the first prize at the Centennial, at your own city of Philadelphia, in 1876. I’ll show you old Brother Regnier, the man who raised that wheat, too. He can’t speak any English yet, but he certainly can raise good wheat. And at the experimental farm you shall see nearly every vegetable you ever heard of.”

“I don’t understand it,” said Rob; “we always thought of this country as being arctic—we never speak of it without thinking of dog-trains and snowshoes.”

“The secret is this,” said Captain Saunders. “Our summers are short, but our days are very long. Now, wheat requires sunshine, daylight, to make it grow. All right; we give it more [Pg 297] hours of sunshine in a month than you do in a month in Dakota or Iowa. The result is that it grows quicker and stronger and better, as we think. It gets ripe before the nights become too cold. This great abundance of sunlight is the reason, also, that we raise such excellent vegetables—as I’m sure you will have reason to understand, for here we always lay in a supply for our return voyage. I am thinking, however,” added the captain, presently, as the boat, screaming with her whistle, swung alongside of her landing-place, “that you’ll see some one in this crowd here that you ought to know.”

All along the rim of the bank there was rather a gaily-clad line of Indians and half-breeds, men and women, many of whom were waving salutations to members of the boat’s crew. The boys studied this line eagerly, but for some time none of them spoke.

“I see him!” said Jesse at last. “That’s Uncle Dick sitting up there on the bench.”

The others also identified their relative and friend as he sat quietly smoking and waiting for the boat to make her landing. At length he arose and came to the staging—a rather slender, bronzed man, with very brown face and eyes wrinkled at the corners. He wore an engineer’s garb of khaki and stiff-brimmed white hat. [Pg 298]

The three boys took off their hats and gave a cheer as they saw him standing there smiling.

“How are you, Uncle Dick?” they all cried; and so eager were they that they could scarcely wait for the gang-plank to be run out.

Their uncle, Mr. Richard Wilcox, at that time employed in the engineering department of one of the Dominion railways, laughed rather happily as he bunched them in his arms when they came ashore. There was little chance for him to say anything for some time, so eager were the boys in their greeting of him.

“Well, you’re all here!” said he at length, breaking away to shake hands with Alex and Moise, who smiled very happily also, now coming up the bank. “How have they done, Alex?”

“Fine!” said the old hunter. “Couldn’t have been better!”

“This was good boys, all right,” affirmed Moise. “We’ll save her life plenty tam, but she’s good boy!”

“Did you have any trouble getting across, Alex?” asked Uncle Dick.

“Plenty, I should say!” said Alex, smiling. “But we came through it. The boys have acted like [Pg 299] sportsmen, and I couldn’t say more.”

“I suppose perhaps you got some game then, eh?”

All three now began to speak at once excitedly, and so fast that they could scarcely be understood.

“Did you really get a grizzly?” inquired Uncle Dick of Alex, after a while.

“Yes, sir, and a very good one. And a black bear too, and a moose, and some sheep, and a lot of small stuff like that. They’re hunters and travelers. We gave them a ‘lob-stick’ to mark

their journey—far back in the Rockies."

"Well, Alaska will have to look to its laurels!" said Uncle Dick, taking a long breath and pretending not to be proud of them. "It seems to me you must have been pretty busy shooting things, from all I can learn, young men."

"Oh, we know the country," interrupted Rob, "and we've got a map—we could build a railroad across there if we had to."

"Well, to tell the truth, I'm mighty glad you got through all right," said Uncle Dick. "I've been thinking that maybe I oughtn't to have let you try that trip, for it's dangerous enough [Pg 300] for men. But everything's well that ends well, and here you are, safe and sound. You'll have to be getting out of here before long, though, in order to make Valdez in time for your fall school—you'd be running wild if I left you on the trail any longer.

"The boat will be going back to the Landing in a couple of days, I suppose," he added after a time, as he gathered their hands in his and started along the path up the steep bank; "but there are a few things here you ought to see—the post and the farms and grains which they have—wonderful things in their way. And then I'll try to get Saunders to fix it so that you can see the Vermilion Chutes of the Peace River."

