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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FIERY TOTEM ***



THEN HE GRIPPED HIS WEAPON BY THE MUZZLE, AND
SPRANG STRAIGHT FOR THE PACK.

See page [175](#).

THE FIERY TOTEM

A TALE OF ADVENTURE IN THE CANADIAN NORTH-WEST

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"BRAVES, WHITE AND RED" "COMRADES THREE!"

"TANGLED TRAILS" ETC. ETC.

SECOND IMPRESSION

LONDON

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THE FIERY TOTEM

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CHAPTER I

A PERILOUS PASSAGE

"Well, good-bye, boys! You won't go far from camp before we return, will you?" The speaker was one of two men seated in an Indian canoe. He gripped the forward paddle, while his companion at the stern added cheerfully—

"The backwoods is not the City of London. There are no policemen to appeal to if you lose your way. Besides, we hope to find dinner waiting for our return. Hunting lost sons is not the same sport as hunting moose."

Both the boys laughed at the elder man's remark, and one—Bob Arnold by name—answered—

"Don't worry about us, father. Alf and I can take care of ourselves for half a day. Can't we, Alf?"

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"Rather," the younger chum replied. "It's our respected parents who'll need to take care of themselves in unknown waters in that cockleshell." Then he called out merrily, imitating the tone of the first speaker—his father: "Take care of yourselves, dads! Remember the Athabasca River is not Regent Street!"

"Cheeky youngster!" returned the elder man banteringly, as he struck the forward paddle into the water. "There's not much of the invalid left about you after three months' camping."

Then with waving hands and pleasant chaffing, that showed what real good chums the quartette were, the men struck out for the centre of the river, leaving their sons watching from the strand before the camp that was pitched beneath the shadow of the great pine trees.

It was a glorious morning—just the right sort for a hunting-expedition. The air was just chilly enough to render paddling a welcome exercise, and just warm enough to allow intervals of pleasant drifting in the centre of the current when there were no shoals or driftwood to be avoided.

"Yes," remarked Holden, the younger of the two men, as the rhythm of the dripping paddles murmured pleasantly with Nature's music heard from leafy bough and bush; "yes, Alf's a different boy now. Who would have believed that these three short months would have changed a fever-

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wasted body into such a sturdy frame?"

"It looks like a miracle," returned the other man. "It was a great idea, that of a six months' trapping in the backwoods. When we get back to England we'll all four look as healthy as savages. My Bob is the colour of a redskin."

"It was a great blessing that you were able to bring him. It wouldn't have been half as enjoyable for Alf, not having a chum."

The elder man laughed softly as he turned a look of good-comradeship towards his companion.

"That's just as it ought to be, Holden," he said. "You and I were chums at school, chums at college, and now chums in business. It's the right thing that our sons should follow our good example. At least, that's my opinion."

"And you know it's mine," was the response. "But, I say! Do you think we are wise to keep quite in the centre of the current? It seems to be driving pretty hard, and we don't know the course. We might wish to land if we saw rapids."

"I dare say you are right," replied Arnold. "We'll steer straight across that bend ahead of us. After that we can keep well under the shadow of the willows—or near them. We will look for a good landing spot and strike inwards. There ought to be moose or some equally good sport among those bluffs and clearings."

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It is one thing to make plans; it is quite another matter to carry them out. Especially is this the case when strangers are travelling in strange country.

Of course the present mode of travel was no novelty to either of the men. Their youth had been passed in Western Canada (though not in the vicinity of the present voyage) before their parents sent them home to college in England. But even the hardened voyager knows that experience does not anticipate all chances, and this case was no exception to the rule.

The river was certainly beginning to run at a pace that was perceptibly swifter than that of the start when two miles farther up. This did not give any cause for concern, however, for the ears of the travellers were prepared for any sound that indicated rapids, and there was no other contingency that they felt need to dread.

At a little distance ahead, the course could be seen to take a sharp turn to the right, where the dense growth of beech and towering pines resembled the portals of a giant gateway; and, as it neared the opening, the canoe swung round the curve with the swift flight of a swallow.

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It was a sudden change of pace, due mainly to the sharpness of the turn. But as soon as the men fully entered the fresh span of the course they both started involuntarily, for the banks were so steep as to prohibit landing, and the river narrowed towards a second gateway formed by towering cliffs—steep as a Colorado cañon.

"Look out!" exclaimed Holden, as he knelt high and gripped his paddle firmly. "Leave the steering to me, I can manage better from the stern. Come back here if you can."

The canoe had already begun to dance among foaming crests like an egg-shell.

Arnold crept towards his companion.

"Not a pleasant look out!" he remarked, with a grim smile on his face. "It will be a marvel if we get through that cañon with dry skins."

"Dry skins!" laughed Holden. His voice was laughing, but his eyes were fixed steadily a few yards in front of the canoe with that firm gaze of a brave man looking peril straight in the face. "Dry skins! It'll be a greater marvel if we get through it with any skins at all!"

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"We'll have a good try, anyway," responded Arnold. Then he remarked quaintly: "This is like old times, isn't it—you and I out in a scrape together? I hope the Head won't blow us up for it when we get back to school!"

The river had now entered the narrow course, and was rushing on a foaming way with an awesome roar.

Now and then the canoe would leap to one side as a wave hungrily licked her prow; sometimes she would push her nose into a crest that splashed the travellers with spray. Fortunately the spring torrents were over, and danger from drifting logs was not to be reckoned with, but the possibility that rocks might be hidden among the white waves was a reasonable cause for concern—all the more so, considering that they were unknown.

Onwards they dashed at breakneck speed, while both the men sat grimly silent, prepared to take bravely whatever fate might be in store for them. Probably their thoughts were more of the two boys at the camp than of their present strait—more engaged with commending their sons to the care of God than speculating as to the result of this adventure.

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Then, with a suddenness that gave no time for thought, there was a crash like crackling match-wood—a rush of water that seemed to crush all within its embrace. Next moment the two men were struggling in the stream.

At that crisis, Arnold's first thought was for his friend—just as it had always been since he fought

his chum's first battles at school.

He grabbed wildly, and held on to something that he afterwards found to be his friend's jacket.

"Are you all right?" he yelled above the din of the waters, as both men reached the surface.

"A1 at Lloyd's!" came the cheerful reply—undaunted even in extremity.

"That's good. We'll weather this yet. Hang on to my coat, and we'll keep together!"

Being expert swimmers, there was little cause for fear so long as the current passed clear of obstacles, and the men had little to do but keep a suitable position, for the force of the water bore them well on the surface. But the chief danger was from undercurrents and whirlpools, and as the boundaries of the river rapidly narrowed this risk became more serious every moment.

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As they rushed onwards, so the two walls of the cañon came nearer—shutting out the light until the scene resembled the gloomy depths of a seething cauldron.

Closer and closer came the walls; swifter and swifter rushed the water.

Now the limits were so narrow that the river was but a smooth riband darting between walls worn glassy by the wear of countless ages.

The friends came so close that they touched one another's shoulders.

That was one moment.

The next instant each felt himself shot forward through a narrow opening like a cork that is volleyed from a bottle; and when the men came to realise their position, they found themselves floating on the surface of a placid lake into which the cañon poured its flood.

They looked at one another. The adventure had parted them, but Arnold laughingly held up a portion of Holden's coat as a banner to signal his position.

"Our same old luck!" exclaimed Holden, laughing.

"It'll cost you a new coat!" returned Arnold with equal cheer.

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It was perhaps a hundred yards to the nearest shore, so the men immediately started in that direction. Both were considerably exhausted by the experiences through which they had providentially passed without serious injury, and consequently the progress was slow.

But at last they reached the bank, where the red and grey willows bent their long strands in a tangled trellis.

Knee deep in the mud, the men stood upright, to clear the way to freedom. But, as they parted the nearest branches, a number of arms were suddenly forced through the scrub; a number of hands gripped them with irresistible strength; and before they could realise what had happened they were rudely dragged up the bank of the lake.

CHAPTER II

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DEER-STALKING

The boys did not find that time hung heavily on their hands when left to their own devices.

The two tents that marked the camp at Crane Creek were pitched on a grassy slope that led down to the Athabasca's dancing waters. This had been their camp-ground for several days after a desultory hunting pilgrimage from Loon Portage—the last town where they had left railways and civilisation. Having penetrated northwards into a region that was apparently remote from attacks of the plough and beyond the sound of the rancher's whoop, it was determined to make this a headquarters for a couple of months or so. Sport in much variety had already been found. Moose-tracks had been seen in the vicinity, and it had been with the hope of practically substantiating the discovery that the two elders had started off that morning.

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The boys' first consideration was that of dinner.

"Let's go into the woods and see what we can find!" Bob Arnold suggested to his chum, after they had watched the canoe disappear round a bend of the river. "There's only the carcass of a prairie chicken left in the larder. That won't be much to satisfy our paters when they come back."

"And we'll want to tackle a small morsel ourselves," added Holden. "I've never had such an appetite in my life until I came West. There's something inside me that is always calling out: 'Grub! Grub! Give me grub!'" And the boy sniffed the pine-scented air with relish, as a hungry street gamin sniffs the fragrance of a cook-shop.

Bob laughed as he strolled back to the tents and stuck a tin dipper into a wooden pail near by for a draught of cold water that had lately been taken from a moss-bordered spring.

"You're a freak of Nature; that's what you are, Alf. Two months ago you were as thin and white as

a sheet of paper, and even Saturday's school resurrection-pie failed to tempt you. Now you are the colour of a redskin, and nothing is safe from your teeth!"

"I'll not deny that I'm sometimes a bit peckish," returned the younger boy, entering one of the tents and filling a cartridge belt, which he proceeded to buckle round his waist. Then he remarked with twinkling eyes: "Say! Mustn't the fellows at St. Wenford's be green with envy if they think of themselves swotting away in class while we're having the time of our lives in the backwoods? They'll all be back by this time, for the school was only to be closed for seven weeks, the doctor said. Lucky thing fever is—in some ways."

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"In some ways—perhaps," repeated Bob in an undertone that had much seriousness in it, as he followed his friend's example in preparing for the hunt. "But it didn't seem very lucky—to me—when—when your dad was sent for, post-haste, that night. It didn't seem the best of luck then—to me, I mean."

"Nor to me," added Alf with equal seriousness. Both boys sighed at the memory, and then the younger resumed light-heartedly: "I tell you what it was, Bob, I was thoroughly riled with that fever. We always meant to be chums for the rest of our lives, just like our dads; and it put my back up to find the fever trying to upset our plans. That's what did it. Once I got the spirit of fight into me, I knocked the stuffing out of the old fever!"

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"That you did!" laughed Arnold. "The doctors said they never saw anything like your recovery, once you set to work. Well, I'm fixed up for shooting. Are you all right? Better take hunting-knives. They come in handy."

"And a repeating rifle, in case of big game. One will be enough; we can take turns in carrying it."

"All aboard. I'll just see that the camp-fire is properly stamped out, and then we'll set off."

In a short time all preparations were completed, and the two boys were ready to enjoy a morning's adventure in any form that it chose to offer.

Having hopes that something bigger than duck or chicken might reward their efforts, the chums immediately struck inwards through the bush, following an old trail from a buffalo wallow that was the ancient path of those bovines when they sought water to drink or mud to wallow in when the mosquitoes were troublesome.

Beyond chipmunks, gophers, and a single jack-rabbit (the latter falling to Bob's gun), nothing was met to tempt powder for some time. Then they reached a large "slough" that in early spring would be a small lake, though now it was filled with long blue grass and wild lavender. Here the boys paused as they examined the clearing.

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"It's a likely-looking place for rattlesnakes," Bob remarked. "It hardly seems probable that—What's that?—Over there in the centre?" The speaker's voice had suddenly dropped to an excited undertone as he pointed to a couple of small dark marks that peeped above long grass and might have been the ends of a broken branch.

Alf stared keenly for a few moments.

"I thought I saw them move——"

"So did I. Wait a minute and we'll make sure."

Keeping as still as statues, the boys waited in silence with both pairs of eyes steadily fixed upon the dark objects, and the pulses of each gave a sudden jump, for then the points moved and sank among the long grass.

"Antelope! Those are horns!" decided Alf, to which Bob returned, with a sly dig at his chum's ribs

—

"'Horns?' *Antlers*, you old duffer! We're not hunting cows!"

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"Same thing," was the retort. "Horns or antlers both mean deer in these parts." Next the boy gave a slight start. "Say! I thought I heard the branches moving above my head!"

The young hunters turned to look upwards among the dense leaves of a gigantic maple tree whose lower branches were matted with twining convolvulus and other wild creepers.

"A bird or a chipmunk," was Bob's decision. "In any case, whatever it is, this antelope comes first. We are both at windward, though I guess he hasn't scented us yet on account of the long grass. But I think it would be better if we got round to the lee-side and waited for him to rise."

"How would it be if I were to stay here, in case he comes this way?" Alf suggested. "You could take the rifle——"

"A good idea. No, you keep the rifle," amended Bob, falling in with the suggestion. "If I get to lee, I'll be near enough to do damage with the breech-loader. If I fail, you'll have the longer sight with the rifle."

"All right," said Holden. "I'll wait just where I am behind this red willow. I'll not fire until I'm certain that your gun is out of it."

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"Good. I'm off," responded Bob, and immediately he started a cautious creeping journey in the

shelter of the bush, in hopes of reaching the lee-side of the slough without attracting the attention of the animal that was apparently resting in innocent bliss among the cool blue grass.

During his silent guard Alf a second time thought that he heard a rustling above his head. But, following former experience, he thought that the sound was due to nothing more than a flying squirrel at the most, and he did not allow his eyes to be diverted from the spot where the signs of the antelope had last been seen.

By and by he at last caught sight of his chum. Bob had reached the farther end of the oval slough, and had risen to show himself. He waved his arm to announce his position before creeping down to the grass. Holden answered the signal, and rose to be ready for emergencies. But, as he moved his right foot, he stepped upon something soft, whereupon he was startled by a cry like that of a kitten. He gave a swift glance downwards, and saw that he had inadvertently trodden on something small and furry which was now expressing pain by means of shrill infantile wails.

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But his attention was immediately diverted by the sight of a dark body starting up from the long grass in the slough. At the same instant he heard the sharp crack of Arnold's gun. Alf darted the butt of his rifle to his shoulder, to be in readiness for an emergency shot; but, before the position was attained, something launched down upon him from the trees—bearing him forwards into the willow bush, while the forest echoed with the snarls of an infuriated wild beast.

CHAPTER III

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THE LONELY CAMP

A lynx may be only a cat, but a cat that is the size of a young tiger, with all a tiger's ferocity, is no pleasant opponent at any time. Add to naturally aggressive tendencies the fact that her baby has cried out in pain, and you have an angry mother-fiend that takes a deal of seeking to find her equal in fierceness.

In this case the lynx had been watching the young hunters with one eye for some time from her shelter among the leaves of the overhanging maple. She had been keeping the other eye upon her offspring, having an idea that the humans might endanger its safety; and, when she heard the cry of pain, she simply dropped from her branch right upon Holden's back, fixing her claws in his coat and snapping furiously at his neck.

Luckily the boy's hunting-coat was of tough buckskin, and when the lynx set her teeth in the collar she imagined that she was wreaking vengeance upon flesh and blood. And the sound she made was enough to chill the marrow.

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Arnold had heard the scream and his chum's cry of surprise at the sudden assault. But he did not understand it at first. He surmised vaguely that it was nothing more than sympathetic rejoicing at his successful shot that had toppled a fine buck antelope in the grass.

However, second thoughts quickly dispelled the first surmise, for he heard Holden calling upon him in evident trouble.

"Bob! Come quickly! There's something on my back, and I can't get at it!"

Bob dashed into the long grass as the shortest route. But before he had crossed the slough Alf had managed to free himself from one sleeve of his coat, and had got the lynx beneath him.

Now it was a hand-to-hand fight. The claws of the animal seemed to be everywhere. They struck with lightning swiftness, and the teeth snapped like steel gins. In fact, the boy's opponent was simply a mass of fur and claws—nothing that could be gripped, but everything that could wound.

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"Don't shoot!" exclaimed Alf, as his friend appeared with gun half raised in his hands. "You can't get a clean shot at her—ugh! the brute! She's clawed my shoulder!"

It was a fierce struggle while it lasted.

Hot and panting, Alf fought to get a grip of the creature's throat. She, on her part, seemed to divine his purpose, and battled successfully to prevent him.

The combatants rolled over. The lynx was uppermost, and she made a vicious snap at the boy's face. But the quick head-turn of a trained boxer avoided that snap, and the sharp white teeth met in the lad's coat collar, slightly grazing his neck.

Alf gave a cry of pain.

That was too much for Bob, who snatched his hunting-knife from its sheath, and threw himself upon the enemy.

One plunge of the blade in the animal's side made it yell like a thing possessed. Then Bob dug his thumbs into the lynx's neck and pressed his fingers into its throat, pulling towards him with all his might, to drag the animal from his friend.

The knife was still sticking in the wound, and as the lynx felt another enemy above her, she

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momentarily turned her attention to the one above, while she struck with her claws to deliver herself from the fingers that were choking her.

That was Alf's chance. He plucked at the hunting-knife, and plunged it into the wild animal with three rapid thrusts.

Then followed another scream more wild and blood-curdling than the rest. It was a death-cry; for in a moment more Bob stood up, holding a limp body by the neck.

Holden slowly rose from his bed of broken willows, and he grinned as he regarded his clothes—especially the jacket, that hung from his left arm like the evening dress of a Weary Willie.

"Rather the worse for wear and tear!" he remarked with comical ruefulness.

"Which? The clothes or yourself?" questioned Bob, as he threw the lynx's carcass to one side.

"I guess it's the clothes more than anything else. There's a lot of blood about, but that's the lynx's more than mine."

In truth the lad was a strange spectacle, for hardly an inch of his clothes had not been visited by claws or teeth. The boy himself was covered with dust and dirt, while crimson patches of blood completed a picture that was both humorous and pathetic.

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Fortunately, both the boys were able to look at the matter from the former point of view. Physical damage was not severe. There was a scratch on Alf's shoulder. Arnold examined it carefully, but decided that no danger was likely to follow, since the claws had passed through the leather jacket before touching the flesh. As a precaution against blood-poisoning, he insisted upon sucking the wound, after which he bound it with a handkerchief.

"That will be all right, I expect," he said, as the operation was completed. "I don't think we need worry about the other scratches."

"There would have been more—worse ones, probably—if you hadn't turned up," said Alf. "I couldn't get at the beast any way. She seemed to have claws like a porcupine's quills."

"And she knew jolly well how to use them. Do you think she's worth skinning?"

The dead lynx was examined.

"I don't think the hide is worth the trouble," commented Holden. "It's a bit ragged in any case, and the hunting-knife did not improve it. But I'll take the tail as a memento. What about the antelope?"

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"Oh, I got him all right. He's lying somewhere in the grass."

"Good!" exclaimed Alf delightedly. He had soon recovered from the exhaustion of the fight. "That will surprise the paters when they return to grub. And say! I'm as hungry as a hawk. Let's get back to camp. It must be getting on for noon by this time."

"Half-past ten. That's all," remarked Bob, as he looked at his watch. "Time drags when the appetite's healthy. I vote we leave the antelope where it is for the present, and shoot a few chicken for dinner. It would be a pity for us to try skinning the animal. We might spoil it altogether. I dare say father will do it for us afterwards."

"What about wolves?" questioned Alf.

"Yes, I hadn't thought of them. But I don't think there's much chance of wolves coming in the daytime. It would be safe enough until night."

"Right you are," agreed Alf. "First for the tail of my lynx, and then a bee-line for the camp."

Retracing their path by the buffalo trail, the boys were soon on the home journey again. Five prairie chicken were bagged on the way, and soon the hunters were once more at the campground.

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Of course Holden's first move was to strip, plunge into the river, and then robe himself in garments that were less like a rag-picker's bundle. Meantime, Arnold set to work lighting a fire and preparing the chicken for roasting on wooden spits, as their camping experience had taught them.

By midday the meal was in readiness. The birds were cooked, "biscuits" were baked in the camp-oven, the fragrant smell of coffee was issuing from a billy-tin, and all preparations completed to welcome the elder hunters.

But time went past, and there was no sign of a canoe on the river.

"I wonder if they have missed their way?" remarked Alf, to whom the waiting was a trial, considering inside calls and tempting odours.

"I don't think that's likely," said Bob. "Your dad and mine are both old backwoodsmen. I'm beginning to think something has happened—"

"An accident?"

"Possibly. But of course we can't tell. But it isn't like them to be late when they promised to be

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back by noon."

"But then, if an accident has happened to one, the other could always come back and let us know," Alf answered; and his chum returned—

"That's just what I've been thinking. I don't want to frighten you, old man, but I can't help thinking that something has gone wrong with both."

"Perhaps it's the canoe. It might have got damaged. They were exploring new water, you know."

Bob nodded.

"As likely as not. In that case they'll come back by land, and that would take some time, as, of course, they would go much quicker by water. We'll wait a little longer, and if they don't arrive we'd better have our grub. They'll turn up later."

The boys waited as patiently as possible, but ultimately, with no sign of the travellers, they were obliged to dine alone; though the meal was not eaten with customary cheerfulness, for both the boys shared forebodings of troubles to come.

The day wore on, and still no signs of the wanderers, while the anxiety of the boys rapidly increased. And when night came, without bringing any news to allay concern, they then began to decide that some serious accident must have taken place.

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Until late into the hours of darkness the two lads sat by the camp-fire, starting hopefully at each sound from the forest or river—ready to believe that any whisper of Nature must be the sound of a reassuring messenger.

How different it was from their usual little camp-fire gatherings! At such times they were wont to loll about while reciting the many incidents of the day just gone, and planning fresh exploits for the morrow. Even last night they had thus sat and planned the expedition that had ended in adding a heavier gloom to the night.

The fire-flies flickered their tiny lamps, the night-hawks shrieked as they swooped from the heavens, the owls hooted their dismal cries, and the wolves wailed in the distance as they fought over the remains of the antelope that had been left to them.

It must have been near midnight when Bob broke an unusually long spell of silence.

"Well, old boy," he said, with forced brightness, "I guess the best thing we can do is to turn in. They won't be back to-night, that's certain."

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"Yet—one might come. I wouldn't like to be asleep if—if there was any call, you know."

"Then we'll take it turn about—two hours asleep, two hours watch," was the elder boy's practical suggestion. "Besides, very likely we are worrying ourselves without need. Anything may have happened to keep them from returning—not even an accident, as we've been supposing. One never knows what may take place in the backwoods, and—and perhaps they were forced to wait till morning."

Bob knew, and Alf knew as well, that it was but a plucky attempt to look at fears in the best light—an effort to convince both against their conviction that their evil forebodings were groundless.

But Alf was not easily convinced.

"I am sure that nothing except accident could have happened to prevent at least your father or mine from returning to camp. They would know that we should be worried. And no matter how far they went by canoe in the morning, there has been plenty of time to walk the distance. I can't help thinking that they came upon tracks of the moose, as they wanted, and——"

"Hush," interrupted Bob kindly. "Don't let your imagination run away with you like that, old man. Besides, you know what good shots both our fathers are. They know the ways of most big game. No; I can't think that you are right. Such an accident *might* happen to one—even the finest trapper; but, to both—believe me, it's out of the question. Now, turn in like a good chap. I'll take first watch."

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"You'll wake me as soon as the two hours are up?" pressed Alf, reluctant to leave the watch when he might have first sign of news.

"Yes, I'll waken you. Don't worry about that. You are tired as a dog as it is—what with fighting lynxes and other excitements. In two hours you'll find that I'll be too ready for sleep to let you doze a second over time."

