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THE

RIVER RIDERS

An Exciting Lumberjack Story

BY

T. C. BRIDGES

(CHRISTOPHER BECK)

Author of

"MARTIN CRUSOE," "THE SKY RIDERS," ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I. [THE MYSTERY MEN](#)
- II. [THE FLUME](#)
- III. [THE BULLY OF THE CAMP](#)
- IV. [THE MAN WITH THE GREEN EYES](#)
- V. [HANSON GETS THE ORDER OF THE BOOT](#)
- VI. [STICKING IT!](#)
- VII. [IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY](#)
- VIII. [A CONSULTATION AT THE CAMP](#)
- IX. [KEITH BOLTS](#)
- X. [THE CHASE](#)
- XI. [WHEN DAWN CAME](#)
- XII. [KEITH EXPLAINS](#)
- XIII. [SHORTY SHOOTS](#)
- XIV. [THE LITTLE BLACK BIT](#)
- XV. [TONY FINDS A CLUE](#)
- XVI. [GRANITE'S BARGAIN](#)
- XVII. [THE WAY OUT](#)
- XVIII. [IN THE HEART OF THE HILL](#)
- XIX. [THE HIDDEN BRIDGE](#)
- XX. [A FEW WORDS WITH GRANITE](#)
- XXI. [SHORTY HUNTS A SHORT CUT](#)
- XXII. [GRANITE'S THREAT](#)
- XXIII. [THE MAN IN THE SNOW](#)
- XXIV. [KEITH IS TAKEN DOWN A PEG](#)
- XXV. [GRANITE GETS TO WORK](#)
- XXVI. [A FIGHT AND ITS FINISH](#)
- XXVII. [KEITH KEEPS HIS TEMPER](#)
- XXVIII. [DIRTY WORK AT THE CROSS ROADS](#)
- XXIX. [A RACE FOR LIFE](#)
- XXX. [SHORTY TAKES A DAY OFF](#)
- XXXI. [THE CRACK IN THE WALL](#)
- XXXII. [GRANITE GETS BUSY](#)
- XXXIII. [GRANITE TRIES HARD](#)
- XXXIV. [GRANITE SKIDS](#)
- XXXV. [THE SOUNDS IN THE NIGHT](#)
- XXXVI. [THE BROKEN TRACK](#)
- XXXVII. [KEITH'S "AIRYPLANE"](#)
- XXXVIII. [THE FLOOD IN SNOWY RIVER](#)
- XXXIX. [ON THE FACE OF THE "JAM"](#)
- XL. [DOWN THE RAPIDS](#)
- XLI. [GRANITE'S LAST BID](#)

The River Riders

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERY MEN

"You needn't expect an easy time out there, for you won't get it." The words spoken by his father three weeks earlier came back to young Keith Hedley as he stood on the deck of the rough little river-boat, and gazed at the desolation on either side of him.

Winter had shut down early over the great wilderness of the North-West, and the first snow lay thick on the banks and covered the dark trees with a white mantle. Ice was forming under the river banks, and great sheets of it broke away under the wash of the panting, churning stern wheel, and clattered like broken glass in the wake.

Not a human habitation or any living thing was visible in the snow-clad depths of the forest. The still air was bitter with frost and a dull red sun was dropping behind the distant hills.

"Mighty cold, eh?" came a voice, and Keith turned to see a man beside him. A long, slack-jointed fellow, who wore a rough rabbit-skin coat over his dark flannel shirt, and trousers that were tucked into butcher boots. He had a thin, hooked nose, like the beak of a bird of prey, and bright, pale blue eyes set close on either side of it, but what most struck Keith was the bleached pallor of his skin. Keith did not quite like the look of him, but the man spoke civilly, and Keith was lonely enough to be glad of any companionship.

"Yes, it's pretty keen," he admitted.

"I reckon you're bound for Jasper?" continued the tall man.

Keith was not yet aware that questions of this sort are bad form in the North-West. "No, I'm going to Calvert's Camp," he answered civilly.

The other looked at him oddly, and Keith felt a little puzzled. "Then you'll hev to get off at Brant Bridge," said the man.

"Yes," said Keith. "That's the next stop but one, isn't it?"

"No, it's the next ever," the tall man told him.

"Are you sure?" asked Keith.

The tall man turned. "Mold!" he called, and another man came up. This was a thick-shouldered, bull-headed person with blunt features and little dark eyes deep set in his big head.

"What's your trouble?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"This here gent is going to Calvert's," said Fargus. "He's a-getting off at Brant's Bridge. I reckon that's the next place the steamer stops?"

"That's so," said Mold. "And I guess we're pretty nigh there. So if you got any duds to pack, Mister, you better look slippy."

"My stuff is all ready," Keith told him, and just then the steamer whistled.

"She's right there," said Fargus. "Don't you waste no time, Mister. They don't wait long, specially when the river's

a-freezing up like she is now."

Again Keith had a queer feeling of puzzlement, but there was no time to think. "Much obliged to you," he said, and bag in hand hurried forward.

The steamer slowed in to the end of a rough jetty, a rope was made fast and a gangway thrust out. A deck hand helped Keith with his portmanteau and next minute he was all alone on the wharf watching the steamer churn away round the bend.

A horrible feeling of loneliness came over him, but he shook it off, and walked up to the landward end of the jetty. There was no one about, but a little way off was a shack from the chimney of which smoke curled.

Keith knocked and a big bearded man came to the door, and scowled at the visitor. "Sorry to trouble you," said Keith, "but can you tell me if there is anyone here to meet me from Calvert's?"

"What 'ud they want to come here for?" grunted the man. "If you'd wanted to be met, why didn't ye go on to Brant Bridge?"

"Isn't this Brant Bridge?" asked Keith in dismay.

"No. This here is Jasper. Brant Bridge is four mile further on."

Keith's heart sank. "Then how am I to get there?" he asked.

"You got legs, haven't you? It's only about eight mile."

"I can walk all right," returned Keith, resenting the sneer, "but what about my luggage?"

"You can leave it here, if you've a mind to, and send fer it to-morrow."

The man's bite was not so bad as his bark. He helped Keith to carry his portmanteau into the shack, and gave him directions as to finding his way, and presently Keith, feeling a little more cheerful, was tramping along a narrow track through the frozen forest. It was rapidly getting dark, but the night was clear and the moon was rising. So Keith had no fear of not being able to find his way. The one thing that bothered him was why those two men on the boat had insisted on his getting off at the wrong place.

Though Keith was only sixteen he was no fool, and he was pretty sure that Messrs. Fergus and Mold had done this thing on purpose. Of course, it might have been just a silly trick, such as some men delight in playing on a tenderfoot. But the more he thought it over, the less likely it seemed that this was the case, and the more probable that they had some purpose in view. But what that purpose could be he was quite unable to guess.

Night shut down, the cold increased, and even through his warm jacket Keith felt the sting of the frost. The dry snow creaked under his feet. In the forest the silence was intense. So intense that presently he distinctly heard the steamer whistling for Brant Bridge four miles away. "And that's where they'll be waiting for me," he said half aloud, and once more felt angry at the trick that had been played on him. "If I ever meet those two chaps again I'll jolly well tell them what I think of them," he growled.

The track began to rise. It grew very steep and rough.

Then quite suddenly the intense silence was broken by a sharp snapping sound followed by a gasping cry.

Keith did not hesitate but dashed forward. The trees broke away and he found himself on the edge of a deep gorge, which was spanned by a rough foot-bridge. This bridge was nothing but a single pine trunk flattened on its upper surface, and a rudely made rail.

Half-way across, clinging to the trunk with his gloved hands, and with his body swinging like a pendulum over the

abyss, was a boy of about Keith's own age.

Keith saw at once just what had happened; the boy's foot had slipped on the frozen snow which coated the log, he had caught at the rail to save himself, but it was so rotten that it had broken under his weight.

The wonder was that he had not gone straight down into the depths of the dark cleft, but somehow he had managed to catch the trunk in falling, and so had saved himself. But Keith could see that the unlucky fellow was perfectly helpless, for his hands had no sort of grip on the icy surface of the log, and it could only be a matter of moments before they slipped and then—ugh! it made Keith shiver to think of the awful drop below.

But this was no time for thinking, and with one shout of "Hold on! I'm coming," Keith dashed out along the log.

In cold blood he could never have done it, but in the excitement of the moment he hardly thought of the danger. Next moment he was astride the log close beside the other, and had caught him by the collar of his thick leather coat. "I'll pull, you climb," he ordered, and the other wasted no time in obeying.

For a moment it was just a chance whether both went down together, but Keith hung on like a bulldog, and the other kept his head and gradually dragged himself up.

For a moment the boy lay across the log, panting. Then he pulled himself together. "We better crawl out of this," he remarked. "Your head's all right, I reckon."

"For the present it is," smiled Keith, "but I'd hate to have to stay and look down into this dyke."

"Then come right along," said the other briefly, and rising to his feet ran lightly across to the far side. Keith followed, and the two stood together on firm ground. The moon was full on the stranger's face, and Keith glancing at him with interest saw that he was lightly built but wiry, with a thin brown face and very clear brown eyes.

"You're British, I reckon," said the boy.

"I suppose it sticks out all over me," grinned Keith. "Yes, I'm English. Keith Hedley's my name."

"Mine's Brock—Tony Brock, but I guess it would have been 'Mud' if you hadn't come along just when you did. Mighty odd, too, for it isn't once a month anyone does come along this track after nightfall."

"As a matter of fact, it was an odd chance brought me along this way," replied Keith, then broke off. "Hadn't we better be shifting along? It's a bit nippy."

"Cold as Jericho," agreed Tony. "I'm bound for Calvert's. That any good to you?"

"Exactly where I'm going," said Keith. "I shall be very glad of company."

Tony Brock eyed him with interest. "You got a job there?"

"Yes," replied Keith, and that was all. He was not going to tell anyone that he was Crab Calvert's nephew.

Tony still paused. "You come by the steamer?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"Then what made you get off at Jasper?"

Keith told him and was surprised at the keen interest with which Tony listened. "It seemed a rotten sort of joke," Keith ended.

"Joke! Not much joke about that, I reckon," returned Tony sharply. "By the way you describe 'em, I'd say those fellows were hard characters, and that they'd laid out to rob you."

Keith laughed. "I've only got about ten dollars on me and an old silver watch. Not much bait for all that trouble. Besides, they went on in the steamer."

A frown knitted Tony's brown forehead. "That don't matter. They could land at Brant's and catch you easy before ever you got to Calvert's."

"But what's the big idea?" urged Keith.

Tony shook his head. "They've got something against you. I'll lay on that." He flung up his hand. "Listen!" he whispered quickly.

Keith's straining ears caught a slight rustling sound from somewhere down the hill below. Tony caught him by the arm. "That's them," he said in a low voice. "I'll bet on it. Say, we'll get out of this pronto."

"On to Calvert's?" questioned Keith.

"Not on your life. Those hoboos are reckoning to cut into the track a quarter mile or so further on, where the bushes are thick. No, sir, it's up the hill for us."

Keith shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like," he answered.

CHAPTER II

THE FLUME

By the way Tony Brock went up that hill it didn't seem as if his narrow escape on the bridge had done him any harm. The rise was about one in three, and it was all rocks and bush. Since the rocks were mostly covered with ice the going was simply horrid, and Keith, though as fit as most, soon found himself painfully short of breath.

Also being unaccustomed to climbing snow-clad mountain sides on a winter night he kept on slipping and stumbling.

Tony Brock turned. "Say, can't you come a bit quieter? Anyone could hear you a mile off."

"Sorry," panted Keith. "I'll try."

Tony held up his hand for silence. Keith, watching his face in the moonlight, saw it harden. "They're right after us," he said in a low voice. "See here, Hedley, those folk are sure bad men. They mean mischief, and we got to dodge 'em some way."

"Well, it's me they're after," said Keith. "No reason why I should drag you into this business."

Tony swung on him sharply. "See here, Hedley, you're green to this country, but I tell you right now that white men stick together when trouble's brewing."

Keith smiled. "All right, Brock. I'm not saying I'm not grateful."

"Then don't say it," snapped Tony. "Save your breath for the rest of the climb. It's some hill, I tell you."

Some hill it was, and cold as was the night Keith was wet with perspiration when at last they reached more level ground. Here Tony stopped again, and flinging himself down laid his ear to the ground. "They're still coming," he said presently. "Gee, I wish I had a gun. You heeled, partner?"

"I've nothing but a jack-knife," replied Keith. "Can't we beat them to the camp?"

"If it was all woods we might. But we're on the edge of a big clearing, and we can't cross it without being seen."

"You mean they'll shoot?"

"Sure thing," Tony answered briefly.

"Any place we could hide?" asked Keith.

"What's the use? They'd track us in the snow."

"I hadn't thought of that," Keith said blankly. "It seems we're up against it."

Tony started, and a sudden gleam of excitement lit his dark eyes. "Say, I wonder if it's still there," he said half aloud.

"If what is there?" repeated Keith.

"The flume. At least that's there, I know, but the scow. Come on. It's a chance if we can reach it."

Keith had not the foggiest notion what Tony was talking about, but he had heaps of confidence in his new friend, and he followed him as he moved on.

A few steps brought them out of the wood on to the edge of an immense clearing where the open ground sloped away covered with the melancholy-looking stumps of felled trees. From somewhere close at hand Keith heard the sound of running water.

Tony made to the left and all of a sudden the two were standing on the edge of a narrow channel filled almost to the brim with rushing black water. The channel was about eight feet wide and evidently artificial. It reminded Keith of one of those leats which they cut to get water power for the mines down in Cornwall, only this was bigger, deeper and much straighter.

"She's running all right," said Tony. "If we can find the scow we ought to fool them." He started rapidly along the flume. Keith following saw that though the water was still running strongly the sides were already coated with ice.

A shed-like building loomed up in the moonlight, and Tony quickened his pace. "Here's where the scow was kept," he said quickly. "If only she's still there!"

He tried the door, and exclaimed in dismay. "She's locked. Quick, find a rock, Hedley."

Rocks were easily found, but not so easily lifted out of the hard frozen snow. At last Keith managed to wrench one out and lifting it in both hands dealt the door a smashing blow. But the timber was stout and it took two more blows to burst the lock.

"Gee, but we've made noise enough to wake the dead," grumbled Tony, and the words were hardly out of his mouth before there came a shout from up above.

"Stop right there," came a voice, which Keith recognized only too plainly. "Stop right there or I'll drill ye both."

"It's Fargus," he told Tony. "What shall we do?"

"Get the scow into the water," snapped back Tony, as he seized one end of a narrow punt-like boat.

Keith caught the other. It was heavy, but excitement gave him strength and between them they sent the clumsy craft shooting out over the snow. "Launch her careful," warned Tony. "The water's running mighty strong."

"They got the scow." It was Mold's raucous voice. "Shoot, Fargus! Stop 'em!"

"Crack!" came the voice of a heavy pistol. "Crack! Crack!"

The echoes crashed thunderously through the quiet night, and the bullets sang an ugly song just over the heads of the two boys. But Tony was clever enough to keep the shed between him and their enemies, and anyhow moonlight is deceptive. The scow splashed into the swift, black water and Tony held her with all his strength.

"Get in," he gasped, and Keith flung himself in. "Crack! Crack!" Both Mold and Fargus were shooting and running as they fired.

"Let her go!" cried Tony, and as Keith relaxed his grip on the ice-clad bank the scow shot away so suddenly that he lost his balance and pitched all in a heap in the bottom of the queer craft. An accident which saved his life, for a bullet better aimed than the rest struck the ground not a yard from the edge of the flume, and its splintered fragments screamed viciously just over Keith's head.

"Close call!" he remarked, as he picked himself up. Then with a gasp, "Goodness, how we're travelling!"

The slope of the flume had become much steeper, and the scow carried on the surface of the bubbling, foaming current was shooting downwards at breathless speed. Tony in the stern wielded a steering oar. His lips were tight set and his eyes fixed on the flume in front. Mold and Fargus were still shooting, but neither of the boys paid any attention to them, and each instant their figures dwindled in the distance.

The flume left the ground and ran in a sort of wooden trough lifted on trestles high above the treeless slope. The slope became, if anything, steeper, and the speed of the current still greater.

"The Devil's Slide!" said Tony between tight lips. "Hold on!" They swept round a curve where the flume, high on its trestles, clung dizzily to the mountain side, and as they swung Keith caught a glimpse of Mold and Fargus running hard down the hill-side, cutting across the curve.

Suddenly the scow seemed to up-end and then to drop away from under him. The bitter air cut like knives; the surroundings became a mere blur, and he felt as though he were falling down a precipice. He glanced at Tony's set face and wondered what would happen if he made any mistake.

Suddenly there was a sharp jar, the scow seemed to rise clean out of the water, and for an awful second Keith thought she was going to shoot clean over the edge of the flume. A long splinter of wood flashed up and ripped clean through the skirt of Keith's coat, which was blown out like a balloon by the speed of their passage. Then the scow settled down again and flew like the wind down the long, straight, foam-flecked water-slide.

The pace began to slacken and Keith drew a long breath of deepest relief.

"All right now," said Tony. "But, gee, I got a scare."

"Nearly over the edge, weren't you?"

"I sure thought she was gone," responded Tony, "but I reckon we're all right now."

"Those fellows are still chasing us," said Keith.

Tony glanced back to the two figures which showed like toys in the moonlight against the vast white hillside. "Guess they won't trouble us any. Not unless they got horses. We got a mile start and we're still travelling three times as quick as them."

"Where does this flume take us?" asked Keith.

"It runs clear down to the river, but there's a place we can land before we get there." He pointed. "There it is! Now

you be ready to catch hold the minute I do."

The scow shot towards a sort of platform and Tony made a grab. Keith did the same. There was a jerk that nearly wrenched his arms from their sockets, but between them they stopped the scow.

"Get right out," snapped Tony.

"What about the scow?" asked Keith.

"She'll have to go. We can't wait to haul her out."

They scrambled on to the platform and the empty scow shot onwards, and vanished like a flash around the next bend.

A rough ladder led from the platform to the ground. The boys shinned down it in a hurry. "Now which way?" questioned Keith.

"Dead south. We haven't got more than two miles to go."

"Those fellows are still following," said Keith.

"They're mighty set on catching you. Say, I'd like to know what they've got against you."

"So would I," agreed Keith. "It's the funniest business I ever saw or heard of."

"I wouldn't worry," said Tony. "With any luck, we'll be in camp long before they can catch up with us. Once we're across the bridge I don't reckon they'll risk coming further."

Tony seemed tireless, and kept up such a pace that Keith had his work cut out to follow. At last they were across the clearing, and as they entered the woods Keith glanced back. Mold and Fargus were still in sight and coming as hard as they could run.

"Don't worry. We're right on the bridge," said Tony. "There it is!"

He stopped short. "Helloa, there's someone on it. Looks like he's waiting for us."

"Who is it?" asked Keith.

"Hulke Hanson," replied Tony in a low voice. "Say, I reckon this means more trouble."

CHAPTER III

THE BULLY OF THE CAMP

Hulke Hanson was well named. He was a great hulk of a man with a heavy, brutal face and small, narrow eyes. As the boys came near he stepped out into the middle of the narrow bridge. "What's your hurry, Brock? What are ye running away from?"

"If you wait there long enough you'll know," retorted Tony.

"I don't want none of your cheek," growled Hanson threateningly, and turned his attention to Keith. "Where did ye pick up this here specimen, Brock?" he enquired sarcastically.

Keith's blood was boiling at the tone in which the man had spoken to Tony. He answered for himself. "My name is Hedley. I'm from England. Is there any information with which I can oblige you?"

If Keith had thought for five minutes there was nothing he could have said more calculated to enrage Hanson. Sarcasm was his own weapon, and to have a youngster like this use it on him made him see red. "British, be you? Then I reckon to teach you not to give any of your gall to an American," he exclaimed as he strode forward.

"Look out, Hedley!" hissed Tony. "He'll half kill you if he gets his hands on you."

Keith had already made up his mind on this point, and he had no intention whatever of being manhandled by this hulking brute. Remembering the old adage, "Thrice blest is he who gets his blow in first," he lowered his head and charged Hanson.

It was, of course, the very last thing that Hanson had expected. Before he well knew what was happening Keith's head met him just about the region of his third waistcoat button, and the force of the blow doubled him up. His feet slipped on the icy snow and down he went with a crash that made the solid timber of the bridge quiver. Keith stood over him. "Perhaps that'll teach you to be a little more polite to the next Britisher you meet," he said.

Tony caught Keith by the arm. "Run, you fool!" he snapped. "He'll be up in a moment, and we can't tackle him and those other two together."

Keith realized that Tony was right, and leaving Hulke on his back, still gasping for breath, the two were off as hard as they could split down the open trail leading to the camp. Tony kept the pace up until they arrived in sight of a huge structure built of sixty-foot logs, roofed with shingles and hung with icicles to the eaves. Other buildings surrounded it, giving the place almost the appearance of a village. Smoke curled from a chimney and a rich odour of cooking hung in the cold still air.

"Here's the camp," said Tony, slackening his pace.

"And I'm jolly glad to see it," said Keith.

"You've a right to be," said Tony, glancing at the other with a flash of admiration in his brown eyes. "I don't know anyone else would have got by Hulke Hanson like you did."

"Who is he?" asked Keith, with some curiosity.

"The bully of the camp," replied Tony. "And see here, Hedley, because you got the better of him once, don't you go thinking you've finished with him. Hanson will never forgive that to you; he'll never forget it, and he'll never rest till he's got square."

"Sounds cheerful," observed Keith, "but we won't worry about him till we have to. Tell me now, where can I find Mr. Calvert?"

Tony laughed. "You don't have to find him. He'll find you right enough when he's ready for you. Come right into the bunk-house, and we'll see if Shorty can find us some supper."

It was only natural that Keith should feel a trifle nervous as he followed Tony into the lamp-lit interior of the great place. Scores of men clad in blue jerseys and thick trousers and long boots sat about at tables, playing cards or yarning, while some lay on their backs in their bunks. The place was warmed by two enormous stoves, and the air was thick with tobacco smoke.

"Helloa, Tony!" said one or two, but otherwise no one paid any attention to the new arrivals, who made their way right through the long room to the cook-house at the back. Here several men were busy washing up the supper dishes, and as Tony approached one turned. He was a little man, no more than five feet three or four, and his tremendously broad shoulders and chest made him look even shorter than he really was. His round face was red, his eyes were china blue, and his hair the colour of tow.