"I know right where that is," said Rob, feeling in his pocket for his map—"about sixty miles below here. That's the head of navigation on the Peace, isn't it?"

"It is for the present time," said Uncle Dick. "I've been looking at that cataract of the Peace. There ought to be a lock or a channel cut through, so that steamboats could run the whole length from Chippewayan to the Rockies! As it is, everything has to portage there."

"We don't know whether to call this country old or young," said Rob. "In some ways it [Pg 301] doesn't seem to have changed very much, and in other ways it seems just like any other place."

"One of these days you'll see a railroad down the Mackenzie, young man," said Uncle Dick, "and before long, of course, you'll see one across the Rockies from the head of the Saskatchewan, above the big bend of the Columbia."

"Why couldn't we get in there some time, Uncle Dick?" asked Jesse, who was feeling pretty brave now that they were well out of the Rocky Mountains and the white water of the rapids.

"Well, I don't know," said Uncle Dick, suddenly looking around. "It might be a good idea, after all. But I think you'd find pretty bad water in the Columbia if you tried to do any navigation there. Time enough to talk about that next year. Come on now, and I'll introduce you to the factor and the people up here at the Post."

They joined him now, and soon were shaking hands with many persons, official and otherwise, of the white or the red race. They found the life very interesting and curious, according to their own notions. The head clerk and they soon struck up a warm friendship. He told them that he had spent thirty years of his life at that one place, although he [Pg 302] received his education as far east as Montreal. Married to an Indian woman, who spoke no English, he had a family of ten bright and clean children, each one of whom, as John soon found to his satisfaction, appreciated the Imperial Toffy which made a part of the stock of the Hudson Bay Company at that post also.

THE PORTAGE, VERMILION CHUTES, PEACE RIVER

All of these new friends of theirs asked them eagerly about their journey across the Rockies, which was a strange region to every one of them, although they had passed their lives in the service of the fur trade in the north. As usual, in short, they made themselves much at home, and asked a thousand questions difficult enough to answer. Here, as they had done at Peace River Landing, they laid in a stock of gaudy moccasins and gloves and rifle covers, all beautifully embroidered by native women in beads or stained porcupine quills, some of which work had come from the half-arctic tribes hundreds of miles north of Vermilion. They saw also some of the furs which had been sent down in the season's take, and heard stories in abundance of the ways of that wild country in the winter season. Even they undertook to make friends with some of the half-savage sledge-dogs which were kept [Pg 303] chained in the yard back of the Post. After this they made a journey out to the farm which the Dominion government maintains in that far-off region, and there saw, as they had been promised by Captain Saunders, wheat and rye taller than any one of them as they stood in the grain, and also vegetables of every sort, all growing or in full maturity.

"Well, we'll have stories to tell when we get back," said Rob, "and I don't believe they'll believe half of them, either, about the wildness of this country and the tameness of it. Anyhow, I'm glad we've come."

The next day they put in, as Uncle Dick suggested, in a steamer trip down to the Vermilion Chutes. They did not get closer than three or four miles, but tied up while the party went down on foot to see the big cataract of the Peace—some fifteen feet of sheer, boiling white water, falling from a rim of rock extending almost half a mile straightaway across the river.

"I expect that's just a little worse than the 'Polly' Rapids," said John. "I don't think even Moise could run that place."

Even as they stood on the high rim of the rock at the edge of the falls they saw coming up from below the figure of a half-breed, who was dragging at the end of a very long line a [Pg 304] canoe which was guided by his companion far below on the swift water. Had the light line broken it must, as it seemed to these observers, have meant destruction of the man in the canoe. Yet the two went on about their work calmly, hauling up close to the foot of the falls, then lifting out their canoe, portaging above, and, with a brief salutation, passing quickly on their way up the stream.

"That's the way we do it, boys," said Uncle Dick, "in this part of the world—there goes the fast express. It would trouble the lightest of you to keep up with that boy on the line, too, I'm thinking. Some day," added Uncle Dick, casting a professional eye out over the wide ridge of rock which here blocked the river, "they'll blow a hole through that place so that a boat can get through. Who knows but one of you will be the engineer in charge? Anyhow, I hope so—if I don't get the job myself."