CHAPTER IV

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FRIENDS OR FOES?

So sudden had been the attack when the two men were snatched from the waters of the treacherous Athabasca, that they were too confused to realise what was taking place. No signs of

any prowlers had been previously evident, though possibly the fact that danger from that quarter was unconsidered might have secluded what would have been discernible by suspicious eyes.

Moreover, the men were so exhausted by the adventures through which they had just passed that they were only able to offer feeble resistance, and, by the time their scattered faculties were collected, they found themselves lying bound in the centre of a chattering throng of Indians.

Such conduct was certainly surprising in these days, when the redmen are a peaceable people who have learned to regard the pale-faces as well-meaning friends, and have long since buried the hatchet of tribal feuds.

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"What on earth can be the meaning of this?" Arnold questioned of his companion, who lay at his side.

"It's certainly extraordinary," the other man said. "Yet they don't seem particularly aggressive."

"No. They offered no indignities, such as would have been our fortune in olden days. But did you notice how that old warrior examined the knots himself? He seems to be a sort of head-man. I can remember a smattering of a few dialects, and I am sure I heard him say to the braves: 'Not too tight. Do not hurt the pale-faces, but keep them firm.'"

"It's certainly mysterious," said Holden. "Perhaps we have arrived in the middle of some sacred feast. Or perhaps we've come upon them when they were about to carry out some form of lawlessness."

Arnold shook his head decidedly.

"No. There are no signs of feasts. As for the latter, these are Dacotahs—one of the most law-abiding tribes. We'll have to look further than that for an explanation. Of this I am certain: we are in no immediate danger. That they are chattering about us is evident from these side-glances; but there is nothing hostile in the looks."

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"More like awe than hostility."

"Just what I was thinking. But see! That old warrior is coming our way again. We'll learn something this time, perhaps."

As Arnold spoke, an old Indian was seen to step from the chattering crowd. He was tall, well built, and still a fine specimen of manhood, though his face bore traces of many years.

That he received the homage due to rank as well as to years was made plain by the respectful way that a path was cleared, so that he might pass through the group of twenty or thirty redskins. He carried himself with the air of one who commands respect as his right.

All the same, though there was no hesitation in the steady stride with which the Indian approached the captives, nor in the stern set of his face, there was something in his eyes that indicated awe in the heart. The other Indians barely attempted to conceal their feelings. Throughout there was the expression that seemed to say (to put it in plain English): "Plucky of you, old chap. But better you than me!"

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Reaching the Englishmen, who were bound hands and legs, so that they were unable to adopt any position unaided except sitting or lying down, the old warrior stopped at a couple of yards' distance.

Drawing his blanket tightly round his figure, he folded his arms and thus addressed the strangers in excellent English—

"The tomahawk has been buried between the pale-faces and the redman for countless suns, and for many suns their hands have met as the hands of brothers. And the heart of Swift Arrow is sore within him this day, for the hands of the Dacotahs have been raised in their might against those whose faces shine as those of our pale-face brothers."

The old man paused, and Arnold jerked in—

"Then why on earth raise them? We did not bid you truss us up with these rawhide thongs?"

The Indian shook his head.

"The ears of Swift Arrow are old. They understand not as when he was a brave."

"Your idiom is too much for him, old man," said Holden quietly. "Try him with something easier. Better not let him know that we can speak Indian, though. It might be to our advantage later to know without being known."

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"Quite right," answered the elder man. Then he addressed the Indian again.

"We would ask, O Swift Arrow, for what good purpose your braves have bound us. We have been in peril from the waters; we seek the friendship of your land. Is this the way the Dacotahs treat their white brothers when they seek the friendship of your shores?"

The Indian felt the reproach, and his eyes fell for a moment with shame.

"The pale-face speaks words that go right into the heart like burning arrows. But Swift Arrow knows well that all things must be fulfilled. The sun must come and the darkness follow. Then

darkness come, and after—the sun again. All things must be as Manito^[1] will."

The Englishmen looked at one another with puzzled expressions.

"I wonder what he means by that?" questioned Holden. "'All things must be fulfilled.' What can that have to do with us?"

The Indian heard the question and understood.

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"All things must be as Manito will," he repeated; and Arnold, catching swiftly at the words, demanded sharply—

"Is it willed that we be bound, as the Dacotahs of old bound their captives for burning?"

This was evidently a point of view that had not occurred to the redskin, for he was at a loss for an immediate reply. He looked first at one man and then at the other, after which he repeated half aloud, half to himself, as if he were conning the exact meaning of the words—

"When the moon is round, and they rise out of the silver waters——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted Arnold, and speaking at guesswork. "That is true. We know that—'out of silver waters'—but is anything said about bonds?"

The old man shook his head. He was deeply puzzled.

"The pale-face speaks true, and it may be that the redman is wrong. There are many trails, but only one that leads to good hunting-ground. How shall the redman's eyes see right?"

Then Arnold assumed an air of indifference as he remarked carelessly, though not without a certain sneer in his tone—

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"Does Swift Arrow ask a question of his white brothers, or does he talk as old squaws chatter—foolish words like running water? We could tell him much, but it is well to know with whom one speaks. Words may be wasted as rain upon rocks."

"Let the pale-face speak," returned the Indian with dignity, though it was plain that he was moved by the sneering tones.

"Then listen. We who came 'out of the silver waters,' as you put it, can tell you much. But how can we speak in bonds? The pale-face is a chief. He will not speak as a slave to his master."

But the old man shook his head.

"It cannot be so, lest you return to the waters from whence you came——"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" exclaimed Arnold, with sudden enlightenment. "If that's all, it's easily settled. Look here—you know that when a pale-face says he will do a thing he will surely do it?"

"My white brother's word is ever truth."

"And when we say we will not do a thing, you know that we will keep our promise?"

The Indian bowed assent.

"Well, look here! If you will remove these cords, my friend and I will promise not to fight and not to run away without telling you first that we intend to do so. We will go with you where you will. We are not foxes to hide behind bushes; we are no half-breeds to hide behind forked words. I have spoken."

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The old man was immediately impressed by this view of the situation. He retired for a few minutes to consult with his friends, and afterwards solemnly returned, accompanied by a couple of young men.

"My white brother has spoken well," he said. "The redman will take the word of his white brother." Then he turned to the braves, gave a brief order in Indian, and the next moment Arnold and Holden stood up free.

"What next, I wonder?" questioned the latter, as he looked inquiringly at Swift Arrow.

He was not kept long in doubt, for the old man called the Indians together, signing to the Englishmen to take places in the centre of the group. Afterwards the company started on a trail that led away from the lake through the woods to the north-east.

CHAPTER V

[Pg 40]

LOST IN THE FOREST

Morning came, but it brought no news of the absent men. There now seemed to be no possible doubt that some accident of a serious nature had overtaken both, and the boys were at their wits' end to know what steps to take.

There had been but one canoe for the outing, so it was not possible to follow up the river course in pursuit of explanation. The only course was to take the journey on foot. That would be a tedious process, seeing that the river twined in some parts like a corkscrew. Two or three miles might be walked, and yet only half the distance might be covered as the crow flies. However, there seemed nothing else to be done. It was impossible to remain idly at the camp waiting for what might turn up. Meantime, their services might be urgently needed, and delay might only increase the necessity.

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"I vote we pack up our outfit in the tents and set off on the chance of finding their tracks," said Bob. "We can take a good supply of cartridges with us, in case we are delayed and need to forage for food."

"It's my opinion that we may have to go a good long way," was Holden's view. "It would be as well to take a small axe and one or two things for possible camping. A pannikin would be useful——"

"And a small coil of rope. You can never go far in the bush without finding a use for rope."

"But suppose they come back in our absence?"

"Ah, that's well thought of," Arnold agreed. "It might mean starting out to hunt for us. We'll leave a note explaining things."

As soon as breakfast was over, the boys made their preparations for departure. They filled knapsacks with such supplies as they deemed necessary to meet the circumstances and possible emergencies. They packed away the loose articles of the camp outfit, and pinned a note against the flap of the tent to explain the cause of their absence to any person who might reach the ground before their return. Then they set out bravely on their quest.

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It was their first intention to follow the course of the river, even though their journey might be considerably lengthened thereby. But very soon it was found that such tactics were, in the main, impracticable. In some parts the banks were steep and rocky; in others they were so thickly clothed with bush that a pathway was only possible after the axe had cut its way. The latter was particularly the case when a certain great bend of the Athabasca was reached, so the chums determined to attempt a short cut across the loop by plunging straight through the forest.

"It seems easy enough," Alf had said. "We are going about due north, I think. The bend goes due west, but as the main part of the river flows north according to the map, if we go straight on we are bound to strike the water again."

"Right, old man," responded Bob. "In any case, the paters could not be so near home, or they would have had plenty of time to get back, even by crawling. So it would be almost wasting energy to trudge so far out of the way."

It is one thing to say "go north," it is quite another matter to hold a steady course in a forest. The Indian can do it; likewise the trapper. They know the signs of the compass such as Nature has provided for them. They know on which side of the trees certain moss is to be found, and they know the signs that the blizzard wind leaves behind it when it has passed on its way from arctic zones. To such as have been initiated into the higher mysteries of woodcraft from their earliest years, a due course to any set point of the compass is second nature. But those who are unlearned in the art soon find out their mistake when they put their inexperience into practice. The sun is a pointing finger to the craftsman—a disastrous lure to the ignorant.

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Bob and Alf pursued their way pluckily. Determined to keep a steady course, the tomahawk had to be requisitioned at frequent intervals in order to clear a passage through the thorns and binding creepers that impeded the way.

At any other time the adventure would have been one of sheer delight, for who would not have enjoyed exploring unknown land—probably land, too, where only the Indian's foot and the feet of the wild creatures of the forest had ever pressed?

Once or twice the boys saw the great velvet eyes of an antelope peeping at them through a screen of maple leaves. Again the scrub would rustle, as a fox crouched down to hide his skulking body from the strangers' sight. The cat-birds were calling their sad messages to each other among the maple leaves, and lively little chipmunks would utter their shrill piping sounds of warning to their friends as they started before the advance of the young explorers. Yes, it was an experience to fill the heart with joy when any ordinary call inspired the venture spirit.

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On this occasion, however, neither of the boys had eyes for such pleasant sights, or ears for such sounds as are the delight of the trapper's life. Their minds were too full of anxiety to permit room for ordinary enjoyment, and they hardly spoke as they pressed forward in single file.

In this way they continued for two hours or more. At intervals they would take it in turn to act as leader and handle the axe; but they did not allow a pause in the pushing forward, until at last Bob called a halt, feeling that a rest had been earned.

"We ought to be getting near the river again by this time," he remarked.

"That's what I've been thinking," said Alf. "You see, it was such a sharp westward turn that the river took after we crossed the ford, that I don't think we can be far off now. It must come round to the east again."

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"Yet there's no sound of it——"

"That is what's puzzling me. We've covered a couple of miles at the least."

"And done enough work for four," added Bob. "However, let's get to work again. The sooner there, the sooner this job will be over."

"Thank goodness it looks pretty clear ahead now—more pine trees and less of the beastly scrub," said Holden.

Once more the boys pressed forward; but, although they continued the march for quite another hour, apparently they were as far off as ever from the river, for they neither sighted water nor came within hearing distance of the object of their search.

Again they stopped and faced one another with perplexed expressions.

"I'll tell you what it is, old man—we've missed the way," said Alf.

But Bob was never ready to admit defeat of any sort.

"Nonsense," he said. "We've kept a fairly straight course."

"Or thought we have. To my mind, if we'd kept straight on we ought to have reached the river by this time. As it is, there is no sign of it." [Pg 46]

"That's true. Except for being free from the brushwood, we might almost be where we started. It looks much the same—no slope or any other sign to suggest that we are nearer to the water."

"What's to be done?"

"I see nothing for it but to go back again and follow the river, as we were doing in the first place. We were fools to think of taking short cuts. The other way may have seemed longer, but it would have been a deal shorter in the long-run."

Both the boys were feeling rather fagged by this time, for their trudge had been of an exceptionally fatiguing nature. But each kept the thought to himself, and cheerfully stepped out with the intention of retracing his steps. It was a disappointment and irksome enough; yet there was no help for it, and the situation had to be faced pluckily.

But all the best intentions seemed to go wrong that day, and it did not take an hour's marching before Bob stopped and turned to his chum with a crestfallen countenance. [Pg 47]

"Look here, old man, I don't know what you're thinking, but my own opinion is——"

"That we've missed the path; that we are lost——"

"I'm afraid that is the truth of it. You see, we've never come to any of the places that we had to clear with the tomahawk."

"Then what's to be done?" Alf questioned.

Arnold took out his watch and looked at it.

"What's to be done? Grub. That's the first thing. After that we can make fresh plans. It's noon now, and we can do nothing while we're hungry. Besides—well, to tell the truth, I'm feeling a little tired."

"I, too," responded Alf, with a faint smile. "I didn't want to say so while I thought you wished to go on——"

"Just my own idea," Bob returned, with a slight laugh, as he lowered himself to a soft place under the shadow of a large maple. "So we'll rest here and have a bite. We'll feel better afterwards."

The little camp was made, and a meal was enjoyed from the contents of Bob's haversack—biscuits and cold venison. Neither of the lads thought it was worth while to trouble about shooting and cooking a meal just then. They would reserve that till night, in the event of their not being able to find Crane Creek again. [Pg 48]

After a considerable rest, the march was resumed for the third time. On this occasion, however, the process was varied. Their first purpose was, of course, to find the path by which they had come; so at Bob's suggestion they carefully proceeded to walk in a circle—checking the route by notching the trees, and taking wider courses each time a circuit was completed.

But even these means were ineffective. Circle after circle was made, and still the earlier track was undiscovered. All the afternoon was thus occupied, and, when evening came, the boys were footsore and weary—glad to throw themselves down on the first piece of springy grass, too tired even to trouble about preparing food.

The disappointment was beyond words. They had started out in the morning full of cheerful hopes of being able to render aid to their parents who (they felt sure) were in need of assistance. And now, not only was this purpose frustrated, but they themselves were in that terrible plight of being lost in the backwoods—a hundred miles or more from the haunts of white men, with nothing but plucky hearts to help them, and limited ammunition to supply bodily needs. [Pg 49]

The sun passed over their heads and sunk somewhere beyond the forest. They could not tell

where it vanished, for the camp was amid such dense surroundings that they could hardly see beyond a hundred yards through the branches.

With dusk, and after a sparse meal, it was decided to light a fire, more for the sake of the cheering sight than the need for warmth.

Bob was the first to rise, and as he stood upright he was heard to give vent to a decided—

"Bother it!"

"What's the matter?" grunted Alf, as he also proceeded to rise.

"Matter?" repeated his chum. "Nothing; only I have stuck my head into a cloud of moths—big ones and little ones. There seems to be a regular party going on under this tree."

"It's that luminous patch in the tree that we've been sitting under," said Holden, at the same time drawing his friend's attention to what looked like a patch of light on the trunk of the maple about five feet from the ground.

"That's curious," remarked Bob, bending forward to examine the spot. "I wonder what it can be? It looks like the light on one of those luminous match-boxes that are made so that you can see them in the dark." [Pg 50]

"They say that rotten wood sometimes has that effect——"

"But this tree is quite sound. And see! There's another the same on that tree to the right!"

It was certainly strange, and the boys picked up their guns and sauntered over to examine the next trunk, on which they found the same peculiar light attracting an equally numerous lot of moths of many descriptions.

"There's another!" exclaimed Alf, pointing ahead of him.

"And another!"

"And another!"

By this time the boys were quite excited by their discovery, and when Alf suddenly drew attention to the further discovery that the marked trees were almost in a straight line, their excitement was still further stirred.

"It's the strangest thing I ever heard of—in the natural history way," the younger lad said. "To find all these trees marked on the same side, and all in a straight line—why, it would puzzle the brains of anybody to explain it!" [Pg 51]

Without any decided plan, and more out of curiosity than from any other motive, the chums proceeded from one tree to another, examining each as they reached it, and marvelling all the time at what they decided as being one of the most remarkable freaks of Nature that they had ever heard about.

Then they became aware of a strange sound that reached them from no great distance through the trees. It was a most remarkable sound—not that of any animal with which they were familiar; indeed, it was not a sound that suggested any beast or bird.

"What on earth is it?" questioned Alf, as the weird wail sighed through the forest.

"It sounds like a harmonium in distress!" replied Bob, with a slight laugh. And even as he spoke the wail was repeated, though this time could be distinctly heard the voice of some person struggling to articulate to some musical accompaniment the words—

"Rool Brittany! Brittany rool waves!
Britons ne-vaire—ne-vaire—ne-vaire
Shall be sla-aves!"

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 52]

THE MEDICINE MAN

During the march through the woods the Indians were not communicative. Once or twice Arnold attempted to draw Swift Arrow into conversation, but the old man merely listened in solemn silence. He refused even to respond to direct questions.

Eventually a clearing was reached where a large number of teepees were pitched. It was quite a wigwam village, and thence the two captives were escorted to a tent that stood among many others. They were politely requested to enter, and, on obeying, they found that the teepee was otherwise empty. Several men were posted on guard at a little distance from the entrance, while Swift Arrow departed with the rest of his brethren.

"There's no doubt but that we are prisoners," remarked Arnold, as he sat down upon a buffalo [Pg 53]

hide, preparing to make the best of things and take his ease while he might.

"The whole affair is a puzzle," said his companion. "Why on earth they should take us prisoners passes my comprehension. It can't be that they regard us as enemies. They would not have been so polite and considerate if that had been their thought."

"That's just it," laughed Arnold, who, like his son, had the gift for worrying little until he knew exactly what to worry about. "That's just what surprises me. We are treated as prisoners, and not as prisoners. My impression is that we are regarded with more fear than anger."

The time allowed for speculation was soon curtailed by the sound of many voices approaching the tent, though presently there was silence, and a loud voice called to those within—

"The eyes of Mighty Hand would gladly rest on the sight of the White Men."

"He means us," commented Arnold, rising from the couch of fur. "He's too polite to enter the teepee uninvited."

"By all means let his eyes rest upon us," laughed Holden.

The two men then advanced, while one threw open the flap of the tent. And the picture that met their eyes was one that struck the strangers with admiration, for it seemed to throw the years back to the days when the Indian ruled the prairie—the days that knew the youth of Ballantyne and the prime of Fenimore Cooper.

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Ranged in a semicircle before the tent was a crowd of braves and warriors—all arrayed in the picturesque garb that was unspoilt by any touch of Saxon attire, such as is commonly seen among redskins of the present day. Except that the old-time bows and arrows were replaced by more modern muzzle-loaders, there was nothing to suggest any association with white men and white men's tastes.

But it was not so much the background of natives that impressed the Englishmen. Their admiration was called to the central figure. He was an Indian of enormous size—tall, squarely built, and equally proportioned. His head was surmounted with a turban of black fox decorated with eagle feathers that were continued like a wing right down his back and nearly touched the ground. His black hair was threaded with many coloured beads, some of which resembled (and actually were proved to be) nuggets of pure gold. Necklaces of beads and animals' teeth hung in many strands upon the breast of his deerskin shirt. Leggings and moccasins were a mass of beads, feathers, and porcupines' quills woven in intricately fantastic designs. And, over all, there hung in graceful folds an ermine robe of spotless white.

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This was the great chief of the Dacotahs. Mighty Hand was his name, and that hand was famed for its deeds of valour as equally for its deeds of kindness. He was sole monarch of a mighty branch-tribe of the Dacotahs that had long been separated from its renegade brethren, preferring to maintain the old life in the forest and on the prairie rather than a workhouse existence in a Government Reserve. He led his people far from the haunts of white men, and his life was only harmful to the game that supplied his people's needs. Powder and other necessities he obtained from frontier trading-stations. But he was known as a man of peace and a man of spotless honour. Hence his irregular life and failure to comply with Government Reserve regulations had been hitherto winked at by the officials.

When the Englishmen issued from the tent, this chief was standing before them in a majestic attitude that at once proclaimed his royal blood. He was unarmed. This was a courtesy to the strangers.

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At the chief's right side stood Swift Arrow; at the left was a figure that formed a weird contrast to the other two. This one was lean, bent, and twisted like a gnarled tree that had been starved and warped in the forest. His dress was alike native, but the grotesque ornaments of animals' skulls, tails, dried monkeys' hands, and other gruesome relics gave the wearer an appearance that was repulsive to Saxon eyes. This freak of figure and dress was Thunder-maker, the great Medicine Man of the tribe. Without his presence no state conclave was complete; without his opinion no tribal law or ruling was ever decided.

It must not be thought that the time we have occupied in describing these several features was similarly occupied by the Englishmen in minute observation. Not at all. Arnold, immediately recognising the bearing of the chief, promptly addressed him in English, which Mighty Hand could understand—judging from his first salutation.

"The white brothers of the redmen are gladdened by this visit of the great chief," he said. "The white brothers have been in great danger from rushing waters—danger from which the great chief's braves snatched them. They are grateful that their lives have been saved, and they are glad to meet the chief and thank him for what was done."

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The Indian listened in silence, and, at the pause that followed, he returned in deep tones, as if he were repeating a lesson that he had learnt by heart—

"Out from the silver waters, when the moon is round, they shall come. They shall be pale-face, and they shall look like men."

This was certainly a puzzling rejoinder! To neither of the captives did it convey any knowledge. Arnold, however, deemed that the best course would be to assume no impression that he and his

friend were regarded as prisoners.

"The chief speaks well," he returned. "But his tongue deceives him when he says that we *look* like men. Pale-faces we are. But we are friends to the redman. We would smoke the peace-pipe with him. But we are far from our camp. At our tents are our young sons, who are awaiting our return with anxious hearts. Perhaps the great chief has also a son! He will know, then, how heavy would be the heart of his papoose if the chief were long absent from his teepee. We therefore beg that the chief will hasten the peace-pipe. Afterwards he will lend a brave to guide the white brothers back to their camp-ground."

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While Arnold spoke there was silence among the Indians, and it was obvious, from the chief's face, that his mind was disturbed with indecision.

"Mighty Hand has listened to the words of the pale-face," the chief said. "The white man's words flow as music, but—'out from the silver waters, when the moon is round—'"

The speaker's voice faded into thoughtfulness, and Holden whispered to his companion—

"What is the fellow driving at? What does he mean by 'out from the silver waters'? Of course we came out from waters, but what has that to do with the moon, I wonder?"

"I can't think, unless—yes, I believe I've got it! It's full moon about this time, Holden. There's some Indian superstition, I imagine, about full moon and people being rescued from the water —"

"It sounds like that from the way he speaks. You remember Swift Arrow said much the same thing."

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"Then depend upon it we've hit the mark. In some way we've got mixed up with a legend or superstition."

Mighty Hand had been consulting with Swift Arrow while the Englishmen had been quietly summing up the situation, but now he again faced the captives.

"Mighty Hand has lived long and seen many wonders and much great medicine. But to-day there is a cloud in his mind. He understands but darkly. It would be a shame that Mighty Hand should bring water to the eyes of his white brother's papoose, but who can say if the Fiery Totem be not calling this day? Behold!"

As he spoke the chief tore open his deerskin shirt, and when the Englishmen bent forward in curiosity they saw—upon the naked breast—the figure of a serpent tattooed in gold and red so cunningly that it seemed as though a living reptile were there resting—a reptile moulded from burning flames, with head raised in the attitude of striking.

The men gave a gasp of wonder and surprise, and at the same instant the Medicine Man jumped forward, pointed a finger towards the sign, and turned with an evil grin towards the strangers.