"Say, kid," he said reproachfully. "You're mighty late."

"I know I am, Shorty," replied Tony, "but this new chum and I have been having quite a time of it. Got chased by two hoboos, and had to come down the flume in a scow to get away from them."

Shorty's blue eyes widened. "The mischief you say! And you rode down the flume? Say, spin us the yarn, kid!"

"Give us something to eat first. We're both clemmed as wolves."

"Supper's over an hour ago," said Shorty, "but I reckon there's some bacon and beans left, and I'll hot ye a pot o' coffee."

"You're white, Shorty," declared Tony. "Get your coat off, Hedley, and hang it up."

The beans were on the table almost before Keith had hung up his overcoat, and with the hot boiled bacon and the scalding coffee made a capital meal. Leaving the washing up to his underlings, Shorty himself looked after the two boys, filling their plates and not asking a question until they had finished eating.

But the moment they had done he demanded the fulfilment of Tony's promise.

"All right," said Tony, "but first this chap's Keith Hedley. Hedley, this is Shorty Scott, cook of the camp and a real white man."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hedley," said Shorty politely, and the two shook hands. Then Tony began his story, first telling how Keith had rescued him at the bridge over Crooked Canyon, then going on to tell about their ride down the flume with the robbers shooting at them.

Shorty's eyes bulged. "Gee, but it beats the band!" he declared excitedly. "But what had these here hoboos got against Hedley?"

"That's just what I can't make out," Keith answered. "I never saw them in my life until I got on the steamer, and then I hardly noticed them till one came up and spoke to me."

"I reckon they took you for someone else," said Shorty shrewdly. "Like in one o' them stories about a chap called Nick Carter I been reading. Called 'The Captive of the Canyon.' It's the goods, I tell you."

"It's about the only possible explanation," agreed Keith.

"That's what you says," came a deep, harsh voice from behind them, and swinging round Keith found himself looking straight into the great ugly face of Hulke Hanson. "But I guess I can give you a better explanation. Listen, all of ye. Them two as was chasing the Britisher is Pinkerton detectives, and they wants him fer pinching a wad of notes off of a old gent on the train between this and Montreal."

Keith rose to his feet. He realized that, while Tony talked a ring of men had gathered round, big, powerful, competent-looking fellows, who were now watching him in a rather terrible silence. He faced Hulke. "I don't know whether you invented that story," he said coldly, "or whether they did. But I'll take it that you did, and call you a liar."

There was a sort of sigh from half a dozen throats. For a youngster like Keith to give the lie to the camp bully sounded to them a good deal like suicide. All expected to see Keith instantly smashed to pulp.

Hulke's great fists clenched, his face was dreadful in its brutish rage, yet to everyone's surprise he did not strike Keith. "I'll have something to say to ye later about that remark, Britisher," he said hoarsely. "But first I'm a-going to show who's the liar. That's your coat a-hanging over thar, I reckon?"

"It is," replied Keith.

"Hand it me, someone," said Hulke.

A man took it off the nail and slung it across. Hulke held it up, slipped his hand into an inner pocket and pulled out a pocket-book. He opened it and showed it stuffed with notes. On the outside were stamped in black the letters "J. R. W."

"He says as his name is Hedley," said Hulke. "And the detectives told as the man as lost his wad was called James R. White. What ye got to say about it, eh, Britisher?"

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WITH THE GREEN EYES

Hulke's question left Keith dumb. Of course, he saw that the whole thing was a put-up job, but the fact that he knew this was not going to help him to convince the others that Hulke was lying.

"Wal, what ye got to say about it?" repeated Hulke in coarse triumph.

Keith pulled himself together. "I repeat what I said before. You are lying. The whole business is a plant."

Hulke glared at him. "If you was anything but a common sneak Britisher I'd break your dirty neck for saying that. But I'd rather leave ye alive to go to the pen. They'll give ye ten years, I reckon."

Keith had gone very pale, but he still faced the bully pluckily. "I came straight here from England," he said. "I have never before heard of or seen a man named J. R. White, nor have I ever before seen this purse. And I'll tell you all this much, that where I come from a chap is considered innocent until he is proved guilty."

Hulke gave a nasty laugh. He turned to the others. "He talks about proof. The wallet was found in his coat. Do any of ye want any more proof than that?"

There was a deadly silence. Even Shorty looked doubtful. In all the crowd there was only one who stuck up for Keith. That was Tony. "I don't believe a word of it," he said plump and plain. "This fellow Hedley saved my life to-night. He's as white as any chap I ever met, and I believe, like him, that this is all a plant."

Hulke swung upon him in an instant, and his great right hand fell on Tony's shoulder, the thick fingers sinking into the muscle with such crushing force that Tony's face whitened with the pain. "Ye little skinny skunk, I wouldn't wonder if you was in it with him," he growled. "But I'll learn ye." His left hand came down on the side of Tony's head with a clap that sounded like a pistol shot, and a force that nearly knocked the boy silly.

In a flash Keith sprang in. As before, he caught Hulke Hanson unawares, and his sturdy fist meeting the man square between the eyes sent him staggering. There was a heavy bench just behind Hanson, and striking against this he and it together went over backwards. He fell full upon the table at which the boys had been having their supper, and there was a loud crash of broken crockery.

Unfortunately the bully was more frightened than hurt. He was up in an instant, and with his great arms whirling and his face purple with passion leaped upon Keith. Keith sprang away, but he could not get far, for he was against the wall. He realized that he could not escape, so put up his fists. He was aware that Hulke would probably kill him, but he hardly cared. Anything was better than to be accused like this of thieving before the whole camp.

And killed or at least half-killed he would most certainly have been, for Hulke was crazy as a mad bull, but for a most unexpected interference.

"Stop!" came a voice, not by any means a loud voice, yet with such a note of command that even the maddened Hulke paused. "What is all this about?" was the curt question, and in between Keith and his enemy stepped a man whom

Keith had not previously seen. Not a big man, for he was only of middle height. Nor was he particularly broad or muscular looking. Also, he was much older than any of the others, for his hair was getting quite gray.

And yet there was something about him which singled him out from all those great powerful logging men, something which breathed power. Never in his life had Keith seen a face so clean cut and hard, or a pair of such intensely piercing eyes. It was the man's eyes that held him more than anything else about him, for the pupils were a most extraordinary greenish gray and seemed to hold light in some odd way.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he enquired again, and at that everyone started talking at once.

The newcomer held up his hand. "Hanson will tell me," he said. Hulke glowering sulkily seemed suddenly ill at ease. But he began to talk.

"This here Britisher come in to-night with Brock. I was out on the bridge and seed them both a-running, and two chaps after them. The chaps come up to me and asked me who they was, and I told 'em one was Brock and the other a stranger. Then these two tells me as they're Pinkerton detectives, and they was after this Britisher fer stealing a wallet off a old chap in the train. They asked me to go into the camp and find out if he was the one they was after."

"They were friends of yours, I reckon?" remarked the quiet man.

Hulke scowled. "Not special."

"Then I presume that you were acting in the interests of justice?" questioned the other.

"That's it," growled Hulke, but Tony and one or two others smiled.

"Go on," said the green-eyed man to Hanson.

"Wal, I come in and seed the Britisher having supper here and a-yarning to Brock and Shorty, and I asked him about the job."

"Asked him!" broke in Tony bitterly. "He shouted out that he was a thief."

The elder man made a sharp gesture. "When I want you to speak, Brock, I'll ask you. Go on, Hanson."

"The Britisher said he didn't know nothing about it," snarled Hanson, "so I asked one of the chaps to look in his coat which was hanging up on the wall, and sure enough there was the wallet with the notes in the pocket. Arter that, I don't know as there's anything more to be said."

The quiet man looked all round. His eyes fell on Keith, and Keith felt as if they were boring into his very soul, yet he faced the gaze steadily. "No more to be said," repeated the quiet man in his quiet voice, which yet seemed to carry all over the room. "Let me see the wallet."

It was handed to him and he examined the pocket-book and its contents. Everyone was watching him, and an ominous silence reigned in the big, warm, crowded place. Suddenly he looked up at Hanson. "These Pinkerton men—why did they not come in here and arrest this Englishman, themselves?"

Hanson had his answer pat. "They didn't want to make no trouble. They said as it would be better fer a chap like me as belongs here to take a look round first."

"And where are they now?"

"Outside, I reckon. I was to take the chap out to them."

"Oh, you were to take him out. Did they swear you in first as a special constable?"

Hulke's heavy face reddened. "What would they want to do that for?" he growled.

"To enable you to make the arrest. Unless they did so I fear you have been exceeding your powers. But no doubt you were actuated purely by a desire to see justice done. Is it not so?"

Hulke realized dimly that he was being made fun of. He grew purple with rage, and Keith fully expected a fearful explosion. Yet it did not come. It seemed that even the bully was afraid of this quiet, elderly man.

"Suppose you fetch them in, Hanson?" continued the latter.

Hanson hesitated, and now Tony's brown face was suddenly all aglow. As for Keith, he was badly puzzled.

"Tell them they need not be afraid," went on the green-eyed man, still looking at Hanson. "Calvert's Camp is all for law and order. We don't want thieves here, I can assure them of that."

Hanson went, and the rest waited. The men, who had seen no such excitement since coming to camp, waited in silence. As for Keith, his heart was thumping. Although he did not see any way out of this horrible business, yet he had a sort of feeling that the quiet man was not ill-disposed towards him. The one thing he longed for was to get it over. He felt as if he could not stand this suspense much longer.

Three minutes passed. They dragged like three hours. "Where's the chap gone to?" muttered someone in a low voice. And just then the door opened and Hanson came in and with him the two men, Mold and Fergus.

Keith's heart dropped to his boots. What he had been building on was the hope that these two blackguards would have been afraid to enter the camp.

CHAPTER V

HANSON GETS THE ORDER OF THE BOOT

"Come here please, gentlemen," said the quiet man. "I understand from Hanson that you are Pinkerton detectives in search of a thief?"

"That's so, boss," replied Fergus boldly. "And that's the feller we're after," pointing to Keith. "I hear as the goods was found on him."

"A wallet was found in his coat," said the quiet man. "I have it here."

"That's good enough, then. We'll take him right along. And I'll trouble you for the wallet. We got to hold it as evidence against him." He stretched out his hand for the pocket-book, but the other still held it.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I should just like to be satisfied about this matter. How much was there in the wallet?"

"A hundred and fifty dollars," replied Fergus promptly.

The quiet man turned over the green rustling bills. He shook his head. "There's not that much here."

"Then he've used some of it," replied Fergus promptly.

"I don't think so," said the other gently.

Fergus stared at him. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said in a hectoring tone. "Be you a-trying to shield a fugitive from justice?"

The green-gray eyes settled on Fargus' long, lantern-jawed face. "No, on the contrary I am thinking of arresting one."

There was a slight stir among the big circle of men. They seemed to sense danger in the air. As for Keith, he felt half suffocated.

Fargus still tried to bluff. "The case is plain as print. Be you going to hand the chap over, or be you not?"

"Why should I, unless he is actually a thief?"

Fargus raised his voice. "There's the wallet. There's the notes. They was took from his coat. What have you got to say?"

"There's the wallet," agreed the other. "Here are the notes." He took them out. "And as you say, the case seems plain as print. And nothing but print."

Fargus wilted suddenly. "W-what do you mean?" he stammered hoarsely.

"You scoundrel, I mean that these are snide notes—forgeries! What have you got to say about that?"

A sort of gasp went up. Keith's legs felt like water. He had to cling to a table.

Fargus made a last effort. "I don't know nothing about that," he declared. "I haven't seed them, so I don't know what they are. But anyways, they're stolen property, and that's all as concerns me."

The other gazed at Fargus for perhaps five seconds. "Yes," he said. "I'll allow you're an expert on stolen property. If I'm not badly mistaken it's not a month since you came out of the penitentiary."

"You dare talk to me that way?" shouted Fargus.

"I do. If you're a Pinkerton man, where's your badge?"

"If you think I'm going to stay here to be insulted you're mistook," snarled Fargus. "Come along, Mr. Mold. We'll leave."

"Yes, you will leave," said the other. "Boys, take 'em out."

Fargus and Mold made a dash for the door, but before they had gone six steps they were in the hands of the loggers. They struggled frantically, but two great powerful chaps seized each of them, and they were helpless.

"Don't kill them," ordered the man with the green eyes. "But you can ride 'em on a rail if you want to."

There was a great roar of sound. In a trice a length of spruce was produced from somewhere and the two ruffians were flung astride it and tied to it. Someone poured a pot of molasses over Fargus; another did the same for Mold; a pillow was broken open, and feathers plastered in the sticky mess. Fargus shrieked for mercy, Mold howled like a whipped dog. But their cries were smothered in treacle and feathers, and a dozen great hefty fellows swung up the rail and ran them out, shouting, into the frozen forest. In a moment the great room was almost empty.

Hulke Hanson tried to sneak away after the rest, but the boss man stopped him. "Hanson," he said, and his voice cut like the cruel frost outside. "You're as bad as those two, and I'm not sure you're not worse. I've had my eye on you for quite a time, and I'm fed up with you. Go to the office, get your wages and clear out. And if ever I catch you anywhere in this neck of woods you can take it from me that you'll be sorry. Now, get!"

The bully never said a word, but sneaked off with his tail between his legs.

"Pity I didn't sack him long ago," observed the green-eyed man. "He never was worth his pay." Suddenly he swung round on Keith. "So you came down the chute, eh Hedley?" he said.

"Yes, sir," replied Keith, wondering how on earth the other knew his name or anything about him.

"And he didn't turn a hair, sir," put in Tony.

"And why should he?" said the other shortly. "Now you two, turn in. Scott will show you your bunk, Hedley. You've got to be up at six. Remember that. We don't want any slackers at Calvert's."

Without another word he walked sharply away. Keith watched him out, then turned dazedly to Tony. "My goodness, you don't get much change out of him. Who is he, Brock?"

Tony stared. "Don't you know? That's the boss, Crab Calvert."

Keith gave a low whistle. "So that's—my uncle," he nearly said, but just managed to change it in time to "the boss."

"Some man, isn't he?" exclaimed Tony.

"I should rather think he was. My goodness, it was a treat the way he handled those two beauties."

"Lucky for you, too, Hedley."

"I should jolly well think it was—and the way he spotted that those notes were duds! It was wonderful. But how did he ever know anything about it?"

Tony laughed. "There isn't much the boss don't know, Hedley. When you've been here a bit longer, you'll find out that. And now we'd best do as he said and turn in. It's just eleven, and we're all up and out by six. Shorty will show you a bunk."

Shorty who had been listening to everything, but so far had said never a word, woke up. "Say, Hedley, I'm plumb ashamed of myself," he said earnestly.

"Why, what's the matter?" questioned Keith in surprise.

"Why, for being jackass enough to come anywheres near believing what that there Hulke said."

"So long as you don't believe it now, that's all I care about," laughed Keith.

"Then put it there," said Shorty, extending his broad powerful hand. And so began a friendship which was to be a very useful one for both the English boy and the camp cook.

CHAPTER VI

STICKING IT!

"Shake a leg, Hedley. You're overdue in the chuck-house."

Keith opened his sleepy eyes, sat up and saw Tony standing by his bunk. For a moment he could hardly remember where he was, then as recollection flashed back he shot out and landed with both feet on the rough board floor.

"There's a bucket of water. Dress quick or you'll go short of grub," advised Tony, and Keith lost no time in setting about his toilet.

A sluice in the icy cold water sent the blood tingling through his body, he dressed in no time and ran for the chuck-

house where already the whole force was collected at the long tables, eating silently and quickly. Gray dawn was just breaking outside.

Men who work in a logging camp need good food and plenty of it, and Keith found nothing to complain of in the fare set before him. He was hungry as a hawk and made great play with the fried bacon, hot bread and strong steaming coffee. No one spoke to him, but he caught one or two glancing at him, and the looks were not unkindly ones.

The meal was soon over, and the men began to push for the door. Keith was following them out into the chill dawn when he heard a voice. "You, Hedley, come here."

It was his uncle, and Keith lost no time in obeying. For a moment those keen eyes measured him up, and somehow they made Keith feel small and humble. "What can you do?" snapped his uncle. "Ever handled a saw or an axe?"

"No, sir."

"Want a job in the cook-house with Shorty or to go out in the woods?"

"The woods, sir," said Keith.

Crab Calvert grunted. "If you go outside you'll have to keep up with the procession. I don't have any greenhorns hanging up my work. And you needn't think you'll get any special consideration because you happen to be my nephew."

Keith coloured hotly. "I don't want it," he snapped. "I haven't told anyone you are my uncle, and I hope you haven't either."

Crab Calvert's hard face relaxed for a moment. "Darned if you haven't got a bit of the proper spirit after all. All right. You shall have a chance to make good. And mind you make the best of it. You'll work with Blacky Cole here."

He was gone in that queer, quick, silent way of his, and next minute a man strode up to Keith. "Come right along," he said briefly.

As Keith walked off with this new man he looked at him with some interest. He was a slim fellow with curly black hair, a face almost coffee brown and eyes like jet. Keith thought that he looked rather a decent sort.

The man stopped at a shed, and selected a long cross-cut saw, an axe and some steel wedges. He carried the saw himself, but handed the axe and wedges to Keith. Then still without speaking he led the way into the woods. For a mile or so they tramped down a corduroy road, then over frozen swamp, and Keith noticed how large a space had already been cleared of trees. At last they reached thick woods where they were to work.

Blacky turned to his companion. "You're mighty young for a sawyer," he said.

"Not too young to make a start, I hope," replied Keith.

"Make a start," repeated the other. "You mean to say you've done no sawing?"

"Never, except on a wood pile," answered Keith.

Blacky stared, then scowled. "Then you're no use to me. Gee, what did the boss mean by foisting off a tenderfoot like you on me?"

"Meant me to learn, I expect," replied Keith. "See here, Mr. Cole, I'm green and I know it. I've never seen a lumber camp till last night. But I'm fairly strong, and I'll do all I know to keep my end up."

Cole nodded. "That's straight goods, son, but the trouble is you can't stick it. You'll keel over and have to quit. Then the laugh will be on you. And mind you this, I can't afford to go slow for your sake."

"Don't do it then," said Keith. "I'll stay with you as long as I can."

Cole shrugged his shoulders and without another word picked up his axe and walked to a tall spruce. He glanced at it, swung his axe and in a few moments a deep notch yawned in one side. Then he took the saw and slipped the blade into the notch. "Take hold," he said, and the work began.

At intervals Cole flung advice at Keith. "Don't grip the handle so tight. Don't push it. All you got to do is pull. No use trying to shove the blade through the tree. Go steady now!" Of course Keith was clumsy at first, but he was quick in the uptake and very soon he had grasped the first essentials of the work.

Presently the saw stuck. Blacky motioned for a wedge, drove it behind the saw and they started again. The keen teeth bit through the wood, the yellow sawdust spurted and presently the tree began to sway. A few more cuts then Blacky quickly unscrewed the handle of the saw. "Pull her out," he ordered.

The tree was leaning, cracking. Keith stared at it until a hand caught him by the arm. "Get back, you fool. Do you want to be squashed flatter'n a flapjack?" Blacky whirled him aside, and the tree keeled over and fell with a crash that sounded like the boom of a heavy gun.

There was no rest. At once Blacky started on a second tree. Light as the man looked, he was all wire, and his hands like leather. Keith was fit enough and stronger than most youngsters of his age, but by the time the third tree was down his back felt as if it was cracked and every muscle in him was crying out at its strange new usage. Each tree, remember, had to be sawed into logs, and on an average each trunk made three logs. In spite of the cold Keith was sweating profusely.

Cole eyed him. "You're trying, anyways," he admitted, "but it's no use, son. You got to be broke slow to a job like this. I remember well I didn't do more'n four trees a day my first week."

"And how many do you do now?" asked Keith hoarsely.

"Twelve to eighteen," was the answer.

"Then I won't waste breath talking," said Keith.

By the time the sixth tree was finished Keith began to realize that Blacky was right. He couldn't stick it. His back was gone, and he felt weak as a cat. The palms of his hands were a mass of blisters, and the woods were beginning to sway and spin before his aching eyes.

Blacky looked at a big metal watch which he took from his trousers pocket. "Dinner-time, I guess," he said.

Keith had absolutely forgotten that such a thing as time existed. He stared stupidly at the other.

"Come on, Britisher," said Blacky, and somehow Keith hobbled back to camp. There was his uncle with his clean-cut face as utterly expressionless as usual. He paid no attention to Keith, but beckoned Cole aside.

The two talked a moment. Then Keith leaning dazedly against the door-post caught a few words from Cole. "He stuck all right. He's got the nerve. Give him me for a week and I'll make a sawyer of him."

The words were like a draught of champagne to Keith. He straightened up, and marched into the chuck-house with his head high. He was too done to eat, but Shorty spotted his condition and brought him a mug. "It's not coffee; it's soup," he whispered. "Drink it up quick."

The rough kindness of the man brought a lump into Keith's throat, and the soup, hot and rich, did him no end of good. For the rest of the hour he lay quiet in his bunk. He would have given worlds to sleep, but he knew he must not.

All too soon he was following Blacky out of the room again into the snow-clad open. He was now aching more terribly even than before, and what was worse, his head felt very queer. And before him were four more hours of this killing toil.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

The first half-hour of sawing was absolute agony, for during the dinner-hour Keith's over-wrought muscles had stiffened. But presently this wore off, and he was better able to drive the saw.

The worst of it was that he was growing so weak. His head felt as if it was quite empty and his knees began to give out. He didn't say a word, but he was quite aware that Cole knew how tired he was and was helping him all he could. When it was Keith's turn to pull Cole pushed. It doubled Cole's work, and Keith was very grateful.

An hour passed, but it was still three hours before knocking-off time, and in spite of his most desperate efforts, Keith knew that he could not stick it. He tightened his lips, and once more vowed to himself that he would go on until he dropped. The afternoon had darkened, clouds covered the sky and a thin snow began to fall. But there was no wind or anything to stop the work.

Keith grew more and more giddy. Now and then he swayed slightly. The rip-rip of the saw seemed to be cutting into his brain. He hated the sound. There was no one else in sight, but every now and then a heavy thud in the distance would tell of another great tree coming to earth.

Suddenly came a crash louder than any yet. It was followed by a smothered scream. Cole stopped sawing, straightened himself and looked round. "Sounds like someone got hurt," he remarked, and almost as he spoke a man burst through the timber and came running towards them.

"Say, Cole," he cried. "A tree's fell on Jim Prest. Come and lend us a hand."

