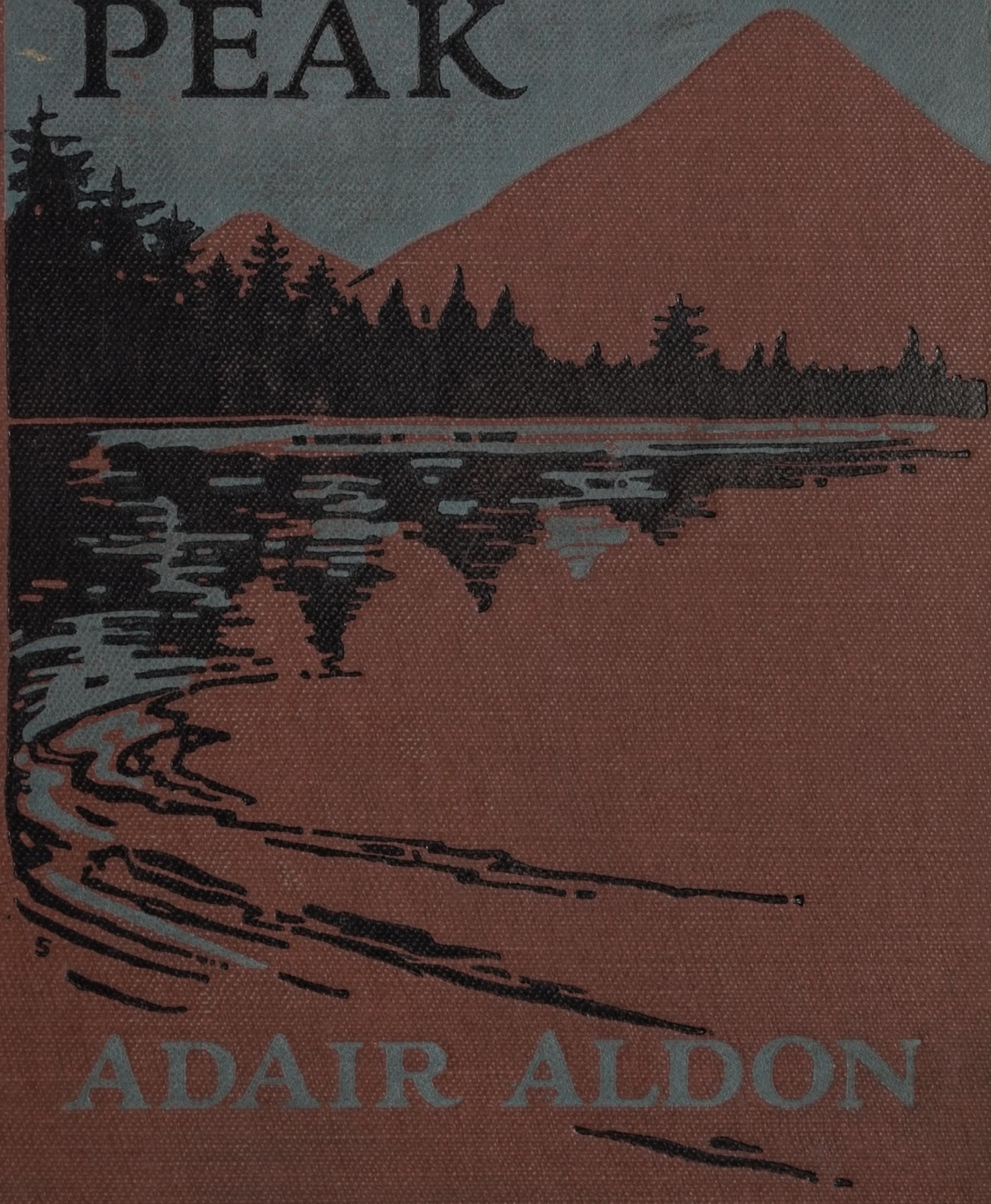
THE PIRATE OF JASPER PEAK



ADAIR ALDON

THE PIRATE OF JASPER PEAK

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Close to the hearth a big chair had been drawn and in this some one was sitting.

THE PIRATE OF JASPER PEAK

BY

ADAIR ALDON psend.
Author of "The Island of Appledore," etc.
Cornelia Lynde Meigs

WITH FRONTISPIECE

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THE PIRATE OF JASPER PEAK

CHAPTER I

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

THE long Pullman train, an hour late and greatly begrudging the time for a special stop, came sliding into the tiny station of Rudolm and deposited a solitary passenger upon the platform. The porter set Hugh Arnold's suitcase on the ground and accepted his proffered coin, all in one expert gesture, and said genially:

"We're way behind time on this run, but we come through on the down trip at six in the morning, sharp. You-all will be going back with us to-morrow, I reckon."

"No," replied Hugh, as he came down from the car step and gathered up his belongings. "No, I'm going to stay."

"Stay?" repeated the porter. "Oh—a week, I

suppose. No one really stays at Rudolm except them that are born there and can't get away."

Hugh shook his head.

"I am going to stay all winter," he said.

"The whole winter! Say, do you know what winter *is* up here?" the man exclaimed. "For the love of—"

A violent jolt of the train was the engineer's reminder that friendly converse was not in order when there was time to be made up.

"All right, sah, good-by. I hope you like staying, only remember—we go through every day at six in the morning less'n we're late. *Good*-by."

The train swept away, leaving Hugh to look after it for a moment before he turned to take his first survey of Rudolm and the wide sheet of blue water upon whose shore it stood.

Red Lake, when he and his father had first looked it up on the map, seemed a queer, crooked place, full of harbors and headlands and hidden coves, the wider stretches extending here and

there to fifteen, twenty, twenty-five miles of open water, again narrowing to mere winding channels choked with islands. Hugh would have liked to say afterward that he knew even from the map that this was a region promising adventures, that down the lake's winding tributaries he was going to be carried to strange discoveries, but, as a matter of fact, he had no such foreknowledge.

Indeed, it was his father who observed that the lake looked like a proper haunt for pirates and Hugh who reminded him that pirates were not ever to be found so far north. All the books he had seen, pictured them as burying treasure on warm, sunny, sandy beaches, or flying in pursuit of their prey on the wings of the South Sea winds. Pirates in the wooded regions to the north of the Mississippi Valley, pirates where the snow lay so deep and the lake was frozen for nearly half the year, where only through a short summer could the waters be plied by "a low, raking, black hulk" such as all pirates saĭl—it was not to be thought of! Even now, when Hugh

stood on the station platform and caught his first glimpse of the real Red Lake, saw the wide blue waters flecked with sunny whitecaps, the hundred pine-covered islands and the long miles of wooded shore, even then he had no thought of how different he was to find this place from any other he had ever seen. Both lake and town seemed to him to promise little.

For Rudolm, set in its narrow valley between the Minnesota hills, looked as though it had been dropped from some child's box of toys, so small and square were the houses and so hit-or-miss was the order in which they stood along the one wide, crooked street. There were no trees growing beside the rough wooden sidewalks, the street was dusty and the sun, even although it was October, seemed to him to shine with a pitiless glare. He walked slowly along the platform, wondering why Dick Edmonds had not come to meet him, thinking that Rudolm seemed the dullest and most uninteresting town in America and trying to stifle the rising wish that he had never come.

A soft pad, pad on the boards behind him made him turn his head as a man walked swiftly past. Hugh saw that his shapeless black hat had a speckled feather stuck into the band and that he wore, instead of shoes, soft rounded moccasins edged with a gay embroidery of beads. Plainly the man was an Indian. At the thought the boy's heart beat a little faster. He had not known there would be Indians!

His own being in Rudolm was simple enough, although somewhat unexpected. Hugh's father was a doctor, enrolled in the Medical Reserve since the beginning of the war but not until this month ordered away to France. The problem of where Hugh should live during his absence was a difficult one since Hugh had no mother and there were no immediate relatives to whom he could go. He had finished school but had been judged rather too young for college, and, so his father maintained in spite of frantic pleading, much too young to enlist.

"I'm sixteen," was the boy's insistent argument, but—

"Wait until you have been sixteen more than two days," was his father's answer.

"I could go with the medical unit, I know enough from helping you to be some use as a hospital orderly," Hugh begged, "I would do anything just to go to France."

"They need men in France, not boys just on the edge of being men," Dr. Arnold replied, "when you have had one or two years' worth of experience and judgment, then you will be some help to them over there. But not now."

"The war will be over by then," wailed Hugh.

"Don't fear," his father observed grimly, "there is going to be enough of it for all of us to have our share."

So there the discussion ended and the question of what Hugh was to do came up for settlement. There was a distant cousin of his father's in New York—but this suggestion was never allowed to get very far. Hugh had never met the cousin and did not relish the idea of going to live with him, "sight unseen" as he put it, on such short notice. It was his own plan to go

to Rudolm where lived the two Edmonds brothers, John, cashier of the bank there and a great friend of his father's, and Dick, a boy four years older than himself, whom he had met but once yet knew that he liked immensely. Several times John Edmonds had written to Dr. Arnold—

"If Hugh ever wants to spend any time 'on his own' we could find him a job here in Rudolm, I know. It is a queer little place, just a mining and lumbering town full of Swedes, but he might like the hunting and the country and find it interesting for a while."

It was the idea of spending the time "on his own" that made Hugh feel that thus the period of his father's absence might chance to seem a little shorter and the soreness of missing him might grow a little less. John Edmonds had answered their letters most cordially and had said that all could be arranged and Hugh need only telegraph the day of his arrival. The final preparations had been hastened by the coming of Dr. Arnold's sailing orders; the two had bidden each other good-by and good luck with resolute cheer-

fulness and Hugh had set forth on his long journey northward. He had never seen the Great Lakes nor the busy inland shipping ports with their giant freighters lying at the docks, nor the rising hills of the Iron Range through which his way must lead, but he noticed them very little. His thoughts were very far away and fixed on other things. Even now, as he walked slowly up Rudolm's one street he was not dwelling so much on his forlorn wonder why he did not see his friends, but was thinking of a great transport that must, almost at that hour, be nosing her way out of "an Atlantic port," of the swift destroyers gathering to convoy her, of the salt sea breezes blowing across her deck, blowing sharp from the east, from over the sea—from France. For he was certain, from all that he could gather, that his father was sailing to-day and was launching upon his new venture at almost the same time that Hugh was entering upon his own.

Somewhat disconsolately the boy trudged on up the hot empty highway, seeing ahead of him the big, ramshackle building that must be the

hotel and beyond that, at the end of the road, the shining blue of the lake. He was vaguely conscious that, at every cottage window, white-headed children of all sizes and ages bobbed up to stare at him and ducked shyly out of sight again when they caught his eye. Between two houses he looked down to a sunny field where a woman with a three-cornered yellow kerchief on her head was helping some men at work. She did not look like an American woman at all, Hugh thought as he stopped to watch her, but walked on abashed when even she paused to look at him, leaning on her rake and shading her eyes with her hand. He rather liked her looks, somehow, even at that distance, she seemed so strong, in spite of her slenderness and she handled her rake with such vigorous sun-burned arms.

He raised his eyes to the circle of hills that hemmed in the little town rising steeply from beyond the last row of houses and the irregular patchwork of little fields. They were oddly shaped hills, rolling range beyond range, higher and higher until, far in the distance there loomed

the jagged mass of one big enough to be called a mountain. The nearer slopes were covered with heavy woods of pine and birch, the dense trees broken here and there by great masses of rock, black, gray or, more often, strange clear shades of red.

"Red Lake derives its name," so the atlas had stated in its matter-of-fact fashion, "from the peculiar color of the jasper rock that appears in such quantity along its shores."

Hugh had never seen anything quite like that clear vermilion shade that glowed dully against the black-green of the pines. Across the slope of the nearest hill, showing clear like a clean-cut scar, there stretched a steep white road that wound sharply up to the summit and disappeared. He began to feel vaguely that although the town attracted him little, the road might lead to something of greater promise.

There were some men lounging before the door of the hotel when he reached it, miners or lumberjacks wearing high boots and mackinaw coats. They were talking in low tones and eyeing Hugh

with open curiosity. Just as he came to the steps, two figures shuffled silently past him, one, the Indian he had seen at the station, the other, a broad-shouldered, broad-waisted woman stooping under the heavy burden she carried on her back. The man, erect and unimpeded, strode quickly forward, but she stopped a moment to readjust the deerskin strap which passed over her forehead and supported the heavy weight of her pack. She turned her swarthy face toward Hugh and greeted him with a broad, friendly smile, then bowed her head once more and trudged on after her master. The boy, not used to the ways of Indian husbands and their wives, stood staring after the two in shocked astonishment.

"That's Kaniska, the best guide around here, and his squaw," he heard one of the men say to another. "She's the only Indian hereabouts the only one I ever heard of, really, that smiles at every one she meets. They are all of them queer ducks; no matter how well you know them you never can tell what they are thinking about.

I believe she is the very queerest of them all. The Swedes here call her Laughing Mary."

The two dark figures slipped out of sight around a corner and Hugh went up the steps into the hotel. The big, untidy room was apparently empty except for a bluebottle fly buzzing against the window. A faint snore, however, made Hugh aware that he was not alone and drew his attention to the office clerk, sitting behind the high desk, his head back, his heels up, sound asleep. The men outside had ceased talking, the entire village was so quiet that Hugh could actually hear a katydid singing its last summer song loudly and manfully down in the field.

"I never saw such a town before," he thought bitterly, "the whole place is either dead or asleep!"

He rapped sharply on the desk to arouse the clerk and was delighted to see him awake with a guilty jump.

"Can you tell me where I can find—" he began, but a voice at his elbow interrupted him.

Turning, he saw that the woman he had noticed in the field had left her work to come hurrying after him, and now stood, a little breathless, at his side. She had very kindly blue eyes, he observed, and a rather heavy Swedish face that lit up wonderfully when she smiled.

"You are Hugh Arnold, is it not so?" she said. "John Edmonds has told me that you would be here."

"Oh, yes," cried Hugh with relief, "I was just asking for him. Can you tell me where he is?"

The clerk, a sandy-haired, freckled youth, leaned over the desk and spoke eagerly.

"Why, haven't you heard—?" he said, but the woman cut him short.

"I will tell the boy of that," she announced with decision, then added to Hugh, "The two Edmonds are not here now, and it is best that you should come to stay at my house until they come again. This hotel is no fit place for you."

To this last frank statement the clerk agreed with surprising warmth.

"We have some queer customers here at times,"

he admitted, "and I won't deny there's a sight of them is ugly ones. There's that fellow from Jasper Peak blew in last evening and kept me up all night. When he and his friends are here there's always something doing."

"Do not begin to talk of them, Jethro Brown," the woman said a little impatiently, "or you will keep us here all day, and this boy is wanting his dinner, I make no doubt."

The clerk laughed a little, although without much merriment.

"I guess you are right, Linda," he replied, "and talk of that gang is only words wasted. You'd better go along home with Mrs. Ingmarsson, sonny, you couldn't be in better hands."

Much nettled at being called "sonny" by this person so little older than himself, Hugh merely nodded stiffly, took up his suitcase and followed Linda Ingmarsson to the door. Jethro, however, stopped them before they could get outside.

"How about your baggage," he inquired, "got a trunk or anything at the station?"

Hugh was not certain whether his trunk had arrived with him or not, so the clerk volunteered to telephone and find out. While he was doing so, Hugh stood waiting in the doorway, looking idly down the street and at the hills beyond. He noticed again the line of white highway that fascinated him curiously as it slanted upward through the dense woods. He turned to his companion who stood so silent beside him and ventured a question.

"What is that road, please?" he asked; "where does it go?"

Linda Ingmarsson looked up quickly toward the hill, while her face took on a new expression, wistful, sad, but somehow proud as well.

"That is my young brother Oscar's road," she said; "now it goes nowhere but some day—some day it will go far."

Hugh could not make very much out of this answer, but did not have time to ponder it long. Jethro announced that all was well with the baggage, so Hugh and Linda went out together. It

was a relief to him to think that he was with a person who knew at least who he was and why he had come.

"You are very good," he began shyly as they came out on the steps; "you should not—" but the rest of his sentence was never spoken.

The hot sleepy silence was broken suddenly by a shrill steam whistle, followed by another and another. A strident siren joined them; then came a deep blast from some steamer on the lake; then a loud clanging of bells added their voices to the tumult. For full five minutes the deafening noise continued until Hugh's ears beat with it and his head rang. The street had become alive with people, women with aprons over their heads, men in overalls, scores of children, as though each of the little houses had sent forth a dozen inhabitants. Down at a far corner Hugh saw the two Indians come into view again, the man with his head up, listening, like a deer, the woman with a pleading hand laid upon his arm. He brushed her aside roughly, and disappeared beyond the turn, she following meekly after. No

one noticed them except himself, Hugh felt certain, since every face was turned northward to the wooded rocky hill that overhung the town. Puffs of white steam rose here and there among the trees, showing the mine buildings or the lumber mills from which the whistling came.

This was no ordinary blowing of signals to mark the noon hour: the excitement, the anxious faces, the hideous insistence of the noise all told him that. Just at the instant that he felt he could not endure the tumult longer, silence fell.

"What is it, what is it?" he gasped his inquiry, and one of the men standing by the steps, the one who had spoken of Laughing Mary, began to explain.

"You see—about four days ago—" The words were cut off by a new outbreak of the clamor. It rose higher this time and lasted longer, it rolled back from the hills and seemed to echo from the ground itself. Twice it fell and twice broke out once more, a long fifteen minutes of unendurable bedlam. The man, undismayed, called his explanations into Hugh's ear,

sometimes drowned out by the uproar, sometimes left shouting alone in a moment of throbbing silence. What Hugh caught came in broken fragments.

"Two fellows—hunting—gone four days now —lost some way—these hills—blowing all the whistles at once—hoped—might hear—"

The screaming and clanging finally died away, leaving one long-drawn siren to drop alone, while Hugh's informant also lowered his voice to ordinary speech.

"We do that hereabouts when people get lost. Every whistle in three counties is blowing right now, so if they don't hear one and follow it, they may another. Sometimes it brings them back, more often it doesn't. It's an ugly thing to get lost in these hills."

"How long did you say they had been gone?" asked Hugh.

"Three—four—no, by George, it's five days. There's their pile of mail that's been collecting on the window ledge, and those first letters are five days old."

The man glanced at a pile of envelopes that lay just inside the window. The upper one was yellow and caught Hugh's involuntary attention as he stood by the door. The people were dispersing and the excitement evidently was over.

The telegraph envelope was one of those transparent-faced ones, showing the name and address inside. Half unconsciously Hugh read, "John Edmonds, Rudolm, Minnesota." He turned with a gasp and looked closer. A little of the typewritten line was visible below, "Thanks for letter, will arrive—"

It was his own message that had never been received. His two friends, his only two friends within a thousand miles, were the men who had vanished into the forest.

CHAPTER II

THE BROWN BEAR'S SKIN

IT was not until some hours after his dismaying discovery that Hugh was able to get any particulars of what had really happened to John and Dick Edmonds. A dozen people at once tried to tell him of the affair, putting in much comment on what they themselves thought and what they had said to friends at the time, with most confusing results. Although he was so bewildered, he began at least to understand one thing, that Rudolm was not at all the town he had believed it to be. He had considered it lonely, empty of friends, dull and lifeless, and behold, it was quite otherwise! In fifteen minutes—probably the exact length of time required by little Nels Larson to travel the whole length of the street and tell every one of the newcomer who was a friend of the lost Edmonds—words

of kindliness and sympathy began to pour in upon him. Long before the small, unofficial towncrier had come to the last house, the first sunburned face had appeared in Linda Ingmarsson's doorway, and the first heavy Swedish voice had asked for "that boy that vas Edmonds friendt." The shyness and reserve that usually stood firm between these people and any stranger, melted away at the sight of some one who was in trouble. It was, at last, by the very greatness of their proffered kindness that Hugh began to realize how serious his trouble was.

It was only the last visitor who gave him the actual facts of the affair, Nels Larson, Senior, a little elderly Swede with a wrinkled skin and puckered eyes that were mere pin-pricks of blue. He chanced to be left alone with Hugh and proved so shy and slow of speech that he was able to answer direct questions and make the truth clear without complicating it with opinions of his own. He said that the two Edmonds boys had gone hunting, and expected, so far as any one knew, to be gone but a day, that they had pos-

sibly meant to meet an Indian guide in the woods but had left Rudolm alone save for their dog. That one day of their absence had passed, and two, without causing any anxiety, that search had been made on the third day and the fourth and fifth, but without result.

"But does no one know which way they went?" asked Hugh desperately. "Couldn't they have got to some other town? Couldn't they just have taken a wrong road? Aren't people often lost that long and still able to get back?"

The other slowly shook his head.

"There's no town between here and Canada," he said; "no, indeed, nor for a hundred miles north of the border either. And there are no houses in the direction the Edmonds boys went, nor camps—and roads, bless you, these woods don't have roads. Just trees—and trees—and trees—and Heaven help the man who loses his bearings amongst them!"

"Are people still looking for them?" cried Hugh; "surely they haven't given up hope yet!"

"There is no hope," Nels answered with a

sigh; "we would look for a year if it would be of any use; but why go on searching when we know they cannot be found?"

He got to his feet to go, leaving Hugh still sitting, stunned, trying to think what this cruel news must mean to him. At the door Nels paused and, even without the encouragement of a question, actually volunteered a remark of his own.

"There is something I must tell you also," he said, "for others may say it to you and perhaps not with kindness. It is that John Edmonds left his accounts in bad shape at the bank, that his books are confused and there is talk of money missing. So there are some people, and presently there will be more and more, who say that even if he is not dead in the woods he will never come back."

"That is not true," cried Hugh, springing from his seat, "that cannot possibly be true."

"No," returned Nels, "I do not think it can be. There are many rascals in this neighborhood, but John Edmonds is not one of them."

He put on his battered old hat that was so big it came far down over his ears, took up his thick umbrella, opened the door and went out. Hugh sat by the table, his chin in his hand, thinking deeply long after Nels had gone. It was hard to know what to believe, what to think and above all what to do.

He could hear Linda Ingmarsson talking to her children in the next room and presently one small boy came in and seated himself, without saying a word, on a chair by the door. He seemed to think that politeness demanded his sitting with the guest, although to talk to him was far beyond his power. Linda's husband stood at the door a moment, but went away again. He was a big, quiet man, seeming much like an overgrown edition of his small son. Hugh, beginning to look about him, concluded that this room was quite the cleanest place that he had ever seen. The boards of the floor were worn smooth with much scrubbing, the copper kettles on the shelves winked in the firelight. In one corner stood a quaintly carved cupboard, painted a most bril-

liant blue, that must surely have come from Sweden, or have been made by the patient labor of Ingmarsson's great rough hands. In the center of the table was another bit of carving, a really beautiful wooden bowl with a raised wreath of water lilies fashioned about its edge. It was full of moss and gay red bunches of partridge berries. The Ingmarsson child saw Hugh's eyes resting upon it and, with a mighty effort, managed to speak.

"My Uncle Oscar, he made it," the youngster said in his little Swedish voice; "he brought it to us with the berries in it the last time he came from the mountain."

It was his only attempt at conversation and, although bravely undertaken, lapsed immediately into frightened silence.

Linda, entering just then, finally broke the quiet of Hugh's reflections.

"Supper will soon be ready," she said. "Carl, take the visitor upstairs and show him where to put his things."

The small guide went obediently before Hugh,

climbed the narrow stairs and opened the door of the guest's room, a tiny place with sloping ceiling and square dormer windows, everything shining with the same cleanliness so evident below. Carl opened the cupboard doors, pulled out the drawers of the press and finally, evidently thinking that hospitality demanded his speaking again, pointed to a picture on the wall.

"That is the two Edmonds," he said; "did you know them?"

Hugh, looking closely at the faded little photograph, managed to recognize Dick Edmonds, but had no knowledge of the older brother whom he had never seen. Beside Dick, with his nose in his master's hand, stood a big, white dog.