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"The totem of the Serpent Dacotahs!" he hissed through his teeth. "Can the pale-face look upon it without fear? Can they not feel the poison-tooth break the covering of their flesh?"

At this strange attack Arnold laughed aloud, and Holden smiled as he said—

"The white men are not cowards! They do not shrink before a figure of paint!"

The Medicine Man threw up his arms in a transport of rage.

"They laugh! The white men smile at the sacred totem!" he cried in a wild appeal to the sympathies of the people, who began to respond with disapproving murmurs. "Shall it be that the fiery serpent hear laughing tongues while the hands of the Dacotahs are idle? *Who* are they that dare to revile our sacred sign with mocking eyes and tongues?"

Matters were beginning to assume a serious aspect towards the strangers, for evidently the Medicine Man was one whose lead was followed by his people, and who knew well how to play upon their weaknesses. So Arnold hastened to try and pacify the anger that he had inadvertently roused.

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"My red brother mistakes," he said, addressing Thunder-maker. "The white man's laughter was at the suggestion of fear. We are brave men who fear nothing. But we did no insult to the totem of the Dacotahs—"

"Dogs!" exclaimed the furious Indian. "Dogs! The fiery totem has been defiled. Revenge, my brothers! Revenge! lest the names Dacotah and Mighty Hand become things for jeers and laughter in the women's tents!"

The Indian was quite frantic with passion, and as he flung his wild appeal to his people the murmurs suddenly burst into a flood of angry roars—knives were snatched from their sheaths, a hundred arms were lifted, and the circle quickly closed upon the helpless men. But just at that moment of peril and almost inevitable death, the great figure of Mighty Hand was seen to start. He stepped forward with one stride, turned his back upon the captives, and then raised his arms, from which his robe hung like great protecting wings that shielded the strangers beneath their folds. And his voice rang out above the angry clamour like the voice of a wind roaring through the pine forests.

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"Back, Dacotahs! Back to your tents ere the strength of Mighty Hand is lifted and you sink to the dust! Is this how the redman treats the stranger who would smoke the peace-pipe by our fire? Is this the welcome that my braves give to those whom Mighty Hand has received with a smile—with no arms in his hand, no tomahawk at his belt? Back, dogs! and hide your coward faces like frightened papooses in the skirts of the women!"

The clamour ceased instantly. The men hung back, and their heads bent with shame, that is, all heads but that of Thunder-maker. His face betokened no shame. Nay, greater fury than ever was depicted, though he was silenced before the anger of his chief. But it was only for a little while that he was thus disconcerted, for soon he resumed—though now he spoke with humble fawning —

"It is death in the heart of Thunder-maker when the eyes of Mighty Hand shoot their looks of fire. But—*Thunder-maker speak true*. Has he not made great medicine these many suns? Did he not bring the thunder to prove his great medicine? Has he not many times driven the fever from the camp, till it fled over the prairie like a coyote driven with sticks and dogs? Huh! many wonders has he done, and—more will he do. He will do great medicine this day. He will show if the fiery totem has called in vain for vengeance."

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Thus speaking, Thunder-maker dived a hand into the bosom of his shirt and drew out a bundle of dirty linen. The chief had lowered his arms, so that the Englishmen could now see the Indian as he laughed and held up the bundle triumphantly above his head.

"Great medicine!" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes upon the white men. "Great medicine! Look! See! Listen!"

They looked, and as they looked they saw the linen move, as if something inside were struggling to be free, and at the same time they heard a sound like the sudden springing of an old-time policeman's rattle.

"Rattlesnakes!" exclaimed Arnold under his breath.

Thunder-maker laughed when he saw that the sound had been recognised.

"Come! Come, my children!" he cried, as he turned his face upwards. "Come, my little son—come, my little daughter!"

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Then he shook the knot of the bundle, and out from the aperture crept two grey-green bodies—a pair of twisting, writhing somethings that caused the onlookers to shudder and the Medicine Man to laugh, as he repeated carelessly—

"Come, my little papooses! You will speak great medicine in the ears of Thunder-maker!"

Slowly the serpents came from their covering. One remained coiled on the raised wrists, the other—still sounding the ominous rattle—moved slowly downwards till it rested on the man's shoulder. Then Thunder-maker inclined his head, as if listening to a whisper. Afterwards his face lit up with understanding.

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "Did not the spirit of Thunder-maker speak true? Come, my little papoose! You shall show for whom the fiery totem called."

Turning his head so as to look along his shoulder, the Indian suddenly grabbed the writhing reptile with his teeth, after which (holding the other serpent with his right hand) he commenced dancing until he had cleared an open circular space, of which the Indians and the white men formed the border.

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Suddenly he sprang to the middle and tossed the snake to the ground, while he uttered a wild shriek.

Once on the earth, the snake glided swiftly in several directions, while all watched the creature with tense excitement. Then for a second it seemed to pause with its head in the direction of the Englishmen. At the same moment the Indian gave a cry of triumph, tucked the one snake into a fold of his robe and bent down, making passes with his hands above the serpent on the ground. And as his hands moved so the rattlesnake gradually straightened out its body till it lay stiff and straight as a piece of wood.

Thunder-maker paused. Then he rose up slowly and looked with triumph straight into the chief's face.

"My children say that the time has come to take the cloud from the Dacotah. My papooses show *who* answer call of fiery totem!"

CHAPTER VII

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THE FRIEND IN NEED

Even considering the serious nature of their quest and the plight they were in, it was not possible for the boys to refrain from laughing when they recognised Britain's national song as caricatured

by the singer. But they had sufficient wisdom to control most of their amusement to "inward laughing." It is not always safe in the backwoods to announce your presence too suddenly where strangers are concerned—especially strangers who are not of the white skin.

"That's a rum sort of music to come upon a hundred miles from nowhere," remarked Bob, with a grin, to his chum.

"Let's hope that it comes from a throat that has something of civilisation about it," said Alf.

"It doesn't sound quite like a white man. That 'ne-vaire' is more French accent than English—probably a half-breed."

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"What do you think we ought to do?"

"Investigate. We've got no choice. We're lost; that's certain enough. What's more, there seems to be very little chance of finding our own trail back to the camp."

"That's true enough," Alf assented. "But suppose we come upon a camp of half-breeds, as you suggested? I've heard that they're not the best of friends to white people in out-of-the-way places."

Arnold nodded in agreement.

"I dare say that's true. But, at the same time, most yarns of the kind have usually got large bits of ornamental stuff stuck round the facts. We'll have to take our chance of falling in with friends or foes."

"Right-away. If you're ready, I'm ready also," said Alf promptly. "It will be a strange thing if 'Rule Britannia' leads Britons into a mess instead of out of one."

Having thus determined what course to pursue, the two boys began to creep cautiously through the bush towards the locality from whence still proceeded the music that was being repeated with all the diligence of some one who was determined to learn his lesson thoroughly.

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The night was now quite dark, but presently the chums were able to distinguish the flickering of a camp-fire at no great distance before them.

Taking every care not to betray their presence by any careless footstep, they twined a path with all the success that a professional tracker would have admired. Then, penetrating a more than usually dense portion of the bush, the young explorers found themselves right on the edge of the encampment, and the picture that they then discovered was one that was surely calculated to drive away all melancholy thoughts and feelings of fatigue, for the time being at least.

Seated on the end of a water-keg, in front of a moderate-sized "A" tent, was a man of gigantic size whose black hair stood up from his head as if he were constantly seeing ghosts, and whose equally black beard streamed down his breast like a cataract of ink. He was dressed in a blue shirt, corduroy trousers protected with cowboy "shaps," and heavy top-boots. In his hands was an accordion, at his side sat a collie dog, while in front of him, with his back to the fire—standing with his hands behind his back in the attitude of a schoolboy repeating a lesson—was a tousle-headed half-breed, whom he of the black beard was addressing in encouraging tones—

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"Noo then, ma callant, we'll just be having that last line ower again. It's no' bad as an eemitation o' a cat left oot on a winter's night; but it's no' just what I call 'ceevilised'; no' just quite that—yet."

Then the accordion sounded a dismal chord suggestive of an attack of asthma, the half-breed reattacked the "ne-vaire, ne-vaire, ne-vaire" in a manner that made up in energy what it lacked in music, and the collie raised his head to add a long-drawn wail to the concert.

"That's a wee bit better," was the player's verdict at the finish. "I'm thinking we'll make a ceevilised creature oot o' you in time, Haggis." Then the speaker turned to the dog. "As for you, Bannock, you're a bit oot o' tune at times. But it's no' that bad for a doggie. It's good to be aye trying to do our best—"

"Hear! hear!" shouted Bob, whose interested amusement had quite banished his caution.

The effect of the boy's applause was electric. The two men started. The half-breed snatched up a gun that was leaning against a tree near by; one hand of the bearded man deposited the musical instrument upon the ground as his right picked up a handy rifle; while Bannock, the dog, crouched down with bristling hair and deep growling.

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"Come oot and show yourself, whoever ye be!" commanded the master, as he raised himself to his great height, with rifle in readiness and eyes staring towards that part of the bush where the chums stood. "Come forward this instant, or I'll bore as many holes in your body as there are farthings in a pound!"

In obedience to the gentle invitation, and not in the least nervous, now that they knew who the musicians were, the boys immediately made their appearance.

"There's no need to be afraid——" began Holden reassuringly, when he was interrupted by a huge guffaw of derision.

"Afraid! And what for shall Skipper Mackintosh be afraid? Unless it's mosquitoes, there's no man

or beast in Canada that'll turn a hair on his hide." Then, seeing the lads as they approached into the firelight, the man immediately changed his tone of address as he also altered the threatening pose of his rifle. "What! A pair o' laddies?" he exclaimed in astonishment, and Bob replied—

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"Neither of whom is particularly anxious to be riddled with a pound's worth of farthing bullets!"

But the words had barely passed the boy's lips before the rifle had been dropped to the ground and the man had sprung forward excitedly to grab a hand of each boy in his great fists.

"Faix! but this is a fine sight for sore eyes!" he exclaimed, as he vigorously pumped the arms up and down. "I've no' seen a white face (barring a trader's, and that was ower dirty to call it 'white') this twelvemonth past. I'm right glad to see you!"

"And I guess we're jolly glad to see you," returned Alf. "It's a treat, but—speaking for myself, I really want to use my hand again. It'll be jelly in a few more seconds."

"And mine too!" laughed Bob, who could not help wincing at the vigorous form of the welcome.

The Scotsman immediately released his severe grasp.

"Sakes! But I'm that glad to see you, laddies, I feel just like squeezing for another hour. I suppose, noo, that I'm no' just dreaming? You're no' by chance just twa o' them muckle moths that's come into my dream in a make-believe?"

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"We're human, sure enough," Arnold laughed in reply, and Alf added—

"Terribly human we are, for we've lost our way in the forest, and we're beastly tired as well as hungry."

"Lost—tired—hungry?" repeated Mackintosh. "That has a human sound—terribly human, as you say." Then he turned towards the half-breed, who had been standing an amazed spectator of the scene. "Did you hear that, Haggis?" he demanded. "Did you hear that—'hungry and tired'?"

"Haggis hear," was the quiet reply of the native, to which the Scot retorted angrily—

"You heard? And yet, one meenit after, I see you standing there like a daft gowk instead o' hustling for food as fast as your legs can move you? Ma conscience! But you tak' a deal of ceevilising! You dinna ken the first meaning o' the word 'hospitality.' Off wi' you!"

There was no need to repeat the order, for the half-breed immediately disappeared within the tent, and the almost simultaneous rattling sound of tin-ware was evidence of his haste to supply the want.

Mackintosh then turned to the boys.

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"Noo then, rest yourselves, laddies. Sit doon by the fire, and you'll soon have a bit o' something to grind between your molars. Haggis is slow to understand, but he's quick enough when he kens what's wanted."

Not unwillingly, the chums soon stretched themselves in comfortable positions beside the camp-fire at either side of their eccentric host. Bannock, however, still eyed the strangers with suspicion, so Mackintosh was forced to introduce the dog formally to each boy in turn, at which the intelligent animal extended a paw with all the air of one who is accustomed to polite society.

"He's a fine chap," explained the Scot. "There's no' a single thing that he canna do (according to the leemitations o' Nature) except speak. And even that he manages to do in his ain way. Noo, come here, Bannock, and lie down while oor freends spin us their yarn. They've no' told us yet who they are, where they come frae, nor where they're going."

"That's a yarn that's quickly told," remarked Bob. The half-breed by this time had returned from the tent with generous supplies of cold deer, damper, and wild berries, after serving which he placed a pan on the fire in preparation for coffee. "It's a yarn that won't take long in the telling, though, if you'll excuse me, I'll eat while I speak."

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"Eat awa'," assented the other, while he lit a corn-cob pipe to satisfy his own immediate wants. "There's plenty mair where that came frae, and the coffee will soon be ready!"

Arnold then launched into a brief recital of his and his chum's adventures, beginning with the departure of their fathers on the previous morning, and concluding—

"So all this afternoon we've been wandering about trying to find a path back to our camp, so as to start afresh by the river course. But it was no use."

"And we might have been wandering still if it had not been for a strange accident that led us here," added Alf, at which remark Mackintosh questioned—

"And what might that be? The soond o' Haggis's nightingale voice?"

"No—at least, not in the first place. We heard that later. What first started us in this direction was a curious sort of light that we discovered on one of the trees. And while we were examining it we noticed that there were other lights on other trees in a straight line with one another. Strange, wasn't it?"

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"Very," returned the Scotsman dryly. "Very strange."

"It would be a good thing for a naturalist," said Bob. "I noticed that there was a perfect cloud of moths flying about wherever there was a patch of light. A collector of moths and butterflies would reap a harvest. I suppose you've noticed the lights as well as we?"

"H'm—yes—considering that I painted the trees mysel' this afternoon," was the reply. "It's an invention o' my own. I'm what *you* call a collector of moths and butterflies. An entomologist is a shorter way o' putting it. Well, there's many folks stick to treacle—I mean, stick to the auld-fashioned way o' putting dabs of treacle and speerit on trees to attract the nocturnal creatures. That's all very fine and good. But you canna carry gallons o' treacle on a tramp like this, when your whole outfit must be packed on one pony. So says I to mysel': 'Moths are attracted by light; I must invent a compositieon o' phosphorus to take the place o' treacle.' And those lights that you found on yon trees are the result."

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"And a splendid idea it is!" exclaimed Alf, who had also done his little share of treacling at school. "Is it a success?"

"Magnificent. I've found more moths than were known to exist in the West. I'm thinking that I'll open the eyes o' the Royal Edinburgh Entomological General Natural History Exchange Society when I get back again after my journeys. But——" The speaker here paused in his enthusiasm, remarking seriously, "I'm thinking there's other matters o' mair importance before us the noo than moths. Your faithers went doon the Athabasca, you said?"

"Yes; in a canoe," said Bob.

Mackintosh shook his head ominously.

"That's bad. I suppose they'd never been there before—indeed, it was no' possible, or they'd never have made the attempt yesterday."

"Is it—dangerous?" questioned Holden, in an undertone of dread, for the man's voice conveyed no small impression of the risks the voyagers had run. "We had not thought of danger in the river. We only thought of moose."

Mackintosh grunted uneasily.

"The river is more treacherous than any moose. There's a terrible narrow bight atween cliffs where it runs like lightning, and then shoots in a waterfall into the Silver Lake. Man! I've seen great trunks o' pine giants flung through yon opening like wee arrows a hundred feet in the air afore they touched water again."

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"Then a canoe——"

"If it reached so far in safety it would shoot likewise."

"You think it possible that the canoe *might* pass the gully unharmed?" Bob then questioned. It was always his nature to struggle for the brightest view, and the man's answer was somewhat in the same spirit.

"It's no' the way o' Skipper Mackintosh to find trouble until trouble finds him. He's been in a' the back corners o' Europe, Africa, India, China, and America; and, if he learned nothing mair from his travels, he learned this: troubles are easier conquered when you meet them wi' a firm lip at the proper time. But the man that moans before he kens what he's moaning about—well, it's little strength he's got left when the fight really begins."

"Yet if, as you say, the Athabasca is so dangerous——" began Alf, when he was again interrupted with kindly roughness.

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"If? Laddie, laddie, are you forgetting that there's a Hand that could guide the frailest birch-bark safely through Niagara itsel'? And I doot not that I'm right when I say that it's my opeenion that that same Hand has no' been very far from your faithers in their plight. Does either o' you ken anything o' this by chance?"

As he spoke Mackintosh dived his hand into the hip-pocket of his overalls and produced a white handkerchief which he spread out upon the ground by the fire. The boys bent forward, and immediately Alf exclaimed—

"That's my father's! See! His initials are at the corner. Where did you find it?"

"*Not* in the Athabasca!" said Mackintosh with quiet triumph. "Haggis and I came upon it this morning a hundred yards from Silver Lake."

"Then that means that they are on shore!" exclaimed Bob with delight at the relief from one anxiety that the evidence of the handkerchief provided.

"Ay. The Athabasca is free from that charge, at any rate. That hanky has no legs to walk by itsel'. It must have been carried. By whom? No' by an Indian, though I ken there's been Indians in the viceenity. If a redskin had found it, he'd have taken better care o' it. And so it's clear to me that one o' your faithers must have dropped it on dry land, and so—so—— Well, you both o' you can have a sound night's rest."

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So convincing were the tones in which the man clothed his words that the spirits of the boys were quickly stirred from gloomy anticipations to comparative cheerfulness.

"You've lifted a load from my mind, Mr. Mackintosh," Bob said gratefully, "for of course it is all fairly plain now. As likely as not they passed through that horrible gully, but were too worn out yesterday to start the trudge back to camp. It would be a long way, too, seeing how the river winds."

"In that case, most likely they are back at the camp by this time," suggested Alf. "But they would understand our being away, for they would find the note that we pinned to the tent."

"That's right, laddies. Look for the bright side and you'll always find it," the Scotsman remarked. "But I'm thinking that your reasoning is a wee bit oot in one respect—they have no' gone back yet, else Haggis or I would have seen them. This camp is in the direct natural path from that part o' the Athabasca. My opeenion is that they've fallen in with the Indians—a tribe o' Dacotahs, and peaceable folk they are. It's no' to be expected that the gully could be passed unscathed. So it's likely to me that they're nursing themselves for a day wi' the redskins, after, maybe, sending a brave to your camp to tell you o' it. So to-morrow we'll lose no time in starting for Silver Lake. That's the best plan I can think o'."

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"You mean to come with us?" asked Alf.

"What do you take me for—a savage?" was the reproachful return. "Do you think that Skipper Mackintosh is going to allow twa laddies like you to go wandering about the backwoods when he can guide you? And when Skipper fails, is there no' the Haggis and Bannock—a pair o' the finest scouts and trackers that ever set foot in bush or prairie? What do you take me for, I'd just like to know?"

"One of the kindest hearts in the world, Mr. Mackintosh," said Bob fervently.

"Bah! Fiddlesticks and porridge-sticks!" was the rough rejoinder, though a pair of eyes were turned kindly enough upon the youths—eyes that glistened in a way that rather suggested the nearness of water. "All a pack o' nonsense! If a man is no' ready to help his fellow-creatures when they need him—well, I'm thinking that he ought to have a pin stuck through his thorax and mounted in a box among my moths, labelled, 'A horrible freak o' Nature.' And I'd have you know, too, that my name is Mackintosh—Skipper Mackintosh. There's no 'Misters' in the backwoods. 'Skipper' is the name that my auld faither gave me to commemorate his discovery o' a new variety of skippers in the entomological world. Mind that, and—and good-night to you, laddies. Good-night, and God bless the pair o' you."

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CHAPTER VIII

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NIGHT IN THE WIGWAM

While the two boys had been holding their lonely watch at the camp prior to setting forth the following morning on their disappointing search, matters of serious moment were taking place at the encampment of Mighty Hand and his brother Dacotahs.

Thunder-maker's triumph had been complete. The savage mind seldom looks for a simple explanation of anything that surprises him. When the unusual is not understood, he does not search for a simple and natural explanation. He immediately flies to the supernatural and attributes to good and evil spirits actions that a little common sense would have readily explained in an everyday way.

The Medicine Man of a tribe is different from others of his race. He is the brainy exception of craft united to common sense, and he uses these to best advantage for his own interests. Thunder-maker's method of divining was very simple after all—nay, even childish. We have seen it performed by redskin jugglers, as we have also seen the same effects produced by Arab diviners on the Syrian desert.

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The explanation is found in the fact that serpents are exceedingly sensitive to blows. A cut with an ordinary willow wand is usually sufficient to break the spine and disable all but the monsters of the class. At the same time, although the first blow may daze a snake, it is some time before the final effect takes place, and the creature will wriggle about for some time after having been struck, while its energy is practically nil—that is to say, it merely lives without possessing any real strength.

Now, Thunder-maker's cunning was well aware of all this, and when he dropped the rattler from his teeth he was careful to do so in such a way that the creature would touch the ground with considerable violence. Then he allowed it to wriggle about until in time its head faced the Englishmen. That was the moment for which he had waited, and immediately he started forward with a cry that startled the snake into still fear. A few passes with his hands fascinated the creature long enough for the Medicine Man to show the Indians that the creature was undoubtedly pointing in the direction of the captives, and when that was done the crafty redskin had achieved his purpose:

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The serpent had divined whom the sacred totem of the tribe had called that day.

Then Thunder-maker had replaced his assistant in the linen cloth before it revived sufficiently to

commence wriggling again, and, perhaps, point its supernatural head to some one else.

Both Arnold and Holden had observed how Mighty Hand had been wavering between reason and superstition until the intervention of the Medicine Man had caused superstition to take the uppermost place. A moment before, and the chief would have released the captives and sent them back to their camp in charge of a guide. But the art of Thunder-maker had stepped in to convince the people that the sacred totem of their tribe had been calling that day, and that it was the Englishmen for whom it called.

Why?

Ah, that was what the strangers found inexplicable. Of this, however, there was no doubt: their arrival had been at a most unfortunate time, when some answer to the supposed call of the totem was then expected. They were that answer, and the result—who can say what the consequences would be when falsehood and superstition had a savage people at command?

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So the Englishmen were requested to return within the teepee that had been reserved for their prison. But, curiously enough, they were not treated in any way after the traditional Indian mode of treating prisoners. They were not bound; no guard was placed at the entrance, though sentries were placed round the camp of which the prison teepee was the centre. The best food that the Indians possessed was supplied to them, as well as a sufficiency of fur robes to sleep upon. All the same, in spite of these kindnesses and other thoughtful attentions, there was no room for doubting that they were prisoners who were not to be allowed any opportunity for escape, and the men could only accept the present situation in a philosophic spirit, and await the course of events with such patience as they could muster.

As the day passed, and darkness fell upon the forest, the Englishmen stretched themselves upon the robes, while in whispers they tried to arrive at the solution of the mystery and form some sort of plan for future action.

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"It's all owing to that scoundrel Thunder-maker," Arnold said. "If he had not stepped in, Mighty Hand would have released us. I could see by his face that he was favourably disposed towards us."

"It is a serious business," said Holden.

"Serious enough for us, for there is no knowing what may happen when people get mixed up with native superstitions. At the same time, what I worry about most is the boys."

Holden sighed at the thought of Bob and his son Alf being alone at the deserted camp.

"Yes," he said. "It will be hard on them if anything happens to us—miles away from civilised habitations. Of course, I don't give up hope of coming out of this right enough in the long-run, and we may be worrying over very little after all. But meantime—the boys—I wonder what they are doing now?"

At this question the elder man gave a slight laugh.

"You wonder?" he repeated. "I don't think you need go very far for the answer if you haven't quite forgotten our own schooldays. What would you and I have done if two of our chums had disappeared from camp as we did?"