"You mustn't forget about that trip over the Yellowhead Pass, where your new railroad's going now, Uncle Dick," said Jesse, as they turned to walk again up the rough beach toward the mooring-place of the steamer.

"Don't be in too big a hurry, Jesse," returned his relative. "You've got a whole year of [Pg 305] studying ahead of you, between now and then. We'll take it under advisement."

"What I believe I like best about this country," said Rob, soberly, "is the kindness of the people in it. Everywhere we have been they've been as hospitable as they could be. We don't dare admire anything, because they'll give it to us. It seems to me everybody gets along pleasantly with everybody else up here; and I like that, you know."

"It's a man's country," said Uncle Dick, "that's true, and I don't know that you'll be the worse for a little trip into it, although you come from a man's country back there in Alaska yourselves, for the matter of that. Well, this is the northern end of your trail for this year, my sons. Here's where we turn back for home."

They paused at the bend and looked once more back at the long, foaming ridge of white water which extended across from shore to shore of the stream which they had followed so far.

"All right," said Rob, "we've had a good time."

They turned now, and all tramped steadily back to the boat, which soon resumed her course up-stream.

Regarding their further stay at Fort Vermilion, or their return journey of several days [Pg 306] southward to Peace River Landing, little need be said, save that, in the belief of all, the young hunters now had killed abundance of game. Although they saw more than a dozen bears on their way up the river, they were willing to leave their rifles in their cases, and

spend their time studying the country and poring yet more over the maps which they were now preparing to show their friends at home.

XXXI

HOMEWARD BOUND

[Pg 307]

Arrived at Peace River Landing, the young hunters found everything quite as Alex said it would be, their belongings perfectly safe and untouched in the tent where they had left them. Uncle Dick, who now took charge of the party, agreed with them that it was an excellent thing to make Alex and Moise presents of the canoes, and to give Moise the remainder of the supplies which would not be required on their brief trip to Little Slave Lake by wagon.

At this time the telephone line had been completed from Little Slave Lake to Peace River Landing, and the factor at the latter post had sent word for two wagons and teams to come up for these passengers, outbound. There was little difficulty in throwing their light equipment, with their many trophies and curiosities, into one of the wagons, and arranging with the other to carry out the *Jaybird*, which, a little bit battered but practically unhurt, now continued the last stage of its somewhat eventful journey over the old Mackenzie trail —Alex, as may be supposed, watching it with very jealous eye so that it should get no harm in the long traverse.

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Alex was thus to accompany the party for a few days, but Moise, who lived at the Landing, now must say good-by. This he did still smiling, though by no means glad to lose the company of his young friends.

“You’ll come back some more bimeby,” said he. “Any man he’ll drink the water on this river one time, he’ll couldn’t live no more without once each year he’ll come back an’ drink some more on that river! I’ll see you again, an’ bimeby you’ll get so you’ll could carry seex hondred poun’ half a mile an’ not set it down. Moise, he’ll wait for you.”

When they reached the top of the steep hill which rises back of Peace River Landing, almost a thousand feet above the river which runs below, they all stopped and looked back, waiting for the wagons to toil up the slope, and waiting also to take in once more the beauty of the scene which lay below them. The deep valley, forking here, lay pronounced in the dark outlines of its forest growth. It still was morning, and a light mist lay along the surface of the river. In the distance banks of purple shadows lay, and over all the sun was beginning to cast a softening light. The boys turned away to trudge on along the trail with a feeling almost of sadness at leaving a place so beautiful.

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“It is as Moise says, though!” broke out Rob, answering what seemed to be the unspoken question in the minds of his fellows—“we’ll have to come back again some time. It’s a man’s country.”