"That is Nicholas," announced Karl; "he came from Russia. We Swedes do not like Russians, but we all loved Nicholas. John Edmonds said he used to belong to a prince in Russia, so he was different from our dogs. He used to laugh and call him the Grand Duke. With men and other dogs Nicholas was very proud but he always

would play with us. So we liked him. And how he could run!"

"He is a beauty," Hugh agreed heartily; "I should like to see him."

He turned toward the window where the hinged sash stood open and through which he could look out at the sunset and at the distant mountain black against a flaming sky. He could see most of the little town also where the children were running home and men were coming from their work and gay voices could be heard calling greetings from one doorway to another. The tiny houses had a comfortable, cozy look, now that he knew what warm-hearted people lived within. Carl came to his side, seeming to feel more at ease, and began to point out one place after another.

"That is Nels Larson's house," he said, "and that is the landing where the boats come in from the lake and that," pointing to the mountain, "is Jasper Peak. My Uncle Oscar lives way out beyond there."

"He lives on the mountain?" said Hugh; "that must be very far away."

"No, not on the mountain," corrected Carl, "beyond it. On the mountain there lives a—a—another man."

"What sort of a man?" inquired Hugh, caught by the little boy's change of tone.

"Oh, a strange man. He is half Indian; people call him a pirate; his name is Jake."

"Has he no other name?" asked Hugh; "is every one so afraid of him as you are?"

"His whole name is Half-Breed Jake, and, yes, every one is afraid of him except just my mother and her brother Oscar and maybe Dick Edmonds and the dog Nicholas. Every one else."

"Does he live out there on the mountain all alone?" Hugh inquired.

"Yes, he will not let any one live near him. He will not let any one shoot in his woods or fish in his streams or paddle a canoe on his end of the lake."

"And are they all his?" In spite of being so

absorbed in other things Hugh was growing interested.

"Not really his, he just says they are," Carl explained vaguely. "No one dares go near his place now after—after some things that have happened. The Indians will do anything he says, they and even some of the Swedes say that the bullets from his gun can shoot farther than any other man's, and that his ill will can find you out no matter where you hide. Yes, we call him the Pirate of Jasper Peak."

"But you say your Uncle Oscar lives out there too?"

"Oh, yes," assented Carl, "but you know with my Uncle Oscar it is all different."

Linda called from below, causing her small son to rush clattering down the stairs and leave Hugh alone. He stood long by the window watching the sunset fade and pondering deeply.

"So there can be pirates this far north after all," he was thinking, "and father was right."

With the thought came a sudden pang of home-

sickness, a longing for his father, for the comfortable, ordinary life at home, for everything that was usual and familiar. What would become of him here, he wondered, what could be the end of this venture "on his own"? What a strange place it was to which his journey had led him, what strange people he had met or heard of that day, the clumsy, friendly Swedes, kind-hearted Linda Ingmarsson, that mysterious Jake out on the mountain, that brother Oscar whose road it was that climbed the hill. He ran through the list over and over and found that his mind, with odd insistence, kept coming back to the road that "now went nowhere but some day would go far."

The announcement that supper was ready interrupted his reflections, after which he received a pressing invitation from Carl to go with him to get the mail. Rudolm knew no such luxury as a postman, it went every night to fetch its letters at the general store where John Benson sold meat and calico and mackinaw coats. The little postmistress who sorted the mail behind her own

official counter was an expert at her task, for no one besides herself could make head or tail of some of the Swedish and Finnish scrawls that came from the Old Country or the French-Canadian flourishes on the addresses of the picture postcards. No one else could have remembered that Baptiste Redier liked to have his papers accumulate for six months while he was away at the lumber camp, or that Gus Sorenson must not be trusted with the Malmsteads' mail if he had been drinking, or that it was a kind act to pretend to look through the pigeonholes when an Indian asked for mail, even though it was well known that none of these Chippewas ever got a letter. "Stamp-stamp," would go the marking machine behind the window, "stamp"—a long pause and then another brisk "stamp-stamp." No matter in what a hurry were the patrons of the Rudolm postoffice, they must wait, every man, woman and child of them, until Miss Christina had read all the postals.

The little place was already crowded when Hugh arrived, mostly with men and children, for

the women did not often come for the mail, it was their hour for washing dishes. Hugh sat down on a bench in the corner to listen to the talk going on about him in all degrees of broken English. It concerned mostly the lost Edmonds boys, but occasionally drifted back to the universal subject, the war, for this was the time when the American army was gathering in France, when Russia was crumbling, when the first pinch of winter was beginning to be felt abroad and the cry was going up over all the world to America for bread. By and by the general talk died away and all began to listen to some one who was airing a grievance very loudly on the other side of the room. He was a big man with a rough corduroy coat and a rougher voice which he raised very loud in the height of his indignation.

"I tell you there wasn't a better bale of furs in the whole Green River country. I got some myself, trapping, and bought some from the Indians, and there wasn't one pelt but was a beauty, but the brown bear skin was the best of all. Five

hundred dollars I would 'a' got for them, just that little bale, not a cent less—and when I come to myself again every hide and hair of them was gone!"

"And you can't tell who took them?" questioned one of his audience.

"I can't tell but I could guess right enough. I didn't see nobody, only a billion or two stars when I was hit over the head in the dark, and that was all. There's only one man around here who will do that kind of dirty work and he hails from Jasper Peak. That's the kind of fur trading he likes to do, let some other man go through the snow and the cold, spending his good money, risking his life, tramping along his line of traps or from one Indian camp to another, wheedling the red rascals into selling their furs, and just as a fellow's nearly home again, dreaming about the profit there's going to be this time, here comes some one sneaking behind in the dark and the whole thing's gone!"

"You was lucky he did not shoot you, Ole Pet-

erson," commented another friend. "He does not care much who he shoots, that Jake he doesn't."

"I would just like to meet up with him somewhere," Peterson returned quickly. "A man can't do nothing when they sneak up on him in the dark, but if I ever have the chance, why, I'll just show him once. I wouldn't have sold those furs for less than seven hundred dollars, I swear. And that bear skin, I tell you, was a prize."

"Wass it so beeg?" asked an old Swede, sitting in the corner near Hugh.

"No, sir, it wasn't big, but it was rare. Just a bear cub it was, but a cub that had turned out blond by some freak and surprised his old black mother some, I'll be bound. Not the brown, even, that grizzly bears are, but a light, gold, yellow brown. The Indian who had it vowed he wouldn't sell it, not for any price, but at last I got it away from him. And I'd like just to meet the fellow that stole it from me. Shooting would be too good, I'd—"

Miss Christina opened her window at this point

and put an end to the fearful threats of Ole Peterson. Hugh received his mail almost the first of all, a short and very hasty note from his father, which did not say openly that they were about to embark but contained more than one veiled hint to that effect. He read it through three times, trying to make the most of the censored information it contained. Then, his attention caught by the complete silence that had fallen around him, he looked up to see what had happened.

Nothing, apparently, had really occurred except that a newcomer had entered abruptly and banged the door behind him. Yet as he strode over to the middle of the room every person in the crowded place drew back, the big Swedes elbowing the quick Canadians, the children standing on tip-toes to peer under the arms or around the shoulders of their protecting elders. The space that had been filled a moment before by a chattering, friendly group, became all in an instant silent and empty with the big man standing quite alone.

He was very big, as Hugh noticed at first glance, taller than any other man there, and strong and heavy in proportion. One of his broad shoulders sagged a little under the strap of a heavy pack which he presently unbuckled and dropped upon the floor. His hair was very long and black under his slouch hat and his skin was so dark that Hugh felt sure he must be an Indian.

"Any mail for me?" he called across to the postmistress without troubling himself to turn around.

Miss Christina had disappeared somewhere into the protecting depths of the postoffice department. Her voice rose, trembling, from behind the partition,

"I think so," she said, "but it's been here some time. I will have to look it out."

"No hurry," returned the man with an insolent laugh at the quavering of her voice; "don't disturb yourself so much. I can wait."

He threw himself down upon one of the benches and pushed back his hat. Hugh felt something like a shudder when he first saw his

eyes; they were blue, a pale unlovely blue that looked terrifyingly strange, set in his dark face.

"Hello, friends," the stranger continued genially. "I thought I would look in and get my mail before I was off down-State to sell my furs. I've got a fine lot this year, the best that's come out of Canada for a long while."

There was no answer, unless one could call little Eva Stromberg's frightened squeak a reply, or the uneasy shifting of old Nels Larson's big feet.

"Would you like to see what I've got?" the man went on, seemingly quite untroubled by the lack of friendliness. "You won't see anything so fine again for quite a month of Sundays, nor anything that's worth so much money, you poor penny-pinchers. Come here, sis," he added to one of the smaller children; "you would like to see my furs, now, wouldn't you?"

The little girl, afraid to disobey, advanced with something of the air of a charmed bird, and came trembling to his side. He opened the big pack and spread out its contents on the floor.

"That's otter," he said to her; "don't be frightened, just feel of it. Isn't it silky and soft?"

She passed her hand obediently over the silvery brown surface and then, bursting into terrified sobs, ran to take refuge behind her father. The stranger, undisturbed, went on spreading out his wares.

"This wolf skin now should bring me something big," he said. "Of course wolf isn't much compared to otter but I've never seen finer fur. Step up, folks, and look, it's a dead wolf that isn't going to bite you."

It was Hugh alone who felt sufficient curiosity to come nearer. A wolf skin, an otter skin! He had never seen one before. He came closer and closer as the man unrolled more and more of the soft, furry pelts.

"Now this—"

He stopped, for even he must take notice of the gasp that went through the crowd, a gasp of surprise and indignant protest. Only Hugh, eager and excited, took no notice of the strange tension

in the air, so astonished was he at the sight of what lay in the man's hands.

"Why," he blurted out, "it's Ole Peterson's brown bear skin!"

A quiver seemed to run through the whole of the crowd, while the silence became so complete that Miss Christina's clock upon the wall went tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, three times before any one seemed to move or before the storm of the stranger's fury broke forth.

"Whose did you say?" he snarled, rising suddenly and standing over Hugh, a threatening, towering figure. "Whose did you say it was?"

Hugh thought afterwards that never, as long as he lived, would he forget how terrible were those shifty, pale-blue eyes in that lowering face. He could never say it was real courage, but only rash, hot anger that made him answer defiantly,

"I said it was Ole Peterson's. He told us it was the only one in the country and that it was stolen from him."

The man gave a queer, harsh laugh.

"Ole, come here," he ordered.

There came out from the corner a very different Peterson from the reckless, angry person who had voiced his wrongs a few moments before. This poor creature was fairly sallow with terror, and was apparently trying to make his large figure as small and inconspicuous as possible. He swallowed convulsively two or three times before he was able to speak.

"What is it, Jake?" he questioned meekly.

The man called Jake flung the skin toward him.

"Is that yours?" he asked in a tone that said plainly, "Claim it if you dare."

Ole passed his hand lovingly over the lustrous brown gold of the thick fur. He held it up so that all could see the shape of the chubby little bear cub whose coat it once had been, and the dark hairy paws that still dangled from it. He smoothed the dark shadings of the fur and looked at them with longing.

"Is it yours?" Jake insisted, turning from Hugh to advance a threatening step toward Ole.

"No," said Peterson at last in a frightened husky voice. "No, it ain't mine, Jake."

"Then what the—?" The stranger made one stride toward Hugh and caught his shoulder in a grasp that made the bones grind together. The boy looked about him desperately, surely some one of all these men would come forward to his aid. He saw pity in the eyes of many of them, and one or two making a movement toward him and then drawing back. It needed only that to prove to him at last that this was the much-feared Pirate of Jasper Peak.

Yet before either could move further, before Jake could finish his question, help came from an unexpected quarter. The door beside them opened and closed quickly, and Linda Ingmarsson came in. The wind had blown her yellow hair from under her kerchief, her cheeks were glowing and her eyes bright. She made a single step to Hugh's side and laid her strong, firm fingers on Jake's crushing hand. He withdrew it as quickly as though something had stung him.

"So you are at your old bullying ways," she

said scornfully; "you found long ago that there was one woman not afraid of you, now you find a boy. It is like you to believe that he would fear you as the rest do, but this time you are wrong. And you know that there is nothing that can make you so angry as to find some one you cannot terrify."

He muttered something but did not speak aloud.

"Come," she said to Hugh, and, "Come, Carl," she added as she held out her hand to her small son and moved toward the door. But Jake barred the way.

"He tried to tell me that bear skin wasn't mine," he blustered. "He said it was Ole Peterson's, but Peterson vows it isn't his. What do you make of that? Has he any right to call me a thief?"

Linda answered quite undisturbed.

"He is a shrewder boy than are we Swedes," she said, "and has been quick to see the truth. Yet he is not the only one to know you for a thief."

The man's blazing eyes narrowed into slits and his grating, harsh voice was full of suppressed fury.

"There are not many who have dared to call me that, Linda Ingmarsson," he said, "and whoever does it, whether man, woman or boy, will live to be bitterly sorry. John Edmonds did, and where is he? Out there in the woods, I hear, lost, dead beyond a doubt, he and his brother, the worthless two of them. I heard the whistles blowing as I came down the valley, and I thought to myself, 'You can blow them until they split, but you will never call him back.' " He lowered his voice, yet still spoke so that all could hear—"He didn't want to be called back."

"John Edmonds and his brother will come back," insisted Linda steadily, "for they have friends who believe in them and will help them still. Whatever John has left in confusion he will make plain and straight when he returns."

"What friends has he?" cried Jake scornfully. "Before another day has passed every one in Rudolm Valley will know just why they went,

both of them, and then where will their friends be?"

"There is still my brother Oscar," returned Linda.

"And do you think your brother Oscar can save them? He does not even know what has happened, and if he did, what help could he give?" Jake laughed harshly. "He is having all that he can do to save himself, these days, has Oscar Dansk."

Hugh could feel Linda's hand tighten on his arm as though, in spite of herself, she winced under the last words. He stepped in front of her to face their common enemy, but she spoke before he could.

"The Edmonds are not friendless," she declared. "No matter what all the world may say there will still be some of us who know they are honest and who will find and save them in the end."

She moved to the door, and Jake, seeing that he could no longer block her way, suddenly

stepped back and flung it open with a great flourish.

"I wish you luck," he said; "it will be a long task, finding and saving two men who either have fled the country or are already dead."

Linda turned back to speak her last word as she and Hugh and Carl went out together into the dark.

"I know they have not fled the country," she said, "and I am certain they are not dead. Had anything happened to them, their dog would have been here to tell us. So I know they are alive since Nicholas has not come back."

CHAPTER III

LAUGHING MARY

HUGH sat in his little room for a long time that night, reviewing his adventures of this scant half day in Rudolm. He found it very difficult to decide what to do, in the light of this unexpected turn of his affairs, the disappearance of the two Edmonds. Of one thing he was hotly certain, that John Edmonds had not vanished of his own will. The very fact of Hugh's being there, urged to come by both the brothers, showed that their absence was entirely unplanned. He was less certain, however, of the chances of their ever coming safe home again. Linda Ingmarsson was sure they would, but she was only one woman holding her opinion against a score of men. He wished that he could make some effort of his own to find his friends, wished it more and

more as he went slowly over the situation and realized how desperate it was. What could he do, a boy, alone, knowing nothing of woodcraft and the cruel mysteries of the forest? Nothing, reason told him plainly, absolutely nothing.

Quite evidently he must go back to that cousin in New York who was to help him if things went wrong. That things had gone wrong, from the moment of his getting off the train, onward through his terrifying interview with Half-Breed Jake, was not to be denied. This seemed to be one of the few certain facts in the whirling confusion of his affairs. He recollected now how the friendly porter had felt misgivings as to the length of his stay in Rudolm and had reminded him that the train that would carry him back to the world he knew, would go through at six o'clock in the morning. After long pondering, he decided to take it.

Just as he was about to go to bed he heard a sound at the window, a handful of pebbles striking against the glass. He got up to look out and saw some one standing on the doorstep below.

"It is I, Jethro Brown," called a cautious voice. "Can you come down? I want to talk to you."

Hugh took up his candle and stole on tiptoe down the stairs. All of the Ingmarssons were sound asleep. He contrived to shoot back the bolts and open the front door without a sound. The clerk from the hotel, looking more lank and awkward than ever in the candle light, stood waiting outside.

"I saw your window was bright and I had some things to tell you," he said. "I am sorry to bring you down."

Hugh blew out the candle and they sat down together on the doorstep.

"It is all right," he said; "you wouldn't have found me to-morrow. I am going away early in the morning."

"Going?" echoed the other in a tone of the greatest disappointment and dismay. Then he heaved a deep sigh.

"Well," he remarked, "I suppose it is the only thing you can do, but somehow I had kind of hoped you were going to stay."

"Why?" Hugh stared in astonishment, for what difference could it make to any one whether he remained in Rudolm or went away?

Jethro sat staring at the ground between his feet and shuffled them uneasily several times.

"That Half-Breed Jake has been at the hotel all evening," he said at last. "He has been talking a long time about the Edmonds boys and how they have disappeared because they had to. It is true that John's books at the bank were pretty badly mixed and they have had an expert up to go over them, but nothing has been proved yet, one way or the other. It seemed to me, at last, that Jake talked rather too much. He always hated the Edmonds boys, they were too square and honest and they had blocked him more than once in some of his devilment. If there is a mean or a cruel or a crooked way of doing a thing, he will do it. That's Jake."

"But why is every one so afraid of him?" inquired Hugh. "He is only one man against all of you."

"It is just part of living here to be afraid of

him, I suppose, and to try to keep out of trouble with him," Jethro answered slowly. "The Indians fear him so much that they will do anything he says; he understands them as very few men do and he uses his knowledge to get what he wants. A man who can control these Chippewas has a lot of power. There is a white deer that ranges these woods once in a long time and is supposed to bring bad luck. The Indians have a saying that whoever sees the white deer or opposes Half-Breed Jake is sure to die inside a year."

"But the Swedes have better sense than that!" exclaimed Hugh.

"The Swedes are very superstitious too, and once they are convinced of a thing it is hard to make them change. And it does seem that whoever stands in Jake's way is cursed with bad fortune until he gives it up. There are only a few that ever dared stand out against him, such as the Edmonds boys, and where are they?"

Hugh sat quiet, watching the moon come up over the eastern rim of the valley. He found Jethro as talkative as the Swedes were silent,

but he felt no very great interest in these accounts of Half-Breed Jake, a man whom he instinctively hated and would, he hoped, never see again. Only wonder as to why Jethro wished him to stay in Rudolm and what all these details had to do with himself, held his lagging attention.

"Do you see that road," Jethro went on heatedly, "that road yonder that leads over the hill? That would have meant a lot to the people here, but it came to nothing. It was to be built through the woods as far as Jasper Peak and would have opened up the country at the upper end of the lake. Jake stopped it. He calls all that country his, and is bound to keep the fishing and the hunting and trapping for himself. He killed the plan with open threats and secret lies: at first the men went at it with a rush, but in the end somehow the whole thing fell through. It was the first time he ever scored a real victory off Oscar Dansk."

Hugh turned, his interest caught at last.

"That is one person I want to know about," he said. "Who is this Oscar Dansk?"

"He is Linda Ingmarsson's younger brother,"

Jethro answered. "You know that much and it is hard to tell you a great deal more. Oscar isn't like the rest of us. I don't quite know what to say about him; he is always dreaming about something big, some way. His father must have been quite a great person back in Sweden; he was poor to the end of his life, just as every one in Rudolm is poor, but you can see that Oscar and Linda are not quite the same kind of people as the rest."

"He doesn't live here in Rudolm?" Hugh said.

"Not now, he lives out beyond Jasper Peak. He is proving up on some kind of a claim, homesteading, right in the country that Half-Breed Jake calls his. He was here in April when war was declared and went down pell-mell to Duluth to enlist, wanted to go into the Navy, I think, these Swedes all do. But they wouldn't take him, or for the army either, I don't know why. He came back in a few days, looking grim and set and not saying a word to any one. He went right off into the woods again and we've scarcely seen him since. It was a cruel disappointment,

I think, as bad as when he couldn't build his road."

"But why did he care so much about the road?"

Hugh's curiosity about that mysterious highway had grown greater and greater, yet even now it was not to be satisfied.

"He had something big in his mind," Jethro said vaguely, "so big I never quite understood it. He was a fellow who could always see farther than the rest of us, I think. John Edmonds used to say he did, although even he lost faith in the plan about the road at last, and that nearly broke Oscar's heart. Some people even said they had quarreled, but I don't believe it. Oscar wasn't the sort to bear a grudge."

Jethro thrust his hands deep into his pockets and turned at last to face Hugh squarely.

"That is what I am getting at," he said. "Oscar Dansk can find John and Dick Edmonds if any man on earth can do it. But some one would have to go out through the woods to tell him, otherwise it might be weeks before he hears what

has happened. And the only person to go is you."

"I?" cried Hugh in amazement, *"I?* Why, that's impossible."

"All right," said the other briefly, "I was afraid maybe you would take it that way. Of course, after all, you oughtn't to try it. Well, good-night."

He shambled off into the dark, leaving Hugh still staring in astonishment. He wished that he had not said quite so decisively that the plan was impossible, so that at least he might have heard more of it. How strange it was that, after leading up to the subject so long, Jethro should have dropped it so quickly. Probably he himself knew that it was impossible as well as did Hugh.

Very slowly he went up to bed, still wondering. It was in vain that he tried to compose his mind to sleep: he could not, for thinking of what Jethro had said. For an hour he tossed and turned and puzzled and pondered. At last he got up and went to the window, thinking that he might feel sleepy if he sat there for a while.

The moon was very bright now, so that all the little square houses showed plainly, as did the white expanse of the empty street. Nothing stirred in all of the sleeping town; the very quiet and peace did indeed make him feel drowsy almost at once. He yawned a great yawn and was just about to turn from the window when a moving shadow caught his eye. Some one was coming down the deserted street, some one who walked noiselessly but swiftly and with great determination. It was a woman, he could see, an Indian squaw, with broad, bent shoulders and heavy dark hair. Even at that distance and in the deceiving moonlight he felt certain that it was the woman he had seen before, Laughing Mary.

She turned in at the gate and came hurrying up the path, but she did not reach the door. Two men followed her, one lithe and stooping, the other tall and moving with great strides—there was no doubt in Hugh's mind that it was Half-Breed Jake. He seized the woman by the shoulder and whirled her about just as, very plainly, she was on the point of mounting the doorstep

and knocking at the door. There followed an altercation, whispered, yet so full of fierceness and passionate gesture that Hugh, at his window, could feel the fury of their quarrel even there. It was almost like watching a dance of shadows, so noiseless did they manage to be, although now and then he caught a low-voiced sentence, couched in guttural Chippewa, and once, to his surprise, he heard his own name, spoken very distinctly by Laughing Mary.

She was not smiling now but speaking volubly, gesticulating, urging and insisting something, to which Jake slowly and determinedly shook his head. She kept pointing to the bale of furs still under his arm and seemed to be voicing her desire with such violence in the face of his continued refusal that finally, in angry impatience, he raised his arm as though to strike her. She winced and cowered, but still persisted, advancing her dark wrinkled face almost into his to utter her last word. Whatever she said seemed to have effect, for Jake's arm dropped to his side and, muttering angrily, he stooped down to open his pack and

give her what she demanded. What the coveted article was, Hugh could not see, for the Indian husband, Kaniska, was standing in the way.

Then all three went out quickly through the gate, as silent and as swift as ghosts. For the first time, Hugh noticed that Jake, who walked behind, moved with a slight unevenness in his giant stride.

It had grown so late that Hugh in spite of his curiosity and excitement was sleepy at last. He lay down again, going over and over once more the puzzles of the day. What ought he to do? What had these strange people to do with him? Why did Jethro say that he was the only one to go on that impossible errand, why did the fellow not go himself? If there were really a chance of his helping the Edmonds boys, Hugh would have risked anything gladly, but this plan was such absolute madness! No, thought Hugh, he had made up his mind, he would not change it again, he would go to-morrow.

He arose at five, packed his belongings and, on hearing Linda stirring in the kitchen, went down

to explain to her. She heard him through in silence and without protest.

"I suppose you must know best," was her only comment.