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"Gone to look for them," was the prompt reply, to which Arnold resumed—

"And I think there's not so very much difference between Arnold and Holden *pères* and *fils*. You take my word for it: at this very minute the youngsters have summed up the situation and are planning a rescue expedition, if, indeed, they have not already set out. Neither Bob nor Alf is the sort of chap to sit still and moan at such a time."

"Yes, I believe you are right. Neither of the youngsters would allow himself to be knocked over by the first difficulty. And they would know that some accident must have taken place, for we promised to be back at camp by dinner-time."

"All the same, we don't want them to be mixed up in this affair in the event of their coming on our track," said Arnold. "We must contrive to prevent that, but— Hullo! Who's this?"

A dark outline had suddenly filled the space at the opening of the tent at this juncture, but the Englishmen were not left long in doubt of the nature of their late visitor, for a voice addressed them in Indian accents.

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"Thunder-maker would speak words of counsel with his white brothers."

"Oh, he would, would he?" returned Arnold, and his companion added—

"There was very little friendship about Thunder-maker this afternoon."

The Indian gave a low laugh, as though he were thoroughly enjoying some secret joke.

"There are days when hunter's path must be straight; there are days when crooked trail lead him where he find much deer. To-day—crooked trail. But Thunder-maker friend. He would speak in ear of white brother—low, soft. Thunder-maker wise man. He speak words of wisdom to his friends. But—none may hear but pale-face."

"By that you mean that you want to come into the teepee?" said Arnold. "All right. Come along. And if you have any sense to speak of, out with it."

The Indian noiselessly entered and took a seat on the robes between the Englishmen. He did not speak during these movements, but when he was comfortably settled he turned to Holden and addressed him in a whisper—

"Night dark, and red men sleep—all but braves, who watch that white men no return to Silver Lake." And a second time the Medicine Man laughed quietly. [Pg 89]

"Silver Lake!" returned Holden. "I shouldn't think we need any watching to prevent that. Without a canoe, Silver Lake is not much use to us."

"Still—braves watch. They believe that white men return to waters. They came without canoes; they go back without canoes."

"Fools!" exclaimed Holden. "What do they think we are? Spirits?"

"Huh! My white brother speaks true. Indians—*some* Indians—fools," answered Thunder-maker, at which Holden uttered an exclamation betokening sudden enlightenment.

"By Jove, Arnold! That's it! That explains the whole business. These idiots take us for spirits, since they saw us scramble out from the lake without any boat in sight. Spirits! It's almost too silly to believe."

"Yet that's what Thunder-maker means," said Arnold, to whom the solution of the mystery was now equally clear. "That is what you wish us to understand, isn't it, Thunder-maker?"

"The understanding of the white man travels quick." [Pg 90]

"And that accounts for the kind treatment—the food, half-freedom, and the rest. But if your people think us spirits, why do they keep us here? Why not let us return?"

The Indian paused for a moment before he replied, after which he remarked quietly, and with a peculiar inflection of tone that added deep meaning to his words, while at the same time it betrayed the fact that there was some curious reason to account for this confidence—

"Dacotahs fools. They think white brothers spirits—*evil* spirits. They have not the eyes of Thunder-maker."

"I see," said Arnold thoughtfully. "But you forget, Thunder-maker, that your trickery with the snakes helped them to that opinion."

Once more the Medicine Man laughed quietly in a manner that irritated his hearers, and Holden broke in roughly—

"Come now, you old cheat, explain yourself! *You* didn't believe as the rest of your people did. And if not, why did you behave in such a double way? Out with it. You had some purpose in coming here to-night, and you may as well give us the truth right away."

It is not possible to hasten an Indian in the matter of speech. Hasty response or rapid talk they deem discourteous. Thunder-maker was no exception to his race in this respect, but he was exceptional in another, inasmuch as when bent on a subject he stuck to it without using many unnecessary words or ornaments of speech. He waited in thoughtful silence for several minutes. Possibly in his cunning way he was mentally scrutinising the peculiarities of his companions in the teepee—deciding what course would be best to enable him to be assured of their trust. Whether or not he judged their characteristics correctly will be seen later. [Pg 91]

"My white brother has asked for the truth," the Indian began. "Thunder-maker shall speak words as straight as the path of a burning arrow."

"Many years ago—when the buffalo lived upon the prairie to feed the redman and provide his robes—the great tribe of Dacotahs would hunt in the valley that is known even to-day as the Peace Camp. Many deer would feed there, and the buffalo would eat the blue grass, and Manito had filled the camp with fruit and flowers. In those days the Dacotahs were ruled by a mighty warrior, Flying Cloud—the son of the fiery totem serpent that saved his life by slaying the chief of the Chippeways in the war-path by night." [Pg 92]

Here the speaker paused, as though he expected some comment from the listeners regarding the seeming miracle. But no remark being forthcoming, he resumed—

"For many years our tribe lived in prosperity. Pemmican was in plenty, and the redmen kept the hunting-grounds in peace. Then—one night—Chief Fire-water came to the camp, and a brave with foolish mind praised Fire-water more than the sacred totem. He was slain by Flying Cloud ere the insult was cool on his lips. But the serpent was angered. He flashed tongue of fire to the Dacotahs—called down the rains and the tempest upon the Peace Camp by night, until the water spirits rushed through the valley on white horses, destroying trees and fruits—washing the land bare of earth. And, when the sun came up from his teepee of fire, Flying Cloud and the best warriors of the Dacotahs had been carried away by the water spirits and were never seen again."

"Then there was great wailing in the camp, and the totem of the tribe was called upon to cease anger, lest the Dacotahs be a tribe no more." [Pg 93]

"And the serpent had pity, and spoke thus to the warriors and braves—

"I will stay my anger; but I have given power to the spirits that ride on white horses, and I may not call it back again."

"Then what shall the Dacotahs do?" asked the warriors. "It may be that the spirits will again ride their white mustangs and take from us our chief and our young men."

"And the serpent replied—

"When such time come, the Dacotahs will see two white spirits rise out of the lake that is silver. When the moon is round, they shall rise out of the lake that is silver. They shall come without canoe to bear them, and without arrow or tomahawk for fighting. By this shall you know them. Then shall the Dacotahs lay hands upon the white spirits; they shall treat them kindly, but they shall bring them to the Peace Camp and there consume them with fire. Then shall the power of the water spirits be broken. Then shall the Dacotahs be safe. Then shall the fire of my anger be quenched.

"But I—the sacred totem of the Dacotahs—am mighty and full of pity. The Dacotahs are brave, but they are not all wise. It may be that their ignorance might lead them to bring suffering to those who are not evil spirits. But let them not hold back in doubt, for I shall stay their hand, even though the torch be set at the wood. For if the eyes of my children are blind, I shall be near to guide them. And the sign of this shall be: *I shall appear before the eyes of all people as a serpent of fire*. By this shall they know that they have erred. They shall withhold the torch, free the captives, and be to them as brothers."

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Once more the speaker waited for a space, until he knew that his hearers had time to grasp the full meaning of the legend that he had related. Then he lowered his voice and spoke with deep meaning that was not difficult for the Englishmen to understand—

"Yesterday the moon was round. Two white spirits came from the lake that is silver without canoe for sailing, without arms or tomahawk for fighting. The fiery totem called, and was answered.... By another sun Mighty Hand will lead the white spirits of the water to the camp that is called Peaceful!"

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 95]

THE TEMPTATION

It needed no great knowledge of Indian character and Indian ways to make clear to the Englishmen all that was implied in this story that Thunder-maker had recited. Nor had they any reason to doubt that he had spoken the truth, for the evident pleasure that it gave him to watch the effect of his revelation was almost a sufficiently convincing argument in itself.

Of course Thunder-maker had only the evidence of his ears to inform him, for the tent was in darkness, the convenience of lamps not being a usage of the redskins, who either retire to sleep at nightfall, or rely upon camp-fires for illumination. But the Medicine Man could hear his companions give slight gasps of horror when the climax was reached. His ears were quick to interpret the faintest sounds of pleasure, pain, or surprise.

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The trio sat in silence for a time, until at last the soundless night became too oppressive, and Holden was forced to speak his thoughts.

"Why have you told us of this, Thunder-maker?" he asked. "Were you sent to us by Mighty Hand?"

The Indian made an impatient movement of his body, and grunted meaningly at the question.

"Mighty Hand send Thunder-maker?" he exclaimed, in an undertone that conveyed a sense of the uttermost contempt for the chief of the Dacotahs. "My white brother speak foolish words—the words of women and papooses. Mighty Hand do the wish of Thunder-maker. The chief of medicine no slave to run when any man speak."

"Then why have you come to us to-night?" urged Holden.

"It was not out of friendship for us," added Arnold.

"Huh! It true what the redmen say, that the pale-face have heart of buffalo skin that keep out the love of brother," responded the Indian, in fawning tones that caused the listeners to feel as though they would have gladly kicked the speaker out from the tent. There was low cunning in his voice—such cringing craft as all brave men naturally despise. But it was the instinct of both to draw out the visitor's confidence. It was possibly their only hope of learning the truth of their position, thereby enabling them to make plans for their future actions.

[Pg 97]

"The redman love the pale-face and would be friend to him," Thunder-maker went on. "So he come to tell his brothers what they did not know. Dacotahs fools, Dacotahs believe foolish stories, and—*Thunder-maker can lead their feet by what trail he will*."

"H'm. That was plain enough this afternoon when you played with those rattlesnakes," remarked

Arnold, at which the Indian laughed quietly.

"Dacotahs fools. But white men wise. They see not with the eyes of redmen. But Dacotahs might be great people if Mighty Hand were in Happy Hunting-ground."^[2]

"But what has all this got to do with us?" asked Holden.

"My white brothers in great danger. In a few more suns cruel fire burn beautiful bodies. But——" [Pg 98]

"Well—but?"

"Thunder-maker could save—white brothers—from fire?"

"Oh, that's it, is it? That's what you are driving at, you cunning old serpent?" said Arnold, in accents that were as little complimentary as the words. "You want us to buy our lives for money? Well, how much do you wish?"

"My white brothers have papooses, they say to Mighty Hand?"

"Yes; two boys in a camp by Crane Creek."

"It would gladden the eyes of the pale-faces to see their papooses by another sun?"

"We would do much to go back to them, for they must be sad at the absence of their fathers," said the elder man.

"Then it may be as the pale-face wish," resumed the Medicine Man. "Thunder-maker can save his white brothers, and he will——"

"If you will, there is nothing that we will not do, within our power, to repay you," said Holden, wrongly anticipating the motive of the Indian. "We can give you many dollars, and will give you blankets and weapons for hunting."

"That is good," returned the redskin quietly. "But—Thunder-maker no wish blankets—dollars, He have many—many." Then he lowered his voice to speak in deeper tones of confidence. "Let the pale-face be patient, and listen to the words of the redman. Then he will understand how it may be that he look not upon the face of the fire." [Pg 99]

"The Dacotahs foolish. They see white men as spirits that came out of Silver Waters. And Mighty Hand foolish too. He believe that fiery totem speak—that fiery totem call water spirits to torture. Foolish redmen! Foolish chief! But Thunder-maker would see his people a great people. He would see his tribe wise as the fox and brave as the great bear. He would see *another* chief to rule them—he would see *another* wear the robes of a chief! So he would blind the eyes of his people. He would say to them: 'Children, you are foolish. The spirits that come from the Silver Waters are not the spirits that the totem called. They great spirits sent to you by Manito to tell you how to be a mighty tribe again.' Then great medicine will be done, and Thunder-maker will ask the pale-faces to speak what Manito has told them.

"Then the pale-faces will tell the Dacotahs: 'Slay Mighty Hand! Let him not see another sun, and place the chief's robes on Thunder-maker; tie the chief's feathers in the hair of Thunder-maker; write on Thunder-maker's breast the picture of the sacred totem.' Then will the Dacotahs believe. Then shall Thunder-maker be chief of the Dacotahs, and—the pale-faces shall return in peace to their tents. I have spoken." [Pg 100]

The Indian paused, but, no comment being immediately forthcoming, he resumed quickly, being warmed to excitement by treacherous hopes—

"Then it shall be well with my white brothers. No fire shall have their white bodies——"

"And if we—refuse—to do—this?" questioned Arnold slowly and seriously, and his companion added: "Yes, if we refuse—what then?"

"The pale-faces will not refuse," returned the Indian firmly. The savage mind could not conceive such a possibility as refusal to purchase freedom at any cost, no matter how despicable that cost might be. "The pale-faces will not refuse," he repeated. "The flames hurt much, and white men die slow, slow as tongue of fire lick their bodies. The pale-faces not refuse——"

"But we do!" exclaimed Arnold angrily, as he raised his voice to a louder pitch, now that the first need for caution was past. "You know little of the pale-faces, as you call them, if you think that they would do the deeds of dogs to save themselves from pain. Manito, to us, is God—He whom we serve and honour; He whom we love. Do you think that we could dare to live another hour if we knew that we had pretended to be sent by Him—and so delude foolish people? No! A thousand times no! Even if we were to see our sons dying before our eyes, and knew that one such false word would save them and us, I tell you, liar and cheat that you are, that word would never be spoken! We would be as dumb as the trees of the forest!" [Pg 101]

So moved was Arnold by the indignation that he felt at Thunder-maker's treacherous proposal that he rose as he spoke and poured out the torrent of his anger with reckless vehemence. Holden also got up, anticipating that the Indian might attempt some deed of revenge, seeing that he had displayed his hand to the sight of enemies who might make much of this knowledge in an appeal to Mighty Hand.



DACOTAHS! DACOTAHS! COME QUICK TO THE HELP OF THUNDER-MAKER! HE IS BURNING WITHIN WITH FIRE. QUICK! QUICK!

But Thunder-maker was too cunning to risk violent measures with two such powerful antagonists. He merely waited until Arnold had finished his tirade. Then he suddenly leaped out from the tent, threw himself upon the ground, and uttered wild screams that immediately roused the entire camp. [Pg 102]

"Dacotahs! Dacotahs! Come quick to the help of Thunder-maker! The evil spirits of the water have witched him! He is burning within with fire. Quick! quick!"

Instantly the camp was in an uproar, and men came rushing from all directions, bearing arms and torches that they had snatched from the still burning camp-fires. And before the Englishmen were well aware of the sudden change of affairs, a score of hands had seized them, and many strands of thongs bound them helpless, hand and foot.

CHAPTER X

[Pg 103]

A DEATH-TRAP

"Wake up! Do you want to sleep all your senses away?"

It seemed but an hour after the tired boys had laid down their heads that the above words were bellowed through the opening in the tent.

Bob sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Yes, it was really morning. There was no doubt about that, for the sun was pouring into the tent in a warm stream, the birds were filling the woods with music, and the perfume of Nature was creeping all around them.

One entire end of the tent had been thrown open to reveal these delights, and when Arnold opened his eyes he saw the gigantic figure of his Scottish host doing its best to fill the space. There was a good-humoured smile on the man's face—a smile that betokened a heart of the largest dimensions. [Pg 104]

Bob soon roused his chum, who was buried in a blanket.

"What's the matter?" questioned the latter, as he unrolled from the coverings.

"Can you not smell it?" demanded Mackintosh.

"Fried bacon and coffee—yes—ripping!" was the reply as Alf began to move, being inspired to haste by the odour that proceeded from the camp-fire beyond the tent, where Haggis was busy cooking.

Mackintosh gave a snort of assumed contempt.

"Bacon and coffee! Who thinks o' bacon and coffee on a morning like this? Fegs! but have you no ears for the birds, nor nostrils for the scents of Nature? Man, but I'd sooner have a sniff o' the backwoods—"

"Than a mouthful of bacon? Not I," chimed in Alf merrily, at which the man laughed heartily as he turned on his heel.

"I'm thinking that there's very little poetry in a hungry stomach," he said. "Well, 'get a gait on.' You'll find a wash-hand basin behind the tent, and breakfast'll be ready when you are."

The boys needed no second bidding, and it was not many minutes before they were ready to show how well they could appreciate the half-breed's culinary art. [Pg 105]

While the lads were breakfasting, Mackintosh and Haggis busied themselves with striking the tent and packing the rest of the camp outfit upon the single pack-horse that accompanied the naturalist's wanderings. The two men had already fed at an earlier hour, and had stowed away most of their belongings in preparation for the journey.

"We'll be making straight for the Silver Lake, where the hanky was found," explained Mackintosh as they set off. "Haggis'll maybe pick up tracks there that'll be o' use to us." And so a northerly route was taken—crossing an arm of the Athabasca, and then following a course through the woods under the unerring guidance of the half-breed.

Towards noon the Scotsman called a halt, as he pointed to a small clearing through which ran a small stream of clear water.

"This'll no' be a bad place for us to eat our dinner, lads," he said. "If you'll unpack the mare and tether her, Haggis, we can see about the fire and the meat."

"Don't you think it would be well if we were to shoot something?" suggested Bob. "You see, we don't know where we may have to go yet, and game may be scarce. There seemed to be any amount of it on the way here. It would be as well to save what we have in hand." [Pg 106]

"A good thought," returned Mackintosh approvingly. "Let's see what the pair o' you can do wi' your guns while Haggis and I are setting things to rights."

"I'll go one way and you the other, Bob, and see which of us will have the best bag in half an hour!" said Alf, with the eager delight of a friendly competition in prospect.

"Right you are," agreed Arnold heartily, "You go to the right; I'll take the left, and in half an hour we'll meet again at the camp and compare notes."

With a few words of friendly chaffing as to which would be the more successful, the chums parted. Each was determined that his gun should prove a superior Nimrod's skill, and both were stirred to high spirits by the excitement of the quest.

It must not be a matter for surprise that the boys could take such pleasure in the diversions of the moment, even recollecting the serious nature of the mission on which they had embarked with the original Skipper Mackintosh. The truth was that, once having been convinced that the absent men were indeed alive, the weight of anxiety was greatly lifted by that knowledge. As we are already aware, their fathers were men who had had many a backwoods adventure in their youth. They were well capable of taking care of themselves according to the circumstances in which they were placed. Hence the chief anxiety now was to hasten a meeting, when they would learn aright the cause of the elders' absence; and, though they could not conjecture what that cause could be, they felt assured that accident (in the ordinary sense of the word) was not the reason. Ordinary accidents of the hunt were not likely to meet two such experienced sportsmen at one time; and if one had suffered the other would have found means to communicate the fact ere this. The boys felt assured that to some other cause the matter must be attributed, and so they were fairly at ease in their minds, though, of course, anxious to hasten the time when the mystery would be explained. [Pg 107]

Thus it was that when the opportunity occurred for this diversion in the form of a little friendly rivalry, each set off in the highest of spirits. [Pg 108]

Holden at once plunged into the thickest part of the bush at the back of the little camp-ground. Arnold decided to follow the downward course of the stream, in the hope that it might lead to a lake or pool where duck might fall to his lot.

Pushing his way through the scrub that bordered the running water, Bob went some distance without any success. Then he heard the sound of a gun some way to the rear, and he smiled to himself, as he thought that his chum had already commenced operations.

Spurred on by the thought, the boy hastened his steps, and increased his vigilant scrutiny of the bush for the first signs of game. But luck did not come his way for some time, and his anxiety not to be beaten in the contest led his feet farther than the half-hour's limit merited.

It was not until he had tramped a mile or more that Bob realised how quickly the time had passed. It was disappointing to have to return empty-handed to the camp, especially since he had heard Alf's gun crack twice again. At the same time, if there were no creatures to be shot, he could not be reproached for his lack of success. [Pg 109]

With a rueful grimace and a laugh of amusement at his own failure, the boy was just turning to retrace his steps, when suddenly the bush rustled at his side, and a brown body leapt into the air as if it had been shot from a catapult.

"Antelope!" Bob exclaimed with delight, and quick as a flash of light the butt of his gun darted to his shoulder and the woods resounded with the explosion of a cartridge.

It was a quick aim and not too good, for the animal disappeared in the farther bush, and the cracking of twigs told the young hunter that the quarry was yet active.

"This is worth waiting for," said Bob to himself, as he rushed forward in pursuit. "A dozen of Alf's

prairie chicken will not be equal to an antelope—if I get him!"

There was much in that little "if," for evidently the deer was far from being disabled, since it had so rapidly made distance between itself and the hunter.

Nothing daunted, Bob hurried on, replacing the used cartridge as he ran, and easily following the tracks that the animal had made in its dash for liberty.

Bob's pulses were thrilling with excitement, but his nerves were the real hunter's nerves that can be steady even when excitement runs highest. He gripped his gun firmly, and with eyes scaled to see each tremor of a leaf he followed the track with the dogged purpose of one who meant to capture. [Pg 110]

Time and distance were unheeded now. All the boy's senses were converged towards one aim, and for the time being he was oblivious to all other distractions. Suddenly he stopped in the very midst of a pace, as if he were suddenly changed into a statue of marble; for at no great distance, he saw the deer standing at the edge of what seemed to be a natural paddock of green grass. The animal had paused in its flight, and was now sniffing the air with head raised, to discover if it were still pursued.

It was worth gun-shot.

Cautiously Bob raised his weapon without even moving from the strained position in which he had stopped at first glimpse of the game. It would be useless for him to approach closer, for the least disturbance of the bush would be discovered, and a few leaps would carry the deer across that stretch of green turf, and thence—probably beyond all chance of recovery. [Pg 111]

Bob took a careful sight this time. Then he fired. Instantly the deer sprang upwards into the air, gave two marvellous leaps forward, and then fell in a lifeless heap right in the centre of the paddock.

Bob gave a cry of exultation and ran forwards towards his bag. So excited was he now that he did not notice how the turf shivered under his feet when first he stepped upon the edge of the clearing. He had no thoughts for aught else but the triumph of his stalking. But suddenly, when he was within a few yards of the deer, he felt one foot sink beneath him. For a moment he did not give the incident any serious thought, but placed his other foot a little beyond, where the turf seemed firmer. But the next step sunk deeper than the first, and at each effort to release the one the other sunk farther.

Then a cold sweat broke out all over the lad's body. He realised the plight that he was in, for the green sward was no more than a thin covering of turf that concealed a great muskeg—a lake of liquid mud such as has been known to swallow men, horses—nay, even a herd of buffalo, without leaving a trace of the hapless victims that have disappeared within that ever-hungry throat. [Pg 112]

Bob stood still in horror at his terrible discovery.

He looked round him. There was not a sign of anything that might aid him—not a log, not so much as a twig. Nothing was at hand but the grass that a moment before had looked so fresh and alluring, but which now seemed to suggest all that was ugly and treacherous. Even the slain deer was already beginning to yield to the suction from beneath.

If ever Bob was near to utter despair, it was at that moment. He was over the ankles in mud, and he could feel himself gradually sinking, while the slimy mass seemed to cling to his limbs and drag him downwards with irresistible force.

Once he thought that he might be safer if he lay upon his face, but he quickly banished that suggestion when he saw that the prostrate position of the deer did not impede its certain destruction. He scarce dared to breathe, since every movement of a muscle hastened the work of the muskeg.

Down, down he sank. The mud crept to his knees and gradually began to ascend his thighs.

It seemed to be only a matter of time—another hour, perhaps less—and the tragedy would end. [Pg 113]

Yet he tried to be brave. He tried to brace himself to face the trial like a man, though it is hardly to be wondered at that he felt hope quickly leaving him, as inch by inch he sunk into that horrible green death-trap.

Then, just as suddenly as if a voice had spoken to him from the very grass at his feet, there flashed into his mind the words that the good old Scot had spoken by the camp-fire the previous night—

"There's a Hand that could guide the frailest birch-bark through Niagara."