Hardened by their long experience in the open, the boys were able to give even Uncle Dick, seasoned as he was, something of an argument at footwork on the trail, and they used wagons by no means all the time in the hundred miles which lie between Peace River Landing and Little Slave Lake—a journey which required them to camp out for two nights in the open. By this time the nights were cold, and on the height of land between these two waterways the water froze almost an inch in the water-pails at night, although the sun in the daytime was as warm as ever. To their great comfort, the mosquito nuisance was now quite absent; so, happy and a little hungry, at length they rode into the scattered settlement of Grouard, or Little Slave Lake, passing on the way to the lower town one more of the old-time posts of the Hudson Bay Company.

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“You see here,” said Uncle Dick, as they paused at the edge of the water which lay at the end street, “only an arm of the lake proper. The steamer can’t get through this little channel, but ties up about eight miles from here. I suppose we ought to go aboard to-night.”

“If you will allow me, sir,” said Alex, stepping forward at this time, “I might give the boys a little duck-shoot this evening on their way down to the boat.”

“Why not?” said Uncle Dick, enthusiastically. “I don’t know but I’d like a mallard or so for myself, although I can’t join you to-night, as I’m too busy. Can you get guns and ammunition, Alex?”

“Oh yes,” replied the old hunter, “easily. And I’ll show the young gentlemen more ducks to-

night than they ever saw in all their lives before. The *Jaybird* will carry all of us, if we're careful, and I'll just paddle them down along the edge of the marsh. After we've made our shoot, we'll come on down to the boat after dark, or thereabout."

"Fine!" said Uncle Dick. "That'll give me time to get my business completed here, and I'll [Pg 311] go down to the boat by wagon along shore."

This arrangement pleased the boys very much, for they knew in a general way that the lake on whose shores they now were arrived was one of the greatest breeding-places for wild fowl on the continent. Besides this, they wished to remain with Alex as long as possible, for all of them had become very fond of the quiet and dignified man who had been their guide and companion for so long.

The four of them had no trouble in finishing the portage of the *Jaybird* and her cargo from the wagon to navigable water, and finally they set off, paddling for the marshes which made off toward the main lake.

They had traveled perhaps three or four miles when Alex concluded to yield to the importunities of the boys to get ashore. They were eager to do this, because continually now they saw great bands and streams of wild fowl coming in from every direction to alight in the marshes—more ducks, as Alex had said, than they had thought there were in all the world. Most of them were mallards, and from many places in the marsh they could hear the quacking and squawking of yet other ducks hidden in the high grass.

"We haven't any waders," said Alex, "and I think you'll find the water pretty cold, but you'll [Pg 312] soon get used it to. Come ahead, then."

They pushed their canoe into the cover of the reeds and grasses, and disembarking, waded on out toward the outer edge of the marsh, where the water was not quite so deep, yet where they could get cover in rushes and clumps of grass. Alex posted them in a line across a narrow quarter of the marsh, so that each gun would be perhaps a hundred yards from his neighbor, Jesse, the shortest of the party, taking the shallowest water nearest to the road beyond the marsh.

They had not long to wait, for the air seemed to them quite full of hurrying bands of fowl, so close that they could see their eyes dart glances from side to side, their long necks stretched out, their red feet hugged tight up to their feathers.

It is not to be supposed that any one of our young hunters was an expert wild-fowl shot, for skill in that art comes only with a considerable experience. Moreover, they were not provided with the best of guns and ammunition, but only such as the Post was accustomed to sell to the half-breeds of that country. In spite of all handicaps, however, the sport was keen enough to please them, and successful enough as well, for once in a while one of them [Pg 313] would succeed in knocking out of a passing flock one or more of the great birds, which splashed famously in the water of the marsh. Sometimes they were unable to find their birds after they had fallen, but they learned to hurry at once to a crippled bird and secure it before it could escape and hide in the grasses. Presently they had at their feet almost a dozen fine mallards. In that country, where the ducks abound, there had as yet been no shooting done at them, so that they were not really as wild as they are when they reach the southern latitudes. Neither were their feathers so thick as they are later in the season, when their flight is stronger. The shooting was not so difficult as not to afford plenty of excitement for our young hunters, who called out in glee from one to the other, commenting on this, the last of their many sporting experiences in the north.