When he made an attempt to thank her for all her kindness, she refused to listen.

"The Edmonds boys are my friends," she said, "and for them I would do much. This was nothing."

She came to the door to bid him good-by and stood watching him as he went down the path to the gate. The morning mist lay heavy in the little valley and stretched upward in wreaths over the hills. The air was cold, so that he turned up his coat-collar and walked very briskly. Once he looked back and saw that Linda Ingmarsson had come out to the gate and stood leaning over it almost as though she were about to call him back. She made no sign, however, so he turned once more and walked on toward the station. He found that he was early, that the little building was still locked and that he must sit down on the narrow bench at the edge of the platform and

wait. The mist lifted, little by little, until he began to see the miles of blue water, the hills and the vast unbroken forest sweeping down to the water's edge. How would it be, he thought with a shudder, to be lost in that unending maze of green?

Presently he heard footsteps coming up the stairs and around the corner of the building. He glanced up quickly and saw that it was Jethro Brown again, wearing a dingy straw hat on the back of his head and carrying a suitcase. He loitered at the other end of the platform and would not have come near, but Hugh arose from his seat and went straight to him.

"You must tell me," he said, "why you thought I was the only one to carry that news to Oscar Dansk. I have thought of nothing else all night."

Jethro flushed.

"I shouldn't ever have spoken of it at all," he stammered, "I don't know what possessed me. I just got to thinking and felt that something ought to be done, that some one ought to go. But I

should not have come to you, of course you couldn't do it."

"If I did go," Hugh persisted, "how would I ever find the way?"

He did not really know himself why he asked the question.

The other turned and pointed.

"You would follow that road to the top of the hill and where it ends you would find a trail that runs across the range of forest beyond. It leads to a little Chippewa village on Two Rivers; there's an Indian boy there, Shokatan, who could guide you the rest of the way. He got to be quite a friend of mine when he came in to the Indian school near here and he knows English, though he probably won't be willing to speak it now. I could give you a letter and I know he would help you."

It was plain that Jethro had thought it all out.

Hugh still stood pondering.

"Why don't any of the Swedes go?" he asked, "aren't they willing?"

"They are willing enough," Jethro returned,

"but they have given up. They say there is no hope. Once they have made up their minds there is no changing them."

"And why," questioned Hugh bluntly, "don't you go yourself?"

"Oh," Jethro answered simply, "I forgot to tell you that. Of course I would go only I am leaving to-day. I've enlisted. I've got my orders. I'm going to Fort Snelling."

"Oh," cried Hugh, "how did you manage? My father wouldn't let me. How old are you?"

"I am a little under age but I made them take me," replied Jethro. "There wasn't much trouble about getting consent, I haven't any one that my going would make any difference to."

Hugh's whole view of the affair underwent a sudden and tremendous change. If Jethro was going to the war, why, that made everything different! He must think and think quickly, for, far off among the hills, he heard the whistle of the approaching train.

"Well," Jethro said, breaking into his reverie, "I will be taking the forward coach when the

train comes in, so I may not see you again. Good-by."

He reached out his huge, red hand and Hugh shook it, still half dazed.

"Did you write that letter to the Indian?" he said, and, as the other nodded, "Give it to me. I haven't decided yet but I—I might need it."

Jethro pulled a paper from his pocket and handed it to him.

"No, no," he cried, immediately after, "it is not the right thing at all for you to go. Do not think about it again. Here's the train. Good-by."

"Good-by," said Hugh, still in doubt, "good-by and good luck."

Jethro strode away down the platform just as the big locomotive came thundering in. Hugh was turning slowly toward the Pullman coaches at the further end when he heard quick short footsteps behind him and little Carl Ingmarsson very red and breathless came panting up.

"I wanted to say good-by," he said; "we never knew you were going until Mother told us."

He laid his square, firm little hand in Hugh's.

"It was good of you to come," returned Hugh. "What did your mother say about my going?"

"She didn't say much," Carl replied, "I think she had been crying."

"Crying?" echoed Hugh; "why?" This seemed the most amazing thing of all the surprises that had come to him.

"I think she didn't want you to go," the little boy answered, "I don't understand it. She doesn't often cry."

So there was more than one person who wanted him to help and was confident of his success. And even Half-Breed Jake and Laughing Mary seemed to feel that he was in some way involved in the matter. Should he go or stay? Time was passing.

The grinning porter looked at him doubtfully, then picked up his stool and climbed up the steps of the last car. The long train, with its shining brass rails, hooded vestibules and sleepy passengers peering from the windows, looked as though it had come from another world than this wild,

wooded country where such strange things could come to pass. The brakeman glanced inquiringly over his shoulder and shouted,

"All aboard!"

The bell began to jangle, the wheels creaked and groaned, the heavy cars slowly gathered headway—there was still time to run and catch the last step, but Hugh did not move. The line of cars, with a final echoing whistle, slid away into the morning mist and disappeared behind the shoulder of a hill, leaving him behind, committed at last to his adventure.

CHAPTER IV

THE HEART OF THE FOREST

LINDA INGMARSSON was standing at the door when Hugh and Carl came up the path. She did not seem to be at all surprised to see him.

"I met Jethro Brown at the station," he explained briefly. "He told me, oh, quite a lot of things. I decided not to take the train, to go into the woods instead."

Linda shook her head gravely.

"I think I know what he told you," she said. "It is a mad plan. You ought not to go."

"But I'm going," returned Hugh, and she smiled.

"Yes, I believe you are going," she answered, "and perhaps I would not stop you if I could."

The children came clattering in and Ingmarsson appeared by the door, so there was no more discussion just then. Later, however, when the

various members of the family had set off to work or to school, Linda came up to Hugh's room bringing an armful of things for him, a pack such as hunters carry, heavy boots, thick wool socks, a mackinaw coat.

"You will need all these," she said. "It may be that you will be gone some time."

She advised him as to which of his own possessions were the most necessary to take with him and showed him how to pack them in the smallest possible space.

"Leave all of your other things here," she directed, "and most of your money, too; you will have little need of it where you are going and—you might meet Half-Breed Jake in the forest."

"Does he do that kind of stealing too?" Hugh asked.

"He does every kind," was her brief reply.

Hugh accomplished the rest of his preparations in silence except for one question.

"Is your brother Oscar old?" he inquired.

Linda laughed.

"I am not so very old myself," she answered,

"and he is much younger than I, not a great deal older than you, I should think. You are not quite a grown man yet, and he has only just ceased being a boy. That is all the difference."

She put the last thing into his pack and helped him to pull the straps tight.

"We are ready now," she said, "and I know you would like to go at once, but it is not wise. It is a long day's journey even to Two Rivers, and if you set out now you could not reach there until hours after midnight. So you had better start at daylight to-morrow."

It was before dawn next day when she knocked softly at his door. When he had slipped downstairs and had a hasty breakfast in the kitchen, she went out upon the steps with him and gave him the most explicit directions as to how he was to go. She had never been so far as Jasper Peak or the end of the lake where her brother lived, but she could tell him, almost mile by mile, the way to the Indian encampment where the Chippewa boy, Shokatan, could put him on the next stage of his journey.

"You should not go," she said again at the last, but the light of excitement danced in her eyes as plainly as in Hugh's.

He shouldered his pack, adjusted the straps and held out his hand to say good-by. The spotless house, as he looked about it for the last time, seemed a very homelike little place even though he had known it for only a day. The white, scrubbed floor, the bright blue cupboard, the picture on the wall of the Edmonds boys and their great white dog—how soon would he see them all again?

Even in early-rising Rudolm there was no one yet abroad to see him go. He went out the gate, past a half dozen houses, across a stretch of meadow, came out at last upon the road, Oscar's road, and set off up the hill.

The sun was just coming up over the ridge to the eastward, the birds were beginning to chirp in the thickets and the tall, scattered pine trees were bowing their heads in the autumn wind. Very little of all this did Hugh notice for he had eyes of wonder and interest only for the road

upon which he was traveling. It wound up the slope, grass-grown in many places, as though very few feet had trodden it in the past year. It was built of stone and gravel, well built too, as he could easily perceive, for it mounted the hillside in easy grades with wide, even curves, and it still showed the weed-filled ditches that had been dug to drain it and it spanned a little stream on a high, stout bridge. Hugh tramped on up the slope, crossed the summit of the hill and was about to descend on the other side when—

"Oh!" he cried suddenly and stood still in surprise.

He had known that the road would not carry him far, but he had not realized that it would end as abruptly as though sheared off with a knife. The dense wall of trees and underbrush that had hemmed it in on both sides had closed together before him and completely blocked the way. He could actually see the sharp line where the gravel roadbed ended and the soft leaf-mold began, while just before him he spied in the grass a broken ax and a rusty pick, as though the last

workman had ceased his labors so suddenly as to have even left his tools. Hugh had to stand and look for some minutes before he could distinguish the narrow trail threading its way off among the trees, the path that he must now follow.

Down the hillside it led him, over great tree trunks, under low-hanging branches, through thickets that seemed almost impenetrable. The noonday sun began to feel hot, even among the trees, and the air seemed close and heavy as he progressed further and further into the valley. It was a great relief to hear suddenly the cool patter of what sounded like falling water and a great disappointment to find that it came only from a grove of quaking aspen trees where the wind among the leaves made just the sound of rain. Once past these, however, the going was a little easier, for on the next hill the birches and poplars gave way to solid pine forest and the trail led upward between black trunks and over a carpet of fallen needles. He came out, at last, on the summit of the slope and stopped a moment

to look back. Nothing but hills beyond hills, forest beyond forest could be seen; the little town of Rudolm had utterly disappeared. Only a sharp glint of blue at the end of the valley and the rising bulk of the mountain to the westward showed the familiar landmarks of Red Lake and Jasper Peak.

He sat down here to eat his lunch and to rest a little, for his knees were beginning to weary and the pack was heavy on his unaccustomed shoulders. When he arose at length and trudged on he found that he could no longer make such good time; he had perhaps set too fast a pace at first and worn himself out too soon. It was a long, long way over the next ridge and down into the valley beyond, so long that the sun had disappeared and the hollows were beginning to fill with shadow when he came finally to the foot of the steep incline. The long, gray northern twilight held, however, so that he had no real difficulty in following the trail, faint as it was, that led him to the edge of a stream, skirted its bank and brought him, just as heavy darkness fell, within

sight of a row of fires that must belong to the Chippewa encampment.

Indian dwellings are far more picturesque than imposing, so at least Hugh concluded as he approached the huddle of teepees, mere shelters of skins and blankets stretched over birch poles. A woman was cooking by the nearest fire; she sat back upon her heels and gazed at him stolidly, but made no answer when he asked for the boy Shokatan. Some children came crawling out from one of the tents and also stared at him but not a word could he get from them. He stood irresolute, not quite knowing what to do, when another squaw, who sat at the second fire, holding a baby, suddenly turned and greeted him with a strange, vacant smile, which he recognized at once as Laughing Mary's. Again he asked for Shokatan, and she pointed silently at a boy who was coming toward him from the edge of the stream where he had evidently been fishing.

"Jethro Brown sent me to you and gave me this letter," began Hugh, but he received no answer, only the same stolid stare. The boy held

out his hand for the paper, turned it over and over without making even a pretense of reading it, then grunted, "No English," and, turning, walked away.

It was an awkward moment for Hugh and a most discouraging one. Apparently he was to get no help here for the continuing of his journey, while the thought of trying to go back, through the dark, in his present weary state was quite too appalling. Almost without thinking, he unbuckled his pack, laid it down on the grass and seated himself at the nearest fire. Two children and an old man moved over to make room for him, yet no one said a word or regarded his presence with the least surprise. Presently a woman, he thought it was Laughing Mary, but in the uncertain light could not make sure, came over and put down some food before him.

He was hungry enough to have eaten anything, but he thought then and long afterward that it was just as well that he should never know of what that savory stew was made. It might be—no, he concluded firmly, he would make no guess

as to what it was—nectar and ambrosia was what it tasted like and he ate it all. Afterward he went down to the river to wash his hands and to have a long drink of the cool, running water. Looking back at the camp he thought what a curious picture it made with the leaping fires, the shadowy teepees and the black figures moving noiselessly to and fro.

Somebody startled him by touching his arm as he sat staring. It was the boy, Shokatan, carrying Hugh's pack which he had left beside the fire. Not a word did the Indian speak, but he motioned to a canoe that lay bottom upward on the grassy bank, and, by a grunt, indicated that he wished Hugh's help in lifting it. With some wonder, Hugh arose to assist him, and in a moment had set it afloat on the rippling shallows of the little stream. The Indian produced two paddles and slipped into his place in the stern; Hugh laid his pack in the bottom of the boat, took up a paddle and knelt in the bow, as they launched forth through the reeds and out into the current. An-

other stream flowed into the first just below the camp, making quite a wide brawling little river that swept away into the dark.

Nothing had yet been said, but Hugh began to realize that this was the second stage of his journey. Shokatan, feigning complete ignorance of all English speech, as is the obstinate Indian habit, had nevertheless read the letter unobserved and had agreed to help Hugh on his way. Silently the canoe slipped out into the stream, was caught by the current and with the aid of the two steady paddles shot swiftly onward upon its course. There was no talk as they sped along, as the dripping paddles rose and fell and mile after mile of river and forest dropped behind them.

The stars began to come out above them and lay reflected in long drifts of shimmering light as they crossed a quiet pool. Hugh began to see more and more clearly the white birches on the shore, the reeds and rocking lily-pads and the two lines of ripples that slanted outward from their swiftly moving bow. There was a long,

long reach of steady paddling while the river grew ever wider in its twisted course toward the lake.

Hugh's blade rose and dipped with the weary regularity of a machine and his eyes were falling to with sleepiness. But he was startled suddenly broad awake when they rounded a sharp bend and came full upon a gigantic moose, its great shoulders, bearded chin and wide sweep of antlers outlined sharp and black against the starlit water. The huge creature stood knee deep in the cool flood, a long string of wet lily pads still hanging from its dripping jaw. It looked so big as to seem scarcely real and, for a second, stood as still as though carved in stone. Then, with so mighty a splashing that the spent waves rocked the canoe, the great beast plunged to the shore, scrambled up the bank and was off through the forest with a stamping and crashing that could have been heard a mile away.

"Ah-h-h—!" sighed Hugh, letting out the breath that excitement had imprisoned within him for a full minute.

Again they went on in silence, the sound of the paddle behind Hugh being the only proof that he was not alone in this whole forest-covered world. Past one curve and then another they went, until they began to hear a new sound ahead of them, a dull muffled roar that he did not in the least understand. He was about to ask what it was when the Indian spoke at last, a single inarticulate word which was evidently meant as a warning. For in an instant they began to move faster and faster, the sound grew louder, and they plunged, all in one breathless second, down a foaming slope of shouting white rapids. Great black bowlders shouldered up through the water, threatening them in a thousand directions, but somehow the frail canoe threaded its way like magic in and out among the rocks and came safe into the calm pool below. Before Hugh could speak they had swept into another reach of tossing water and then another, the canoe staggering back and forth in the furious current, but coming finally out into the quiet stream again.

Then at last, warmed to friendliness perhaps

by Hugh's calm acceptance of the dangers of the rapids, the Indian behind him spoke. His English, learned at the Indian school near Rudolm, was nearly as good as Hugh's own, yet had the guttural burr of all Chippewa speech.

"You are going to Oscar Dansk's?" he asked.

"I wish to," answered Hugh without looking around. "Can you take me there?"

"No," was the immediate answer; "the white deer has been seen in the woods near Jasper Peak and we Chippewas will not go where the white deer goes."

"But I must go on," insisted Hugh. "How can I ever find the way without you?"

"I will take you to the lake," was the reply, "and around Harbin's Channel into the upper end of the lake you can paddle alone. You can keep this canoe; it belongs to Oscar Dansk; he left it at Two Rivers, for his last journey he made overland."

They went on and on, until Hugh, knowing long since that it was past midnight, began to feel that morning must be close at hand. They

passed more rapids, threaded narrow stretches of river, then wider ones, but still the dark held and the journey seemed never to come to an end. At last the Indian spoke again.

"That squaw whom you whites call Laughing Mary told me to tell you, I do not know why, that the man of Jasper Peak passed through Two Rivers only a few hours before you, and must be camping in these woods. I think that is his fire now."

Far off through the black tree trunks there could be seen a faint red glare that grew brighter as they went along.

"Do you mean Half-Breed Jake?" inquired Hugh anxiously. "Was he alone?"

"There were two Indians with him," replied Shokatan. "Yes, that is their camp. It is better that they should not see us go by."

They came nearer, saw the firelight flickering among the trees, saw two black figures stretched upon the ground rolled in their blankets and sound asleep. One man only was sitting upright, his back against a pine, his face toward the

stream, but he, too, seemed wrapped in deepest slumber. The canoe floated so slowly that it seemed scarcely moving, the Indian's paddle dipped and dipped again without a sound. Foot by foot they worked their way along, skirting the bank where the shadows lay, sliding past like shadows themselves. The fire flared high, one of the burning logs broke and settled with a crash, the man beside it awoke. Both boys held their breath, while the canoe floated with the current; slowly, slowly it crawled into the thick pool of shade cast by a big maple that overhung the bank. The man, it was the Indian Kaniska, listened as though vaguely conscious that something was stirring, stooped to mend the fire, then stopped to listen again and to peer into the dark. Almost imperceptibly the canoe moved on, was swallowed up in denser shadow, slipped past a bend in the stream and left the camp out of sight.

The moment of danger had roused Hugh into full wakefulness now and, although he was unbelievably weary, he bent to his paddling with redoubled energy. The trees seemed to recede

on either hand, showing overhead a myriad of stars, the river widened and they came out at last on the vast dark flood of the open lake. The canoe's bow wavered a little, then turned toward shore where Shokatan, grasping an overhanging branch, pulled it up to the bank and stepped out.

"The rest of the way you go alone," he said. "Around that point, through the channel, then when you are in the open lake again make for the nearest sandy beach. You will see Oscar Dansk's house on the hill above."

Before Hugh could speak, to protest against being left, to thank the Indian for his help, he had pushed out the boat again and had disappeared into the underbrush. Wearily the boy took up his paddle once more and drove the canoe steadily onward parallel to the wooded shore.

He was thinking of what might be before him and of the strange journey that lay behind, but for the most part his tired brain was concentrated on the rise and dip, rise and dip of the paddle. One detail of his night's adventures alone seemed to stand out in his mind, only because it was the

one thing of all others that he could not understand. When, at Two Rivers, Laughing Mary had turned to greet him in the firelight, he had noticed that her baby was wrapped in something brownish yellow, that even in the half darkness he was certain must be the brown bear-cub's skin. He was too worn out either to reason the matter out or to drop it entirely from his mind.

Above him the stars were paling at last and the sky growing gray. He came to the headland where the lake seemed suddenly to end and where Jasper Peak, which towered directly over him now, sent a long rocky spur down to the water's edge. Through Harbin's Channel he crept, out into the second stretch of open water, a wide expanse, beginning to show blue instead of gray as the sky grew brighter. Over at his right he could see a little inlet and a line of sandy beach, above it a steep wooded hill with a cottage at the very summit. The miles of woods beyond, the bays and bold capes that bounded the lake, the undiscovered country claimed by the Pirate of Jasper Peak, for these he had no eyes and no

interest as he struggled wearily toward his journey's end.

Gently the canoe grounded its bow upon the sand, just where a narrow trail led off among the trees and up the hill. With a great sigh of relief, Hugh stepped ashore, shouldered his pack, and went slowly up through the dawn to his first meeting with Oscar Dansk.

CHAPTER V

OSCAR DANSK

HUGH walked very slowly as he made his way up the path, for he was worn out, weary enough to drop by the wayside and sleep there for half a day. He was stiff from kneeling all night in the canoe, his shoulders were lame from the weight of his pack and from the long miles of paddling, his brain whirled from want of sleep. On he trudged, past the groups of overhanging maples, scarlet and gold after the autumn frosts, past a huge mass of red jasper rock with a spring bubbling out at the foot of it, up the hill at last and to the open space where the cottage stood.

It was a little square building of logs, chinked with plaster, with two small sheds behind it and a chimney of rough field stones. Small and rude as the cottage seemed, it had the same air of

neatness and homely comfort that Hugh had noticed about the little Swedish houses in Rudolm. A plume of smoke was rising from the chimney and, at the open window, a white curtain was blowing in the morning wind. Before he reached the door, it opened and Oscar Dansk came out upon the wide stone step. The moment their eyes met Hugh knew they were to become fast friends.

There seemed no more natural thing in the world than to sit down upon the doorstep—Hugh's tired legs could not have carried him farther—and tell Oscar immediately all about why he had come. The other seemed to understand at once just what had happened, just why Hugh had come to find him and just what he himself was expected to do. He shook his head gravely when he heard how long the Edmonds boys had been gone.

"Five days when you first heard," he said; "that makes seven now and another night. It is bad, but not hopeless. If they are alive we will find them."

"Your sister thinks they are alive," repeated

Hugh, for he had already spoken of Linda's theory about the dog.

"Yes," replied Oscar, "I know that Nicholas, if anything had happened to his masters, I am certain he would have come back. I think Linda is right."

Hugh, half blind with weariness as he was, had already begun to notice how like his sister Oscar was. All things that were attractive in her were present in Oscar, with much more besides. There was fire in his blue eyes where hers held only kindliness, there was no heaviness, nor any sadness in his expression, but spirit and courage and love of high adventure. He was taller and straighter than Linda, also, with more clear-cut features. As he sat on the doorstone, with the sun shining on his bright fair hair, and his strong hands clasped upon his knee, he looked as though he were indeed, as Jethro had said, "a person who could see further than others."

"It is not right," he said at last, "for me to let you sit here talking, when the first thing you

should do is to have breakfast and then sleep the clock around."

He got up and led the way into the cottage, with Hugh following eagerly, curious to see what sort of an abode it was. There were two tiny rooms inside with so wide a doorway between that they were practically one. Linda Ingmarsson's fingers must surely have sewed those curtains at the windows, the braided rugs on the floor and the blue and white quilts on the two narrow bunks. She must also have given her brother the pot of red geraniums that stood on the sill of the sunniest window. But she had never seen the little log cottage, so she could not have been responsible for the spotless cleanliness of everything.

Never before had Hugh sat down to such an odd breakfast, nor, even at the Indian camp, had he ever eaten with such ravenous appetite. There was half a partridge stewed in brown gravy, wild rice, flapjacks instead of bread, blueberries and, strange to say, thick, rich cream.

"The blueberries? Yes, it is pretty late for them, but you still can find a few in the hollows," said Oscar, misunderstanding Hugh's surprise. "Oh, you mean the cream? Why, that is nothing; I have a cow."

"But how did she get here?" Hugh persisted. "By water, or through the woods?"

He thought of the journey that he himself had made and decided that, for a four-footed creature, both routes were equally impossible.

"She must have been born hereabouts," Oscar answered. "I found her running wild in the woods when she was still a calf. I brought her home and built her a stable and fed her for a month or two and then"—here he indulged in the silent chuckle that Hugh was to learn was his only form of laughter—"and then Half-Breed Jake sent over to say that she was his."

"Was she?" Hugh wished to know. He felt a great interest in what had occurred between Oscar and the pirate.

"In a way she might have been called so. You see, old Mat Henderson had a little farm up on

the spur of Jasper Peak, where Jake lives now. I don't know how Henderson got his live stock in; I believe he chartered a little steamer to bring them up the lake and through Harbin's Channel. That was before the pirates came; boats do not come through there now. Henderson was a queer old soul; he had lots of money, people said, and just came away up here so that he could live alone. The next thing we knew Half-Breed Jake and some Indians were living on the place, claiming that Henderson had sold it to them and that very soon after the sale—he had died. There wasn't anything to be proved, so we had to let it go. But we'll know some day."

He had spoken quietly until the last words, when his tone turned suddenly to bitter earnestness and he dropped his big sunburned hand upon the table with such force that the tin plates danced in their places. His clear face clouded with anger and he sat silent, staring out through the little window. Hugh was almost frightened at the sudden sternness of his face.

