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Title: The Bungalow Boys North of Fifty-Three

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Illustrator: Charles L. Wrenn

Release date: November 30, 2013 [EBook #44317]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Roger Frank and Sue Clark

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BUNGALOW BOYS NORTH OF FIFTY-THREE ***



The two Dacre boys succeeding in rescuing their chum from his unfortunate position.

THE BUNGALOW BOYS NORTH OF FIFTY-THREE

BY
DEXTER J. FORRESTER

Author of "The Bungalow Boys," "The Bungalow Boys Marooned in the Tropics," "The Bungalow Boys in the Great Northwest," "The Bungalow Boys on the Great Lakes," "The Bungalow Boys Along the Yukon," etc., etc.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS
BY CHARLES L. WRENN

NEW YORK
HURST & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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THE BUNGALOW BOYS NORTH OF FIFTY-THREE.

CHAPTER I—IN THE WHITE SILENCES.

The air in the valley was still as death. Not a wandering puff of wind swept the white, snow-covered slopes that shot up steeply from either side of its wide, flat floor; nor had any stirred for several days. The land was chained and fettered in icy bonds, and would be for many long weeks.

The river—the Porcupine—that, when the Bungalow Boys had first come to this valley in the Frying Pan Range, had dashed and sometimes raged along its shoaly course, was ice-fast. Occasionally from an overburdened birch or hemlock branch the accumulated snow would fall with a dull crash.

These miniature avalanches alone broke the white silence. In the dead stillness they sounded quite loud and startling when they occurred. There was no twittering of birds nor were there traces of any larger animals than field mice and small rodents. In the snow, as if it had been a white drawing-board, these tiny animals had etched their tracks everywhere as they drove their tunnels or skittered over the surface.

But from round a bend in the river's course a column of blue smoke could be seen sagging and wavering almost straight up in the windless air toward the leaden sky.

The smoke came from an odd-looking craft tied up to the bank of the river. The boat in question was a small steamer with a single black smokestack. At her stern was a big cylindrical paddle-wheel to drive her over the shallows and shoals. For the rest she was homely in the extreme. In fact, she might not inaptly have been compared to a big floating dry goods box pierced with windows, and with a pilot house, like a smaller box, say a pill box, perched on top.

The *Yukon Rover*, which was the name she bore painted on her sides in big black letters, was of a type common enough along the navigable waters of Alaska, although she was smaller than most such steamers. Red curtains hung in the windows of this queer-looking specimen of the shipbuilder's art, and the smoke, already mentioned, curled from a fat stovepipe, suggesting warmth and comfort within.

At the bow, lashed fast to a small flagstaff, was a strange-looking figure. This was Sandy MacTavish's Mascot of the White North, the famous totem pole that the Scotch youth had purchased as a good-luck bringer when the lads, as described in the "Bungalow Boys Along the Yukon," were on their way northward from Seattle.

A door in the forward part of the box-like superstructure suddenly opened, and out into the frozen, keen air there burst three laughing, jolly lads. All were bundled up and carried skates. However depressing the Alaskan winter might have been to many of our readers, it was plain that these healthy, happy lads were enjoying themselves to the full. They slipped and slid across the frozen decks, and then made their way down a steeply inclined sort of gangway leading to the frozen surface of the river.

Their passage down this runway was not without incident. Sandy MacTavish was behind his two chums, Tom and Jack Dacre. All were laughing and talking at a great rate, their spirits bubbling over under the stimulus of the keen air and the thought of the fun they were going to have, when a sudden yell from Sandy came as the forerunner to calamity.

"Whoop! Ow-wow! Hoot, mon!" shrilly cried the Scotch youth, as he felt his feet slide from under him on the slippery, inclined plane leading to the ice.

"What in the world——!" began Jack Dacre, the younger of the Dacre brothers, when he felt himself cannonaded from behind by the yelling Sandy.

His exclamation was echoed an instant later by Tom Dacre, who was in advance. He had half turned at the almost simultaneous outcries of his brother and Sandy.

"Gracious!" he had just time to exclaim, when it was his turn to give a shout.

As Jack had been bumped into by Sandy, so he in turn shot helplessly against his brother.

In a flash all three Bungalow Boys were shooting down the slippery gangway. They fetched up in a snow pile at the bottom, a fact which saved them a hard bump on the frozen surface of the river.

"Whoopee! Talk about shooting the chutes!" puffed Tom, scrambling to his feet and shaking the powdery snow from his garments.

"Beats the time Sandy went sky-hooting down that old glacier on the Yukon!" chimed in Jack, half angrily. "What's the matter with you, anyhow, you red-headed son of Scotland?"

"I'm thinking I'm loocky to be alive," muttered Sandy, feeling himself all over as if to ascertain if he had sustained any mortal injuries.

"I guess we're the lucky ones," laughed Tom.

"Yes, we formed a human cushion for your freckled countenance to land on," pursued Jack, as Sandy rubbed his nose affectionately. The organ in question was of the snub variety and decorated with freckles like spots on the sun.

"Aweel, mon, dinna ye ken that you saved my beauty?" chuckled Sandy gleefully. "You ought to be glad of that."

"I'll fix your fatal beauty, all right!" cried Jack, and he rushed at Sandy with a whoop.

But the Scotch lad was too swift for him. He dashed off, and at a safe distance proceeded to adjust his skates.

"I'll get you yet!" cried Jack, shaking his fist, and then he and Tom Dacre sat down at the foot of the disastrous gangway and put on their ice-skimmers.

Jack looked up from his task to perceive Sandy making derisive gestures at him.

"Hoot, mon, gie me a bit chase!" yelled Sandy, hopping about nimbly and executing some gliding figures with a taunting air.

"If it's a chase you're looking for, that is my middle name!" exclaimed Jack, and with a shout and a whoop he was off after the other lad. The steel rang merrily on the smooth ice as Tom swung off after the other two.

The blood of all three boys tingled pleasantly in the sharp air. Their faces glowed and their eyes shone.

"You look out when I get hold of you!" exclaimed Jack, as Sandy, for the 'steenth time, eluded his grasp and swung dashingly off, skimming the ice as gracefully as the swallows soared above the river in the summer months.

"Yah-h-h-h-h!" called Sandy tauntingly, "want a tow-line?"

Sandy gave a loud laugh as, elated at his easy escape from his irritated chum, he gave a fancy exhibition of figure-making, and at its conclusion skimmed off again just as Jack's fingers seemed about to close on his tormentor's shoulder.

"I'll wash your face in the snow when I catch you! Just you see if I don't!" shrilly threatened Jack.

A laugh from Sandy was the only answer as he shot off under full steam. He turned his head to show his perfect command of the fine points of skating. A broad grin was on his freckled countenance.

"Catch me first, Jack! I'll bet you——"

"Hi! Look out!" roared Tom.

But his warning came just about the same instant that Sandy, skimming at full speed over the ice near the *Yukon Rover's* hull, gave a howl of dismay as he felt the ice give way under him.

The next instant he vanished from view as the thin ice—merely a skimming over the hole chopped early that day to get drinking water out of the river—broke under his weight.

Jack, close on his heels, had just enough warning to swing aside. The last they saw of Sandy MacTavish was two hands upheld above the water as he vanished from view.

Then he disappeared totally.

"Tom! Quick! Help! He'll be drowned," yelled Jack at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER II—THE RESCUE OF SANDY.

On the edge of the thin ice that had formed over the top of the water hole was a bucket. It was used to draw the supply of drinking water, and to its handle was attached a long rope. Jack, half beside himself with fright at the sight of Sandy's plunge and his own narrow escape, stood as if in a trance as he watched Tom swoop down on the pail.

He had hardly done this when Sandy's face, blue with cold, appeared above the water at the edge of the hole.

"Ouch! Ow-w-w-w-w! Fellows, canna ye get me oot of this before I freeze to death?"

"All right, Sandy old man. Hold on! We'll get you out!" cried Tom encouragingly.

"It's cuc-cuc-cold!" stuttered the Scotch youth, his teeth clicking like a running fish reel as he clung desperately to the solid ice at the edge of the hole.

Tom's answer was a reassuring shout, and, aided by Jack, who had quickly recovered from his temporary paralysis, he came swiftly toward Sandy with the rope from the bucket in his hands. As he skated toward the unfortunate Caledonian youth his hands nimbly made a loop in the rope. He flung this over Sandy's head and then, with a mighty heave and yank, the two Dacre boys succeeded in rescuing their chum from his unfortunate position.

"Now you get back to the boat as fast as you can," ordered Tom, half angry and half amused at Sandy's plight.

"It was Jer-Jer-Jack's fault!" chattered the unfortunate one.

"Why didn't you look where you were going?" demanded Jack. "You gave us the scare of our lives!"

Sandy appeared to be about to make an indignant reply, but Tom checked him.

"You two fellows fight this out another time," he ordered sharply. "Sandy, get into the cabin right away. There's some hot tea on the stove. While you're getting into dry things I'll fix something up for you. Get a move on now."

Sandy, without a backward glance, took his way up the gangway, followed by the others. Both Mr. Chisholm Dacre, uncle of Tom and Jack, and his partner in the enterprise that had brought the party north, were away back over the snowy mountains on a trip to a distant post for provisions. The boys were not sorry for this, under the circumstances.

And now let us leave them for a time while Sandy is being half scalded to death with hot tea and vigorously rubbed with rough, scratchy towels, and explain in some detail, to those who do not already know them, who the Bungalow Boys are, and what they are doing in the frozen north in the dead of winter not long before Christmas time.

We first met the lads in the "Bungalow Boys," a volume devoted to their doings and adventures, grave and gay, in the Sawmill Valley in Maine, where, by a series of strange events, they fell "heirs" to a cozy bungalow, which fact resulted in their being known as the Bungalow Boys. It was a name bestowed upon them after they had routed a band of counterfeiterers who made their haunt in the valley and caused all sorts of trouble for the boys, whom the gang viewed as interlopers.

Adventures came thick and fast to the boys and their companion, a certain wise and lovable, though eccentric, professor. The latter, by accident, stumbled on the counterfeiterers' den, an odd, cavern-like place cunningly concealed on a cliff summit above a small lake opposite to the bungalow. The boys, too, had many thrilling experiences, the memory of one of which lingers particularly. Our readers will have no trouble in recalling Tom's adventure in the flooded cave following his battle with the enraged moose, and his subsequent adventures with the Trulliber gang. In this volume,

also, Mr. Chisholm Dacre, the Bungalow Boys' uncle, appeared after a mysterious absence, the cause of which was fully explained in the unraveling of events.

We next encountered our fun and adventure-loving heroes down in equatorial seas. In the "Bungalow Boys Marooned in the Tropics" their experiences in search of sunken treasure were set forth in full. In an exciting narrative, warm with the color and life of the tropics, the tale of their adventures and perils below, as well as above, the ocean was told. How Tom saved Mr. Dacre's life from a huge devilfish far under the surface of the sea was but one of the experiences that occurred on that expedition. Jack and Sandy, too, came in for stirring times, not the least of which was the incident of the haunted cabin on the desert island and their "laying of the ghost."

The "Bungalow Boys in the Great North West" dealt with very different scenes. In this book we made the acquaintance of Mr. Colton Chillingworth, the sturdy, sterling-hearted ranchman and friend of Mr. Dacre. How the boys incurred the enmity of a band of Chinese smugglers and how they acquitted themselves in several trying situations may all be read there, together with much information about that wonderful section of our country.

The great bodies of fresh water lying on our northern boundary line provided the setting for yet another volume which was called "The Bungalow Boys on the Great Lakes." In a Lake Huron "hummer" the boys began a series of remarkable experiences. Setting out for a pleasure cruise, they found that they were once more called upon to face difficulties and dangers. Doubtless the hardened muscles and self-reliance developed in them by their other adventures helped them to meet these with fortitude and success. The secret of Castle Rock Island was one well worth finding out, as those who have read the book in question know.

Then came a succeeding volume, "The Bungalow Boys on the Yukon." The "Golden River" of Alaska, that vast territory "North of Fifty-three," was traveled by the lads and their elders in the stout little craft, the *Yukon Rover*, which we have already encountered in "winter quarters" in the present volume. Sandy, as usual, got into many scrapes, and Tom and Jack met with an extraordinary experience at the hands of two demented gold miners, who imagined that they had discovered a new El Dorado. From these two victims of the mad lust for gold they finally made their escape with the aid of a good-hearted, though comical, negro.

Their object in navigating the Yukon was to establish winter quarters for a unique industry, namely, the trapping and breeding of the rare and expensive silver fox and black fox. The animals were to be taken alive in specially designed box-traps, and when enough had been captured they were to be shipped to Mr. Chillingworth's ranch in the state of Washington and set at liberty to breed in a climate believed to be excellently suited to them.

Perhaps some of our young readers may think this a very queer form of enterprise. To these it must be explained that the project in which Mr. Dacre, the Bungalow Boys' uncle, and Colton Chillingworth, the rancher, were partners was by no means a chimerical one. Good silver fox pelts bring in the open market from fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred dollars each, and black fox pelts even more than that. If it was possible, therefore, to raise them in numbers, there would be almost literally a "gold mine" in the business. At any rate, both the partners thought well enough of the idea to sink considerable capital in perfecting their plans.

An important part of their scheme was to preserve its secrecy, for rivals might prove troublesome. With this object a steamer had been chartered and the *Yukon Rover*, in sections, transported to the northland. She was put together at St. Michaels, near the mouth of the Yukon River, and loaded with "duffle," traps and material for constructing a well-equipped "trapping-line," had climbed the swift, shallow river to its junction with the Porcupine.

In the "Bungalow Boys Along the Yukon" we saw them in the earlier stages of the enterprise, which was now in active operation. The trapping season had opened, and already in several specially constructed cages close by the *Yukon Rover* were some choice specimens of silver and black foxes. But many more would be needed before the spring came, and the adventurers with their valuable living cargo could "go out," as returning to civilization is called in Alaska. The enterprise had succeeded so far in a manner very gratifying to both the partners. As for the boys, they were enjoying themselves to the full. But it was not all play. They had been brought along to "make themselves useful," as well as to have fun. Already they had become hardy snow travelers and experienced trappers, and so, when this story of their doings opens, we find them well content with their situation and delighted at the successful way in which the trapping had so far gone forward.

But already there were signs that what Mr. Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth had feared, namely, the enmity of the professional trappers of the country had been aroused. As small clouds precede a mighty storm, so slight signs may indicate coming trouble. Mr. Chillingworth had himself been a trapper when younger and he knew the wild, half-savage traits of most of this class of men well.

Jealous of intrusion on what they deem their rights to the wild lands, distrustful as wild animals and vengeful, and experienced in the ways of the silent places, they make enemies not to be despised. This fact the boys were closer than they thought to discovering, and that before many hours had elapsed.

CHAPTER III—THE THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

"Say, Tom!"

The elder of the Dacre boys awakened with a start from a sound sleep to find his brother Jack bending over him. That is, he knew it was Jack from the lad's voice, but, as for seeing him, that was

impossible, for the cabin of the *Yukon Rover* was pitchy dark.

"What's up, Jack? What's the trouble?" "It's something over by the fox cages." Jack's voice was vibrant with anxiety. As for Tom, he was up in a jiffy. In the cages, as has been mentioned, were some half dozen silver foxes and one black one. In all, about seventy-five hundred dollars' worth of pelts "on the hoof," as it were, were confined in the big wooden cribs.

That night before they had turned in, Tom and Jack, leaving Sandy in his bunk recuperating from his ducking of the afternoon, had visited the cages and fed their valuable charges with the fish which formed their main article of diet.

"It is really like being left as watchmen in a bank," Tom had laughingly remarked as they saw to it that all was secure for the night.

"Well, I don't think it is likely that anyone would care to tackle valuables like these foxes," Jack had rejoined, as the animals sprang snapping and snarling viciously at the fish, "that is, unless they were like the Spartan boy in the old reader come to life again."

"I'm not so sure about that," had been Tom's grave reply. "Before Uncle Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth left, they warned me to be constantly on the lookout for trouble, and to spare no pains in watching the foxes at every possible opportunity."

"But who in the world can they be afraid of up here in this desolate, uninhabited part of the world?" Jack had asked, gazing about at the solitary, snow-covered slopes, the drooping balsams and the long stretch of empty, frozen valley.

"As for its being uninhabited, I'm not so sure of that," Tom had replied. "You remember those two miners 'way back in the hills where we thought no human being had penetrated; and at this time of year, Mr. Chillingworth said the trappers are ranging all through this part of the country."

"You mean that you imagine they thought there would be danger of somebody bothering our foxes?" Jack had inquired anxiously.

"That is just what I mean," Tom had said. "Of course they didn't say so in so many words, but I'll bet that was what was on their minds. To lots of trappers there's a fortune right here in these cages."

This was food for reflection, and Jack had been in a wakeful mood all that night. What the hour was he could not imagine, but a short time before he aroused Tom, he had heard a soft crunching on the snow outside in the direction of the fox cages, followed by a sound as if the pens themselves were being tampered with.

He had leaped from his bunk with a bound and made for his brother's, Tom being the accepted leader of the Bungalow Boys.

"Close the shutters!" were the first orders Tom gave.

"What for?" Jack could not refrain from asking.

"So that no light can get outside" was Tom's reply, "while we jump into some clothes and see what's up."

The shutters he referred to were used when an unusually heavy wind came up. They were felt lined and excluded every bitter draft. At such times ventilation was obtained from a device in the roof of the cabin. Jack soon had the solid blinds closed and fastened, and then he struck a match and lit the hanging lamp. The next task was to arouse Sandy while they hastily dressed. The Scotch lad was hard to awaken, but at length he sat up blinking and drowsy, and Tom rapidly informed him of what Jack had heard.

"Huh! I'll bet it was nothing but just a wolverine," spoke Sandy scornfully.

Wolverines, the gluttons of the northland, had assailed the fox pens quite frequently, being attracted by the odor of fish. In one instance the black fox's pen had been almost demolished by the steel-clawed, truculent robber of the northern woods.

"Maybe that's what it was," said Jack anxiously, inwardly much relieved. As a matter of fact he had not much relished the notion of creeping out into the night upon possible human intruders.

"Well, if it is wolverines, we'll have a chance to nail them red-handed," said Tom, "so get a move on and jump into your 'parkee'."

Sandy saw from Tom's face that there was no use delaying any longer and he lost no time in obeying. Then, armed with rifles, having carefully extinguished the light, the boys crept softly out into the night.

It was bitterly cold, but to the north the famous "Lights" flashed and burned against the sky, shedding a softly luminous radiance on the white covering of the earth.

"Ugh!" shivered Jack under his breath, "isn't it cold, though!"

"Hoot!" grunted Sandy disgustedly, "if it hadna' been for you and your false alarms, we might ha' been in our beds the noo' instead of tramping around oot here like a lot of gloom-croons."

"Hush!" breathed Tom impatiently; "what's the matter with you fellows? Can't you move quietly?"

"Oh, aye!" rejoined Sandy. "In my opeenion, yon noise was nought but a pack o' bogles."

"Then they're the first ghosts I ever heard of that carried hatchets," retorted Tom sharply, although in a low whisper. "Hark at that!"

They all paused just within the doorway of the *Yukon Rover's* deck-house, into which they had withdrawn, and listened intently.

Over against the hill there could be made out in the faint glow of the Northern Lights a number of dark blotches sharply outlined by their white background. These blotches they knew were the fox cages. In other words, the "safes" containing the four-footed wealth they had been set to guard.

"Can you see anything?" asked Jack under his breath.

"I'm not sure,—just a minute,—yes! Look there!"

"Where?" demanded Jack, his eyes burning and his heart giving a violent thump.

"Right by the last cage."

"The one that the black fox is in?"

"Yes."

"By hookey, I do! It's—it's——"

"A man!"

"Holy smoke! What'll we do now?"

"Get after him, of course. Come on!"

Clutching his rifle in his gloved hands Tom started forward, but before he could move another step he stopped short. From over by the black fox's cage there came a shot and a blinding flash.

"He's shooting!" cried Sandy in real alarm.

"Yes, but not at us," rejoined Tom excitedly, springing forward once more, "it's the black fox he is after. We've got to head him off in that little game."

CHAPTER IV—THE TRACKS IN THE SNOW.

As they ran across the bridge of planks connecting the *Yukon Rover* with the shore, the boys saw something else. Standing by the cages in such a position that they had not seen it before was a dog-sled.

Even as they were still on the gangway the form of a man glided through the darkness toward the sled. In his arms he held a bundle of some sort.

"Stop where you are!" cried Tom, guessing with a catch at the heart what it was the man was carrying.

There was no reply. The man had reached the sled and bent swiftly over it an instant.

Crack!

Jack gave a jump. The man was not shooting. It was the sharp crack of his dog-whip, sounding like the report of a pistol on the frozen air, that had startled the boy.

The dogs started forward. The sled creaked on the hard, packed snow. It began to glide off through the night like a phantom.

"Stop or we'll fire!" shouted Jack excitedly.

He raised his rifle but Tom sternly grasped his arm.

"None of that," ordered the elder Dacre boy sternly.

"But—but he's a robber, or at least attempted to be one," sputtered Jack indignantly.

"That makes no difference. We don't want any shooting."

"Hoosh!" exclaimed Sandy disgustedly, "you're going to let him get clear away."

Before Tom could check him, the Scotch boy had leveled his rifle and fired in the direction of the sled, which could now only be made out as a dark object gliding swiftly off over the snow.

From that direction there floated back to them a laugh. It was a derisive sound that made Tom's blood boil, but he kept his head.

"You do anything like that again, Sandy," he said, turning on the Scotch lad, "and you'll have me to settle with."

"But we can't let him get away like that without raising a finger,—hoosh!" exclaimed Sandy indignantly.

"Let's first see if he has really done any harm," said Tom, "he may have only intended it and we have frightened him off."

But although he spoke hopefully, Tom's inner senses told him that the daring marauder had done more than merely alarm them. In the first place, there was the shot coming from the direction of the black fox's cage. To Tom that could mean only one thing and that was that the intruder had killed the occupant of the cage. In fact, that was the only way that he could have secured his prey, for the foxes were wild and savage to a degree, and it would have been impossible for anyone to abstract them alive.

All these thoughts and conclusions flitted through his mind while Jack and Sandy, at his orders,

were getting a lantern. When it arrived, the three boys in any but enviable frames of mind made their way as quickly as possible to the fox cages.

The animals were excited and frightened, and through the darkness their anxious eyes glowed like jewels as the lantern light struck them. This showed Tom that at least six of the cages still held their occupants. But the seventh, the one that had been used to hold the black fox, was apparently empty.

When they reached the pen in question even Tom could not refrain from exclamations of anger, for the cage had been ripped open and the black fox was indeed gone.

On the snow were blood-stains in plenty, and enough mute evidence of the slaying and theft to enable them to reconstruct everything that had happened as well as if they had seen it all.

"Oh! wow! Fifteen hundred dollars gone ker-plunk!" wailed Jack.

"Hoots-toots," clucked Sandy, clicking his tongue indignantly, "the bonny black fox killed and taken by that gloomerin' thief!"

Tom alone was silent. The suddenness and completeness of the catastrophe had overwhelmed him. What could they say to Mr. Dacre and his partner when they returned from the settlement? What explanation could they make that would excuse their seeming carelessness?

As Tom stood there beside the empty cage with the blood-stained snow at his feet, he passed through some of the bitterest moments of his life. He was fairly at a standstill. In the dark it would be impossible to overtake the bold thief, and there was no means, of course, of sending out a warning as might have been done in a civilized region.

No; the thief had vanished and there appeared to be not the remotest chance of ever catching him. Any trader would be glad to buy the black fox skin, and with the proceeds the marauder could easily leave the country, leaving no trace behind him.

"What will Uncle Dacre say?"

It was Jack who voiced Tom's gloomy thoughts. With his younger brother's words a sudden resolution came into Tom's mind. Undoubtedly he, as the one in charge of the camp, was responsible for the loss of the black fox. It would never be seen alive again, of that he was sure.

But its skin? That was valuable. If he could only recover that, it would at least be partial restoration for what he, perhaps unjustly, felt was a neglect of his duty.

He came out of his reverie. Swiftly he set about examining the remainder of the cages. They had not been tampered with. No doubt the thief knew that he was not likely to have time to rob more than one cage undisturbed after the noise of his gun had aroused those who were undoubtedly on watch. With this in mind he had taken the most valuable of the lot.

Tom's eyes fell on the tracks of the dog-sled on the hardly frozen snow. They lay there in the yellow lantern light as clean cut and conspicuous almost as parallel lines of a railroad.

The boy knew that the sled must be packed heavily, probably with all the paraphernalia of a traveling trapper. The question of how the man had come to find out about the valuable collection of foxes on the bank of the Porcupine River, Tom, of course, could not guess. But one thing he did know—that the thief had left behind him a valuable trail which it would be as easy to follow as the red line on a map indicating a transcontinental railroad.