Bob remembered, and hope sprang up in his heart with a bright-burning flame. Yet his faith was severely tested, as the mud crept up, up—now to his hips, then slowly advancing beyond his waist, until at last it was embracing his chest in a cold grip.

TO THE RESCUE!

As Bob had surmised from the sounds that reached him, Alf had not been long in striking luck. Shortly after leaving the camp he bagged first one chicken and then another, and in a short time was lucky enough to bring down a fine jack-rabbit. Then he hastened back to camp, and arrived there just as he heard the sound of Bob's gun in the far distance.

"I guess I've done the better of the two," he said merrily, as he displayed the result of his half-hour's hunt. "That's the first shot that I've heard from Bob."

"There's no telling. Maybe your friend has shot an elephant!" remarked Mackintosh. "Here, Haggis! Tak' these birds and the beastie from the laddie, and dress them for the spit. There's a fine roasting fire, and we'll be having dinner all ready by the time Maister Bob gets back. I'm thinking that he's come off second best the day." [Pg 115]

"Not much praise to me. If there's nothing to shoot, a fellow can't get much of a bag, can he?" remarked Alf generously. He was ready enough to laugh at his friend in a good-humoured way. It was quite another matter, however, for any other person to cast the slightest sneer at his chum. "I was lucky in finding sport right at hand. But when it comes to shooting—a quick aim on the wing or on the run—I can't hold a candle to Arnold. Hark! Did you hear that? He has brought down two, to balance with my three."

"Young boys give long trail," remarked the half-breed, who was pushing wooden skewers through the birds, preparatory to balancing them on wooden Y's before the fire.

"Too long," grunted the Scotsman. "We can't afford to waste time. I was meaning to start off again soon after dinner."

But by the time the birds were ready for eating, and the inevitable coffee was hot in the billy-tin, there were no signs of the boy's return.

Mackintosh was plainly annoyed.

"I dinna like that sort o' going-on," he grumbled. "Time is time, and if a body doesn't keep to time, there's no knowing what deeficulties may arise." [Pg 116]

But Alf knew his friend better than Mackintosh did. He knew that the excitement of the chase might result in a little lateness, for no one is perfect in matters of punctuality (or anything else, for that matter) under unusual circumstances. And the lad's anxiety had been gradually increasing as the delay had been prolonged, though he said nothing concerning his feelings until the man offered the remark that rather displeased him.

"I don't think it's quite fair to judge a fellow until we know all the reasons," he said with keen resentment. "Bob is not the chap to forget other people. There's not a bit of selfishness about him."

"Yet I'm thinking that the silly laddie *has* forgotten this time, though, mind you, I'm no' saying that he's o' a selfish make," returned Mackintosh a little more gently, seeing how his previous words had hurt Alf. "I ken fine that boys will be boys——"

"And Bob is—Bob—one of the best fellows that ever lived. Listen! What's that?"

The boy had suddenly started and bent forward with intent listening, for his quick ear had caught the sound of two shots fired in rapid succession. They were very distant sounds, but still, far away as they were, the clear Western air enabled them to reach distinctly across the distance. [Pg 117]

"That's Bob's gun! I know its voice!" the lad exclaimed; and hardly were the words uttered before two more shots were heard—equally distant yet equally clear.

"That's queer——" began Mackintosh thoughtfully, when Alf interrupted him by springing up from the ground where he had been sitting, and exclaiming in troubled excitement—

"Queer? It means that Bob is in danger. See! There it is again!"

Two more shots were heard, followed in a short time by another double.

By this time Mackintosh was thoroughly roused. His backwoods experience told him what a chum's sympathy had already gathered, that no freak of sporting opportunities would cause these shots to be fired at such regular intervals. They could mean nothing else but a signal of distress.

"Come, Haggis!" he said in steady tones that showed how ready he was for any emergency. "Leave those birds, and set your best foot forward. There's tracking to be done, and that right quickly." [Pg 118]

Picking up his rifle and bidding Alf take his gun, Mackintosh at once made a move towards that part of the bush where Bob had last been seen. Haggis and the dog Bannock quickly followed, and the former moved with all the quiet swiftness of a native who was used to meeting the unexpected emergencies of life without being in any degree flustered. That life had many times been in danger, and its safety had only been attained by being in a constant state of readiness.

By instinctive acknowledgment of the presence of a superior craftsman, the two white men yielded the place of leader to Haggis, who quickly discovered the tracks that Bob's progress had

left behind. The imprint of a rabbit's foot would not have escaped notice from such eyes as those of the half-breed, who had been trained in all forest lore from his babyhood. Hence it was mere child's play for him to pick up the track of top-boots, as well as the traces that had been made by the displacement of grasses and thorns.

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Meantime the distant shots were continued at intervals, until Holden counted twenty in all.

Poor boy! It was little to be wondered at that he urged Haggis to press on with greater speed, for now he was certain that his chum must be in a terrible fix, out from which there was no self-help. He would hardly waste cartridges so recklessly were he not in some dire extremity.

"For goodness' sake, hurry!" the boy exclaimed, for even the rapid walking in Indian file was all too slow for the patience of one who was pressing to the rescue of his friend.

But the half-breed did not change the pace.

"We step enough quick for bush-track," he said, without turning. "We no' wish lose track. On prairie we go quick—run; but in bush slow."

"The Haggis is right," completed Mackintosh, whose position was third in the procession. "It's no' good to be too quick. We might lose the trail, and that would mean a vexatious delay to find it again."

Alf was forced to acknowledge the truth of the reasoning, though it was a hard task for him to curb the desire to make a mad dash forward and take his chance of keeping in the right track.

Then the half-breed stopped for a few moments and bent low to examine the ground and the surrounding scrub. [Pg 120]

"What is it?" questioned Holden. "Have you lost it?"

Haggis shrugged his shoulders.

"Lost? No. Haggis no' lose track. But he find others—deer. White boy shoot deer, but no kill. Deer jump—run—white boy follow quick—there—there!"

As he spoke the half-breed rapidly pointed at the various signs that he had interpreted. They were plain enough to the native eye, and in a lesser degree to the sight of the Scotsman. But Alf's inexperience could only distinguish an occasional displacement of the undergrowth, though he was well content to rely on the opinions of those who were more versed than he in woodcraft.

Again the rescuers hastened onwards, with Bannock bringing up the rear, and when at last they came to a part of the bush where the trees were somewhat fewer, Haggis suddenly stopped and pointed straight in front of him, exclaiming the one sound—

"Ha!"

Holden was at the native's side in an instant.

[Pg 121]

"What is it? Where? What do you see?" he exclaimed.

"In middle of grass—see!"

Alf looked, but all that he saw was a head and shoulders that apparently rested on the grass without any lower limbs. The poor lad was indeed in the depth of extremity, and he was almost faint with exhaustion.

"Bob!" cried Holden in an agony of distress, and darted for the clearing.

But he had barely crossed a couple of yards before a pair of strong hands gripped him and kept him from moving.

"No! No! You dare not—" said Mackintosh; but the lad struggled frantically to free himself from the powerful grip.

"Let me go! Let me go! Can't you see that Bob is lying hurt?" he cried frantically.

But the hands did not relax their grasp.

"Wait, laddie," said the man's kindly voice. "Wait, or we'll be having two lives to account for. Yon's a muskeg—a living bog. It's death to them that sets a careless foot on yon green grass."

Instantly Alf's struggles ceased, and for the moment he was limp in the arms that supported him. The horror of learning of his friend's plight struck him dumb and suspended the power to move. [Pg 122]

"Come, come, laddie. You mustn't give in. Your friend's life depends on your strength."

Mackintosh was a man of the world, whose experience enabled him to be a good judge of character. And he well knew the sort of counsel that would inevitably stir all that was best in the boy and lend strength to his pluck. He judged rightly, for immediately Alf straightened himself with set lips, steady eyes, and controlled nerves.

"Forgive me," he said quietly. "But it knocked me over to think of Bob—out there."

"I'm no' blaming you, laddie. But you'll need all your strength now, for I think that your friend is

past helping himself—or nearly." Then Mackintosh faced the muskeg, and called loudly.

"Hullo! Bob! Can you hear me?"

Very slowly the eyelids were seen to open, the head moved slightly.

"Can you hold out for a bit longer? Can you get a coat under your arms if I send it to you?" were the next questions.

The boy did not answer at once. He seemed dazed, and the man repeated his questions. [Pg 123]

Then came the answer, spoken weakly and with an apparent great effort.

"I'll try. But—come—quickly——" And the eyes half closed again.

"That's right. Hold on for a wee bit, and we'll have you oot o' that mess in a jiffy!"

Without pausing to explain his intentions, Mackintosh then quickly stripped off his leather hunting-jacket, emptied the pockets of all that could weight it, and called Bannock to his side.

"See, Bannock," he said, "I'm going to tie a sleeve to your collar—like this. Now you must go over there. Do you see? Right over there where someone needs your help."

He pointed towards Bob as he spoke, and the intelligent collie looked straight in the direction indicated. He had often had game pointed out to him in the same way, so quickly understood what was wanted of him.

"Off you go!" his master then commanded. "Off you go—quick—quick!"

The dog needed no second bidding. He sprang forward at once towards the hapless boy, dragging the coat with him.

"Bannock's coming!" shouted Mackintosh. "When he's there, grip the coat and lean on it. He'll no' move when I bid him stay." [Pg 124]

"All right," came the faint reply.

The ground that was so treacherous to the heavy boots of the incautious hunter could play no similar tricks with the light tread of the collie, and in a few seconds he had reached the goal.

"Lie down!" the great voice rang out, and the animal immediately crouched close to the boy, who had just strength enough left to lay hold of the jacket in such a way that it formed a slight support of a temporary nature, to check further sinking for the time.

But how to draw the boy from the slough? That was the next problem.

Alf turned questioningly to the Scotsman.

"Get to work and break off as many branches as you can," was the reply to the look. "Haggis, you've got your tomahawk? Well, cut down a lot o' these straight poplars. I'll give a hand to the laddie."

It was not long before the sharp axe had laid prone a number of young poplars and partly lopped them, while Mackintosh and Alf had torn down a number of maple and other leafy branches that would lie fairly flat. These were gathered to the edge of the muskeg. [Pg 125]

"You're no' feared to take a bit o' risk for your friend's sake?" the man then asked, turning a look of confidence to the boy.

"Afraid?" echoed Alf contemptuously. "Tell me what to do, and—well, I'd give my life for Bob!"

"That's as it should be," returned Mackintosh approvingly. "'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.' I would offer to do this myself, only I'm a great heavy gowk, and Haggis is no' much better. But you're light as a feather compared with us. Now we'll put two o' these poles like the sides o' a ladder; then some o' the branches cross-ways. And you'll go out and build farther as we hand them to you. Can you do this?"

"Of course," replied Alf firmly.

"And don't hurry. Work sure and steady. The turf will stand the weight with only you on it. And when you reach Bob, you'll spread the branches all round. The rest I leave to you."

To Alf it seemed hours before even the first section of the ladder was completed, but he did his best to control his impatience, knowing well the value of Mackintosh's advice; and at last came the moment of joy when he was ready for the second poles to project from the ends of the first ones, and a fresh supply of branches. But it was a tedious undertaking at the best, made doubly so by anxiety to reach the end; for each time the supply of building material was exhausted he had to creep back for more, as the men dared not trust their weight far from the edge of the muskeg. [Pg 126]

All this time Bob was watching the work as a starving man feasts his eyes upon the nearness of food and drink.

Now and then Alf spoke encouraging words, but he did not relax his energies, nor did the sufferer make answer except once, when he stirred himself to say pluckily—

"It's—all—right, Alf. I can—hold out—for—some time——"

Yet when the younger lad once glanced ahead of him, the cold sweat broke out over his body, for he saw that his chum had sunk yet farther, and that the weight was dragging down the dog as well.

"I'm coming, Bob! I'll be very soon now!" the lad forced himself to call cheerily.

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And, oh! the joy of that moment when at last the bridge was completed, and Alf could bend down to grip his exhausted chum beneath the arms!

"Be careful!" called Mackintosh. "Don't jerk. Pull steady!"

Inch by inch Alf felt the mud release its hold upon its prey, as he strained every ounce of strength to drag his friend from the clammy grip. It was a tremendous effort, for the boy was slight, and the hold of the muskeg added weight to Bob's by no means slender bulk. But at last Arnold's arms were clear, and in time he was dragged so far that he could rest his breast upon the structure.

Then Alf paused for breath. But he did not delay long. He set his teeth and once more resumed his task. Then he made the woods ring with a triumphant "Eureka!" for Bob lay safe upon the bridge!

Bannock barked for joy also, and struggled up to scamper back to his master.

"Just in the nick of time! You've saved my life!" muttered Bob gratefully, when he recovered a little of his strength after a short rest.

Alf's reply was characteristic.

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"You'll take a deal of washing, old man, before you're fit for decent society again!"

The warmth of the sun soon restored some of the old energy to the chilled body, and after a time Bob recovered sufficiently to crawl to safety in the wake of his rescuer.

And when solid land was regained poor old Mackintosh was fairly crying with joy.

"Lads, lads! but God's been kind to us this day!" he was saying, while the tears ran down his manly, weather-beaten cheeks. Then he made all laugh by suddenly starting with a look of horror in his face as he exclaimed—

"Ma conscience! But the birds will be burnt to cinders by this time!"

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 129]

CRAFTY TACTICS

So unexpected had been Thunder-maker's tactics and so immediate the response of his people, that the attack was over before the Englishmen were well aware that it had begun. Not that any foreknowledge would have availed them much. They were unarmed, while the Dacotahs were both armed and numerous. Still, the average Englishman does not like to be trussed up without showing some marked resistance. It makes him feel small to be trapped without dealing a blow in self-defence.

The place was brilliantly lit with burning brands which many of the Indians had brought, and the camp was in an uproar with the voluble chatter of the men as they crowded round the captives, while Thunder-maker excitedly cried out his story of the affair.

So well did the Medicine Man concoct his lies so as to work upon the feelings of his people that meanwhile it seemed as though the Englishmen were in for a hot time. Indeed, so great was their wrath that knives were already reflecting the flames, and fingers were nervously twitching about the locks of their guns. And all the time Thunder-maker was dancing about in a frenzy of passion. He was not brave enough to strike a blow, but he hoped to shift the responsibility upon the shoulders of his brethren.

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What would have been the termination of the scene it is not difficult to decide, had not the old figure of Swift Arrow pushed a way through the seething multitude and taken a place at Arnold's side, while he faced his people with burning indignation.

"What is this, brothers?" he exclaimed. "Is this how the Dacotahs treat the stranger in their tents?"

"They are witches, not men!" came from many throats, and Thunder-maker added—

"They call me from teepee—call me without words, and fill Thunder-maker with hot fire!"

"Bah!" ejaculated Swift Arrow with utter contempt, as he turned to the last speaker. "Is not Thunder-maker great medicine himself? Has he no weapon to protect himself from magic?"

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But the Medicine Man had his reply ready.

"Thunder-maker sleep. When Thunder-maker sleep he have no power against magic." Then he turned to the surrounding Indians with a wild appeal. "Shall it be, brothers, that the great medicine of the Dacotahs die before arrows of the evil spirits?"

"Kawin!^[3] Kawin!" was the general reply, and again the knives glistened as they were raised in many hands.

Thunder-maker shrieked with triumph.

"Then save our tribe from the magic of the evil ones!" he cried as he flung his arms upwards and turned to the captives with a fiendish grin of exultation.

The Indians were now worked up to a condition of irresponsible madness. Another such impulse from the Medicine Man, and the thirsty knives would be quenched.

"Stay!" commanded Arnold suddenly.

So unexpected was the word from that quarter that for the time curiosity superseded frenzy, and all paused to hear what the white man might have to say. And Arnold, seeing the advantage, went on with a calmness that seemed to act like a spell upon the excited minds. "Stay! My white brother and I are not afraid to die, if it be Manito's will that we find the Happy Hunting-ground this night, and if the Dacotahs have so forgotten the brave name of their tribe that they would slay the stranger who came to their tents in trouble. But first tell me: is it the way of the redmen to kill a prisoner without the wish of their chief——"

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"Ha!" interrupted Thunder-maker, hissing the exclamation through his teeth, for even now he felt his victims slipping through his hands. "Do not listen, brothers! They are evil spirits—they speak magic words against which nothing prevails. They have forked tongues that dart as fire. Ugh! I spit upon them—dogs!"

The Englishmen met the verbal onslaught as firmly as a rock resists a wave, and Arnold did not so much as look towards the madman, but resumed, in the same even tones as before.

"Who are you, redmen? Are you dogs, to be beaten to obey the first loud voices? Shall the howling wolf put fear into your hearts, to drag down a prey that he dares not attack alone? Or are you children of your rightful chief? Who is chief of the Dacotahs—Thunder-maker or Mighty Hand?"

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"The fiery totem is on the breast of Mighty Hand," answered one of the warriors. The hubbub had fallen, and all were listening intently—partly with the native courtesy that forbids the rude interruption of speech, and partly because the better self was beginning to replace the moment's frenzy.

"Ah," resumed Arnold with a smile, "I see that the understanding of the pale-face was wrong. We thought that the chief was Thunder-maker, as you hastened to obey *his* words."

"Thunder-maker great medicine——" began Swift Arrow, when the former speaker rejoined—

"Then he would make himself great chief. Will you braves suffer this insult to the wearer of the fiery totem?"

"Ka—Kawin!" was the chorus that met this question, and the dark looks that had been directed towards the Englishmen but a little while since were now turned towards the defeated Medicine Man, who was standing sullen and silent.

But Thunder-maker was not yet conquered, though he was apparently humbled. To give him his due, he was a man of wonderful resource, and when he saw that the tide was turning against him he was quick to meet the occasion.

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"My brothers, listen not to the words of Thunder-maker," he said quietly, and with a pretence of sad emotion that he had failed to influence the other Indians to take the right course. "Did not Thunder-maker say that these evil spirits have tongues of magic? Did he not say that no weapon could prevail against those magic words? But let it be as my red brothers wish. Mighty Hand rest in teepee. He not come from tent at night, unless the war-cry call him. So let it be as these—dogs—say. Let them rest in their tent to-night, and at another sun we will bring them before the great chief Mighty Hand, who is the greatest of warriors, and chief of the greatest of all tribes, the Dacotahs. I have spoken."

"And spoken well," said Holden, thinking that it might be well to propitiate the Medicine Man for the time. But Thunder-maker, stooping forward with a pretence of picking up something from the ground, came close enough to whisper, so that only the Englishmen could hear him—

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"By another sun, when Mighty Hand looks upon the pale-faces, it may be that the friends of Thunder-maker have looked first!"

The words were spoken with all the venom of a savage threat, and before Holden could make reply the Medicine Man was speaking loudly to Swift Arrow.

"The Dacotahs shall see great medicine when the fiery totem again turn eyes upon the evil water-spirits. Thunder-maker will now go to his teepee. He would speak with his little children that they show much magic."

But Swift Arrow did not deign to reply. He turned to the Englishmen, and with a few movements of his hunting-knife severed the cords that bound them.

"The stranger who has raised no arm against the redmen may not be bound in the camp of the Dacotahs. My brothers did wrong. The pale-faces will forgive my foolish people."

"We do not blame you. You are a good man, and Manito smiles upon the kind heart," returned Arnold quietly.

Thoroughly worn out with the events of the previous day as well as the exciting incidents of the night, the two friends were glad to be at liberty to return to their tent and stretch their tired limbs upon the robes that had been provided for them. The Indians had quickly dispersed at the bidding of old Swift Arrow, and soon the camp was once more in peace. [Pg 136]

Little was said by either of the men as they lay down at opposite parts of the teepee, and it was not long before sleep came to the relief of weariness.

For a couple of hours or more the Englishmen were wrapt in deep slumber. Then, just as the grey dawn was beginning to chase the shadows from the forest, Holden suddenly awoke. It was not the calm awakening that follows refreshing rest, but that sudden return of the senses that one sometimes experiences accompanied by a horrible instinct of danger.

Holden sat up and looked round. Nothing strange was to be seen within the tent, and when he looked through the entrance all seemed peaceful without. The brown teepees were not even stirred by a morning breeze. Not a soul was to be seen, and it was too early even for the birds to sing their morning anthems.

He looked at Arnold, and saw that his friend was still enjoying profound rest. So, laughing at his own weakness, Holden returned to his robes and was soon dozing again. [Pg 137]

Then a second time he wakened with the former conviction even stronger than before.

He raised himself on his right elbow, and as he did so was startled by a sound that is calculated to strike terror into the hearts of men quicker than the most formidable of human foes.

It was the danger-signal of a rattlesnake—the harsh alarm that is unmistakable even when heard for the first time, and the sinuous green thing was poised in the centre of the tent, with head thrown back in the attitude to strike. It had been startled by Holden's sudden movement on awakening, and now was armed to repel its supposed enemy.

The man dared not move, for the least motion of a muscle might be sufficient to frighten the deadly little rope of flesh, and then—?

The continued sound of the rattle had roused Arnold by this time; but at his first stirring Holden spoke, though he managed to do so without moving his lips.

"Keep still. There's a rattlesnake in the tent. It's got an eye on me, and—"

But the rest of the sentence was choked, for the man's blood suddenly ran cold as another serpent came from among the fur robes, writhing its cold chill body across his bare hand as it lay at his side, and then moving towards its companion. [Pg 138]

"There's another—just crawled over my hand," whispered Holden hoarsely.

"And I see a third—over there just beyond my feet!" said Arnold. "What on earth are we to do?"

"Lie still. We can do no more, unless we get a chance to make a bolt for it. But they are between us and the door."

The men waited in tense silence, preserving the immovable attitudes of statues until, as time passed, other serpents made their appearance and the teepee was swarming with a dozen at least. They seemed to be everywhere. They crawled over the robes and peered into the men's faces, they wriggled beneath the covering and even passed across Holden's bared throat. But they were no longer aggressive. They were more of an exploring than an antagonistic bent.

"I wonder where they have come from and why they have congregated in this particular tent?" Arnold questioned in a whisper, and, with the question, the explanation seemed to flash into Holden's mind like a flame of fire. [Pg 139]

"Thunder-maker!" he exclaimed. "The treacherous hound! This is his work. I was wakened by something before. He must have been letting loose his vile creatures."

Just then the snakes returned unpleasantly near to the men's heads again, so further conversation was impossible, for it is remarkable what little sound will attract a serpent's attention, and the nature of a rattler is to regard every sound and movement as something dangerous to be fought.

For more than an hour the men lay in strained positions, watching the writhing movements of the ugly creatures, and wondering how long the position could be sustained.

And then, just when it seemed that the situation could not be supported another minute, they became aware of a sound of soft whistling at no great distance from the rear of the tent. At first the sound was quite low, and barely audible, but gradually it increased in volume until it took the

form of a sort of minor tune of barbaric rhythm played on some sort of reed instrument.

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At the beginning the music was unheeded by the serpents, but as it became more distinct it was observable that the creatures became restless and uneasy. Now and then one would raise its head and begin to sway gently to and fro, in agreement with the rhythm. But gradually each seemed to be irresistibly drawn towards the back of the tent, as the spell of their master's music fascinated them. One by one they passed in one direction—moving slowly yet steadily in obedience to the call.

And as the last of the reptiles passed beneath the edge of the tent-cloth both men sprang from their couches and rushed round to the teepee that was pitched a little way behind their own.

But they found Thunder-maker reclining on a heap of robes and apparently asleep; and not a sign was seen to suggest the presence of a "rattler."

So much for the art of the snake-charmer and the craft of an evil man.