"But the cow?" he hinted gently.

Oscar hesitated, then the grimness of his face relaxed and he smiled.

"They cared for Henderson's stock after a fashion," he said, "for they knew it might be a starvation winter for them otherwise. The calf they evidently did not want to feed and turned it out into the woods. When they feared that I would get some good out of it they came over to fetch it. But they went home empty-handed."

Hugh had a quick recollection of Half-Breed Jake standing in the postoffice with the brown bear's skin in his hand and of the shrinking claimant, Ole Peterson, slipping away into a corner. There were not many people, he thought, who could successfully dispute a question of ownership with the Pirate of Jasper Peak.

He had finished his breakfast and began to feel, once more, an overwhelming sleepiness. In spite of the brightness of the morning sun making squares upon the floor, in spite of the pressing nature of his errand and the mystery of the green forest outside, his eyes were dropping shut. One

question, however, loomed so large in his mind that it must be spoken.

"I wish you would tell me, Oscar," he said, the name coming as readily to his tongue as though the friendship were years old, "I wish I knew why you choose to live here all alone."

The man's face flushed a little under his sunburn and his blue eyes, once again, took on that stern look.

"It is too long a story, Hugh," was all he answered. "Before I tell you about it you must have your sleep."

The hands of the big Swedish clock in the corner of Oscar's kitchen must have come very near to making a complete round before Hugh awoke. He had been dreaming so vividly that for a moment he was bewildered and sat up rubbing his eyes and wondering where he was. He remembered in a moment, however, and scrambled quickly out of bed. The cottage was quite silent save for the ticking of the clock and the crackling of the fire on the hearth. Hugh went to the little

window at the foot of his bunk and looked out. When he had come up the trail that morning he had noticed little save that the hillside was steep and the forest dense, but now that he could see across the little plateau upon which the cottage stood and down into the next valley, he looked and looked again.

The country through which he had come on his journey from Rudolm had seemed to him all alike, one narrow ravine after another with close tangled woods, precipitous slopes and rocky summits in endless succession. But here he was looking out into a broad green basin where the hills drew back from the lake in a gigantic semicircle, leaving the half-wooded slope to drop gently to wide green meadows and a winding stream. Over to the north the hills closed in a little, but still left a broad valley through which flowed away toward Canada the river that was the lake's outlet. Groups of trees extended downward from the woods and stood knee deep in the wild grass of the sloping meadows. A cheerful tinkle sounded below the cottage, heralding the fact that Oscar

was driving up his cow from the luxuriant pasture land, to be stabled for the night.

"It is a nice place," thought Hugh. "I do not wonder Oscar likes to live here, but—well, winters must be pretty long and lonely."

Oscar came in presently and they had supper before the blazing fire, a meal as odd and delicious as breakfast had been. After supper there was much work to be done in which Hugh lent a hand, wood to be cut and carried in, water to be fetched from the spring half way down the hill, the cow, Hulda, to be fed and milked. The long twilight was nearly at an end and Hugh already feeling sleepy again before they finished at last. Oscar, it seemed, had spent most of the day in searching the nearest hillsides for traces of John Edmonds and his brother, but had to report blank failure so far.

"But if they are alive they are in this region," he said. "They would not have gone far north, for the woods and swamps in that direction are almost impassable. Nor, if Edmonds wanted to hide for any reason, would he go toward the east

end of Red Lake where there are more settlements and the Indian reservations."

He brought out a rude map made evidently by himself, showing in rough drawing the western end of the lake and the watercourses.

"We will divide it off into squares," he said, "and search one square of country every day. Then, if we don't find where they are, we will at least know where they are not. We will begin with this one to-morrow."

"Wouldn't it be quicker just to follow up the main streams and the most likely valleys first?" asked Hugh.

Oscar was slowly rolling up the map and putting it in its place.

"It would be quicker—and we might miss them on the way," he said. "If we are to do the thing thoroughly, we had better not hurry too much."

Hugh was to learn that this was Oscar's method of doing all things. He did not agree just then that it was the best, but, on looking back afterward, he wondered at his own stupidity.

"Will we meet Half-Breed Jake, do you think?" was all he asked, however.

"No," returned Oscar, "that fe..ow and his Indian friends are nearly always away at this time of year. You say you saw them in the woods, but they must have gone back again, for there has not been a sign of life about their cabin. His place is over opposite us on the spur of Jasper Peak; you can see it plainly enough by daylight. Every season about this time they go down-State to sell their furs and have a final spree before they come back for the winter. He is an ugly neighbor, Half-Breed Jake is, when he has just had his fling. He does not ever like to stay away very long, for he likes to watch the place and drive out any one that might try to settle hereabouts."

"But he hasn't driven you out," said Hugh. "Has he tried?"

"Oh, yes, he has tried," replied Oscar cheerfully, "but he hasn't succeeded yet."

They set out very early the next morning, having arisen before sun-up to get their work done

and to cook the dinner they were to carry with them. Oscar took down his spare rifle from where it hung upon the wall and gave it to Hugh.

"You may have a chance at a partridge or even a deer," he said. "You had better take it along."

They walked down past the spring into the thickly wooded ravine with its little stream that separated them from Jasper Rock. At one point they could look up and see even more plainly than from the hill above, the Pirate's cabin. It was a tumbledown log building with a few rude outhouses and ragged fences. A black hen rose suddenly from a tuft of weeds at their feet and ran squawking up the hill toward her unlovely home.

"I hardly know how his stock keeps alive while he is gone," observed Oscar, "but the creatures are all half wild, anyway, and used to ranging the woods and foraging for themselves."

After they had tramped some distance, Oscar decreed that they were to separate.

"See," he said, showing Hugh the map, "here are these two little streams flowing on each side

of this hill, and joining where we are now. You follow this one, going up and down the slope on one side of the ravine to find traces of where the boys might have passed by or camped. When you reach the swampy land where the stream rises, turn back and come down the other side. Then when you get to where the two streams meet, follow up the other branch in the same way. It will take you nearly all day to do that and to come back here, where it is easy enough to find the way home."

Hugh agreed to follow these instructions carefully and went off, a good deal elated at being trusted to search alone. He found the ravine narrow and the going very rough. He clambered laboriously up and down, up and down, finding nothing but some very old deer tracks and the footprints of some little wood animals that he could not identify. Before long he grew hot and rather tired and sat down by the stream to rest. He began to wonder if there were not some easier way of performing the task and presently decided that there was. The valley was so small that he

felt he could easily examine both slopes at once; then, when he reached the marsh, he could cut across the intervening hill and follow the other fork down to the point of junction. His journey from Rudolm had made him feel quite like an experienced woodsman already, so that he felt very confident that he had thought of a better plan than Oscar's. He pushed on resolutely and reached the headwaters of the creek about noon. There he ate his lunch, rested a little and then turned gayly to clamber up the hill.

It was a longer and a steeper climb than he had bargained for. More than once he thought he was at the top and even beginning to descend on the other side, only to discover that there was another ascent to be made. He went upward for what seemed to him an endless time, and began to be very weary. At last he reached the summit, but found that the trees were so tall and thick that he could see no distance even from there, and a slight, a very slight doubt began to arise in his mind as to whether he had done the wisest thing in following a plan of his own.

He saw a great mass of rock rising among the trees not a quarter of a mile away and decided that he had better climb to the top of it and get his bearings before going any further. It was a hard scramble through the thickets and up the side of the giant red bowlder, but Hugh accomplished it in ever increasing haste. He wished to assure himself as quickly as possible that all his calculations were correct. He was panting with hurry and excitement when he came out upon the top of the rock and turned his face toward where Jasper Peak should be.

Somehow it is rather a terrible thing to look for so reliable a landmark as a mountain or a lake and not to find it.

"They must be there, they must be there," he kept repeating half aloud; but, no, there was nothing to be seen but hills and hills, endless miles of green in every direction and all utterly unfamiliar. For a full minute Hugh stood gaping, before there came over him the sickening knowledge that he was lost.

He had thought the forest beautiful on his

night journey with Shokatan, it had seemed to him mysterious, wonderful, teeming with adventure. But now it seemed only dark, threatening and cruel, as though it existed merely to shelter dangers and hidden enemies, as though the rolling hills and valleys swept up to his feet to drown him in a sea of green.

"I mustn't get excited," he kept telling himself, "I must keep my head."

But even as he so thought, he knew that his brain was reeling and that his bewilderment was increasing every moment.

"I will go back just the way I came," was his first plan, but it proved impossible to follow. He found traces here and there of where he had passed before, yet the way was so twisted and uncertain that, after an hour of struggling through the underbrush he finally came out on the same ridge again and faced the same mass of red rock. He climbed the steep bowlder once more to make sure that he had not been mistaken and, on seeing again that vast pitiless expanse of forest, all calmness suddenly left him. He slid

down the rock in a wild scramble, landed on all-fours among the brambles, picked himself up and started down the opposite side of the hill at a run.

He was quite unconscious of the fact that he had dropped Oscar's rifle and had left it behind him. He never had any idea of where he went or in what direction. He ran until he could drag his leaden feet no longer, then he lay panting upon the ground until he could get up and run again. Finally he became so exhausted that he could only walk and had to stop to rest every few minutes, but still he pressed obstinately on, determined to get somewhere, anywhere.

Once he found himself, not knowing how he got there, floundering at the edge of a wide marsh and noticed footmarks in the soft ground beside him as though some great creature of the woods had passed there not very long before. The prints were very large and clear in the wet earth, but he scarcely noticed them so far gone was he in weariness and despair. Slowly he dragged himself on, past a dense poplar thicket, over a dried-up watercourse, up a hill, through the close

undergrowth at the top—and stood still with a cry that was almost a sob. Below him spread a wide valley, green and open and full of sunshine, at its foot, in exactly the opposite quarter from where it should be, lay the shining blue of the lake. Oscar's little house, still in quite the wrong direction, stood on the ridge at his right, the door open, the curtains flying, the red roof basking in the sun. A pleasant home-like tinkle came up from the grassy slope below him where the contented Hulda was grazing peacefully.

"Gee!" said Hugh and sat down abruptly on the grass. "Gee, but I'm glad to see this place again!"

It looked indeed, to his weary desperate eyes, like a true bit of Paradise. He thought quickly of the name at which he had laughed a little when he saw it written in Oscar's hand upon the map. It was, after all, not so much amiss to call the valley "The Promised Land."

CHAPTER VI

THE PROMISED LAND

THERE was not a great deal said, that night, about Hugh's first experiment as a woodsman, for Oscar seemed to be the sort of person who knew when it was kinder not to ask questions. One look at his white, anxious face when he came home long after dark, one glimpse of his smile of delight and relief when he found that Hugh had returned safely after all, these caused the boy enough remorse without the wasting of any words. That he had lost Oscar's rifle was to Hugh the bitterest and most irretrievable mishap of the whole day. He might tell himself over and over that he would replace it when he went back to Rudolm, but how soon would that be and how desperately might not the weapon be needed before that time?

When they set out again next day, Oscar gave

his directions without any added warning that this time Hugh had better not improve upon them with additions of his own. He trusted the boy to carry out his share of the search alone and made no comment when this time they met successfully at the place that he had chosen.

All of that day they searched, and all of the next, but with no results.

"It is a good thing that Jake is really gone," said Oscar, "for otherwise I would not dare go so far and leave the cottage alone. This way we can cover twice as much ground and so must surely find the boys at last."

They went further and further afield each day and finally, carrying blankets and provisions, they penetrated far to the northward, slept in the woods two nights and returned in a wide circle that covered the forest for many miles. Footprints of Indians they found, and of moose and deer, but of traces that two white men had passed that way, they saw no single one. They came home worn and dispirited, each one trying to talk cheerfully to raise the hopes of the other.

The next day they were too weary to set forth again. It was Sunday, a week from the day that Hugh had come through the forest from Rudolm. The day came somewhat as a surprise to him, for he had quite forgotten that there were such things as calendars and days of the week. He noticed that Oscar slept later that morning and reduced the household tasks of both of them to as few as possible. He did not however suspect any other reason beyond weariness until, at the end of the afternoon, he came out to go to the spring for water and found his friend seated on the doorstone, reading his Bible in the thorough, painstaking manner with which he did everything.

"But how do you know when it is Sunday?" Hugh demanded when Oscar explained that this was his weekly custom.

"Why, I keep count," he replied, "and then I somehow think that I ought to feel that it is Sunday in the air. Doesn't it look like a Sunday today?"

Now that Hugh thought of the matter it did

It was only chance, of course, but the sun was mild and clear, the blue lake was like a mirror and the flaming trees in the forest unstirred by any wind. Even though he knew better, he felt that, if he listened intently enough, he might hear church bells ring.

"Aren't you ever mistaken when you think it feels like a Sunday?" Hugh asked curiously.

"Oh, yes," Oscar admitted, "I feel that I should know, but I don't. Last year when I went down to Rudolm I found that I was three days out and had been having Sunday on a Wednesday for a month. How Linda laughed at me!"

"Did you ever know how you happened to lose count?" Hugh inquired idly.

He had sat down upon the doorstep also, where he could see, on one side, the open sunlit valley and, on the other, the narrow ravine with its little stream that ran between them and Jasper Peak.

"Yes, I knew how I missed count," Oscar answered, smiling a little queerly as he looked down at one of his big rough hands. Whether he would have gone on to explain is not certain,

for just then another thought drifted into Hugh's mind and he asked another question.

"You say you are sure that Half-Breed Jake is away?"

"Yes," returned Oscar. "Why?"

"Because sometimes I think I see something moving about in the clearing near their house."

"But I have looked for days for any sign of life there and have seen nothing," Oscar insisted. "Perhaps you saw their chickens or their cow. They are usually gone at this time of year, but yet, I do not understand it. If Jake had anything to do with the Edmonds boys' disappearance—and I am certain he had—he would be staying. And you say you saw him in the woods. No, I do not understand it. Perhaps he is in Rudolm helping still to spread the report that John Edmonds' accounts are short and that he ran away."

"Do you think we will ever find them?" Hugh asked, the discouragement of the whole week suddenly welling up in his voice.

"I do not know," Oscar admitted, yet trying

to speak cheerfully. "We can only go on looking until we make sure it is hopeless."

He closed his book since Hugh's continued questions had evidently made reading impossible. They sat together looking down the valley, so green and quiet in the sun. A lovely place, but a very lonely one, Hugh was thinking.

"I should think you would have a dog, Oscar," he observed aloud. "It would be such company for you."

The grimness of Oscar's tone as he answered startled Hugh into turning square about.

"I had one," he said, "and Jake killed him."

"What," exclaimed the boy, "are they so bad as that?"

"They are as bad as anything you can think of," his friend answered.

He looked down again at his hand and Hugh noticed that over the back of it ran a long puckered scar that extended upward under his sleeve.

"That was the time when I lost count of Sunday," Oscar went on. "It was before I had been here very long and Jake and his friends were

bound to run me out. You see I am proving up on a claim to this land; I have to live here just so long, build a house and keep up a certain amount of cultivation. They thought that if they could drive me away and burn down the cottage they could jump the claim. They know better now."

"Was it—was it hard to teach them better?" Hugh inquired eagerly.

"It took me three days, no, four or five, I never quite knew. They lay in the woods at the edge of the clearing and shot whenever I came near the door or window. See there," he laid his finger upon a rough groove that showed in the window ledge, "that is some of their work and there are more marks around the door and even inside. Little Hendrik—that was the dog—and I stood the siege for two days; he was a great help, for he waked me twice in the night when I had dropped asleep and the Indians were stealing across the clearing. We stood them off easily enough for a while, but it got to be bad when our water gave out."

Oscar told the story as calmly as though it concerned some one quite other than himself. He would indeed have dropped the narrative there had Hugh not urged him on with impatient questions.

"Yes, by the third day we were badly off. So when it was twilight I let little Hendrik out to go down to the spring and drink. Would you think it mattered to them whether a little black dog lived or not? They knew that I—I liked him a good deal, I suppose, for they killed him halfway across the clearing. I heard a shot and a yelp and ran out to him, but when I got there he was dead."

"You ran out? Didn't they shoot at you?" Hugh exclaimed.

"Yes, and hit me too, but I didn't even notice it at the time. I carried little Hendrik back, and if I was determined to hold out before, I was a hundred times more determined then. It rained that night and I caught a little water in a bucket by the window, so I had that to go on, but I never really knew quite how long the fight lasted. The

bullet had plowed across the back of my hand and along my arm and had broken the bone just above the elbow. It got very sore and made me lightheaded, so for a while it seemed to be always glaring daytime and for a while always night. And then I seemed to wake up from a long sleep and found the sun just coming up and a fresh wind blowing off the lake and the pirates gone. The clock had run down and I had lost the place on the calendar and that was how I got Sunday three days wrong."

"And Jake and the Indians, did they all get away?"

"There were seven that came, and it seemed to me that I could still count seven afterward where I saw them walking around their cabin over there. But I heard when I went to Rudolm that there was not a sound man amongst them, and that two of them had got enough of pirating forever and did not come back to these parts. And while it is pretty hard to see for certain, I believe Jake limps still."

"I think he does," said Hugh, remembering

that tall figure striding away in the moonlight down Rudolm's single street.

"Over yonder under that maple," continued Oscar, "is where I buried little Hendrik, so now I have no company but Hulda. She is not much good to talk to, Hulda isn't, but she is a nice cow in her way. It has been good to have you here, Hugh, for it has been a little lonely since little Hendrik was gone."

He laid his scarred hand on Hugh's knee and looked very steadily out across the hills. Hugh sat very straight, staring at the Pirate's house with new and fascinated interest, thinking very deeply. Presently he broke out again.

"Oscar," he said, "why do you live here all alone? You are in danger, you are not happy, what good is it going to do you in the end?"

His friend answered with a little hesitation, his words coming almost shyly at first, but gradually gathering headway as he put into speech the thought that possessed his whole heart.

"It is on account of those people back in Rudolm. They, and my father with them, came

over from Sweden, thinking, like children in a fairy tale, that they were coming to a new world where they were to be rich and happy always. My father was the biggest man amongst them, I think it must have been he who persuaded them to come. He was so bitterly unhappy afterward to see how poor and disappointed they were. He gave me the best education he could and encouraged me to work for an even better one after he died; he said more than once that he hoped I could help his comrades since he never could."

"How did they find such a place as Rudolm to come to?" Hugh asked.

"A good many Swedes had settled in this part of the country, for it is like their own, the same sort of hills and woods full of birch trees and lakes and little rivers. And there was at that time a great cry that these mountains were fabulously rich in iron, some even said in gold and silver, but the iron was thrilling enough. All who could came flocking into Rudolm valley to stake out a claim or to buy one, expecting to grow rich in a single night. My father spent all the

money he had from selling his farm in Sweden to buy a few stony acres—where now Linda and her children work all day long to cut the hay."

"And there were no mines?"

"A few, one or two that were worth working if one had the money to put into them. Some millionaire or other owns what there are, and those Swedes who spent everything they had to buy themselves a hole in the ground, they work for him and live as best they can."

"Why didn't they all go back to Sweden again?" Hugh inquired.

"They were too proud," said Oscar. "Would it be easy, do you think, after your whole village had turned out to do you honor, after your gateway had been dressed with wreaths and branches and all your neighbors had come in to wish you good-by and good luck and to envy you a little, in a friendly way, for your boldness and spirit in going to America to make your fortune, would it be easy to go back and say you were ruined? No, one and all of them went stubbornly to work

and never a complaint went back to the Old Country."

"But I don't quite see—" began Hugh.

He could not understand what all this had to do with Oscar's living on a lonely hilltop in the forest.

"Linda and I often talked the whole matter over," Oscar went on, "and wondered what could be done, but we never saw a way. Then one day, when I had been hunting, I came as far as this valley which Jake had just begun trying to hold; it was then I saw suddenly whence help could come. There are only rocky bits of ground to be tilled near Rudolm, but here is land, and prosperity for all even though it will not come in a single day. I thought it out as I lay by my campfire that night, and in the morning I could hardly get home quickly enough to tell them of my plan."

"And wouldn't they listen?"

Hugh had moved close up to him to make sure of missing no single word. He was beginning to see the reasons for some of the things he had

noticed in Rudolm, the tiny houses, the narrow fields, the heavy sad faces. He thought of the road, "Oscar's road," that went to the top of the first hill, and stopped.

"It was hard to make them heed, for they had been deceived once, but in the end they began to listen. The first step needed was to build a road through the forest so that the new valley should not be buried beyond the reach of the world. We got together a little money, the men came with their horses, their axes and picks and, at the summer Festival, with laughing and singing and a few tears too, so great a plan did it seem to some, we began to push our way into the wilderness. But the labor was harder than they thought and the men began to be discouraged and to quarrel and to mutter among themselves, 'That mad Oscar Dansk, he and his father, they were both dreamers of dreams.' So the work went slower and slower until we came at last to the top of the hill.

"You see it was Jake who had commenced to make trouble. He began to think that this val-

ley where he hunted and fished would be lost to him if settlers came. He threatened openly that any man who worked longer on the road would be shot in the dark some night, and he got the women whispering that the whole affair was a mad scheme that could come to nothing. So they doubted and hesitated and finally lost heart. And that was the end of our road-building."

"But not the end forever, surely," Hugh said.

"No, for I made up my mind that if I could not persuade them at that end I could show them at this. I staked out a claim for a farm of my own, and I mean to live here until it is mine and those people in Rudolm see that it can be done and that Jake's threats must come to nothing in the end. It takes fourteen months to prove up on a claim, but my time is almost done."

"And you have lived in this lonely place so long as that," Hugh exclaimed. "How did you ever hold to that one idea for all this time?"

"I did not," admitted Oscar, "for I went off on a wild goose chase, but I came back again. When I went down to Rudolm last April and

knew that war was declared, there was nothing I thought of but that I must be a soldier or a sailor as quickly as chance would let me. I rushed down to Duluth to enlist; my scheme for helping Rudolm was forgotten as though it had never been."

Oscar's tale stopped suddenly short. Hugh, looking down, saw his big hand clench suddenly upon his knee until the knuckles were white and the cords stood out along his wrist. For a moment the boy did not dare to speak.

"Wouldn't they take you, Oscar?" he said gently at last.

"They wouldn't take me," was the heavy answer, as though even now the disappointment was too keen to dwell upon. "It was on account of what that fight with the pirates had done to my arm, the bone had been injured so that the elbow will only move halfway. I never believed it amounted to anything, but every man at the recruiting station thought otherwise."

"What did you say to them?"

"Say—I have no notion what I said. I

shouted and cursed at them, for such anger possessed me as I had never known before. Finally I flung out of the building and down the street, not knowing or caring where I went. I wandered all night, I think, for when at last I came out on the docks where the Great Lakes' freighters were loading, it was beginning to be morning. I saw iron and steel and flour and wheat all being dropped into those great holds, to be carried overseas, so some one told me, to help toward the winning of the war. I sat there long in a sort of daze, and watched the steamers loading, but at last, through my anger, through the sight that was before my eyes I began to see this valley again and to dream of what might come out of it to help us win the war."

"Iron—mines?" ventured Hugh inquiringly after Oscar had sat quiet a minute, seeing his vision again, perhaps.

"No, there is iron in plenty near Rudolm and in the ranges to the eastward, enough for all the munition factories we have. No, no, what are mines alongside of a great valley lying fallow,

ready to help feed a starving world? Can't you see those wild grass meadows cut up into great square fields of green, can't you see those slopes all yellow with grain and rippling like water under the autumn winds? It's not iron—it's not gold—it's wheat, man, wheat!"

Hugh leaned forward, thrilling to the fervor of Oscar's tone. He looked at the wide valley brimming with sunshine and abundant fertility, and thought of what a gift it might offer to famine-stricken France as she cried to America for aid. He drew a long breath.

"It is a wonderful idea, Oscar," he said. "But can you do it?"

"I will do it," said Oscar with all his slow Swedish determination sounding in his voice. "I saw it all as I stood and watched a big, black freighter steaming away into the dawn toward—where I wanted to go. I saw that if you serve, you serve, and some other than yourself settles where you are to be the most useful. So I went over to the Land Office and explained what I

wanted to do and asked to double the size of my claim."