And that track Tom meant to follow before it grew cold. They had no dog sleds, but they knew that the man with his heavy load could not make very fast time. Before daylight, long before the first glimmerings of the brief winter's day of the north, the boys' arrangements had been completed.

Snow-shoes were looked over and things inspected, tea and provisions packed into provision bags secured with "tump-lines," and everything put into readiness for the long trail that Tom and Jack (for his younger brother was to be his companion) were to strike. As the boys had been in the habit of going thus equipped over the long trap-line, and had become adepts on snow-shoes, these preparations did not take long.

Sandy was almost in tears when it was decided that he was to be left behind. But it was necessary for someone to be there to feed and guard the foxes, and to be on hand to meet Mr. Dacre and his partner on their return from the settlements and explain matters to them. Tom was not certain just when their elders would get back, but he entertained a vague hope that it might be possible to overtake the thief and secure the black fox pelt before that time.

As the two lads glided off in the dim gray light, moving swiftly along the thief's trail on their snow-shoes, Sandy stood and watched them till they were almost out of ear-shot.

"Good-luck!" he shouted and saw them turn and wave, and then, feeling very depressed and alone, he turned back to the *Yukon Rover* and to the foxes which were already barking and whining for their fish.

CHAPTER V—THE WILDERNESS TRAIL.

It is a peculiarity of the wilderness, be it in the frozen north or under the blazing sun of the southwest, that it breeds in its dwellers and sojourners a stout and hardy independence and self-reliance that no other life can. In the midst of primitive solitudes, where man has to battle with nature for his means of life, every quality of hardiness and ingenuity that may have been dormant in

civilization is called forth by that stern task-mistress, necessity.

Thus it was that, though only boys so far as years were concerned, their many adventures had made of Tom and Jack Dacre two woodsmen of unusual competence, considering that they had not been born and bred to the life. Brown as berries, with muscles like spring-steel, and in the pink of condition, the lads were as well equipped almost as veteran woodsmen to fight the battle of the wilds which lay before them.

As they glided along over the hard crust of the snow, always with the trail of the sled stretching before them, a sort of feeling that was almost exultation came over them. Both boys possessed a love of adventure, a delight in meeting with and conquering difficulties and asserting their manliness and grit, and surely if ever they had an opportunity before them for the exercise of these faculties they had it now.

Along with their heavy garments and thick hoods, the lads carried packs and their rifles, besides ammunition. In his belt each lad had a stout hunting knife and a serviceable hatchet. Stoutly laced leather boots encased their legs as far as the knees, and altogether, to anyone encountering them, they would have looked to the full the part of efficiency and capability demanded by the problems of the north woods.

As they ascended the valley and the tracks they were following began to leave the side of the river, they found themselves gliding through open woods of spruce and balsam. In these woods signs of animal life began to be plentiful. Everywhere the parallel lines of the thief's sled were criss-crossed with tracks of martens, and scored deep with the runways of the big hares.

Sometimes they came on a spot where a pitiful little pile of bedraggled fur and scattered splashes of scarlet showed that a weasel or an ermine had made a banquet on some small woods creature.

It was when within a short distance of one of these mute evidences of a woodland feast that Tom, who was in advance, came to a stop. Jack also made a quick halt. Running parallel to the trail of the sled was another track,—that of an animal.

Tom dropped his rifle butt on the ground and looked at Jack with quizzical eyes.

"One of our old friends!" he said with a short laugh.

The trail, which was somewhat like that of a small bear but much narrower in the feet, was a thoroughly familiar one to them. It was that of the most cunning creature to be found north of fifty-three, and one that is pretty well distributed throughout the wild regions of the north.

It was, in fact, the track of a wolverine, carcajou, or, to give him the trapper's and woodsman's expressive title, "the Glutton." No animal is so detested by the trappers. The wolverine's hide is of little value, but one of his banquets, made invariably at some luckless trapper's lure, may destroy a skin worth a hundred dollars or more.

Among his other talents, the Glutton is possessed of a sense of smell and wariness keener than that of a fox. No bait has yet been devised that will lure him into a trap, no poisoned meat, no matter how skillfully set out, has, except on rare occasions, been known to tempt him. And so the wolverine, low, black and snakey-eyed, with ferocious teeth and claws, roams the northern woods seeking what, of other's capture, it may devour. Nor does it confine its depredations to the trap-lines.

Many a trapper on reaching one of his huts where he has carefully cached away his flour and bacon to serve in an emergency, has found that it has been raided in his absence by wolverines, who have spoiled what they could not destroy. The camp of our friends on the Porcupine River had been visited on several occasions by wolverines, but they had merely contented themselves with prowling about the fox-kennels and on one occasion ripping open a fish-pound and devouring all the supply of fox food contained therein.

"I'll bet that fellow has smelled the blood of the black fox on that rascal's sled and is on his track," exclaimed Tom, as the boys stood looking at the often anathemized footprints.

"In that case he may get to the carcass before we do," remarked Jack.

"Not very probable," said Tom; "you can be sure that a man carrying a valuable skin like that would guard it day and night, and——"

He stopped short and his brown face grew confused. It had just occurred to him that to guard the black fox day and night was just what they ought to have done. Jack noticed his confusion.

"Cheer up, old fellow," he struck in consolingly, "it couldn't be helped, and——"

"But don't you see that that is just what we can't explain to Uncle Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth?" demanded Tom. "How are we to get them to see that it couldn't be helped?"

Jack looked rather helpless.

"But we'll get it back,—at least we'll get the skin,—if we ever catch up with this chap," he insisted.

"Yes, and that 'if' looks as big as the Washington Monument to me right now," responded Tom, "but come on. Hit up the trail again. I wonder how much ahead of us he is, anyhow?"

"Funny we haven't struck any of his camps yet. He must have stopped to eat."

"The very fact that he hasn't shows what a hurry he is in, but if he keeps on at this rate his dogs will give out."

"And that will give us our chance?"

"Exactly. He must guess that we are on his track and is going to drive ahead like fury."

"But he can get fresh dogs."

"Not without entering a settlement, and I guess he wouldn't take a chance on doing that just yet."

"If only we could get another dog team and a good guide, we could run him down without trouble."

"I'm not so certain of that, but anyhow I'd rather have the dogs than the guide. A blind man could follow this trail."

After this they pushed on in silence, watching as they went the stealthy tracks of the wolverine following, like themselves, the unknown marauder of the night.

CHAPTER VI—STOPPING TO REST.

Large natures are apt to take heavy blows more calmly, at any rate so far as outward appearances are concerned, than smaller ones. The Dacre boys, broadened and deepened by their adventurous lives, were not as cast down over the disaster that had befallen them as might have been many lads less used to meeting hardships and difficulties and fighting them as American boys should.

Therefore it was that, keen as was their interest in the stake that lay ahead of them, they yet found time to notice the sights about them and to talk as they moved along over the snow much as they might have done under quite ordinary circumstances.

If anything, Jack had shown his anger and chagrin more perceptibly than Tom when the blow had first fallen. But now he was in as perfect command of his faculties as his elder brother. He was able even to crack a joke now and then with seeming indifference to the object of their journey and the perils that might lie in front of them, perhaps just around the next turn of the trail, for all that they knew.

As for Tom, following the calm, almost stoical way with which he had met the discovery of their loss, he had become possessed of an unconquerable desire to find the man who had robbed them and if possible hand him over to the authorities. Failing this, Tom found himself possessed of a grim, bulldog determination to make the man give up the spoils. As for the man himself, he felt no wish to punish him under those circumstances. That was for the law to do. The main thing was to get back the black fox's skin, for he was sure the creature had been killed.

At about noontime Tom called a halt. Jack was for pressing right on without stopping to eat, but Tom would not allow this.

"It's no use two fellows wearing themselves out," he said; "we shall work all the better for having stopped to 'fire up.'"

"Well, it looks to me like so much lost time," observed Jack, sitting down, however, at the foot of a tree and loosening his snowshoe thongs. This was in itself a sign of weariness, but Tom pretended not to notice it.

He set Jack to work hacking fragments from a dead hemlock which was still upstanding, for, although there were plenty of fallen trees about, timber that has been lying on the ground is never such good kindling as upstanding deadwood, because it is almost sure to be damp. While Jack was about this task, Tom cleared a space in the snow, and then he drew from his pack a blackened pot, which had boiled tea on many a trail.

When Jack had the kindling and some stouter bits of wood for the permanency of the fire, Tom filled the pot with snow and then set a match to the pile of shavings. They had been raked together lightly and the heavier wood set up in somewhat the form of an Indian's tepee.

The dry kindling caught as if it had been soaked in kerosene. Up shot the cheery red flames, and the blue smoke curled merrily away as the wood crackled joyously. There is magic in a fire in the woods. In a trice a match and dry timber can convert a cheerless camp into a place fit for human habitation and happiness.

The snow was melted by the time the kindling had died down and Tom could make a bed of red coals. In these he set the pot once more, this time with tea added to the boiling water. It was sweetened with some of a precious store of molasses, carried in a bottle and used as a special luxury. As for milk, even of the condensed variety, the Bungalow Boys on their trips along the trap line had long since learned to do without it.

With jerked deer meat, prepared the week before, and some soggy flapjacks baked in an aluminum oven, they made a satisfactory meal. By way of dessert, each boy stuffed some dried apricots into his mouth to chew as they moved along. Thus refreshed, thongs were tightened, duffle packed, and they were once more ready for the trail.

All that afternoon they followed along the man of mystery's track, but in no place could they find a spot where he had paused to camp. He must have eaten whatever refreshment he had while riding on his sled or while on foot, for no traces of a fire or a resting place could the boys' eyes discover.

One clew alone the thief had left behind him, and that was in the form of numerous stubs of cigarettes which had been rolled by hand out of coarse yellow paper. But outside of this sign there was nothing but the sled marks to guide them. One thing about the trail that has not yet been mentioned is that the man was back-trailing. That is to say that, on leaving the boys' camp, he had followed the same path by which he had come, and in places the two tracks could be seen where the sled had swung out a little.

After a time they found that a snow storm, which must have fallen in the vicinity during the night, had entirely wiped out the "coming" track, leaving only the fresh marks of the "going" trail.

From this fact the boys deduced that the man might have turned off somewhere on his journey to their camp, but they cared little for this. It was his fresh trail that they were following hot upon, like hounds upon the scent.

All the way, too, went the trail of the wolverine, and, judging from the tracks, the boys guessed that the animal had been traveling fast. This looked ominous, for the wolverine is not, as a rule, an energetic animal, and proved at least to Tom's mind that the robber must be traveling very quickly.

He pointed this out to Jack, who agreed with him. But neither of the boys said a word about turning back. They were far too nervy for that, and, having started out, such an idea as quitting did not once enter their heads. All that afternoon they kept grimly on.

At about three o'clock, or shortly thereafter, the sun grew dim and low. Half an hour later only a pale twilight lingered about them, for at that time of year in the northern wilds the evening sets in early.

Above their heads, from the darkening canopy of the sky, the stars, a million pin points of light, began to shine. The snow turned a dull, steely blue as the light shut in. A slight breeze stirred in the hemlocks and spruces. It began to grow noticeably colder, too.

But as the daylight died another light, a wonderful mystic glory of radiance, began to glow in the northern sky. Against its wavering, shimmering, unearthly splendor every twig on every tree stood out as though carved in blackest ebony. The brush was shrouded in deepest sable, and the shadows lay upon the snow as black as a crow's wing.

Everywhere was a deep, breathless hush, except where the light wind caused a huddled mass of snow on an interlaced branch to slip ground-ward. The great solitudes appeared to be composing themselves for sleep. On the hard, frozen surface the boys' snowshoes creaked almost metallically as they pressed on, following in the dimming light the two parallel lines that had begun to burn themselves into their brains.

They knew when they set out that it was going to prove a stern chase; now they saw that unquestionably it was likewise to be a long one. How long they could not guess. They passed a small stream. In the silence they could hear the ice "crack-cracking!" with that startling sound that is one of the most mystic of the voices of the woods. It grew bitterly cold. Tom began to look anxiously about him. They must find a lodging for the night. The question of sleeping in the open did not bother him. Timber was plenty, and they could make an evergreen shelter and soon have a roaring fire to warm their blood. He was merely prospecting for a place that looked a likely one.

And then, suddenly, something happened that sent an involuntary chill running up and down the spines of both boys.

From the westward, through the long, melancholy aisles of straight-trunked trees, the sound had come. Out of the silence it was borne with a chilling forboding to them. It was a long-flung, indescribably forlorn sound, and seemed to fill the silences, coming from no definite spot after an instant's listening.

It deepened and swelled, died away and rose like the sound of distant church bells. Then, while they stood listening, involuntarily brought to a swift, startled halt, it died out uncannily, sinkingly, and the silence shut down again.

"It's the wolves!" said Tom in a low, rather awestruck voice.

The boy was right. The gray rangers of the big timbers were abroad seeking their meat from God.

CHAPTER VII—IN THE TRAPPER'S HUT.

Now, to a reader who has never been a woodsman, who has never penetrated the silences that lie north of Fifty-three, the word "wolves" conveys a distinct impression of uneasiness.

The cold fact is that the northern woodsman stands rather in contempt of wolves. He has no use for them, but he does not fear them; and the wolves for their part—except in some startling exceptions—leave mankind alone.

The boys had been long enough in the Northland to share this feeling, and it was not fear that brought them to a halt at the long, melancholy ululation that told them of the "gray brothers" wishing each other "good hunting." It was quite another feeling: the sense of their isolation, that the moaning cry had brought sharply home to them, the loneliness of the solitudes about them, the possibly dangerous nature of their quest.

"Wow! but that sound always makes me shiver," said Jack, glancing about him, as if he expected to see a gray head pop out from behind the trees at any moment.

"Yes, it never sounded very good to me, even when we were lying snugly in our bunks on the good old *Yukon Rover*," agreed Tom. "I wish we could find some trapper's shack or hut hereabouts. I wouldn't mind making a good camp with some company around, for to-night anyhow."

"Why, you talk as if we might be a long time in the woods," said Jack, in rather dismayed tones.

"And so we may be, for it is up to us now to keep on that trail till we find the man that made it, or else run it out."

Jack did not make any reply to this. His spirits had been good all day, and he had looked upon the chase rather in the light of an enjoyable adventure than anything else.

But now the twilight desolation, the fading line of light in the west and the long howl of hunting wolves, which ever and anon swelled and died out in the distance as they stood there, combined to give him a sense of forboding and creepiness.

Tom's cheery voice aroused him.

"We can push on a way yet, anyhow," his elder brother was saying; "even half a mile farther will be better than nothing, and who knows that we may not come on some Indian camp or trapper's shack, where we can get a hot supper and find, maybe, some news of our visitor."

Jack, thus admonished, roused himself. By an effort he put aside his gloomy thoughts. Side by side through the trees the two young adventurers forged ahead. But Jack soon began to sag behind. It was plain that he was beginning to get fagged. It was small wonder. They had come thirty-five miles that day, as Tom's speedometer showed, which is a fair journey for a grown man, let alone boys. A seasoned woodsman can make fifty miles a day on snowshoes and pull up with no feeling but a huge appetite. But, although the boys were well muscled and used to following the trail, they could not hope to compete with the lifelong rangers of the forest in endurance.

Tom was just thinking of making camp right where they then were, in a grove of hemlocks and stunted spruces, when he gave a sudden cry of joy.

"Hurray! Jack, old boy! Talk about luck!"

"What's up?"

"Don't you know yet?"

"I do not."

"Then you are a worse woodsman than I thought you."

"You might explain. Have you gone crazy?"

"Not just yet. Don't you smell anything?"

"Um—a-h-h-h! Yes, I do. Smoke."

"Wood smoke, Jack, and wood smoke means a fire, and fire means a human being."

"Yes, and a human being may—mean—may mean——"

"Well?"

"A human being that may make us a lot of trouble; for instance, the man who stole that skin!"

"Cracky! It may be he! Wait right here till I creep ahead a little."

Dodging here and there behind tree trunks, Tom stole cautiously forward. He made not a sound as he went except when now and again the snow creaked under his feet. As he moved, he was doing some rapid thinking.

All day long they had been striving with all their strength to get near the man of the long trail who had stolen their black fox skin. Yet now that he might be at hand, almost within earshot of them, Tom found his heart pounding in a most uncomfortable way. What kind of a man might he be? Perhaps some desperado who could easily overpower them. Perhaps there were even a gang of them.

All these discomfoting thoughts kept popping into Tom's mind as he made his way onward as cautiously as a scout. But suddenly, as he bent forward, his rifle that he carried slung by a bandolier over his shoulders bumped his back. It was like a dose of magic elixir and brought his courage back in a flash.

"Well," he thought, "if that rascal wants trouble, he can——"

He came to a quick halt.

"Here's the end of the trail!" he gasped.

Before him, not ten rods away and just over a slight rise, which had prevented his seeing it before, was a small log hut.

It stood on the brink of a little lake, the latter, of course, frozen many inches thick. About it was a clearing where the logs to build it had been felled. But what brought Tom up with a round turn was the sight of sleigh tracks leading up to the door.

From the chimney a thin wisp of bluish smoke was curling, undoubtedly the subtle aroma they had sensed at a distance. Tom stood as still as a graven image for a minute, listening intently. Over everything about him hung the hush of the wilderness at nightfall.

For a space he stood thus, and then, giving his rifle a quick hitch so that it would be in readiness to his hand, he strode forward on his snowshoes with long, certain strides.

CHAPTER VIII—THE GHOSTLY CRY.

There was a big wood pile at one side of the hut, from which the owner evidently drew for his fuel supply. Tom used this as a sort of screen to conceal his advance, and, slipping behind it, gained a place where, through a chink in the logs, he could gaze into the interior. It was deserted. Of that he

was sure immediately after his first glance, for the shack consisted only of the one room.

Having made sure of this, he continued his way around to the front of the place, and then discovered to his astonishment that the sled tracks went straight onward through the snow. It was easy for him to guess that the man they were pursuing had camped for a short time in the hut, cooked himself a meal and left the fire in the stove burning. When he saw several brown-paper cigarette butts lying scattered on the snow in front of the place, the identity of the visitor to the lonely hut became a certainty.

The problem of a place to pass the night was thus solved, for it is the rule of the waste places that the benighted traveler may make himself at home whenever he happens to come across a shelter. Tom gave a loud "Hullo!" and there came back an answering hail from Jack. In a few minutes the younger of the Bungalow Boys was at Tom's side.

"Well, here's our hotel, all ready and fixed up for us, even the fire lighted in readiness for us," laughed Tom as Jack came up.

"But what does the owner say about it?"

"Not being at home just at present, he hasn't anything to say; however, our friend of the black fox skin stopped here, rested his bones, fed his dogs, to judge from all the litter around, and then passed on."

"But isn't there a chance that he may come back?"

Jack spoke rather timidly. He was tired and a little nervous, and the thought that the fellow who had robbed them might be prowling about somewhere rather scared him.

"No danger of that. I wish he would. Then we could end this thing up right here."

"Been inside yet?" asked Jack, by way of changing the subject.

"No; I waited for you. Come on, let's go in and see what sort of a place it is and who lives in it. I guess it belongs to a trapper, all right, from the looks of it."

An inspection of the big room inside proved the correctness of Tom's surmise. Traps of all sorts and sizes were littered about the room or hanging on nails. A rough table, chairs formed out of boxes, the stove, whose smoke had first caught their attention, and some pots, pans and other equipment completed the furnishings. In one corner was a rough bunk containing dirty bedding.

One thing caught Tom's eye immediately, and that was a barrel in one corner of the place. All about it several small skins such as beaver, marten and weasel were scattered on the floor. Closer inspection showed that the barrel contained some more of the same kind of pelts. It looked as if somebody had hastily rummaged through the barrel of skins and selected what he wanted.

"I'll bet that rascal who stole the black fox has been on a raiding expedition here, too," cried Tom indignantly. "What a shame!"

"Yes, looks as if he'd helped himself," agreed Jack, unstrapping his pack and taking off his snowshoes.

They spread their provisions out on the table, got in plenty of wood and water, and lighted a coal-oil lamp which they found on a shelf. When the door was shut and secured by a big wooden bar which was adjusted from within, they set about getting supper. In the yellow lamplight, with the kettle singing on the stove and some jerked meat bubbling in a sort of stew Tom had fixed up, the place looked quite cosy and homelike.

"Wonder how poor old Sandy is getting along?" said Jack, as they sat down to eat.

"Oh, he'll be all right," replied Tom. "Of course, he'll be lonesome and all that, but he's quite safe unless some other fellow takes it into his head to come a-raiding."

"Well, lightning never strikes twice in the same place," responded Jack, "and it is hardly likely that a second thief would come along so soon."

"Just what I think," agreed Tom.

Having finished their supper, they washed up the dishes and set about preparing to make everything snug for the night. From time to time they could hear the distant howling of the wolves, but that only made the hut seem more snug and secure.

"I wonder what the owner would say if he found us making ourselves so very much at home?" said Jack, as he inspected the none too clean bedding.

"Oh, he would be glad to see us, I guess," replied Tom. "Visitors are welcome in this wilderness, and as for making ourselves at home that is the right of every traveler in the woods when he needs hospitality and the host happens to be out."

"Still, I don't imagine the hospitality includes helping yourself to skins, like that rascal we're trailing did."

"I hardly should think so," rejoined Tom dryly. "Fellows like that don't have a bed of roses when they are caught. It is as bad as horse stealing in the West."

"I know I can think of a good many punishments fitting for the rascal who stole our black fox."

"So can I, without straining my imaginative powers, either."

Both lads were thoroughly exhausted by their labors of the day, and after a little more talk they made up a good roaring fire to keep the hut warm through the night, and turned into the bunk. For

some little time they lay awake, listening to the crackling of the blaze and the sighing of the wind which was stirring outside.

From time to time, too, they could still hear the howling of the wolf pack, and occasionally the night air would ring with the sharp cry of some small animal pounced upon by a great snow owl or a weasel. But both lads were well used to these sounds of the northern night, and it was not long before their senses began to swim and they dropped off into sound and refreshing sleep.

Just what time it was when they both awakened together they did not know, but the cause of their sudden arousing was a startling one. Borne to their ears there had come a strange sound, a long, low, howling sort of moan.

"Wow-ow! Ow-hoo-ha-hoo-wow-w-w-w-w-w!"

That is about as nearly as the sound can be indicated in print.

Both boys sat bolt upright, wide-eyed with alarm. Jack felt the skin on the back of his scalp tighten as he listened. The lamp had been left alight, although it was turned low, and in the dim light each lad could read fear and perplexity in the other's countenance.

"Wh-wh-what is it?" gasped out Jack.

"I der-der-don't know," stuttered Tom, equally at a loss and almost as badly disturbed by the weird nature of the wailing cry.

CHAPTER IX—TOM CALMS JACK'S FEARS.

"Wow-yow-wyow-ow-oo-oo-oo!"

Again came the cry, punctuating the night in the same ghastly, unaccountable manner.

"Is it wer-wer-wer-wolves?" stammered Jack.

Tom shook his head.

"Nothing like them. It beats me what it can be. I never heard such a sound."

"It gives me cold shivers," confessed Jack.

"Maybe it is only a wildcat," said Tom, regaining his nerve which had been badly shaken by his sudden awakening and the ghastly cries.

"Doesn't sound much like one," objected Jack; "it sounds more like—more like—"

He broke off short, for now something occurred that made each boy feel as if his hair was standing on end and ice water being poured in liberal quantities down his spine.

"There is death in the snows, death-death-death-to-all-who-brave-the-trail!"

"Gracious!" gasped Jack; "it's a ger-ger-ghost!"

"Nonsense," said Tom sharply.

Although he was badly scared himself, he kept his nerve better than his younger brother, but the sepulchral voice made him shudder as he listened.

The uncanny sound of the wailing chant died out. Then fell a deep silence, broken only by the sighing of the night wind.

"But if it isn't a ghost, what is it?" demanded Jack.

"I don't know, but of one thing I'm certain, it isn't a ghost. There are no such things, and only fools and kids believe in them."

"Well, nobody else would be outside in the snow making such noises," declared Jack. "It is a spirit or something, that's what it is. Maybe somebody was murdered here and it is his—"

"Say, if you talk any more nonsense, I'll—I'll—" burst out Tom disgustedly, but just then came an interruption.

It was the sepulchral voice again.

"The-white-death-is-abroad-in-the-land! O-wo-w-ow-oo-oo-oo-oo!"

The voice broke off in a terrifying scream that brought both boys out of the bunk and to their feet. Tom picked up his rifle.

"Maybe it is somebody lost in the woods," suggested Jack, glad of any theory that might reasonably account for the alarming voice.