Cole dropped his saw. "You stay right here," he said curtly to Keith, and Keith only too thankful for a few moment's pause, dropped down on the ground, with his back against the great trunk which they had been sawing up, and sat there all in a heap. At any other time he would have been the first to run to the help of a man who was hurt, but now he was so done that he hardly gave the accident one thought.

The cold was bitter, and sleep most dangerous, but Keith's eyes closed, and in another few seconds he would have been sound asleep when suddenly a sack was flung over his head, and at the same moment a pair of hands seized him from behind, and dragged him to his feet. "You make a sound, and it'll be the last you ever make," growled a hoarse voice in his ear.

The threat was quite unnecessary, for however much Keith might have wanted to shout it was quite impossible to do anything of the sort. The thick sack both gagged and blinded him. The grip shifted to his right arm, another pair of hands gripped him by the left arm, and he was dragged rapidly away.

In his dazed state, the whole thing seemed to Keith like a bad dream. He was perfectly helpless, and all he knew was that he was being led quickly through the snowy woods. But where or by whom he had not the faintest idea.

Presently his foot caught on a root under the snow, and he stumbled and would have fallen had not the men who held him hauled him roughly up. He could not breathe and in his exhausted state soon fell again.

One of the men cursed him, at the same time kicking him brutally. And suddenly Keith knew the voice. With a shock of horror he realized it was Mold's. And that was all he did know for some time, for there comes a point with all of us when we can bear no more, and it was at this particular moment that the last of Keith's strength went out of him and he fainted dead away.

When he came to himself it was with the sting of some strong spirit in his mouth, and with the sack off his head. He was lying flat in the snow in a little clearing surrounded by thick tamarack; Fergus was kneeling beside him with a flask in his hand, and the thick-set figure of Mold stood over him, with a scowl on his hard face. "Told you he was shamming, Fergus," growled the latter, and stepped forward threateningly. "Get up, you young scab," he growled, "or I'll boot your ribs in."

The brutality of the man sent a flash of anger through Keith's aching body. He scrambled to his feet. "Try it, you brute!" he said so fiercely that Mold stopped short.

Fergus laughed. "Plumb scared ye, didn't he?" he sneered. Then he turned on Keith. "That's enough," he said, and there was deadly threat in his voice. "Since you're able to stand you can walk. Now you'll come right along or——" As he spoke he pulled a small but deadly-looking automatic from his pocket. "I'd rather have ye alive than dead," he said, "but if you make any more trouble I'll shoot. I mean it."

"What do you want with me?" demanded Keith. "I never did you any harm, and I've got nothing on me that's worth your taking."

Mold's heavy face went dark with rage. "Never did us any harm," he snarled. "Don't you call five years in the pen any harm?"

"In the pen?" repeated Keith puzzled. "Do you mean prison?"

"Do I mean prison!" retorted the other, with a hideous sneer. "Yes, you peach, I guess I do mean prison. And well you know it for all your pretence at innocence."

"I don't know it," snapped Keith, "I know nothing about you, or why you went to prison. I never saw either of you in my life before yesterday."

Fergus looked at him with a sort of unwilling admiration. "Dog gone if he don't lie well," he remarked.

"Dog gone if I don't teach him to tell the truth afore I'm done with him," threatened Mold aiming a heavy blow at Keith. Keith dodged it, and weak as he was would have gone for the brute, but Fergus caught and held him.

"Enough o' that, Mold," he said curtly. "You better remember we're a mighty sight too near to the camp still fer any games o' this sort. Here you, Hart, come along."

"Why do you call me Hart?" demanded Keith, but Fergus paid no attention.

"You come right along," he ordered in his most deadly tone, at the same time making a significant motion with his pistol. And Keith, too worn out to struggle, and realizing that Fergus would shoot if he resisted, obeyed.

With Mold on one side and Fergus on the other, he was led away through the thickest of the woods. Where he was being taken he had not the faintest idea, any more than he had as to what these men wanted with him.

They were soon out of hearing of the axe-men and climbing a steep slope, but still in thick timber. The snow fell silently and it began to grow dark. The country became wilder and more desolate with every step, and great rocks thrust their jagged heads through the snow. Keith aching in every limb felt more than ever that the whole thing was an ugly dream.

At last, just as night began to close down, they came to a hillside so steep it was almost a precipice. Keith's conductors, however, must have known the place well, for they picked a winding way up it, and when they had climbed to a good height turned sharp round a big outcrop of rock on to a narrow ledge. A few steps along this and Keith saw a low-browed opening in the face of the hill. It was the mouth of a cave.

Keith pulled up, but Fergus pushed him forward. "Get in there," he ordered. "You'd ought to know the way," and Keith blundered blindly into the darkness. There was the scratch of a match, and the gleam of a candle on the low arch of

the roof.

By its light Keith saw that the cave ran inwards far beyond the radius of the light. He saw, too, that the place had some appearance of being lived in, for in a recess to the left was a pile of firewood and some bundles of dry grass. But by this time he was done to the world. He dropped on the nearest boulder and sat there all in a heap. Mold had hold of him in a moment and jerked him to his feet. "Get up!" he roared in sudden fury. "What have ye done with the stuff? Where is it?"

"What stuff?" asked Keith wearily. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Mold's thick cheeks went purple. "You brat, you! You'd still try to bluff! Don't ye know when you're beat? Don't ye know that Fargus and me can burn you alive if we've a mind to?"

Keith braced himself. "You certainly look quite capable of it," he said coolly, "but if you'll kindly explain why you kidnap a chap who's never seen you before, and propose to burn him alive why I, for one, should be much obliged to you."

Mold looked as if he was going to have a fit, but Fargus stepped between him and his victim. "See here, Hart," he said in that low voice of his which was so much more dangerous than Mold's shouting. "You've put up a pretty good bluff, but this time I call it. Bear in mind you're here alone with us two, and that there's not another soul knows where to look for you. Now I'll ask you square, where's the loot, and after this I'll only ask you once more."

"If you'd tell me what loot you're talking about perhaps I could tell you," replied Keith wearily.

There was an ugly flash in Fargus' narrow eyes. "What good do you think it will do you to keep up this pretence?" he said fiercely. "You and your dad were the only ones that knew where we'd hidden the stuff, and you're not going to tell me that, once your dad had got me and Mold shut up, you didn't get away with it."

Keith shook his head. "It's all Dutch to me," he remarked. "I haven't a ghost of a notion what you're talking about."

Mold, whose features were working with fury, broke in. "What's the good of letting him give you all this back chat, Fargus?" he roared. "You've had your turn. Now let me handle him. If I don't make him talk my name is Mud."

CHAPTER VIII

A CONSULTATION AT THE CAMP

"Funniest thing I ever did see." The speaker was the sawyer Cole. "Flym came to tell me that Jim Prest had got hurt, and seeing Hedley was real tired I told him to wait where he was. After we got Prest out I came straight back, but Hedley was gone, and though I looked everywheres I haven't seen him since."

Tony Brock came pushing his way through the ring of men who stood round Cole at the door of the bunk-house. "Hedley gone you say? Then it's Hulke Hanson. I'll bet anything it's that brute, Hulke. Say, Cole, were there any marks?"

"Aye, there was marks of two pairs o' boots, and it looked to me mighty like they and the Britisher had gone off together. I followed 'em quite a piece, but the snow had blurred 'em up, and anyways it was getting dark."

"Two pairs, you say?" cried Tony. "Then it's Hulke and one of those beauties we rode out of the camp yesterday."

"Them hogs!" growled a big swamper. "Gosh, ef I thought they'd dared to come back here interfering with our chaps I guess I'd be the one to start out after 'em."

"Which way did the steps go?" asked Tony who was looking very anxious.

"Right east up towards the hills," Cole told him. He looked at Tony. "I wouldn't wonder if you was right, son. For Hedley wasn't in no shape to go a-cruising off on his own. He'd been sawing till he nigh dropped. For a chap as was plumb tenderfoot I will say he stuck it right well."

"I'm sure I'm right," declared Tony. "Those chaps were mad keen to get hold of Hedley. They chased us for miles yesterday. And as for that business of pretending that Hedley had stolen a wallet, you all know how the Boss proved it was a pack of lies."

"What was the trouble anyway?" asked Cole. "What did they want him for?"

"That's just what none of us know," replied Tony. "Hedley, least of all. He'd only just arrived from England. We'd best go to the boss and tell him what's happened."

"He's not in camp," put in the big swamper who had spoken before. "He rode down to Coon Camp at mid-day, and he's not back yet."

"But we've got to do something," urged Tony. "Those brutes may be killing Hedley."

Blacky Cole shook his head. "I don't reckon they're a-going to murder him. Ef they'd wanted to do that they had their chance when they caught him first off. If you ask me, they want him alive."

"But what for?" asked another man.

"That's just it. No one knows," said Tony.

"What's this—someone took Hedley away?" came another voice, and Shorty Scott who had just heard the news came running up.

Tony quickly told him what he knew and Shorty's square honest face hardened. "Aye," he said. "I'll lay a month's pay that Hedley's been took off by that pair of peaches as we run out of the camp last night, and I'll bet they've took him up into the hills. There's caves there where ye could hide a tribe of Injuns, let alone one prisoner. Boys, I guess we got to do something."

"I reckon we're ready to do anything as we can," said the big swamper, "but what do you recommend, Shorty? It's dark, it's a-snowing pretty steady, and I don't reckon any of us knows them there hills up ter the east. What about it?"

Shorty opened his mouth as if to speak, then stopped and seemed to hesitate. And just then came a sudden and startling interruption. "Here he be! Here's Hedley!" shouted a voice, and into the circle of light walked a stalwart-looking youngster who in height, figure, colour of hair and eyes and shape of face, was apparently no other than Keith Hedley himself. A little dazzled by the strong glare of the big paraffin lamps, the newcomer stood still and looked round a little uncertainly.

Everyone stared at him. Tony hurried towards him, and gazed at him for a moment. "It's not Hedley," he announced sharply. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Hart," said the new arrival. "Kirby Hart. What made you think my name was Hedley?"

"Because you're the dead spit of him," replied Tony. "Only I guess you're American, and he's British."

"I'm American all right," said the young fellow. "Say, this is Calvert's Camp, isn't it?"

"That's so," replied Tony. "Anyone you want?"

Hart hesitated. "Could I see the boss?" he asked.

"You can see him when he comes back, but he's away right now," said Tony. "You come right in and wait."

Hart passed in and went to the stove. It was getting very dark and the snow was still powdering down. Most of the men had gone inside the bunk house, and were getting ready for supper, but Tony, Cole, Shorty and the big swamper still stood together by the door.

Tony glanced again at the new arrival who was sitting by the fire. "See here," he said eagerly. "I guess I'm beginning to get the hang of this. This Hart is the dead spit of Hedley, and I reckon it was him those hoodlums were after when they chased us yesterday. They took Hedley for him."

Shorty brought one fist down into the palm of his other hand. "By gum, you've struck it, kid. Yes, you've hit it in once, and I'm going right over to find out from that chap what he knows."

He went straight to the stove, and he and Hart talked for some minutes. When Shorty came back to Tony there was a queer glow in his blue eyes. "You were right, Brock," he said eagerly. "I reckoned from the first you'd hit it but now I'm sure of it. But see here, this is a bigger business than I reckoned, and it won't do to make any blunders about it. So far as I can judge, these swabs have took the Britisher away up into the hills, and it's going to be some job to get him out of their clutches."

Tony cut in. "You know the hills, Shorty. You know them a sight better than any other chap in the camp. Do you reckon you know where they've got Keith?"

"I know all right, son. I can find the place."

"Then let's get off after them right away."

Shorty shook his head. "Not a mite of use, Brock. There isn't a man alive could find his way across that country on a night like this. He'd only fall into a gulch and break his neck. No, we got to wait till daylight."

Tony looked dismayed. "But that may be too late, Shorty. Likely as not those swine will have finished Keith by then."

"I don't reckon so," Shorty answered quietly. "So long as Mold and Fargus keep on thinking that Hedley is Hart, just so long he'll be safe in their hands. I mean, they won't kill him." He paused. "Now you better get some grub and turn right in. We got to be ready to start at dawn."

CHAPTER IX

KEITH BOLTS

Fargus did not move, and it looked to Keith as if the fellow meant to leave him to the tender mercies of the brute Mold. From the expression on the face of the latter it seemed to Keith that his shrift would be a very short one, for if ever murder was written big on a man's features that man was Mold.

Perhaps Fargus realized this, for all of a sudden he stepped between Mold and his victim. "Keep your hands off of him, Mold," he ordered harshly. "I kin fix him and I'm a-going to."

Mold swung round on his partner. "You—you haven't got the guts to touch him. You've had your turn. It's mine now." As he spoke he caught hold of Keith by the shoulder sinking his thick fingers deep into the flesh.

Next instant he was looking straight down into the muzzle of Fargus' pistol. "You better remember as I'm boss here,"

snapped Fargus. "Drop him, I tell you."

For a moment Keith thought and hoped that the two were going to quarrel and fight, but after a moment Mold gave way. "You're a nice pardner," he snarled, but all the same he released Keith and stepped back.

"I know my job, and that's more than you do," sneered Fargus.

"And a pretty botch you've made of it so far," retorted Mold, "letting this here kid bluff you stone cold."

"Bluff me! That's what you think. You wait till I gets to work. I reckon I can leave you standing when it comes down to real business. He's going to talk all right, and don't you forget it."

There was such concentrated malice in his voice that Keith actually shivered while Mold remained silent.

Fargus turned to Keith. "I told you I was only going to ask you once more where the stuff was hid, and I meant it. Now see here. I'm a-going to tie you up in the mouth of the cave, and there you'll stay without food or drink until you speak. We're not in no hurry."

He waited a moment, as if he expected Keith to speak. But as Keith remained silent he seized him suddenly, and held him while Mold slipped a rope round his body and arms and drew it tight. Keith was too exhausted to resist and the precious pair dragged him to the mouth of the cave and tied him against a big spur of rock just inside the entrance.

Fargus stepped back and looked at him. In spite of himself, Keith's teeth were chattering. "Cold, be you?" sneered Fargus. "You'll be a sight colder afore morning." With that he turned and swung back into the cave, followed by Mold. The latter at once set to lighting a fire, and Keith had to watch while they cooked and ate their supper in the warm glow of the burning wood.

The spot where Keith was tied was just out of the snow, but it was cruelly cold. Keith had taken off his coat for his work with the cross-cut and was in his shirt sleeves. He had been wet through with perspiration and now his damp clothes began to freeze upon him. For a time he suffered intensely, then a sort of numbness crept over him, a dull drowsiness.

Keith had sense enough left to know what this meant. Presently he would go to sleep and that would be the end. He would freeze to death, and never wake again. And just then he realized that Mold was standing in front of him holding a torch of fat pine wood. "Enjoying it, be you?" he sneered. Then all of a sudden his face changed, and an anxious expression crossed it. "Fargus!" he shouted. "Come here quick."

"What's the matter?" demanded Fargus.

"The kid's gone in. Ef you leaves him here any longer we won't get nothing out of him, fer he'll be dead."

Fargus came up, and what he saw evidently made him agree with his partner. "I guess you're right," he growled. "All right. Better get him back to the fire and thaw him out a bit."

Keith felt them untie the rope, but when it was taken off him and he had no longer any support, his legs gave, he crumpled up and fell in a heap. His head struck the rock as he fell, and that was the last thing he knew for a long time.

When at last he came to he found himself lying on the cave floor near the dying fire. He was not so cold, but he was aching all over and savagely hungry. The cave was lit only by the dull red glow of the embers and the darkness was so intense that he could not even see his two gaolers. But by their heavy breathing he realized that they were both asleep.

Hope leaped to life within him, for here at last seemed some possibility of escape. He lay listening a moment, then began to feel about in the darkness. As he had fully expected, he was not free. A rope was round his body, the other end of which was attached to something. Fingering it cautiously he found that it was tied to the man nearest to him. A breath of cold air from outside fanned the dying fire and by the flicker he saw that this was Fargus.

The question now was whether he could in any way cut the rope without waking his enemy. He felt in his pockets, but to his bitter disappointment his knife was gone. Fargus was taking no chances, and for a moment Keith's heart sank to his boots. But only for a moment. Keith was not the sort to give up easily, and all at once he saw a fresh chance. The fire though low had heat enough to burn a rope.

In utter silence he crept close to the embers and laid the rope across them. Smoke began to rise and there was so strong a smell of burning hemp that he was terrified it would wake his gaolers. But they still snored, and inside a couple of minutes the rope fell apart. Hardly able to believe his luck Keith set to creeping away, and in a few moments had reached the mouth of the cave.

The snow had ceased, the sky was clear and all a-glitter with frosty stars. Rising to his feet, he started away along the ledge. He had to go cautiously for the new snow was slippery, but there was light enough to see his way, and his heart beat high at the prospect of escape.

But in his excitement, Keith had quite forgotten how utterly done he was, and besides he had had nothing to eat since twelve the previous day, and then only a cup of soup. To his intense disgust he found his strength failing rapidly while the bitter frost began to bite into his very bones. Even so, he managed to get down the worst of the slope on to better ground. Then came a fresh shock as he realized that he had not the faintest idea which way the camp lay.

He stopped, and as he did so, from above came a hoarse angry shouting.

The voice was Mold's.

CHAPTER X

THE CHASE

Keith knew that it was no use running, for he was far too weak to have any chance of getting away from his pursuers, who were both well-fed and rested. He realized that his only way of escape was to dodge them by hiding.

The brush was thick, the light was not very good, and he had a fair start. At first sight it seemed as if he had at least a sporting chance of getting clear, and he at once crept quietly away into the thickest of the cover.

Up above on the hillside, Mold was uttering wild threats. "It's all your fault, Fargus," he bellowed. "Ef you'd have let me handle him there wouldn't have been none of this trouble."

"Aw! Cut it out!" snarled back Fargus. "We'll have him all right. He can't have gone far. He was too near played out fer that. And anyways we can track him easy enough in this new snow." Though the speaker was quite two hundred yards away the words came as plainly to Keith's ears as if they had spoken in his ear. And they came like the crack of doom. For, in his excitement, he had completely forgotten the fact that his footsteps in the snow were bound to give him away.

Now the last hope was cut off, and he knew in the very soul of him that he was bound to be caught. And this time—this time there would be no mercy shown him. Mold would probably murder him out of hand.

The thought filled him with such horror as for a moment gave him a sort of false strength, and he actually ran for a little way through the thick brush. He came to a patch of wood so thick that the ground beneath the trees had hardly a trace of snow, and once more a little gleam of hope rose within him. If he could only put Fargus and Mold off the trail there was just a chance for him still.

He stepped from side to side, dodging the snow patches, and keeping always among the thickest of the trees. The exercise warmed him a little, but his legs felt like paper and he knew that he could not last long.

He stopped for a moment and listened, and though he could plainly hear his two pursuers crashing through the bush, it seemed to him that they were not quite so close. He made a fresh spurt, and all of a sudden found himself on the edge of a deep ravine. It was all he could do to pull up in time to save himself from pitching head foremost into the black depths.

The ravine was narrow, but much too broad to jump, and the sides were as steep as the wall of a house. What was worse, it ran as far as he could see both ways. He was completely cut off, and the disappointment was so bitter that it almost paralysed him, and for a moment he stood stock still gazing helplessly at the opposite side, barely twenty feet away, yet as much out of his reach as the moon. Then came the crashing again, the thud of heavy steps, and once more Keith pulled himself together and started up the edge of the great dyke. It might be, he thought, that it was narrower further up.

So far from this being the case, it grew wider, and Keith had almost given way again to sheer despair when he noticed a tree, a large scrub oak which grew on the near edge of the ravine and spread its branches almost across the gulch.

Weak as he was, he did not hesitate for a second, but scrambled rapidly up the sloping trunk and out upon a big limb which formed a sort of natural bridge across the gulf. His head was spinning from sheer weakness, but desperation lent him strength, and he managed to reach the far end.

The bough bent and cracked horribly but Keith gave himself a great swing, let go, and landed all in a heap in a little drift of snow on the far side. Struggling to his feet, he staggered forward, reached a big fir and flung himself down behind it. He was only just in time, for at that very moment the long lank form of Fergus appeared on the far side of the ravine, followed by the squat shape of Mold.

Keith's heart almost stopped beating, for he felt certain that his enemies must have seen him. Fergus stopped, with his eyes on the ground, and flung out a hand to stop Mold. "Stand still, you fat fool!" he ordered savagely. "How in thunder can I hear when you're stamping like a bull?"

Mold pulled up and Fergus stood listening a moment. "I can't hear him," he rapped out. "Yet he can't have gone far."

"Hiding, most like," replied Mold sulkily. "Why don't you look over in the gulch?"

"Because it's fifty feet deep, you idiot," retorted Fergus. "And Hart's not fool enough to have chucked himself down there."

"Curse this ground!" he went on savagely. "It's froze too hard to take a mark. I don't reckon even an Injun could find his steps."

Keith lay quite still, breathing deeply, trying to recover a little strength. He felt certain that it was only a matter of time before his enemies would discover how he had crossed the ravine, and be on his track again. But behind him the brush was thicker than ever, so thick that the ground was only patched here and there with snow. If he could only creep off again there was just the chance that he might find a real hiding-place.

A precious thin chance, but anything was better than to be caught, for by this time Keith was only too certain of what would happen to him once these two ruthless brutes got him again into their clutches.

He ventured to peer out around his trunk and saw that Fergus and Mold were both some way above the spot where he had crossed. They were scouring the ground like two hounds. "How fur does this here gulch run?" snapped Fergus.

"You'd ought to know better'n me," growled Mold.

"I don't know nothing about it," replied the other. "You go on up it. I'm going to cast back and see if there's any way across or round the lower end."

"And meanwhile Hart's a-getting all the start he needs," sneered Mold.

"Shut it!" ordered Fargus fiercely. "Shut your mouth and get on, or I'll shut it for you."

Mold started and Keith heard him grumbling to himself as he went. Fargus turned back, and Keith's heart was in his mouth for, if the fellow once spotted the tree by which the gulch could be crossed, it was all up. There was just light enough for him to see the man's long slouching shape as he prowled back down the edge of the ravine. Opposite the oak he paused, and for a moment Keith hardly breathed, but then to his intense relief Fargus moved on again.

Keith could have shouted for joy. Whatever happened now, at any rate he had a few minutes respite, and waiting only until Fargus was out of sight, he rose to his feet, and went straight away through the brush.