"They should have given you the whole valley," Hugh said.

"They didn't," his friend replied drily. "They didn't take any stock in me at all. I think they thought I was trying to dodge military service for they sent over to the recruiting office to see if the facts I gave agreed at both places. An officer came over himself to say, 'If there is anything for that shouting madman to spend his energies on, in the name of Heaven, give it to him.' So they let me register for as much as I wanted and told me to go back and hold it if I could. They were pretty sure I couldn't."

"But you will, oh, Oscar, I know you will," Hugh said. "And now I see why you have called it the Promised Land."

Oscar laughed a little shamefacedly.

"It is a foolish name perhaps and we will find another when the settlers come. But now I call it that just to—to keep my courage up. If you

have not something big to think of while you are waiting, the loneliness might eat into your very soul."

"And after the settlers come the road will follow?" said Hugh.

"I have thought many times of how it will be," answered Oscar, leaning forward to point. "The road will come winding down that hillside, white and smooth and dusty with much travel. There by that group of pines will be Linda's house, with a space for children to play in the meadow below. Nels Larson's place will be there just north of it by that knoll, and Ole Peterson's across the stream. And by the bend of the river there will be a little town with a school and white houses with gardens and a church with a square spire, just as it used to be in Sweden. I have pictured it a hundred times as I sit here by the door. I know every house and field and meadow, just how it will all be. Sometimes I think I can almost hear the church bells ring already or the children calling to each other as they go across the fields to school."

"It looks homelike, somehow, even without any houses in it," observed Hugh after a long survey of the quiet landscape. "Oh, Oscar, how like home it looked the day that I was lost and came over that hill at last!"

He hesitated a moment, for very little had been said of his adventure in the wood. He had not even let himself think of it often and, half defiant, half ashamed, had avoided the subject, but now let his spoken remorse come with a rush.

"I am so sorry that I did not do just as you told me. You looked for me for hours, I know, and I have never owned that it was all my fault. And I lost your rifle, too; I feel so dreadfully about that. I thought that I could save time and that you were too careful."

He sat thinking for a second, then added in a sudden burst of illumination:

"Perhaps that was why my father wouldn't let me go to France, because he knew I hadn't sense enough to obey orders. I understand now what he meant by my not having enough judgment. Oh, Oscar, I am so ashamed!"

"It iss all right." The Swedish accent in Oscar's voice sounded very distinctly as it was apt to do when he was moved. "It was my fault as much as yours; I should have warned you that you would be tempted to do just such a thing. When I waited for you and you did not come—well, I am not so often frightened, but I was afraid then. It is no little thing to be lost in these woods. I wish—I wish—"

He did not finish his sentence, but Hugh knew that he was thinking of the Edmonds boys and of how the search for them was growing more hopeless every day. He, too, felt that despair was not far off, but he had a feeling that, if either of them spoke of it, the idea of failure would suddenly become a real thing instead of a dreaded possibility. He tried to turn the talk to another subject and spoke the first words that entered his mind. It was the most careless of questions, but it led to such unexpected consequences that he used to wonder, later, why the clock had not ceased ticking or the rising breeze stopped blowing to listen as he spoke.

"Have you seen any wolves about here lately, or that white deer that the Indians say is in the forest?"

"Wolves never come so far south as this in summer," answered Oscar, then added sharply, "Why?"

"Because when I was lost I stopped by a marsh and—I haven't really thought of it very clearly since—but there were footprints in the ground that were much too big to have been made by a fox, I am sure, so I thought they were a wolf's."

Oscar leaned toward him, his blue eyes suddenly burning with excitement.

"What sort of footprints?" he questioned tersely. "How big? That makes all the difference in the world."

"Why, I don't know," stammered Hugh; "just footprints of some big animal. They weren't very plain."

In wild haste Oscar fumbled in his pockets, pulled out a pencil and, so great was his eagerness, drew his rough outlines on the blank page of his Bible.

"If a fox had made them they would be this big," he said; "and if a wolf, like this. Were they as big, bigger than that? As big as this?"

Hugh looked over his shoulder and pointed unhesitatingly to the third drawing.

"They were as large as that, or even larger," he stated. "Oh, what does it mean?"

Oscar drew a long breath.

"There is but one creature that could have made them," said he; "that is the dog Nicholas. He is very large, and white, as large as a deer. Now we have something to go upon at last."

He glanced quickly toward the west and frowned as he noted that the sun was low.

"It is too late to go now," he said, "and would hardly be worth while, for I suppose the marks were days old when you saw them. We will have supper, and go to bed early for a start at sunrise to-morrow."

Rising, he went into the cabin and, as Hugh could plainly hear, began to whistle gayly as he stirred the fire and brought out the frying pan. He seemed much more cheerful already now that

there was, at last, a little hope. Hugh took up his pail and went to finish his long interrupted task of fetching water from the spring.

He came running up the path a few minutes later, spilling the water in wild splashes, and burst in at the cottage door.

"Oscar," he cried, "did you say that you were sure Jake was still away?"

"Yes," answered Oscar, looking up from the fire; "he can't be back yet."

"But he is," insisted Hugh excitedly. "I thought so, and now I know. Just this minute I saw three men walk across the clearing and there is smoke coming from the chimney of the cabin on Jasper Peak. Just come to the door and see."

CHAPTER VII

WHITHER AWAY?

IT rained in the night, and blew so fiercely that the windows of the little house rattled and the door shook upon its hinges. When Hugh got up in the morning, all eagerness for the expedition, there was watery sunlight showing, but great gusts of wind were still thundering down the valley and the air was raw and chilly. The smiling autumn landscape of scarlet and gold was totally transformed; the flaming leaves had disappeared in one stormy night and the brown woods stood bare and bleak and cold.

"I wish this storm had waited just one day longer," said Oscar as they were having breakfast before the welcome blaze of the big fire. "There may even be snow now before many hours."

He did not say, "If only you had remembered

one day sooner what you saw in the wood!" Hugh felt that the thought must be in his mind, so large did it loom in his own. But Oscar's fashion of never wasting words was contagious, so he, too, said nothing.

As he opened the door to go out and feed Hulda, he heard, above the booming of the wind, a steady dull roar that was quite new to his ears.

"That is the stream that runs this side of Jasper Peak," Oscar explained. "You could hardly believe how one night's rain can carry it over its banks. Even less of a storm than this will sometimes make it impassable. Fortunately, where I want to go to-day is on this side and I will not have to try to cross it. But I may not be back until long after dark."

It was not like Oscar to say "I" when there were two to talk about. Hugh noted this with a sinking of the heart.

"Oscar," he cried, turning back from the door, "am I not going, too?"

Oscar slowly shook his head.

"I'm so sorry," he said with evident under-

standing of Hugh's disappointment, "but you see if Jake is really back we can't risk leaving the cabin alone. The claim is nearly established now and the closer we come to the end, the closer we come to trouble. There is bound to be one more row before the thing finally goes through."

"What sort of a row, Oscar?"

Oscar looked down at his scarred hand and smiled reflectively.

"A row like the others we have had," he said quietly, "only this time a really good one. Good-by."

He took up his pack and went out without another word. The furious wind seemed to seize him and whirl him away the moment he stepped outside the door. Hugh had not answered his farewell, for he was disappointed and indignant at being left behind and he did not mind how plainly Oscar saw it. After all, it was he himself who had seen the footprints by the marsh; he ought to be the person to go and look for them again. He went out to feed Hulda, slamming

the door smartly behind him and never looking at Oscar, who was still in sight, trudging along the open ridge above the valley. Hugh understood now why Oscar had asked so many questions about the region where the footprints had been seen, about how long the boy had walked before he came in sight of the cabin, about the contour of the land and the direction in which the shadows fell.

Hugh, as he moved sulkily toward the shed, began composing bitter speeches to be launched at Oscar when he should return. He stopped for a moment and looked across at Jasper Peak and the shack high up on its rocky shoulder. Yes, there was the plume of smoke again, torn and whirled about by the wind, but still sending up its ominous signal. He turned to open the shed door. He would tell Oscar plainly that—that—But, after all, why should Oscar have gone at all? It was a forlorn hope at the best for which he was risking everything, leaving in Hugh's safekeeping property that was infinitely valuable in

the light of the purpose it was to serve. A sudden change of feeling overcame Hugh, filling him with shame for his blind ill-temper.

He ran back to the top of the hill to see Oscar just about to disappear into the forest. It was too far for a shout to carry, but, yes, Oscar looked back just as he plunged into the wood. Hugh raised his arm high in a gesture of farewell and Oscar waved his woolen cap in generous-hearted understanding. Thus good feeling was reëstablished between them before they parted, parted for a longer time than either of them could have thought.

Hugh went back to attend to Hulda's wants for the day. She was a patient cow, but even she looked around at him in reproachful surprise over the awkwardness of his good offices.

"And I suppose I will have to try to milk her to-night," he reflected with some misgiving. He was not sure that her patience and forbearance were great enough for him to attempt such a feat.

As he returned to the cabin he was wondering how he was to spend the lonely day. There were,

he found, however, any number of things to be done, pans to be cleaned, water to be carried, some last weeds and dried stalks to be cleared from Oscar's vegetable garden and in the small field that he had cultivated. Oscar had managed to raise quite a store of wheat, had ground it by hand in the rude little mill that he had constructed himself and had put it aside for use during the winter. He had potatoes, too, and beans, turnips and other vegetables that could be dried or stored, so that the supplies that must be carried so laboriously from Rudolm need be the fewest possible.

After he had finished his work in the cabin and had cooked his dinner, trying to imitate Oscar's skill in tossing flapjacks and not succeeding very well, Hugh took an ax and went out to the edge of the forest to cut wood. Gathering the winter's fuel was an endless task, one upon which he and Oscar spent all of their extra time. He looked across at Jasper Peak again as he came out, but a curtain of rain was falling between him and the mountain and the cabin oppo-

site was invisible. It was growing colder and colder, the wind coming in icy gusts and the roar of the flooded stream becoming louder as darkness fell. Hugh worked actively all afternoon, as much for the sake of keeping warm and occupied, as for what he might accomplish. He had a generous store of wood to reward him for his heavy toil when at last it grew so late that he could see to wield the ax no longer. He walked heavily back to the cabin, wet and weary and wishing that Oscar would come home. In the shelter of the trees he had not noticed the wind and was amazed at its strength when he crossed the open ridge and ran for the cabin door.

On looking at the clock he realized that he had spent more time in the forest than he had intended and that he must make haste about his evening tasks. The fire was nearly out and did not wish to burn, for the wood was wet and the wind, whistling down the chimney, filled the room with sparks and smoke. He grew impatient and irritated at last, kicked the logs into place and received in return such a puff of ashes in his face

that he was nearly choked. As he went to the door for a breath of fresh air, he remembered, with sudden dismay, that he must milk Hulda.

For a long time after, Hugh preferred not to remember that interview between himself and the indignant cow. Even when he did think of it, he realized that Hulda showed the greatest forbearance and that the kick she gave him was probably an involuntary one, administered when cow nature could endure no more. She looked around at him a moment later with apology in her mild brown eyes, encouraging him to forget his smarting knee, to sit down upon the stool and attempt the task again. At last he straightened his aching back and stood gazing with pride at the bucket half full of foaming milk.

"You are a good cow, Hulda," he confided to her; "there are not many who would stand for what you have."

Very carefully he carried his prize back to the house, slipping and stumbling on the wet path, but taking the greatest care that not a drop should be spilled. He felt prouder of having milked

Hulda without assistance than of anything he had ever before achieved; he did wish that Oscar would come home to see. He stood a minute by the cabin door, trying with vain eyes to peer through the darkness. Nothing was visible, hardly even the hand he held before his face, nothing would pierce that heavy blackness but the rushing of the flooded stream and the calling of the wind. With a great sigh he turned at last, fumbled for the latch of the door and stepped inside.

The fire had burned up during his absence, making the room look warm and cozy, a welcome sight after the storm and rain without. He lit the lamp upon the table, then looked up uneasily at the clock on the wall. Its hands pointed to nine. He carried the lamp to the window, drew back the curtains and set it on the sill.

"I wish Oscar would come," he said aloud.

So busy had he been that he had not had his supper yet. His unaccustomed hands and his great hunger both served to make the process a lengthy one, so that when he had finished and set

things in order again, it was nearly eleven. To tell the truth, he had kept himself occupied as long as he could in an effort to ignore the fact that the storm, bad as it had been all day, was growing worse. Rain thundered on the roof of the cabin with a noise that was almost deafening, paused a moment, then came pouring down again. The windows shook and the lamp flared and flickered in the sudden gusts that seemed to be trying to snatch the little dwelling from its foundations. Once during a momentary pause in the tumult he heard the sharp crack and then the slow crashing of a tree blown down in the forest. How could a storm be so terrible and still grow ever worse? Oh, why did not Oscar come home?

He built up the dying fire and established himself in the rough armchair to wait. He blinked up at the clock; it was midnight now. In spite of his discomfort, in spite of all his anxiety and his determination to keep awake, he fell into a doze.

A sound aroused him, he had no idea just how much later. It was a strange noise at the door,

one that at first made him think that here was Oscar come home at last. He jumped up and ran eagerly to admit him, but stopped with his hand almost upon the latch. It was not Oscar, it was no human being that was making that panting sound outside, that pushing and shouldering of some huge body against the door. His heart seemed to stand still as he waited for a second, watching the rude boards shake and tremble under the impact of that strange pressure. Something sniffed and snuffled along the crack at the threshold, something padded back and forth out there in the dark, then the soft fumbling and shouldering began again.

"If I push the table across the door—" thought Hugh, but the idea came a second too late.

The latch suddenly gave way, the door flew open, letting in a blast of wind and rain and blowing out the lamp, so that the cabin was left in inky darkness. A vast white form sprang into the room, knocking Hugh into a corner, striking against a chair and upsetting it with a crash. Then there was utter silence, broken only by a

quick panting over by the inner doorway where the invading creature must be standing.

With a great effort Hugh managed to close the door against the fury of the wind. Still there was quiet, no movement from that corner whence the quick breathing came. Very slowly he took up the lamp, managed to steady his shaking hand and fumble for a match. He set the lamp on the table, lit the wick and turned the light full upon his strange visitor. Even when he saw the creature clearly he could not, for a moment, grasp what it really was. It was a dog, but such an enormous dog as Hugh had never seen before. Its shaggy coat was white, and so wet with the rain that water dripped from it and ran pattering to the floor. Motionless, it stood there, still panting from the effort of forcing its way in, and gazing steadily at Hugh with its great melancholy black eyes. He had never seen such an animal before, still there was something familiar—yes, he could have no doubt. It was the dog of the picture, Dick Edmonds' dog, it was Nicholas!

The two stood long, staring at each other with-

out moving, then the dog advanced very slowly and began sniffing delicately at the edge of Hugh's coat. For all his size, he seemed to be shy and nervous, jumping back when the boy sought to lay a hand on his long head, advancing again when he was not looking to sniff at his clothes again and determine whether this was friend or foe. All his dignity disappeared, however, when Hugh brought some food and set it upon the hearth before him. He fell upon it with wolfish ferocity, as though he had not eaten a full meal in weeks. He tore at the meat, crunched the bones and looked gratefully up at Hugh from time to time, wagging his long brush of a tail that swept the floor. But he did not eat all the food, ravenous as he seemed to be. When the first edge of his starvation was dulled, when the warmth of the fire had dried and warmed him so that he ceased to shiver, he stopped eating, went to the door and whined to be gone.

"What's the matter, old fellow, aren't you happy here?" Hugh asked, whereat the dog

came to him, nuzzled his hand with his long wet nose, then ran to the door again.

His insistence was so great that at last Hugh felt forced to lift the latch, open the door and let him go. He bounded over the sill and disappeared instantly into the dark. Not for long, however, for Hugh had not had time to close the door before he was back again, shoving his nose beseechingly into the boy's hand, jumping about him and whining again and again. There was no doubting what it was he wished.

"It's a nice night for you to be asking me to go out with you," remonstrated Hugh, "but—well, you are Dick Edmonds' dog and we have been looking for you and him for a long time."

He stepped back into the cabin with Nicholas at his heels and took up his coat and cap. At the sight of this, the dog's joy knew no bounds; he leaped about so that the furniture of the little cabin rocked and swayed under the force of his gigantic delight. Hugh put on his warmest clothes, got out a pack and put into it blankets,

food, matches, anything he could think of that might be needed. He had no idea how far Nicholas would lead him, how long he would be gone or what he should find. At the last minute he took Oscar's revolver down from the wall; there had been two, but one his friend had evidently taken with him. He quenched the fire, put out the light and was finally ready. With Nicholas running ahead, barking in loud delight now that his desire was understood at last, they set out into the storm.

The rain was still driving in sheets across the hill and the wind sweeping furiously along the open spaces. The darkness was so dense that at first Hugh could do nothing but feel his way down the trail which Nicholas so unhesitatingly followed. When his eyes became a little more used to the dark, however, and the trees began to shelter him from the stinging rain, he could make out the windings of the steep path, could distinguish the dog, white and ghostly, traveling steadily ahead of him, and finally could see the foaming white flood of the stream that poured

downward to the lake between him and Jasper Peak. Nicholas advanced to the very edge of the creek, stopped and looked back.

"You don't mean that we are to cross that?" exclaimed Hugh in dismay, gazing down at the tossing water.

Such, however, was plainly Nicholas' intention, for without further hesitation he plunged in and began to swim across. The wild current caught him and whirled him down the stream, as Hugh could just make out. The black mass of a floating log shot by and barely missed him, but none the less he struggled on and finally, a dim white form in the dark, scrambled out upon the opposite bank.

What a dog could just barely accomplish was certainly impossible for a boy with a heavy pack. Hugh remembered that half a mile up the stream a huge tree had fallen across from bank to bank, making a bridge by which he might get over if the rush of the flood had not carried it away. Nicholas, whining with anxiety, followed along on the other shore, as Hugh made his way with

difficulty to where the tree should be. Yes, it was still there, high out of water at each end but with the furious current pouring across it in the middle. It looked like none too safe a crossing, but it was the only one. He attempted, at first, to walk upright, but soon found that impossible, so stooped, and was at length reduced to crawling painfully along on hands and knees. The cold water swirled about him as he approached the center of the stream, the current seemed trying, with direct intent, to tear loose his hold and wash him away. The tree-trunk quivered and trembled under the mighty force that was hurled against it, but it held under his weight as slowly he crawled along, felt the current lessen, came into quieter water and was at last safe on the other side, with Nicholas standing up to lick his face.

"Now, then, where next?" questioned Hugh as the dog immediately set off up the mountain. The rain and wind were less violent on this side of the ravine, so that their progress was quicker as they climbed upward. It was fortunate that it

was so dark, Hugh thought, for it seemed as though they were about to pass uncomfortably close to the Pirate's cabin. He plodded on, stumbling over roots, scrambling through bushes, finding the way very rough indeed. It was not until they came to the edge of a clearing and saw before him a little house with one lighted window and with Nicholas standing waiting on the doorstep that he realized what was to be the goal of this strange night journey.

Even then he thought of turning back. The perils of the rain-swept forest and of the swollen floods were as nothing to the dangers lurking in that evil dwelling that blinked at him with one staring red eye. Had not Nicholas run quickly through the dark to lick his hand, had he not thought once more of the lost Edmonds brothers and how he had pledged himself to help them, it is possible that he might not have gone on. Yet at last he stepped out of the woods, and, very firm and straight, walked across the clearing to the house.

He stopped for a moment upon the step and

listened. There was not a sound from within. Was the place empty, or had some one heard him coming and was waiting, in stealthy quiet, until he should enter? What was that, a sigh perhaps, more like a stifled moan? Without further hesitation he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

CHAPTER VIII

A NIGHT'S LODGING

IT had been the intense darkness of the night outside that had made the cabin window look bright, for the room into which Hugh came was lit only by a dying fire. Close to the hearth a big chair had been drawn and in this some one was sitting, some one who whispered and muttered to himself and stirred uneasily but did not look round. Nicholas ran to him and began licking the thin hand that hung limply over the arm of the chair. A lantern stood on the table, but it had evidently burned out. A canvas pack, half-emptied, with its blankets trailing out upon the floor, lay on a bench. It was quite evident that, besides the man in the chair, there was no one in the cabin.

Hugh went over to him, but still he did not look

up. The boy touched the hand that Nicholas was licking and found it burning with fever. The man was very thin; he had on the rough clothes that every one wears in the woods, but he was fair-skinned and as unlike Half-Breed Jake and his companions as it was possible to be. It needed no very long reflection to make it clear to Hugh that this was John Edmonds.

Although it was quite true that Hugh did not know very much of the woodcraft and that, at milking Hulda, he had come very near to being a flat failure, there were still some crises to which he was equal, for he was not a country doctor's son for nothing. He had helped his father more than once in emergencies very like this one, so that he was not long at a loss what to do. John Edmonds must certainly be got to bed, but one look at the bunks against the walls and the filthy rags that lay piled upon them, assured Hugh that the floor was infinitely preferable. He unpacked his own blankets, gathered up those that lay on the bench and made a bed upon the rough board flooring. It required almost unbelievable effort

to arouse John Edmonds and move him, helplessly weak as he was, to the improvised couch. Hugh did not stop to rekindle the lantern, but flung more wood upon the fire and by its light went about the task of getting his patient partly undressed and of making him more comfortable.

During these ministrations, poor Nicholas, not realizing that his share of usefulness was over, contrived to make himself continually in the way. He seemed at least ten sizes too big for the tiny cabin and to have the idea that the best thing he could do was to keep as near to Edmonds as possible. Hugh pushed him out of the way a score of times, stumbled over him in the half dark and felt, every time he stood still for a moment, that cold nose pushed into his hand as though the big dog were begging him to do his best. At last the worried creature subsided, and lay down at the sufferer's feet, with his chin on his paws and his dark eyes still following Hugh wherever he went. The boy tried everything he knew and, finally, kneeling beside his patient on the floor, was rewarded by seeing the uneasy stupor pass into

something like natural slumber. He waited a long time to assure himself that Edmonds' breathing was easier and quieter and that he really slept. Then he got up stiffly, mended the fire once more and began to explore the resources of the little cabin.

In a store-shed behind the one room he found an open window, through which Nicholas had evidently made his way when he had set out on his own expedition. He also discovered a can of oil, with which he filled the lantern so that it could be lit again. The yellow light, falling upon the table, showed him something that he had not seen before, a note scrawled hastily in pencil on brown paper.

"John," it ran, "I have gone for help, but not to Oscar Dansk, because I promised you I would not. I have gone to the Indian village at Two Rivers and will try to send some one into Rudolm for a doctor. I will be back before a great many hours. Dick."

With the letter still in his hand, Hugh sat down beside the fire to try to think the matter out. It

was evident that the two Edmonds had taken shelter from the storm in the Pirate's cabin and that John had become so ill that his younger brother, in alarm, had gone for aid. Their plight must have been desperate indeed for Dick to leave his brother alone in such a place. But why should he have gone so far when just across the ravine help was to be had? Why did he speak of a promise? It was very hard to understand!

Nicholas arose from where he had been lying and came to stand beside him, arching his curly neck as Hugh stroked it, and trying to burrow his head under the boy's arm.

"You could tell me all about it if you could talk," said Hugh in a whisper. "Oh, dear, it is such a puzzle, I wish you could."

He began to remember now that Jethro had dropped some hint of a misunderstanding between John Edmonds and Oscar Dansk. He had hardly noticed it when it had been mentioned, but now he commenced to recall the fact more clearly.

"In the end even John Edmonds lost faith in

Oscar's plan about the road, and that nearly broke his heart," Jethro had said.

Plainly, the quarrel had been a serious one, if Edmonds was so determined not to receive aid from Oscar's hands. And how had Oscar taken it? Even at that moment he was out there in the storm, risking his life, risking the plan for which he cared even more than life—he was doing this for the friend with whom he had quarreled.

"Oh, Nicholas," exclaimed Hugh as he squeezed the big dog's ears, "oh, Nicholas, that Oscar Dansk is a real man!"