"Rubbish! Nobody lost in the snow would make that racket. Besides, there's all that stuff about death!" Tom shuddered. "It's got me guessing."

"It's aw-awful!" stammered poor Jack.

"But I mean to find out what it is."

Tom compressed his lips and looked very determined. He began examining the lock of his repeating rifle, and then moved toward the doorway.

"What! You are going out there?" demanded Jack.

"I surely am. I mean to satisfy myself just what it is, or *who* it is, that is making that ghostly noise."

"But it can't be human," urged Jack. And then, recollecting some ghost stories he had read, he continued: "It might ber-ber-blast you, or something."

"Rubbish! I'll blast it, if I can get hold of it!" declared Tom, who couldn't help smiling, perplexed though he was, at Jack's real alarm.

The boy's hand was on the bar that held the door securely shut, when the voice arose once more. It was certainly not a little awe-inspiring. The mere facts that they could not tell with accuracy from just what direction it came, and also that they were the only living beings in that part of the country, made it all the more frightful. "*Be-ware—be-ware-of-the-white-death-of-the-north!*" came the voice. "*Turn-back. Go-where-you-came-from. The-trail-leads-to-destruction-swift-and-terrible!*"

Tom waited no longer. He flung open the door and rushed out into the darkness. Behind him came Jack, also armed, and trying desperately to keep his teeth from chattering. The Northern Lights were flashing and splashing the sky with their weird radiance, and the snow lay whitely all about the hut.

Had there been any man or animals within the cleared space, they must have been able to see their forms.

But nothing was to be seen.

The two alarmed boys standing there looking this way and that, like startled deer, were the only living things near the hut. Tom was badly mystified. The whole thing certainly flavored of the supernatural, and yet the boy's better sense told him that it could be no such thing. There must be some way of accounting for that voice, but for the life of him Tom could not hit upon a solution of the mystery, try as he would.

At length, after making as thorough an examination of the space surrounding the hut as they could, the two lads were fain to go back again into the structure, and at least one of them was heartily and unfeignedly glad to be able to do so.

Tom felt that, had he been able to account for the strange and supernatural voice in any imaginable way, he would not have been so worried over it. It was the very fact that the whole thing was inexplicable in any ordinary way that made it more alarming.

The bar was secured in place and both boys got back into the bunk. But sleep did not visit them for a long time. They were under far too great a strain for that. They lay awake listening nervously for a repetition of the spectral voice, but none came.

"Perhaps in the morning we may find something that will throw some light on the matter," said Tom, after a prolonged silence.

"Yes, I suppose we'll find a phonograph or something out there," scoffed Jack. "It's no use talking, Tom, I tell you that nothing earthly made those sounds."

"What do you think it was, then?"

"Just what I said: a ghostly warning to us not to go farther."

"Very kind of the ghost, I'm sure. I didn't know they were such benevolent creatures."

"Oh, you needn't laugh. I've read lots about ghosts giving warnings and so on. That voice was to tell us to beware how we proceed."

"Rot! As if a ghost would care! I only know of one person who might be desirous of seeing us turn back."

"Who is that?"

"The fellow that stole that black fox."

"Then you think——"

"I don't think anything. Now try to get to sleep till morning."

Jack lay awake long after Tom was asleep once more. But the voice did not come again, and at last his eyelids, too, closed, not to open till it was broad day.

CHAPTER X—THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"Ah, ha! I fancy that this is a clew to Mr. Ghost!" exclaimed Tom.

He was bending over a sort of megaphone of birch bark, which had been rolled up into a cone-shaped formation. He held it aloft triumphantly.

"So this is what your spook made those noises with, Jack, old fellow, and scared you half to death."

"He did no such thing," protested Jack, getting very red in the face. "I did think, though, that there must be something of this kind behind it."

The two boys had left the hut almost as soon as it was daylight to prosecute their search for some trace of the cause of the alarm they had experienced during the night. Tom already had a theory in his head as to what it was that had made the sounds, and, deducing from the fact that the thief alone would desire to try to scare them, the first things he looked for were traces of some prowler in the vicinity of the hut.

He had discovered footprints among some trees on the edge of the clearing, the prints of a big, soft

moccasin-shod man. Then came the finding of the peculiar woods-made megaphone with which, beyond doubt, the man who had tried to scare the boys off his trail had uttered the alarming sounds.

Of this they could be reasonably certain, but it was beyond their power to make out how the man had come to turn back and put his plan to frighten them off his tracks into execution. Tom was inclined to think that he must have turned back soon after he left the hut and discovered who were the occupants. Then he had secreted himself not far off till nightfall and improvised his "ghost party."

"At any rate, he gave us a fine scare," declared Tom, as they walked back to breakfast before taking the trail again, "for I'll admit that I felt just as creepy as you looked."

"And that was some creepy," admitted Jack.

And so the matter was, for the time, dismissed from their minds, and over their breakfast they fell to discussing further plans when they should start on again.

The meal had been finished, the dishes hastily wiped and put neatly away, and a penciled note left by Tom on the table thanking the unknown owner of the hut for his hospitality, when both boys were startled at the sound of a dog whip being cracked viciously somewhere in the vicinity. Then came a voice:

"Allez! Allez viteement! Ha! Pierre! Ha! Victoire!"

Both boys ran to the door. Coming toward them at a good pace was a sled drawn by four Mameluke dogs. Seated upon it was a strange figure. It was that of a venerable-looking man with a long white beard, out of which his sun-browned face looked oddly, as if peering from a bush. He wore a bright-red "parkee," deerskin moccasins and a heavy fur cap. In his mouth was a short clay pipe, at which he was puffing ferociously.

"Father Christmas!" cried Jack. "Santa Claus in real life!"

In fact, the old man on the sled did bear a marked resemblance to that popular Yuletide saint.

As he saw the boys, he uttered an exclamation of astonishment. He cracked his whip again, and the Mamelukes, yapping and snarling, drew the creaking sled up to the door. The old man checked the dogs with a word, and then turned to the boys.

"Ah! mes garçons," he cried; "where you come from, eh? You look plante young to be out on the trail alone."

While the old man busied himself in unpacking the goods he had brought back from the trading post some fifty miles away, Tom told him of how they had passed the night in the hut. Then the old man told them that he was the owner of the hut, by name Joe Picquet, an old voyageur of the wilderness.

When Tom told the old fellow of the raiding of his fur treasury, Joe Picquet burst into an excitable fury. He shook his fists and swore to punish the man who had done it with all manner of torments, if he could catch him. A hasty investigation of the barrel showed, however, that the thief had only deemed two skins worth taking. One of these was a silver fox pelt, for which old Joe had counted on getting a thousand dollars, and perhaps more.

"Ah, he is a mauvais chien!" he burst out, when Tom told him how they, too, had suffered at the hands of the marauder. "Joe Picquet make it ver' hot for him if he get hands on him. Sacre! One silver fox pelt worth all dese put togeder!"

"Possibly you may have passed him on the trail?" said Tom.

"No, I pass only one man. Li'l old man all same lak me," said Joe positively.

"Did he have a sled with four dogs?"

"Oui, certainment. But he was harmless-looking fellow. He no would rob like the man that was here. Non, it would be impossible to teenk of eet."

"I'm not so sure of that," rejoined Tom dubiously. "Oh, by the way, was he smoking cigarettes?"

Old Joe knit his bushy eyebrows in deep thought.

"Oui, he was smoke. Certainment. Li'l yellow cigarettes he was smoke! Bah!"

"Then it was the same man for certain," said Tom positively. "Look here."

He indicated the stumps of yellow cigarettes scattered all about.

"Ah! You are right, mon garçon. Boosh! What a bad mans he must be! So you are follow him, eh? You teenk you catch him?"

"We certainly hope to, or at any rate to get close enough to him to put the authorities on the trail," said Tom.

"But you are only two li'l boys."

"Not so very little," rejoined Tom, while he could not restrain a smile, for Joe Picquet himself was shorter than either of the Dacre boys.

The little old man kept his eyes on his dogs in a speculative mood for a few seconds. The boys did not disturb him. At last he broke out with an exclamation.

"Boosh! How you lak it I go long wid you hunt dees bad man?"

"Why, it would be the very thing! But are your dogs fit for a long journey?"

Old Joe laughed scornfully.

"Mon garçon, attendez. Dey are the finest team of malukes in whole Yukon country. Old Joe is poor, but he wouldn't tak one, two, t'ree hundred dollar for one of dem. I feed dem, den we start back again. The man I passed go slowly. Maybe he teenk he scare you away. Ha! ha! He badly fooled. Boosh! I go feed dem now."

He made a peculiar sound with his lips, and instantly the dogs began jumping about in great excitement.

"Attendez, mes gallons," said the old man, holding up a forefinger impressively; "do not touch dem now. Dey are good dogs, but all malukes plenty mean. You got beat, beat them all time or dey teenk dey boss and bite you plentee hard, I bet you."

The boys had heard before of the savage, intractable natures of mameluke dogs and how they can be kept submissive to their owners only by harsh treatment. A mameluke is practically a wild beast broken to harness. They are swift and sure over the frozen lands, but there their association with man ends. They do not wish to be petted, and are likely to retaliate with their teeth on anyone who attempts friendly relations with them.

Muttering angrily to himself, old Joe pattered off to a barrel in the rear of his hut where he kept a plentiful provision of fish for the dogs. Presently he reappeared, and began throwing it among them, cracking his big black-snake whip in a regular fusillade as the dogs fought and snarled furiously over their food.

"Ah, Pierre! mauvais chien! Allez! Hey, Victoire! Wha' for you bite ole Pete, hey! Boosh! Take your time!"

But the old man's cries as he darted here and there among them had no effect on the dogs, who finished their meal with frenzied snappings and one or two fights which had to be broken up by main force.

"Now, I go get few teengs an' we start," said old Joe, when the animals had lain down in the snow to digest their not over-plentiful meal.

"Boosh! We geev that feller warm reception when we find him, I bet you."

When old Joe reappeared from the hut, he carried with him a long, wicked-looking old squirrel gun. Its barrel was almost six feet long and it was of a dark, well-worn brown color.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Tom, as the old man tenderly fumbled with the lock.

"Maybe have use heem. Boosh! No can tell," he replied oracularly.

"Jiminy!" whispered Jack to Tom, as with their new ally they set out once more along the trail, "old Santa Claus can look positively ferocious when he wants to, can't he?"

"Yes, but I've got a notion that he carries that funny old shooting iron more for effect than anything else. Still, I'm glad we have him along; he may prove a valuable ally," surmised Tom.

"Well, with Santa Claus on our side we ought to have better luck along the trouble trail," agreed Jack.



The dogs sprang forward, and Tom and Jack sped after them on rapidly moving snow-shoes.

Crack! crack! went the dog whip.

"Boosh!" cried the old man, with whom the exclamation appeared to serve all purposes.

The dogs sprang forward, and Tom and Jack, relieved of their burdens which now lay on the sled,

sped after them on rapidly moving snowshoes. Their chase of the unknown thief now began to look like business.

CHAPTER XI—THE NEW-FOUND FRIEND.

Old Joe Picquet came to an abrupt halt. All that morning they had followed the trail of the thief and had now arrived at a small lake, Dead Rabbit Lake.

"Boosh!" exclaimed the old man angrily, "I am one fool. Someteeng I jus' see I nevaire notice before."

He pointed down at the trail of the man they were pursuing.

"You look! You see something funny 'bout dat snowshoe?" he asked.

Both Tom and Jack examined the footmarks without seeing anything odd in them. It was then that Joe gave them an exhibition of his skill in trailing.

"His toe turn oop," he said. "Dese snowshoes mooch broader, too, than dose we wear here. Dese shoes made in some factory. See! They no good."

"Like the man that wears them," sniffed Jack. "Then you think, Joe, that he must be a stranger up here?"

"I not know," rejoined Joe with a shrug, "no can tell. But dose snowshoes no made oop here. Come from south, maybe. Boosh!"

"If he is a stranger, he is a good traveler anyhow," was Tom's comment.

Not long after, they came upon a spot where the man had halted and built a fire. Joe Picquet felt the ashes, running them slowly through his gnarled fingers.

"Boosh! He still long way in front of us," he said disgustedly. "Dis fire been cold long time. He keel his dogs, he no look out. Boosh! Allez, Pete! Hey, Dubois!"

On they went again on the monotonous grind of the chase. They passed small lakes, sections of muskegs, swamps, rocky hillsides and deep valleys. But all lay deep under snow and ice. The sun beat down, and the glare from the snow began to affect Jack's eyes.

"I soon feex that," said old Joe.

"How?" asked Jack, winking and blinking, for everything looked blurred and distorted.

"I get you pair of snow-glasses. Boosh."

"Snow-glasses. Have you got some with you?" asked Tom.

Old Joe shook his head.

"Non. But I get some vitement. Very quickly."

"Are we near to a store, then?" asked Jack.

"No, Otter Creek is twenty miles away."

"Then I don't see——"

"One second, mon ami. You shall see. Old Joe live long in the woods. He can do many teeng. You watch."

Near the trail they were still following with the same pertinacity stood a white birch clump. Old Joe called a halt, and with his knife stripped off a big slice of bark from one of them. This he fashioned into a kind of mask. But instead of cutting the eye-holes all round, he left part to stick out like shelves under the orifices. These were to prevent the light being reflected from the snow directly into Jack's eyes. A bit of beaver skin from the load formed a string to tie the odd-looking contrivance on, and from that moment Jack was not bothered with his eyes.

"In wilderness men do widout many teengs; except what dey make for demself," quoth old Joe, as they took up the trail once more.

Soon after noon they stopped to eat. It was a hasty meal, for they felt that they could ill afford to waste any of the daylight. Then on again they went, old Joe urging his dogs along remorselessly.

"They look pretty tired," suggested Tom once.

Old Joe gave one of his shrugs and took his pipe from his mouth.

"Dey what you call beeg bluff," said he. "All time dey play tired. Boosh! Dey no can fool me. Allez!"

Crack went the whip, and the cavalcade moved on as briskly as before.

It was twilight when, on rounding a turn in the trail in a deep valley, they suddenly heard the barking of dogs. Those of their own team answered vociferously, old man Picquet yelling frantically at them above the din.

The cause of the noise ahead of them was soon apparent. From the midst of a clump of second growth Jack-pine proceeded a glow of firelight. It was a camp. They soon saw that it consisted of one tepee. From the opening in the roof of this, sparks were pouring and smoke rolling out at a great rate, telling of a good fire within.

The barking dogs rushed at them savagely, and old Joe had all he could do to keep his own from

attacking the strangers. In the melee that would have been sure to follow such an attack, the sled would certainly have been upset even if one or two of the dogs had not been killed; for when mamelukes fight, they fight to the death.

In the midst of the uproar, the flap of the tepee was thrust aside and a figure came toward them. It was an Indian. He called to his dogs, who instantly crept back toward the tent, growling and snarling and casting backward glances at the invaders.

"Boosh!" exclaimed old Joe as he saw the Indian coming toward them, "dat Indian my fren' long time! Bon jour, Pegic. How you do to-day?" Then followed some words in the Indian dialect which, of course, the boys did not understand.

The Indian invited them into his tepee. He was camping alone and had killed a small deer that morning. The meat hung in the tepee, and as soon as his guests were seated, he set about cutting steaks and frying them over the fire.

Then, on tin plates, he handed each of the boys and old Joe a portion, accompanied by a hunk of baking powder bread. The long day's journey in the cold, nipping air had made them ravenously hungry. They fell to with wolfish appetites on Pegic's fare. The Indian, his jaws working stolidly, watched them eat. He was a small man and rather intelligent-looking.

After the meal, the dogs were fed and old Joe told the boys that they would stay with Pegic for the night. As both lads were just about tired out, this arrangement suited them down to the ground, and in the glow of Pegic's fire they lay down and were soon asleep.

Then old Joe began to ask the Indian questions. Indians must be dealt with calmly and above all slowly, and in a roundabout way. Haste or undue curiosity upsets them. To ask an Indian a brief question is in all probability to have it unanswered. Hence old Joe proceeded with caution. The conversation was carried on in Pegic's dialect, which the old French-Canadian understood perfectly.

First of all he asked the Indian how long he had been camped there.

"Two days," was the reply.

"To-day a man passed here?"

The Indian nodded gravely, staring into the fire.

"It is even so. Just as you say, my friend."

CHAPTER XII—THE FRIENDLY INDIAN.

"I am teenking dat perhaps he stopped at your tepee. Is dat so?" inquired old Joe, wise in the way of Indians.

Pegic nodded gravely.

"It is even so, my white brother."

"Bon. And he was a small man and gray?"

"He was."

"And carried skins on his sled?"

"Yes. Many skins and one he showed to me. It was the skin of a black fox. Truly a fine pelt, my brother. You are wise in the ways of trapping, but your eyes would have glittered and your fingers itched had you beheld it."

Old Joe nodded his satisfaction. Clearly, then, they were on the right trail and the man had the skin with him.

"So de man showed you de skins? Yes?"

"He did. He was swollen with pride. But to Pegic he looked like a man who is sick."

"Seeck?"

"Yes, my brother. His eyes were overbright and his skin was flushed. He was sick."

"Boosh! He'll be seecker yet when we find him, myself and de two garçons. Pegic, dose skins were stolen!"

"Stolen, do you say, my brother?"

"Yes, Pegic, it is even so. And how long ago was he here?"

"About two hours before the dropping of the sun. I urged him to stay, but he would not. He said he was in much haste, and truly his dogs showed signs of being hard pressed."

Old Joe chuckled grimly.

"Bon, so we close up the gap. Boosh! Mon ami, we shall meet before very long. Voila!"

"It was while I was cutting up the deer," volunteered Pegic, his reserve now thawed by old Joe's skillful way of leading him on. "I sat on my blanket—so. My dogs barked, and, going to the door of the tepee, I saw this white man coming. He wished food for himself and his dogs. I gave to him, and then he asked the way to the nearest trading post. I told him, and then he inquired for the one even beyond that."

"For which he had good reason," muttered old Joe. "He wished to gain on us a good distance before

he traded in his furs—bien!”

“His talk was smooth and without stoppage, like a deep stream,” went on the Indian, “but he would ever and anon arise and go to the door of the tepee and look back along his trail. Then I wondered much at this, but now I know why this was so. Then he left, after pressing some silver upon me which I would not have taken but for owing Jumping Rabbit much money, which I lost when we did last play at ‘chuckstones.’ After he had left I lay on my blankets, thinking of many things. But chiefly of how my brother, Walking Deer, was killed at Old Squaw Rapids when his paddle did break and left him to the mercy of the waters. If you like, I will tell the tale to you. I am thinking that it is a story that would delight you much.”

But old Joe, who well knew how an Indian can drag out a story to interminable lengths, diplomatically pleaded fatigue and sought his blankets. Long after he slept the Indian sat motionless, squatting on his haunches, smoking without ceasing and gazing into the fire. Then he, too, curled himself up, and the firelight in the tepee glowed upon four slumberers.

Bright and early the next morning they took up the trail. Old Joe was in high spirits. He flourished his aged rifle vindictively. He belabored his dogs without mercy.

“Courage, mes camarades!” he kept crying to the boys. “Before long we catch up by dis robber, for he is seeck and his dogs are weary. Bien. Before long, we shall have a reckoning.”

At noon they stopped and ate a hasty lunch. A few miles back they had passed the ashes of a cooking fire. Old Joe declared that the embers were not more than a few hours cold. They were gaining on the man. The boys began to feel the excitement of the chase gripping them more and more every instant. The meal was eaten almost in silence. Then—on again.

The day died out; but allowing only a halt for supper and to rest the dogs, old Joe insisted on pressing on. It was a brilliant, starry night, and onward over the creaking snow under the twinkling luminaries of the sky the relentless pursuers of the man with the black fox skin pressed steadily on. Had their excitement been less, or their frames more unused to hardship and long “treks,” the boys might have felt the pace. As it was, they hardly noticed the fatigue that was slowly but surely creeping over them till it was almost midnight.

Old Joe was quick to notice the first signs of flagging. He called a halt.

“Mes enfants, you are très fatiguè,” he exclaimed, “we must rest and sleep.”

“We’re all right,” protested Tom, but his objections were feeble and were not seconded by Jack, who, now that they had actually stopped, felt about ready to drop in his tracks.

“Non, we will stop and camp here and you must get some sleep,” insisted old Joe. “Let me see. We are now near end of Spoon Island. Bien! Just below is Hawk Island. Many times have I camped dere, and dere I have a petit cache in a tree. We will go on as far as dat and den rest and eat.”

Two or three miles below the end of Spoon Island lay Hawk Island. They took to the frozen surface of the river and soon reached it. It was a small, rocky speck of land thickly wooded with balsam, spruce and poplar.

“Long time ago many t’ous’and hare live here,” said Joe, “now not so good. But I like camp here. Boosh! So now we will stop.”

While the old voyageur unharnessed his ravenous dogs and fed them, the boys looked about them. Sticking up from the snow they could see the ends of some poles set in a quadrangular form. This marked the site of one of Joe’s former camps. Having unharnessed the dogs and left them to fight and snarl over their supper, old Joe next set about making a camp.

The boys watched him with interest. It was the first camp of the kind they had ever seen.

“Come help me dig,” admonished the old trapper. “Do like I do. Soon we have fine camp. Warm and snug—bien!”

He set to work digging with a snowshoe, and the boys followed his example, working under his directions. Before long they had excavated a square hole some four feet deep in the snow. By the time they had banked and patted it smooth they stood in a pit which reached about to their shoulders.

This done, old Joe wetted his finger and held it up. The side to the wind immediately grew cold and indicated to him from which direction the light breeze came.

“Bien!” he exclaimed, when he had done this, “now four poles from dose trees, mes amis, and we are snug lak zee bug in zee rug,—n’est-ce pas?”

CHAPTER XIII—THE INDIAN’S PREDICTION.

When the four poles had been obtained, old Joe erected them in the snow to windward of the excavation. Then from his sled he got an oblong of canvas which he stretched over them.

“Boosh! So now we get firewood and start a blaze and den everyteeng is fine,” he exclaimed, briskly stepping back to admire his handiwork. Although the boys did not know it, this camp which Joe had just erected is a favorite form of temporary resting place in the frozen North. The canvas stretched above the poles serves a double purpose, to keep out the wind and to act as a reflector to the fire in front so that those down in the pit are kept delightfully snug and warm.

The boys next set about getting wood for the fire. This did not take long. Then branches stripped

from the balsam boughs were thrown into the snow pit to a depth of several inches, to form a soft, springy mattress for their blankets. The fire was lighted and plenty of wood heaped near by to keep it going.

Finally the kettle was filled with snow, which was set by the fire to melt. From the sled old Joe got some deer meat, by this time frozen hard, which he had obtained from Pegic. While the meat was thawing the boys helped spread their beds in the warm, fire-lighted pit, and then old Joe cooked supper.

The boys were certainly learning woodcraft from the old French Canadian. They would hardly have thought it possible, an hour before, that such a cozy camp could have been made in the snow with such simple means. But the wilderness traveler has had to learn by many hard experiences how to make the best of things, and the experiments of successive travelers have resulted in a score or more of makeshift devices for comfort and safety.

While the party of adventurers ate their supper with hearty appetites, washing it down with big drafts of scalding tea, the dogs outside made their own camp in their peculiar fashion. The mamelukes make themselves comfortable very easily. Having gorged themselves on fish, they burrowed into the snow and slept the sleep of the faithful sled dog.

In their improvised camp the travelers slept till daylight, which to the boys, at least, seemed to be an interval of not more than five minutes. Breakfast, consisting of the remains of supper and more tea, having been consumed, the dogs, which had been routed out and fed, were harnessed up once more. Then, trail sore and stiff after their sleep, the boys resumed their travels.

They followed the river and, of course, the track of the runners of the thief's sled, which still lay clear and sharp on the snow. About two hours after the start they came upon another of his camps. Clearly he had allowed his dogs to sleep, for there were the marks of their burrowings to be observed in the snow.

"Aha, dey are tiring, mes enfants!" cried old Joe. "Not verree long now. Courage! Boosh!"

At the expiration of another period of travel, and not long before noon, on rounding a bend in the river they sighted another party coming toward them. There were three figures and a dog sled. The figures speedily resolved themselves into a Black River Indian and two squaws.

"Bien! Now we get news, maybe!" chuckled old Joe.

Then, as they neared the other party, which had come to a halt awaiting them, old Joe breathed a caution.

"Let me do zee talking. Boosh! Indians are hard to talk unless you know dem, and den—not always easy. Tiens!"

Old Joe did not drive right up to the Indians, who were squatting down on their sled. Instead, he halted at some little distance. There followed an exchange of greetings in the Black River dialect, and then pipes were produced and both sides, squaws and all, smoked gravely for a time. The boys looked on, much amused at all this ceremony, which, however, as old Joe knew, was necessary. To quote an old proverb, "The longest way round is the shortest way home," with an Indian.