The short rest had done him good, and weak and starved as he was it was at a better pace that he travelled on through the thick scrub. Now and then he paused to listen, but he heard no sound except now and then the cracking of a tree in the bitter frost. He kept his course by the stars, making as near as possible straight south, and as the minutes went by and there was still no sound of pursuit a little hope crept back into his heart.

Not that he had much to be hopeful about, for he was alone without food or shelter in the heart of some of the wildest country in the west. Even if there was no one chasing him, it was quite doubtful whether he could keep going until daylight. A horrible drowsiness kept creeping over him and more than once he stumbled and nearly fell. He stopped for a moment to get breath, and leaned against a tree.

He was very near the end of his tether, and he could not help but know it. His legs felt like sticks and his head like a balloon. As he stood there, gazing through the trees, a little red spark seemed to float into view. He rubbed his eyes and stared. Yes, it was no fancy, but a light of some sort.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN DAWN CAME

Any port in a storm, and Keith instantly made up his mind that he would chance it, and make for this light. New strength seemed to come to him as he hurried through the frozen forest towards the welcome glow.

The light was a good way off, and the going terribly rough, but as he drove his way towards it, it shone more and more brightly, and soon showed itself as the square of a window behind which was a lamp or fire.

Keith's spirits rose like quicksilver. It was a house, and that argued civilization of some sort and shelter. His pursuers were certainly not the sort who were going to break into a house after him, not even if they found out where he had taken refuge. Forgetting his fatigue, he quickened his pace, and presently came out on to more open ground.

The house was right in front of him, a small shack standing in a clearing. It was too dark to see anything more than that it was a very small place, probably a miner's or prospector's cabin. But the light glowed strongly, and for the first time during this awful night, poor Keith felt almost happy. At the edge of the clearing he waited a moment to make sure that he had out-distanced his pursuers, then as he could hear no suspicious sound he went straight up to the door of the shack and knocked.

There was no reply. The light from the window was not from a lamp, but from a fire. The chances were that the owner was in bed and asleep and Keith knocked again more loudly. Still no answer, and the third time he pounded loudly with both fists.

"Waked him this time," said Keith to himself as he heard a thud from inside. Next instant the door flew open, and in the firelight Keith saw a man standing in the entrance, holding a double-barrelled shot-gun. A broad yet gaunt-looking man with a big hooked nose, a chin like the toe of a boot and bushy beetling brows over pale grey eyes.

"What in blazes do you mean by making this row?" roared this formidable-looking person. "Get out of it afore I fills you up with lead."

Keith was horribly dismayed, but he was also extremely annoyed at being received like this. "That's a nice way to talk to a chap," he retorted warmly. "I'm dead-beat, half frozen and starving, and I want shelter till morning. That's why I had to wake you."

"Shelter," growled the other. "You'll not get shelter here. I don't take in strangers at this hour of the night."

Keith grew desperate. "Then you'd better shoot me out of hand," he said. "It'll be a quicker way of murdering me than leaving me to freeze to death outside."

The gaunt man seemed to hesitate. "Who are you?" he demanded harshly.

"My name's Hedley. I work at Calvert's Camp."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I was caught by two robbers yesterday evening. They gagged me and dragged me away, but I got loose and managed to escape. They're chasing me now."

"Chasing you now!" repeated the other in sudden alarm. "Who are they?"

"Mold and Fargus they call themselves. They——" Keith got no further, for the big man's left arm shot out open-handed, and gave Keith such a violent push as sent him staggering backwards to fall flat on his back in the snow. Before he could get up, the door was slammed and he heard the bolt being shot. Next instant the shutters were flung-to across the window and there was the clank of an iron bar as it fell across inside.

Dazed and giddy, Keith struggled to his feet. All was darkness, even the welcome gleam of the fire had been cut off. Furiously he flung himself at the door, wrenching vainly at the handle. It was no use. Not a sound came from inside as he dropped back and stood trembling and shivering. His anger at the brutal way in which this man had treated him was so intense that for the moment he quite forgot the danger in which he still stood from Fargus and Mold.

But Keith was not the sort to give way to useless passion, and very soon he pulled himself together again and began to try to think out what was best to do. Shelter he must have—shelter of some kind, for now just before dawn, the frost was so bitter that in his weak state he knew it would finish him very shortly. He looked round, but at first could see nothing except the black shapes of dead, ring-barked trees towering like gaunt skeletons against the greying sky.

Then suddenly he spotted another building at some distance behind the shack. It looked like a shed, but there was not yet light enough to see. Making a round so as not to be spotted by the surly brute within the house, he reached it and found it was a rough stable. It was empty, and when he went inside to his great joy he discovered a pile of hay in the corner. It was coarse, mouldy stuff, but if it had been a heap of blankets it could hardly have been more welcome, and at once he opened it up and crept into the middle of it. There he lay down and pulled it all over him. For a time he lay shivering with his teeth chattering, but after a while a little warmth crept into his aching limbs. Then sleep came on him like a pall, and in a few moments more he had forgotten all his troubles.

How long he slept he could not tell; it seemed only a few minutes, yet when he woke it was broad daylight. Some subconscious sense warned him that he was in hideous danger, and he was broad awake all in a moment, with all his senses alert. Even so it was on him before he was ready. Two men pushed their way into the shed and the first of them was Fargus.

Keith flung the hay aside and leaped to his feet, but it was too late. He found himself facing the black muzzle of a pistol grasped in Fargus' dirty freckled hand. "I told you we'd get him, Mold," he said in a tone of cruel triumph. "Put up your hands, Hart, and stand mighty still."

CHAPTER XII

KEITH EXPLAINS

With his wrists tied firmly together and a cord running from them to Fargus' hand, Keith was marched across the clearing and back in the direction of the cave. As he and his gaolers passed the house the window shutters were open, and through them he caught a glimpse of the gaunt man peering out. And on the man's face was the oddest expression. Fear, Keith thought, but could not be certain. Anyhow, it didn't matter, for the fellow was not going to help him.

Mold too spotted the watcher. "Who's the old geezer?" he asked suspiciously.

"Stone his name is," replied Fargus. "'Old Granite' they call him. But you needn't to worry about him. He's plumb loony."

"Loony," thought Keith. "Mad, I suppose he means. So that accounts for it. And yet I don't know. Seemed to me he was more bad than mad."

But Keith had little thought to spare for Stone or for anyone else but himself. For now he was up against it with a vengeance. Bad as things had been for him the previous night, they were worse now. It was quite certain that he would not get a second chance of escape, and unless he could in some way persuade these two gaol birds that he was not the person they took him for, he was certainly in for trouble. Trouble of a kind which hardly bore thinking of, for these men evidently believed that he had some secret which they meant to get out of him, and from the experience which he had already had of their methods he knew they would not stick at anything to gain their object.

Meantime they were evidently taking him straight back to the cave. The distance was not great, and Keith, a little rested with his sleep, was better able to walk, but the worst of it was that he was so terribly hungry. In the bitter cold of a northern winter the body needs more food than at any other time, and it was now twenty-four hours since Keith had had anything solid to eat. He was doubled up with pain, and so empty and weak that walking was agony.

The last steep climb up to the cave very nearly finished him, and when at last they reached the level he dropped all in a heap. Mold jerked him to his feet with brutal violence. "None o' yer shamming!" he snarled. "We've had enough o' that already."

Keith roused once more. "Shamming, you thick-headed idiot!" he retorted fiercely. "Can't you see I'm starving?"

"You'll do worse than starve before I'm through with you," threatened Mold. "We're fed up, Fargus and me. You'll tell us where you and your dad have hid the cash, or we'll roast you till ye do."

Keith set his lips stubbornly. "I won't say a word till you give me some food," he retorted.

Mold glared savagely, and clenched his thick fist as if to strike but Fargus interfered. "If we give you some grub, you'll speak?" he demanded.

"If you give me some food I'll tell you all I know," replied Keith. What he said to himself was that if he had to die it was better to do so on a full stomach than an empty one.

"He'll fool us again," grumbled Mold, but Fargus went across to the place where the fire was still burning and came back with a chunk of doughy bread baked on a sheet of iron over the fire and a large slice of fat bacon. Rough food, but to Keith it was the finest thing he had ever tasted in his life and with every mouthful he felt fresh strength.

The two men watched him sourly until he had finished, then Fargus spoke. "Out with it," he barked. "Try to fool us any more, and I'll hand ye over to Mold. I'll not interfere any more to save ye."

Keith spoke up. "I'm going to speak, and you'll kindly not interrupt till I've finished. After that you can do as you please."

His boldness impressed Fargus. "Go on," he said curtly.

"First I'll ask a question," said Keith. "Who is it you take me for?"

"For who you are, Kirby Hart, son o' the chap that got us put in the pen five years ago."

"Then you admit you haven't seen me for five years," said Keith. "A chap of my age would change a lot in that time."

"He's a trying to buldoze you again," broke in Mold, but Keith kept his temper.

"Wait. I've given my word to tell all I know. See here, Fargus, was this chap Hart English or American?"

"American, of course," snapped Fargus.

"Well, I'm British. My name is Keith Hedley, and I can prove that I only arrived from England yesterday. If you've got eyes or ears you can surely tell that I don't look American or speak American, and if you'll take the trouble to look at this"—he pulled a letter from an inner pocket—"that's from my people in England, and not the sort of letter that your man, Kirby Hart, is likely to have about him."

"He's kidding you," broke in Mold again, but Fargus took the letter and looked through it. Then he stared hard at Keith. "Gee!" he said slowly, "I wonder if we're really barking up the wrong tree." Then he grew angry again. "Why didn't ye tell us all this afore?" he demanded.

"I tried hard enough," said Keith curtly. "You wouldn't give me a chance."

"Ye never showed me this here letter."

"Why should I? I don't show my private letters to strangers unless I have to," returned Keith warmly. "Especially to people who've treated me as you have."

"He's kidding us," repeated Mold savagely. "There was 'K.H.' on his suit-case, and he's as like Kirby Hart as two peas."

"Aye, he's like him, but now I get a look at him he's not so like as I thought," said Fargus. "And the way he talks is British." He paused. "What brings ye here, anyway?" he demanded of Keith.

"If you want to know, I'm Mr. Calvert's nephew, and I've come out to work for him," returned Keith.

A look of something like dismay crossed Fargus' scowling face. He stepped across to Mold, took him by the arm and drew him aside, and the two talked together for some moments in voices too low for Keith to hear. Keith saw Mold cast an ugly look towards him, then nod. "Aye, he knows too much," Keith heard him mutter.

Fargus came back to Keith. "We're taking your word," he said smoothly—too smoothly, Keith thought. "You come along with us and we'll set ye on your way back." He picked up the rope which was still fastened round Keith's body. "We're not a-going to let you loose yet. You're a bit too slippery," he said with a sinister grin. Then with Mold following he led the way out of the cave.

Keith was anything but happy. He had an inner feeling that there was something behind all this, but for the moment he was quite helpless. Fargus led the way down the slope, and through the scrub in the direction of the ravine. All of a sudden Mold stopped. "There's someone a-coming," he exclaimed harshly. Keith looked, and sure enough saw half-a-dozen men coming across an open patch of ground not quite half-a-mile away. Fargus' face changed. A look of fear crossed it. Then he hastily dragged Keith behind a patch of brush. "It's all right," he said. "They haven't seen us yet. There's time to get rid of the brat and get clear. Sharp now. Catch hold of him."

In a flash Mold had Keith by the other arm, and the two ran him across towards the gorge. Keith knew now. This precious pair were afraid of him and meant to fling him into the depths of the gorge.

CHAPTER XIII

SHORTY SHOOTS

Struggling was no use whatever. The two men held Keith so firmly that he was quite helpless. In a flash he realized that his only chance was to shout, and shout he did at the top of his voice.

"Help! Help!" he yelled. "Help, Tony!"

Then before he could get out another word, Mold's great hand closed over his mouth with brutal force.

"Quick, Fargus! Quickly, before they come!" snarled the man.

Keith made a last effort. Thrusting out his leg, he managed to trip Mold and bring him floundering on his knees in the snow, but the only result was a blow on the head from Fargus which half stunned Keith. The two rushed him across towards the rift, and Keith saw the edge of the chasm black against the dazzling white.

There was no sound from the rescue party, nor could Keith see them, for the trees hid them. Confused and dazed, Keith hardly knew what was happening.

Now they were close to the edge. A vague thought crossed Keith's mind that it was poor luck to be finished in this way, all because these two ruffians had happened to mistake him for another chap.

They were at the edge, and Keith caught a glimpse of the black depths that yawned beneath.

"Over with him," growled Mold, shifting his grip. Fargus had him by the legs, Mold by the arms. They were actually lifting him, when from the distance came the ringing crack of a rifle, and Fargus, releasing his hold, sank down on the snow all in a heap.

The shock of seeing his partner fall seemed to paralyze Mold. His grip relaxed, and in a flash Keith had wrested himself free. A dead branch lay at his feet. He snatched it up and with a last effort hit Mold over the head. Then everything seemed to spin round in a dizzy whirl, his legs gave under him, and he fell on top of the body of his enemy.

When Keith came to himself, the first thing he saw was the anxious face of Tony Brock bending over him. He himself was lying flat on his back on a soft bed of grass and skins. Several other people stood around, and from somewhere close by came the cheerful crackle of a fire. Keith started up. Tony pushed him gently back. "You keep right still," said Tony.

"But Mold!—Fargus!" exclaimed Keith.

"Don't you worry about them," said Tony comfortingly. "Those hoboos won't trouble you any more, nor any one else either." He pointed as he spoke. "There they are, Fargus shot through the shoulder and Mold roped like a steer."

Keith lay still for a moment, trying to collect his scattered thoughts. He now realized that he was back in the cave, and that besides Tony there were three other people present. They were Shorty Scott, Blackie Cole and a fourth person whom Keith had never before seen.

Yet it was this fourth person at whom Keith stared with growing amazement. "Why! Why!" he gasped. "You must be Hart."

The young fellow turned with a pleasant smile. "Sure I'm Hart," he said. "But how do you know?"

"I ought to know, seeing what's been happening to me because these chaps took me for you. Not that I wonder at it," he added. "Why, we might almost be twins, only that you are a bit older than me."

"I am right down sorry," said Kirby Hart. "It's been a bad mix-up. All the same, I'm mightily obliged to you for helping me out in this business. It's all through you that we've got these two gaol birds safe and sound."

"I don't know so much about that," replied Keith. "Seems to me that the chap who shot Fargus should have most of the credit. Who was it?"

Tony Brock spoke up. "It was Shorty, Keith," he said eagerly. "And my word, he took chances. Though we'd been running all we knew, we were still a good two hundred yards away when we saw those two swine getting ready to fire you over into the pit. I tell you it was the finest bit of markmanship I ever saw, or ever expected to see."

"It was fine," agreed Keith gravely. "Shorty, old man, I've got to thank you for saving my life."

"Shucks!" growled Shorty getting rather red. "It wasn't nothing. The light was good, and I got a good gun. I am only sorry I didn't get him through the head."

"I'm rather glad," said Keith. "If you'd slain him outright he couldn't have explained things, and I'm wanting a lot of explanation. I don't in the least understand what's been happening. Tony, can't you explain?"

"I guess I've hardly got the hang of it all myself," said Tony. "Hart knows more about it than I do. You tell him, Hart."

"I'll put you wise as far as I can," said Hart. "It's this way.

"My father used to be express messenger on the Trans-Continental Railway. Five years ago, when I was a kid of fourteen, a train was held up at Grizzly Crossing by a couple of train robbers. Dad was knocked out, the safe was blown open, and the thieves got away with fifty thousand dollars in greenbacks and quite a bunch of securities as well.

"The Company blamed it on Dad and sacked him. Now Dad had recognized Mold and Fargus, and after a long chase some Pinkerton detectives arrested them. Dad gave evidence at the trial, and they were sent up for five years.

"The trouble was they refused to own up, and the loot was never found. It was just because the Company were so sore about this that they refused to reinstate Dad. Dad was a bit sore himself, and his one idea has always been to find out where the stuff was hidden. He said he'd wait till Mold and Fargus were released, then set out and track them.

"Then as bad luck had it, a month before they were due out his horse fell on him and broke his leg; so naturally I said that I'd take on the job.

"I was there all right when they came out, and for a bit I stuck to them pretty close, but they were mighty suspicious; and at Slain's junction they dodged me. But I found out which way they had gone, and followed by the next train.

"So far they hadn't seen me, but when they changed on to the river boat, and spotted you, and saw you had a suitcase with the same initials as mine, I guess they made up their minds it was Kirby Hart after them, and it was up to them to out him.

"From what I heard at the camp, they tried mighty hard."

"You bet they did," broke in Keith. "And if it hadn't been for Tony here, they'd certainly have done it."

He paused a moment. "Yes, I'm beginning to understand now. Then I suppose you arrived at the camp, Hart, just after I'd been fool enough to let those two ruffians carry me off?"

"Yes, I couldn't have been an hour after you," answered Kirby. "Then Brock and Scott put me wise to what had

happened."

Keith lay back on his comfortable couch, and presently spoke again.

"There is one thing I don't quite understand," he said. "That is how you chaps knew which way to go, and where to look for me."

"It's Shorty you've got to thank for that," said Tony. "Before Shorty took on at Calvert's, he was a mining prospector, and he knows the whole of this country like the palm of his hand. As soon as ever we found the direction in which the tracks went, he said right off that they'd taken you up into these hills."

"Seems to me I've a good deal to thank Shorty for," said Keith.

Shorty who was busy over the fire, turned with a grin on his round face. "You're a-going to thank him for a mighty good breakfast in about five minutes," he remarked, and just then Kirby Hart broke in.

"I reckon we are all ready for breakfast," he said. "But before I eat, I want to be sure that the loot is safe in this cave. Do you know where those chaps have it hidden, Mr. Hedley?"

Keith sat up quickly. "Good heavens! I thought you knew. The loot isn't here. It's gone."

CHAPTER XIV

THE LITTLE BLACK BIT

"Gone! Say, you don't mean that," exclaimed Kirby Hart. And there was such dismay in his voice that Keith felt desperately sorry for him.

"There is no doubt about it, I'm afraid," he said. "You see, Fergus and Mold think that you or your father found it while they were in prison, and have taken it away. That is the real reason why they were so anxious to get hold of me. So far as I can understand, after Tony and I escaped them two days ago, they came straight on here, expecting to dig the stuff up.

"But someone else must have found it and taken it away, and when they discovered that it was gone, they made up their minds that it was your father who had got it, and came back to the camp with the express object of catching me, and making me own up. Of course they thought all the time that I was you."

Kirby Hart said nothing. He looked astounded.

Tony Brock spoke. "What did they do to you, Keith?" he asked.

"They began by tying me up in the mouth of the cave hoping that would make me tell. It was only after I was very nearly frozen to death that they cut me loose."

Shorty looked round. "Durn 'em," he growled. "I've a mind to take Mold outside and tie him thar jest to see how he likes it."

"And what happened then, Keith?" he added.

Keith went on to tell the story of his night's experiences. Of how he had burnt the rope through in the fire and escaped, of how he had been chased, how he had found the lonely house in the clearing, and of how its owner had slammed the door in his face.

Shorty started up again. "Old Granite!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet a farm that was Granite. The meanest old skinflint that ever lived. But I'll fix him. You bet I'll make him sorry for treating a pard of mine like that. An' what come next, Keith?"

Keith told how he had found refuge in the shed, how he had gone to sleep, and how his pursuers had tracked him down and dragged him back to the cave. "The rest you know," he finished.

"Seems to me you bluffed 'em good and proper," said Shorty. "And now as this 'ere bacon is jest ready, and the flapjacks is hot in the pan, I reckon we best make a good meal, and then we'll feel fitter to tackle this here problem of the lost dollars. Be you agreed, Hart?"

"I reckon you are right," said Hart slowly.

Shorty proceeded to dish out the food which he had cooked with his usual skill.

So far as Keith was concerned, he had never enjoyed a meal more intensely, and when he had finished two large mugs of steaming coffee, he felt almost himself again. Breakfast over, Blacky Cole spoke for the first time. He was never a man who wasted words.

"Waal!" he said slowly. "The dollars is gone, but it's a sure thing they didn't walk by themselves. I reckon the next thing on the programme is to hold a court, and examine these here train thieves."

"A right good notion," pronounced Shorty. "But as they can't move, I guess the court will have to adjourn to where they lie."

Accordingly all five moved over to the spot where the prisoners lay in a little recess. Fergus whose wound had been attended to by Cole, was white but defiant. Mold, scared stiff by the prospect of another term's imprisonment, was simply a great shaking lump of jelly.

Fergus refused to speak, but Mold was ready enough to tell anything. Kirby Hart questioned him, and it soon became clear that Keith was right, and that the robbers had no idea what had become of the loot which five years earlier they had hidden in the cave.

"Whereabouts did you hide it?" questioned Hart.

"If you'll untie me, I'll mighty soon show you," replied Mold. They let him loose, and he led them deep into the cave, and showed them a small recess hidden between two projecting rocks, and artfully covered by a slab of rough stone.

"That's whar we put it," he said. "And it were covered up good and careful. Fergus and me, we couldn't believe our eyes when we found that someone had got ahead of us."

"Whoever he was, I reckon he must have been watching you," said Shorty.

"Fergus and me, we didn't see anybody," replied Mold. "If there was anyone round he sure was hid somewhere in the cave."

Then suddenly Mold broke off and began to beg them to let him go.

"I served my five years," he whined. "I couldn't go back to the pen. I'd die if I did."

Cole cut him short.

"You'll be mighty lucky if you don't die anyways," he said curtly. "You and Fergus was attempting murder when we caught you. Tie him up again, Shorty, and shove him back where he belongs. The sheriff will handle him and Fergus all right, I guess."

They tied him up, and left him to keep Fergus company. Then the rest went back to the fire to talk things over.

"See here," said Shorty. "Someone's took that loot, and I reckon it's up to us to help Kirby here to find out. If you should ask me what's best to do, I'd say the first thing is to explore the cave. What do you say, pards?"

"The very best thing we could do," agreed Kirby. "But you know the place, don't you, Scott?"

"I been here before," said Shorty. "But I haven't never, so to speak, explored it, and it's a mighty big place."

As he spoke he took a couple of candles from an inside pocket and lighted them. Then all five started up the wide passage leading into the heart of the hill.

"Keep your eyes skinned, boys," said Shorty. "It's always on the cards that the chap who has sneaked the loot might have left something behind, even if it is only a trouser button."