One thing still so puzzled him that his baffled thoughts came back to it again and again. Was it the two Edmonds who had occupied the Pirate's shack yesterday, that quiet Sunday when he and Oscar had sat talking so long before the cottage door? Was it the smoke from their fire that he had seen rising from the chimney?

After long reflection, during which his thoughts began to wander sleepily here and there and had to be brought back again with a jerk,

he began to be certain that it could not have been the two Edmonds brothers. He himself had seen three men walk across the clearing and from the letter he could make sure that Dick and his brother had been alone. Besides, the distance was not so great that he could not have made out so big a creature as Nicholas, had the dog been with them. Evidently the pirates had come and gone before the storm—but why? Evidently the Edmonds, after the wind and rain had come on in such fierceness, had taken refuge there—but how did they dare? And, evidently, he was growing very sleepy now, but the force of this new thought served to rouse him completely again, evidently the pirates would be returning—and when?

The night wore to a slow end, and day broke at last. With the first gray light there came a change in his patient, the fever was succeeded by chills and shivering and for an hour Hugh was doing his utmost with hot blankets and warming drinks. Gradually the trembling stopped and John Edmonds, opening his eyes, gave Hugh a

look of bewildered amazement and stared about him as though the cabin and the boy were both totally unfamiliar. It was not until his eyes fell upon Nicholas that he seemed satisfied and dropped off to sleep again. It was broad daylight now and time for Hugh to realize that he was exceedingly hungry. He fell to examining his own stores, Edmonds' and Half-Breed Jake's, to see what the combined larder afforded. There was not much in his pack, for he had not thought he would be very long away from the cottage; there was nothing in Edmonds', but quite a supply of flour and bacon in Jake's store room.

"I don't care to use anything that belongs to that gang unless I have to," he thought. "It was probably all stolen in the first place."

As he was putting one of the bags back into place, he knocked down a gun that had been standing in the corner and that now fell at his feet with a loud clatter. He picked it up and recognized with delight that it was Oscar's rifle, the same one that he himself had dropped in the woods the day that he was lost. This would be a

prize indeed to take back with him when the time should come to go. But how had the pirates come by it? Had somebody been following that day in the forest, was the same somebody even now following Oscar wherever he had gone?

He made his breakfast and fed Nicholas from his own supplies. Fortunately he knew enough not to try to give food to John Edmonds, who was sleeping uneasily again, as though the fever was once more beginning to rise. Hugh, sitting beside him, began to do some very intense calculating as to who would be the most likely to come back first, Dick Edmonds or Half-Breed Jake. It was impossible to tell, he could only wait. He sat, staring down at his patient for a long time. The only proper thing to do was to try to get him across the ravine to Oscar's cottage, but could a boy of sixteen possibly hope to convey a heavy, helpless man that far? To all of his questionings this was the only one to which there was a definite answer. And the answer was no.

The morning passed, one slow hour after another. It was still raining heavily, with water

pouring from the edge of the cabin roof and streaming down the windows, and with the flooded creek still thundering in the ravine below. Every minute that passed brought nearer the possible return of Half-Breed Jake, since, so Hugh began to think, he must certainly be the one to come first. More than once he thought he heard steps outside and felt of his revolver to be ready for whatever might come, but each time it proved to be a false alarm. Finally he sat down at the table, facing the door, and laid his revolver before him, to wait as best he could. He had risen very early the morning that Oscar had gone away alone—was it a day or a week ago? At least he knew that he had slept very little since and that he must, at all costs, keep awake now. Yet slowly his head began to nod, to droop further toward the table; finally it rested on his arms and he was asleep.

It was the deepest of slumbers into which he had fallen, yet he came out of it with a suddenness that left him dazed. Nicholas was leaping at the door, barking loudly to herald some one's

coming, sniffing along the threshold, then barking and leaping again. Hugh jumped up, so stiff that he could not move quickly. He took up his revolver and tried to reach the door, but was only half way across the room when it swung open, and Dick Edmonds came in.

He was drenched and dripping, and he, too, held a revolver in his hand. The two boys stared at each other for a long moment, then burst into roars of laughter. The long strain, the sudden desperate tension, the relief of each one at seeing a friend when he expected to confront an enemy, was quite too much for both. Even while they laid down their threatening weapons and shook hands they were still laughing. It was Dick who sobered first and went over to stoop down by his brother.

"He must have been getting steadily worse from the time I got him here," he said. "Poor old Johnny, if he had been as badly off as this I would never have left him. But this was as far as I could get him alone and I was so desperate that I went off for help. I had been hoping

against hope that Jake and his gang were away for some time, but when I saw by the muddy footprints on the doorstep that some one had gone in since I went away, I can tell you I was anxious."

"Did you bring some one back with you?" asked Hugh.

"I never got to Two Rivers at all," replied Dick. "The first stream I came to was so far over its banks that I walked for hours trying to find a place to cross and couldn't. At last I realized that, even if I got help, it would risk leaving John alone too long, so I turned back. A lot of good I did by going!"

"The thing now," said Hugh, "is to get your brother away as quickly as we can. The pirates will be coming back any minute."

"I doubt if even the pair of us could ever get him to Two Rivers," Dick returned doubtfully.

"We'll take him across to Oscar Dansk's house, there beyond the ravine," Hugh said.

Dick hesitated, stammered and flushed.

"I promised—" he began.

"Whatever you promised," Hugh interrupted him, "you will not be asking for help from Oscar Dansk. He is not there."

"Where is he?"

"Out in the woods—looking for you."

Dick shook his head slowly.

"That beats me," he said. "I always thought poor Johnny was wrong about Oscar. I never really understood about that quarrel myself. And lately John was too sick to know quite what he did think, and he made me promise over and over, when he knew that we might be somewhere near where Oscar lived, that I would not go to him for help. They are both so obstinately proud. But I can see for myself that the only thing now is to do as you say. I should like to know how you ever got here, Hugh, and about a hundred other things, but we won't spend time on explanations just yet. I suppose we can make a stretcher of blankets and carry him between us somehow."

Their preparations were quickly made. John Edmonds, still unconscious, was lifted to the rude

litter they had constructed, and was carried out of the cabin. They had covered him well against the wind and rain, but the journey would be a perilous one for him, none the less. Slowly, and with frequent pauses, they got him across the clearing and down the hill to the stream, then along its bank to where the fallen tree still held its place. With the decreasing of the furious rain the flood had dropped a little, so that to-day the whole of the rude bridge was out of water. How they got across, Hugh did not ever quite know. The tree swayed and shook more than it had done before, for the water had undermined the banks and made the frail support even more uncertain. They worked their way across, holding their burden high between them, and breathed a monstrous sigh of relief when at last they were on firm ground again. Nicholas would not trust their way of crossing, but swam over, with much difficulty, and was waiting for them on the other shore.

They were a tired and breathless pair when they had finally carried Edmonds up the steep

trail and into Oscar's cottage. Most eagerly, as they approached the house, did Hugh look for some sign of his friend's return. But the door and the windows were closed, the chimney smokeless, there was no one there. Only Hulda greeted them with an impatient call and loud stampings on the floor of her shed, to signify her indignation at having been forgotten so long. Hugh did not stop for any vain wonderings.

"Can you get your brother to bed alone," he asked Dick, "while I go back?"

"Go back!" exclaimed Dick. "What for?"

"For the things we had to leave behind," Hugh answered, "and for Oscar's rifle. I dropped it in the woods and Jake had picked it up. I would risk anything to get it back for him."

"You should not go," Dick insisted; "the pirates may come back any second now."

But the door had already closed behind Hugh and he was speeding down the trail with Nicholas at his heels. They crossed the stream, even the dog being willing to use the bridge this time after his last experience with the wild current.

Hugh reached the cabin and secured the rifle and the two packs that still lay upon the table.

"What luck I have had," he thought exultantly. "Now I suppose I ought to put out the fire; it would not be fair to risk burning up their cabin, no matter who they are."

He had stepped back to the hearth when a low growl from Nicholas startled him to sudden attention. The big dog was standing with ears and head up and the hair on his back beginning to bristle. Tiptoeing to the window, Hugh peered cautiously out. There, on the side of the clearing away from the stream, he saw three men coming out of the edge of the wood. Even at that distance he could recognize the tall figure and swarthy face of Half-Breed Jake as he came up the hill a little ahead of the other two. The door was on the opposite side of the cabin, so that Hugh could slip out undiscovered, but it was a long, long open slope that lay between him and the sheltering woods.

Down the hill he plunged, cutting off corners of the trail, leaping over the rocks and scrambling

through the low-growing bushes. Nicholas seemed to cover the distance in two bounds with a speed that Hugh greatly envied. He was burdened with the two heavy packs and the rifle slung across his shoulders, but, by some instinctive obstinacy, he would not drop them for the pirates to capture.

For a minute he thought he could escape unseen, but his progress was slower than he thought and he had delayed in the cabin an instant too long. A shout behind him told that he was discovered. He looked desperately upward as a clattering of feet sounded on the stony trail and saw three men cross the top of the hill and come running down the path.

CHAPTER IX

PERIL AT THE BRIDGE

ANY person of real judgment, so Hugh realized even at the time, would have thrown away the pack and rifle and run to safety unimpeded. He did think of it, but somehow he could not. So he stumbled on, the men behind him gaining, the river and the fallen tree seeming a long distance away. He reached the sheltering underbrush, turned sharply upstream and was hidden for a moment from his pursuers as they came dashing down the hill. He had just leaped upon the tree-trunk when they came out upon the bank.

"Look out, Hugh," came a shout from the other shore, where stood Dick, who had shamelessly deserted his brother. "Look out! They are going to shoot."

Hugh did not stop to look, but ducked quickly and heard a bullet whistle over his head. The next second, "ping," another buried itself in the pack that hung from his shoulder. The impact almost destroyed his balance; he staggered and dropped to his knees and crawled the last few yards to safety.

"Are you hurt?" cried Dick. "Are you safe? Lie down behind that log until they have stopped shooting."

In absolute defiance of his own advice he, as well as Nicholas, was standing among the trees, the one shouting, the other barking in wild excitement. But Hugh would not come, for his very danger on the now tottering bridge had given him an idea for the furthering of their own safety. He was standing knee deep in the running water with his shoulder against the tree-trunk, pushing against it with all his might.

"Go back; stay with your brother," he called to Dick. "What would he do if you were to be shot?"

A bullet carried away his woolen cap and an-

other cut the bark beside his hand, but he did not give up. He pushed until the big tree swayed, moved a little, then suddenly rolled all the way over. Just as the first Indian's foot was upon it, the great log fell splashing into the water, was whirled over and over by the current and rushed away down stream. Dripping and delighted, Hugh ran up the trail to join Dick, the angry bullets still whistling behind him. He looked back to see one of the Indians wade into the water, stand waist deep, reeling under the force of the flood, then struggle back to the shore. All three of the pirates strode away through the bushes, talking earnestly together.

For some time after the boys returned to the cabin they were busied caring for John Edmonds. While they were working, they exchanged their various experiences, so that Dick learned how Hugh came to be in the cabin on Jasper Peak, and Hugh, of the Edmonds' adventures in the forest.

This illness of John's, it seemed, had been coming on gradually. Dick had noticed that

he was restless, erratic and worried over his work, at which he often had to toil late into the night. The hunting trip, Dick had thought, would help to put him on his feet again, and he had, indeed, seemed better the first day, but after that grew rapidly worse.

"It was the last thing we could do together," Dick explained, "for I was going to enlist when I got back; I had only been waiting until they could find some one to fill my place at the mine. We started off in great spirits; the Indian, Kaniska, was our guide, a man we had had before, who always seemed reliable enough. He was a friend of John's, in a way, and that queer squaw of his, Laughing Mary, had always professed to be devoted to us, especially to my brother. I can't imagine how Kaniska could have done such a thing to us."

"And what did he do?" inquired Hugh eagerly.

"He took us in a direction we had never been before," said Dick, "through a perfect network of streams and little lakes and swamps, and made us push on as fast as we could, saying that we

were getting to a place where there was famous shooting. We did not camp until very late that first night and I was so tired that I slept like the dead. When I woke up in the morning, he was gone."

"He left you alone?" exclaimed Hugh in horror.

"Not only that, but he took all our stores with him, and our axes and our compass. To leave men in the woods, stripped of everything they need, is very little short of murder. I had been sleeping with my rifle beside me, so he didn't dare take that. It was the only thing that saved us."

"And you have lived only on what you could shoot?" questioned Hugh. "Why, you must be half famished!"

"I am," assented Dick, cheerfully, "rather more than half, to tell the truth, but we must attend to Johnny first."

When at last there was time to stir up the fire and prepare a meal, Hugh realized on seeing Dick eat how near he had been to real starvation.

"Berries and things are pretty scarce so late in the year as this," Dick continued his tale as they sat at the table. "I managed to catch a few fish now and then, and I shot any kind of bird that I could hit. We ate some queer things, but you get so that you don't care much. Nicholas could catch rabbits and he always brought them to me, although, poor fellow, he could have eaten a hundred of them himself."

He related how, after a few hours of bewildered searching for the vanished Indian, he had decided that the stream upon which they were encamped, being larger than the others and flowing north, must be the outlet of Red Lake and was therefore the best guide to follow. If he could find the lake, he could find Rudolm, he thought, but what a long and hopeless way it seemed! Now and then, in trying to cut off some of the windings of the stream, they had strayed away from it altogether and had only found it again after the loss of much time and effort.

"And all the time Johnny kept getting sicker and sicker," he said, "so that I got more fright-

ened about him than about anything else. At night he would be out of his head, sometimes, and in the daytime he would just trudge along at my heels and never say a word. Only once, when I said that if we ever found the lake we might come out somewhere near Oscar Dansk's house, he got furiously angry and made me promise that I would never ask him for help. I don't know yet what idea he had in his poor confused head, but I had to promise, to quiet him."

He told further of their growing weakness, of the shorter and shorter distances they could travel in a day, of a final afternoon when, having gone to shoot a partridge, he had come back and found his brother had disappeared.

"Perhaps I hadn't realized until that minute how desperately ill he was. He had wandered off; I could see the storm coming and I looked and looked and called and called, but I couldn't find him. I felt pretty hopeless, I can tell you."

It was Nicholas who had discovered John Edmonds at last, lying insensible under a big tree

near the foot of Jasper Peak. They had sat by him a long time, the boy and the dog, helpless and exhausted both of them. Dick had caught a glimpse of the cabin on the side of the mountain and had decided, when the storm broke, that they must get there at any cost.

"I carried Johnny on my back," he said, "don't ask me how, but some way or other we made it. I was so anxious to get him in out of the storm that it didn't matter much where we went. I don't think I had sense enough to mind a great deal even when I realized it was Jake's cabin. We found something to eat, although we didn't take more than we could possibly help. John seemed to revive a little, but still I was desperately anxious, and felt that I must do something, no matter what. I think I believed Two Rivers and Rudolm were much nearer than they are and I had not counted on the streams all being in flood. I could see the light from your cabin, but—well, I had promised. Now, I can understand that the promise was a foolish business, but your judg-

ment isn't quite so good when you are worn out and half starved, as when you are rested and fed. You don't see things quite so clear."

"But weren't you afraid of Jake's coming back?" Hugh asked.

Dick, it appeared, did not have such horror of the Pirate of Jasper Peak as had Hugh. He did not even yet seem to suspect that the half-breed had been concerned in their being lost in the forest nor had he heard the full tale of what Jake had done to Oscar Dansk. One anxiety had overcome the other and he had left his brother, ordering Nicholas back when he would have come too, and finally shutting him in so that John Edmonds should not feel himself quite alone.

"But almost as soon as I was gone he broke out and went across the valley to you," Dick concluded. "Nicholas had more sense than I had, didn't you, old fellow?"

The big dog, lying on his side before the hearth, opened one eye and beat gently on the floor with his plumy tail at mention of his name. Then he

heaved a great sigh, stretched himself luxuriously to the fire and fell asleep again, completely satisfied that those he loved were safe at last.

Dick, also, being assured that at least his brother was no worse, went away to sleep off some of the exhaustion of his journey through the forest, and Hugh was left to sit alone, still watching for Oscar's return and wondering more and more anxiously why he did not come. The little cabin was peaceful and absolutely quiet except for the ticking of the clock and the deep breathing of the dog at his feet, but far from peaceful were Hugh's racing thoughts. Where had his comrade been during that furious storm? What had happened to keep him so long? Oh, if he only had not parted from Oscar in such churlish ill-nature how much easier it would be to bear this anxious waiting!

He looked at Oscar's recovered rifle hanging on the wall and thought with satisfaction of how glad he would be to see it. He felt a good deal of pride in having been able to get it back, but, as he sat thinking, he began to feel his pleasure

give way to a certain lingering doubt. Had he really been wise in returning to the Pirate's house, was the value of the rifle greater than the value of the help he could give the two exhausted Edmonds, help that they would have lost had his venture ended in his being shot? It was an unwelcome thought, yet he was forced to conclude that this was another of those errors in judgment of which his father had accused him, a rash failing to count the cost at the critical moment.

"Oh, dear," he sighed, quite out loud, "when will I ever get sense enough to qualify for a soldier?"

Nicholas, hearing his voice, raised his head to look at him inquiringly. He seemed to hear something else also, for he got up, went to the door and stood listening intently. Then he turned to Hugh and whined to be let out. Hugh listened, but heard nothing save the rushing of the stream and the sighing of the wind in the trees.

"There isn't anything," he said to Nicholas, but

the big dog still insisted, so at last he opened the door.

He stood before the cottage, looking in every direction, north, south, east; the sun was in his eyes so that he shaded them with his hand to look across the open meadows to the west. Was that something moving, was it a distant, plodding, weary figure slowly making its way up the slope? He could not be mistaken. It was Oscar!

With a shout of joy Hugh ran to meet him, but stopped short in surprise and dismay when he came close. Oscar's forehead was cut and had been bleeding; his cheek was discolored with a great bruise; he carried neither pack nor gun, and he limped as he came toiling painfully up the hill.

"I had a fall," he explained briefly, in answer to Hugh's anxious questions.

Long after, Hugh learned the real details of the mishap, how Oscar had taken shelter from the storm under a mass of overhanging rock, how the fury of wind and water had loosened it above

him and how he had been swept down in the midst of an avalanche of plunging bowlders, sliding earth and uprooted trees, to lie stunned for he knew not how many hours, but—

"I had a fall," was all he said, then added quickly, "What is that? Nicholas, *Nicholas!*"

He sat down abruptly on a fallen tree as though sudden relief had weakened his knees; he put his arms around the great dog's neck. Nicholas, in turn, overwhelmed him with endearments, licked his face, nuzzled his hand, nearly pushed him from the log in his clumsy efforts to show his joy. There seemed no need to tell Oscar that the two brothers had been found, for he seemed to guess the whole of the good news from the mere presence of the big wolfhound. Hugh, as he stood looking at the greetings of the two, had a sudden understanding, from Oscar's overwhelming relief and delight, what was the real depth of the friendship he bore John Edmonds.

When he and Hugh reached the cottage, Oscar went straight to John's bed and sat down beside it. The sufferer had lain in heavy stupor for

hours, only arousing once, much earlier in the day, to stare at the boys with no recognition and then to drop into unconsciousness again. But now, almost as soon as Oscar's firm hand closed about his wrist to feel his pulse, he opened his eyes, looked at the other with slowly dawning comprehension and said:

"I was wrong about that road, Oscar, and you were right."

"It wass no matter," his friend answered hastily, his voice sounding Swedish again in the extremity of his feeling. "Opening up these wheat lands might not have been advisable then, when it was just a question of dollars and cents. Now it is different, it is a matter of daily bread and lives and victory."

But Johnny Edmonds did not hear. Having given voice to the thought that had so long been uppermost in his mind, he drifted contentedly away into sleep again, real sleep this time, with no further mutterings and restless movements of his head upon the pillow. Oscar got up quickly and went to stand at the window, looking out with

that queer far-off look that his face sometimes wore. Turning at last he met Dick's anxious eyes and smiled slowly and happily.

"It was just a year ago we quarreled," he said. "I thought he should have stood by me when I wanted to build the road; he thought, like the rest, that I was a mad dreamer—perhaps I was. This war has overturned all things; what was a far vision once may be what the world most needs to-day. But your brother is a better friend than I, Dick Edmonds. I could not have been the first to say that I was wrong. And now all is well again."

The next day and the next, John Edmonds' fever ebbed and flowed, leaving them sometimes full of hope that recovery was beginning, sometimes in terror that such recovery might never be. In the end, however, the crisis passed, leaving him pale and shaky, but clear-headed and himself again at last. It was on the first day that he was able to be propped up in bed that Oscar, sitting by him, began to discuss, with unreserved bluntness, what was being said in Rudolm about

John's books and the state in which the bank's affairs had been left. For a moment Edmonds looked astonished, dismayed and angry, then he laughed.

Three of his clerks had gone to war, he explained, and he was so short-handed that he used to work fourteen, sixteen, eighteen hours at a time, trying to keep things going, reeling with exhaustion, his brain at last so weary and confused with illness that he scarcely knew what he was doing.

"Now my head is cleared up again," he said, "I begin to realize what queer things I must have done to those books. The expert who is trying to make them out must be having a glorious time of it. I wonder how far he has got and what he thinks he has found."

Then Oscar broached the plan that he had evidently been turning over and over in his mind. Edmonds must get back to Rudolm as soon as possible, he said, for affairs must be cleared up and the anxiety of bank directors and stockholders must be brought to an end. The moment

he could be moved Oscar himself would take him home; they would go by water, the whole length of Red Lake, a two or three days' journey by canoe. He stated the plan and its urgency very briefly, even more briefly told the need of the boys' staying behind.

Both immediately raised their voices in clamorous objection. Dick must get back, he was going to enlist; Hugh wished to go with him, in fact the two boys had been laying their heads together and making plans of their own. But in all of their arguments they found Oscar's calculations had been before them.

Did Dick know the bars and channels and bays between here and Rudolm? He did not. Could he, or could he and Hugh together, be sure of handling a heavily laden canoe successfully in the face of chance winds on the open stretches of the lake? They were not able to say they could. Could John be taken overland, paddled up rivers, carried around portages, risk a meeting in the forest with Half-Breed Jake or some of his followers? No. Or could Oscar go with Dick and

John and leave Hugh behind to hold the cabin alone? Most certaintly not.

So the plan stood as Oscar first proposed it, and, on John's continuing to improve steadily, preparations were made for a start three days later. The night before they were to go, Oscar went with Hugh all over his small domain, indoors and out, showing him just how this was to be cared for and how that was to be done. They were coming up the path from Hulda's stable, picking their way over the rough stones in the moonlight, the big dog following them, while Oscar gave his final directions. The wide valley of the Promised Land lay at their feet in sharp outline of black and white, while above them the sky was powdered thick with stars and, across the ravine, rose the dark heights of Jasper Peak with one gleaming light shining from its rugged shoulder.

"And you must look out for Jake," Oscar ended. "Every hour, every minute, you must watch for him. In three weeks the date for my proving up will have passed, the claim will

be really mine—if I can hold it until then."

"But surely there is nothing that he can do now," Hugh protested.

"He and his comrades will perhaps do the worst they have ever done, between now and that day," returned Oscar quietly. "They will not come openly to shoot or rob or burn, they will lie in wait and play some trick on you, for the crooked way is always their way. What they will do I cannot guess, I can only tell you to watch and never cease watching and in the end I know we will win."

"Still," insisted Hugh, "I do not see how they can ruin your plan so near its end as this."

"Suppose," said Oscar, "he should drive you out, burn down the buildings and destroy the fields and, before I can file my final papers, prove to the Land Office that none of the required improvements are really here. We could take the matter into court and establish in time that it was he who laid things waste, but that would take months, the season would pass and the lands would not be open in time for a harvest next year.

And a year in terms of wheat and bread counts now for more than ten ordinary years."

"And you think that when the place is yours and you are settled here, then the people of Rudolm will follow?"