The Indian was a short, squat fellow with straight black hair. He was very dirty, but otherwise very like Pegic in appearance. One of the squaws was old and very hideous. The other was a younger woman and not uncomely in a way. She was evidently considered a belle, for she was hung lavishly with beadwork, while the homely old squaw did not display any ornaments.

Old Joe was the first to speak, addressing the man in his own dialect. We will translate the conversation that followed into "the King's English."

"It is very fine weather. The traveling is very pleasant and the wind gods sleep."

The Indian nodded gravely.

"It is even so, my white friend," said he. "The sky is soft as the cheek of a baby and the storm slumbers like an old man by the fire. But there will come a change before long. Early to-day the river smoked, the frost was low on the trees and the wind stirred in its dreams. Before long we shall get much snow and the wind, too, will awake and set out upon the trail."

"What you say may well be true," rejoined old Joe. "The same signs have I noticed. But who are we that we should control the winds or the snows?"

Old Joe paused. The Indian did not reply, and for some moments they both smoked on in silence. Blue wreaths rose almost straight from their pipes in the still air. The cracking of the ice on the river alone broke the silence.

Then the Indian removed his pipe and spoke once more in his slow, measured tones.

"The owl was abroad in the night and at daybreak my squaw's mother, the ill-favored one yonder, did see one with a weasel in its claws. What think you is the meaning of that sign, my white brother?"

Old Joe shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"No man can read the owl, my friend," he replied. "Tell me, how do you interpret the sign?"

"That ere long a white man—the weasel that my squaw's ill-favored mother did see—shall be caught by the bearded white man and the two unbearded boys that do travel with him."

This was a typically Indian way of stating a conclusion, and old Joe appeared to feel highly flattered

at the comparison of himself to an owl. He smiled and said:

"It is even so. The owl that is Joe Picquet does pursue the weasel that is a thieving white man, a robber of trappers, a despoiler of cabins in the woods."

"Then ere long you will catch him," the Indian assured him gravely, "for so do the signs read and no man may gainsay them."

The moment in these roundabout negotiations had now arrived when old Joe deemed he could diplomatically ask a direct question.

CHAPTER XIV—SWAPPING STORIES.

"It is as you have said," rejoined old Joe, "the signs are seldom in the wrong. But I have been thinking, my friend, that perhaps on your way you have seen this weasel of a white man whom the owl and the two young hares pursue?"

But, to Joe's disappointment, the Indian shook his head.

"I did meet no white man who is as the weasel and whom the owl and the two young hares pursue," he rejoined; "neither, till I met you, have I met any man, either white or Indian, since I left Blue Hare Lake."

"You do not come from the way of the setting sun, then?" For the trail of the fleeing thief had so far led west.

Another negative sign was the reply as the Indian said:

"We come from the north. But some half day's journey back I crossed a trail which was even as the trail you now follow."

"I am sorry," said old Joe. "The weasel must travel as the wind."

"It may well be even so," rejoined the Indian. "But hasten, my brother, if you would still follow the trail, for the snows are awakening and the wind stirs in its sleep."

They bade the Indian and his two silent women "Good day," and pushed on. Now there was good reason for haste. Indians are rarely or never mistaken in their weather prophecies, and if the snow came before the pursuers had caught up with the thief, they stood a fair chance of losing him altogether, for the snow would infallibly blot out his trail.

That night they came to a small trading post kept by a tall, gangling American, by name Ephraim Dodge. He had a thin, hatchet face and a bobbing goatee, and on either side of his prominent bridged nose twinkled a shrewd, although kind, eye.

Yes, Ephraim had seen the man they were pursuing and "allowed he was pretty badly tuckered out." He had stopped at his post and purchased some canned goods and oatmeal. Then he had pressed straight on. No, he had not offered any skins for sale, and, according to Ephraim, was an "ornery-lookin' cuss, anyhow."

When he heard their story Ephraim was sympathetic, but he could not offer much in the way of consolation except to assure them that they were bound to catch the man, for he appeared to be "right poorly." There was no possibility of their pushing on that night, for old Joe, anxious as he was to continue the pursuit, decided that his dogs must have rest. So they spent the evening with Ephraim, who brought out an old violin and amused them by executing jigs and double shuffles while his old fiddle squeaked out the "Arkansas Traveler" and other lively airs.

After Ephraim had exhausted his repertoire they sat about the big stove and talked. Ephraim was a lively companion, and was frankly glad of company. He "allowed it was plum lonesome with nothing but Injuns and mamelukes fer company." It was not necessary to attempt to join in his incessant flow of talk. He talked like a man who has pent up his thoughts and words for months and lets them go in a flood of conversation.

The talk turned to California, which Ephraim "lowed was a white man's country, fer sure." He wished he was back there. What a climate it was! What wonderful air!

"Why," declared Ephraim, "that air out thar is so wonderful deceiving that two fellers who set out fer the mountains from a plains town, thinking the hills weren't but two miles away, rode two days without gettin' any closer to 'em. Then they come at last to a river. One of 'em was fer crossing it, but the other, he 'lowed they wouldn't. 'It don't look to be more'n a few feet across,' says he, 'but in this climate it's liable ter be Christmas afore we ford it,' an' so they come back ag'in," he concluded.

"'Nother time I've got in mind," he went on, while his auditors gasped, "a friend of mine went fishin'. He was known as the most truthful man in the San Juaquin Valley, so there ain't no reason ter suppose that his word wasn't gospel truth and nothin' else. Anyhow, he was known as a mighty good shot and right handy with his shootin' iron, so nobody ever was hearn to doubt his word.

"Well, sir, as I'm a-saying, William Bing—that was his name, gents, William Bing—went a fishin'. He went up in the mountains, where the air is even clearer than it is on the plains. Bing, he moseyed along, lookin' fer a likely place and totin' his pole, when all at once he happened ter look down over a bluff, and what do you think he seen? Right below him thar was a fine hole in a big creek, and right in that hole, gents, William Bing, he seen hundreds and hundreds of trout and black bass swimming about so thick they was regularly crowdin' one another.

"Bing says he could see their gills pumpin' an' their fins wavin' jes' like they was a-sayin', 'Hello, Bill! We're waitin' fer you. Throw us down a line and a bite ter eat, old sport.' Waal, Bing, he didn't lose no time in lettin' down his line. He figgered it was erbout a hundred feet down to that hole, and he had a hundred and fifty feet on his pole. But he fished and fished all that mornin' without getting a bite, not even a nibble. An' thar below he could see all them fish swimmin' about and every now and then looking up at him sort of appealin' like. Bing says it looked jes' as if they wanted to be caught and was reproaching him fer not doin' the job an' doin' it quick.

"Bing, he reckoned something was wrong, so he changed his bait. But still nary a bite. Then he changed it again. Not a flicker, and there was those fish jumping around like peas on a griddle. It was plum aggervatin', Bing 'lowed, and he couldn't figger it out noways.

"He ate his lunch up thar on the top of the bluff, and then he decided that he'd kinder investigate the mystery of why those fish didn't bite. He kind of pussyfoots around on the top of the bluff fer a while, and then he finds a place whar he reckons he can climb down right by that pool and dig inter the mystery in due and legal form.

"He sticks his pole in the bluff, leaving his bait on the end of the line, thinking that maybe he'll git a bite while he's carryin' on his investigations. Then Bing, he starts to climb down. Waal, sirs, he clumb and clumb, did William Bing, and at last he got to the bottom. And then what do you suppose he found out?

"That clear air had fooled him. Made a plum jackass out'n him. Instdid of bein' a hundred feet high, that bluff was all of three hundred! Then he looked down in that hole whar the trouts and bass were swimming about. Gee whillakers, sirs, that thar hole 'peared to be more'n a hundred feet deep! And thar was all them fish per-ambulatin' and circumambulatin' erbout in it an' looking up at William Bing's bait that was danglin' in the air a good hundred and fifty feet above that thar gosh almighty hole. Yes, sirs," concluded Ephraim, "that Californy air is some air."

"I should say so," laughed Tom. "I don't see how they can field a ball in it without being gone for a week on the journey."

"Waal, that may hev happened, too," rejoined Ephraim gravely, "but I never hearn tell on it. Leastways, not frum any reliable source such as William Bing."

"Boosh!" exclaimed old Joe. "Long time 'go I out West. An' you talk 'bout cleefs! In one part of zee country dere ees beeg cleef. More big dan Beeng's cleef. Bien, I had a friend dere. His name Clemente Dubois. He ver' fine man, Clemente. But, poor fel', he dead long time ago."

"How'd he die?" inquired Ephraim.

"Poor Clemente, he fall off'n dat cleef. Oh, he beeg cleef, more'n t'ousand feet high!"

"Mashed plum ter mush, I reckon?" queried Ephraim, while the boys, who had caught a twinkle in old Joe's eye, listened to see the storekeeper's discomfiture.

"No, Clemente, he not mashed to pieces. Leesten, I tell you how Clemente die. He was miner. Ver' well. One day Clemente take peek, shofel an' he go to aidge of dis cleef. Clemente, he have on one beeg pair rubbaire boots. Oh, ver' beeg rubbaire boots. Bien! Clemente, he work an' teenk he strike fine colors. Zee colors of gold. He get ver' excited. He deeg an' deeg, an' bimeby he deeg so hard zee aidge of zee cleef geev way.

"Bang! Clemente, over he go right into zee air. He land on zee ground below, but den hees rubbaire boots begin to work. Clemente, he bounce back. Jus' lak zee rubbaire ball. He bounce up and down, up and down and no one can stop Clemente. He bounce all zee day, and once in a while some of zee boys from zee camp zey t'row heem biscuits to keep Clemente from starving. But Clemente, he no can catch zem. Two days he bounce up and down and no stop.

"Den zee head man of zee camp, he say: 'Boys, Clemente, he starve if we no do someteeng. We have to put heem out of zee misery of die lak dat way. Somebody have to shoot Clemente.' Everybody say, 'No, no,' but zee boss, he make dem draw lot. Man name Beeg Terry, he be zee one as draw lot to shoot Clemente. Everybody feel ver' bad, but no can be help. Beeg Terry, he shoot Clemente zee next mornin'. Poor fellow, it was hard on heem, but it was better dan starving to deat' in meed-air. After dat, nobody go near zee cleef wiz rubbaire boots on zeer feet."

This truly remarkable and pathetic narrative brought the evening to a close, as a glance at Ephraim's alarm clock showed that it was almost eleven o'clock. With old Joe still chuckling triumphantly over the manner in which he had "capped" Ephraim's brief and truthful story, they turned in, sleeping in regular beds for the first time since they had taken to the trail.

CHAPTER XV—TOM ON "THE DOGS OF THE NORTH."

The next morning old Joe was occupied for some time repairing sundry worn places in harness and sleds. The boys seized the opportunity to write some letters home.

Both lads penned newsy epistles teeming with facts gleaned by them about the region in which they were traveling. As a sidelight on their experiences, we may take a peep over their shoulders while their pens are flying and learn something of their impressions.

From Tom's letter to a school chum we can detach some interesting remarks on the "steeds" of the northern wilds, the faithful mamelukes upon whom the hunter and trapper's success and even life may depend.

"There are said to be two seasons in this land," wrote Tom, "winter and June-July-and-August. We are now in the midst of the latter, as you, of course, know.

"During the summer the mamelukes—the Alaskan dogs I told you something about in a former letter—run wild. They mostly forage for themselves and become very bold and ferocious.

"But as soon as the winter sets in the canine free-lances are rounded up and led off into captivity by straps, strings and wires. Sometimes one owner gets into a dispute with another concerning his four-footed property, and then there are lively times indeed.

"After their long holiday the dogs, especially the puppies, are very wild. In some cases they have to be broken into their work all over again.

"This is no picnic for the dogs, for some of the drivers are very brutal. But they don't dare abuse the dogs too much for fear of injuring their own property.

"The dogs used by the government for transporting the mails—a team of which will haul this very letter—are splendid looking brutes. They are called Labrador 'huskies' and are very large and heavy-coated.

"Some of them are, without exaggeration, as big as young calves. They carry the mail over vast, snowy wildernesses, and even sometimes to Dawson, when the air is not too nippy. That is to say, when the thermometer is not more than thirty degrees below.

"The dog drivers have almost a language of their own, like the 'mule skimmers' of our western plains. When a group of them gets together you can hear some tall stories of the feats each man's team has performed. And, wild as some of these yarns may seem to an 'outsider,' they are not so incredible as they appear.

"The big, well-furred, long-legged Labrador Huskies are the most powerful, as well as the fiercest, of the sledge dogs. A load of one hundred and fifty pounds to each dog is the usual burden—and no light one, when you consider the trails over which they travel.

"As a rule, seven to eight or nine dogs are hitched to a sledge. The harness is of the type called the 'Labrador.' It consists of a single trace. Other traces are attached to it, so that the dogs are spread out fan-shaped from the sledge. This is done to keep them from interfering with each other, for they will fight 'at the drop of a hat.' And when they do fight—well, fur flies!

"And here is where the driver's job comes in. His main care is to keep his animals—some of them worth more than one hundred dollars each, from maiming each other. Nor do his troubles end here, for he has to see to it that the dogs don't turn on him. You must recall that some of the 'huskies' are as savage as wolves, and an iron hand is required to keep them disciplined.

"Nearly every driver carries a stout club and a ferocious looking whip of seal-hide. He uses both impartially and unmercifully. If the dogs thought for a moment that you were afraid of them they would turn on you like a flash and probably kill you. That is the reason for the driver's seeming brutality. He literally dare not be kind, except in some instances where, as with our present companion, Joe Picquet, he has an exceptionally gentle team.

"Then, too, the dogs are forever attacking each other. Every once in a while there will be a desperate battle, which can only be stopped by a free use of the whip. But in their wolflike fury the dogs sometimes cannot be quieted even by these means.

"Another curious bit of dog lore is this: In each team—just as in a big school of boys—there is always one unfortunate that appears to be the butt of the others. They take every opportunity to steal his food and make life miserable for him. Sometimes the whole pack will make an onslaught on the poor beast and, if not stopped in time, will tear his flesh and rip him open, although they rarely eat him.

"Then, too, some of the dogs are mischievous in the extreme. They will show an almost human intelligence in making life miserable for their driver. It is their delight, sometimes, to spill the sledge and the driver, and gallop madly off, overturning the pack and losing the mail. I hope that will not happen to this letter, for I am writing it under some difficulties and want you to get it.

"When this happens it's tough luck for the driver. It means that he has to wade miles through the snow, tracking the runaways. He usually finds them at the next post-house, unless the sledge has become entangled in brush or trees. When this latter occurs the dogs scoop out snug-holes for themselves in the snow and go to sleep!

"The class of dog most used by the ordinary traveler is different from the giant huskies. These are the mamelukes or the native Indian dog. They are supposed to have wolf blood in them, and they certainly act up to the supposition!

"The mamelukes are usually harnessed all in a line, one before the other. They are shorter-haired, more active, faster and ten times meaner than the husky—and that's going some, let me tell you.

"Their chief delight is to get into a regular Donnybrook fight. When this happens there is only one way to stop them, and that is to club them till they are knocked insensible. Sounds brutal, doesn't it? but it is the only way to quell one of these disturbances.

"If they get a chance to they'll bite through their harness with one nip of their long teeth. Then, having gained their liberty, off they will gallop and sometimes not be caught again for days.

"The mameluke is an habitual thief, too. His idea of a nice little midnight repast is to pull the boots off your feet while you are asleep and indulge in a hasty lunch. His seal-hide harness, also, appeals to his epicurean tastes; in fact, he will eat anything, including his best friend, if he gets a chance!

"Besides the mameluke, the husky is an aristocrat and a highly-bred gentleman, although his manners are nothing to brag about. Another accomplishment of the mameluke is opening provision boxes and getting out the tin cans they contain.

"He carries his own can-opener in the form of his powerful teeth. His taste is not particular. Canned tomatoes, fruit, vegetables, sardines—in fact, anything a man can put into a can, a mameluke can get out of it! Any leather covered goods are also appetizing to the mameluke. Trunk covers, saddles, and so on. He'll eat any of them without sauce, and not leave any bones either!

"It seems strange that these dogs—which are the mainstay of the traveler in the northern wilds—live through their whole lives without ever getting a kind word. They have performed wonderful feats of endurance and, with all their wolfish greed and viciousness, they have time and time again saved human lives by their wonderful stamina.

"'A mameluke knows only one law, and that is contained in the end of a club or whip,' an old driver told me once; and yet some, like Joe Picquet, have succeeded in getting them to do much of their work through kindness. But such cases are so very rare as to prove the rule.

"There is another remarkable difference between the husky's character and that of his disreputable relative. Food that he has stolen tastes sweeter to the mameluke than any other delicacy. The fact that he has pilfered it from the camp or the sled appears to give it an added zest.

"The husky, however, will go off fishing or hunting for himself if given a chance. In this he shows his wild origin. Just like a wolf or a bear, he will take his place in a stream and seize any fish that may be cast up on the shallows.

"The average speed of a dog team in good condition is ten miles an hour, and, as you know, in the States we call that good 'reading' even for a blooded horse. The dogs travel various distances daily, depending on the state of the trail they are following. I have heard of dogs that made seventy miles a day. Such animals are very valuable and carefully watched, for there are plenty of dog-thieves in this country.

"When the thermometer drops too low for horse travel, what horses there are in the country are stabled. From then till spring the dog is the Alaskan locomotive. With the coming of the snows the dogs become the constant traveling companions of the men of this northland, and do practically all the transportation work.

"The dogs can travel in weather so terrifically cold that men would not dare to stir abroad. The lowest temperature recorded so far at Dawson was eighty-three below zero. No need for an ice-box, then, up here in the winter.

"But these great falls of temperature only occur occasionally, for which we are duly thankful. When it gets so very cold the air becomes filled with a thick fog. It is hard to see even a hundred yards. Nobody stirs outside, and it is like a dead world.

"One curious thing about the extreme cold is the tendency it has to make you want to hibernate just like a wood-chuck. We sleep sixteen and fifteen hours when we are not on the trail, and could do with more. Wouldn't it be tough if some time we all overslept and didn't wake up till spring! How Jack would eat! He can put away a man's sized portion of grub now, anyhow.

"Travel up here is not usually done by a man alone. There is great danger of his eyelids becoming frozen together, and perhaps ice will form about his nostrils or mouth, half choking him and keeping him busy removing the accumulation. There is also the Arctic drowsiness to contend against, that overpowering desire to sleep that it is almost impossible to fight off. If this overtook a solitary traveler it would mean his almost certain death in some drift.

"The freezing of the waters of the rivers comes on very suddenly. Sometimes in a night. The only warning that you get is the glow of the sun-dogs—like little suns—scattered all round the central luminary.

"You have to watch out, then, if you are in a canoe or a rowboat. The water may be free from ice, but as you paddle or handle the oars, you may notice bubbles and particles of ice bobbing to the surface.

"That's a danger signal!

"It means that the bottom of the river has begun to freeze. If you don't make a quick landing you are soon hemmed in by ice too thick to row or paddle through, but too thin to walk on. You may be frozen before you can escape.

"Well, I've told you enough to let you see that life up here is not a bed of roses, but, as my uncle says, 'it makes men'. At any rate, no mollicoddle could get along very well in a northern winter. But we are enjoying all of it—the rough and the smooth. We have each gained in weight—and eat!—Fatty Dawkins at school was a mere invalid compared to us!"

So closed Tom's letter and, by the time it was finished, old Joe was ready to resume the trail. The storekeeper took charge of the boys' mail, to be delivered to the dog-teams when the post came by.

CHAPTER XVI—COMING STORM.

It was after the noonday halt of the next day that the Indian's prophecy of the coming snow was verified. All that morning they had pushed feverishly along under sullen skies. Signs were not few that the chase was drawing to a close. Old Joe's examination of the man's last camp-fire convinced

him that it was not more than a very short time since the man had "moved on."

Ominous slate-colored clouds began to roll up. There was a strange stillness in the air, like but very different from the hush that precedes a thunderstorm. They had about finished their noon snack when the boys noticed the dogs beginning to sniff about uneasily, elevating their noses and pacing up and down, giving from time to time short yapping barks.

"Aha!" cried old Joe as he saw this, "zee snow, he come. Beeg snow, I teenk. Malukes know. Boosh! It weel wipe out zee trail—bah!"

He knocked the ashes from his pipe disgustedly. The boys, in fact, felt equal disappointment. It appeared that the forces of nature had leagued themselves with their enemy. They pictured to themselves how the unknown fugitive must be chuckling as he saw the signs of the approaching storm which must obliterate his tracks.

"Are we going on?" asked Tom, as old Joe rose to his feet and looked about him.

"Boosh! Non, mon garçon! It ees not well to travel in the snow. We must camp. Dat is all dere is for us to do. Maybe he not be bad. But look plenty bad now."

"You mean to make camp, then?"

"Yes. Back by dose trees. Eet is good place. Zee wind is from zee nort'. Zee trees hold zee dreeft, bon. Eet might have come in much worse place."

"Is the storm likely to last long?"

Joe Picquet gave one of his expressive shrugs.

"Maybe. Perhaps one day, maybe two, t'ree days. I do not know."

Feeling rather low in spirits, the boys set about making a camp under Joe's directions. It was the same kind as the one in which they had passed the night on a previous occasion. Great quantities of wood were chopped, and from the way Joe kept eying the sky, the boys could see that he was afraid the storm would be on them before they could get everything in readiness.

The old man himself worked like a beaver. It would have seemed impossible that a man of his age and apparently feeble frame could perform so much work. But Old Joe Picquet was capable of doing a day's work with men of half his age, and the way he hustled about that camp showed it.

The dogs were fed, but instead of fighting as usual, they devoured their food in silence and then began looking about for places to burrow.

"Ah-ha! Mameluke, he know. He ver' wise, all same one tree full of zee owl," declared old Joe, noting this.

At last all was finished and they were ready to face whatever the weather was preparing to launch upon their heads. About three o'clock the sky was full of tiny flakes which came through the still, silent air with a steady, monotonous persistency that presaged a heavy downfall. By night, which closed in early, the air was white with whirling flakes. It was impossible to see more than a few feet.

"You see. She get worse before she get better," declared Joe oracularly as, after an early supper of jerked meat and hot tea, they sought their blankets.

When morning came the worst of the storm was over. But what a scene! Every landmark was obscured. Nothing met their eyes but a broad sheet of unbroken snow. Every track was obliterated. Only some bumps in the snow, like the hummocks over graves, showed where the mameluke dogs slept, securely tucked in by a snowy blanket.

Joe shook his head despondently.

"Boosh! No good, dees!" he grumbled. "That rascal, he moost be most glad to see. 'Ha! Ha!' he teenk to himself, 'now I get away.'"

"I guess he's dead right in that, too," muttered Tom despondently.

"Courage! Mon garçon, we not geev up yet. We come long way get dees fellow, we get him. Get breakfast, den we open trail. Joe Picquet know dees country lak he know zee bumps in hees mattress."

Soon afterward they took to their snowshoes, pressing forward over an unbroken expanse of white. Both boys now wore old Joe's bark "snow glasses." As for the old trapper himself, he had merely blackened his eyes underneath with a burned stick to relieve the glare. It gave him an odd and startling appearance, but it averted the danger of temporary sightlessness.

"Dat beeg rascal, he have to keep to dees valley," said Joe as they pushed along. "No can get out till reach White Otter Lake. Maybe dere we strike hees trail once more."

Encouraged by this hope, they made good progress till noon, when old Joe declared that they were within striking distance of White Otter Lake.

"But there he can take more than one road," declared Tom, recalling what Joe had said.

"Dat ees so. Two valley branch off dere, one to zee north, zee ozeer to zee south."

"Then it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack," said Jack disgustedly.

Old Joe looked up quickly.

"Maybe we find heem, maybe not," he said; "all we can do is try. No good get sore, mon garçon. Boosh!"

Jack looked rather abashed, but said nothing, and they went on again in silence. Late in the afternoon, when near White Otter, they came upon two Indians fishing through the ice. They had a decoy, one of the oddest of its kind the boys had ever seen. It was a fish skin blown out like a bladder and anchored at the edge of the ice. They seemed to have had good luck, for a big pile of fish lay beside them.

Old Joe bought a good supply of these for the dogs, whose food was beginning to run low. Then, after the usual palaver, the Indians were asked about other passers along the trail. But they had not been there long, they said. Their camp lay to the south. Since they had been fishing they had seen no one.

The trapper paid for the fish, gave some of it at once to the dogs, and then they went on again. It was a monotonous journey, trying to the body and the spirits. A silence, tragic, gloomy and sinister hung over everything. Although the snow had ceased and the sky was clear, the going was heavy and tiring, and the uncertainty of picking up the thief's trail again added to their depression.

But the silence did not always hang heavy, brooding and unshattered.