Five pairs of eyes searched the floor of the cave thoroughly as they slowly advanced, but barring a few half-fossilized bones they found nothing of interest. Further in, the cave narrowed and the main passage broke into several branches. Shorty, candle in hand, led the way along the highest of these, which presently opened into a large chamber from the roof of which hung long grey stalactites.

Shorty paused and looked around. "Limestone," Keith heard him mutter. Then he spoke in a louder tone. "Say, boys! I reckon it would take an army about a week to search this here place. Anyways it don't look to me as if the thief ever come this far in. I guess we'd better go back and have another look nearer the mouth."

They turned, but just as they were leaving the low-roofed chamber Keith spotted a small dark object lying close under the wall, and stepping across picked it up.

"What you got there?" asked Shorty.

"It's not a trouser button," smiled Keith. "It looks like a bit of jet."

"Jet," repeated Shorty as he took the fragment from Keith and held it up to the candle-light. For a moment he stared hard at it. Then suddenly he gave a whoop of excitement which sent the echoes ringing under the arched roof.

"Gee!" he cried. "You sure found something, Keith. This here's worth more than jet."

All crowded round.

"What is it?" asked Keith quite eagerly.

"It's anthracite," answered Shorty. "Anthracite coal." Without another word he hurried across to the side of the cave beneath which Keith had found the fragment, and pulling a small geological hammer from his big inner pocket, set to work to chip away the coating of stalactite.

In a few moments he had laid bare a patch of the same dark, heavy, shining material.

"Anthracite!" said Keith. "That's a sort of hard coal, isn't it?"

Shorty turned. His pale blue eyes were gleaming with excitement.

"Coal! You bet it is, and worth ten to fifteen dollars a ton. Say! If this here is the edge of a big seam, and I reckon that's right likely, it beats a gold mine holler."

"Seems to me it's a mighty queer place to find coal," said Blacky. But Shorty turned on him like a flash.

"No, sir!" he said sharply. "This here rock is what they calls carboniferous limestone. Jest the stuff whar you might find a good seam of coal. And by the look of it, this is a mighty good seam." As he spoke he was still chopping away at the glassy coating of stalactite.

"Aye!" he said presently. "It's sure a big find. There's a fortune right here."

"Whose is it?" asked Tony in his practical way. "Whose land is this?"

"It's Crab's," said Shorty. "He owns all this land to the south-west, and that's the direction the seam looks to run. But it's mighty close to old Granite's boundary. I reckon the mouth of the cave is well over the line between his land and Crab's. I mean as where we're standing is jest about whar the boundary lies."

"Then it all belongs to the boss," said Tony in a disappointed voice.

"Crab's hard," said Cole. "But I guess he's square. He'll do the right thing by Keith here and Shorty."

"I reckon it'll come mighty handy for him," said Shorty. "If what I've heard is true, the old man is plumb hard up. He has nigh on finished cutting all of his timber, and old Granite won't sell him that patch of cedar as he owns at anything like a reasonable price."

Keith pricked up his ears. "I hadn't heard that," he said.

"But it's sure true," Shorty told him. "Crab's been a-trying to buy that there cedar land from Granite these two years past, and first Granite said he'd sell, and then he wouldn't, and then he kept on sticking up the price on Crab. Wants to bleed him of the last dollar. Oh, he's a dirty dog is old Granite as they calls him. Not that there's much real granite about him. He's just a mean old miser."

"But if this coal belongs to my—that is to Mr. Calvert," said Keith, "then he'll be all right, won't he? It's worth a lot more than timber, isn't it?"

"Worth more!" exclaimed Shorty. "You can bet your life on that. Crab won't need to go messing with no measly cedars or any other lumber, fer that matter. Onst this here coal seam is opened he'll be worth a million."

"Then we'd better go and tell him, hadn't we?" suggested Keith.

"Oh, we'll tell him right enough," said Shorty, "only there isn't no rush. I reckon we better find out a bit more about it, first. And someone's got to go an' fetch the sheriff to take them two hoboes to the country gaol."

"And I should like to look round a bit more," said Kirby Hart. "As you may reckon, I'm real anxious to find out who took that loot. I——"

Shorty flung up a hand and cut Kirby short. "Hst!" he whispered. "What was that? Did you folk hear anything?"

Blacky Cole shook his head. "No, I didn't hear anything," he replied. "Did you?"

"I did think as I heard something move jest outside of this here cave room," said Shorty a little doubtfully.

"I'll go and see," said Tony, and taking one of the candles hurried off across the rough, uneven floor. He disappeared round the corner, but was back in a minute.

"I can't see anything," he told Shorty. "I guess it was just a bit of stuff falling from the roof."

"I don't see why stuff should fall from the roof, but it might have been one o' them cave rats," said Shorty. "Or mebbe I jest imagined it. But fer a moment I had the notion that mebbe one o' them train robbers had got loose."

Tony laughed. "Seeing you tied Mold up yourself, that's not likely. And as for the other, I don't reckon he'd go far, not with that hole in his shoulder."

"I guess we may as well go back and see they're all right," said Cole. "Then as we're a-taking a day off we'll give Hart here a hand to look around the place and make real sure whether's any sign left by the chap as sneaked the greenbacks."

"I'm with ye," said Shorty. "And afore we goes back to camp I'm a-going to hev another look at this here coal seam. A job like that takes a bit of looking into afore ye can be quite sure about it."

As he spoke he turned and made his way towards the entrance of the big chamber. The others followed.

They had gone further than Keith supposed and it took quite a time to get back to where they had left Mold and Fargus. The place where the precious pair had been left was about a couple of hundred feet in from the mouth, at the inner side of the first chamber, and not far from the spot where the fire had been lighted. This was still burning brightly, and by its light the very first thing that they saw was Mold's big flat face. He had managed to raise himself with his back against the wall of the cave, but his hands and feet were still as firmly tied as ever.

"He's safe enough, anyhow," said Keith.

"And there's Fargus right beside him," put in Tony. "So I guess it was a false alarm, Shorty."

"I'm mighty glad it was," said Shorty heartily. "I tell you I was plumb scared the chaps was loose. But say, what's the matter with that feller Mold. He looks as if he'd seed a ghost."

"He does look a bit excited," agreed Keith, "but I expect it's just disappointment at seeing us again. Probably he hoped the roof had fallen down on us."

The words were hardly out of Keith's mouth before a dull booming sound came from the mouth of the cave. It was followed by a tremendous crash and all of a sudden the daylight which shone dimly in from under the low-browed opening was blotted out. Crash after crash followed while the air became so thick with dust that it was like a fog.

The sounds died away, and for a moment there was dead and utter silence. Tony was the first to break it. "The roof's down!" he gasped.

"It sure is," answered Shorty. "What's more, it's been blowed down. That was a dynamite cartridge as made that first bang."

CHAPTER XV

TONY FINDS A CLUE

"Blown down," repeated Keith. "Blown down! But—but who could have done such a thing?"

Shorty shrugged his shoulders. "It don't make much odds who done it," he said. "The trouble with us is that it's done."

As he spoke he started away towards the mouth of the cave, and the others followed.

By this time the air had cleared, and by the light of Shorty's candle there was visible a gigantic mass of broken rock which completely barred the entrance to the cave.

Blacky Cole stared in silence at the monstrous pile of broken rubbish. "Whoever he was, he's done the job proper," he said. "If all the men in the camp was here, they wouldn't get through that in a month of Sundays."

What he said was so evidently true that for several moments there was complete silence. Tony broke it. "You asked who did it, Keith. It's my notion it was Hulke Hanson."

Keith shook his head. He pointed to the two prisoners. "I don't think that'll work, Tony. No doubt he'd like to have

settled us, but what about his two pals there?"

"Pals," repeated Tony. "They are no pals of his. It was just Hulke's cussedness that made him join up with them the other night."

"Well it's no use arguing about that," said Keith. "Our job is to try to find some other way out while our candles last."

Shorty nodded. "That's the first sensible thing you've said," he remarked.

"Do you think there is some other way?" questioned Tony.

Shorty shrugged again. "It's a big cave," he said briefly. "There might be."

"Then the sooner we start the better," said Cole as he turned back towards the inner part of the cave.

As they passed the spot where Mold and Fargus were lying, Mold started shrieking. "You are not a-goin' to leave us to die here like rats in a trap. You can't do that."

Shorty faced round. "What do you think we're going to do—carry you on our backs? Shut your mouth," he added scornfully. "If we find the way out, we'll come back to you all right. We're not a-goin' to cheat the sheriff out of his job."

With Shorty leading, the party passed out of the first cave chamber and up the sloping passage beyond. This led them past the cache where the looted treasure had originally been hidden. Here Shorty paused a moment, staring at the cleft in the rock.

"What's the matter, Shorty?" asked Cole.

"I was just a-thinking," replied Shorty frowning. "It jest struck me as it might have been the same chap as got the loot."

"You mean that it was the thief who blew in the mouth of the cave," said Keith.

Shorty nodded. "Sure! That's what I meant."

At this moment Tony Brock whose eyes were sharp as a needle, stooped suddenly and picked up something which was wedged between two little points of rock in the floor.

"Hallo! What you got there?" asked Cole.

Tony held it up close to the candle.

"Why, it's a piece of rubber!" exclaimed Keith.

Shorty took it from Tony and examined it closely. "It's rubber sure enough," he said, "and it's off a man's boot sole."

"I wonder if it's the thief's boot," suggested Keith.

Shorty was still turning the thing over, gazing at it with deep interest. Suddenly he looked up.

"Boys," he said, "it's off the thief's boot right enough. What's more, I can tell you now who stole that there bunch of bills and who blowed in the mouth of the cave."

The others standing round gazed at the speaker in silence. "Yes," repeated Shorty, "I can tell you. There's only one man around here who's mean enough to wear a sole like that. That's ole Granite Stone."

For several seconds no one spoke. Then Blackie Cole gave a sort of gasp. "By Gum, Shorty! I wouldn't wonder if

you was right," he said. "That old curmudgeon is mean enough for anything."

"I should think he was mean," remarked Keith dryly, "after the way he treated me last night. But, Shorty, I don't quite understand you when you say that this fellow Granite is the only man about here mean enough to wear a sole like that on his boot."

Shorty stretched out his hand with the piece of rubber in it. "Look for yourself," he said. "Don't you see nothing peculiar about it?"

Keith took the piece of rubber and examined it, "Why yes!" he answered. "It's not a regular made boot sole. It's been cut out of a sheet of rubber, and by the look of it, a very badly worn sheet."

Shorty nodded. "You got in once, Keith. That there sole is cut out of a old busted motor tyre, and I don't reckon there's anyone else around these parts as would take the trouble to save fifty cents that way. What do you say, Cole?"

"I says as you are right, Shorty. I don't know this here chap Granite real well, but from all I have heard, he's as mean as they make 'em, and I wouldn't wonder if it was he has looted the cache, and blowed in the mouth of the cave so as no one would be the wiser."

Kirby Hart, who up to now had been silent, spoke up suddenly. "The candle is burning down," he said sharply. "Don't let's waste another minute. If there's a way out of this cave, we've got to find it. We've got to bring that double-dyed blackguard to justice."

"I guess that's good sense," said Shorty quietly. "Come right along, boys."

CHAPTER XVI

GRANITE'S BARGAIN

Shorty had not been mistaken when, just after Keith had picked up the bit of coal, he had said that he had heard something. The sound had been made by Granite himself.

Granite from the window of his house had seen Keith being dragged back to the cave by Fargus and Mold. Although he did not know who Keith was, Fargus and Mold were no strangers to him, and in his mean and cunning mind he had made a pretty good guess at the actual state of affairs.

As soon as the three had passed and disappeared among the scrub timber in the direction of the cave, Granite had left his house and started to trail them. Completely hidden behind a pile of fallen logs close to the ravine he had watched everything. He had seen Fargus fall, and the arrival of Keith's rescuers, then with many misgivings he had noticed their entry into the cave.

Creeping from tree to tree and rock to rock, Granite had reached the mouth of the cave without anyone being the wiser, then had hidden himself in a niche near the entrance from which point he was able to both see and hear all that went on.

As Shorty had cleverly deduced, it was Granite who had looted the robbers' cache, and it is hardly surprising that the robber began to feel very uneasy when he realized Kirby Hart's mission.

The moment that Granite understood the intention of the party to search the cache, he made up his mind what to do, and hurrying straight back to his house which was little more than half a mile away, he picked up a couple of dynamite cartridges, a length of fuse and his big old-fashioned Colt, then made the best of his way back to the cave.

By the time he again reached the cave mouth, the only people left near the fire were Mold and Fargus. Fargus Granite knew to be helpless, and since Mold was tied neck and crop he was equally harmless. So Granite marched boldly in.

"Who be you?" began Mold.

Granite put a finger to his lips for silence. "Your friend," he whispered, "not theirs. Keep your mouth shut and they won't worry you much longer." So saying he slipped past, and tip-toed up the long passage in pursuit of Shorty's party. Since his heavy boots were rubber shod, his approach was unheard, and when the rest had reached the inner chamber Granite was within twenty yards of them, crouching behind a rock just outside the big chamber. And there he lay, listening to every word they said.

He saw Keith pick up the black fragment from the floor, and he shivered all over with greed and excitement when he heard Shorty pronounce that it was anthracite. For Granite Stone was that most unpleasant of human creatures, a miser. His one joy in life was to collect money. Not to spend it. The man lived in his mean little shack like the poorest prospector, and no one but himself and his banker had the faintest idea of the thousands that lay to his credit in the vaults of the Second National Bank in the county town of Pine Lake.

Anthracite! No need to tell Granite the value of such a find. And his disappointment was bitter indeed when he heard Shorty declare that the seam ran to the south-west and was therefore not on his land, but on that of Crab Calvert.

But this rage of disappointment lasted only a minute. Then it flashed across him that for more than a year past Calvert had been trying to buy from him the big patch of valuable cedar forest which lay on his side of the boundary. In an instant, his cunning brain had conceived a new scheme by which, as he fully expected, he would be able to secure the whole of this gigantic fortune.

So great was his excitement that he made a careless movement, and this was what Shorty had heard. But Granite knew that Shorty had heard, and by the time that Tony had reached the mouth of the rock chamber the old scoundrel was securely hidden in a narrow cleft between two rocks.

Tony, as you will remember, went back to the others, and the moment his light had disappeared, Granite was on his feet again, and moving quickly and quietly back towards the mouth of the cave. He stopped a moment by Mold and Fargus. "It's all right," he whispered. "I've fixed them. Jest you wait a minute while I fetches my knife which I left outside. Then I'll come back and turn you loose."

It is hardly necessary to say that Granite had no earthly intention of doing anything of the sort. He had already made up his mind that this was a heaven-sent chance of polishing off everyone in the cave at one fell swoop. The moment he was outside he set to work. There are few easier things for a skilled miner to manage than to blow in the mouth of a cave, and, as we have seen, Granite managed it quite successfully.

The moment the job was done, and Granite was sure that the mouth was completely blocked, he set off to Calvert's camp. He arrived there just as the men were coming in for dinner. His great gaunt frame and craggy features were familiar to many of them and he heard more than one jeering remark at his expense. But Granite was accustomed to jeers. He went straight through to the office. "Where's the boss?" he asked the clerk.

"Here's the boss," came a voice behind him, and turning he saw Mr. Calvert in the doorway. "Good morning, Mr. Stone," continued Crab Calvert in that extraordinarily quiet voice of his. "Have you come to bring me news of the missing boy or of the party who are searching for him?"

Granite was prepared for this question. He did not even blink. "I've got something better to do than keep tab on your tenderfeet," he returned.

"Who told you he was a tenderfoot?" questioned the other.

"Gosh! Isn't all the camp buzzing with it?" retorted Granite. "But I come on business," he added.

Calvert motioned him to a chair and sat down opposite to him. Crab was much too good a business man to speak first. He waited to hear what Granite had to say. Granite sat there, looking like an elderly vulture. Then as Crab remained perfectly silent, he began to speak.

"You still want that there piece of cedar of mine?" he asked.

There was nothing Crab wanted more. To him indeed the purchase of this piece of cedar was a matter of almost life or death. Or if not life or death, at any rate of wealth or ruin. The last two seasons had been very bad ones, the cut had been poor and prices of lumber terribly low. What was worse, there had been so little snow during the previous winter that it had been impossible to get much more than half of the cut timber down to the river, and some thousands of dollars worth had been lying out in the sun all the summer, and were now almost worthless.

And now there was hardly anything left worth cutting on his own land, barely enough indeed to keep the camp going and pay wages for the rest of the winter. Crab Calvert was in a very tight place indeed. How tight no one knew except himself.

This patch of timber which Granite owned was red cedar, the most valuable of all timber trees in the North-West, and at present in great demand. If he could secure it at anything like a reasonable price, he could start cutting at once and be certain of a fair profit within the next six months.

But Crab knew the man he had to deal with, knew him for the miser that he was. He was not going to show any eagerness. "I've got plenty to carry me through the winter," he said calmly.

"But not for next year," growled Granite.

"Oh, I don't know," said Calvert. "Selby will sell me that pine of his."

"His stuff is no good," sneered Granite. "Besides you'd have to shift your camp."

Crab went on in a perfectly unruffled tone. "I don't mind buying that cedar of yours, but you know what I offered. I have no intention of going beyond that figure."

Granite nodded. "I got a new proposition to put to you. This here cut land of yours. What do you value it at?"

For once Crab was badly puzzled. He could not imagine what the man was after. But he was much too wise to let the other get the least hint of his perplexity. "There are five thousand acres of it," he said. "I'll take ten dollars an acre. It's worth that for farming and grazing. There's good water and plenty of shelter."

Granite's wrinkled face twisted into a hideous sneer. "Ten dollars an acre," he repeated. "If you'd said ten cents you'd have been nearer the mark. But see here, I calculate as I've a chance of selling this here land of yours and I'm willing to allow you ten thousand dollars against the forty thousand you offered for my cedar. You pay me thirty thousand, and give me a title to this here five thousand acres o' yours, and you can have the cedar."

With anyone else but Granite, this was an offer that Calvert would have jumped at, but in a deal with such a man as Granite, Crab knew better than to do any jumping. Besides, he felt perfectly sure that if Granite allowed that he was going to get ten thousand for the cut land, the real sum was at least twice that.

So he settled down to steady hard bargaining, and to his secret surprise found that Granite was ready to give way. At the end of half an hour, he had cut Granite's price by no less than ten thousand dollars and had agreed to give twenty thousand in cash and his own five thousand acres in exchange for the cedar forest.

Secretly afraid lest Granite might change his mind, Calvert arranged with Granite that they two should drive at once to the county town and register the sale before a notary without any delay.

He gave Granite some dinner, had a little food himself, then ordered his own sleigh out, and before one o'clock the pair had started.

It was twenty miles to the county town, but the horses were fresh, the snow hard, and before four o'clock the whole business was completed. Granite had become absolute owner of all Calvert's land.

The old scoundrel went back to his shack, chuckling hideously to himself at the way in which he had outwitted Crab Calvert, and not wasting a single thought on the unfortunates whom he had left buried in the cavern, doomed to a slow and horrible death in its black depths.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WAY OUT

Shorty had been a mining prospector all his life. It was only because he was so dead broke that he could not even raise a grub-stake, that he had taken on the job as cook of the camp. Blacky Cole and Tony Brock both knew this, and were content to allow him to take the lead in their attempt to find a way out of the cave.

He took them straight through the inner chamber where they had discovered the coal. Beyond it, they found themselves in a maze of passages.

Shorty stopped and scratched his head. "This here is a regular limestone cave," he said, "and these here passages has been cut by water. The trouble is as there's likely to be miles of them. I don't doubt there's one or more may come out somewheres on the high ground, but the trouble is as it may take a mighty long time to find a way out, and we haven't got grub or candles to last us very long."

"How many candles have we, Shorty?" asked Keith.

"These two half-burnt bits and two more whole ones as I've got in my pocket."

Kirby Hart spoke. "And I've got an electric torch with a nearly new battery."

"Gee! why didn't you say so before, lad? That's a-going to be mighty useful." He paused. "See here," he continued. "My notion is that the best thing we can do is to split up into two parties, and search two ways. If either party sees daylight they got to come back and fetch the others."

"But how are they going to find them?" questioned Keith.

"That's easy," replied Shorty. "All you've got to do is to blaze your trail—make a smoke mark on the wall every place where there is a cross passage."

Blacky Cole shook his head. "I don't like that notion, Shorty. There's only one of us as knows anything about underground work, and that's you. What I says is, you lead the way and we'll all follow."

Shorty looked round. "Is that what you all says?" he enquired.

"It's what I say," said Tony. "And I," added Keith and Kirby in one breath.

Shorty shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like," he said. "Then here goes."

There is nothing so utterly daunting to the average man as to find himself deep in the heart of Mother Earth. A mine is bad enough, a cave ten times worse, and a cave like this worse than all.

The place was a maze of passages cut in the course of ages by water seeping down from above through the limestone. Some passages ran uphill, some down; some were wide and lofty, others mere cracks too narrow for even a

little fellow like Tony to push his way through; in some the floor was fairly level; in others it was a mass of spiky stalagmite the queer shapes of which glimmered ghostly white in the light of Shorty's candle end.

"I'd hate to be alone in here," whispered Keith in Tony's ear as the two struggled along in Shorty's wake.

"Hate it! Gee, I reckon I'd sit right down and die, or go plumb loony I'd be that scared," agreed the Canadian boy. "It beats me how Shorty goes right ahead like he does. Looks like he knows the way."

Indeed it was really rather wonderful how Shorty Scott kept going. Every now and then he would pause, and examine the wall of a passage, or he would stop and wet his fore-finger and hold it up. But he never waited long before he was off again.

Half an hour passed and the little party still tramped steadily onwards at Shorty's heels.

In spite of the exceeding peril of their position they were not half as scared as most people would have been, in their position. The fact was that they all had the most absolute confidence in Shorty. The little square-built man so evidently knew just what he was about. If he had faltered or hesitated it would have been quite a different business, but as he showed no sign of panic they felt none. One and all believed that they were going to get safe out and that was all there was to it.

They entered an enormous cavern so huge that the flickering light of the candle failed to reach the monstrous arch of its roof. The floor sloped upwards and at the upper end two great arches showed.

Shorty examined both briefly then took the left-hand one. He quickened his pace. Then suddenly the candle flickered and blew out. "I knowed it," cried Shorty jubilantly. "It's the draught. I felt it from somewheres."