CHAPTER XIII

[Pg 141]

THE PRICE OF A ROBE

Thunder-maker did not move while the strangers were watching him. To all outward appearance he was asleep.

Holden stepped forward and shook the Medicine Man roughly by the shoulder.

"Come along! Open your eyes, you old scoundrel. You are no more sleeping than we are," he said.

The Indian moved, slowly opened his eyes, and looked for a few moments at the speaker, just as a person would who had been suddenly roused from a deep slumber. Then a pleased smile broke over his face.

"My white brothers in the tent of Thunder-maker? They are very welcome," he said.

But Holden did not respond to the greeting, as he demanded—

"Does Thunder-maker think that we are fools? Do you think we did not hear you piping to those vile serpents of yours?"

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The Indian looked puzzled.

"My white brothers speak strange words, or it may be that the mind of Thunder-maker still sleeps ___"

"Rot!" interrupted Arnold brusquely. "The Thunder-maker's mind is wide enough awake. What is the use of lying to us? We know that you put those snakes into our teepee, and we heard you call them back when you found that your purposes had failed."

For answer, the Indian raised one of the blankets and disclosed a basket against which he had been leaning during his pretended sleep. He raised the lid, looked in, and signed the Englishmen to do likewise.

"See? On their bed of grass my little papooses also sleep," he said, lifting the basket so as to show the tangle of green bodies that it contained.

"We can gain nothing by further talking," remarked Arnold to his companion in an undertone. "The fellow has done us this time, and we have nothing to support us if we accuse him before Mighty Hand."

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"That's true enough," returned Holden. "He is best man this time."

The Indian quietly closed the lid and again covered the basket with a blanket, after which he looked up with a cunning and triumphant leer.

"White men will eat; then—Mighty Hand take trail for Pleasant Valley!"

How he seemed to gloat over the thought of the terrible fate that awaited his enemies! Brave men though they were, they could not but feel a sense of shrinking at the picture that this man's attitude and tone conjured up. There are times when anticipations of pleasure seem to be rendered more alluring by reason of description. It is also so with expectancy of pain. Words may paint that picture in crimson colours so that our revulsion is intensified before we see it.

"We will gain nothing by remaining here," said Arnold abruptly, as he turned from the tent, whence he was followed by his companion. And as the Englishmen departed they heard the Indian saying aloud, purposely to be overheard—

"The pale-face no' think that he see Pleasant Valley, but fiery totem call. Fiery totem must be obeyed."

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Thunder-maker grinned evilly to himself as he watched the departure of his visitors. Then he rose

up, folded around him a robe of deerskin that was covered with many strange designs, and crept with the sly movements of a prowling wolf among the various teepees. Reaching the farther side of the camp, he stopped in front of one of the tents that stood a little way apart from the others. Gently he raised the flap and looked in. An Indian of gigantic size was sitting by himself, adjusting his leggings and moccasins. He looked up to observe his visitor, and it was noticeable that as he did so Thunder-maker winced as though he were in pain.

There were few who could look upon that man's face without wincing. In early scalping-days it had been slashed on one side with a scalping-knife in such a way that the left eye was totally destroyed, and a livid scar ran from the eyebrow to the neck—drawing the flesh into creases that robbed that part of the face of any semblance to humanity. The other side was whole, but the entire expression was so horrible that even familiarity did little to prevent repulsion in the senses of the beholder.

"Thunder-maker is welcome to the tent of Red Fox," the Indian remarked, returning again to the completion of his wardrobe. [Pg 145]

"Thunder-maker would speak wise words with his brother," said the Medicine Man, entering, but not deigning to sit in the tent of that "brother." He seldom paid that honour to any teepee except his own and that of the chief.

"It is well," returned the other man. "Red Fox will gladly hear the wise words the Thunder-maker will speak."

The Medicine Man did not waste any time in needless palaver. The hours were precious to him, and even an Indian can cut time when his business is pressing.

"Red Fox is great warrior; Red Fox have eyes like father of his name," he said. "There is good work for Red Fox to do."

The listener had broken the cord of a moccasin, and was apparently concentrating all his attention on knotting the break. But his attention was mainly given to Thunder-maker all the same, and the latter knew it, so he continued—

"Thunder-maker have rich robe of ermine—better robe than Mighty Hand wear. Many dollars as leaves in tree not buy the robe of Thunder-maker. Yet—Red Fox may wear it." [Pg 146]

"Huh! Red Fox poor. He not have dollars to buy new traps for hunting."

That was what the Indian said. He pretended that he thought the Medicine Man had come to trade. But he knew differently, and waited for the visitor to "show his hand." Whatever bargain was to be proposed, he knew that his share would not be increased by any show of eagerness to possess the robe that even chiefs had coveted in vain.

Thunder-maker darted a keen glance at the other man as he said mockingly—

"The dollars of Red Fox stay in pouch, yet ermine robe lie on his shoulders—if he do what Thunder-maker say."

Still Red Fox made no sign to show interest, and the other went on—

"At Crane Creek two white papooses live in tent. Red Fox will find them—he will go as a friend, and he will say, gentle as the voice of a mother pigeon: 'White boys would find friends who are far away? Then Red Fox will lead them.' And Red Fox will take them by dark path through the forest—by long path that twine like path of serpent. Then, when sun sleep, Red Fox will creep away—soft—soft, that pale-faces hear not. And when sun waken—Red Fox will be back at camp of Mighty Hand. I have spoken." [Pg 147]

Red Fox had fastened the moccasin by now, though he still sat with body bent while he intently listened to the Medicine Man's proposal to cause the two boys to be lost in the forest. And as the story was ended he slowly raised his head to look into Thunder-maker's face. What he saw there evidently satisfied him, for his ghastly face moved with a sort of smile that indicated satisfaction.

"Then the—the fiery totem—foolish?" he questioned shyly, and the other Indian rejoined solemnly —

"The totem of the Dacotahs wise—very wise. It speak to Thunder-maker by night, and tell him this."

Red Fox nodded. But it was not the nod of agreement with the falsehood so much as at recognition of the lie.

"Thunder-maker great medicine," he said, with a slight sneer. "But Red Fox hear much. He hear water-spirits say to Mighty Hand that they have papooses. Water-spirits have not young. So these are pale-faces." [Pg 148]

Thunder-maker's face flushed angrily.

"Does the Red Fox insult the sacred totem of the Dacotahs?" he demanded, as he drew himself up as though it had been he to whom the insult was offered.

But the Indian also raised himself, and did so with the conscious knowledge that his gigantic body and bare limbs, which glistened like muscles of copper, were more than protection against

any physical attack that the Medicine Man might offer. And his upper lip curled with a sneer as he stared straight into the eyes of the totem's champion.

"Red Fox is not fool. He live long among white men, and he know that totem cannot speak—that totem a lie. But Red Fox will do this for his brother Thunder-maker. Thunder-maker would have revenge against the pale-faces in yonder teepee, for they face Medicine Man—bravely when he would have had Dacotahs slay them. This will Red Fox do, for he would gladly wear the ermine robe."

"The papooses will never again see their fathers?" interrupted the Medicine Man eagerly. He forgot etiquette and totem alike in the excitement of knowing that the success of one part of his evil plans was practically assured. Red Fox was known to be a man of little conscience though great determination, and it was only his enormous strength of arm that allowed him to keep a place within the clan of the really kindly Dacotahs.

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"The Red Fox will blind the trail, that the white boys never follow? For Mighty Hand weak—like woman. He listen to soft words, and it may be that he will not light fire in Pleasant Valley. The robe must return to tent of Thunder-maker if boys find their fathers."

"Let Thunder-maker take his way in peace. By another sun Red Fox will have found the young pale-faces; by two suns he will return to the camp of Mighty Hand—alone. I have spoken."

CHAPTER XIV

[Pg 150]

THE BATTLE OF WITS!

It was only to be expected that Bob was not fit for much exertion after his experience with the muskeg, and it was Skipper Mackintosh's decision on returning to camp that the boy should proceed no farther that night.

"But that will be a longer time before we get on the track of our fathers," protested Arnold, to whom the thought of inactivity for even twelve hours was irksome.

"Better to bide quiet for a night at present than be laid up for days later on," was the Scotsman's response. "But you can set your mind easy-like. The time will no' be lost, for Haggis and me will set out on a wee scouting expedition to the place where we found yon hanky. We'll be back by midnight."

This plan was a relief to the boys' minds, for though it entailed a certain delay in the forward journey, the result of the scouting might curtail matters in the long-run. Mackintosh's report might enable them to make more definite plans than were possible at present.

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So, after a few preparations for the journey, the two men set off, accompanied by the faithful Bannock, early in the afternoon.

"Don't you go and disappear like the others did!" laughed Holden, to which the "ceevilised" Haggis replied—

"Fox lose trail in bush easier than me!"

It was a hot afternoon, so, when the boys had watched their friends disappear in the forest, Bob decided that it would be a good opportunity to wash the mud and slime from his clothes, as they would soon dry in the sun.

No sooner said than done. The soiled garments were stripped (for of course the lads were reduced to one suit apiece) and the stream utilised as a washing-tub, after which Bob was obliged to sit in his suit of Nature while the clothes of Art were drying upon handy branches.

As we said, the day was hot, and, as the grassy slope upon which the boys sat formed the margin of a clear pool where the stream widened, it was not to be expected that the period of idle ease would be prolonged.

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"Ah!" Bob suddenly exclaimed, as he sat up and regarded the water with covetous eyes, "the temptation is too much for me. I'm going to have a dip."

"It certainly looks more tempting than your plunge into mud. A pleasant change, I should say," remarked Alf chaffingly. Then he added merrily: "But are you sure that you can stand it? It won't do to exert yourself too much yet. Old Mackintosh expects you to rest."

"That's all right. I shan't muck about very much. I can take it easy. As a matter of fact, I am sure that a plunge will buck me up."

"All serene," returned the younger boy, rising to prepare himself for a bathe. "So long as you don't think that it will do you any harm, I'm ready."

A short run, and then Bob had entered the water in the clean-cut style of a practised diver.

"It's glorious!" he called to his chum, who was almost ready to follow his leader. "I should think

that it is quite eight feet in the middle, so you can plunge safely."

"Right. Clear out of the way!" was the response, and in a second more Holden in his turn cleft the sparkling water. [Pg 153]

Those of our readers who are only familiar with the cheerless sea or even the placid river-bathing of England can have no idea of the charm that is found in emulating the fishes in the cool depths of a Western forest stream.

Imagine the great trunks of cedar and pine and the gnarled giants of maples spreading their great arms—shutting off the distance with a surrounding barrier of dense colour; imagine the red willows dipping their heads in the margin of the bowl, gaily coloured birds skimming the surface in pursuit of insects, and gaudy butterflies sometimes touching your cheek, like a piece of down borne upon the mellow air. At such a time, in such a place, you feel yourself to be but a tiny little speck in the centre of the world of Nature. You feel as free as a savage. If you are not happy, it must be that you are a weakling boy who lacks the real boy's love for out-of-door freedom.

These were some of the sensations that our young heroes experienced as they splashed about in the crystal pool. Probably they did not realise the details as I have described them; but that was the effect, all the same. It is the glorious sense of freedom that everybody feels if they have the "backwoods spirit." It cannot be properly described, but I can smell the atmosphere of it all, even though I am now sitting in an English room in an English county. And so intent were the boys on the enjoyment of the moment that they did not observe the figure of an Indian who crept out of the bush near by while they were experimenting in various positions for swimming. [Pg 154]

The Indian paused for a few moments. Then, seeing the attention of the lads was devoted to their amusement, he crept to the tent like a snake in the long grass. This he examined thoroughly, and he gave a grunt of satisfaction as he discovered the pack-horse picketed near by. After this, seeing no necessity for further secrecy of movement, he boldly walked to the edge of the pool where the boys were bathing, and sat down quietly to watch their play.

It was Alf who was the first to discover the stranger. "I say! There's an Indian!" he exclaimed.

"Where?" questioned Bob, who had swum a little way out of sight beyond a curve in the creek. [Pg 155]

"Over there—beside our clothes. But, I say, what a horrible face he has got! He looks as if a lion had started to chew him and changed his mind! He's the ugliest-looking freak I ever saw."

Taking for granted that the Indian would not understand the uncomplimentary remarks, Holden swam towards the side of the pool, being quickly followed by his chum. But the Indian had understood. He was as familiar with colloquial English as he was with his own tongue. Nevertheless, he did not alter the grin on his face, though there was something very different from a grin at his heart—a something which (if the rash speaker had only known it) had suddenly determined him to carry out his contract in quite a different manner from that which had been arranged with Thunder-maker.

An Indian is a queer creature at the best. He loves as quickly and impulsively as he hates, while devotion may be turned into detestation as rapidly as a vessel of clear water is discoloured by a drop of ink. Red Fox's eyes flashed fire towards the imprudent lad, though his lips still smiled, and anyone who was a judge of Indian character would have understood from that look that it would be an ill moment for Alf if ever it was within the power of the redskin to repay the insulting expressions. [Pg 156]

By this time both lads had reached the shore, whereupon Bob addressed the stranger while the pair proceeded to dress—Arnold's clothes being dry by this time.

"Well, where have you come from?" the boy questioned.

"Trail long. Red Fox come over prairie—bush—far—far——"

"Oh, you understand English?" exclaimed Alf, at the same time hoping that the Indian had not heard enough, or understood English well enough, to comprehend the recent criticisms as to his personal appearance.

The redskin nodded, though he craftily pretended that his knowledge of the foreign tongue was but scanty.

"Red Fox know little—very little. He speak—he no' understand all that ears tell him."

"And a jolly good job, too," commented Alf to his friend. "He's a hideous monster, but I shouldn't like to hurt his feelings by letting him know my opinion."

"I don't think that I would express it too freely, if I were you," said Bob, who had quickly resumed his everyday attire. "You never can tell how much fellows like that understand. I remember father telling me that Indians won't always admit that they know English well. They think that they can drive better bargains by pretending ignorance." [Pg 157]

Then the boy turned to the native, and the fact that the man was alone and seemed to have no other possessions than his gun, hunting-knife, and pipe, raised doubts in the lad's mind as to the truth of the statement concerning the long journey. He knew and had heard sufficient about Indians to be aware that they seldom travelled any distance without their family and other belongings.

"You said that you had come a long trail?" he said, regarding the Indian with a sharp scrutiny.

Red Fox bowed assent, taking out his pipe to fill it with kini-ka-nik (tobacco and red willow bark mixed) as he spoke.

"Red Fox come far—with feet of deer. He have story for ear of pale-face brothers."

The boys started at the remark, while Alf repeated—

"A story?"

"From the white men to their papooses."

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This was news indeed; but the unexpected announcement disarmed suspicion for the moment.

"From our fathers?" said Bob eagerly. "Where are they? What has kept them from returning to camp?"

"The white men rest," replied the Indian. "The trail far. They find Red Fox, and they say: 'Go, find our papooses and lead them by straight trail to our tent.'"

"But they had no tent with them!" exclaimed Alf, at once touching the weak point in the falsehood. "Perhaps they are with other Indians?"

Red Fox had not been instructed by Thunder-maker in the details of the story that he was to tell in order to gain his ends. It had not occurred to him to invent more than that he had been sent to bring the lads. That had seemed sufficient to attain his aims, though he realised that it would not do to say that the white men were captives. That might frighten the boys and prevent their following his guidance. The poor servant had not calculated upon the probing questions that would have been naturally anticipated by an English mind and prepared for.

But he saw the blunder, and hastened to amend the error as best he might.

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"White men with Indians—with friends. Red men good to pale-faces—give them food and teepees and robes to rest on. So white men wish papooses to follow where Red Fox walk."

Holden turned aside to his chum.

"I'll be hanged if I'll follow the lead of a murderous-looking villain like that unless he can show very good reasons why I should. His face is like a nightmare."

"I can't say I like the look of him myself," returned Bob. "He hasn't got the expression of a fellow you could trust. Besides, don't you think that if our fathers were well and had sent a native messenger to us—don't you think that they would have sent some sort of written message as well?"

"It would have been easy enough. Father always carries his notebook and pencil with him——"

"So he could have easily explained matters. I don't think he would have trusted an Indian to be understood. It isn't as if we knew anything of the lingo."

While the boys were thus discussing the situation in low tones, they did not heed how Red Fox was observing them sharply from the corners of his eyes. He was trying to discover how far his deception had succeeded, though he endeavoured to hide his anxious observation by the action of lighting his redstone pipe. And it must be confessed that his keen scrutiny of the lads' faces did not reassure him. He could see suspicion plainly marked in both, while his heart burned with fire of anger, though resentment was mainly directed to the younger lad, whose inadvertent remarks had cut so deeply into the savage pride.

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But the redskin's mental observations were suddenly cut short by Bob, who wheeled upon him with a sudden inspiration.

"Look here," he said quickly, though his voice was pleasant and almost reassuring, "it is very good of you to travel so far to bring us this news. We are glad to see you, and will try to give you a good present. But we will settle our business first. So, give me the letter, and then we will go to the tent and eat."

"Letter?"

The Indian repeated the single word in a puzzled tone.

"Yes; the one my father gave you," said Bob.

So mystified was Red Fox by the intelligence that apparently he had not only been expected by the boys but that he had been looked for as the bearer of a letter from the fathers to their sons, that he was momentarily startled out of his caution in pretending an only slight acquaintance with the English language.

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He stared open-eyed at the question, and Bob continued evenly—

"Of course my father would send a letter if he wanted us. He would do that to prove that his messenger was one whom we could trust. Did he give you one?"

Red Fox was quite taken off his guard by the white boy's guile, but he strove to cover his confusion by further lying.

"Yes—the white man send paper by hand of Red Fox, but—but Red Fox foolish; he—lose letter—on trail—"

"But you are *sure* you had one? It would be written—in red—with a red pencil—a red paint-stick."

"My white brother speaks true," said the Indian.

"Of course he does!" chimed in Alf, to whom his chum's ruse was now clear. "And if that letter was written in red and sent to us, we would know where it came from, and would follow the messenger at once."

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The Indian flashed a quick glance of hatred towards the last speaker, but instantly lowered his eyelids again, as he returned with more calmness than before—

"It is well. The pale-face did paint letter with red. But—Red Fox foolish Indian. He lose letter on trail. He seek much—much—but no' find."

The game of bluff had succeeded. Now the boys knew for certain that the man was lying—that he had not been commissioned by either of their parents, and both laughed derisively.

"Trapped!" exclaimed Holden triumphantly. "You've got him tight as a rabbit in a gin, Bob."

How that sneering laughter scorched the redman's pride! It touched him at the quick, and caused him to writhe inwardly, until his fingers twitched beneath the folds of his blanket with eagerness to tear out the tongue that thus jeered at him. Yet the lads did not dream how near they were to tragedy as they laughed at the little comedy, with the chief actor sitting huddled at their feet. They did not notice how the Indian's eyes first measured the distance from the overhanging bank to the surface of the water, and then as quietly calculated the distance between himself and the lads.

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"Yes, you were indeed foolish," resumed Arnold, "for you have shown us that your words were lies. My father never wrote such a letter, I am sure, for a red pencil is not a thing that he possesses. And if he were well enough to write, he would be well enough to come himself, instead of sending such a foolish Indian and a bad liar."

"At the same time," whispered Alf, "the chap must know something, or he wouldn't be here at all. We must find out that in some way or other."

"True," Bob said.

But there was no time allowed for considering what means to adopt to obtain further information, for just at that moment Red Fox uttered a wild cry, and sprang from the ground with the leap of a deer. Next instant Bob was gripped as in a vice and flung into the centre of the pool; then, with a snarl like that of a wild cat, the Indian sprang for Alf's throat.

CHAPTER XV

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OFF!

The Indian is nothing if he is not unexpected in all his actions. Surprise attacks were ever his weapons of warfare. From among the long grass of an apparently innocent meadow he would suddenly rise up with his followers to attack the caravan that was quietly pursuing its way along the prairie in absolute ignorance of the nearness of enemies. In the dead hour of night the war-whoop would suddenly ring through the forest, and the settlers would be scalped and dead before the last echo had time to fade away.

So it was on this occasion. Utterly unsuspecting of attack, both boys were taken at a disadvantage. Bob was floundering in the water before he had time to realise the assault, while Alf was equally unprepared as the Indian sprang towards him.

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The claw-like fingers missed their intended grip upon the boy's throat, but the arms managed to grapple the lad in a tight embrace. Alf struggled well, but he was no match for the muscles of the giant Dacotah.

"I'm coming! I'll be with you in a second!" called Bob from the water, striking out strongly for the shore as soon as he had recovered breath.

The Indian looked hastily around him without releasing the bearlike hug. He saw the swimmer quickly approaching, and he gave a cry of fury as he thought that he would be baulked of his purpose of revenge, for he rightly thought that he would stand a poor chance against two active lads. He might succeed in injuring the one, but there was little chance of his escaping.

Suddenly he released Alf. Feeling himself free for the moment, the boy jumped back in readiness for another attack. But once again the unexpected had him at a vantage. The boy anticipated no other attack now but that of fists or a knife at the utmost. These were the only contingencies that his inexperience could imagine. But before he had time to conjecture other possibilities, Red Fox had slipped off his blanket, flung it around the lad just as the ancient gladiator was wont to

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entangle his opponent in the deadly net, and before Arnold had reached the river bank the Indian had wound the blanket tightly round his captive, picked him up in his arms, and commenced running towards the tent.

Bob gave a cry of dismay and rushed on in pursuit.

But the redskin had the start, and ran straight towards the picketed horse, still carrying the lad, who was half stifled by the thick cloak, and practically helpless, owing to the tightness with which the bond was twined.

It would have been an easy matter then for Red Fox to have killed his captive and yet escape the other boy. But that was not his purpose. In his thirst to revenge the insult of Alf's words, he had quite forgotten Thunder-maker's commission and the coveted ermine robe. These were nothing to him now. He had listened to sneers with patience. The time had now come to repay the taunts with interest. He ran towards the pack-horse. A slash with his hunting-knife severed the rope within two or three feet of the halter. Alf was then thrown roughly across the animal's back, while the Indian was himself astride an instant afterwards. A vicious dig of the heels, and the horse sprang forward.

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And the last that Bob saw as he reached the tent was an ugly face grinning at him and an arm waving tauntingly as horse, rider, and burden disappeared into the woods.

Arnold was aghast!

He rushed into the tent and snatched up his repeating rifle, which was already loaded; by the time he emerged again he could only hear the distant sound of the fugitive rider pressing the branches through the bush track.

He ran forwards at top speed, but he knew well that unless some accident befell the horse he stood a poor chance of being able to aid his chum. The Indian would know the bush as well as his namesake fox. He would not be likely to take any risk that would imperil his safety or blight any evil purpose that he might harbour.

The boy followed the track, which was well marked. It was the same course that had been taken by Mackintosh and Haggis earlier in the day. For a time it led through an avenue of trees. Then it branched off to the left, where the ground was hard-packed and dry, having been stripped of vegetation by a bush fire earlier in the year. Here the tracks were less easy to follow, for a steady breeze was blowing, and the imprints of the hoofs were covered almost as quickly as they were made.

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It was heart-breaking to have to slacken speed at such a time, when every second might mean disaster to his chum. But what else could he do? And when ultimately the tracks led him to the border of a vast marshland, the lad was obliged to halt in what was almost despair.

"What is to be done now?" he exclaimed to himself. "Poor old Alf! What a fool I was not to be prepared for such a rascal, when once my suspicions were so roused!"

But it was no use sitting down in hopelessness. Such weakness would have nothing to gain and everything to lose. So Bob pulled himself together, as the apt saying has it, and racked his brains to meet the occasion.