From time to time a cry like the scream of a banshee would split the air, startling the boys, used as they were to it. The cry was that of the hunters of the north, the gaunt, gray rangers of the wilds—the wolves.

CHAPTER XVII—THE LOUPS GALOUPS.

At such times old Joe would shrug his shoulders and say:

"Zee wolves, hey? Les Loups Galoups? Ever you heard of zee Loups Galoups, mes enfants?"

"The galloping wolves?" said Tom, more for the sake of breaking the silence than for any great curiosity he felt. "No, what are they?"

Old Joe looked mysterious.

"We do not lak to talk of zem," he said. "Dey are not of zee earth, comprenez vous? Dey are from above."

He pointed upward at the heavens.

"Above?" repeated Tom, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Dat at night, when you hear dem rush tru zee air, howling and crying, you know dat you hear noteeng dat is of dees eart'. Dey are what you call zee ghosts, are zee Loups Galoups. Always before a pairson ees to die you hear dem rush tru zee air ovair zee house."

"What a queer notion!" laughed Tom, although Jack's face was long and serious. "Have you ever heard them?"

Joe Picquet's face looked serious. Then he spoke slowly.

"Once, long time ago in Quebec Province, I hear zee Loups Galoups," he said slowly. "My wife was ver' seeck. She sit up in zee bed one night and call to me:

"'Joe! Oh, Joe! allez vous ici!'

"I run queeck, and she hold oop her fingaire—so—and say to me:

"'Leesten, Joe!'

"I leesten, an' pretty soon I hear noise passing ovair zee house. Eet sound lak zee galloping of someteengs tru zee air. Den I hear zee howl of zee pack. Den I know dat I have hear zee Loups Galoups. Zee next day my wife die, and I—I come away. I have nevaire been back. Dat long time ago, when Joe Picquet, who is old, was yoong man, strong and full of life. But old Joe nevaire forget zee Loups Galoups. Always when you hear dem, dey mean death."

Had the boys listened to such a fantastic bit of superstition in any other surroundings, they would have laughed at it as ridiculous. But hearing it as they did in that forlorn, man-forsaken waste, and told so solemnly by the old trapper, it took a singular hold on their imaginations. The Loups Galoups legend, which comes from old France, is one of the most widely spread superstitions of the French Canadians. To hear the Flying Wolves is to be certain that death or serious misfortune is at hand.

Not long after Joe had concluded his story a large white Arctic hare limped across their trail a few rods ahead. As it paused and gazed back for an instant, Tom's rifle jerked up to his shoulder, and the next instant the hare lay kicking in the snow.

"Bon! Good shot, mon garçon!" cried old Joe. "To-night we have fine stew for suppaire. Dat bettaire dan all zee time eat jerk meat."

Darkness overtook them that night near to Otter Lake. They made camp in an abandoned shanty of some gold-seeker or hunter on the banks of the frozen river. It had once been quite a pretentious cabin, but had fallen into disrepair. Among other of its unusual features was an open fireplace set in a big chimney.

They did not light a fire in this, however, preferring to camp outside, for the cabin was musty and damp and the floor had given way in many places. Joe declared that it was certain to be infested with rats, and they could see how the creatures had gnawed the timbers. Instead, they established comfortable quarters outside the abandoned hut, and sat late around the fire, talking over their strange quest and the ill fortune of the snowstorm which had overtaken them.

It was just about as they were getting ready to turn in that Jack, who was sitting nearest the hut, started and turned pale. He held up one hand to command attention, and then he cried out:

"Gracious! Hark at that! What is it?"

What was it, indeed? Not the cry of the wolf pack, although that had come closer. Nor did it resemble anything else earthly. It was a booming sound like that produced by a giant bass fiddle and appeared to come from the air.

Old Joe crossed himself as he heard it.

"Sacre!" the boys heard him exclaim.

Again came the booming sound. It appeared to fill the air, to come from all directions. Mingled with it there burst suddenly on their ears a series of appalling shrieks, which also seemed to come from above.

Startled beyond power of controlling themselves, the boys jumped to their feet.

"It's there! Up in the air!" cried Tom excitedly.

"But what can it——" began Jack, but he broke off suddenly. Into his mind, as well as into his brother's, and, to judge by his expression, old Joe's, there had burst simultaneously a sudden explanation.

The Flying Wolves!

At almost the same instant old Joe fell on his knees in the snow.

"Les Loups! Les Loups Galoups!" he burst out.

Jack's teeth fairly chattered. But Tom grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and shook him vigorously.

"Don't be a chump!" he remonstrated. "Remember the last scare you had, and how simply it was explained."

Jack turned red and rallied his fears.

"Do you think it is the thief trying to scare us again?" he asked in rather quavery tones.

"I don't know. But, by hookey! I'll find out and——"

Over their heads came a rush like the sweeping of a hundred wings. A big white form flew downward, almost striking the old guide in the face. With a howl he rolled over, scattering the ashes of the fire right and left.

Jack also uttered a shout.

"Ow-ow! Did you see that?" he gasped.

"I did," said Tom sternly, "and unless you also want to see stars you had better dry up, Jack Dacre. There's some excuse for old Joe, but none for you."

"Ber-ber-but these woods seem full of ghosts!" complained poor Jack.

"And cowards," supplemented Tom dryly.

Old Joe got to his feet. A strong smell of scorching pervaded the camp. Some coals, too, had lodged in his white whiskers, singeing those venerable appendages. In spite of the scare he had got, Jack couldn't help laughing at the old man's woebegone appearance.

"Oh, mes enfants!" wailed the old trapper, "les Loups Galoups have passed ovaire us!"

"Rot!" snapped Tom. "Your Loop of Glue was only an old white owl. As for the other noises, I have a theory which I will prove in the morning. Now let's turn in."

CHAPTER XVIII—TOM PLAYS DETECTIVE.

While the others were getting things in readiness for resuming the march the next day Tom began an investigation. He had at first thought that the mysterious noises of the night had been caused by their old enemy, but some reflection made him believe that he was mistaken.

In the first place the thief, having had the good fortune to have his trail wiped out by the snow, was not likely to be foolish enough to come back and leave a fresh one. In the second, he was probably aware that his first attempt had failed to scare the boys off his track. At any rate, his continued haste along the trail appeared to conduce to such a belief.

Tom had noticed that the white object which swooped down on old Joe, scaring him almost into a fit, was a big white owl, in all probability bewildered and blinded by the fire glow. He had observed, also, that the mysterious noises appeared to come from the old hut, and the strange "booming" sounds, as nearly as he could make out, had also emanated from the same quarter.

The hut, then, appeared to be the logical place in which to look for the origin of the series of happenings that had so alarmed the venerable and superstitious Joe Picquet.

The first thing that Tom noticed when he entered the hut was something white lying on the hearthstone of the chimney. On closer inspection this proved to be the body of an Arctic hare. It was badly mangled and torn, as if something had been eating it. Tom stooped and peered up the chimney.

"Who-oo-oo-oo!" he shouted, at the same time beating the sides of the smoke shaft with a stick that he had selected from a pile of firewood laid in by the former occupant of the ruined hut.

His voice rang up the chimney like the noise of a train in a tunnel. At the same instant there came a thunderous booming sound and the rush and roar of wings. Tom had just time to dodge back before there came flopping and scratching and squeaking down the chimney the body of a huge white owl.

Tom fell upon it, but before he could secure the bird it had dug into his arm with beak and talons, and then, with a weird shriek, blundered across the hut and out through an unglazed window into the open air.

"Gone!" exclaimed Tom as he saw this. "And," regretfully, "it would have made a bully trophy stuffed, too. However, the mystery of the Flying Wolves is explained. That booming sound was made by the flapping of the owl's wings in the wide chimney as it flew down there with that white hare it had caught. I've heard that chimney swallows make the same booming in chimneys at home as they enter and leave their nests.

"As for the screams and shrieks, the cries of that poor hare explains that easily enough. Naturally, they sounded louder and as if they were up in the air, proceeding as they did from the top of the chimney. The rest of the mystery must be laid to old Joe's imagination, which appears to be in first-class working order."

Tom couldn't help giving mischievous glances at Joe as, over their breakfast, he told the others the result of his investigations. But the old man's face was scornful as Tom proceeded. When the boy had concluded, Joe, who had patiently heard him out, had his say. It was brief and to the point.

"You only theenk. Joe Picquet *know*. Many men know 'bout Loups Galoups—c'est sufficient."

Tom saw that the old man was not in the least convinced that the noises were not of supernatural origin. So hard is it to shake superstitious beliefs, especially in the case of a man like old Joe, who had been born and brought up in the wilds, and who rarely came into contact with cities or life as it was beyond the wilderness.

They came to Otter Lake a few hours after their early start. On the banks of the lake they found a party consisting of two families of Indians. They were having a sort of carouse. The bucks had had the good fortune to kill three deer the day before. As is the custom with the Indians, the occasion was being observed by a celebration.

The Indians would not move on again till all the meat had been eaten or wasted. They greeted the newcomers with unusual cordiality, and the squaws threw big lumps of raw meat to the dogs, which the mamelukes gulped down in great swallows and then yapped and barked for more.

They insisted on the party halting to eat with them and partake of the unaccustomed plenty of the camp. This Joe was the more willing to do as he guessed that from the Indians he might get some news of the fugitive. But in their present mood the Indians were giving all their time to jollity of a decidedly rough character, and Joe knew better than to offend them by talking business until the time was ripe.

While they waited to eat, the squaws bustled about collecting wood. The boys hated to see women thus employed, but they knew that they dare not offer to do it; so they sat silent while old Joe and the Indians smoked and talked. The Indians were telling of the great hunt of the three deer, enlarging, as is their custom, every little detail till the story stretched out to endless lengths.

Then they discussed dogs, a topic of endless interest in the North, where dogs are infinitely more valuable than horses, and where oftentimes a life, or many lives, may depend on their gameness and reliability. This topic exhausted, they turned to the weather.

In a land where so much depends upon its moods, the weather is a subject of vital interest. The Indians told of the big snows they had seen, and old Joe Picquet related his similar experiences, and so the chat ran along till the squaws announced that everything was ready for them to eat.

They sat about the fire in the drafty tepee, eating off bits of birch bark. That is, the white men did. The Indians used their fingers. At last the meal was finished, pipes lighted, and old Joe felt at liberty to ask the questions he was dying to put.

At first the Indians shook their heads. They had seen no white man. But then one of the squaws interjected a remark. Wild Bird, another of the squaws, had seen that very morning, while gathering wood to the north, the trail of a sled. She had examined it and had found by it an odd object. She had brought that object into camp. Would she produce it? She would.

From a corner of the tepee the squaw shyly produced her find. The boys could have uttered a cry of joy as they saw what it was.

The fag end of a yellow cigarette! Assuredly, then, the trail Wild Bird had seen was that of the fugitive. It began about two miles to the north by a tall "Rampick" (dead tree), near which he had camped, judging by the remains of a fire, and from which he had hacked off some dead limbs. And then Wild Bird herself gave another bit of evidence to clinch the identification. She had remarked the man's funny snowshoes. Never had she seen any like them.

"Boosh! Mes garçons! We have found zee trail once more! Bien!"

Old Joe's face beamed. But although they were anxious to hurry on, they could not leave the friendly Indians hastily without a severe breach of etiquette. But at length the social code of the tribe was satisfied, and, with well-fed dogs in the traces, they got under way once more. Wild Bird and another Indian went with them part of the way, so as to be sure that they would not miss the spot at which they were to pick up the trail.

At last they reached the gaunt "Rampick," good-byes were said, and they had the satisfaction once more of following the two familiar parallel lines in the snow and beside them the tracks of the odd-shaped snowshoes. The sky was gloomy and gray, but the Indians had said there would be no more snow.

They journeyed on through a melancholy land all that afternoon. That fall there had been a forest fire, and the blackened stumps of the trees that had not fallen stood out, etched in ebony black, against the dreary gray sky.

It was a pensive and melancholy land. But through it all, to brighten the trail like a streak of vivid scarlet, was the track of the sled, the sled on which reposed the stolen black fox skin. And beside it, as if to assure them they were on the right track, lay at intervals little yellow-wrapped rolls of tobacco.

"Zee time ees not long now," declared old Joe, when they camped that night on the edge of a gloomy little lake tucked away between two rocky ridges.

CHAPTER XIX—OLD JOE'S THREAT.

The following morning, when they rose, the sky was cloudless. The night before the stars had shone like diamond pin points in the sky. The Northern Lights had whirled in a mad dance of shimmering radiance.

Beyond the camp stretched the white smoothness of the frozen river leading from the sad little lake. The heaped masses of piled mountains showed to the north and west, savage boundaries, bristling with defiance toward the intruders into a frozen world.

The morning was very cold and very still. It was that brooding stillness that hangs over the land of the frost-bitten suns and seems to convey a sense of something alert with enmity to mankind, hovering like a sinister cloud over the frozen snow fields. But of all this, although keen enough to such impressions at other times, the boys noticed little as they bustled about preparing for the day's work.

It was reasonably certain now that before very long they must catch up with the thief. The dogs were fed with deer meat purchased in exchange for tobacco from the friendly Indians of the day before. The boiling hot tea and the fried cakes and deer meat put new heart into the adventurers. As for the dogs, they frisked and capered in the snow with unaccustomed playfulness after their full meal, till old Joe summoned them to the harness. Then they resumed the hang-dog air of the *mameluke*, which is an odd sort of blend, suggesting obstinacy and defiance and cringing servility.

Tom noticed that old Joe carefully oiled the lock of his old squirrel rifle before they started. On the benevolent face of the old man there was a new expression. It partook almost of ferocity, and Tom began to fear that in the event of their coming up with the thief they might have some difficulty in restraining the old man from violence.

As he oiled his rifle and caressed the aged weapon lovingly the boys noticed that the old trapper was humming to himself.

"You seem happy," said Tom, as the old man knocked the ashes out of his pipe and tightened the thongs of his snowshoes, straightening up again with a grunt.

"Eh bien! I am happy. To-day I teenk the owl catch the weasel, mon enfant. Boosh! Let us be going."

The whip cracked, the dogs yapped, the harness creaked as it tightened under the stout pull of the meat-stuffed *mamelukes*, and the little cavalcade dashed forward. Once more they were remorselessly upon the trail of the thief; but to-day there was a difference in their bearing. By some intuition which he would have been at a loss to explain, Tom felt that the morning's start was the beginning of the end. Before night, if fortune favored them, they would come face to face with the man to whose track they had clung for so long.

Old Joe capered about like a boy. He sang snatches of wild French-Canadian boat songs, he snapped his fingers, and once he cut from the trail-side a thick branch, which he trimmed down like a walking-stick and then swung like a cudgel. The boys guessed that in imagination he was bestowing a sound beating upon the thief.

But Tom had resolved that there must be no work of that sort when they came up with the man, if they ever did. It was plain to see that old Joe was prepared to carry out to the letter the law of "an eye for an eye," the only law that woodsmen North of Fifty-three know or care much about. He did not blame old Joe for his desire to bestow at least a good beating on the thief, considering the old trapper's surroundings for many years; but he did determine firmly that there was to be nothing of the sort that old Joe too evidently contemplated.

At noon that day they overhauled the ashes of the thief's cooking fire. They were still warm. Old Joe's saint-like face grew grimmer than ever. His white whiskers fairly bristled.

"We are not far behind heem now, mes amis," he chuckled. "Boosh! Before long we shall see what we will see."

Tom was wise enough to make no comments then. Time enough for that when they came up with the man. For the present he allowed old Joe to indulge himself in all sorts of sanguinary threats. Their midday meal was despatched with what haste may be imagined. Then the dogs were urged forward at a still brisker pace than they had followed during the morning. The snowshoes flew creakingly over the hard snow.

The boys found their minds busy with conjectures as they forged forward. What manner of man was this they were overhauling? Was he some ruffian of the wilds who would put up a stiff fight that might necessitate the use of firearms in self-defense, or would he yield to the superior force opposed to him and give up peacefully his ill-gained spoils?

As the day waned and the west began to crimson, Tom decided to speak his mind out to old Joe.

"See here, Joe, what do you mean to do when we catch up with this fellow?"

"Eh? Dat man? Why, make him geev up the skeens, of course."

"But if he won't? If he opposes us?"

"In dat case——"

Joe said no more but patted the stock of his old squirrel rifle with a gesture that spoke volumes.

"No, we can't have any of that sort of thing," said Tom decisively. "If he won't give up the skins without making trouble, we shall have to make him prisoner somehow and one of us stand guard over him while the others get some of the authorities."

Old Joe shrugged his shoulders and looked at Tom with inexpressible astonishment. He couldn't make out this at all. In his rough creed offenders against the code of the woods must be summarily dealt with. Rifle or rope, it was all one to him, but the idea of calling in outside forces to aid him had never entered the rough old woodsman's head.

"Zee police?" he inquired. "You want call zee police, or zee sheriff? Pourquoi? You leave heem to me. Old Joe Picquet feex heem—bien."

He raised his old rifle to his shoulder and squinted down the sights as if to make sure that everything was in perfect order.

CHAPTER XX—THE END OF THE TRAIL.

It was about four o'clock when, from a thick clump of young balsam trees about a hundred yards ahead of our party, there came the sharp barking of dogs. The boys thrilled. At last the big moment had arrived; the end of their pursuit was at hand. There could be no doubt that the camp they had come upon was the camp of the thief.

If any doubt remained it was speedily removed by the sight of the roof of a small tent standing amid the dark green trees. It was a white man's tent of the wall type, a variety that an Indian would scorn to use. From the top of it stuck a small stove-pipe, an unwonted sight in wilderness travel. A stream of smoke coming from the pipe showed that the tent was occupied.

From the camp the four dogs who had heralded the arrival of the boys and their old guide came prancing and snuffing, their tails curled and teeth shown in a snarl. But from the tent itself, beyond the smoke that curled up from the stovepipe, there came no sign of life.

They halted and held a council of war.

"Let's go right up to the tent and demand the man to surrender to us," suggested Jack.

But old Joe negatived this with a shake of the head.

"He is ver' bad man," said he, "maybe so he hide in the trees and shoot. Moost be ver' careful."

"He may be peering out at us now," breathed Tom, glancing about him uneasily.

"Oui; maybe so he have us covered weez hees rifle at dees moment," agreed old Joe, without the flicker of an eyelash. With amazing coolness he squatted down and filled his pipe.

"Moost hav' smoke to teenk," he explained.

For some seconds, while the boys were in an agony of suspense and the strange dogs stood with bristling hackles and snarling teeth at a respectful distance from old Joe's team, the veteran of the northern wilds drew placidly at his old brier. To look at him no one would have imagined that the venerable-looking old man was revolving in his mind the capture of a desperate rascal, who even at that moment might have him covered from some point of vantage.

The suspense was a cruel test of the boys' nerves. Remember that they were out in the open, affording an easy mark for anyone lurking within the shadows of the dark balsams that screened the tent with its smoking stove-pipe. For all they knew, in fact, the man might not be alone. He might be one of a gang regularly organized to raid traps and skin stores. Such organizations were not rare in that part of the country, as the boys well knew.

At length old Joe rose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and faced the boys. They knew that he had at last decided upon a plan. It was a simple one. The wonder was that he had taken so long to arrive at a conclusion.

"I am going to call out to dees man," said Joe. "I tell heem if he ees fool he will fight us; if he ees wise man he weel do what we say."

Before they could stop him the old man had stepped forward, using the trunk of a balsam tree as a shield between himself and the door of the tent. A minute later someone stirred within the tent; then came a voice:

"Who's there?"

Joe gave a little laugh.

"Someone to see you," he said. "I ask you, please shove outside any weapon you have weez you. It ees no good for you to fight. We have caught you at last."

There was a silence inside the tent. Then the boys saw the flap raised and a rifle thrust out. Old Joe's face beamed. This was going to be easier than he had imagined. He beckoned to the boys, and, as they joined him, he flung open the flap and stepped inside the tent.

Stretched out on the ground right across the doorway was a small, wizened looking man covered with a shabby blanket made of mangy-looking skins. His head and shoulders were propped up on a couple of filled packs.

Even in the dim light within the tent it could be seen that his cheeks were drawn and gray and that pain had etched lines of suffering on them. The boys stood amazed just at old Joe's elbow.

Was it possible that this little gray man with the look of pain on his face was the robber whom they had pictured during the long days and nights of the pursuit as a savage, truculent fellow ready to give them a fight rather than yield up the stolen skins? They actually felt pity as they looked at the little wasted form on the ground.

As for Joe, he appeared to be equally dumfounded, but he soon recovered his faculties.

"And so, mon ami, we have found you at zee last, eh?"

"Real pleased you come, too! Real pleased," was the answer the little gray man gave in a high, piping treble.

The boys took in the details of the tent. The small sheet-iron stove with its pipe going through the roof, the queer-looking snowshoes, and the pile of duffle left in a corner just as it had been thrown from the sled. Old Joe looked more taken aback than ever. He had come prepared to fight some rascal who would put up a desperate resistance. Instead, he found a little wasted man who had nothing to say but that he was glad to see them.

There was a pause while Joe reconstructed things. It was broken in upon by another piping up of the thin voice of the man on the ground.

"See that sack over thar, stranger?" said the little man, indicating a partially filled pack-bag in one corner of the tent.

"Oui! I see heem," rejoined Joe in a dazed voice.

"Wa'al, thar's fish in thar. I'd take it real kind in yer ef yer'd jes' feed my dorgs, mister. They ain't hed much ter sot their teeth in lately, me being hurried like along the trail."

The boys exchanged glances. They had met with many strange experiences, but this appeared to be the cap-sheaf of them all. Old Joe simply shrugged his shoulders; he was bereft of speech. In the face of this astonishing end to their long, grim chase, he was, for the time being, incapable of finding words.

He crossed over to the sack and began pulling out fish, but in the midst of the operation he found his voice again.

"Say, you, what's zee matter weez you, anyhow?"

"I'm sick," responded the man under the shabby blanket, "right sick."

"I see you seeek, all right," said Joe, "but what ails you? Boosh!" he concluded, puffing out his sun-burned cheeks.

"I don't rightly know," rejoined the other; "it's a sorter pain all over."

He moved uneasily under the shabby blanket and the boys saw his hands, which lay outside the covering, clench and unclench, as if he were suffering a sudden spasm of pain.

Outside the tent there came a sound of plaintive yapping and howling. The little man's mamelukes had smelled the fish.

"Reckon they're hungry, poor beasts," said the little man.

Joe did not reply, but moved to the door of the tent. He threw out the fish. The dogs sprang upon it ravenously, tearing it as if they had fasted for days. Joe watched them for a minute with an odd look on his bearded face. Then he turned to the man again.

"What your name, anyhow?"

"Dolittle—Peabody Dolittle," said the man, "but somehow folks mostly call me Pod."

Pod! The boys, despite the situation, could almost have laughed at the name.

Here was a bold thief who, by all the rules of fiction, should have borne some name that would fit with his supposedly desperate character, and instead of that he told them that he was "mostly called Pod."

As for Joe, he could only gasp and shrug his shoulders helplessly.

"Boosh!" he exclaimed after an interval. "Pod, you an' me and dese garçon got to have some talk, Pod."

"Go right ahead, mister," said Pod.

CHAPTER XXI—THE LITTLE GRAY MAN.

Old Joe was fairly stumped. So were the boys. The little gray man was sick, feeble and apologetic, and yet they knew that he had stolen those furs and he must be made to give them up.

"Guess we'll leave this thing to Joe," whispered Jack to Tom.

"The only thing to do. I don't like this at all. I'd almost rather he'd put up a fight."

"Say, there's no more wood by that stove," said Jack; "guess he was too sick to cut any more. We'd better go and get some ourselves. What do you say?"

"All right. Let Joe do the talking. I'd feel like a ruffian myself to cross-question a sick man, even if he is a thief."

The two boys drew Joe aside. Then they left the tent. As they went, their talk ran upon the strangeness of the twist of circumstances that had made them become ministers to the comfort of a man who had wronged them and led them a long, hard chase through the frozen lands to recover their own.

As they chopped wood, they stopped every now and then and looked at each other.

"This beats our experience with the two crazy miners," said Tom, during one of these pauses.

"Beats it! I should say so. I thought that was about the limit of queer adventures, but this is an odder one still."

"How a sick man could have gone through all that Pod has, I can't imagine," said Tom.

"And he's pretty sick, too, I guess," commented Jack. "Well, let's get ahead with our wood chopping and go back and find out what Joe has learned."

In the meantime old Joe was almost equally at a loss. He needed time to adjust himself to circumstances so utterly different from those that he had imagined would await them at the end of the long trail. At last, however, he found words:

"Say you, Pod, or what'ev' yo' name ees," he began, "you know what for me, Joe Picquet, an' zee two garçons come here, eh?"

"I kin guess," was the response, accompanied by a mild smile.