Then before anyone could strike a match Tony gave a joyful shout. "Light! I see daylight!" he cried.

A faint, gray gleam lit the distance, and lighting the candle again they began to run. The light grew stronger, and in another minute was enough to see by without the candle. Shorty blew it out. "The good old sun!" he cried.

Next moment they all came to a stop in a patch of broad daylight. The light broke down upon them through a hole in the roof.

For a moment they all stood staring up at the patch of blue sky, then Blacky Cole broke the silence. "You found daylight all right, Shorty, but what I'd like ter know is how we're a-going to get up thar without a ladder."

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE HEART OF THE HILL

Dead silence followed Cole's remark. All stood looking up at the opening overhead and the patch of blue sky above it, and as they looked the unpleasant fact began to soak into their minds that, as Cole had said, there was no way out without a ladder.

The opening was in the roof of the gallery which at this point was nearly twenty feet high, and there was no way at all of climbing up to it.

Tony was the first to speak. "I guess Cole's about right," he remarked. "It's either a ladder or a pair of wings we need. What's to be done, Shorty?"

Shorty's round face had an unusually grim expression as he gazed upwards, but all he said was, "I reckon we got to

try again."

Keith glanced at the candle which Shorty was carrying. There was only about an inch left. Then he looked round at the faces of the rest, and it astonished him to see how calmly they took their disappointment.

Cole spoke. "Which way this time, Shorty?" he asked briefly.

Shorty considered for a moment or two. "Back to the nor'-east, I reckon," he answered, and plodded away down the gallery by which they had come. Without a word, the rest followed.

Keith found Tony next him. "This is a bad business, Tony," he whispered.

"You scared?" asked Tony in an equally low voice.

"I don't mind owning I am," Keith answered. "What's going to happen to us if our lights give out before we find a way out?"

"It's not a mite of use worrying," Tony told him. "Myself, I am trusting Shorty."

Keith turned his eyes on their leader, and a little confidence returned to him. Shorty at any rate showed no sign of alarm, but walked steadily onwards, just as if he had some definite goal in view. Keith noticed that Shorty held his candle high, and kept close to one wall of the passage, and that all the time he seemed to be examining the wall as if the rock told him something which was Greek to the rest.

The passages branched endlessly; the cave was like a gigantic maze—a maze so intricate that Keith felt he might wander round in circles for a lifetime in these endless miles of underground passages.

"He's a wonder, Shorty is," said Tony in Keith's ear.

"A miracle, if you ask me," replied Keith. "I've got the feeling that he is keeping the same direction all the way, though how he does it beats me completely."

"He said he was going north-east and that's the line he's keeping," said Tony. "You see, he's spent half his life underground, and the foliation of the rock and the faults in the strata tell him a lot."

"If we ever get out of this, I'll ask him to teach me something about it," said Keith.

"Oh, we'll get out all right," declared Tony.

Keith tried to take comfort from Tony's confidence, but by this time the stump of the last candle was burning out, and when that was gone they would have nothing left but Kirby's electric torch. At best an hour's light, and after that... Well, it did not do to consider too closely what would happen when their light was gone.

Another five minutes, and Shorty stopped. "Hart, I guess I got to ask you for your torch," he said quietly. "This here candle is beginning to burn my fingers." He took the torch from Kirby, switched it on, then blowing out the tiny end of candle which remained stowed it in his pocket and walked forward as steadily as before.

The party was now travelling down a long slope, and Keith had the unpleasant feeling that they must be getting deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountain, but he did not voice these fears; he simply followed Shorty in silence.

They were now in a passage so narrow that two people could not walk abreast. Presently the roof began to grow lower, and all had to bend double as they followed their leader. Cole bumped his head badly.

"Say, Shorty," he remarked dryly. "I never was built for a rabbit."

"I didn't make this here burrow," retorted Shorty. "If I had, I'd have seen it was a bit broader. I've been walking edgeways for the last five minutes."

"It can't be so bad if they are able to joke about it," thought Keith as he crept after the rest. Of them all, Tony the smallest of the party was the only one who was able to get along in any sort of comfort.

Shorty's voice boomed out from the front. "Watch out, boys, there's a bad place here."

"I'd have thought this was bad enough already," grumbled Cole.

"What sort of bad place, Shorty?" asked Tony.

"Hole in the floor," replied Shorty. "Hold the torch, Cole, while I get across."

Keith heard a sound of boot soles scraping on rock, next a slight bump, then Cole's voice. "Are you all right, Shorty?"

"I'm over all right," Shorty answered. "Get your right foot on that there spike of rock, and watch where you step."

Keith could not see what was happening because of a curve in the passage which cut off sight of all the rest except Tony. It was two or three minutes before Tony and he were able to squeeze round the curve and see what lay before them.

The first thing Keith saw was that the passage increased suddenly in height and breadth, the next that the floor was cut from wall to wall by a black crevasse about eight feet wide and apparently of enormous depth. Shorty and Cole were already on the far side, and Kirby Hart was in the act of crossing.

In order to cross, Kirby had to take a long step and plant his right foot on a small point of rock which jutted out from the passage wall a yard or so from the near rim of the chasm, then hop from this uncomfortable support to the opposite side. It looked a most hair-raising performance, but Kirby Hart made no bones about it.

Then came Tony's turn, and he, too, put a bold face on it. But his legs were shorter than those of the others, and though he reached the spike it seemed to be impossible that he could manage the long stretch beyond.

But he did not hesitate; he made a bold jump, Cole caught him, and he was safe.

Then came Keith's turn. The black pit loomed horribly beneath him, and for a moment he turned sick and giddy. The fact was that he was fagged out by his experiences of the previous night. Shorty saw it, and realized exactly what was the matter. He handed the torch back to Cole, and with a hop and a skip was back at Keith's side.

"It isn't as bad as it looks," he said cheerfully. "And it's only because you are plumb wore out that it seems so to you. You take a hold of my hand, and you'll be over afore you can think."

His firm grip gave Keith just that support he so badly needed. He took a long breath and a long stride, and Cole caught him as he reached the far side. Next moment Shorty was beside him.

"Thanks awfully, Shorty," said Keith gratefully. "I'm awfully ashamed of myself."

"Shucks!" grinned Shorty. "There's no need to be." He turned to the others. "Say, chaps! Feel the breeze? I guess we're not a long ways from a hole in the ground."

"Let's hope it's larger than the last one," growled Cole, but Shorty was already leading the way again at a brisk pace.

The passage became wider and more lofty, and they had not gone far before the white gleam of the electric torch was reflected upon something which looked like a great black mirror. A minute later, the party found themselves standing on the edge of a wide underground lake.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HIDDEN BRIDGE

Shorty switched off the light, and for a moment the darkness seemed intense. But only for a moment. Then Keith became aware of a greyness in the distance, and heard Shorty say, "There's daylight, boys."

"I takes your word for it, Shorty," said Cole. "But as it happens that I'm no swimmer, I don't see as to how I am going to prove. Unless, maybe," he added, "you got a collapsible boat in your pocket."

Shorty bent down and dipped his fingers into the water which brimmed level with the rock on which they stood. "I hopes it won't come to swimming," he said and his voice was graver than usual. "This here water is sure cold."

"I can swim," broke in Keith. "Let me have a try."

Shorty put a hand on Keith's arm. "No, son! You are in no shape to go swimming in a place like this. But I am sure hoping that we can travel round this here pond without getting wet."

He raised the torch as he spoke, flashing the light from side to side, but the result was not too encouraging. To the left there was no path at all. The grey rock dipped straight into the black water. To the right a narrow ledge of rock was visible between the wall and the lake, but it sloped away, and before it reached the curve dipped beneath the surface and disappeared.

"Don't look like we could walk far," said Cole.

"We got to try, anyways," replied Shorty, and started along the ledge.

Reaching the end of the ledge, he walked boldly into the water, but within a few steps was above his knees. He paused.

"Goes plumb down," he observed. "Guess we'll hev to swim fer it after all."

"Wait a jiffy," said Keith. "Turn the light my way."

All through their journeyings Keith had stuck to a stick which he had picked up in the outer cave, and he was now poking it into the water just at the spot where the ledge dipped.

Shorty waded back and did as Keith asked. "What's got you?" he asked. "Found an island?"

"Found where the ledge goes, I think," replied Keith trying to keep his voice steady. As he spoke he waded right into the water which to the amazement of the others was hardly over his boot-tops.

"Go slow," said Shorty. "Go mighty slow. You can't tell when a ledge like that will peter out."

Keith did not answer. Using his stick to probe the depth, he pushed cautiously onward.

It was the oddest sensation to walk as it were almost on the surface of this ink-black water, yet to be quite unable to see what he was walking on. Here and there the ledge dipped a trifle, but it was never deep enough to take him to his knees.

Shorty watched him for a few moments, then went after him. His presence gave Keith a feeling of security, and the light helped him to find his way.

"A queer sort of formation this, isn't it, Shorty?" said Keith.

"Caves like this is full of queer things," Shorty answered. "I only hope as the ledge runs all the way across."

It did. It carried them almost dead straight across the subterranean lake and the others watched them reach the far side in safety.

"This is a bit of luck," said Keith with a sigh of relief as he stepped out on to dry rock.

"The luck came in your thinking of such a thing," replied Shorty. "Now you wait right here, and I'll go fetch the others."

Taking the stick and the torch, Shorty made his way back across the hidden ledge, and inside five minutes he and the other three were back with Keith.

Shorty switched off the torch and at once a patch of gray light became visible at no great distance. "Daylight all right," said Cole. "Let's hope as the hole is an easier one to reach than the last was."

"We'll know pretty soon," said Shorty briefly, and started away down a rough slope towards the patch of daylight. They had not far to go, for on rounding a spur of rock which ran sharply out from the left-hand wall of the cave, a small arched opening showed right in front.

A few steps more, and all five were standing once more in full sunlight. Tony took a long breath. "Phew! but it smells good," he exclaimed. "Shorty, I've sure had enough of caves to last me a lifetime."

Shorty smiled superior. "Shucks! that wasn't nothing. You wait till you've been shut up in a flooded mine for a week." He glanced at the sun—a great red ball lying over the snow-clad hills to the west. "Mighty nigh supper time," he remarked. "I reckon we'd better be travelling back to the camp."

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Keith. "You are forgetting the prisoners."

"I guess they'll have to stay prisoners for this night," Shorty answered dryly. "That is unless you are ambitious to wade back across that there lake and travel a matter of nigh on a mile through the cave back to where we left them."

"I hadn't thought it was that far," said Keith in some dismay. "But I say, Shorty, the wretched fellows will be scared stiff, or they may die of cold."

"Don't you worry," said Shorty scornfully. "Chaps like that don't die so easy, and if they did they'd be saving the sheriff a job."

Kirby Hart spoke up. "How'd it be to fetch this chap Granite and start him to dig the cave open. It was he blew the mouth in, and it's up to him to open it again. Besides, if it was he who swiped the greenbacks, the sooner I lay hands on him the better I'll be pleased."

"Nothing doing," said Shorty. "Not until we've had our grub and a night's sleep. You've got to remember, Hart, that this here Granite has the fixed opinion that we are safe inside the mountain. He's not a-goin' to trouble his wicked old head about us, until we shows up at his place with the sheriff somewheres along after breakfast in the morning."

"All very well to talk about the sheriff, Shorty," put in Cole, "but you've got to remember this, that we haven't got no real proof against the chap."

"No proof!" repeated Kirby Hart. "What's the matter with that rubber sole?"

"That isn't no proof," returned Cole quietly. "It is good enough for us maybe, but the law wouldn't take it. Isn't that so, Shorty?"

Shorty nodded. "I guess you're right, Cole, but don't you worry, Kirby. We'll be even with that old sinner before we are a heap older. Now what d'ye say, boys? Do we hike for camp?"

Kirby looked rather disappointed, but agreed with the rest that the best plan would be to wait until morning to fetch the prisoners and tackle Granite.

The opening by which they had come out of the cave was on the north side of the mountain and actually closer to the camp than that by which they had entered. Shorty who knew the lie of the land, pointed the direction and led the way.

The frost was bitter, but there was no wind, and they swung away through the scrub pines at a brisk pace. Reaching the foot of the hill, they came out upon a rough track.

"This here's the road to Granite's place," said Shorty. "I reckon it'll give the old son of a gun an ugly twist if he could see us a-walking home."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before a tall gaunt figure came round a bend in the trail, and was right on top of them before he knew it.

"Hello, Granite!" Shorty greeted him. "How's the world using you?"

CHAPTER XX

A FEW WORDS WITH GRANITE

Granite stopped dead. His jaw fell, his pale blue eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of his head, and his whole expression was that of a man who sees ghosts.

"You looks kind of astonished," said Shorty sweetly. "Boys! The poor old cuss is a-going to hev a fit. Hold him up, some of you."

Granite made a desperate effort and pulled himself together. "I don't want none of your lip, Shorty Scott," he growled.

"Lip," repeated Shorty. "Listen to the chap! And I a-talking to him as nice as a Sunday-school teacher to her prize pupil. What's the matter, Granite? Wasn't you expecting to meet us?"

The badgered Granite glared at Shorty and his grinning companions. "Lemme pass," he snarled. "I haven't got nothing to say to you all."

"Sech ingratitude!" moaned Shorty. "The gent won't speak to us—not arter we been a-showing him all around that there bee-utiful cave."

Granite's long yellow face went livid. "You better be careful what you say," he growled.

"Careful," repeated Shorty. "I haven't said nothing unkind, have I? I asks you all, if I've said anything as a gent could take objection to. What was it you was objecting to, Mr. Stone?"

Granite stood snarling like a mean old wolf anxious to bite yet afraid to. Although he had a large pistol in his hip pocket he did not dare to use it. Blacky Cole and Shorty both had the reputation of being very quick on the draw.

"You sure was interested in them there rocks," went on Shorty, and now there was a subtle change in his tone which did not escape his listeners. "I reckon you never went so far into the cave before. Did you?"

"What do you think you're a-talking about?" cried Granite furiously.

Shorty looked him squarely in the eyes. "It's no use your trying to put up a bluff like that," he said quietly. "You see, Granite, we heard you a-following us."

"You better be careful what you says," retorted Granite, "else I'll sue you for slander."

Shorty smiled a little. "I've told you it wasn't no use to bluff. There's five of us here, and we all knows right well that it was you as followed us into the cave, sneaked out afore we could catch you, and blowed down the mouth."

Granite's parchment-like face twisted hideously. "You lie," he roared. "You haven't got no proof. I'll have the law on you."

"I wouldn't say too much about the law if I was you, Granite. I don't reckon to-day is the first time you've broke it."

For some seconds the man glared at Shorty in silence. Then quite suddenly his expression changed. "Broke the law, have I?" he snapped out. "And what about you, Mr. Shorty Scott? You're a-breaking it right now."

"As how?" questioned Shorty sarcastically.

"You're a-trespassing. You're trespassing on my land."

Shorty looked at him pityingly. "You're sure a poor ignorant cuss," he answered. "The line runs nigh half a mile back. This here is all Calvert's."

"Was Calvert's you'd better say," retorted Granite with an ugly grin. "It's been mine since four o'clock this afternoon." His thin lips twisted back from his discoloured teeth, and he chuckled aloud as he watched the expression of dismay which spread across Shorty's face.

"It's true," he declared. "If you don't believe me, look at this." As he spoke he pulled from his pocket a roll of papers tied with string, dragged one out, and thrust it under Shorty's nose.

Shorty glanced rapidly through it, and Keith saw the startled expression on the camp cook's face. Knowing nothing of what had happened during the day, Keith was of course completely puzzled. Shorty, however, soon understood. He looked at Granite, and all the fun had gone out of his face. His expression was hard as a rock. "You are smarter than I reckoned, Granite," he said, "and I've got to admit that you are one up on this deal." He paused, then went on, speaking very slowly and distinctly. "But one deal is not the game, Granite, and I'll chance the prophecy that the time will come when you'll be mighty sorry for trying your crook games on Crab Calvert's outfit."

"I'll chance that," retorted Granite with an ugly sneer. "Meantime you get off my land as quick as your legs will carry you, and bear in mind that if I catches you on it again you'll likely get hurt."

Shorty who had quickly recovered himself, smiled quite genially. "We'll be moving then," he said. "Come along, boys. Good-night to you, Granite. How much do it cost to open up a coal-mine? Can you do it on fifty thousand dollars?"

Before Granite could find any reply to this last shot, Shorty had swung round, and followed by the others was heading for the camp.

"But I don't understand," said Keith as he strode along beside Shorty. "How can Granite own this land?"

"I'd have thought you'd have understood easy enough, Keith," replied Shorty. "As soon as that old crook had blowed in the mouth of the cave, he must have gone straight down to the camp and signed up an agreement with Crab. Most like they did a trade."

"That's the size of it, I reckon," put in Cole. "The boss was real anxious to get that there patch of cedar."

"But this is awful," exclaimed Keith. "The old scoundrel has swindled Mr. Calvert out of all that wonderful anthracite which must be worth fifty times as much as even the cedars."

"More like five hundred, if you asks me," said Shorty quietly.

Keith stared at Shorty. "I must say you take it pretty coolly," he said.

Shorty shrugged his shoulders. "No use a-crying over spilt milk," he answered, "and anyways, if Crab has got the cedar there'll be logging for all of us till the end of the winter."

He quickened his pace, so that Keith who was pretty nearly done up with all he had been through during the past twenty-four hours, had all he could do to keep up, and no breath left to talk. The rest of the journey was finished in silence.

Just as they got into camp, Shorty spoke to Keith in a low voice. "If Crab sends for you, don't say nothing to him about the coal." Then noticing Keith's look of amazement, he grinned. "Maybe that old crook Granite hasn't got things so much his own way as he thinks he has," he remarked, and hurried away in the direction of the chuck-house.

Keith had barely finished a very badly needed supper, when word came that the boss wanted him, and he hurried off to the office.

Crab was sitting at his desk with a litter of papers before him. He merely nodded to the boy. "What's this yarn about your being kidnapped, Hedley?" he asked in his curtest tone. "I'd have thought you were big enough to look after yourself."

The accusation was, of course, horribly unjust, but Keith knew better than to show any sign of annoyance. He merely told his story as plainly and briefly as he was able. Bearing in mind Shorty's warning, he said nothing whatever about the coal.

His uncle listened without a word, but in spite of his silence, Keith was all the time conscious of that curious atmosphere of force which seemed to radiate from the man.

When Keith had finished, his uncle gazed thoughtfully at him for a few moments. "Feeling discouraged?" he questioned. "Thinking you'd like to quit?"

Keith went a little red, but his voice was perfectly under control as he replied, "No, sir. I am not feeling discouraged, and I have no idea of quitting unless you discharge me."

There was a ghost of a glimmer in Crab Calvert's keen eyes. "I reckon I won't sack you this time," he said in that oddly level voice of his. "Now send Shorty to me, and you go and turn in."

That night Keith slept like one dead, and never moved until he heard the cry, "Ro-o-oll out! Daylight in the swamp! Roll out, lumberjacks, ro-o-oll out."

Keith was stiff in every muscle, but a sluice in ice-cold water and a hard rub with a rough towel sent the blood racing through his veins, and he found himself more than ready for the flapjacks, fried bacon, and strong coffee which composed the morning meal.

While he ate, he was wondering whether he would have to go back to his sawing with Blacky Cole. It was not a prospect he looked forward to with any pleasure, for in his present condition he was quite sure that he could not last out even the morning. And just then Tony slipped up beside him.

"It's true, Keith," the boy said. "Crab has sold this land to Granite, and he's got the cedar in exchange. Orders are that camp is to be stripped right away."

Keith breathed a sigh of relief. This meant at any rate a day or two of respite before he had to go back to that awful sawing. He vowed to himself that somehow he would get himself fit for it when it came.

The whole camp was in a hum of excitement, and Keith realized from the remarks which he overheard that the men

were really pleased that the boss had managed to get hold of the cedar. His uncle, he discovered, was much more popular with these rough lumberjacks than he himself had fancied possible.

Tony who had moved away, came back. "Say, Keith," he exclaimed in some excitement. "Shorty wants you."

Keith hurried to the kitchen, and Tony followed. Shorty in his shirt-sleeves was directing the operations of his two assistants. He turned as Keith came up.

"Are we to help you?" asked Keith. Shorty took him by the arm and drew him to one side. "You are to help me all right, but not here. I've been a-talking to Crab," he added. "He's sent a chap with a sleigh for the sheriff. As soon as he comes, you and me are to go with him over to the cave and collect Mold and Fergus."

Keith whistled softly. "What's Granite going to say about that?" he questioned.

Shorty winked. "The more he says, the better I'll be pleased, Keith, I reckon we are going to have a heap of fun out of that there old crook."

Keith stared. Granite had done them all down most thoroughly, and had got away with that enormously valuable seam of coal. Shorty alone was thousands out of pocket, the sum which he would have been paid as discoverer of the mine. Yet now he laughed, and merely talked of having fun with Granite.

What it meant he could not imagine.

CHAPTER XXI

SHORTY HUNTS A SHORT CUT

"You look kind of mystified, Keith," said Shorty, still with a twinkle in his eye.

"Mystified, I should think I am," replied Keith. "I haven't a dog's notion what you are driving at."

Shorty chuckled. "You'll learn, son. But see here. Not a word to the sheriff about the coal. Nor you needn't tell him about that there shaft we found. I mean the one we couldn't get out of. You are not to mention that to no one at all."

"Right you are," said Keith. "I'll be mum as a mouse."

A few minutes later Crab Calvert's own sleigh drawn by a powerful bay horse drew up outside the big hut, and a man jumped out, a middle-sized man of perhaps about thirty years old. He was rather slightly built, but he gave Keith the impression of being all wire and whip-cord. His hair was nearly as fair as Shorty's, and his eyes were extraordinarily bright and blue.

Shorty stepped out to meet him. "Hello, Greg," he said. "Hello, old-timer. I am sure glad to see you."

"Same here, Shorty. But say, what's the game?"

"We'll tell you as we goes along," replied Shorty and turned to Keith. "Keith," he said, "let me make you acquainted with Mr. Austin Gregory, Sheriff of Orde County. Greg, this here is Mr. Hedley—a Britisher, and a white one."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hedley," said Gregory, giving Keith a grip which nearly crushed his hand. "You coming with us?" he asked.

Keith said he was. Shorty meantime had hurried back into the shack to return in a moment with a big bundle which

he flung into the sleigh.

"Grub," he explained, "and some rubber boots. No sense getting wet this weather."