"I know they will. Their fear of Half-Breed Jake is partly habit, partly a sort of superstition; it is not real cowardice. When they see that one man has been able to hold out against him alone they will not hesitate longer."

"They should be very grateful to you," observed Hugh, his voice grave with the thought of what weight of responsibility was to be laid upon him. He shivered a little. The autumn air was very cold.

"I do not want gratitude," returned Oscar quickly. "What would I have to say to them if they tried to thank me? No, when I see these hillsides covered with the grain for which the whole world is crying; when I can sit here on my doorstep and see many red roofs warm in the sunshine, or the moonlight making sharp black shadows of the pointed gables or yellow lights

shining from the windows there, and there, and there; when I can think that all within are warm and safe and happy, why, I can ask for nothing more on earth, except—except, perhaps, that little black Hendrik might be back again."

Nicholas, who had been sitting on the grass beside them while they stood and talked, came now to rub against Oscar and push his great head under his hand.

"You are a good fellow, Nicholas," said Oscar, patting his curly shoulder, "but you are not my Hendrik. It is strange how a man and a little black dog can learn to love each other when each is all the other has."

There was much hurrying to and fro before dawn next morning when the journey was actually to begin. There was carrying of loaded packs down to the canoe, there was running back for things forgotten, there were many instructions given by every one to every one else. The day promised to be a clear one, although now the sky was dark and the water gray. John Edmonds was made comfortable in the bottom of the

boat; the packs were put on board; there was no time for elaborate farewells, even when it came to pushing out from shore.

"Shove her easy," directed Dick, and—

"A little more," said Oscar. "There, now we are afloat. Good-by, good-by."

His paddle dipped, the canoe shot forward, a sharp ripple rose beneath her bow. The two boys stood watching as she moved steadily away. The water was turning from gray to silver and shining in the morning light, while a gold and scarlet glow behind Jasper Peak showed where the sun was soon to rise. Hugh and Dick still stood as the boat dwindled to a black speck on the glittering lake, turned into Harbin's Channel and disappeared. Even then they waited, shading their eyes, hoping for one more sight of it. Finally Hugh heaved a long sigh and the two turned to look at each other. The valley of the Promised Land was their very own, to hold or to lose.

CHAPTER X

FIRST BLOOD TO THE PIRATE

ON returning to the cottage, the first thing that Hugh did was to mark off the date on the calendar just as he had seen Oscar do every morning.

"We mustn't lose count of the days," he said to Dick.

"Oh, there won't be so many of them as all that," Dick answered.

Hugh said nothing. Oscar had talked to him more fully than to his comrade about the task of righting John Edmonds' affairs.

"It may not be so simple to put them in order as he hopes it will," he had said, "so the time may be three weeks or a month or perhaps more. I will not hide from you the chance that, if there is very bad weather soon, I may not get back to

you for some time. The snow can lie very deep in these valleys."

"Snow," Hugh had exclaimed, "why, it is only October!"

"Remember it will be November in a week," Oscar replied, "and that this is a climate very different from yours. Here the winter begins early and lasts long and we have to be ready for it. There are supplies enough to last until spring, I have made sure of that, and plenty of wood, so that there is no danger of your needing anything. I will come back to you as soon as I can, but at this season all plans go by the weather."

So Hugh had written a long letter to his father for Oscar to send, explaining why mail must be uncertain and just what he was doing.

"I ought to learn a great deal from this experience," he ended, "enough to make even you feel that I am fit for service in France. I am bound that I will make it before I am twenty-one."

It did not look much like winter to-day, even though the woods were so bare and the hillsides so brown. The boys had arranged that they

would hunt and fish as much as possible for the purpose of saving Oscar's stores for future use, and that they would go out alone on alternate days, so that the cottage might never be left unguarded. Neither one was ever to go so far away that a certain signal of rifle shots could not call him back. It was agreed that Hugh was to go shooting the first day, so, very blithely, he had made ready, shouldered his rifle and started forth.

He stopped a moment before the door to look down at the lake, which was very still this morning and very blue. He knew now why Oscar had elected to start before the dawn, for two canoes were skimming over the quiet surface, pirate vessels, although not of the accepted type. Often before Hugh had seen them patrolling these waters that Half-Breed Jake called his own, swift craft, dark and sinister, ready to shoot any man or sink any boat that ventured through Harbin's Channel. Harbin, he had learned, was an explorer who, fifty years ago, had coasted up and down Red Lake, mapping the islands and the bays

and inlets. His boat had been wrecked in this channel: one could see its bleaching bones still wedged among the rocks, and he himself had perished at the hands of hostile Indians. Although the Indians had now nearly vanished and civilization had, since then, been creeping steadily nearer, the upper reaches of Red Lake were still as wild, unexplored and perilous as in his day. But—thus Hugh registered a vow within himself —they would soon be so no longer.

A long day's tramp brought him fair sport, several partridges, two quail, but no sight of larger game. Hugh was a good shot and did not often fail to bring down his quarry.

"I wish I could get a deer," he thought, but knew that for that he must go out at night.

The air was so still and the woods so silent that it seemed he must be the only person within a hundred miles. There was a sleepy swaying of the branches above his head and a quiet rustle of the leaves under his feet, otherwise there was scarcely a sound. Surely in this peaceful region there could be no such thing as quarreling and

bloodshed. It was hard to believe that, only a few miles away, the dingy cabin clung to the slope of Jasper Peak and within it Half-Breed Jake and his Indian comrades were planning any sort of violence that would lead to the ruin of Oscar's cherished scheme.

"It must be a mistake," Hugh reflected almost aloud. "I believe I dreamed it. I don't think this adventure is real."

He had crossed a little brook, in the late afternoon, and was climbing the long slope beyond it when he realized that he was thirsty and that the route he was about to follow lay along the ridge, high above any water for many miles.

"I am not much of a woodsman," he told himself. "I should have remembered to drink when I could. It would be better to go back."

Quickly he ran down the hill, making a good deal of noise as he crashed through the underbrush. He stooped long to drink at the edge of the pool and then stood up to continue his journey. He glanced across at his own trail coming down to the water's edge on the other shore,

stared at it a moment, then ran splashing through the stream to look again. Close beside his own footprints and fresher even than they, were the marks of moccasined feet, as plain as those footprints of the big dog, Nicholas, that he had seen once, as plain and much more ominous. Some person had been following him through the wood, tracking him so closely and eagerly that he had not taken the pains to cover his own trail.

Hugh stood still and looked and listened with every nerve tense, but there was nothing to be seen, nothing to be heard. The forest was as silent as a forest in a dream. He crossed the brook again, and climbed the hill hastily. More than once he turned his head quickly and looked back over his shoulder, but there was never a stirring leaf nor a snapping twig to prove that he was being followed. He made his way homeward in the straightest line possible, thinking deeply all the way.

Time passed, the weather grew colder and the daylight shorter, but still the pirates made no move. Only the blue haze of their smoke going

up from Jasper Peak showed that they were still there, watching and ever watching. Game began to be scarce in the restricted limit the boys allowed themselves for hunting, so that they fell to dipping deeper and deeper into Oscar's stores. Everything was kept in the small shed backing up against the cottage with its door opening into the main room. This place was carefully inspected every day, according to instructions.

"For," Oscar had said, "if the fieldmice get in and chew up your bacon or a leak comes in the roof and spoils your flour and meal, where are you? In case of bad weather your lives might depend on these supplies being safe."

The vigilance of Nicholas sniffed out any overbold mouse that ventured within, while the boys' watchfulness prevented any mischance from wind and rain, so that for a time all went well. They began, indeed, to feel such a sense of security that it did not seem possible anything could go amiss and it appeared that, when Oscar returned, the report given him would be quite barren of adventure. Hugh, however, thinking of those foot-

prints by the stream, still remembered that what danger did lurk about them was bound to be unsuspected and unseen.

It had been, one day, Hugh's turn to replenish the empty larder so that he had spent the whole afternoon fishing about a mile from the cottage. Dusk was just beginning, yet he lingered for "just one more bite," since luck had not been good and he wished to carry home enough fish for one meal at least. He waited long for a nibble, shifting impatiently from foot to foot.

"It must be getting too cold for fishing," he commented to himself. "Why, it feels like winter all of a sudden; it has changed a great deal since morning."

He had just pulled in a flopping trout and had dropped it into the basket when a sudden sound startled him so that he dropped his rod. It was the sharp crack of a rifle, followed immediately by a second and a third, the prearranged signal of alarm. The pirates had struck at last!

A mile is a long way to run when the course is over a heavily wooded ridge and through a valley

of poplar thickets. Hugh covered it in extraordinarily short time, although it seemed to him unnumbered hours. He was just coming, panting, up the last slope, when he met Dick, equally breathless, running toward him.

"It's Hulda," gasped his friend. "The Indians are trying to drive her off; they have headed her away off yonder, over the hill."

He pointed, for even as he spoke, they caught sight of Hulda crossing a clearing, running with the awkward gait common to excited cows and lowing her amazement and dismay at the indignity put upon her

"You strike across the ridge and I will run down into the valley," directed Dick. "I think I can head her off. They sha'n't steal Hulda!"

With a shout, the two boys plunged to the rescue. Hugh was quick enough to reach her, halfway down the slope, but totally unable to check her course. The mild Hulda, now thoroughly alarmed, came down the hill with a blind rush, blundered against him and rolled him head over heels. He picked himself up, unhurt, and ran

after her in determined pursuit. Indeed the pirates were not to be allowed the triumph of stealing Hulda!

On the more open ground below Dick succeeded in slowing her a little and Nicholas, flying through the thickets, like a streak of white lightning, to leap and bark beneath her very nose, managed to turn her back up the hill. Here the boys were able to gain on her terrified speed once more, and, on Hugh's closing in and turning her again, she ran close by Dick, who triumphantly seized her by the halter and brought her to a standstill.

"I've got her," he shouted to Hugh, raising his arm high in signal of victory. "She's—ouch!"

For a sharp report sounded from a thicket and a bullet, speeding just over Dick's head, nipped his uplifted hand. Hugh, on coming up, found him applying his thumb to his mouth, as undisturbed as though he had scratched it with a pin. Poor Hulda still plunged and dragged at her halter, her sides heaving and her gentle eyes wide with fright.

"I was just coming up from the spring," Dick recounted as between them they led the cow homeward, "when I heard Nicholas bark, so I ran around the corner of the cabin and there she was, just going over the hill a quarter of a mile away. At first I thought I could stop her alone, but when I saw the two Indians driving her, I ran back and signaled for you. Here, let's lead her along the valley. I am out of breath chasing her up hills."

"Aren't you hurt?" inquired Hugh anxiously as they trudged along.

Hulda still made the going difficult, jerking and snorting with excitement. Her calm disposition, once completely roused, seemed almost impossible to soothe.

"Pshaw, no, the bullet hardly touched me," Dick replied. "What surprises me is that they let us get her with only one shot fired. I don't quite understand."

"I wonder—" began Hugh, then paused, for a thought had struck him.

It struck him so deeply that he dropped Hulda's rope and turned to run up the hill. There was a growing misgiving in his heart that turned swiftly to real terror as he sped along: it seemed as though he would never reach the summit. Yet even while he was struggling up the slopes he began to see a red glow behind the trees that seemed to grow brighter and brighter. In spite of a contrary wind there was a queer suffocating smell in the air.

"Dick, Dick," he called, "leave Hulda; come quickly."

The loss of forty cows could be nothing beside the disaster before him, as he reached the hill-top. Scarlet flames licked across the roof of Oscar's cabin, with dense clouds of smoke rolling out toward the lake and with a single tall figure moving swiftly across the clearing, black against the brilliant blaze.

Dick always maintained that Jake shot twice at Hugh as he raced across the clearing, but if he did so, Hugh was quite unconscious of the fact.

"We can' put it out—we can't put it out—there is so little water!" he caught himself gasping aloud as he ran.

Fortunately Dick, when he came from the spring, had set down his full pail by the doorstep when he went to rescue Hulda. Dashing inside, Hugh dragged the blankets from the bunks, plunged them into the water and then swung himself up over the eaves to the burning roof. Blindly and furiously he beat at the flames, choking in the dense smoke, feeling sparks and coals burn through his coat, yet caring for nothing but that he must quench the fire. Dick handed him up pail after pail of water from below; how he ever went and came from the spring so quickly was impossible to understand.

It was Hugh who had the presence of mind to realize that the water must be husbanded and thrown upon the fire in well-aimed dipperfuls rather than poured pell-mell across the roof. It was Dick who shouted up to him that he must try to drive the flames back from the cabin proper, since saving the blazing shed behind it was al-

ready beyond hope. How they toiled, now getting a little the better of the fire, now driven back by a fresh outburst of flame, too excited either to hope or to despair, feeling only one instinct—to fight. Hours passed, they were drenched, blackened, their clothes singed, their hands and faces burned, they were exhausted; breathless, but at last victorious.

Slowly the flames died down to smoldering ashes, the smoke cleared away, the last glowing coal was stamped upon, the last spark went out. Hugh slid to the ground, finding his knees suddenly a little shaky, and stood looking happily into Dick's blackened face.

"We did it," he said; "Oscar's got his cabin still."

"Yes," the other assented a trifle quaveringly; "I thought once or twice it was really gone."

"And now," went on Hugh, "where's Hulda?"

Fires, it seemed, did not excite Hulda in the least, for she was discovered grazing peacefully at the edge of the clearing, her former agitation entirely vanished. Nicholas had followed the

boys at first, but, after getting a few sparks in his furry coat, had decided to retreat and was sitting solemnly beside her, mounting guard. The cow's stable, set at a little distance, was untouched by the flames, so Hulda was driven in, her manner showing plainly that she was glad to get home again after the disturbing events of the last few hours. The boys lit a lantern and tended her together, as though she might escape again were one of them to minister to her alone. They made no comment on the fire, both seeming to avoid the subject as long as possible.

"It's cold," commented Dick, once, shivering in his dripping garments, to which Hugh replied:

"Yes, and getting colder every minute."

That was all of their conversation.

They finished at last and, coming out of the shed, closed the door very carefully behind them. Not until they were halfway up the path to the cottage did either of them speak. Yet the extent of their tragedy must be faced.

"There's quite a hole in the roof," observed

Dick, "but we can mend that easily enough."

"And we can block up the store room door," said Hugh. "We'll nail the whole thing over with boards to keep the cold out."

They were quiet again—but at last Dick burst out:

"Hugh, do you realize that our supplies are burned, the shed and everything in it? That we haven't one thing left to eat?"

"I know it," replied Hugh soberly. "I—I've been thinking about just that thing for the last hour."

"They must have meant to do it all along," observed Dick. "They drove off Hulda just for a blind. Oh, that Jake, that skulking blackguard!"

"Oscar said they would choose the mean, crooked way," Hugh agreed. "He told me they would try some trick or other. I wish we could have guessed beforehand."

"But Oscar will be back soon," insisted Dick eagerly. "He must be back soon. Gee, it's cold!"

"Yes," returned Hugh, "he may be back any day now."

Yet he spoke absent-mindedly, as though his thoughts were upon other things. It was because he was swinging the lantern as he went along and his attention had been suddenly caught by something unexpected. In the circle of yellow light he saw a whirling flurry of tiny flakes of snow.

CHAPTER XI

THE WHITE FLAG

HUGH had thought, when he saw those first snowflakes, that he understood a little of what was before them. He had later to learn that winter as he knew it and winter as it could be in northern Minnesota were two very different matters. To lose all their possessions at just the season when cold weather was closing in was a mishap desperate indeed, yet the boys, after a moment of being stunned by the gravity of the situation, faced it gayly.

That same night Hugh insisted on going out to look for the fishing basket that he had thrown aside when he ran to the rescue of Hulda. With Nicholas to help him, he managed to find it, so, that evening at least, they did not have to go supperless to bed. Early next morning they arose to search the ruins of the storehouse for

anything that might have escaped destruction. Part of a side of bacon was found wedged under a fallen beam and a very small quantity of flour, happening to be in a tin container, had not been consumed. That was the whole extent of their salvage.

The snow had only been falling fitfully during the night, but about the middle of the morning the storm settled down, like a blinding white curtain that shut off all the rest of the world. Once or twice the rising wind tore the dense veil apart, showing them the stormy lake, the bowing woods and Jasper Peak for a fleeting moment, before all was blotted out again. The boys had managed to mend the hole burned in the roof and to shut off the door that had once led into the storehouse, and now were warming themselves at the fire after their severe labors outside. Dick went to the window and took a long survey of the snow.

"If I know anything of Minnesota weather," he remarked, "this is the sort of storm that will last for days, three or four, at least, and then it will clear and get cold, colder than anything you

ever dreamed of—thirty—forty—fifty below zero, maybe. If we should start now, we might be able to get to Rudolm, but if we wait until the snow is deep we could not even attempt it. What do you say, Hugh, shall we go or stay?"

"I don't know," answered Hugh from beside the fire; "do you want to go?"

"I do not," returned Dick promptly, "but we have got to decide which is the wiser thing to do."

Hugh looked up at the calendar on the wall.

"Oscar has been gone two weeks and three days," he said, "so his time for proving up on the claim will be over in five days. Jake arranged his plan well. He meant to burn the cabin and just give himself time to get down to the Land Office to make trouble over Oscar's statement that the land is improved and so tie the whole thing up. He knows we have lost our stores; he is watching from over there to see if we go. He will still have time to put the thing through if we do."

"Then let's stay," decided Dick with determination. "We have food enough for two days

and we'll whistle for luck for the other three. Fortunately we have plenty of wood."

"And let's make a big smoke in the chimney," said Hugh, "so that when the storm lifts for a second Jake can see that we are still here and are going to stay."

It was a welcome idea and quickly carried out. Certainly if Half-Breed Jake had any curiosity as to whether the cottage was still inhabited, he had no need to cross the valley to find out, on that day at least. Dick and Hugh built up such a roaring blaze that there was danger of their setting fire to the cabin again; then they sat down before it, toasting their shins and reflecting on the probable disappointment of the Pirate of Jasper Peak.

The hours passed very slowly, for the two had little to do and had chosen to have no midday meal, but to eat of their scanty stock only night and morning. The storm increased; the snowfall was no longer steady, but came in whirling gusts, piling high before the cabin door. About the middle of the afternoon, Dick took his rifle and sallied forth with Nicholas in desperate hope

of bringing home some game. He was gone two hours, returning at last empty-handed.

"And very lucky I was to get home at all," he said as he came in, stamping the snow off his big boots. "I vow I have been walking in a circle for five miles: it was only Nicholas who ever got me here again."

All night the wind screamed in the chimney and fairly rocked the walls of their little dwelling. The snow seemed twice as deep when they fought their way out to the stable to attend to the wants of Hulda. Her placid air was somewhat reassuring, although Hugh observed wisely:

"She really doesn't know just how things are."

The pail of milk that they carried back between them was even more comforting, for it was plain that with Hulda's help they could not quite starve.

"We can get pretty hungry, though," observed Hugh grimly as he saw Nicholas disposing of his share in three laps and then looking up to beg mutely for more.

There could be no thought now of going out to

shoot. The snow was drifted over the window sills and banked against the door and still filled the air in white clouds driven by the roaring wind. The spring, their one water supply, was as inaccessible as though it had been ten miles away, so they melted snow in a pot over the fire and found it a most unsatisfactory process, since, as Dick said, "A bucketful of snow makes about a thimbleful of water."

Their supply of food was quite gone by the fourth day, in spite of all their care, so there was nothing left but the milk night and morning.

"That won't keep one very long," Hugh remarked.

He had been obliged to gulp down his share in the stable, being much too hungry to wait until he got back to the house. Dick immediately followed his example and, when he had finished, stood eying the storm through the narrow slit of a window.

"It can't last a great deal longer, it simply can't," he asserted.

Hugh, shaking down hay for Hulda, envied

her the pleasure with which she ate it and answered gloomily:

"Perhaps it can't, but I am beginning to think that it will."

This day also wore by somehow and at last night came.

"There certainly will be a change by morning," Hugh assured himself as he fell asleep.

When he awoke, however, and got up at once to press his face against the snow-blurred window he saw just the same blinding, swirling storm. It looked like some sort of dream that would go on and on and never end. Dick, awaking, sat up quickly, but, on looking at Hugh's face, forebore to ask any questions.

"You had better lie down again," he advised, dropping his head once more upon the pillow. "It is wiser to spend as much time sleeping as you possibly can."

Stumbling out through the drifts to Hulda, Hugh began suddenly to realize such weakness that he wondered whether he could make the journey again without dropping in the snow.

Through the day he noticed that Dick no longer prowled from door to window, looking at the storm. He sat, instead, immovable in the big chair by the fire, only stirring now and then to add fresh logs to the blaze. The strain of his journey through the wood, his anxiety about his brother, with these present hardships, had tended to break him sooner than Hugh. He tried to speak some words of broken apology when Hugh went about the work of the cabin alone, but the truth was plain enough, that he could scarcely move. Nicholas lay listlessly in a corner, following Hugh always with great hungry eyes. Night seemed to come with unbelievable slowness, even though the winter days had grown so short.

They crawled into bed at last, too weak and dispirited, almost, to bid each other good-night. Hugh tossed and turned upon his bunk; he was too hungry to sleep. Suddenly sitting bolt upright, he addressed Dick, who was awake also, even though he lay so still.

"Dick," he said sharply, "are you sorry we stayed?"

"No," came the answer promptly. "No, by George, I'm not sorry, no matter what happens."

"Nor I," said Hugh, and lay down again, quieted somehow, so that soon he went to sleep.

He awoke, hours later, with a vague knowledge that something was wrong. After rubbing the drowsiness from his eyes and thinking a little, he decided that, even under his mountain of blankets, he was very cold. He got up hastily, huddled on all of his clothes, even to his mackinaw coat, and went into the other room to crouch before the hearth. The fire was not yet dead, but such warmth as it could give made little impression upon the terrible benumbing chill that filled the cottage. Nicholas, shivering and whining, came to his side and the two crept close together, each getting a little comfort from the other. Dick was still asleep; they could hear his breathing in the utter quiet, and the clock tick-ticking above them on the wall. In the flickering light Hugh

could see the hands moving slowly until they pointed to twelve.

It was midnight, the last hour of Oscar's last day. The cabin was safe, the claim was his, the first step of his great plan was made certain at last.

"We've beaten Jake," cried Hugh, in a quick whisper and threw his arms about Nicholas in a great hug of delight. Then he got up stiffly and went to the window to survey the weather. He pushed aside the curtain, rubbed a clear space in the thick frost on the pane and looked out. He gasped and looked once more, with a cry of amazement, as though some strange vision had been presented to his eyes. Yet all he saw was calm, quiet night, a world of glittering snowfields and a clear sky all alight with stars.

"Dick, Dick," he shouted, and his comrade jumped up hastily.

"What is it?" he asked. "Oh, brr-rr, but it is cold."

He came to Hugh's side, looked out also and gave the same gasp of joy.

"I didn't know," he cried, his voice almost breaking, "I didn't know that stars could shine so bright, Hugh!"

What happened next would have shocked Linda Ingmarsson, careful housekeeper that she was, and might even have given some pain to Oscar's tidy Swedish soul. For both boys, fully dressed, got into one bunk together, with Nicholas between them, "just for company," as Hugh said. The big dog accomplished wonders in the matter of doubling up his long legs, so that the combined supply of blankets sufficed to cover them all. Gradually, as they began to be a little warmer, both the boys relaxed a little from their long anxiety during the storm. The claim was safe, there was a chance that they could go into the woods in the morning and shoot a partridge or two, if they could manage to drag themselves that far. And now the storm was over, certainly Oscar would come soon. Hugh did not think upon these matters long, however, for he was growing very drowsy.

"Listen," said Dick at last, rousing himself

very sleepily; "what is that sound at the door? Look, Nicholas hears it too."

The dog had raised his head and was sniffing anxiously, but without moving, as though he, too, were too weary to stir. Hugh listened and heard a sound outside like a soft shuffling in the snow.

"I don't care what it is," he announced. "There is nothing on earth that can make me get up now that I am warm and sleepy at last. Here, Nicholas, spare me a bit more blanket. I am going to sleep for a hundred years and dream of a million ham sandwiches."