Not a sound could he now hear to indicate which way the fugitive had taken. Moreover, the tracks completely disappeared from sight when the boy had taken a few paces into the shallow water and spongy moss.

Plainly the only course was to mark a starting-point with a stake, and then follow round the margin of the swamp until he discovered the spot where the rider had crossed.

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It was a tedious process, but apparently there was no option. So he resumed the weary tour with such hope as he could summon.

Arnold found the tracks after more than two hours' patient searching, as the dusk was beginning to creep over the forest. The footprints were more distinct now than they had been at the other side of the marsh, so the boy was able to make some rapid progress. But, as the darkness fell the work became more difficult. He had to stoop low in order to see the tracks at all, and ultimately he could only follow them on hands and knees—feeling the footprints with his fingers, just as a blind man feels the letters in his book.

He was becoming thoroughly exhausted. Still he plodded on with dogged perseverance. His knees were grazed and his back was aching, especially where the rifle was strapped; and at times he even stumbled and fell in a heap, from which each time he found it more difficult to rise than on the former occasion.

It was indeed a trial that would have taxed the strength and nerves of the strongest. When we remember what the boy had already undergone that day, we have reason to wonder that he endured so long. Still he persevered. Inch by inch he felt his path in the pitch darkness, crawling through the bush with only hooting owls and whining wolves for company, until at last, worn out and dizzy, his muscles gave way, and he floundered unconscious upon the earth.

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A NIGHT'S TERROR

When Bob reopened his eyes, it was to awake suddenly with the horrible feeling that he was being watched by some hidden foe.

He started, and as he did so he was conscious of the sound of many pattering feet—soft, muffled sounds, yet loud enough for him to hear. He even thought, as he turned over and flung out his arm, that his hand had touched something that was warm and furry.

He sat up and gripped his rifle as he stared around him.

In the semi-darkness of the rising moon he could see dark figures moving restlessly all around him, while a score or more of eyes kept twinkling like stars to indicate how he was being watched.

Just then a wild, long-drawn wail rent the night air beside him. The boy's blood seemed to run cold at the sound, for he knew that he was surrounded by a horde of timber wolves who had thought him dead, and come too soon.

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Too soon? Yes. But how long would their moment be delayed?

Bob staggered to his feet and held his rifle in readiness. But the ghouls of the night kept at some distance, though he could still see them stirring here and there, as if they were discussing plans among themselves.

The boy waited—it seemed hours—each moment expecting a dash from the black spectres. Still they hung back, until Bob actually began to long for the attack to begin, that the strain of waiting might be broken.

Then something moved behind him. He wheeled about and swung his rifle like a club, at random. The butt met a soft substance, and a wild howl followed, as a wolf that had been creeping upon him from the rear now sprang back among his lurking comrades. Instantly the forest rang with wails and howls and snarling, as the wolves sprang upon their wounded comrade (as is the way of many wild animals) and tore him to pieces.

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Yet Arnold dared not leave the spot. If he ran, the wolves would soon be upon him, for a fleeing prey is more closely pressed than one that stands at bay. Moreover, he was in the centre of a clearing. If he were to enter the woods, there would be many quarters from which he would be open to attack and unable to defend himself freely.

The night wore on, and the moon crept up into the arc of the sky. His enemies could be plainly seen now, though the shadows prevented him from determining how great was their number. Probably the uncertain light deceived him and multiplied the actual score. One thing—they were in sufficient numbers to be a formidable danger, and it would need sharp watching to ward off the attack effectively.

So long as there was a remnant of their comrade's flesh to fight and snarl over, Bob was left in peace. But presently the strife became less and the noise sank, and by such signs he knew that he had again become the object of their unwelcome attentions.

He stood his guard with every nerve strained to catch the first sight and sound of danger.

Then he saw two large forms creeping towards him from the front. They came slowly, creeping low like dogs stalking game in the grass.

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Bob waited until they drew near. He was reluctant to exhaust a cartridge unless it was an absolute necessity. His wish was to exercise the force of his muscle on these as he had done with their predecessor.

But, as the wolves came within a few yards, they stopped and eyed him cautiously, and in this position the furred enemies and the boy stood watching each other, just as wrestlers watch each other's eyes to discover the vantage moment for a deadly grip.

The time passed, yet neither side moved. Then, to Bob's dismay, he discovered that the whole mass of wolves had gathered together, and were slowly creeping upon him in the wake of these two leaders.

And with the knowledge, the boy seemed to go mad for the time. He could delay the fight no longer. His blood rushed hot to his head. He fired one shot at the foremost wolves. Then he gripped his weapon by the muzzle and sprang straight for the pack.

"Come on, you brutes!" he yelled, as he laid about him right and left. "If it's got to be a fight, the sooner we begin, the sooner it'll be over!"

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Wild with passion, the boy fought with the false strength that is always the accompaniment of delirium. As the blows told, the wolves howled and shrieked and leapt for him with a rage that was equally frantic to his. Fortunately they kept to one side—that was the side from which the moon shone. They could see him plainer thus. Otherwise the light would be in their eyes, and he but a black figure that they could not understand.

How he fought that night!

Strange to say, all fatigue had left the lad's body. He had the endurance of three normal boys—at least it seemed thus, though we never know our real strength, muscular or mental, until we are in the straits of desperation.

More than once he received a nasty little snap in the arm. But these were unnoticed in the heat of the combat. His eyes were "seeing red," as the Westerners say. He had no nerves to feel with; only muscles to fight with. And all the time the impromptu club was in action—sometimes swinging like a flail, at other times being gripped for a no less effective thrust with the butt.

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But gradually the attack became perceptibly easier, as the wolves were beaten back or slain by the ceaseless swing of the rifle. Bob recognised the weakening of the assault, and the spirit of the conqueror fired his blood to renewed energy.

Balked of his prey, a great timber dog sprang forward with determination to vindicate the honour of his kind.

Crash went the weapon, a single howl escaped from the savage creature, then he fell back, quivering and lifeless, upon the ground.

That was the end of the conflict. Their last leader slain, the others turned tail and fled.

Arnold stood firm on the defensive. His hair was soaked in sweat, his clothes were torn in many places, and he could feel the sharp sting of a wound in his shoulder. It was some time before he could believe that the fight was indeed over. The change from storm to calm had been sudden; and it was only when he understood that strength was no longer needed that he began to feel the evidences of fatigue. His limbs began to tremble with the reaction as the unnatural strength that had buoyed him so well now commenced to ebb. He looked around him. The signs of his conquest were visible in the moonlight as dark lumps lying here and there. Then his keen eyes began to haze and his head to swim. And for the second time that night he sank to the ground in a state of unconscious fatigue.

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It was bright daylight when Bob regained his normal faculties. The morning had considerably advanced while he had lain oblivious to the passage of time.

The boy sat up. He was stiff and sore. But he was no puny schoolboy. He had a sturdy frame that healthy athletics had trained to meet fatigue without injury, and Nature's needed rest had rapidly restored normal strength, though, as we said, his muscles were not free from certain little aches to remind him of late events.

At first his thought was that the previous adventure had been nothing more than a bad dream. But as his eyes scanned the surroundings, and he saw no fewer than seven carcasses of timber wolves lying unpleasantly close to him, he was quickly convinced that there had been no ill vision but terrible reality.

Next he called to mind the quest on which he had started from the camp.

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That thought was sufficient to banish the last sensation of drowsiness, and he immediately rose up and examined his rifle, to see if it had suffered from the adventure. The weapon had stood the test well. Beyond a few dents on the butt (which would be so many trophies of the combat) it was otherwise uninjured. The scratches on his own flesh were not serious, though they nipped a little at first movement. So, altogether, Bob was satisfied that he had come through the ordeal in a manner that demanded thankfulness to a protecting Providence.

The next move was towards the bush, where the Saskatoon berries were hanging in inviting clusters like myriad bunches of purple grapes in miniature. These, together with a draught from an adjacent spring, had to suffice for breakfast. Then he turned once more to take up the tracks that he had been forced to forego on the previous night.

It was not long before the boy rediscovered the trail, and with a thousand misgivings for the unavoidable delay in going to his chum's assistance he started on the track at a rapid pace.

It was a winding path that he followed; but in order to ride swiftly Red Fox had been obliged to keep more or less to the open way through the woods, relying upon speed more than strategy to outreach pursuit. He had a plan in his mind that he meant to carry out when at a safe distance. After that was accomplished, he did not care how soon the searchers might reach the spot. He would be far away. And the boy—well, they would be welcome to find him then.

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Doggedly determined to find his chum at all costs, Bob pressed on, seldom taking his eyes from the ground, where the imprints showed how heavy hoofs had thrashed the trail.

What had happened to his chum? Had the savage merely stolen him for some wild purpose—perhaps to await a ransom? Or could the worst have happened, and Alf be even now— No, no. Bob could not bear that thought, and he put it from him, struggling manfully to retain hope as well as strength.

And then suddenly—when it was about noon—he came upon the Scotsman's pack-horse quietly grazing beneath the trees, and at a little distance Alf sitting on the ground with Red Fox prostrate, resting his head on the lad's lap.

CHAPTER XVII

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THE FATE OF RED FOX

It may seem a little surprising that Alf did not make a better resistance when he found himself being carried away on horseback. It is no easy matter for even an Indian to carry a person lying in front of him on a bare-backed broncho when the person is helpless and still. It is a yet less easy matter—if not an impossibility—to do the same thing with a struggling captive.

Of course we know that Holden was at a disadvantage. He was powerless to use his arms, which were held close to his sides by the wrappings, and it was with difficulty that he breathed. But his legs were comparatively free, and it would not have required much energy to make such resistance as would have considerably hampered Red Fox in his purpose.

The reason for the lad's passive demeanour is not difficult to understand.

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Alf was no fool. Indeed, he possessed a more than usual degree of common sense, together with a gift for rapid reasoning. He quickly decided that, for the time being at least, he was at the Indian's mercy. His instinct told him that, for some unknown reason, he must have incurred the native's wrath; and, even though he might have struggled with a measure of success, the Indian was both powerful and passionate enough to murder him then and there.

No person, even in the direst straits, is anxious to incur a violent death. Holden was no exception to that rule, so he deemed it best to make pretence of fainting, on the chance that time might release him from his plight. It would only be a needless exhaustion to struggle now, when he would be easily overpowered. Moreover, a show of resistance might mean the sudden plunge of a hunting-knife.

So he lay still, and the Indian laughed aloud, believing the lad to be unconscious through fright.

"Huh! White dog laugh at Red Fox? He say Red Fox face hideous?" the redskin exclaimed jeeringly, as he pressed the horse to the race. "'Tis well. Red Fox face bad—very bad; but white boy worse when Indian hand have used knife!"

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Then the boy understood the mystery. His careless words *had* been understood, as Bob had suggested. And his fate was to be vengeance of a like mutilation of his own fair cheeks!

Not if he knew it!

It was little wonder if the lad felt his blood run cold as he listened to the Indian's vaunt, and it is little wonder that his head swam until he was near in reality to the very faintness that he had assumed.

But real pluck is never subdued for long. The very threat was enough to rouse a strong determination to thwart the brutal intention, and his mental decision was that which we have just recorded in the third person: "Not if I know it!"

Red Fox had quite forgotten about the ermine robe. That was quite Indian-like. The object of the moment was all that he cared about. To gain that aim he would have sacrificed a thousand robes of costliest fur—nay, even life itself, if he could have the satisfaction of vengeance first.

Guiding the broncho by the swaying of his body and the occasional use of a halter-rope, the redskin did not permit the animal to slacken speed for an instant.

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Once, owing to the stillness of his burden, he drew aside a portion of the blanket to look at the boy's face.

He saw that the eyes were closed, and a fear came into his heart that perhaps he was to be robbed of his pleasure after all.

But the lips trembled, and, on bending down the Indian could hear the sound of breathing.

"Huh!" he laughed, as he replaced the cloth. "That good! Pale-face—he sleep, but he wake soon when Red Fox make sign of totem. Then white boy laugh not again at Indian. Red Fox, he laugh at hideous white boy."

A peal of harsh, savage laughter rang through the woods at this delicious humour, and startled the horse so that it strained harder in the gallop.

Through the woods, the burnt clearing, across the marsh where Bob had tracked so steadily, the broncho passed in the mad race. It was rough riding for the boy as he lay on his back—half across the Indian's knee, with his head partly free of the blanket; but he set his teeth, determined to bear the ordeal without a whimper, that he might be more ready for the later critical moment.

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Then something (he never knew what) startled the horse. It sprang sideways from the path right into the bush, where a heavy branch caught Red Fox right in the forehead.

One cry the Indian gave. Next moment both the riders were thrown violently to the ground, while the broncho went off wildly and riderless.

The folds of the blanket considerably lessened the shock of Alf's fall, and as soon as he had collected his rudely scattered senses he did not take long to emerge from his chrysalis-like state.

He sprang to his feet, prepared to be instantly on the defensive.

To his surprise he was unaccosted, and on turning he saw the Indian lying face downwards upon the ground, while a red stream was making a ghastly pool around his head.

Holden was by his enemy's side in an instant. He knelt down and turned the man on his back. The movement was answered by a groan, but apparently the Dacotah was unconscious, for he did not attempt to move, and his eyes were closed.

A spring was close at hand. Alf tore off the scarf that he wore round his throat in bushman fashion, soaked it in the water, and mopped the redman's brow. Still there was no sign of returning senses, and the lad was now grievously distressed at his enemy's disaster. He would have been rejoiced to have vanquished the man, had the adventure terminated in an unavoidable encounter. But now that Red Fox was in distress, all hard feelings and resentment had left the lad's heart. He was all sympathy for misfortune. That is the way of the truly brave.

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Seeing that recovery was tardy, Alf tore the scarf in two pieces. With one strip he bound the ugly wound that gaped in the Indian's forehead; with the other he resumed his attentions by moistening his lips and temples.

And by and by the redman opened his eyes. He looked up vacantly before him, not seeming to understand what had taken place.

"That's good!" remarked Alf cheerfully. "You feel better now, don't you?"

Red Fox looked straight into the boy's face, but without appearing to recognise him. Then he muttered a few words in Indian and closed his eyes again.

For some time he lay with his head resting against his nurse, while Alf's thoughts began to wander to his absent father and the chum whom he had left in such strange fashion.

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Then he looked down again, and saw that the Indian was regarding him with eyes wide open—looking at him in a peculiar wondering fashion, as if he saw for the first time a being of some strange creation.

Holden smiled encouragingly as he touched the man's brow with the damp cloth.

"How does the head feel now?" he asked. "Does the cut pain you much?"

Red Fox did not answer immediately, but continued to stare at the lad with the same open-eyed wonder.

"Pale-face kind," he said at length, in quiet tones. "He touch Red Fox like wing of a dove. Why is the white boy so good?"

"Nonsense," returned Alf. "It's nothing at all. You don't think that Englishmen would leave a fellow to bleed to death, do you?"

"No—English boy good," said the redskin. Then he added, with a sort of wistfulness: "But Indian would leave pale-face—"

"Rot!" was the sharp interruption. "If I had been hurt as you have been, you would do just the same. Now lie quiet for a while. You'll feel better soon, and then you can go back to your people."

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The Indian shook his head slowly.

"Red Fox understand. Red Fox know English tongue good. But—he no' go back to people. He go—Manito—Happy Hunting-ground—soon."

Alf was silent. He had never been in the presence of death, and never before in the presence of the dying. The thought awed him.

"Yes—white papoose good," the redskin went on falteringly. "He kind to hand—that would have cut face for revenge. Ugh! Red Fox bad Indian, but—he sorry—now. Can brave white boy forgive poor Indian?"

"Of course," returned Alf huskily. "You did not understand. English people speak words that they do not mean to hurt. It is I who should ask forgiveness for what I said about you. I, too, am sorry."

"Then—white and red are—brothers. They bury the hatchet and—my white brother will stay with Red Fox while he go Happy Hunting-ground?"

"Yes, yes," the boy assented readily. "I won't leave you. Don't you be afraid of that."

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"It is well, for Red Fox would speak before he go. He would speak true words to the pale-face. He spoke forked words like serpent tongue when he say that white man sent Red Fox to bring papooses to Indian camp. But he speak well now when he say white men with Mighty Hand now ___"

"*Safe?*" exclaimed Holden, as the information came to him with sudden joy and sudden dread.

And the answer was at once a relief and double anxiety.

"White men safe—now. But before another sun they—they die——"

"Die?" was the exclamation of horror that greeted this announcement.

"Yes," the Indian answered. "Dacotahs foolish. They say white men spirits that brought great trouble of water to Indian. They say that serpent totem call them to Pleasant Valley, and there they burn unless serpent appear to save them from fire." Here the Indian seemed to gather strength, for, without allowing the horrified boy time for utterance, he slightly raised himself and spoke with a flash of energy.

"But white boy brave—white boy good. He kind to Red Fox who would have used cruel knife. But Red Fox no' papoose now. He know that white boy too brave to suffer; Red Fox too bad to live. And he would save the pale-face man—

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"Go, my brother—go to the village of the Dacotahs and find Thunder-maker, the Medicine Man. Tell him that Red Fox die sorry that he made bad promise—that before he die he bid Thunder-maker speak true to foolish Dacotahs, and tell that white men no' spirits. Thunder-maker know. Thunder-maker can save white men, and——"

The last word choked in the Indian's throat. He gave a gasp, fell back into Alf's arms, while his eyes looked up hungrily into the lad's face.

"Be brave!" whispered the boy. "Be brave, Red Fox. Manito waits for you. I have forgiven you; He has forgiven you. All will be well."

"Red Fox understand. He—happy——" were the last words that the poor misguided redman spoke, as he died gazing lovingly in his young friend's tear-clouded eyes.

And it was thus that Bob found his chum—tenderly holding his red brother in his arms while the great journey was taken to Manito's happy land for the sorrowful.

CHAPTER XVIII

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HOT ON THE TRAIL

It was a happy meeting for the two chums after the exciting events that each had experienced. But it was rather sad, all the same; for even in their joy at finding how both had come through their trials with but little damage, they could not but regret the tragic end to poor Red Fox.

"He was a high-tempered chap," said Arnold, when he had listened to his friend's story. "All the same, he must have had some good in him, since he was so completely changed at the end."

"He seemed sorry enough," Alf rejoined. "And I must say that I feel wretchedly sorry about the whole thing. In a way it was my fault—making the remarks that I did. It never occurred to me that he would understand a word——"

"As apparently he did. However, it can't be helped now. No doubt he had some evil purpose all along, or he wouldn't have come to us with that lie about being sent by your father and mine."

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"At the same time it has taught me a lesson," said Alf. "I guess I'll keep my opinions to myself next time, when they are so uncomplimentary."

"Just as well," Bob agreed seriously. Then, turning to the dead Indian: "We've got to lay that poor redskin to rest. I wonder how we are to manage it!"

"We can't dig——"

"And we can't leave the body uncovered. The wolves would work mischief in no time."

"How would it be if we were to lay him in that little hollow and cover him with big stones?" suggested Holden. "There are plenty of boulders about, and we could easily cover him with branches first, with stones on the top, to keep off the animals."

"Right," Bob said; and together the lads gently raised the Indian's body and placed it in a little flower-scented hollow that, after all, was a fitting bed to receive the royal dead—quite as fitting as a dark pit. Then they cast maple branches over it, and carried boulders until a substantial mound was raised.

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And when all was completed as well as they were able to do it, instinctively both lads knelt beside the grave and prayed for a few minutes in silence. And the birds overhead sang their hymns to unite in the service—happy songs of gladness they sang, that seemed to convey to the boys' hearts the grand lesson of all funeral services—that death is not all sadness, for we know of the joy that follows.

There was nothing more to be done now but to return to camp. Mackintosh had probably returned by this time, and he or Haggis would be able to guide to the Dacotah village on the urgent errand. So the broncho was caught. It had never wandered far after the recovery from its fright, which was probably due to the sudden appearance of a wolf in the scrub; and before long

the chums were on the home trail, taking it in turn to ride the horse.

Camp was reached about noon, and the boys were greeted at the tent by the Scot.

"Where in the world have you two laddies been?" he immediately questioned. "Here's Haggis and me (to say no' a word about Bannock) returned at breakfast-time to find no' a single body at the camp. No' that time has been wasted, for we would have rested till dinner in any case. But it's foolish tiring yoursels like this when there's hard work before you. Pleasure is all very well——"

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"We've been on no pleasure trip," interrupted Alf, with a sad smile. "It has been anything but pleasure to Arnold and me."

Thereupon Holden immediately launched into the story of his adventure and his chum's—a tale that was listened to with silent surprise both by Mackintosh and the half-breed, who had come out from the tent and stood attentively apart.

"Well, well," the Scotsman commented at the close, "these are stirring times for you boys. There's no' a bit o' doot about that." Then he added seriously: "But I'm thinking we'll no' be able to wait here ower long. We must set out at once. I ken something o' this Indian legend o' water-spirits, and I ken something o' Indian ways as well. There's evil things that will be doing if we canna stop them."

"Did you find out anything while you were away with Haggis?" questioned Bob.

"A bit. We found the tracks o' boots as well as moccasins, and we followed far enough to learn that they had gone to the Dacotah village. Then we came back to fetch you laddies. And I found four grand specimens for my collection! Real fine they are—such as will make my brither entomologists in Edinburgh open their eyes as big as Duddingston Loch when they see them. But there—I must be daft to be thinkin' o' moths at such a time. See, Haggis! Hurry on wi' the denner! We'll be striking the camp, for we must mak' straight for Pleasant Valley wi'oot delay."

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The speaker was all bustle and hurry now, and as the boys followed to render assistance, Bob asked—

"Pleasant Valley? But did you not say that they were at the Dacotah village?"

"Of course I did. But I said *were*, not *are*. Did you no' attend to what your freend said—that Red Fox told him that Mighty Hand would leave for Pleasant Valley by another sun? That's the day."

"Oh, I see. Then you mean to go there direct?"

"Exactly. I ken something o' that Pleasant Valley. There's no' a verra pleasant look about it noo—a desert o' a place—all crags and sand, wi' just a pickle o' trees. It's a branch arm o' the Athabasca, and has been a torrent at some flood-time—the time that probably started the legend. But there's no' been ony stream flowing there in the recollection o' living man. But"—and the naturalist was predominant for the instant—"there are rare kinds o' hawk moth to be found in that same desert! You'll be seeing the value o' my phosphorus invention before another couple of nights are out."

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The boys laughed as the man's enthusiasm came suddenly uppermost, to the exclusion of (to their minds) a subject of more vital importance.

"I do believe, Skipper, that you would sooner capture a rare beetle than be a Napoleon!" laughed Bob, to which the naturalist replied with scorn, as he indicated the lads to take the opposite end of the tent to roll—

"Beetle? What do you take me for—a coleopterist? Ma conscience, laddie, these insects are no interest to me. I wouldn't touch one with a pair o' tongs. It's moths and butterflies for Skipper Mackintosh—the dainty fluttering things that are like bits o' sunshine and beams o' the moonlight. Beetle? Speak not to me the name o' thae things o' darkness!"

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The tent was rolled and most of the other adjuncts to the camp were collected and deftly stowed on the back of the pack-horse with the neatness of expert campers. Then a hasty cold meal was taken while Mackintosh delivered his plans.