Kirby Hart followed him out and Shorty introduced Kirby to the sheriff. Then all four got into the sleigh, Shorty took the reins and they drove off.

It was a brilliant morning, and although the frost was keen as ever, even Keith did not feel it greatly for there was no wind. The going was rough, but Shorty steered the sleigh cleverly in and out between the tree stumps and rocks, and it was not long before they were in sight of the hill which was their destination. Shorty pulled up and led the horse into a small grove of thick hemlock where he tied the animal up and blanketed him carefully. "We got to foot it the rest of the way, Greg," he said. "You all had better follow me pretty close." He led them up to the steep slope towards the lake entrance into the cave. Keith noticed that Shorty stopped at the mouth and looked round keenly.

Seemingly satisfied, he entered the cave, and as soon as the candles were lighted started up the slope which led to the edge of the subterranean lake.

Here he stopped, and flung down his bundle.

"Here's where we need our boots, Greg," he said, as he pulled out four pairs of long rubber boots.

Gregory gazed at the smooth black water, stretching away under its arched roof of rock.

"You are not a-telling me as that's shallow enough to wade across, Shorty," he said doubtfully.

"I'll promise you won't have to swim," replied Shorty with a grin. "That is, so long as you follows me right carefully."

Picking up a stick which he had brought with him, Shorty started across the hidden bridge which Keith had found on the previous evening, and the rest followed closely behind him. All arrived safely on the far side. There Gregory stopped and looked back.

"I reckon that took a bit of finding, Shorty," he remarked.

"It was Keith here as spotted it," said Shorty.

"His eyes is mighty good for a tenderfoot," Gregory said with a nod of approval, and Keith found the praise very pleasant.

"Now we had better be shifting along," said Shorty. "We've quite a ways to go, and I guess them hoboes are getting kind of hungry."

He started briskly up the sloping gallery, and once more Keith was struck by the ease with which Shorty found his way through the maze of winding passages.

They had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile when Shorty stopped.

"You folk wait here for a few minutes," he said. "I've a kind of notion that maybe I can find a short cut." He slipped away up a side passage, leaving the other three alone.

"He's a wonder at finding his way, isn't he, Mr. Gregory?" said Keith.

"You are plumb right, Mr. Hedley. But you see, Shorty has had a heap of practice. I reckon he's been working underground most ever since he left school. I tell you straight, if I owned a mine, Shorty Scott is the man I'd pick to take charge."

It was some time before Shorty returned, and while he was away Keith told the Sheriff the whole story of how he

and Tony Brock had been chased by Mold and Fargus, of how they had captured him, of the arrival of Kirby Hart and of his rescue by the party led by Shorty.

The Sheriff was much interested. "I remember that there train robbery," he said. "It was just after I was elected Deputy. We did our best but we hadn't no sort of a clue to what became of the loot." He paused. "So Shorty thinks as old Granite had a finger in the pie," he continued. "Well, I wouldn't wonder, for an uglier natured old cuss don't live in Orde County."

Steps were heard, and here came Shorty.

"All right, folk," he said. "I guess I've got the short cut mapped out to rights."

Keith glanced sharply at the little man, and noticed a curious gleam in his eyes. It occurred to Keith that it was something more than a short cut for which Shorty had been searching; but he was too wise to ask questions, and all four pushed on again.

Now there was no more waiting, and Shorty did not stop again until they arrived in the big cavern just behind the blocked up entrance.

The moment their lights showed around the curve, a shriek greeted them. Kirby Hart started rather sharply, but Shorty grinned.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's only Mold. Anyways, he's not dead yet."

Mold was not dead, but the wretched man was very nearly out of his mind. The long hours of waiting in the black cold silence of the cave had been too much for him, and he babbled foolishly as they released him. Fargus, who was made of sterner stuff, was not so badly frightened as Mold, but his wounded shoulder had stiffened and he was really in a worse way than the other.

Shorty however, was quite equal to the occasion. He had a fire lighted in no time, heated up coffee and set to frying bacon. By this time it was nearly midday, and Keith and the rest, as well as the two prisoners, were quite ready for a meal. Mold ate like a wolf, but Fargus could only drink coffee.

Shorty who, to add to his other accomplishments, knew something of surgery, put a fresh dressing on the man's wound, and after a while pronounced him fit to travel.

It was a slow job getting back to the lake entrance, for Fargus was a good deal the worse for wear and had to be helped along. But the worst of the business came with the crossing of the lake. Mold was so scared that they could hardly drive him across the hidden bridge, while as for Fargus, the Sheriff and Shorty had to carry him between them.

When at last they had got the prisoners safe across, Shorty left them under the charge of Kirby Hart and drew the Sheriff and Keith aside. "See here," he said. "I got reasons for closing up this here mouth into the cave. I brought a blasting charge along. If you'll jest wait, I'll go back across the lake and fix it where the passage is nearer."

The Sheriff shrugged his shoulders. "Go ahead," he said. "You knows best."

So carrying a little packet of cartridges and fuse, Shorty went back, while the others waited in a patch of sunshine at the mouth of the cave.

Presently Kirby Hart nudged Keith. "Say, Mr. Hedley, there's someone watching us," he whispered.

CHAPTER XXII

GRANITE'S THREAT

Kirby pointed as he spoke, and sure enough Keith caught a glimpse of a figure half hidden in a patch of scrub at the foot of the hill.

One glance was enough. There could be no mistaking that long, gaunt figure.

"Granite," said Keith. "It's Granite."

The Sheriff took a small pair of field-glasses from his pocket and focussed them. He nodded.

"It's old Stone all right," he said, and smiled. "The funny thing is he don't know we've spotted him. He thinks he's hidden under them trees. I'd like mighty well to know what he's thinking about."

"No kind thoughts, I'll bet," chuckled Keith. "He was horrid cross with us last night."

"I fancy he'll be crosser still before Shorty gets through with him," remarked the Sheriff.

Behind them they could hear the tap, tap of Shorty's hammer. At last it stopped. Another five minutes passed, then Shorty came wading quickly across the hidden bridge.

"Better get right outside," he said. "I put a real big charge in that there wall, and there'll sure be some blast when she goes off."

So they all shifted outside and had hardly done so when the explosion came. A deep sullen boom followed by a tremendous outrush of air, which lifted the frozen snow and sent it whirling in a cloud of white dust. Then a thundering crash as tons of rock came clattering down.

"That's fixed her," said Shorty. "There won't be no temptation for no one to drown hisself wading up and down that lake any more."

Keith suddenly pointed down towards the patch of scrub where Granite had been hiding. "He's heard it," he exclaimed. "See! He's coming to find out what's happened."

Shorty caught Keith by the arm and pulled him back. "Get right in behind this here rock," he said. "We don't want to scare the gent."

The big rock hid them completely from Granite's eyes, but they were able to see him quite plainly as he came striding up the slope, and his expression was so savage that Keith could hardly help laughing.

Next minute he was right on top of them and had pulled up short with a ludicrous look of dismay on his long gaunt face.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Stone," Shorty greeted him cheerfully. "Was you looking for anybody?"

"What in thunder——" began Granite furiously.

"No, it warn't thunder," interrupted Shorty. "Just a dynamite cartridge—same as you used yesterday."

"What proof hev you got?" bellowed Granite. "I told you I'd sue ye fer slander ef you talked that way. And I'll do it, sure as my name's Stone."

Shorty smiled mockingly. "Wal, here's a witness," he drawled. "Mr. Stone, let me introduce you to Mr. Gregory, Sheriff of Orde County."

In his blind rage Granite had not even noticed the Sheriff, let alone recognized him. Now that he did so his face fell in ludicrous fashion.

"Slander, is it?" said Gregory, with a perfectly grave face. "Say, but that's right serious, Mr. Stone. But I don't properly understand. What is it Mr. Scott is alluding to?"

"He sez as I blowed in the other mouth of this here cave yesterday," replied Granite.

The Sheriff's eyes widened. "But it was on your own land, wasn't it? I reckon you were well within your rights. Where's the slander in that?"

"Aye, but he says as he and these here other folks was inside when I did it."

"But you wasn't to know that, Mr. Stone," replied the Sheriff. "Of course you wasn't to know that."

"Of course I didn't know it," exclaimed Granite. "He's a-making me out a murderer."

"No one wouldn't think that of you," said the Sheriff soothingly. "I reckon you did it jest to keep bad characters from a-using the place."

"That's it," said Granite, looking almost pleased to think that someone was taking his part.

Shorty laughed outright. "So you owns up, Granite. Yesterday you said you didn't have nothing to do with it at all."

The badgered Granite turned on him in a fury. "You—you sawed-off little skunk, what d'ye mean by coming a-trespassing here on my land arter I warned ye off, and how dare ye go using blasting charges on my property?"

Keith saw a flash in Shorty's clear blue eyes. If there was one point on which the little man was sensitive, it was his lack of inches. But he kept his temper admirably. "You're plumb off the track, Granite. No one can't trespass when the Sheriff's along with him, and as fer blowing in the tunnel there, well, ye just said yourself, as you wanted the cave protected against bad characters."

A patch of dull red showed on each of Granite's parchment-like cheeks. The man was rapidly going crazy under Shorty's cleverly placed taunts. He knew himself to be in the wrong, and he was desperately afraid of betraying himself before the Sheriff. For a moment or two he stood silent, his lantern jaws working in the oddest way, and his great loose-fingered hands crumpling and uncrumpling.

At last he spoke again. "So ye'd shelter yourself behind the Sheriff!" he snarled, in a voice that fairly grated with malice. "I'll tell ye this, that if ever I catches you or any of your crowd from Calvert's on my land again, and him not along to save ye, I'll make ye sorry the longest day ye live."

Shorty merely laughed again, but the Sheriff himself cut in. "That's no way to talk, Mr. Stone," he said sternly. "First you talk of a slander action against Scott without a bit of evidence to go on, and now you threaten him right in my hearing. If I was you, I'd be careful—mighty careful. From now on you're under suspicion, Mr. Stone, and if anything happens to Scott here or either of these gentlemen you can take it I shall know where to look for the offender."

Granite's jaw fell. The Sheriff had taken all the wind out of his sails, and he was left absolutely dumb. He stood for a moment staring vacantly at Gregory's stern face, then muttering something under his breath that was certainly not a blessing, turned and stamped angrily away down the hill.

Shorty watched him. "A mean old cuss," he said thoughtfully. "But holler—holler, like a rotten tree. He's no 'count is old Stone, even though he does call hisself Granite."

Gregory shook his head. "He may be rotten, as you say, Shorty," he answered, "but he's mean—poison mean. And them kind of folk gets dangerous at times."

Shorty snorted. "Dangerous! Gee, he's about as dangerous as a old pig porcupine."

The Sheriff did not smile. "Even a porcupine quill is a mighty nasty thing to get into your hand, and sure apt to

poison your flesh. You watch out, Shorty, and don't give that fellow no chance to get back at you. It's when a man like that is hurt in his pride, just like you've hurt Stone, as he's apt to do something real mean."

The Sheriff spoke so earnestly that Keith was considerably impressed, but Shorty merely shrugged. "Guess I'll take my chances," he said. "And now I reckon you better take them two prisoners o' yours back to the calaboose, Greg. Keith here can drive along with you. Me, I've got to head for camp. They're a-moving to-day, and if I'm not there some on 'em will go hungry to-night."

He waved a cheery good-bye as he stamped away through the snow, Kirby alongside of him. Keith helped the Sheriff to load up his prisoners and they drove off to the county town.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MAN IN THE SNOW

The Sheriff having gaoled his prisoners made Keith stay to an early supper. "Your boss can't kick," he said, "for the horse has got to be fed and rested anyways. I'd like you mighty well to stay the night if you can."

Keith laughed. "I'd like to see my—that is, the boss's face if I did that, Mr. Gregory. Why, I'd get the sack so quick I wouldn't know what struck me."

"I know Crab's a bit of a terror," smiled the Sheriff. "They say he can get more work out of ten men than most can out of twenty. But I don't hear no complaints. If he works them hard he feeds them and pays them according."

"He's a wonderful man," said Keith gravely, as he took his seat at Gregory's hospitable table. He was sharp set with the long day in the cold air, and Mrs. Gregory was a fine cook. Keith made acquaintance with fried chicken, beaten biscuits, buckwheat cakes with maple syrup and the most delicious pumpkin pie he had ever tasted.

The Sheriff came out with him to help harness up, and Keith saw his new friend look hard at the sky and then go back and tap the weather glass. His face was grave in the light of the hurricane lamp as he came out a second time. "I reckon it's going to snow," he said. "You better stay the night, Hedley."

"It's jolly good of you, Mr. Gregory, but it's absolutely out of the question. My—er—boss doesn't take much account of weather. Besides, the horse knows the road even if I don't."

"If it wasn't for that I wouldn't let you go at all. You're green to this country and you don't know what a snow-storm is out here."

"I've heard it can snow," smiled Keith. "Well, I'll get on quick and beat it if I can. And thanks a thousand times for all your kindness."

"I've been right glad to have you," said the Sheriff cordially. "But before you go I'm going to give you a thermos bottle full of hot coffee and an extra blanket. I hope you won't need 'em, but out here in winter you never can tell."

The horse, fed and rested, started at a brisk trot, and Keith, well wrapped up, enjoyed the swift motion and the crisp keening of the steel runners over the dry snow. But he had not gone far before he realized that the wind was getting up, a wind that drove straight down out of the Arctic with a death-like chill in it.

Keith began to shiver in spite of his wraps. Presently he noticed that the stars were dimming. A faint haze covered the sky and was followed by a pall of cloud which grew thicker and thicker. The horse seemed to sense danger and quickened its pace.

More than half the distance to Calvert's was covered before the snow began. Fine stuff like frozen dust which filled the air and settled in little drifts on the lap robe and every cranny. Keith rolled himself in the Sheriff's blanket and was grateful for it.

They came to a steep slope and the horse's trot fell to a jog. Keith jumped out, and ran beside the horse. The animal, a little alarmed at first, soon recovered, and whinnied with pleasure as Keith patted its arched neck. But the snow grew thicker and up in the tree tops the chill blasts howled desolately.

It was Keith's first experience of an Arctic storm, and in spite of himself a little chill of fear crept through him. The snow was so thick that he could no longer tell where he was and he had to trust entirely to the horse.

They reached the top of the hill, and he flung himself into the sledge again; the horse began to trot, but the snow was deepening every minute, and the horse's pace was much slower than before. Up here, too, the trees were scant, and the wind cut like knives.

"Wish Tony was with me," was Keith's unspoken thought, but Tony was far enough away, and the only thing was to keep up his courage and stick it out. The journey seemed endless, and all the time the snow fine as flour blew thicker and thicker. The horse was floundering knee-deep in drifts.

The temperature was now a long way below zero, and in spite of his warm wraps and his mitts the cold was biting into Keith's body. He began to feel drowsy. "That will never do," he muttered thickly. "Next thing I shall be asleep, and that will be my finish." So out he got again and walked beside the horse. The exertion of forcing his way through the drifts set the blood coursing through his veins, and presently he was himself again.

Suddenly the horse shied sideways. "Whoa, boy!" cried Keith. "What's the matter?" The horse stood snorting and Keith suddenly saw some dark object in the snow at the side of the track. It was a man's body lying half-buried in the snow. He pulled out his pocket torch and stooped over it, then started upright with a sharp exclamation. For there was no mistaking that great head and the heavy features. This was the bully of the Camp, the man that Crab Calvert had fired two days earlier—Hulke Hanson. And there he lay freezing to death in the blizzard.

Keith pulled himself together. Brute the man might be, but he could not be left to die. Keith took him by the shoulders and shook him. Hulke grunted. He smelt vilely of bad whisky, and Keith realized the reason why he had fallen in the snow. "Get up!" he snapped. "Get up!"

But Hulke only grunted again, and his great head nodded. Keith suddenly remembered the coffee. He got the flask from the sleigh, and opening it poured some of the steaming stuff into the cup and forced it into Hanson's mouth. The man choked, but some went down his throat. "What the blazes!" he said thickly.

"Get up and get into the sleigh, you fool," said Keith curtly. "Do you want to freeze to death?"

Hulke looked up with a gleam of recognition in his dull eyes. "It's the Britisher," he mumbled. Then, "What be you a-doing here?"

"Trying to save your life, you idiot," snapped Keith. "Get into the sleigh or stay here and freeze in the snow." Somehow he forced the benumbed man to his feet and into the sleigh, where he promptly went to sleep again. Then Keith started off afresh, walking as before at the horse's head.

He had not the faintest notion where he was, and when the horse suddenly pulled up it took him a matter of half a minute before he discovered that he had reached the camp. Yes, the horse had stopped right at the door of the stable.

Keith heaved a sigh of relief, and leaving the horse for a moment under lee of the stable wall, walked over towards the bunk-house.

He could not find it.

He shouted. There was no reply. He went forward and stumbled over timbers lying in the snow. The bunk-house

was gone; so was the cookhouse.

Then he remembered. The men were to move camp that day to Crab's new ground, and they had done it. Everything was gone except the stable, and there was no one left there.

CHAPTER XXIV

KEITH IS TAKEN DOWN A PEG

It was no use grousing. The only thing was to make the best of a bad job, for Keith knew that, if he could make out until morning, someone would come back from the new camp.

First he dragged Hulke out of the sleigh and into the stable. Then with fingers that were rapidly stiffening with the bitter cold he unharnessed the horse and led it in.

Inside the stable the darkness was intense, and striking a match he hunted for and found a lantern. Most of the horses were gone, but his uncle's pet pair of big bays were in their stalls. Beyond, in an empty stall, old Jesty the stableman was sound asleep on a heap of straw.

Keith fed his own horse, then pulled down some more straw to make beds for Hanson and himself. Hanson was already snoring, so Keith merely piled a quantity of straw over him to keep him from freezing and left him.

With the two rugs from the sleigh he was quite comfortable, but the presence of Hulke made him so uneasy that he resolved to remain awake. But after a long day in the open, to say nothing of a three hours' drive in a blizzard, intentions of this kind are easier to make than to carry out, and in something less than ten minutes Keith was as sound asleep as he had ever been in his life.

It was still pitch dark when he found himself sitting bolt upright, broad awake. The roar of the blizzard had died down, and for the moment the only sound which he could hear was the uneasy stamping of the horses.

Then he heard something else, a low, but unmistakable crackle, and in a flash he was on his feet. It was fire. He could smell it, but at first could see no flame. Then suddenly a tongue of red light licked upwards in the far corner of the long, low building, and shouting to Jesty, Keith ran to the spot.

A pile of loose hay was all alight, and Keith flung himself upon it, tearing it down with his hands and stamping on it.

"Jesty!" he shouted. "Jesty, get the horses out."

But poor old Jesty, only half awake and badly frightened, came blundering up to Keith instead of obeying.

"The horses," repeated Keith. "Get them out, I tell you. I can tackle this."

The loose hay, as he beat it, flew in every direction, and little burning bits kept setting fresh fires on both sides of him. But Keith stuck to it, and finding an old sack began to smother the flames.

And just then came Jesty's voice in terrified tones. "The door's fast. I can't open it."

Keith could not leave the scene of the fire, for so long as a spark remained it was sure to blaze up again.

"Get a hammer," he shouted back. "Break the door down. You must get the horses out."

"I haven't got no hammer," said back Jesty's voice. "I can't get her open."

The horses were stamping and kicking. It was quite clear to Keith that Jesty, who was old and lame, was unable to handle them, and he knew what store his uncle set on those splendid bays of his. He glanced once more at the pile of smoking ashes, and hoping against hope that they would not burst again into flame, ran back down the long building to the door.

He flung his weight against it, but the solid timbers hardly quivered. By the light of the lantern which Jesty had lighted he saw that the key had been turned from outside.

It flashed across him that this was Hulke's work, and a spasm of anger seized him when he thought of the man's brutal ingratitude. He vowed to himself that sooner or later he would settle the score, but for the moment his job was to find some way of forcing the door and getting the horses into safety.

On the face of it, the task was an impossible one. Door and lock alike were enormously massive, and nothing short of a crow-bar or a sledge-hammer was needed to force them. Neither of these tools were to be found in the stable, and Jesty assured him that the men had taken everything of the sort up to the new camp.

The smoke was so thick under the low roof that it almost smothered the lantern light, and for the life of him Keith could not tell whether the fire was out or not. And just then Jesty gave a terrified shout and pointed to the other end of the stable, where an ominous red glow showed Keith that a second fire had been started.

Keith felt positively desperate. Luckily for him he was one of those people whose brain works most rapidly in a big emergency. He swung round on Jesty. "Your pistol," he said breathlessly.

"I haven't got one," was the answer.

Keith's last hope vanished, but just then Jesty spoke again. "I got a gun," he said, "if that's any use."

"Where?" gasped Keith.

"In the stall there, where I was asleep."

Keith made one leap for it. The weapon was a heavy old-fashioned double-barrel twelve bore.

"You be careful with her," said Jesty warningly. "She's mighty light on the trigger and she's loaded with buckshot."

"Get out of my way," cried Keith. "Back the horses."

Poor muddled old Jesty obeyed, and Keith pointing the gun at the door, with the muzzle about six inches from the lock, fired both barrels in rapid succession.

In the confused space the reports crashed out like thunder. The horses reared and kicked, almost pulling Jesty off his feet, and for a moment the smoke was too thick for Keith to see at all. But as it cleared he gave a shout of triumph, for the heavy charges fired at point blank range had torn their way right through the heavy planking, leaving a splintered hole big enough for Keith to thrust his arm through.

At once he began groping for the key. Everything depended on whether this was still in the lock. Keith's bare fingers touched metal—metal so cold that it burnt like fire. The key was there, and with a great effort Keith managed to turn it. Another moment and the door was open.

"Out with the horses," snapped Keith. "You take the pair, I'll get the sleigh horse."

But now fresh trouble arose. Both ends of the stable were a mass of leaping flames, and the crackle and roar had so terrified the animals that they refused to move at all. Jesty's efforts to drag them forward to the door were utterly useless.

Keith, however, knew what to do. Pulling off his coat he flung it over the head of the sleigh horse, and once the creature was blinded it came out quietly enough. Keith tied it to the nearest tree and came back to help Jesty with the

others. Like the sleigh horse, the bays quieted down as soon as their eyes were covered, and they, too, were led out into safety.

It was time, for already the flames had reached the roof of the stable, and eaten their way through the slabs. The red blaze mounted higher and higher, throwing out a great glare across the new fallen snow.