Old Joe smoked furiously. Here was a man he had come prepared to fight over the stolen skins, and the man smiled at him.

"Ah ha! You can guess!" he burst out at last. "You bet my life you guess. You guess bien dat you one beeg teef, eh? You guess dat? Boosh!"

There was no answer from the man lying under the shabby skin rug.

Old Joe began to find his task becoming more and more difficult. If only the man would say something, make some aggressive move, he would have no difficulty in letting loose his long bottled-up rage. But as it was, he felt almost as helpless as the recumbent figure on the ground.

"Why you no answer, you—you Pod!" he exclaimed. "I want know. *Comprenez-vous?* Joe Picquet wan' know wha' for you break in his skeen keg an' take *un-deux-trois* nice skeen?"

Again there was silence. Old Joe rose and came close to the man. This time he shook a finger in his face.

"Attendez, you leetle coyote! You do worse as zees. You steal from two garçons one black fox skeen. Where dose skeens? We come to get dem."

The little man blinked as the finger was shaken in his face, but he made no other sign that he had heard. Old Joe's eyes began to blaze. This was sheer obstinacy.

"You answer pret' queeck or we load you on sled an' take you Red Fox trading pos'. Have you give up to zee jail. Now you talk."

The little man made a peevish face and waved his arms about feebly. "I dunno nuthin' 'bout yer skins," he said. "What's the matter with you?"

This time it was Joe who did not answer. Near the head of the man, half under the sacks that served him as pillows, Joe had seen some skins sticking out. With scant regard for "Pod's" comfort, he began pulling at these.

For the first time, Pod began to grow restless.

"Them's all mine," he insisted, "t'aint no use your lookin'. Ain't none of yours thar, mister."

"Where are dey, den? Where is dat black fox skeen you take from *les garçons* on zee Porc'pine Riviere?"

"I dunno, I'm telling you. I ain't never been near the Porcupine River. Dunno whar' it is."

"You don't, eh? Boosh! Let me tell you, *mon ami*, you tell one beeg story! Zee two garçons, dey trail you all zee way from dere, you beeg teef. You' snowshoes make different track, an' see zee cigarette stumps!" Several of the yellow paper wrappings were littered about the tent. "Now do you say you are not zee same man?"

"Stranger, honest to mackerel, I dunno what yer talkin' erbout."

Joe turned to the pile of skins once more.

"We search every corner dees tent, den," he said, with finality.

But as he was stooping over the skins, throwing them out one by one, and scanning the pile the while with eager eyes for his own and the boys' property, some subtle sixth sense made him suddenly wheel.

Out of the corner of his eye he had seen the little man's hands make a sudden move. He was on him with a bound. In a flash he had both the little gray man's hands pinioned in his own powerful grip, one over and one under the shabby covering.

Then, with a swift movement, he yanked the skin blanket down. He disclosed a hand holding a wicked looking revolver of heavy caliber. It was fully loaded and cocked.

Pod was not the harmless individual he had appeared to be.

CHAPTER XXII—"THE WOLF'S" TEETH.

"Boosh! So you would try keel me, eh, mon brave?" puffed old Joe, wresting the weapon from the hand of the little gray man and hurling it across the room. "Vous etes one fine fellow, n'est-ce pas?"

Leaving him for an instant, old Joe fairly slid across the tent and did something which, but for his excitement, he would have accomplished in the first place. He "broke" the pistol and extracted the six cartridges.

The little man under the tattered blanket watched with glittering eyes. Then Joe Picquet turned to him once more.

"Where ees zee black fox skeen, you beeg rascal?"

The old trapper felt like pouncing upon the other and shaking the truth out of him, especially following his discovery of the little man's weapon. But the fellow appeared to be genuinely sick and he throttled down his anger.

The man remained silent. Old Joe thought he resembled a little glittering-eyed weasel as he lay there watching the old trapper with furtive eyes, that though they appeared averted followed old Joe's every move. But he did not speak in rejoinder to Joe's direct command. He merely grinned in a sickly fashion, showing a double row of yellow, uneven teeth. Seen thus, he looked more like some little wicked animal than ever. The sympathy that Joe had felt for him began to evaporate.

"See here, you, you no play 'possum weez old Joe Picquet," he said roughly, putting on an appearance of ferocity. "He no stand for monkey-doodle business. Non, mon ami."

The man lay in silence for a space. Then he moved and spoke.

"Look in that sack yonder," he said, indicating a bulging gunny-bag in a corner near the sled.

Old Joe lost no time in ripping open the deerskin fastenings of the bag and dragging out its contents. These he dumped in a heap on the floor. There were marten skins, ermine skins and weasel skins galore, but none of his skins nor so much as a hair of a black fox pelt.

Joe turned angrily on the other.

"I geev you one chance," he said; "you fool me no more. You tell me where dat skeen ees or les garçons go to Red Fox for zee autarkies."

The sick man grinned again, showing his yellow molars, that looked like stumps protruding from the sands at low tide.

"I tole yer, yer wouldn't find it, Frenchy," said he, "an' I reckon you won't. I ain't got it, an' that's the truth."

Joe's jaw closed with a click. His teeth clenched and his old eyes flashed.

"Ver' well den, mon ami. I search your blankets."

It might have been fancy, but Joe thought that he saw the man on the ground turn a shade paler. Old Joe approached the bed. In the dim light his face looked as ferocious as the countenance of a wolf. Perhaps something warned Peabody Dolittle that it was no use to evade the question of his guilt any longer.

"It's under the lower blanket," he said weakly.

Old Joe thrust his hand under and then, for the second time, he looked up just in the nick of opportunity. As he stooped low, the sick man had raised himself on his bed, and now had a knife poised above the old French-Canadian's back.

With a shout of rage, the trapper struck the upraised arm and sent the blade halfway across the tent. It fell ringingly to the ground. At the same instant, the boys, who had heard Joe's shout, came running into the tent, their arms full of wood.

"Aloons, mes enfants!" cried the angry old man. "Do not give good wood to such as dis man. Twice he try to keel me. Once weez pistol, once weez knife. Let heem freeze in zee snows if he weel. We weel help heem no more."

He thrust a hand under the man's blankets where the latter had indicated. Then, with a shout of triumph, he drew out a beautiful skin. A black fox pelt, shimmering, glossy, beautiful!

The boys gave a cry. It was theirs beyond a doubt, the skin of the fine black fox that they had last

seen barking and howling for his liberty, and whom the two partners in the fox-raising enterprise had set such store by. They were still looking at the skin, petrified, when old Joe uttered another cry of triumph.

This time, from beneath the blankets he drew out the skins the thief had filched from his own cabin. His rage knew no bounds. He appeared angrier now that he had found the skins than he was before. He shook his fist at the sick man and upbraided him unmercifully.

"You are one skunk! One homme mechant!" he roared. "You first rob and den try to keel. Above all, you lie. Boosh! I have for you no use."

"Well, you've got yer skins now, ain't ye?" asked the man on the ground, in a feeble voice. "What more d'ye want?"

"A good deal more," struck in Tom. "How did you come to know of the foxes on the Porcupine River?"

"I overhearn two fellers at the tradin' post talkin' about 'em," whimpered the crest-fallen Pod.

"You did, eh?" exclaimed Jack. "What sort of looking fellows?"

The man lying stretched out there with an abject, fawning look on his face turned a beseeching glance on them. But they knew of the cowardly crime he had tried to perpetrate and hardened themselves toward him. In his high-pitched, plaintive voice, Pod gave a description of the two men he had declared were responsible for his knowledge of the fox kennels on the Porcupine.

When he concluded his description Tom and Jack exchanged astonished glances.

"Uncle Dacre!" cried Jack.

"Mr. Chillingworth!" cried Tom. "I'll bet they were talking business and this fellow here crept up and listened."

Although they were both very angry, somehow the thought that they had succeeded in the hard task they had set out to accomplish, made them less disturbed than they might have been.

"What did you do it for?" asked Tom.

"I can't tell yer now," was the rejoinder. "It was fer many reasons. Some day perhaps you'll know. Now I can't say nothin'."

"At least, tell us if it was you that tried to frighten us by howling through a birch-bark megaphone?" asked Tom.

The little man grinned.

"Yes, I did it, all right," he said, with the same soft, foolish smile. "I calcerlated to shake you off'n my trail. But I didn't do it. It was jes' a plum foolish joke, that's all, and——"

"Stand right where you are!"

The order came from a voice behind the boys and old Joe, who had been bending over the stricken little gray fellow.

They all wheeled like a flash. In the doorway stood three figures—tall, rough-looking men dressed in the ordinary garb of the trail. All three were armed and each had assigned himself to "take care of" one of our adventurers.

The "sick" man broke into a shrill laugh.

"He! he! he! Thought you'd fooled Wolf Ericson, didn't you? Well, by the eternal, you've got another guess coming, I reckon. Dick! Sarsen! Flem! keep 'em covered while I get up."

CHAPTER XXIII—SANDY ALONE.

The day following the departure of Tom and Jack from the camp of the *Yukon Rover*, Sandy decided that he would take a stroll along the trap line for some little distance to see if any of the smaller traps, interspersed with the big box traps for catching the live foxes, had caught anything. Before he departed he carefully fed the animals in the "kennels."

This done, he wrapped himself up as warmly as possible in a thick parkee, heavy lumbermen's boots and a cap that came down over his ears. Before leaving he took care to write a note and leave it on the table in the cabin, informing the two partners briefly where he had gone and what had taken place during their absence, in case they should return before he got back again.

When all this had been attended to, Sandy filled a haversack with food and packed a small aluminum kettle and set out on snowshoes on his solitary travels. He wondered what his companions were doing and what success they had had in their pursuit of the thief. The boy felt lonesome without his chums, but as he made his way over the crunching snow the keen air brightened him up and raised his spirits considerably.

Since Tom and Jack had left, nothing to cause alarm had occurred, and although Sandy had passed an anxious night, he had seen nothing to indicate that any further harm was meditated to the valuable live things now left in his sole care.

The traps were strung in a regular line, whose general direction was marked by blazed trees and here and there some piled rocks. Near to the *Yukon Rover's* mooring place there were no box traps. These were stationed far back in the remoter districts, for the valuable foxes they were after were

wild, shy creatures, seldom coming within miles of a spot where they could detect the presence of human kind.

At the first trap Sandy found a white weasel. The bait, the head of a hare, was intact. The luckless weasel had not even had the satisfaction of a meal.

Sandy placed the little creature in his pocket, not without disappointment. The Bungalow Boys' traps, the steel ones, that is, were set for food, such as hares and rabbits. They did not care to capture weasels and ermine particularly, although red foxes, which have a habit of scaring away the more valuable varieties, were welcome to their traps.

Tom and Jack, as we know, had already encountered the track of a wolverine. It was now Sandy's turn to come across the funny, bear-like imprints of one of these destructive creatures.

"Whist!" he exclaimed, as he saw it, "no more animals in the traps the noo! A wolverine has a bigger appetite than a cormorant. They're the real game hogs, all right."

As he had expected, the next trap showed plentiful evidences of the wolverine's visit. All that was left of the marten that had been caught in it was some bits of skin and about an inch of the tail. Bloodstains on the snow around the trap showed where the wolverine had enjoyed a meal at the expense of the young trappers.

"Pretty expensive feeder," mused Sandy to himself. "So far this glutton's meals have cost about thirty dollars in the value of skins destroyed. Nothing cheap about him."

The boy trudged along over the snow, the creaking of his shoes as he advanced being the only sound that broke the oppressive stillness of the frozen wilderness. In spite of himself the boy felt the vast silence and loneliness like a weight laid upon his mind. So far as he knew, he was the only human being within miles. It made him feel very tiny, almost ant-like, to think of the minute speck his body must make as he toiled onward amidst the white desolation spread all about him.

At noon he paused, and seating himself under a tall "Rampick" that upreared its gaunt form blackly against the snow, he ate the lunch he had brought with him. Then he resumed his journey, intending to turn back again and make for camp after about an hour's more travel. He figured that this would bring him back to the camp by nightfall.

As he followed up the traps he noticed that beside the ravages of the wolverine other tracks began to appear in the snow, telling of the presence of animals only less welcome.

Tracks that the boy recognized as the footprints of wolves were plentiful about the traps devastated by the wolverine, or perhaps by the wolves themselves.

The sight sent a thrill through him in spite of himself. Sandy had never gotten over his dread of wolves. He would never forget his first sight of the gaunt, gray creatures that he had seen hunting in a pack some weeks before. Even in dreams he could still see their foamy fangs, gaunt flanks and lean, active bodies with their sharp, avid heads and blazing yellow eyes.

At the sight of the tracks, which were apparently recent, an uneasy feeling possessed him. The wolves were abroad, possibly in his immediate vicinity. He glanced around him. About half a mile away, at the summit of a snow-covered rise, was a big pile of rocks heaped up as if they had been some giant's playthings left in jumbled confusion. Beyond lay a dark little wood of balsam and fir. Sandy was still looking at this latter and meditating whether or not to visit the traps he knew were set in under the shadows of the somber-looking trees, when his ear was arrested by a sudden sound.

It rang through the silence like a clarion. He recognized it instantly and his nerves thrilled as he heard.

It was the cry of a wolf pack coming from the timber patch. Sandy half turned, uncertain whether to keep on or make a retreat.

As he hesitated, from the wood there issued several lean-flanked, gray creatures, whose forms he knew only too well.

They were the leaders of the pack. Behind them, helter-skelter, came a tumbling, racing-mass of open-fanged creatures.

The leaders spied the boy, halted an instant and then, with fierce, short barks, headed straight for him.

CHAPTER XXIV—THE PACK.

Sandy's first impulse was to run. Then he recalled what he had heard an old woodsman say, that to flee from a wolf pack is to invite almost certainly pursuit. Yet what other course was there for him to pursue? He had his rifle and some cartridges, but the pack was a large one and there was something in their appearance, even at that distance, that was strikingly sinister in its suggestion of unloosed savagery.

Behind the hesitating boy lay stretched a level snowfield without a tree or a rock showing above its surface for some distance. Ahead of him, and a little to his right, was the big rock pile already mentioned. The wolves were racing diagonally across the snow. If he did not act quickly the only refuge in sight, the heaped up pile of rocks, would be lost to him.

Hesitating no longer, Sandy put out every effort that was in him and started for the rocks. But as he

flew over the snow with his heart beating as if it would burst his sides, he knew that if he won the race it would be only by a very narrow margin.

His feet felt leaden. Although he put forth every ounce of strength he possessed, it appeared to him that he hardly moved. He had experienced the same sensation in nightmares, when he seemed to be in the grip of peril without the power of crying out or moving a limb.

"I must make it! I must!" he kept saying to himself as he pushed forward.

But the space between himself and the wolves, who had seen his move and apparently divined the object of it, was growing terribly small. Racing at an angle to his line of progress, the creatures were swiftly closing up the gap which gave the boy his margin of safety.

The rocks, which he must reach to have even a fighting chance against the famished pack, appeared to his bursting eyes to be almost as far off as they had been when he started on his race for life. He saw that they were immense boulders with big, snow-filled crevasses between them. If only he could reach them he did not doubt but that there were innumerable natural fortresses among them from which he could safely defy the wolves.

But could he make it?

Life and death hinged on that question now, for there could be no doubt remaining but that he was the wolves' quarry, the prey that they sought with dripping fangs and eager, blazing eyes.

The thought flashed through Sandy's mind that the hunting must have been bad for the pack to make them pursue a human being, something which the savage but cowardly creatures rarely do unless driven to desperation by ferocious pangs of appetite. Hunger, as with most animals, will convert wolves, ordinarily despised by the northern woodsman, into beasts as dangerous as tigers.

Sandy had heard tales of the northern wolves when feed is scarce and the snow lies on the land. He was under no delusions as to his danger. But, strange to say, as he ran onward a sort of fierce pleasure in the race came over him.

At school Sandy had made some notable records on the track. But never had he had such an incentive to speed as now confronted him. He felt a savage determination to beat out those gray-flanked, drip-fanged creatures, if the life within him held out in the cruel test of speed and staying power.

The rocks loomed larger. He had crossed the line the pack was pursuing. A savage chorus of yelps arose as the leaders saw what had happened and swung their cohorts on a new tack.

And now the haven of refuge he was struggling for loomed up larger and closer. Only a few feet more and—

A rock concealed under the snow, an outcropping no doubt of the large, castle-like pile, caught Sandy's foot. He plunged headlong into the snow. As he fell he could hear behind him the yelps of the pack. They thought that now the race was over beyond a doubt; that in a few seconds more their teeth would be tearing the helpless boy.

But Sandy, half stunned by the violence of his fall, managed to struggle to his feet in the nick of time. He could almost feel the breath of the leaders of the yapping pack at his neck when he found himself, he hardly knew how, on his legs once more and struggling with the last remaining ounces of his strength to reach the rocky cliffs, which alone held out a promise of safety.

Many things raced through his mind as he drove on. Thoughts of Tom and Jack, of his old school fellows and of his parents far away in Scotland, memories of old grudges and repented wrongs. Sandy had read of drowning people whose whole lives race before them in a dazzling film of realism in their last moments. He wondered if it was his end that was presaged by the vivid panorama of his career that was mirrored in his mind as he ran.

Behind him there arose a savage howl of disappointment. Cheated of their prey just when it appeared certain that it was within their grasp, the pack was giving vent to its feelings. The big, gaunt leaders gave forth a baying note, the hunting call of the pack.

Sandy set his teeth.

"I'll beat you yet, you gloomeroons!" he muttered savagely.

He stumbled again; recovered his balance; went plunging half blindly on. His mind was now a blank to all but one thought: those rocks in front of him. He must reach them, he must, he must.

He stretched out his arms as if to try to grasp with his finger tips the rough surface of the foremost of the huge boulders. The wolves' howls sounded more loudly behind him. His strength began to falter at their cries.

But by an effort he rallied his nerve and put forth another burst of speed.

The next instant he felt his hands touch the rocks in front of him. Almost simultaneously the leader of the wolves, a great, gaunt beast, fully shoulder high among his brethren, leaped at the boy.

But the jump fell short. With a savage snarl of disappointment, the great gray wolf fell back, while Sandy, with the strength of desperation, clambered upward among the rocks.



The leader of the wolves, a great, gaunt
beast, leaped at the boy.

CHAPTER XXV—HEMMED IN BY WOLVES.

Panting, almost at the limit of his strength, with torn hands and rent garments, the lad clambered upward among the rocks. They had seemed large at a distance. Now they appeared to be veritable mountains of boulders. But they were rough and afforded a fair foothold, except where windblown snow had obscured their surfaces and made them slippery and treacherous.

After five minutes of climbing, Sandy rested for a time and paused to look down below him. The wolves were apparently taken aback by his successful evasion of their fangs. The leaders were seated on their gaunt haunches gazing hungrily up at him, while behind them the rest of the pack moved uneasily about. The boy could see the steam of their hot breaths as they panted, their red tongues lolling far out and their sharp, tiger-like teeth exposed.

Their wicked little yellow eyes were fixed steadfastly upon the boy, who looked down upon them from the shoulder of a great rock. He was safe for the time being, and Sandy took advantage of the respite to rally his faculties.

Although he was temporarily secure from the pack, his position was still about as bad as it could be. He was practically marooned on the rocky island in the snows until the pack should see fit to withdraw, or until some other game drew their attention from him.

Without letting his eyes stray from the wolves for more than a second at a time, Sandy took stock. He had his rifle, hunting knife and some twenty cartridges, besides those in the magazine of his rifle, twelve in number. Of his lunch there was left some baking powder bread, a small quantity of cold deer meat and some salt and pepper.

It was little enough for the protracted siege that he might have to stand on the rocky pile, but scanty though the provision was, he was glad of the foresight that had made him save it for a snack on his way home. Besides the articles mentioned, the boy had his matches and a compass, and that was all.

But the next minute he realized that even his matches were gone. In his frantic climb, the nickel, water-proof case in which the precious lucifers were carried had dropped from his pocket. Looking down after the discovery of his loss, he saw the glint of the little metal cylinder lying on the snow at the foot of his haven of refuge.

To recover it was out of the question. The wolves grimly stood guard over it as if fully understanding its value to the human creature on the rocks. As Sandy looked at the wolves, the great snow rangers stared straight back at him with an uncanny steadiness. He seemed to read their message in their flaming yellow orbs.

"There is no hurry. We can wait. As well to-morrow as now."

Sandy clambered yet higher. At his first move the leaders, as if by concerted action, flung themselves tooth and nail at the rocky escarpment confronting them.

The pack, snarling and yapping with chagrin, were hurled back from the stony fortress like waves from a pier. Sandy observed this with satisfaction. His place of refuge appeared to be impregnable.

The wolves' only chance lay in starving him out. And with a bitter pang Sandy realized that unless help arrived or he was able to frighten them off, the creatures stood a good chance of accomplishing this.

It was odd that the emergency which might have unmanned much stronger minds than Sandy's should not have had the effect of reducing him to despair. But this was not so. The Scotch lad possessed in him a strain of indomitable blood. Like his ancestors, who sought refuge in the rocks and caves of the highlands during the stormy periods of Scotland's history, the boy, terrible though his position was and fraught with menace, yet kept up his sturdy courage.

In fact, the danger of his position appeared to lend him nerve which he might have lacked under less trying conditions. It is often so. Human nature has a habit of rising to emergencies. Dangers and difficulties are often the anvils upon which men and boys are tried to see if they be of the true metal.

The wolves, with supernatural patience, resumed their positions of waiting, following their futile attack on the rocky wall that faced them. But Sandy saw that although they appeared indifferent to him, they yet had an eye to his every movement.

He tried the experiment of raising an arm or swinging a leg as if he were about to move again. Instantly every sharp-nosed head was raised in an attitude of deep attention. To those wolves there was but one interesting object in the whole of that dreary expanse of snow, and that was Sandy McTavish.

"I've got to do something," thought Sandy desperately. "Before long it will be getting dusk."

He couldn't help giving a shudder as he thought of this. The idea of spending a night in the freezing cold with those silent, tireless watchers below him shook his courage badly. He concluded to try the effect of a few shots among the pack. Possibly, if he could kill the leaders, the rest might become alarmed and leave him.

He raised his rifle and singled out the great, gray wolf that appeared to be commander-in-chief of the creatures. This was a huge animal with bristling hackles who was covered with wounds and scars received no doubt in defending his title of leader of the pack.

Sandy took careful aim between the wolf's blazing yellow eyes that shone in the gathering dusk like signal lamps. He pulled the trigger and a blaze and a sharp crack followed. Mingled with them was the death cry of the big gray wolf.

He leaped fully four feet into the air and came down with a crash. Before the breath was out of his gaunt body the pack was upon him, tearing, rending and fighting. When the mass of struggling, famine-stricken wolves surged apart again, Sandy saw that a few bloodstains on the snow and some bones in the mouths of the stronger of the wolves were all that remained of the leader of the pack.

A king among them when alive, the dead wolf had been to his followers nothing more than so much meat. Their cannibal feast being disposed of, except that here and there a wolf crunched a bone, the animals resumed their vigil.

Twice, three times more, did Sandy fire; but each time with the same result.

He dared not waste more ammunition. He must conserve what he had left for emergencies, in case it came down to a fight for his very life.

For the first time since he had gained a place of comparative safety the boy gave way utterly. He sank his head in his hands and despair rushed over him like a wave.

CHAPTER XXVI—THE BACK TRAIL.

It is now time to return to Tom, Jack and their companion, old Joe Picquet. It will be recalled that we left them in a most precarious and startling situation.

From a man apparently sick unto death, the gray, pitiable figure on the cot had been suddenly changed to a vicious, spiteful enemy, as vindictive and apparently as dangerous as a rattlesnake. The very swiftness of the change had taken them so utterly by surprise that, as the rifles of his three followers were trained upon them, our trio of friends were deprived of speech.

Old Joe was the first to recover his faculties. With his eyes blazing furiously from his weather-beaten face, he emitted a roar of rage.

The vials of his wrath were directed against the small gray man—Peabody Dolittle, as he had called himself.

"Boosh! You beeg ras-cal!" he cried. "You beeg liar as well as teef, eh? What you wan' us do now—eh?"

"Nothing but to give up those skins you took from me and then vamoose," came the quiet rejoinder from the little gray man, who had lost his Yankee dialect and drawl and who was now on his feet fully dressed except for a coat.

"And if we won't?" exclaimed Tom, retaining a firm grip on the black fox skin.

He was resolved to keep it at all hazards.

"Why, then," rejoined the other, with a vindictive snarl, "we shall have to adopt harsh measures. You may consider yourselves my prisoners."

"Non! Not by a whole lot!"

The angry, half choked cry was from old Joe Picquet. Beside himself with fury at the thought of the cunning fraud the man had worked upon them, he flung himself forward as if he meant to tear him to pieces.