He dropped off almost while he was still speaking and Dick, apparently no more energetic than he, closed his eyes also. Nicholas lay with cocked ears listening until the soft sounds gradually ceased, then he, too, dropped into the unheeding slumber that held them all until daylight.

When Hugh awoke his first thought was that it was a pleasant dream he had had of the storm's being over and the stars visible. Yet when he sat up and saw bright sunlight pouring through

the windows of the little cabin he knew that it must be true and sprang from his bunk with a hurrah of delight. The air was of a more bitter cold than anything he had ever imagined, the breath rose from his nostrils in two columns like steam and was frozen in white crystals all along the edge of the blanket where Dick still lay. Nicholas jumped down after him, shook himself by way of making a morning toilet and ran to sniff and snuffle under the door. There returned to Hugh a vague recollection of the sounds he had heard in the night, so that he undid the fastenings hurriedly and threw the door open. The dazzling sparkle of the snow almost blinded him for a moment, while the rush of intense cold made him draw his breath in quick gasps. Yet nothing could blind his eyes to what lay upon the doorstep—a big sack of flour, a bag of dried beans and the frozen carcass of a deer.

The sight of food when one is nearly starved has sometimes a strange and disquieting effect. Hugh was ashamed of the savage eagerness with which he fell upon the treasures and dragged

them within. He kept thinking that they must vanish from his sight even as he held them and wished earnestly that Dick were not asleep that he might ask him whether he saw them too. It seemed too bad to wake him if the gifts did not turn out to be real. Yet the food remained very solid and genuine in his hands, even while he was preparing it for cooking and cutting off a venison steak. It afforded presently a perfume more delicious than all the sweets of Araby, when at last the meat began to broil. Nicholas lay with his nose almost in the fire, his eyes never moving from the feast as Hugh turned it over and over before the blaze.

"You are going to have the first one," said Hugh. "You deserve it if ever a dog did. You are the only one of the three of us that has not grumbled."

The second steak was nearly ready, flapjacks were browning in the pan and the beans had been buried in the coals to bake for another meal, when Dick awoke. Hugh laughed delightedly at the sight of him, sitting bolt upright among the blan-

kets, his mouth and eyes both round with unbelieving astonishment.

"What is it, Hugh?" he asked, sniffing delightedly. "I could live on that smell for a week. Did the witches or the angels bring it?"

"I don't know," laughed Hugh delightedly, "but however it came, it's real. Get up quickly or I will eat it all without you."

They speculated long over every possible source for the mysterious gift, but could come to no conclusion. On examining the space before the cottage they saw that some one had come on snowshoes up the hill and had removed them to walk in the narrow trampled path that the boys had made, deep in the drifts, up to their door. They could see where the snowshoes had been stuck upright against a bank while the owner came up to the doorstone: the footsteps were short, shuffling ones made by moccasined feet.

"But no Indian man that ever I saw walks with such a short stride as that," Dick insisted, staring thoughtfully at the marks in the snow, "and think what a load he must have carried!"

Hugh had a sudden rapid memory of two figures he had seen that first day he walked through the streets of Rudolm, a swift, silent Indian striding ahead and behind him his wife bearing just such a load as this on her bent shoulders and by the deerskin strap across her forehead. Yet he did not speak of the thought in his mind, it was far too fantastic and impossible.

They dined like lords that day, but spent most of the time still hugging the fire, for the cold was as fierce as had been the storm that went before it. The sun shone brilliantly, turning everything to diamond and silver and making their little world, as they looked out upon it, a strange and unfamiliar place. Jasper Peak opposite was sheathed in white from base to summit, with high-banked drifts and curving blue-shadowed hollows. The lake's surface was blue again, an odd clear greenish blue, for it was ice. During the tumult of the storm it could not freeze over, but now was a glistening expanse, with white broken rifts here and there, where the floating masses of ice had been caught and frozen in. The long

shore showed sharp lines of dark and white in its crowded pine trees with their burden of snow.

An hour after noon they had gone out to clear a path to the stable, a heavy task in snow that had drifted six and seven feet high wherever shelter offered. Nicholas, running about them, floundered shoulder deep in even the open places and more than once succeeded in burying himself entirely.

"Hugh," said Dick at last—he had been leaning on his shovel and staring across the ravine—"I wish you would look over there at the pirates' cabin and tell me what you see."

Hugh turned to look as he was bid, yet for a moment saw only the half-buried shack and the group of pointed, snow-covered pines behind it.

"I don't see anything," he answered. "What do you think is there?"

"Come over by me so that the chimney is in line with those trees. Don't you see now, something fluttering on a pole?"

Hugh came close and looked again, long and carefully.

"Why, they have a flag flying," he exclaimed at last, "and, Dick, it's a white one!"

"That's it," cried Dick excitedly. "I thought I saw it this morning, but with the sun in our eyes I couldn't make it out. It is plain enough now; it looks as though they wanted help."

"They deserve to get it, don't they?" commented Hugh bitterly, digging his shovel very deep into the snow.

They finished clearing the path in silence, then walked slowly back to the cottage. They sat before the fire for a little, each deep in the same thought.

"He shot Oscar's dog," Hugh suddenly broke out. "He made it so that Oscar couldn't go to war, he—he—Dick, does a man who can do such things deserve any help?"

"He has done worse things than any you know about," returned Dick, "and I know now that he had a hand in that Indian Kaniska's leaving us to starve in the woods; he has done every sort of thing, but—but—"

As if with one movement, they both looked

up at Oscar's snowshoes hanging on the wall.

"There is only one pair," observed Hugh. "We can't both go."

"Then," said Dick, and neither had occasion to tell the other that a final conclusion had been reached, "then we will have to draw straws. And it is very generous of me to give you even a chance, because I know I am better on snowshoes than you."

"I have tried them in the Adirondacks," Hugh replied. "I am not so clumsy with them as you seem to think. Well, straws it is. The longest one goes."

They arranged the straws with great show of fairness and secrecy and drew.

"Oh, Hugh, you have all the luck!" exclaimed Dick in bitter disappointment as he gazed at his abbreviated straw and at Hugh's irrepressible grin of satisfaction.

"It is really better," was Hugh's answer, in which he tried to keep the excited delight from his tone. "We have not either of us come through this last week feeling any too husky, but

it has been harder on you because it was your second try at starving. If we weren't both of us so well fed now, I think we would quarrel."

"It isn't fair," cried Dick jealously. "After all, you ought to stay here. Some one must milk Hulda and I don't know how."

"Nonsense," returned Hugh rudely. "For myself, I never want to see milk again. Where is that extra revolver? Lend me your mittens, they are drier than mine."

He strapped on the snowshoes, ordered Nicholas back in spite of the delighted preparations the dog was making to join the expedition, bade Dick a sympathizing good-by and turned his face stoutly toward Jasper Peak. The dry, stinging cold was so intense as almost to take his breath away, but he was growing a little more used to it at last. The big snowshoes seemed awkward at first; he soon fell into the proper swing, however, and made good speed down the hill to the edge of the stream. The brook itself had disappeared completely under snow which was so soft that here he sank and floundered in spite of the snow-

shoes. It was difficult going up the steep incline on the other side, but in his eagerness and curiosity he managed to climb quickly.

There was no sign of life about Jake's cabin, only the white flag—it looked like a torn shirt—was still fluttering from its rough pole beside the chimney. There were footprints about the door, those same heavy, shuffling steps that he had seen before their own cabin. He knocked loudly and stood waiting, thinking of the last time he had stood upon that doorstep. There was a pause and such silence that he could hear his heart hammering excitedly against his ribs. Then a sound of slow, dragging feet came from within, there was a fumbling at the lock, the door opened and a broad awkward figure appeared on the threshold. Somehow, in spite of his surprise, he felt that he had half expected to see that swarthy face and wide, strange, mirthless smile. It was Laughing Mary.

CHAPTER XII

A HIGHWAY THROUGH THE HILLS

THE woman made only an inarticulate sound of welcome and motioned Hugh to come in. Like all Indians she preferred to converse through grunts and signs rather than by means of such English as she had at her command. When Hugh had entered she made no further comment, merely pointed silently at a bunk in the corner.

There, half propped up amid a mass of torn and dirty blankets, lay Half-Breed Jake. He did not move or speak when Hugh came near, but his little pale eyes turned quickly and his heavy black brows knitted in a scowl. The boy stood looking from one to another, puzzled, not yet knowing the meaning of that signal flying above the roof. At last the Indian woman, seeing his bewilderment, condescended to explain.

"I think—dying," she remarked briefly in her thick English.

Jake's pale eyes flickered at the words, but still he did not speak. Hugh went closer to look at him and saw that his hands and feet were clumsily wound with rags and that the dirty bandage had slipped down from one wrist, showing the angry discoloration of flesh that had been frozen. He asked Laughing Mary many questions, but received no answers but shakings of the head.

Finally he unbuckled his revolver, took off his cap and mackinaw and turned his attention to doing what he could for the helpless man. He had a feeling of intense repulsion when first he touched him, but none the less he bathed the swollen hands and feet and rebandaged them. He had a certain knack in such matters, inherited from his father and increased by such training as he had got in helping him. He set the filthy mass of rags in order to make some semblance of a bed; he built up the fire and showed the woman how to make civilized broth from the abundant deer's meat in the storeroom.

As she stood stirring the pot he made another attempt to question her, trying again and again to get some explanation of how affairs had come to such a pass. But Laughing Mary merely jerked her head toward the bunk and said:

"Old—live hard—die."

Thus she summed up what was, to her, the most ordinary thing in life.

It was the second time that he had tended a sick person in that house, so that Hugh already knew the full resources of the Jasper Peak cabin. In John Edmonds' behalf he had worked feverishly, feeling nervous, excited, starting at every sound from his patient, wondering and puzzled as to what to do next. Now he felt himself entirely calm, at no loss what to do even though the state of this man was far more desperate than the other's. He realized how much even a small amount of experience can do and how immeasurably older he had grown even in the month that had passed since he had been in this same place.

He came and went steadily until at last he had done all he could, then he sat down by the fire to

wait, and to watch for results. Laughing Mary sat on her heels on the floor opposite him, nodding with drowsiness while both of them were watched unwaveringly, as the long hours passed, by the pale eyes of that helpless figure in the bunk, the broken, ruined Pirate of Jasper Peak.

And Laughing Mary, since no one pressed her for her story, or disturbed her dim, wandering mind by questions, finally began to speak. She startled Hugh first by rising suddenly, fetching something from the corner and flinging it upon his knee.

"Should be yours—make all the trouble," she said brokenly.

Hugh, in wonder, held it up to the firelight. It was the brown bear's skin!

He had learned by now that it was better to say nothing and so sat silent, without question or comment for a long time. He was rewarded by her telling him the whole truth at last in abrupt, queerly-spoken sentences, uttered at long intervals, often after an hour had gone by without a word. Little by little he was able to piece to-

gether all the facts that had puzzled him so long and to learn the truth about that adventure in which he had so unexpectedly become involved.

As he listened he knew at last that the vital figure in the whole affair was Laughing Mary. Nothing had happened as it should and every plan had gone awry, merely through the strange irresponsibility of an Indian woman's mind. He and the Edmonds boys who did not know her well, and Oscar and Linda and Half-Breed Jake who did, had all been equally deceived. They had been drawn together by a strange web of circumstance of which she was the center. They had all of them had their own ambitions and hopes and misgivings and fears, and the rock they had all split upon was Laughing Mary.

Jake, it seemed, had long ago formed the plan of setting the two brothers adrift in the forest and of casting suspicion on John Edmonds' memory. He had applied to the Indian Kaniska to help him, but the man had refused on account of his friendship for John. So the matter had apparently ended until one night, passing through

Two Rivers, Jake had shown the Indians his furs and Laughing Mary had seen the brown bear's skin.

Indians have still so much of the child in them that, when they see something they greatly desire, they will barter away their last property on earth to gain possession of it. With just such longing did the woman covet the bear skin. Jake's price was her husband's help in his scheme against the Edmonds and that was the bargain they finally made. Certainly she had not realized fully what Jake had in mind, or known, when she lent herself to do his bidding, what she had really done.

Only when the days passed and the Edmonds boys did not come back, when she discovered, moreover, that Jake was withholding the bear skin and had no intention of really giving it to her, did she begin to see in the depths of her fumbling, clouded mind, what it was she had brought about. She had gained possession of the coveted skin by threatening to tell the whole truth to Hugh, as the Edmonds' friend, and she had learned, from the consternation of both Jake

and her husband, just how ugly a deed they had accomplished between them.

She had learned more of the gravity of the matter when Hugh went through Two Rivers to seek help from Oscar Dansk; she had sat brooding by the fire day after day, more and more repentant yet never knowing what to do. She had finally come through the forest to learn for herself how matters stood and had arrived the night of the fire, just before the storm. She had been imprisoned in the cabin with Jake during those five days of fierce snowfall and she made Hugh understand, even in her halting English, that it was much the same as being within the same four walls with a madman. Her husband had returned to Two Rivers, so that she was alone with Jake and must listen hour after hour to the tumult of words that she scarcely understood. All his hopes of holding the valley, of keeping Oscar from establishing his claim, of proving that no one could successfully defy him, all this must stand or fall by whether the boys could hold the cottage and Oscar Dansk could register his claim.

At first he had been certain that they would go the moment their stores were destroyed. When he had learned from the smoke in their chimney and the steady light in their windows that they were to stay, his fury knew no bounds. Even during the storm, in which no ordinary man could walk abroad and live, he went forth every night to go close to the cottage on the hill and see if its defenders were not weakening. It had been the last stab to Laughing Mary's dumbly repentant heart to hear that the boys were starving in the cabin opposite and it had been she who, the moment the snowfall cleared, had robbed Jake's larder and toiled across the valley to bring them food.

Jake had already been behaving strangely that night, his rage, excitement and the long life of hardships and excesses had probably brought him near to the breaking point. He had tried to follow Laughing Mary, had floundered into a drift and had lain there in the fearful cold until she found him and dragged him home. His desperate fury at what she had done made her fear to

come near him, and his terrible, helpless suffering from his frozen hands and feet made her feel that she must call for aid.

"When white man give up—wave white flag," she said and pointed upward toward where she had raised the signal on the roof. That was the end of her story.

To all of it Jake had listened, with never a change of expression, never moving his eyes from Hugh, powerless to interrupt or to deny. Only when the Indian woman once mentioned Linda Ingmarsson's name there was a change, a momentary wincing and a quivering of those steady eyes. Perhaps Hugh's sensibilities had been sharpened by his recent experiences, for certainly he guessed quickly and as surely as though some one had told him that Jake must have loved Linda long ago, but that his bullying ways had failed before her courageous scorn of him.

"Old—live hard—die," said Laughing Mary again when she came to the end. Such was her only comment on the fall of that once-feared master of Jasper Peak.

Hugh sat musing, stroking the bear skin on his knee and wondering what he might say to the woman, who looked up at him with such unhappy eyes.

"It might have been," he said at last, "that if you and Kaniska had refused to do what Jake wanted, he would have found some one who would, some one who did not care so much and who would never have helped us in the end, as you have done. So perhaps the brown bear's skin has saved us all."

She seemed to go over his words laboriously, as though their meaning came very slowly. Then, when she had caught what he meant, she gave a quick little cry and turned away. The stoical Indians never weep; if Hugh had not known that well, he would have sworn that there was a glint of tears in her eyes.

So intently had he been listening, pondering and putting together the story from her fragments of information, that he had paid no heed to the passage of time. He saw now, as he got up from his seat, that the flame in the smoky lan-

tern was burning very dim, that faint moonlight was coming in at the little windows and that the night was far advanced. He went over to stand by the helpless man.

"Is there nothing you want, is there nothing I can do for you?" he asked.

He felt a strange wave of pity for this broken being who had lived his life so hopelessly wrong and who was so near the end. Nothing he could do? What could be done, thought Hugh, so late as this? Plainly the man was of the same opinion, for his eyes looked only dull and weary hatred and, although his lips moved a little, he did not speak.

"Do you want to rest?" Hugh asked Laughing Mary, but she shook her head. "Then watch for me a little, for I am dead for sleep."

It was bright morning when he opened his eyes and started up in dismay at having slept so long. Laughing Mary, sitting beside Jake's bunk, looked up at him and gave him a smile, a smile of relief and gratitude this time, not the queer empty one that had given her the name. There

seemed to be little change in Jake, his pulse was a trifle weaker, perhaps, and his eyes stayed shut for longer and longer at a time. Hugh went into the storeroom to see what food would be best for him; he looked carefully through every box and canister to make certain what was there. So occupied was he that he did not hear the swishing of snowshoes over the frozen slopes outside nor even heed a quiet knock at the door. It was not until some one came into the room and laid a hand upon his arm that he turned quickly to see Oscar Dansk.

That their greeting was a joyful one need hardly be said, but the first words of Hugh's eager welcome were broken off by his shout of delight when he saw what Oscar was pulling from his pocket, a great handful of letters addressed in his father's handwriting.

"Miss Christina, at the postoffice, has been much worried about the way your mail was piling up," said Oscar. "She said I was to give these to you before I said a word, for she was sure I would forget them if we once got to talking."

Hugh snatched the letters, sat down upon a box and then and there read them all through to the end. They told of the voyage, of Dr. Arnold's arrival at the base hospital, of his work and his associates and the war. One of the letters, the last, made Hugh exclaim aloud in delighted happiness. It said:

"Since I have been here and have seen how things stand and have thought the matter well over, I have begun to think that there might, after all, be a place for you in this hospital work. I know that I will be sent home in the spring, for a month, on some business for the Medical Department, and it is possible—remember, I make no promises—it is possible that I may consider taking you back with me."

Hugh looked up from his letter to tell the good news to his friend, but did not speak, so struck was he by the odd expression on Oscar's face. His eyes shone in a way that the boy had never seen before, while there was about him the air of suppressing some excited secret.

"What is it?" Hugh cried.

"I will show you," returned the other.

He opened the door into the main room and went in, Hugh following, filled with curiosity and wonder. As they crossed the cabin, he caught Oscar's sleeve and began to tell him of Half-Breed Jake.

"We will speak of that later," was the answer. "Put on your coat, come quickly."

They went outside into the clear, glittering cold: how good it seemed after the close, dark little shack! Oscar led Hugh across the clearing, in the opposite direction from his own house, along the ridge that ran down to the lake. The sun was very bright, the air absolutely still. He stopped where the ground was so open that they could see out across the forest.

"Look," he said, and pointed.

Crowning the top of the next hill stood a giant pine that towered high above its fellows. As Hugh watched, its branches commenced to tremble, although never a breath of wind was stirring. The whole tree began to rock and sway, to bow forward as though shaken by a furious gale; then

with a roar that sounded through the whole valley, it fell crashing and disappeared.

"Oscar," cried Hugh, "what does it mean?"

There was a little silence, then Oscar spoke in a voice husky with excitement.

"It means the road," he said; "they are clearing the way to build it at last."

They watched another tree fall and another, as they stood there in the breathless cold, while Oscar told his story. His return with John Edmonds and his news that Jake had been unable to prevent the establishing of a claim, had stirred the people to belief in his plan at last. First a few and then more and more had agreed to help him, until now nearly all the men of Rudolm were at work in the forest, clearing the way, and hauling out the logs over the frozen ground, preparatory to building the road in the spring.

"Now that they know the land is mine, safe in spite of Jake, there are a hundred more who are ready to dare the same thing. Ingmarsson and my sister Linda will come first, others will follow; they will be here soon enough to break the

ground and plant it in wheat this spring. The road will be slower; it has many hills and valleys to cross, but by summer when the harvest is ripe, it will be ready to carry the grain away. Some day we will be able to fill one of those great ships whose sailing once so nearly broke my heart."

"And that man there?" questioned Hugh, motioning upward toward the cabin that lowered at them from above on Jasper Peak.

"We can carry him out to Rudolm, now that the way is cleared," Oscar answered. "I think he may live a little time longer, but his power to do harm is gone forever. Yet when he tried to burn the cottage he came, but for you, very near to beating us at last."

They walked down the hill to the edge of the lake so that Hugh might catch a glimpse, around an intervening spur, of the line of cleared ground that wound across the valleys. They sat down upon a snowy log and talked long and earnestly of what had passed and of what was to come. Suddenly Hugh looked down and recognized the big tree trunk upon which they sat.

"Look," he said, "it is the very tree that made a bridge for us to cross the creek when it was in flood. Here are even the marks where the bullets cut the bark."

It had been washed ashore and lay now, one end frozen in the ice, one high and dry upon the bank. Here it would lie for years to come, peaceful and undisturbed, the sun hot upon it, fishes darting about its outer end, the turtles climbing up to bask in the noonday summer heat. So it would lie, unmindful of the part it had played in the events of that stirring night, lie until the valley of the Promised Land was settled, until Oscar's road, white and travel-worn, lay slanting across the hills to bear the gifts of the new country to the old. It would fall slowly into decay and the sharp hoof of the last of the wild deer or giant moose, coming down to drink, would stamp it into powder in the end. For the close of the struggle had come and peace had settled over the domain of the Pirate of Jasper Peak.

"You will stay to help us?" Oscar was saying.

"You will see the fields planted and watch the harvest come in."

"I will help you this winter," Hugh answered, "and perhaps stay in the spring to see the planting. But," and he patted the letter in his pocket, "by the time the harvest comes I will be in France."

He wished a moment after that he had not spoken, for Oscar's face clouded, yet quickly cleared again.

"Yet there will always be things to do at home," he said, "for us who are not so lucky as you who go to France."

THE END

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The Boy's Own Book of Great Inventions

By F. L. DARROW

With many illustrations.

Every boy — and many a girl, too — likes to make things, and it is out of this certain interest which youth has in invention that this book has grown. Its appeal is primarily to the inventive faculty latent in every youngster. Not only does Mr. Darrow describe the great inventions of man, but he applies the principles underlying them to simple apparatus which the boy can construct for himself. The aëroplane, the balloon, the various kinds of engines, the telephone, the telegraph, the submarine, the telescope — all these and many more come in for consideration, followed in each case with simple experiments which the reader can make for himself, and in many cases with explicit directions for the construction of an adaptation of the machine or instrument.

Stephen's Last Chance

By MARGARET ASHMUN

Illustrated, $1.50

Here's a little boy, alone and friendless, in Last Chance Gulch. His aunt, who was his only relative, has just died. The future looks pretty dark to him — and that is where the story begins.

What happens to Stephen after Emery and Sara Clark take him back to their ranch out in the wildest part of Montana, how he rides the bucking "Scratch Gravel," helps to capture the bank robbers, and how he saves Emery Clark's life by doing a very brave (and hard) thing, and best of all, how he takes his "last chance," is told in the most interesting and exciting way.

Boys will like this book immensely because it is full of adventure and something happens on every page. What happens? Well — that's telling!

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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NEW BOOKS FOR GIRLS

Isabel Carleton's Friends

By MARGARET ASHMUN

Author of "Isabel Carleton's Year," etc.

Illustrated, $1.35

The girls who have read and enjoyed the preceding Isabel Carleton stories will be delighted to know that in this new volume, Isabel's life grows even more interesting, as she goes on through the university. What happens in Jefferson, how the war is brought home to Isabel and the story of two of her friends in particular makes an absorbing narrative.

Isabel Carleton has always been a lovable, straightforward, human girl, and all of these qualities are heightened in the new chronicle.

ANOTHER ELIZABETH BESS STORY

The Loyalty of Elizabeth Bess

By E. C. SCOTT

Author of "Elizabeth Bess"

Illustrated, $1.35

This book tells more of the delightful little girl who was the central figure in a story published last year which has met with the favor of thousands of young people.

Elizabeth's active interest in her "fambly" leads her to the doing of unheard of things in their behalf. These experiences and adventures, of which not the least appealing is that growing out of her secret alliance with a fairy king who was to turn stones into gold when his wand, which unfortunately was mislaid, should be recovered, comprise a volume which is different from the average child story.

It is full of whimsical humor and of the sort of entertainment which girls in their teens — and younger and older perhaps — find most satisfying.

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