"Now, boys, listen to me. I've got to be your captain in this journey, for you'll admit that I know best. Well, I've prepared food enough for three of us for two days. Each will carry his own. Then you've got a pair o' guns and a rifle between you. That's all that you'll need. I've got my own rifle and a revolver, in case o' accidents, though I'm hoping there'll be no need for the like o' that. Now we'll start off at once. There's no straight road from here for Pleasant Valley, but it's through bog and bush where the horse canna get wi' its burden. But it'll make four or five hours' difference to us other than by the round-about way. So Haggis'll take the pack-horse. Ay, he'll be better o' Bannock, too. Dogs are often useless creatures in an expedition that might mean creeping and hiding. Bannock's no' that bad-mannered; but he loves hunting, and a wolf might tempt him."

"How far is it to this Pleasant Valley, as it is called?" asked Holden.

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"About fifteen mile as we will travel, twenty at the least by the path Haggis'll follow. Oh, ay, Haggis'll be all right. There's no fear o' him not turning up about midnight. He's no' quite ceevilised yet, for he canna mind a' the words o' 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'Rule Britannia.' But he's ceevilised enough to be dependable. You wait at the Old Crossing till we turn up, Haggis!"

"Right, boss," answered the half-breed, who seldom spoke more than two words at a time if he could avoid doing so, and he immediately rose up to make the final arrangements for his departure.

"Then there's no more to be said," the Scotsman concluded. "It's start right away; keep a brave heart and a steady foot foremost, and we'll no' be that far from our friends come nightfall."

Skipper Mackintosh had spoken nothing but the truth when he said that the direct trail was not one that a laden pack-horse could travel with ease, far less speed.

The earlier portion of the march was easy enough. But after about an hour's walking through the bush the travellers reached a mile of bogland, across which a path could only be found by stepping cautiously from one grassy hummock to another. Even then the surface of the moss shivered for yards around, and the mud between the tufts oozed, as if its mouth were watering to swallow up the trio.

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"Feel for every step before you put your weight on it!" the naturalist instructed. He, of course, had taken the foremost position of leader. "If you want to disappear quicker than you did in yon muskeg, Master Bob, you can set the tip o' your big toe in yon mud, and you'll travel as quick as electricity."

This part of the journey was certainly fatiguing, but the travellers kept up good hearts by pleasant banter and dogged determination.

Reaching solid ground again, there was another easier spell of bush tramping. Then the trail began the ascent of a hill—a rocky, loose-bouldered slope that could only be traversed by a narrow path that somewhat resembled a strip of ribbon on the side of a house.

Up they went, higher and higher each step, with the sharp slope to the left and a sheer declivity of loose stones at the right.

Once Alf slipped, and the stone against which he tripped went leaping down the slope without stopping, until it was lost to sight some three hundred feet or more below.

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"Which of you two laddies is the one that's danced down the hillside?" questioned Mackintosh, without seeming to look round. His voice was pleasant, but he had taken a quick glance backwards all the same, and his face had paled a little. That was but his kindly way of cheering the boys and helping them to keep their nerves in hand.

After a time the climbing ceased. It was now a level path, though it was none the less ready to trap the unwary, as it twisted round spurs and crossed little ravines. Then suddenly the travellers became aware of a sound like that of a small cataract.

Mackintosh stopped, and as they listened they were able to tell that the sound was one that proceeded from the continuous rolling of innumerable stones that were being propelled down the hillside at no great distance.

"What on earth is it?" questioned Alf, and at the same moment the man pointed towards a cloud of dust that had rounded a spur ahead of them—a cloud that was advancing rapidly in their direction to the accompaniment of loud bleating.

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"A herd of mountain sheep on the stampede," was the Skipper's immediate verdict.

"Sheep? Coming towards us?" exclaimed Bob, and as the words were spoken there could be seen amid the dust a lot of woolly animals tearing frantically along the narrow path, throwing the stones from beneath their feet, while now and then one would stumble and roll down the slope as though it had been shot from a cannon.

The noise was bewildering as it echoed among the barren hills and rocks.

"See! There's a black animal chasing them!" exclaimed Holden excitedly.

"A bear," said Mackintosh with grim calmness, as he rapidly slung his repeating rifle into readiness, an example that the boys quickly followed.

"What's to be done?" Bob questioned. Frankly he had not the remotest notion how to meet such an emergency, for it was impossible to climb upwards, as it was equally impossible to descend, while to retire along the path would only be to postpone the threatening disaster for a few minutes.

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"Come! Follow me quickly; but be careful," Mackintosh suddenly ordered, he himself hastening forward as the boys followed.

At this position the side of the hill bent to the left in the form of a horseshoe, so that it was quite easy from where the three adventurers stood to throw a stone across the intervening chasm to the path at the other side.

Mackintosh led the way until he had reached the first spur; then he told the boys to wait.

"Keep your hands steady and your guns ready, boys," he said. "I'm going along a bit to shoot down the leaders, if it may be; you empty your rifle and a round or two o' shot into yon bear. They'll all be opposite us on the other side in a few minutes. A steady nerve will do it; so, if ever you were cool in your born days, this is the day to be coolest."

Without waiting for further remark from either side, the man then hastened some yards along the path and took up a position where he could kneel and steady his gun arm on a boulder, and hardly had the several positions been taken up when with roar and clatter and cloud the stampede rounded the opposite hill-spur.

Crack! went the Scotsman's repeater. Crack! crack! And down tumbled three sheep, two of which rolled over the slope, leaving one to bar the way in the path. The others took the downward plunge. Crack! crack! crack! The rifle spoke rapidly and surely, as each bullet found a billet in a different animal.

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The race was checked, but not yet effectually, though the Skipper had now more time to pick off the leaders as they scrambled over their brethren—only to fall victims to the sharp-shooter and help to build up a barrier to impede the others.

It was now a terrible sight of animals in desperation.

There were a hundred mountain sheep at least, and they were scrambling in a dense mass, trying vainly to advance—fighting, struggling, tumbling down the slope in mad confusion. Now and then one would have a momentary success and almost cross the barrier; then the deadly rifle would again send its message—and the barrier would be raised by one victim more.

Meantime, faithful to their charge, the boys kept their attention to the rear of the herd, but the dust was so dense that they could barely discern the hindmost animals.

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Then Bob suddenly exclaimed—

"Look out!"

But Alf had been equally ready. A rifle and a gun darted up to each boy's shoulder at the same instant; a simultaneous explosion came like one from both weapons. Then followed a roar like a miniature thunder-peal, and a brown grizzly was seen to shoot down the declivity in pursuit of the poor sheep that he had driven to destruction in such numbers.

"Bravo!" shouted Mackintosh, letting go his feelings in a wild whoop of exultation. "A grand shot, lads!"

"I guess his day's work is done," returned Alf quietly, though he was none the less delighted with his own and his chum's success.

Finding that the fierce pursuit had ceased, the few remaining sheep turned on the retreat, since they found it impossible to advance farther. Then the adventurers proceeded on their way, though they, in their turn, found it impossible to pass the barrier, and some time had to be expended in carefully tumbling the carcasses down the slope. But soon the work was successfully accomplished, and the path once more clear to permit the three comrades to pursue their urgent course.

CHAPTER XIX

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THUNDER-MAKER'S DOWNFALL

During the rest of the journey through the hills and along Trapper's Pass, no further accidents occurred to hinder progress, and once free of the hills the trail was level and across a stretch of prairie.

Towards night the Pleasant Valley was reached, and the three travellers descended to the part of the river known to trappers as the Old Crossing, though it was a ford where no water flowed.

On reaching this camp-ground there were evidences of the recent presence of strangers. Moreover, these strangers were not travelling in any secret way, since they had taken no pains to conceal their tracks, and the ashes of trampled-out fires were still warm.

Mackintosh carefully examined the surroundings, and came to the decision, from certain signs, that it had been an Indian camp.

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"To my mind the best thing for us to do is to rest here for an hour or two," the man said.

"I shan't be sorry," said Bob. "We pressed on rather rapidly, and, to tell you the truth, I'm rather fagged."

"But what of the others—your father and mine?" questioned Alf. "They may need help——"

"Not yet," Mackintosh interrupted. "It's no' possible for them to reach Flood Creek before morning, and the—the ceremony must take place at moonlight. Oh yes, I ken fine how you are both feeling. You're wanting to be off until you break down with weariness. But that's no' the way to do things in the backwoods. Work until you are out-and-out weary, then rest, and you'll be able to work again. But to keep on slaving till you're worked out—that's nothing but a gowk's game, and can bring no good."

"I suppose you are right," said Holden slowly.

"Of course I am. Don't you fear, laddie. I'll no' be too late. I know the ways o' the Indian, and I know the Dacotahs. Depend upon it, your fathers are being kindly treated, as best the redskins know how to treat friends. The Dacotahs are firm in their superstition, but they're kindly folk all the same."

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So the boys resigned themselves to the ruling of their guide, though it was irksome to be idle when each was longing to be up and doing. And now that they were so near to the achievement of their quest, it was even more galling to be inactive than it had been when there was distance as an excuse.

It was a dreary place. The valley was deep, and there was a river-bed where once—before the memory of living man—water had flowed in a swift and wide flood, but where now there was nothing but dust. Not a tree was within sight. There was hardly any grass. Only a few cacti appeared to thrive on the barren soil. The rest was rocks, sand, and bordering precipices.

The boys shuddered as they looked around.

"It's a terrible spot," Bob commented, as he viewed the dreary scene. "It feels like being in prison."

"There's a well with the finest of cool water about six feet away," was Mackintosh's remark. It was his quiet way of forcing home the truth that there is a bright speck in everything, if we only take the trouble to look for it.

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A meal was made from the supplies with which each had been provided, and an hour or two later Haggis turned up with the pack-horse.

It was not considered necessary to pitch the tent that night, as a very early start was proposed to be taken at the streak of dawn. So each lay down as he was, with a sand-heap for a pillow, and soon the little camp was fast asleep. They needed no rocking. Sleep came almost with the closing of eyes.

As morning broke, Mackintosh was the first to waken. He quickly roused the others, and a swift "eve-of-battle" meal was served out. The business being ended, the pack-horse was once more loaded, and the journey resumed toward Flood Creek, which was now only about five miles distant.

The Dacotah camp was sighted some way off, and it may be imagined how excited the lads felt when they found themselves practically at the end of their journey.

But once there, what would be the result?

That was the question that was exercising the minds of both; and when Bob gave it voice, the Scotsman smiled grimly.

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"What'll happen? Well, no one can foresee the future, but I can imagine it."

"And what do you imagine?" asked Bob.

"That there will be a pickle o' bother before all comes out right. Superstition is no' that easy baulked; but if we ever have to fight for it, don't think that the ancient Highland blood of the Mackintosh is water in the veins of the clan."

"I hope it won't come to that," remarked Alf quietly, and the Highlander rejoined—

"That's my hope too. But there's no telling. We've *got* to conquer—"

"And conquer we shall!" added Bob, with determination.

On reaching the camp, the rescuers were met by a host of Indians, who were all filled with curiosity regarding the strangers. The white men looked around them, but no signs could they see of the captives.

Then Mackintosh recognised a friend in Swift Arrow.

"Ha, Nitchie!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand for the Indian to grasp.

"It is pleasant for the eyes of Swift Arrow to see the Black Bear in the camp of the Dacotahs," said the redskin as he returned the greeting.

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"And it's good for him to look upon the face o a friend," said the Scotsman. "I wish to speak with Mighty Hand. Where is he?"

"The chief of the Dacotahs is here," replied a voice from the crowd, and the great man himself stepped forward.

"H'm. That's good. Saves a deal of seeking when folk come of themselves." Then the speaker launched straight into the subject of their quest.

"Now then, Mighty Hand, you and me are old friends, and we can talk freely. You're wondering the noo what has brought us here, and you may ken without palaver. We have come for your captives."

"Captives?" The chief looked puzzled as he repeated the word.

"Ay, captives," emphasised Mackintosh. "Perhaps you don't know the meaning of the word."

"Mighty Hand knows the language of the pale-face. But there are no captives in the Dacotah camp."

At this the boys felt their hearts sink. Could it be that, after all, Mackintosh had been mistaken, or that Red Fox had deluded them? Could it be that they had come too late?

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But Mackintosh did not share these doubts. He understood the working of the native mind too well.

"That is good," he resumed. "If the Dacotahs have no captives, then the white men are free. They will travel back with me to their camp now!"

Instantly a stern change came over the face of the chief, and such of the other Indians as understood English began to murmur with ominous disapproval.

"My white brother speak not wise words," said Mighty Hand firmly. "The fiery totem call that water-spirits suffer. What the totem call must be answered. Only great medicine can bid the fire sleep now."

"Idiots! Fools!" exclaimed Mackintosh, for once allowing his irritation to betray him. "Do you think that we are going to allow our own people to suffer at the service of a lie? I tell you that we will take those white men from your hands whether you wish it or not!"

The Indian was unmoved by the Scotsman's outburst.

"My white brother speak hot words. It saddens heart of Mighty Hand to see anger in face of his brother. But he is wrong. The call of the totem shall be answered when the moon is round—to-night."

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How this strain of argument might have progressed it is hard to say, but it was cut short by a cry like that of a wild beast, as Thunder-maker sprang through the crowd, dressed in all the hideous regalia of his profession.

"Dogs!" he cried furiously. "Do the pale-faces come to insult the great chief of Dacotahs and say that the fiery totem lie? Ugh! Spit upon them, Mighty Hand! Chase these dogs from the camp!"

Mackintosh had resumed his temper by now, and he turned to greet the newcomer with a look of feigned amusement.

"Who's this?" he asked pleasantly. "Is it a monkey that Mighty Hand has caught to please him, or is it maybe a little dancing-bear tricked out in feathers for the braves and warriors to laugh at?"

Thunder-maker well understood the jibe, and he flung himself about with passion.

"Ma conscience! Don't go making all that noise," was the quiet reproof. "And if you'll take my advice, you'll go home and put on warmer clothes. You've little enough on to keep you cosy when the wind blows chill."

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Poor Thunder-maker! He had never been treated with such scant respect. Even the young papooses were putting "tongue in cheek" towards him, and some of the women could be seen pointing their fingers at his discomfited self.

Blind with passion the Indian threw himself upon the Scotsman. Instantly the boys had their guns ready to protect their friend. But the next moment they could not have pulled a trigger if it had been necessary to save their lives thereby, for they and the whole concourse of Indians were shaking themselves with laughter at what was taking place.

What was it?

Well, merely that Thunder-maker had not reckoned with the enormous strength that was latent in the Scotsman, nor the peculiar sense of his humour; for, no sooner had the Indian charged, than he found himself gripped by powerful hands, turned face downwards on a bent knee, and smacked in good old homely style of punishment, which the medicine man's scanty attire rendered exceedingly suitable.

Thunder-maker yelled and kicked, but he was held as if in a vice, while the slaps rang out in rapid succession and the valley echoed with laughter.

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At last Mackintosh released the delinquent, and the poor man slunk away amid jeers and laughter. His day was over, and from that hour our white friends saw him no more.

When the hum had subsided, Mackintosh once more appealed to the chief, but without success.

"We must obey the totem," was reiterated doggedly, though it was plain that the chief was sorry to be at enmity with the strangers.

"But how do you know that you are obeying the totem?" questioned Bob, who could remain silent no longer.

At this question Mighty Hand turned to the boy with an indulgent smile.

"White spirits come from waters that are silver when moon round. By this we know. But if redmen foolish, totem wise. Totem will not let redmen do wrong. Totem will appear serpent of fire to warn redmen no' light flames."

"We can do nothing more at present," said Mackintosh, as he turned to the lads. "We'll pitch our camp over yonder and talk things over."

After the camp was pitched and food partaken, Mackintosh decided to pay a visit to Swift Arrow, to see if he could not manage to argue that old man into a state of reason, so as to support another appeal to Mighty Hand. It had not been considered advisable to press for an interview with the captives, lest they might be too closely watched, and any future attempt at rescue be thus frustrated. [Pg 214]

"I'll just go by mysel'," the man explained. "Swift Arrow is an old friend o' mine, and no' a bad creature in many ways. Haggis is away cracking with some o' his friends also. You'll not mind being left alone for a time? I'll no' be long."

"We don't mind," said Bob. "Anything to see light in this difficulty. We'll be all right."

"Very well. I'll be back as soon as I can, and I'll hope to have good news for you."

Left to themselves, the lads did not speak much, for their hearts were very heavy, knowing that if some plan of rescue was not thought of within a few hours it would be too late.

For a considerable time they were absolutely silent, lying within the tent, surrounded by stores and the various tins and boxes of the naturalist's outfit.

Then Bob's mind began to wander over all the events that led up to the present day, and, in wondering at the blind ignorance that could yield so much to a mere legend, he recalled the chiefs last words— [Pg 215]

"The totem will not let the redmen do wrong," he quoted mentally. "Fools! As if a serpent could tell them to do anything in the first place! How can any reasoning person be so— Alf!"

Bob had suddenly sprung to his feet as he uttered the exclamation, and Holden started to look at his friend, as if he had suddenly lost his senses.

"Why, what's the matter, old man?" he exclaimed. "Have you been asleep?"

"Asleep? No! Never was wider awake in all my life. Why, I've got it. They are saved! They are saved!" And the boy laughed for very joy at the thought.

"What do you mean?" questioned Holden anxiously. It was little wonder that he believed for the moment that anxiety had brought his chum to a fever.

"Mean?" the elder boy echoed. "Simply this—that our fathers shall be saved, and you and I will do it. It's all so simple. We must have been fools not to think of it before!"

CHAPTER XX

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THE FIERY TOTEM

The two men—Arnold and Holden—were sitting alone in the teepee that had been assigned for their use. Neither was speaking, for the day was drawing to a close, and they were almost hopeless of seeing any avenue of escape from the fate that the Indian superstition had ordained for them.

We said "almost hopeless." Of course it was necessary to make that proviso, for no one is ever hopeless in extremity, so long as he retains faith in Providence. But every scheme that they had planned had been proved void on consideration. Though free to a certain extent, they were well watched. Escape was impossible, and their only remaining hope was that when they were led forth for the sacrifice they might be able to take advantage of some opportunity to make a last stand for freedom. [Pg 217]

"It would not matter so much for ourselves, if it were not for the boys," Arnold said at last. "Their position is too terrible."

"Of course they will be able to find their way back to Edmonton, when they see that there is no hope of our returning—"

"No hope?" repeated Arnold. "Don't say that. I don't want to give up hope until the very last moment. Something *may* turn up, and in any case I intend to make a good fight for freedom."

"I suppose I do, too, when I think about it," returned Holden, with a short forced laugh. "We both mean to kick up a bit of a dust when the exciting moment comes—"

"And you may bet it will be exciting for the first redskin who comes against my fist. I promised myself to have a go at that skunk Thunder-maker, before I make my bow to the world. But for him, I believe this trouble would never have gone so far."

"He certainly did his best to pile it on," agreed the younger man. "I imagine that he was rather in hot water this morning, for I thought I heard him yelling. There's no mistaking that harsh voice of his. And there were sounds, too, for all the world as if some person were getting a jolly good spanking. You were dozing at the time, so I didn't disturb you. But I know I nearly waked you with laughing at the thought of Thunder-maker receiving a good old-fashioned correction."

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"It would take more than that to do him good," said Arnold, with a frown. "The man is a cheat and a scoundrel of the worst sort. He showed us what he was worth when he told us, two nights ago, that he had the tribe by the nose. Even now, after telling us that he knew better, I suppose he's working up the people for to-night's show."

Holden grunted contemptuously.

"He seems bad to the core. In my opinion it has been he who has kept Mighty Hand away. The chief was ready to reason, but I expect Thunder-maker's boast that he could lead the tribe was a true one."

"The old case of kings being ruled by their subjects," commented Arnold.

After this conversation again flagged. Having little to say of an encouraging nature, the men deemed that silence was best, and each sat engrossed with his own thoughts while the daylight waned and the shadows began to creep over the valley that a joking fate had called "Pleasant."

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As time went on the Englishmen seemed to become aware of a sort of disturbance in the camp. Feet were hurrying here and there, and voices were speaking rapidly in low tones. Now and then, as some one passed the teepee, the words "fiery totem" could be heard by those within, so naturally the Englishmen attributed the excitement to matters relating to the approaching sacrifice.

But presently the excitement seemed to grow more intense, and the voices were raised to a higher pitch.

Unable to restrain curiosity any longer, the men went to look out from the door of the teepee, and as they reached the opening a strange sight presented itself before them.

Gathered in many groups were all the Indians of the tribe, including all the squaws and papooses, while the tall figure of Mighty Hand could be seen through the gloaming, standing erect upon a hillock at a little distance to one side.

All had their backs turned towards the Englishmen.

[Pg 220]

They were facing the towering blackness of a mighty cliff, while with a sudden wave of silence they stood doubly transfixed, with eyes directed to one portion of the dark wall, where a sort of light was dimly glimmering.

What could it be that had such a power to fascinate the whole tribe?

The Englishmen looked in the same direction, but the object seemed to be nothing more than an irregular line of light that might have been some reflection caused by the setting sun.

Still all watched in silence.

And, as the darkness deepened so did the light become clear. From an irregular line about ten feet long it seemed to take form gradually, while it undoubtedly intensified in brightness. Clearer and still more plainly was the outline revealed, until at last—when the sun had quite vanished—there stood out against the black wall the shape of a snake of fire, poised in the very act to strike, just as it was outlined on the breast of Mighty Hand!

Arnold and Holden were astounded at what they surmised to be some fresh trick on the part of Thunder-maker, or some special form of the impending ceremony. And at the same moment a loud cry broke from the throats of the watching multitude.

[Pg 221]

"The fiery totem! The fiery totem!"

Then the Indians fell face downwards to the ground with fear.

Surely such a prodigy had never been seen before?

The sacred totem of the tribe had itself appeared, to warn the Dacotahs that the fire was not to burn that night; that the two prisoners were men, not evil spirits.

While the two men were standing watching the prostrate Indians, three figures crept round an adjacent tent—two of whom then darted forward, while the third followed at more dignified leisure.

"Bob!"

"Alf!"

These were the exclamations that burst from the lips of the captives as two boys launched themselves forward to receiving arms. Then came the dignified Skipper Mackintosh.

"You are saved, good sirs," he said, without waiting for an introduction. "My good phosphorus paint and the brains o' these fine laddies has called up the fiery totem. I'm thinking that there

will be no sacrifice to superstition the—night, and that you'll a' be on your way back to Crane Creek the morn."

And when next day the time came for departure, and the fathers and sons had made their arrangements with the good wishes and help of Mighty Hand, Swift Arrow, and a host of eager redmen, it was Bob who was first to notice that Skipper Mackintosh and the half-breed seemed in no haste to accompany the party.

"Are you not coming with us?" the boy asked.

The Scot smiled and shook his head.

"No. I'm thinking to bide here for a few days, to hunt for yon hawk moth that I told you about. Besides, when you're safe out of the way, I mean to have a serious talk with Mighty Hand and his folk. I wouldn't have them think that you was a real fiery serpent. That would be idolatry. We had to cheat them to save life, but—well, I'll no' leave the Dacotahs until I've ceevilised them into believin' that the legend of the fiery totem is false, and that there's better ways o' living than by believin' such gowk's nonsense."

THE END

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Footnotes

[1] Manito = God.

[2] Heaven.

[3] No.

Transcriber's Note:

The following corrections and changes were made:

- o Passages in italics are indicated by underscores.
- o Illustrations have been moved closer to the relevant paragraphs.
- o In the text version, the footnotes have been moved to the end of the relevant chapter.
- o In the html version, the footnotes have been moved to the end of the book.
- o [p. 30](#): Added missing period to end of "I guess the best thing we can do is to turn in"
- o [p. 64](#): Added missing hyphen to "Thunder maker" in "Thus speaking, Thunder maker dived a hand"
- o [p. 218](#): Added missing period after "returned Holden, with a short forced laugh"

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