Tom's arm jerked him back.

"Don't do anything like that, Joe," he counseled; and then to the gray man, "I suppose your sickness was just a dodge to keep us here till your companions could arrive."

"Just what it was, my young friend," amiably agreed the rascal. "As a guesser of motives you are very good—very good, indeed."

One of the new arrivals stepped forward and whispered something to his leader, who nodded. Then he spoke:

"Of course, I shall have to ask you to give up your weapons," he said.

Old Joe Picquet fumed and fussed, but there was nothing for it but to obey. In the presence of such a force, and with the disadvantage under which they labored, there was nothing else to be done. With the best grace they could, they gave up their weapons, which the little gray man, with a smile of satisfaction, took into his possession.

"Pity you didn't heed the ghostly warning I gave you," said he to the boys, with a grin, "you'd be in a better position than you are now. But after all, it will teach you never again to interfere with the Wolf."

They had nothing to reply to this speech; but at the rascal's next words their anger broke out afresh.

"Are you going to give up those skins, or do we have to take them from you?"

As he spoke he did a significant thing. He lightly tapped with his finger tips the rifle stock of the man next to him. It was a quiet hint, yet a sufficient one.

"We are in your power right now; but perhaps before long the tables will be turned," said Tom. "Take the skin that you stole, and——"

"Say no more, my young friend. You are wise beyond your years. Flem," this to a squat-figured, evil-looking fellow with a shack of sandy hair, who was one of the trio whose arrival had caused our friends so much trouble, "Flem, hand me that black fox skin. I went to some trouble to secure it. I propose to keep it."

"As long as you can, you ought to add," muttered Jack, under his breath.

As for Picquet, he, like Tom, remained silent. There was really nothing to be said. Without a word he booted the skins he had recovered from the fur robber's loot across the floor. One of the Wolf's men picked them up.

By this time it was almost dark within the tent. But from the red-hot stove there emanated quite a glow which showed up the evil countenances of the boys' captors in striking relief. Except for their leader, the Wolf, whose soft tones and retiring manners would have made anyone pick him out for anything but what he was, they were a repulsive looking crew.

It was clear enough to Tom now that they were in the power of men who made a regular business of fur robbing, and a thoroughly prosperous one, too. He felt an intense disgust for them. Knowing as he did the hardships of a trapper's life, the long tramps through the freezing snows, the isolation and the loneliness of the existence, he thought, with angry contempt, of the meanness of men who would rob the rightful owners of such hard-earned trophies.

"Feel pretty sore at me, don't you?" asked the Wolf, who had been eying the boy narrowly.

"Not so sore as disgusted," shot out Tom. "I've seen some mean wretches in my time, but a man who will deliberately——"

"Be careful there, young fellow. Don't get too fresh," warned one of the Wolf's men.

"I consider that you have got off pretty easily," rejoined the Wolf, seemingly unruffled. His tones were as calm and retiring as ever. "I might have sent your dog team scurrying off into the wilderness without you, and then left you to get back as best you could without provisions or blankets. Instead of that, I'm going to do you a kindness. I shall set you free with your sled."

"And our rifles?" asked old Joe.

"I'm afraid I must keep them. You are altogether too capable to be trusted with such weapons."

"I know who I'd like to make a target of," muttered Jack.

"So I shall have to retain your rifles. They are fine weapons and I am glad to have them. And now, gentlemen, under those terms we shall bid you good night."

"We'll see you again some time—Boosh!—an' when we do—nom d'un nom d'un chien!" exclaimed Joe, shaking his fist toward the heavens.

"I hardly think it likely that you will ever see me again," was the little gray man's rejoinder. "We have made enough to leave the Yukon for good and all——"

"For the good of all, I guess you mean," muttered the sharp-tongued Jack under his breath.

Luckily for him, perhaps, the other did not hear him, or appeared not to. Half an hour later,

inwardly raging, but without the means to act on their impulses, the two boys and the old man were out on the snow crust harnessing up the dog-team.

Over them stood the Wolf's henchmen. As they "hit the trail" in the same direction as that whence they had come, they heard a harsh laugh and a shouted good night.

Both sounds came from the Wolf's tent, the Wolf who had tricked and trapped them as a climax to their long pursuit.

CHAPTER XXVII—FACING DEATH.

As the shades of night began to close in upon him, Sandy found himself still in the same position. From time to time one or another of the pack would hurl itself against the rocky islet in the snow waste, only to be remorselessly thrown back by the impact.

But for the most part the creatures sat silent and motionless, content to watch and wait for the harvest that they seemed sure would come to them in time.

After his fit of despair Sandy had once more rallied his energies and devoted his really active and brave mind to devising some means of passing the night, that it now appeared certain he must spend on the great rock pile.

Above him, growing in a rift, were the remains of some stunted balsams, the seeds of which had probably blown thither from the woods whence the wolves had issued. He stared at the melancholy, twisted, dried-up stumps of vegetation for some time before any idea concerning them came into his head. Then all at once he realized that here at least was the means for fire and warmth.

But hardly had this idea occurred to him, when he recollected something that made his heart sink to a lower level than before. He had no matches. The little nicked box that held them lay at the foot of the rocks too well guarded by the wolves for him to make an effort to reach it. And yet he knew that he must have fire in the night or perish.

It was quite a while before a retentive memory helped him out. Then he recalled having heard some time before from an old trapper a method of fire-making without matches. The operation was simplicity itself and yet Sandy doubted if he could make it succeed.

The plan was simply this: to remove from a cartridge the bullet and part of the powder; then to place the cartridge in the gun as usual and fire into a pile of dry kindling. The sparks and flame from the powder were supposed to furnish the necessary start to the blaze, which could then be enlarged by blowing.

"At any rate, I might try it," thought Sandy. "If I don't make it go I stand a good chance of freezing. But if I do——"

He stopped short. While he had been turning these matters over in his mind he had climbed up to the ridge on which grew the withered, dead balsams.

Now that he had gained it, he saw that beyond the gnarled, wind-twisted stumps was a considerable rift in the rocks. How far in it went he did not, of course, know. But it appeared that it ought to make a snug refuge from the rigors of the almost arctic cold.

Further exploration showed that the rift was quite a cave. It was not very high, but appeared to run back a considerable distance. Sandy hailed its discovery with joy. If he could light a fire back within the rift it would be practicable to keep it warm.

The thought of warmth, light and a good fire was comforting, even though for the present it existed only in the imagination. Sandy set to work on the withered balsams with his hunting knife. The wood was dry and dead and cut easily. Soon he had quite a pile of it dragged back into the rift.

As he worked he almost forgot the perils of his situation. For the present the biting cold which, as the sun grew lower, was more and more penetrating, turned his thoughts from his present miseries to the delights to come of warmth and comfort.

Having collected his pile and stacked it till it almost reached the roof of the rift, Sandy thought it was time to see if there was any merit in the old trapper's recipe for starting a fire in the wilderness without matches. With his blade he stripped off patches of dry bark from the dead timber and shredded it until it was an easily inflammable mass, like excelsior.

Having done this, he collected his kindling and then piled the sticks crosswise in the form of a tower, so that when his fire was started he would be sure of a good draft. Then, with his knife, he extracted a bullet from a cartridge, poured a little of the powder upon the kindling and then slipped the half emptied shell into his rifle.

When this much of his preparations had been completed he was ready for the final test. He aimed the rifle carefully at his kindling pile, selecting a place where he had previously sprinkled the grains of powder. Then he pulled the trigger.

A muffled report and a shower of sparks from the muzzle followed, but to the boy's disappointment, the kindling did not catch fire. The only result of his experiment, so far, was a suffocating smell of gunpowder.

But Sandy did not come of a stock that gives in easily.

"I must try it again," he said to himself, thinking of his great countryman, Robert Bruce, and perhaps likening himself in the cave besieged by his enemies to that national hero.

Only in Sandy's case there was no spider, as in the legend, to give him an example of perseverance. It was far too cold for spiders, as the boy reflected, with a rueful grin; and then he doubted if even Bruce's foes were more remorseless or deadly than the ones awaiting him outside the rock masses, piled in the snow desert like an island in a vast ocean of white.

He prepared another cartridge, sprinkling more powder on his kindling. This time there arose a puff of flame and smoke from the pile as soon as he fired the rifle. Casting his weapon aside, Sandy threw himself down on his knees by the fire.

He began puffing vigorously at the smoldering place where the burning powder had landed.

A tiny flame crept up, licked at the kindling, grew brighter and seized upon some of the larger sticks piled above.

Five minutes later Sandy was warming himself at a satisfying blaze. As the smoke rolled out of the rift and upward in the darkening gloom the patient watchers outside set up a savage howl.

"Ah, howl away, you gloomeroons," muttered Sandy, in the cheerful glow inside the rift. "I've got you beaten for a time, anyhow. And noo let's hae a bite o' supper."

With a plucky grimace, as though to defy fate, Sandy spread out on the rock floor his stock of food. It looked scanty, pitifully so, when considered as the sole provision against starvation that the boy had with him in his rock prison—for such it might be fitly called.

"'Tis nae banquet," and the Scotch lad wagged his head solemnly. "It would make a grand feed for a canary bird."

He paused a minute, and then:

"But be glad you hae it, Sandy McTavish, you ungrateful carlin. You're lucky not to have to make a supper off scenery; and, after all, you are nae sae hungry as yon wolves, judging by their voices."

CHAPTER XXVIII—THE TRAP.

It was a dispirited enough party that, under the stars, retraced its way from the camp of the little gray man, who at first, seeming so harmless and helpless, had turned out to be so venomous and vindictive. Tom and Jack had little to say.

The case was different with old Joe Picquet. He cried out aloud to the stars for vengeance on the Wolf. He abused his name in English, French and every one of half a dozen Indian dialects.

"Oh, what's the use," said Tom at length, interrupting a diatribe. "The fellow had the whip hand of us from the moment we let ourselves be taken in by believing he really was sick and helpless."

"Think of that wood we chopped," muttered Jack, with a groan.

Jack was not a lover of that form of exercise which is taken with the assistance of an axe. He felt like joining old Joe's lamentations as he thought of the vigor with which he had worked to relieve the seemingly sick man's necessities.

"It is a good lesson to us," went on Tom, "although it has been a mighty costly one. If we hadn't shilly-shallied about that tent we would have been well on our way with the stolen skins by this time."

"No use crying over spilt milk," counseled Jack. "It is done now and can't be undone. Wonder if we will ever see those rascals again?"

"Impossible to say. If only we could get to a trading post or a station we might raise a posse and take after them. In this part of the country it is a mighty bad offense to steal skins."

"What do they do with such fellows?" asked Jack.

"Hang dem!" burst out old Joe.

"Oh, not quite as bad as that!" exclaimed Tom.

"Boosh! To hang, it ees too good for dem."

They journeyed on for some time in silence. Then Joe told them that he was building his hopes on finding some of his Indian friends, from whom they could get meat of some kind. For they had no rifles and no means of procuring food, and their supply, except for flour and salt, was running low.

He hoped, he said, to make an Indian encampment, possibly the one where they had last stopped, before the next night. About midnight they paused near one of the numerous, small, unnamed lakes that are frequent in that part of the country. At one place in it was a hole which the Indians had chopped to spear fish. This was skimmed over with ice which, however, Joe surmised could be easily broken through.

The old trapper had in one of his numerous pockets the head of a fish spear. Cutting a stick, he soon fitted a handle to this head and Jack, with the lantern to act as a lure and make the fish rise, was despatched to the ice hole to catch all he could. It was important that the dogs should be fed without delay, for they were getting hungry, the fish at the Wolf's camp having been sufficient only for his own mamelukes.

Spearing fish is work that calls for an adept hand. But the boys had had plenty of practice at their own camp, for the silver foxes had not lost their appetites with captivity and would greedily eat all that they could get. This had kept the boys busy securing fish and they were all experts at the work.

Jack, especially, liked it, and was exceptionally good at it.

After he had fished less than half an hour he had speared a good number of fine fresh fish. The dogs, who appeared to guess what was going forward, barked shrilly and appealingly as he started back toward the spot where the sled had been halted.

"Got any?" hailed Tom, as he saw the lantern Jack carried come bobbing toward him.

"I should say I had."

"Good ones?"

"They'll stuff the dogs full and give us a meal besides."

"That's the stuff, the mamelukes are very hungry."

"So they are saying."

"We'll have to hurry up and feed them while Joe gets something to eat."

"I guess we are as famished as they are. I know I——"

Jack, who had been hurrying forward with his fish, uttered a sharp cry of pain and fell to the ground.

At the same time Tom heard a clicking sound not unlike the sliding back of a rifle magazine, only louder. He rushed forward to where Jack lay upon the ground.

The boy was writhing with pain and Tom could not make out what had happened.

"Jack! Jack, old fellow, what is it?" he cried.

"I—I don't know. Something gripped my foot—as I was hurrying back."

"It's got hold of it now?"

"Yes." Jack's voice was very faint. It was apparent that he was suffering great pain. But he tried to bear up manfully and steady his voice while Tom bent over him.

"Can't you move?"

"No, I'm caught fast."

"Let me look. Great Scott, no wonder!"

Tom's voice was vibrant with sympathy. The next instant he set up a shout.

"Joe! Oh, Joe!"

"Oui, mon garçon! What ees maittaire?" came Joe's voice.

"Come here, quick. It's Jack!"

"Wha's happen heem?" cried old Joe, dropping what he was doing and running through the snow toward the boys.

"His foot. It's—it's caught in an old trap, and—and, Joe, I'm afraid that it has bitten to the bone!"

"Sacre nom!"

But of all this Jack heard nothing. He had fainted under the excruciating pain of the pressure of the steel jaws that gripped him fast like a helpless animal.

CHAPTER XXIX—SANDY HAS A NIGHTMARE.

As the ruddy glow of the flames lighted up the rift in Sandy's rock castle, the boy looked about him curiously before he began work on his scant stock of food. The place was about forty feet in length and not more than five in height, sloping down at each end like the roof in an old-fashioned farm bedroom.

He noted with some satisfaction that near the entrance there were masses of dead and dried up bushes, from which he thought he could contrive a mattress later on. But for the present he devoted himself to his meal.

Luckily, he had brought along a pannikin, and in this, when he had melted some snow for water, he made tea, without a small package of which the true adventurer of the northern wilds never travels. The hot liquid did him almost as much good as the food, and, as Sandy remarked as he gulped it down, it was "main filling."

His supper disposed of, Sandy sat for some little time in front of the fire.

"Heaven be praised, there are no dishes to wash," he said to himself in his whimsical way.

The time was a favorable one for thinking, and many thoughts ran through Sandy's mind as he sat watching the flames. His chums, what were they doing? How little they imagined his predicament at that particular moment. Sandy found himself wondering whether he would ever see them again. The warmth of the fire circulated pleasantly through his veins. A delightful glow crept over him.

He was just about dozing off when a noise near the cave mouth startled him.

He looked up, but could see nothing. He thought, however, that in the darkness he could detect the sound of a furtive footfall.

It was creeping away as if in fear of him.

Sandy came back into the warmth and fire-glow of the rift and lay down at full length in front of the blaze. How long he lay there before he was again disturbed he had no means of knowing.

But suddenly he was attracted to the mouth of the rift once more by a recurrence of the noise. Once more he hastened to investigate, but with the same results as before.

He began to grow nervous. Although he could see nothing, he was sure that he had heard some mysterious sounds out there in the darkness. But when he got up to look nothing was to be seen. It was very perplexing and, considering his situation, not a little alarming. Lying down again by his fire, the boy made a determined effort to compose his nerves. But try as he would, he found his mind focused upon one subject, and one only: the wolves.

From time to time the night was tortured by their howls. It was as if they were trying to show the boy that although he was in hiding they had not forgotten him; that they would wait until he was forced to come off the rocks and make a final dash for freedom before they devoured him.

The soft footfalls that he was sure he had heard outside the rift, he was now almost certain had been made by the wolves. Some of the stronger of the pack had scrambled up on the rocks and were waiting outside his place of refuge till a favorable moment presented itself for an attack.

Sandy clutched his rifle nervously. He was determined when the moment came to sell his life as dearly as possible. How many in number his foes would be he had no means of telling. But he knew full well that his cartridges were all too few.

With his weapon gripped ready for instant action, Sandy waited the next move on the part of his implacable foes. But minute succeeded minute and the sounds from without the rift were not repeated.

The boy began to think that he might have been mistaken. Perhaps, after all, it was his excited imagination that had conjured up the sounds.

He rose and looked outside once more. It was a clear, starlit night. The rocks towered up blackly like some giant's castle amidst the bluish-whiteness of surrounding snow wastes. A sensation of terrible loneliness ran through Sandy as he reflected that he was the only human being for miles and miles in that immense solitude. Probably the party in search of the thief were the nearest of his own kind within a great distance.

It was small wonder that the boy trembled a little as out there under the stars he revolved the situation. There was no use evading it, if help did not arrive, or the wolves retreat, he was doomed either to die by starvation on the rocks, or be rent by the teeth of the pack in the event of his attempting to escape.

Seasoned men of the northland might well have been dazed by such a prospect. There did not appear to be one chance in a hundred for the boy. Sandy looked the question fairly and squarely in the face. It is to his credit that by a supreme effort of pluck and grit he averted a second breakdown and retained a grip upon his nerves and courage.

As he stood there, the pack below him rent the air with their wild hunting cry. The sound chilled him to the marrow, and trembling despite himself, he crept back into the rift and sought the companionship of the fire.

About five minutes later there came a sort of scraping noise from the mouth of the rift. Sandy gazed up, and there, confronting him, with hungrily gaping jaws, and great, yellow, signal-lamps of eyes that flashed evilly in the firelight, were three huge wolves—the leaders of the pack. With a wild cry, Sandy sprang up with his rifle in his hand. He was ready for the fight.

The wolves dashed forward, and as he aimed and fired—!

The rifle turned into a stick of firewood. The wolves into three black rocks piled at the mouth of the rift.

Sandy had been dreaming. But it was a dream that might come true, as he realized with a sensation of helplessness.

CHAPTER XXX—THE LAW OF THE NORTH.

Jack lay upon the snow with the ground about him dyed red from a badly crushed ankle. Tom and old Joe Picquet bent over him doing what they could to ease his pain, for he had now regained consciousness.

It was a wolf trap that the boy had blundered into; a cruel, ponderous affair with massive steel jaws, from whose grip it had been hard to release him.

"Is the ankle broken, do you think?" asked Tom of old Joe.

"Tiens! I can no say now. But I teenk not. Zee trap was old, zee spring was weak. Dat is good. Eef eet had been new, eet would have broken zee bone lak you break zee pipe stem. Voila!"

"How do you feel now, Jack?" asked Tom.

Jack made a brave effort to disguise his pain.

"I'll soon be all right, I guess," he said, "but, Tom, I'll tell you one thing."

"What is that?"

"I'll never set another trap for a wild animal as long as I live. I know now how they must suffer."

After a brief consultation, Tom and old Joe lifted the suffering boy and carried him back to the sled. A "snow-camp" had already been devised and Jack was made as comfortable as possible in this.

By the firelight old Joe examined his injury. The flesh was badly crushed and bruised, but so far as the old trapper could see there were no bones broken.

"Sacre! I weesh dat eet was summer!" breathed the old man. "In summer grow many herbs are good for heal. Zee Indians teach me many. But in winter dere ees notheeng lak dat. Moost use what we can."

With bandages made out of a flour sack, which, luckily, was almost empty, old Joe dressed Jack's injury after carefully bathing it. The boy declared that he felt better almost at once after Joe had completed his woodland surgery.

"It's too bad that I should be giving all this trouble, especially right now," muttered Jack as he lay back.

"Say, if you say anything like that again, I'll forget you are sick and punch your head," said Tom, with a look of affection, however, that belied his words.

After supper old Joe announced that he had decided on a plan that he thought would fit the exigencies of the situation. About ten miles from where they then were a friend of his, Pierre La Roche, like himself a trapper, had a hut. They must make their way there as quickly as possible and leave Jack in La Roche's care till he was fit to travel, which might not be for some time. This done, they would go back to the camp of the *Yukon Rover*, tell what had happened, and seek the advice of Mr. Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth.

Tom felt that this was the best plan that could be evolved. After all, they had done all they could to recover the skins, and if he was blamed for not maintaining a better watch on the fox kennels, why he must face the music. Jack, too, thought the plan a good one, so that they were all satisfied, and, despite Jack's injury, he slept as well that night as his two companions.

The next morning dawned bright and clear. They were up and about early, and Tom caught a good meal of fish for the dogs through the hole in the ice. When he returned to the camp he carried with him the old rusty trap that had caused Jack's injury.

"Thought you might like this bit of jewelry for a souvenir," he said dryly.

"So far as I am concerned you can throw it into the next county," was the rejoinder.

No time was lost in despatching breakfast and getting an early start. The way to La Roche's cabin was what is known as a "bad trail." In fact, it would be necessary to break a path for a great part of the way. Jack was made as snug as possible on the top of the sled, and when old Joe's whip cracked, he declared that he felt as luxurious as if he were riding in his own automobile.

Not long after leaving the night camp the party found themselves beginning to climb a steep and stony trail. It lay on the weather side of a small range of hills remarkable for their ruggedness, and in places where the wind had swept the snow clear, jagged masses of rock peeped blackly out of the prevailing whiteness.

It was rough traveling, with a vengeance. From time to time they had to stop and rest the dogs. By noon they had hardly made five miles and, according to old Joe, the worst still lay before them. However, bad as the trail was, it was preferable to taking Jack all the way back to *Yukon Rover* camp. That, in fact, would have been impossible, for the extra weight on the sled was already telling on the mamelukes. They went forward with drooping tails and sagging flanks.

But over that cruel road they showed how well old Joe's faith in them was justified. Fagged as they were, they did not falter, and when they slacked pace a little the crack of old Joe's whip in the frosty air never failed to send them forward once more at their ordinary pace.

Tom began to have an immense respect for the mameluke. He understood how it was that men paid large sums for such capable beasts. Savage, intractable, and, as a rule, responding to none but the harshest treatment, the mameluke dog is faithful unto death in only too many instances. A halt was made at midday to eat a hasty snack and to feed and rest the dogs. Then the journey was resumed once more.

It was not so cold as it had been, and in places the snow had softened, affording only a treacherous foothold for the animals. Now and then, too, the boys observed old Joe glancing upward at the precipitous walls that began to tower above the trail.

At length his observations grew so frequent that Tom had to ask him what it was that interested him so on the precipitous heights that overhung their path.

Old Joe shook his head.

"Zee snow, he soft. Dat plenty bad. Snow soften, rocks loosen. Bimeby maybe, one beeg rock come toomble down."

"Gracious, one of those big fellows up there?" And Tom's eyes roved upward to where huge black rocks, shaped in some instances like monstrous animals, could be seen sticking out of the snow field.

"Yes; eef no watch, one of dem might heet us when zee soft snow loosens zee earth," declared Joe, without any more concern in his voice than if he were speaking of what they would have for supper.

"Well, if one of those ever struck this outfit, it would be the last of it," declared Tom, alarmed at the prospect.

"Weezout doubt," rejoined old Joe, with a shrug of his shoulders, "but for dat we moost watch all zee time. Dat ees zee law of zee north, to watch always."

CHAPTER XXXI—A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

"To watch always!"

Old Joe's words echoed in Tom's mind. Yes, that was the law of the northland, and in some parts of it all the law that there was. Constant watchfulness was necessary to life itself in the frozen regions.

Tom's cheeks flushed as he thought that if constant watchfulness had been observed at Camp *Yukon Rover* there would have been no necessity for their journey and all that it had led to.

The trail wound upward into country that grew more and more gloomy and dispiriting. There was something about the great rock masses poised above the trail, the slaty, leaden sky and the occasional gusts of wind-blown snow that struck a chill to Tom's heart.

There was little to break the monotony of precipice and sky on the one side, while beside the trail on the other was a deep crevasse, and beyond another wall of rock. Tom peered over into the depths from time to time and thought, with a shudder, of the consequences of a fall. And that possibility was by no means remote. One slip on the treacherous foothold of the path that hung on the mountainside like an eyebrow on a face, and the victim of the accident would go sliding and plunging down the slippery slopes into that forbidding pit.

It was not a thought to inspire cheerfulness, and Tom refrained from speaking of it to his companions. But it might have been noticed that he kept to the inside of the trail. The mameluke dogs, too, by instinct avoided the outer edge and kept hugging the inside wall of the trail as far as possible from the gaping chasm.

It must have been toward mid-afternoon, as time is reckoned in those latitudes, that old Joe paused with a worried look on his face.

"Attendez!" he cried, holding up one finger.

The mamelukes stopped, their red tongues lolling out and their breath coming in long heaves. They were glad of the respite, whatever had caused it.