They found that Alex, although he had never boasted of his skill, was a very wonderful shot on wild fowl; in fact, he rarely fired at all unless certain he was going to kill his bird, and when he dropped the bird it nearly always was stone-dead.

After a time Rob, hearing what he supposed to be the quacking of a duck in the grass behind him, started back to find what he fancied was the hidden mallard. He saw Alex [Pg 314] looking at him curiously, and once more heard the quacking.

"Why, it's *you* who've been doing that all the time, Alex!" exclaimed Rob. "I see now why those ducks would come closer to you than to me—you were calling them!"

Alex tried to show Rob how to quack like a duck without using any artificial means, but Rob did not quite get the knack of it that evening. For a time, however, after the other boys had come over also, they all squatted in the grass near to Alex, and found much pleasure in seeing him decoy the ducks, and do good, clean shooting when they were well within reach.

At last Alex said, "I think this will do for the evening, if you don't mind. It's time we were getting on down to the steamer."

The boys had with them their string of ducks, and Alex had piled up nearly two dozen of his own.

“What are we going to do with all of these?” said Rob. “They’re heavy, and our boat’s pretty full right now.”

“How many shall you want on the boat?” inquired Alex.

“Well,” said Rob, “I don’t know, but from the number of ducks we’ve seen I don’t suppose they’re much of a rarity there any more than they are with you. Why don’t you keep these ducks yourself, Alex, for your family?” [Pg 315]

“Very well,” said Alex, “suppose you take half dozen or so, and let me get the others when I come back—I’ll pile them up on this muskrat house here, and pick them up after I have left you at the steamer. You see,” continued he, “my people live about two miles on the other side of the town, closer to the Hudson Bay post. I must go back and get acquainted with my family.”

“Have you any children, Alex?” asked Rob.

“Five,” said Alex. “Two boys about as big as you, and three little girls. They all go to school.”

“I wish we had known that,” said Rob, “when we came through town, for we ought to have called on your family. Never mind, we’ll do that the next time we’re up here.”

They paddled on now quietly and steadily along the edge of the marshes, passed continually by stirring bands of wild fowl, now indistinct in the dusk. At last they saw the lights of the steamer which was to carry them to the other extremity of Little Slave Lake.

And so at last, after they had gone aboard, it became necessary to part with Alex in turn. Rob called his friends apart for a little whispered conversation. After a time they all went up to Alex carrying certain articles in their hands. [Pg 316]

“If you please, Alex,” said Rob, “we want to give your children some little things we don’t need any more ourselves. Here’s our pocket-knives, and some handkerchiefs, and what toffy John has left, and a few little things. Please take them to your boys, and to the girls, if they’ll have them, and say we want to come and see them some time.”

“That’s very nice,” said Alex. “I thank you very much.”

He shook each of them by the hand quietly, and then, dropping lightly into the *Jaybird* as she lay alongside, paddled off steadily into the darkness, with Indian dignity now, saying no further word of farewell.

XXXII

[Pg 317]

LEAVING THE TRAIL

Continually there was something new for the travelers, even after they had finished their steamboat journey across the lake on the second day. Now they were passing down through the deep and crooked little river which connects Slave Lake with the Athabasca River. They made what is known as the Mirror Landing portage in a York boat which happened to be above the rapids of the Little Slave River, where a wagon portage usually is made of some fifteen or sixteen miles. Here on the Athabasca they found yet another steamboat lying alongshore, and waiting for the royal mails from Peace River Landing.

This steamer, the *North Star*, in common with that plying on Little Slave Lake, they discovered to be owned by a transportation company doing considerable business in carrying settlers and settlers’ supplies into that upper country. Indeed, they found the owner of the boat, a stalwart and kindly man, himself formerly a trader among the Indians, and now a prominent official in the Dominion government, ready to accompany them as far as Athabasca Landing, and eager to talk further with Mr. Wilcox regarding coming development of the country which Moise had called the Land of Plenty. [Pg 318]

They found that the Athabasca River also flows to the northward in its main course, joining the water of the Peace River in the great Mackenzie, the artery of this region between the Rockies and the Arctics; but here it makes a great bend far to the south, as though to invite into the Far North any one living in the civilized settlements far below. Their maps, old and new, became objects of still greater interest to the young travelers, both on board the

vessel, where they had talked with every one, as usual, regarding their trip and the country, and after they had left the steamer at the thriving frontier town of Athabasca Landing.