Tom halted behind the sled, and Jack turned his eyes on old Joe, whose face betokened the most eager attention. His body was tense with concentrated energy, as if he were putting every fiber of his being into what he was doing, which was listening.

Tom thought of the old man's watchword, "To watch always."

For some minutes they stood like this, and then old Joe signified that all was well and they went forward again. But ever and anon the old man cast an uneasy eye about him. It was plain that he was worried and wished the long trail were at an end.

In that gloomy canyon between the beetling walls that rose on either side seemingly straight up to the gray sky, the old trapper's voice rang stridently as he called to his dogs or cracked his whip with loud words of encouragement.

"Courage, mes enfants!" he would cry to his struggling team. "Soon we be at Pierre La Roche's; den plentee feesh for you—bien—Boosh! En avant!"

His words always had a magical effect on the drooping mamelukes. With stubborn determination they bent again to their task, their flagging spirits revived by the cries of their owner.

Jack turned to Tom after one of these intervals.

"Gee whiz! but I feel like a useless log," he exclaimed, "lolling here on a pile of soft blankets while those poor beasts are pulling me along at the expense of almost all their strength."

"It can't be helped," rejoined Tom briefly. "No one supposes that you walked into that trap deliberately."

"It's just one of those accidents that have been happening to us right along," rejoined Jack irritably. "We have had nothing but bad luck so far on this trip. It is too bad."

"I agree with you," rejoined Tom, "but, after all, whose fault is it?"

"Nobody's, that I can see."

"Think again."

"What's on your mind?"

"Just this, that it all comes from our not having forced ourselves, to use Joe's words, 'to watch always.'"

"Great Scott! we couldn't have sat up all night to watch those foxes!"

"One of us could. We might have taken it in turns. However, it is too late to worry about that now. But we will have to face the music when we meet Uncle Chisholm and Mr. Chillingworth. I fancy they will have something to say on the subject."

"Ouch! The thought of that hurts me worse than my foot," exclaimed Jack. "I don't much care about the idea of the explanations that will be up to us to make."

"Yet they have to be made."

"Er-huh," gloomily.

"I fancy that is just the usual result of neglected duty," responded Tom. "It is part of the price you have to pay for not being on the job."

"Goodness, are you turning into a moralizer?"

"No. I've just been thinking things over. Somehow this canyon——"

Above them there was a sudden sharp crackling sound, like the trampling of a thicket full of twigs. It was followed, or rather accompanied, by a yell from old Joe.

"Back! Get back!"

The next instant Tom echoed his cry.

Simultaneously old Joe sprang forward and tried to turn the mamelukes, but they, maddened by fright, plunged forward.

From above, loosened from its foundation by the softened snow, a huge rock was bounding down upon them. Had the mamelukes stopped where they were they might have been saved. As it was, their plunge forward had brought them directly in the path of the great boulder. The destruction of the sled appeared certain.

And on the sled was Jack, crippled and unable to make a move to save himself from the impending doom.

CHAPTER XXXII—A PROVIDENTIAL MEAL.

Sandy's nightmare had the effect of keeping him awake, save for spells of uneasy dozing, for the remainder of the night. It was one that he never forgot. There were times when he sank into a half waking stupor and allowed the fire to die low. Then, waking up, he would see crouching in the dark corners of the rift all sorts of fantastic shapes. At such times he hastened to hurl on more wood, and then, as the bright flames crackled up, the shadows fled away and he breathed more freely again.

Sometimes he would creep to the mouth of the rift and gaze down upon the snowy flat beneath. Each time he had a faint hope in his heart that the dark shapes that he knew were the watching wolves might have abandoned the siege and gone away.

But every time he was disappointed. Every fresh inspection showed him the dark forms massed beneath him. They were gazing upward at the glow of fire proceeding from the rift. Once Sandy hurled down a red-hot brand among them. With yelps and cries those whom it touched loped away from the main body, but they soon joined them again. As for the others, they never moved. There was something uncanny in this immobility. It expressed a calm determination to see the matter through to the bitter end, be that what it might, which was far from comforting to one in Sandy's predicament.

At last, somehow, the night wore itself out. In the east, on one of his visits to the entrance of his hiding place, Sandy descried a faint gray light.

The coming of the day inspired him with a fresh hope. Perhaps with the light of day the wolves would betake themselves elsewhere. Night is their favorite hunting time and they do not usually go much abroad till at least the afternoon.

But as the light grew stronger, Sandy saw that hope, too, fade away. Far from expressing any intentions of deserting their posts, the wolves greeted the slow rise of the sun with a howl that echoed up to the heavens. It sent a shudder through Sandy as he stood there looking down upon the massed gray backs and the hungry upturned faces.

"Is this the end?" he found himself thinking.

But just then something occurred to divert his thoughts. Across the snow came winging, in full flight, a flock of fine, plump snow-grouse. The plumage of these birds changes in winter from its summer russet and brown to a snowy white. Except when in flight it is almost impossible to distinguish them against a white background.

The flight of the birds inspired Sandy with a sudden interest. And it was no wonder that it did, for grouse are excellent food and not wild or hard to shoot. If they landed upon his rocky fortress he was reasonably sure of being able to get one or two of them.

The wolves, too, saw the coming of the grouse, and watched them with almost equal interest. Wolves by no means despise grouse, and sometimes stalk a flock miles in the snowy wastes, seeking a chance to pounce on them. And so, as the flight came on, they were watched by the boy and his besiegers with equal interest.

Sandy ran within his shelter so as not to frighten the birds from alighting on the rocks, which appeared to be their intention. Some stunted bushes, covered with a sort of hard, red berry must have attracted them, so Sandy guessed, or perhaps the rocks were a regular feeding ground on account of these same berries. From the mouth of his rift Sandy could command a view of a patch of the berry-bearing bushes. If only the grouse would alight in that particular patch he would be sure of a good shot or two. But would they?

He watched their maneuvers with feverish interest. His very life might depend upon their actions within the next few minutes. On came the flock, and at last they were above the rock fort in which the boy had taken refuge. With burning eyes and rifle in hand, Sandy watched them from his place

of concealment.

But they flew on over the mouth of the rift to alight in some other feeding place. Sandy might have risked a shot as they passed over him. But to hit a bird on the wing with a rifle is a feat so seldom performed as to be noteworthy, and Sandy did not dare risk frightening them away altogether by sending a useless shot among them.

After all, he conjectured, they would probably come to the patch he was watching in the course of their wanderings about their feeding grounds. Throughout a great part of the morning he watched for the birds, but none appeared. Below, the wolves from time to time gave tongue. Sandy would have liked to creep out and try the effect of a shot among them, but he did not dare to risk showing himself for fear of alarming any of the grouse that might be approaching.

All at once he noticed among the brush patch some white moving objects. He knew that these must be the grouse. They had wandered around below him without his seeing them and were now feeding in the patch upon which he had his rifle sights trained.

But there was a long wait, severely trying to the patience, before the grouse began to move upward, making their way toward the rift and approaching a position in which it would be possible to fire at them with a reasonable prospect of success. Sandy's hands trembled with excitement as the grouse fluttered and stepped daintily among the berries, pecking them off right and left.

At last one of them, a fine, fat fellow, came into full view. Against the dark brown of the dead brush his body made a splendid target. Sandy set his teeth, steadied his aim and fired.

The grouse fluttered into the air and then fell back upon the snow, dead. The boy had time for one more shot before the flock took wing.

He could not refrain from a cry of joy as he dashed down the rocks to secure his game. For a time at least he could sustain life, even pent-up as he was in his rocky prison.



With a hideous roar, the boulder crashed downward and upon the trail.

CHAPTER XXXIII—OVER THE CREVASSE!

For one moment Tom beheld the tableau that had his helpless brother for its central figure.

Then with a hideous roar, like that of an express train rushing at top speed through a tunnel, the boulder crashed downward and upon the trail. Like figures that are wiped from a slate the mamelukes vanished, their lives crushed out in a flash under the huge rock.

"Jack!" shrieked Tom, as he saw.

"Sacre nom!" roared old Joe. "See!"

As the boulder flashed downward, rumbling into the crevasse at the side of the trail, the sled followed it!

In a small avalanche of snow and loosened shale Tom beheld his brother being swept over the brink to what appeared certain annihilation.

Tom reeled back against the inner wall of the trail. He felt sick and dizzy. For some moments he knew nothing. The world swam in a dizzy merry-go-round before his eyes.

Then he was conscious of somebody plucking at his sleeve. It was old Joe.

"Courage, mon enfant!" the old man was saying. "Eet may not be zee end. Wait here. Do not move. I weell go see. Whatever eet ees, I weell tell you zee truth."

Tom could say nothing in reply. All he could see or think of was that terrible picture. The downward rush of the loosened boulder, the sight of the obliterated mamelukes and then the last glimpse of the sled as, with Jack clinging helplessly to it, it had plunged over the brink in a swirl of loosened snow! The injured boy had not even had time to cry out or to utter a word. He had been carried to his doom in absolute silence. In fact, the whole thing had happened so quickly that only the horror of the sight had etched its every detail indelibly upon Tom's mind.

Old Joe cautiously approached the edge of the crevasse. He did not know but that there might be a treacherous "lip" of snow overhanging the brink. In that case, if he went incautiously he might share Jack's fate. For, although he had tried to instill courage into Tom, the old trapper hardly entertained a doubt but that Jack's dead body lay at the foot of the precipice.

As he made sure of his ground and then thrust his head over the edge, he received a joyful shock. Below him, in a deep snow, lay Jack and what was left of the sled.

Joe's voice stuck in his throat, but at length he mustered up his courage and hailed the boy lying beside the crushed and broken sled.

"Hullo! mon ami!"

He paused while his heart beat thickly. And then a yell of joy burst from his lips.

The figure lying below him moved painfully and the boy waved an arm. Then, as if the effort had been too much, he collapsed again.

But Joe was jubilant. He sang and shouted his delight and hailed Tom in stentorian tones.

"He lives! Le garçon, he lives!"

Tom, his face as white as a sheet, came to Joe's side. Together they gazed downward at the form of the boy on the snow bank below. It was a spot where the drifting snow, forced up the narrow canyon by some wild wind, had been piled within fifty feet of the trail. It was to this fact undoubtedly that Jack owed his life.

Beside him, and not very far away, was a huge hole in the snow like the crater of a volcano. It showed where the great boulder had bored its way into the soft snow with the velocity of a bullet. That hole gave them some idea of the mighty force that had wiped out the lives of the mamelukes.

Till the moment that Joe knew that Jack was alive he had given no thought to his precious dogs. But now he ran toward their mangled bodies and bent over them, the tears running down his old cheeks and his voice uplifted in lamentation.

He called to each dead beast by name and dwelt upon its particular virtues. His grief was so genuine and so heartfelt that Tom, urgent though the occasion was, yet felt some hesitancy in disturbing him until some minutes had passed.

Then the boy drew the old trapper's attention to the necessity of devising some means of rescuing Jack from the snow bank below the trail. As Tom addressed him the old man sprang to his feet. The tears still streamed down his cheeks and his face was working with grief. But he burst into a flood of self-reproach.

"Ah! I was forget zee enfant, zee brave garçon who lies below. Forgive me, please. My heart ees veree seeck. I love my malukes lak I love my children. Now eet ees ovaire. We must work. Afterward I bury my dog. En avant! Vitement! Courage!"

The old man smote himself upon the chest with each word as if to instill action and courage into his breast.

"We must have a rope," he said at length.

"Of course. We can do nothing without one. But where can we obtain one?"

They looked at each other despairingly. Without a rope they could do nothing. Yet Jack lay there below them, possibly in instant need of attention, and they were compelled to stand there helpless, unable to aid him.

It was one of the most trying moments of Tom's life.

CHAPTER XXXIV—A BATTLE ROYAL.

Sandy cooked and ate one of his grouse and resumed his watching. The cooking, thanks to his training in the ways of woodcraft, was an easy matter for him. He had a small, telescopic cleaning rod with him for his rifle. Having plucked and split the grouse, he impaled it on this and cooked it over the embers.

He would have liked bread and salt, but was in no mood to grumble over his meal. He was only too thankful to have secured it at all. He noted with delight that the wolves were beginning to get uneasy. The hunger that was gnawing at them was beginning to work upon their patience. As soon as they saw Sandy they set up a chorus of howls and yapping barks and once more tried to scale the rocks. One almost succeeded in doing this, but Sandy shot it before it had gained a foothold. It shared the fate of the dead leader, the ravenous pack leaving absolutely nothing of its remains.

It was well on in the day when the pack began to raise their nostrils and sniff the wind. Plainly something was in the air that Sandy knew nothing about. The wolves, however, appeared greatly excited. They got on their feet and began to mill about, barking and yapping in bewildering discord.

"I wonder what is the matter with them," thought Sandy, as he watched, and then it began to dawn upon him that something that either alarmed or excited the wolves must be approaching the rocks.

"Perhaps it is a man," thought Sandy, with a thrill of pleasurable anticipation. The next minute he almost began to hope that no human being was near unless there were several of them in a large party, for a lone hunter or trapper would be able to make only a feeble stand against the pack.

At length, far out on the snow fields, he made out a dark form lumbering along toward the rocks. For some time he could not think what it was, but at last he made out the nature of the creature.

It was a bear, and a big one, too. It was probably one of those surly old fellows that refuse to hibernate like most of their kind and stay out the winter through, hunting what they can and maintaining a scanty living till spring comes again.

A sensation by no means pleasurable possessed Sandy at the idea of such company on the rocks. The wolves were bad enough; but a bear! However, he reflected, his rifle was of good heavy caliber and he had plenty of ammunition left to dispatch the bear if it should prove troublesome. Moreover, as Sandy knew, bear meat is good meat when one is hungry; and although the bear now approaching the rocks was undoubtedly poor and thin, its carcass would have at least some meat upon it.

But now his attention was distracted from the bear by the actions of the pack. They set up their hunting cry, which differs from their ordinary yapping accents very widely. In fact, wolves appear to have a rudimentary language of their own.

The constant milling round and round and up and out ceased. A sudden hush settled down over the pack and then, like one wolf, they were off. Sandy saw, with a thrill, what was coming. Their game was the bear! A battle royal hung upon the issue.

With an interest which swallowed up all other considerations, Sandy watched as the pack swept down on the bear. The big, clumsy creature had already seen them coming and had quickened his pace to a lumbering gallop, which yet brought him over the snow at a good speed. He was heading directly for the rocks, where he could make a stand. His instinct must have told him that out in the open he would have but a poor chance against his savage opponents.

Sandy felt a flash of sympathy for the great bear as the pack made a detour and were on his heels. He saw one chisel-clawed foot shoot out and a big wolf leap high and fall down, rent from shoulder to thigh. The killing gave the bear a breathing space, for the pack fell on their comrade with hideous yelps. Their cannibal feast gave the bear time to increase the distance between himself and his swarming foes.

He reached the rocks with the pack close on his heels, and then seeing that he could not scale the rocks, the huge creature upreared himself against the boulders and prepared to battle for his life.

With a yelp the leader of the pack flung himself at the great hairy animal's throat. With one glancing sweep of his huge paw the bear disposed of him. One after another the wolves attacked their foe, only to be felled, wounded and bleeding, and to become victims to their own hunting mates.

"Good boy!" Sandy found himself saying. "Hit 'em again!"

His sympathies were all with the bear, making the fight of his life.

The wolves fell back. But the bear was not deceived. He maintained his stand against the rocks. The wolves crouched, glaring hatred and defiance at him. The ground about the battlefield was red now. Ten wolves had given up their lives. But the bear, too, showed marks of the combat. More than one pair of gleaming white fangs had met in his skin.

Sandy watched with the interest of someone who has a personal stake in a battle royal.

The wolves did not long remain quiescent. This time they tried new tactics. They attacked *en masse*. Like a swarm of bees they flung themselves on the great monarch of the northern forests. His steel-shod paws swept right and left. Yelping and howling the wolves fell before him. But as fast as some fell, others took their places.

The bear was bleeding now. Wounded in a score of places, he fought on against his overwhelming foes with royal courage. To the boy watching from the rocks above, there was something almost sublime in the fight for life that the great creature was making against such overwhelming odds. But plainly the contest could not last much longer.

Like great waves of gray the wolves were hurling themselves forward. They fought blindly and desperately and the bear's blows were growing weaker.

"I'll help you, old fellow!" breathed Sandy. "I'll take a hand in this myself. I've no more reason to love your enemies than you have."

He reached out to the rocks and secured his rifle. When he turned back he was just in time to see a gray form at the bear's throat. The wolf hung on while the big animal beat the air helplessly with his paws.

Bang!

Sandy's rifle cracked and the wolf dropped to the ground. But the others hardly seemed to notice

the intervention of the bear's ally. So numerous were they, that their ranks appeared to be hardly thinned by their losses.

Again and again, unbaffled by the tremendous courage and the sweeping blows of their adversary, they returned to the attack. Again and again, too, did Sandy's rifle crack, and each time a wolf drew his last breath. The battle was beginning to tell on the wolves as well as on the bear. Their leaders were gone. The pack began to fight in desultory fashion.

The bear's blows were feeble, but since that desperate assault on his throat, the wolves had not had the courage to close with him. Sandy's rifle completed their rout. At last they appeared to realize that they were pitted against the terrible fire tube of the white man as well as the steel-shod paws of the bear. They wavered, broke ranks and then, as if by a concerted resolution, they turned tail.

Straight for the forest they sped, while the bear, flinging his big bulk down on the snow began licking his wounds. Sandy looked down upon him. The big creature was an easy shot, pitifully easy, and his skin would make a fine trophy. Sandy raised his rifle to his shoulder and aimed it. He put it down and raised it again. But again his resolution failed him. "No, old fellow," he exclaimed aloud, "you helped me fight those gray demons and for all of me, you shall go where you like unharmed."

It was late afternoon before the wounded bear rose slowly to his feet, and without a backward glance shuffled off toward the south. Sandy watched him going across the snows for a long time. He was glad he had not shot him.

He turned from the trail of the wounded bear toward the north once more, and as he did so a shout burst from his lips.

Coming toward him over the snow were the figures of two men. With them was a dog sleigh, and they were traveling fast on a course that would bring them past the rocks.

Ten minutes later Sandy recognized in the travelers his uncle and the latter's partner, Mr. Colton Chillingworth.

CHAPTER XXXV—THE DEATH OF "THE WOLF."

Old Joe looked about him with despair in his eyes. When the sled had gone over the edge of the cliff, the ropes that bound the load to it and the harness of the dogs had gone with it. There was not so much as a foot of rope left by which they might devise a means of reaching Jack.

Tom groaned.

"What are we to do?" he demanded.

"We moost keep on and get help from La Roche. Eet ees not far now, mon garçon."

"But by the time we get back, Jack may be—may be——"

Tom could not complete the sentence.

For lack of something to say, old Joe gazed about him. Suddenly he gave a cry of delight. On a ledge not far above the trail there were growing a thick clump of cedar trees.

"Bien! I get rope queeck! Watch, mon garçon!" he cried.

"But how in the world!" began Tom.

"Nevaire min'. Len' me you' hunting knife. Eet ees bettaire dan mine. Bien! Now ole Joe, he get rope vitement."

The old trapper stuck Tom's knife in his belt and clambered up to the steep plateau where grew the cedar trees. He ascended one after the other, peeling off long strips of bark from each. At length he had a big pile of long, pliant, tough strips collected on the ground. He brought these down to where Tom stood watching him with puzzled interest, although he had an idea of the object of Joe's labors.

"Voila! Behold, mon ami! Now we soon have rope."

"You mean to make one out of these?"

"Oui! Many a time have I make rope lak dat."

"A strong rope?"

"A rope dat would hold a wild buffalo. Oui!"

"It was fortunate that those cedars were there, then."

"Mon garçon," solemnly spoke old Joe, "le bon Dieu put dem dere to remain till dere appointed time came."

The old trapper set Tom to work plaiting the ropes in strands of three lengths of bark. These were knotted together till they made a strong, pliable rope of the required length.

Then they went to the edge of the crevasse. Jack was sitting up with one of the blankets from the sled drawn about him for warmth. He looked up as they shouted down to him.

"Jack," hailed Tom, "do you feel all right now?"

"Sound as a bell, but I wish you could get me out of here."

"We are going to try to. Can you fasten this rope around you?"

As he spoke, Tom held up the bark rope.

"Easily. Lower it away. If it wasn't for this ankle of mine I might have tried climbing out, but I have had to cross that sort of exercise off my list."

The rope was sent snaking down to Jack, and was found to be amply long, for the steep bank was not more than forty feet high instead of the fifty they had estimated.

As its end came within his grasp, Jack seized the improvised rope and made a loop in it which he knotted under his arm-pits.

"All ready?" hailed Tom.

"All ready."

"Then hold tight and help yourself all you can."

"I sure will. But please don't let go!"

"Not if we have to go over ourselves," Tom assured him.

A stunted "rampick" grew close to the edge of the trail. The rope was passed around this, one turn being taken so that they could rest and still keep their grip on the rope if they desired. Then the long haul began.

Inch by inch, resting at times when they were out of breath, the two, the boy and the old trapper, hauled Jack up to a point where they were able to knot the rope about the "rampick" and lift their comrade up to safety with their hands.

Thanks to the softness of the snow bank into which he had been hurled, Jack had not received additional injury, except for a few bruises. They rested for a time and then old Joe and Tom resumed the tramp to La Roche's place. Carrying Jack between them and making frequent stops, it was dark when they reached there and found a warm welcome.

Tom promised La Roche liberal pay to take them back to Camp *Yukon Rover*, and after some demur the trapper consented. The next day he hitched up his dog sled for Jack's convenience, and they started on again under his guidance. They paused on the homeward trail to bury old Joe's faithful mamelukes, who had proven themselves, as have many others of the kind, faithful unto death.

Then the journey was resumed, for old Joe had promised to accompany the boys to their camp. Tom wanted his uncle and Mr. Chillingworth to meet the old man who had been such a good friend to them and helped them over so many stumbling blocks.

On their second day on the trail they espied an Indian coming toward them. It proved to be Pegic, the friendly Indian with whom they had camped. He set up a shout on seeing them.

"That Injun sure has suth'in on his mind," said La Roche, noticing such unusual signs of excitement in the son of a stoical race.

A few moments later the mystery was explained. Pegic, with some others of his tribe, had the day before found a white man with a broken neck at the foot of a precipice.

It had proved to be the "little gray man," whom they all had seen and of whose flight and theft they knew. Pegic, recalling the story of his friend, Joe Picquet, had searched among the dead man's effects, which lay scattered about him. Among them were a black fox skin of shimmering beauty, which the Indian gravely handed to the delighted Tom, and many other skins, including those nicked from old Joe.

How the Wolf had met his death was never discovered, nor did his companions ever appear to explain the mystery. One explanation was that he fell from the precipice during a fight, a theory which some marks on his body served to support.

With frontier justice, old Joe Picquet awarded to Pegic for his honesty the skins unclaimed by himself or by the boys. They amounted in value to a considerable sum, and the Indian was delighted with the gifts of his white friends.

The next day they reached the camp of the *Yukon Rover*, where they found Mr. Dacre, Mr. Chillingworth and Sandy. How much they all had to tell each other and how many hours of the night were consumed in the telling, you may imagine. Tom and Jack did not receive the scolding they had contemplated getting for the loss of the black fox. Their recovery of the skin and the hardships they had undergone on the trail, in the opinion of both their elders, more than counterbalanced any carelessness they might have shown.

The remainder of the winter was spent in trapping with old Joe Picquet, who was retained at a good salary as chief trapper. The old man, too, not long afterward, bought himself a new team of mamelukes, but fine as they are he declares that no sledge animals will ever be seen in the north country to equal his lost team, for which he mourned for many months.

When Jack's ankle healed, he took as active a part as any in the work and play of the *Yukon Rover* camp. In due course, spring came over the icy regions North of Fifty-three. The rivers were opened, and one fine day the *Yukon Rover* slipped her moorings and with a valuable cargo of live foxes—destined to start the first enterprise of its kind in the United States—she dropped down the Porcupine to the Yukon. On the bank a sorrowful figure stood waving goodbye. It was Joe Picquet. Long after a bend of the river shut him out from view, the boys could see him in their mind's eyes standing there, motionless as a figure of stone, calling:

"Good-bye! Come back some day!"

"I wonder if we ever will?" mused Sandy as they stood on the foredeck beneath the "Totem of the Frozen North."

"Who can tell?" rejoined Tom. "But whatever happens, we shall never forget our adventures up here."

"I shan't for one," said Jack with conviction.

"Nor I," echoed Sandy. "I feel different, somehow, bigger and older for it all."

"And so say we all!" cried Jack.

And here we must bid good-bye to the Bungalow Boys, leaving them, as Sandy expressed it, "bigger and older" and better equipped to meet life's trials and battles for the experiences that they had faced "North of Fifty-three."

THE END

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