Here they were almost in touch with the head of the rails, but still clinging to their wish to travel as the natives long had done, they took wagon transportation from Athabasca Landing to the city of Edmonton, something like a hundred miles southward from the [Pg 319] terminus of their water journey. At this point, indeed, they felt again that their long trail was ended, for all around them were tall buildings, busy streets, blazing electric lights, and all the tokens of a thriving modern city. Here, too, they and their journey became objects of newspaper comment, and for the brief time of their stay the young *voyageurs* were quite lionized by men who could well understand the feat they had performed.

Mr. Wilcox was obliged to remain in the north for some time yet in connection with his engineering duties, which would not close until the approach of winter. He therefore sent the boys off alone for their railway journey, which would take them first to Calgary, and then across the Rockies and Selkirks through Banff, and forward to Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle, from which latter point they were expected to take coast boats up the long Alaska coast to Valdez—a sea voyage of seven days more from Seattle.

Mr. Wilcox gave them full instructions regarding the remaining portions of their journey, and at length shook hands with them as he left them on the sleeping-car.

“Tell the folks in Valdez that I’ll be back home on one of the last boats. So long! Take care of yourselves!”

He turned, left the car, and marched off up the platform without looking around at them [Pg 320] even to wave a hand. His kindly look had said good-by. The boys looked after him and made no comment. They saw that they were in a country of men. They were beginning to learn the ways of the breed of men who, in the last century or so, have conquered the American continent for their race—a race much the same, under whatever flag.

Even on the railway train they found plenty of new friends who were curious to learn of their long journey across the Rockies. The boys gave a modest account of themselves, and were of the belief that almost any one could have done as much had they had along such good guides as Alex and Moise.

The Rockies and the Selkirks impressed them very much, and they still consulted their maps, especially at the time when they found themselves approaching the banks of the Columbia River.

“This river and the Fraser are cousins,” said Rob, “like the Athabasca and the Peace. Both of these rivers west of the Rockies head far to the south, then go far to the north, and swing back—but they run to the Pacific instead of to the Arctic. Now right here”—he put his finger on the place marked as the Yellowhead Pass—“is the head of the Saskatchewan River, and [Pg 321] the fur-traders used to cross here from the Saskatchewan to the Columbia just the way Mackenzie and Fraser and Finlay used to cross to the Peace from the Fraser. I tell you what I think, fellows. I’d like to come back next year some time, and have a go at this Yellowhead Pass, the way we did at that on the head of the Peace—wouldn’t you? We could study up on Alexander Henry, and Thompson, and all those fellows, just as we did on Fraser and Mackenzie for the northern pass.”

“Well,” said John, “if we could have Alex and Moise, there’s nothing in the world I’d like better than just that trip.”

“That’s the way I feel, too,” added Jesse. “But now we’re done with this trip. When you stop to think about it, we’ve been quite a little way from home, haven’t we?”

“I feel as though I’d been gone a year,” said John.

“And now it’s all over,” added Rob, “and we’re really going back to our own country, I feel as if it would be a year from here to home.”

Jesse remained silent for a time. “Do you know what I am thinking about now? It’s about our ‘lob-stick’ tree that our men trimmed up for us. We’ll put one on every river we ever [Pg 322] run. What do you say to that?”

“No,” replied Rob, “we can’t do that for ourselves—that has to be voted to us by others, and only if we deserve it. I’ll tell you what—let’s do our best to *deserve* it first!”

The others of the Young Alaskans agreed to this very cheerfully, and thus they turned happily toward home.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

1. Minor changes have been made to correct typesetters' errors; otherwise, every effort has been made to remain true to the author's words and intent.

2. "Uncle Dick" is variously referred to as both Richard Hardy and as Richard Wilcox in the text; in transcribing this book, no effort was made to correct this.

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