"I reckon this'll bring some on them down from the new camp," said Jesty. "Nice way the boss will be in, losin' all this hay and straw."

"We've got the horses out. That's the main thing," replied Keith.

"Aye," said Jesty. "I'll allow you was smart over that job, but all the same Crab is going to be mighty peeved about losing them there stables."

He looked at Keith. "Say, Hedley! How come the place to get aight like that, and who was it locked the door on us?"

Keith told him how he had picked up Hanson in the blizzard and brought him in. "It couldn't have been anyone else who did it," he said.

Jesty was furious. "The dirty dog," he growled. "I reckon the boss will have something to say to that chap unless he clears clean out of this country."

As Keith had expected, it was not long before the big blaze brought help from the new camp, and the very first to arrive was Crab Calvert himself, on snow-shoes.

"What's this?" he demanded of Keith, and his voice rang like steel on ice.

Keith explained as briefly as possible, and as he spoke his uncle's face darkened ominously.

"Hulke Hanson, you say. And you hadn't better sense than to bring a fellow like that into my stable, and leave him there without watching him."

Keith said nothing. He knew better than to try to defend himself.

Those queer, greenish eyes were fixed on his face with a stare that made him feel extremely uncomfortable.

"I had thought you were learning a bit of sense," said Crab in his hard, level voice. "I see I was wrong. Hitch that horse to the sleigh."

Keith obeyed, and his uncle, after unstrapping his snow-shoes, got in and took the reins, and drove off in the direction of the new camp. Not one word did he say until they arrived at their destination, and he had got out. "It's a swamper's job for you this morning," he said to Keith, and swinging on his heel went straight to his own quarters.

It was now about five in the morning, and in the cook-shack windows there were already lights. After putting up the horse, Keith went in, and found Shorty and his two assistants busy preparing breakfast. Shorty gave Keith a cup of coffee, of which he was badly in need, and Keith told him what had happened.

"So it was Hulke," said Shorty, pursing up his lips. "Gee, but I don't wonder that the boss is properly worked up."

"He's worked up all right," replied Keith. "He's kicked me out of my sawyer's job and turned me on to swamping."

Shorty heard the bitter ring in Keith's voice, and laid a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder. "Don't let that worry you, son," he said. "If you asks me you got off cheap. Anyways, you got the horses out, and that's one good mark to you.

"Now I got to rouse the boys out," added Shorty. "You set right there by the stove and warm yourself. It's sure a cold morning."

CHAPTER XXV

GRANITE GETS TO WORK

The new camp was much nearer the cave than the old one had been, but on the other hand much further from the river. The grove of cedars which Granite had sold to Calvert lay upon a slope which ran down to a good-sized lake, the lake which the White Horse river drained. At the back of the camp the ground rose steeply towards the ridge of hill in which was the great cave, and across this slope cut a deep gorge, which was the same that Keith had crossed on the night when he escaped from Mold and Fergus. A small stream ran down the bottom of the gorge, but like all other water in this bitter weather, it was frozen almost solid.

Keith's new work as swamper meant that he had to help haul the big logs out of the woods and down on to the surface of the frozen lake. Since there was no current in the lake, it was necessary to haul the logs all across the ice to the head of the gorge where the river broke out from the lake.

Up in the wood itself, broad rides were cleared and roads made by smoothing the snow, then pouring water over the surface. The water froze almost as soon as it touched the snow, and turned these roads into tracks of glare ice.

The logs were piled upon immense sledges and chained to hold them together. Each sledge was pulled by two horses, whose shoes were heavily caulked to enable them to keep their feet.

Driving these sledges down the long slopes to the lake was no easy matter, for the weight of the logs was very great, and care had to be taken to prevent the sledges breaking loose and running upon the horses.

Luckily for himself, Keith knew and loved horses, and it was not long before he began to enjoy his new work.

As the days went by the cold grew more and more intense, and Keith found he had to be very careful to avoid getting his fingers or toes frost-bitten. The most trying part of it was teaming a load across the open lake, for there the wind caught him and there was no protection.

But Shorty gave him useful hints and kept an eye on him, and as the days went by Keith's muscles hardened, his chest deepened, and he began to feel himself a match even for the rough lumberjacks who were his companions.

His uncle never spoke to him. Keith did not trouble about that, for he felt that he was doing at least his fair share of work and earning his food and wages.

If Crab had driven his men on the pines, it was nothing to the way in which he drove them now. It was common talk in the camp that Crab had made up his mind to get out the whole of the cedars before the spring thaw.

The odd thing to Keith was that the men did not seem to resent it, and he spoke to Shorty about this. Shorty looked scornful. "What would they want to kick for?" he asked. "Crab pays them well, and if I says it myself, the grub's the best of any camp for a hundred miles round. Besides, Crab don't spare himself, and that counts for a lot, let me tell you."

"Have you heard anything about Hulke Hanson?" Keith asked.

"You bet I have. Didn't you know he was working for Granite?"

Keith stared. "No, I never heard that. I like his cheek. Does Crab know?"

"He knows all right," said Shorty. "As soon as he heard he went right up there and tackled Granite. Told him he ought to be ashamed to keep a crook like that in the country. Granite wanted to know what Crab had got against Hulke,

and when Crab told him, Granite up and swore that Hulke hadn't never been in that stable. He vowed to Crab that Hulke had been at his place the night the stable burned!"

"Of all the liars!" burst out Keith.

Shorty chuckled. "I guess that's what Crab called him. Anyways there was a flaming burst up, and I do hear that Crab talked to Granite till the old stick shook like a jelly."

"What a miserable old curmudgeon the fellow is," said Keith scornfully.

"He is miserable all right," replied Shorty. "But so is a rattlesnake. And you remember what the Sheriff said—that a fellow like that can be real ugly."

"You don't mean to say that Granite would try anything?" said Keith in surprise.

"I do," replied Shorty significantly. "And if I'm not much mistook he's begun already. There was two chaps took their time yesterday."

Keith stared.

"That's six we've lost in the last two weeks," continued Shorty, "and I happen to know as every one of them is up there working for Granite."

"You mean that Granite is decoying our men away?" exclaimed Keith.

"Don't talk so loud, son, but that's just exactly what I do mean, and if I'm not much mistook Granite has got an agent of his own right here in our camp, someone as he's a-paying to get our chaps away from us."

Keith looked grave. "If you are right, this is an ugly business, Shorty. As it is, we haven't too many men, if we are going to finish out the cedars by the spring."

"That's right, Keith," said Shorty. "We are real short-handed already, and the worst of it is that there's not a man to be hired as late in the season as this."

Keith lowered his voice. "Do you think that Crab knows what's up, Shorty?"

"As I've told you already, there isn't a lot Crab don't know," replied Shorty. "But right here he can't help hisself."

At this minute the whistle sounded for the men to return to work, and Keith had to go with the rest, but all that afternoon, as he drove his pair of horses, he was thinking of what Shorty had said. He thought, too, of Granite busy up on the hill, opening out that great coal seam which he had obtained by such swindling methods; and he wondered vaguely if there was no means of getting even with the old ruffian.

He was taking out his second load when, as he passed through a piece of thick wood, one of his horses slipped, and he stopped the team to see if the horse needed a fresh caulk. It was at that moment that the sound of voices reached him. Two men were talking barely thirty yards away, yet quite hidden by the thick growth of tamarack.

One voice Keith recognized as that of a man named Harrigan, and although he was not trying to listen, the words came very clearly to his ears.

"Four dollars a day," Harrigan was saying. "That's a dollar more than you draw here, and a steady job, too. If you takes on with Granite it's summer work as well as winter."

"Sounds mighty good to me," came the second voice, which Keith recognized as that of Hutton, an elderly sawyer. "All the same I've got nothing against Crab, so I reckon I'll stay where I be."

Harrigan spoke again, trying hard to persuade Hutton, holding out all sorts of inducements, and as he listened Keith

grew more and more angry.

At last he could stand it no longer, so leaving his horses he stepped quickly round the edge of the tamarack, and came upon the pair before either of them saw him.

"If you are so keen on working for Granite, Harrigan, why don't you go up the hill yourself?" he demanded.

Harrigan swung round on him. "Who asked you to come butting in?" he asked fiercely. "If I got business with another gentleman, I don't want no blooming Britisher twicking his oar in. What business is it of yourn?"

"It's the business of any decent fellow to interfere, when he hears a paid spy trying to decoy men away from the job they've been hired for," replied Keith.

Harrigan's cheeks went dull red and sparks showed in his little deep-set eyes. He was a big lump of a man, a dozen years older than Keith, and all of two stone heavier.

"Paid spy," he repeated in a very ugly tone. "Britisher, I'll make ye eat them words."

CHAPTER XXVI

A FIGHT AND ITS FINISH

As he spoke Harrigan rushed Keith, and swung a clumsy but powerful right-handed punch at the boy's head. Keith managed to elude it, and sprang back. He knew just enough about boxing to realize that it would be sheer suicide to mix it with this heavy brute.

"Skeered!" sneered Harrigan. "But whoever seed a Britisher as would fight?"

Keith's blood boiled. "You'll see one now," he snapped, and jumped in, hitting right and left.

It was sheer luck for him that Harrigan was not ready. He was not looking for anything of the sort, for he had really believed that Keith would not dare to fight him.

It was still bigger luck for Keith that his fist landed fair and square on Harrigan's nose, sending the blood squirting, and for the moment almost blinding the man.

"Go in. Get him, son," said Hutton. But Keith had stepped back. He had the idea fixed in the back of his mind that he must fight to rules. He forgot that there are no rules in a lumber camp, and that when two men come up against one another each is out to *hurt* the other in any way he can with fists, boots, even teeth.

It was a bad blunder on Keith's part for Harrigan, clean crazy with the pain of Keith's blows, rushed at him again, kicking out with all his force.

Keith, unprepared for such a method of attack, was not quite quick enough in getting out of the way, and although he escaped the full force of the kick which was aimed for his stomach, Harrigan's heavily nailed boot caught him above the left knee.

The pain was agonizing, and for a moment Keith's whole leg was almost useless.

"I'll learn ye," roared Harrigan, and next moment was on top of Keith, and had him on his back in the snow.

It looked as if Keith was done for, but he still had his wits about him, and slewing half over on his side he drove his

elbow backwards and outwards against his enemy's jaw.

The blow was a terrible one, it jolted Harrigan's head right back and jarred every tooth in his head. For a moment he was quite dazed, and before he could recover, Keith had rolled clear and regained his feet.

"Jump him!" cried Hutton. "Jump him, Britisher!"

But Keith could not bring himself to attack a fallen foe, and next second Harrigan was up, and bellowing like an angry bull had flung himself again on Keith.

Keith's injured leg was hurting abominably, but he managed to haul off and side-step. Grunting with fury, the other pursued, punching with both hands. Keith was badly punished, yet he knew enough of boxing to guard the worst of the swinging blows.

But he was getting the worst of it, he knew he could not last long, and he was still too lame to keep clear.

He grew desperate. Suddenly he stopped in his retreat, so suddenly that Harrigan was taken by surprise. As he blundered right on top of Keith, Keith got in under his guard, and drove in a left-hand punch. His fist took Harrigan just under the point of the jaw, and stopped him dead. His great arms went all adrift.

"Finish him!" Hutton's voice came vaguely to Keith's ears, and this time he obeyed orders. With all his remaining strength he struck the man on the throat, exactly on the lump called the Adam's Apple.

Harrigan clucked like a hen, his legs sagged, and down he went in the snow.

As Keith stood panting, hardly able to believe that he had won the fight, and so dizzy that he could hardly see, he heard Hutton give a sudden shout. "Look at them horses!" he cried, and made a dash towards the road.

Keith wheeled just in time to see the two great draught horses go galloping clumsily down the road, the piled up load of logs swaying behind them.

In a flash he realized what had happened. The skid he had placed under the runners had slipped, the load had run upon the horses, and frightened them so that they had bolted.

Forgetting all his aches and pains he rushed after them. But in his heart he knew that it was useless. Ten to one both of the splendid beasts would be killed, and they could not be replaced. Their loss would mean hanging up the winter work and the certain failure to get out the cedar before the spring thaw.

CHAPTER XXVII

KEITH KEEPS HIS TEMPER

Just ahead of the galloping horses the track rose slightly, and it was in Keith's mind that the slope might check them long enough for him to catch them up and stop them.

Vain hope, for by that time the two great powerful beasts had got up such speed that they went tearing up the little hill at full gallop.

Keith's heart was in his boots. His last hope was gone, for beyond the slight rise the track ran down hill all the way to the frozen lake, and disaster was certain. At such a pace the horses could not possibly keep their feet, the heavily-loaded sledge must run upon them and both the splendid animals would be killed outright or terribly maimed.

His heart pounding against his ribs and his breath whistling from his bursting lungs, Keith still ran desperately, but in spite of his most frantic efforts he had barely reached the foot of the little hill as the horses gained its summit. The piled up load of logs swayed terribly, and the sound of the steel-shod runners had risen to a sort of scream.

Just then, when all hope seemed gone, a figure black against the snow darted out from behind a patch of scrub at the head of the slope, just in front of the racing team, and Keith saw that it was Kirby Hart.

The sight did not give Keith much hope, for at the speed at which the horses were travelling, and with all this enormous weight behind them, it did not seem possible that anyone could stop them. Indeed it seemed to Keith that Kirby must be knocked down and ground to pieces under the galloping hoofs of the maddened beasts.

But Kirby was too wise to attempt to seize the heads of the runaways. He waited by the side of the track, and as they passed stooped swiftly and managed to seize the dangling reins. Then he flung his whole weight backwards, driving his heavily caulked soles deep into the ice.

Keith saw the heads of the horses go up, yet even so their pace hardly slackened, and Kirby was dragged forward, skating across the ice.

For the next few seconds it was nip and tuck, but Keith sprinting desperately up the slope, could see that Kirby's weight on the reins was having its effect, and that the speed of the runaways was slowing. Running as he had never run before, Keith overtook the sledge, and passing Kirby leaped into the little driving seat and, seizing the brake lever, flung on the brakes with all his force. The steel skid screamed and the broken ice flew up in white dust; but the good metal held, and under the tremendous resistance the terrified horses slowed first to a trot, then to a walk. Kirby leaped to their heads, and the danger was over.

Keith sprang from his seat. "My dear chap—" he began, then his legs gave under him, and he collapsed in a heap on the snow.

"Say, Keith! Whatever's the matter?" exclaimed Kirby in a badly scared voice.

"I—I'm all right," Keith gasped hoarsely. "O—only winded. Don't mind me. Hang on to the horses."

"But your face! What's the matter with your face? It's all over blood."

"Had a bit of trouble with another chap. That's how the horses came to get away. Kirby, I'm more grateful than I can say."

"Shucks!" grunted Kirby. "It wasn't anything. I'm mighty glad I happened to be here. You sure you are all right?"

"I shall be in a minute or two when I have got my wind back."

"You ought to be back in camp, and in your bunk," said Kirby. "Whoever it was you scrapped with, he's sure messed you up properly."

"I licked him anyhow," replied Keith grimly.

"Who was it?" questioned Kirby eagerly.

"That fellow Harrigan."

"Gee!" exclaimed Kirby. "Say, that took some doing. He's nigh twice your weight."

Keith rose slowly to his feet. "I'm all right now," he said. "I can take them on, Kirby."

"I guess you won't do anything of the sort," returned Kirby. "I'll finish this load for you, Keith. You go right back to camp. If those cuts of your get the frost in them you'll sure have trouble."

"Cuts," laughed Keith. "They are nothing. What do you think Crab will say if I quit because of a few measly bruises?"

"I wouldn't mind what Crab said," retorted Kirby, and as he spoke, quick light footsteps crunched on the frozen surface behind them, and the two spun round to find themselves facing the boss himself.

Crab's keen, greenish eyes dwelt for an instant on Kirby's excited face, then fixed upon Keith's bruised and gory countenance. "Who let those horses run away?" he demanded in cold, level tones.

"I did, sir," Keith answered.

"It wasn't his fault," broke in Kirby hotly.

"It was my fault, sir," said Keith. "I left them, and the skid slipped and they started. It was Kirby here who stopped them."

Crab turned to Kirby. "Can you drive?" he asked curtly.

"Yes, sir, but——"

Crab cut in. "Then take them on and dump your load. You, Hedley, get back to the camp. I'll have no man driving for me that leaves my horses on the track."

Kirby's cheeks were scarlet with indignation. "You don't understand," he began, but this time it was Keith who stopped him.

"Go ahead, Kirby," he said in a low voice, and turning round walked off towards the camp without another word.

Crab looked after him with an odd expression on that hard face of his. Then he swung on his heel and went back into the woods.

Reaching camp, Keith washed his face, then went to find Shorty. But Shorty was not in the cookshack, so Keith went back to the bunk-house. Before he reached the door, he saw Crab coming across the clearing in company with the cook. Crab saw Keith and beckoned to him. "Hedley," he said. "You've lost your job as swamper. Either you can take your time, or take on with Shorty here as cook's mate."

The colour rose to Keith's bruised face, and for a moment it was on the tip of his tongue to tell his uncle that he would quit at once. But Keith had had hard lessons during the past few weeks in the art of self-restraint. He straightened himself. "Very good, sir," he answered quietly. "I will help Scott." Without another word he walked straight into the cook-shack.

Shorty followed, and coming up to him laid a big hand on his shoulder. "Say, Keith, what have you been a-doing of?" he questioned gravely.

"I let the horses run away," Keith answered, "Kirby Hart stopped them, but the old man saw it, and that is why I have lost my job."

Shorty gazed at Keith. "Them horses didn't mark your face that way," he said.

Keith laughed harshly. "That's a fact," he answered. "If you want to know the truth, I had a turn up with that beauty Harrigan."

Shorty's eyes gleamed. "You don't say!" He paused. "And you come out of it alive," he added.

"Much more alive than Harrigan, anyway," responded Keith with a slight smile.

A new respect dawned in Shorty's eyes as he gazed at Keith's disfigured face. He brought his great hand down with

a sounding smack upon his knee. "I always said you was white, Keith, but, by gum, I never reckoned you was that kind of a scrapper."

The whole-hearted admiration in Shorty's words and voice was very pleasant to Keith. Shorty went on eagerly. "Say, tell us all about it, Keith. Was it what I said? Was Harrigan trying to decoy our chaps away?"

"That's just what I caught him doing," said Keith, "but I've a notion that he won't try it again."

"I'll lay he won't," cried Shorty delightedly. "What's more, I'll lay that Crab will look at things a bit different when he knows the truth."

Keith spoke sharply. "You are not to say a word, Shorty. I absolutely forbid you to tell Crab anything."

Shorty looked at Keith. Then he grinned slowly. "All right, Britisher," he said. "I won't say nothing."

CHAPTER XXVIII

DIRTY WORK AT THE CROSS ROADS

If Keith was slightly surprised at Shorty's ready acquiescence to his request it was not long before he came to understand the reason. Later that same night he had a message that he was wanted in Mr. Calvert's office, and he stiffened himself for what promised to be an unpleasant interview.

He found Crab seated as usual behind his desk, but the old man's face was decidedly less grim than on the occasion of their last meeting.

Keith stood bolt upright, waiting silently for his uncle to speak. For a moment or two those queer green eyes were fixed upon Keith's face. There was no blood upon it now, but the bruises were black and angry.

A slow smile parted Crab's thin lips. "He did mess you up a bit," he said, "but——" and there was something suspiciously like a chuckle in the old man's voice—"Harrigan is a darn sight worse-looking than you, Keith."

It was the first time that Crab had addressed his nephew by his Christian name, and Keith was so astonished that at first he could only stare.

"Sit down, Keith," said Crab, pointing to a chair, and Keith sat down, not feeling quite sure whether he was on his head or his heels.

Then suddenly he remembered. "Shorty promised——" he began indignantly.

His uncle raised a hand. "Don't get fretful. It wasn't Shorty. I got the yarn from Hutton."

He paused. "Keith, I'll own I was a bit hasty this afternoon, but I don't think the worse of you for making no excuses. Now I've taken your job away from you as swamper, and I never go back on my word. Still, I reckon I can do better with you than making you cook's mate. How'd you like to come here into the office for a bit? Morton, my clerk, has a head that's solid bone, and the accounts are tangled up good and proper. If you think you can straighten them, you can take a try at it. Do you know anything of book-keeping?" he ended sharply.

"I have learnt double entry," Keith answered quietly. "I shall be glad to try my hand."

"Very good," replied his uncle. "Then you begin to-morrow. Good-night."

Keith rose to go, but his uncle spoke again. "It may interest you to know that Harrigan has left," said Crab. "He didn't even come back to collect his dunnage or take his time."

"Which showed that he had some sense left," remarked Keith with a smile.

Crab nodded. "That's so, Keith. I don't fancy that the boys would have left a lot of him if they had known what you and I know."

In spite of his bruises and aches, Keith felt happier after that interview with his uncle than he had at any time since his first arrival, and what made his promotion pleasanter still was the very real delight shown by Shorty, Tony Brock and Kirby Hart when they heard the news.

Early next morning Keith took up his duties in the office. Crab had spoken no more than the truth when he said that the accounts were in a tangle, and Keith certainly had his work cut out for him to straighten them. Luckily for himself, he had a good head for figures and had been well grounded in book-keeping at school; yet even so, the light was burning in his office till past ten o'clock during every night of the next week, and he saw next to nothing of Tony and his other friends except at meal-times.

On the tenth day, Keith finished up the back work. With a sigh of relief he pinned together the many sheets of closely written figures and was laying them away when his uncle entered the office.

Without a word to Keith he picked up the sheets and glanced through them. Then he compared them with the ledger.

He nodded. "Some of your masters had more sense than mine ever had," he remarked. "You can keep right on in the office, Keith, and in future you'll draw clerk's pay, that is forty a month."

Keith went hot with pleasure, but he knew his uncle too well to say more than a brief, "Thank you, sir."

Crab went on. "You know we are short-handed. Shorty tells me there is a chance of picking up two or three good men over at Casey Creek. To-morrow morning he is going after them with the cutter. You can go along if you've a mind to."

"Thank you, sir," said Keith as briefly as before, but inwardly he was delighted, for although his uncle had not said so, he quite realized that the outing was in the nature of a reward for his work.

The morning dawned clear and bright, but the frost was if anything harder than ever, and even in the cook-shack buckets of water froze solid if more than ten feet from the stove.

But Keith and Shorty, well fed and well clothed, made little of the weather, and as soon as breakfast was over got busy harnessing the horses to Mr. Calvert's own cutter. While the horses were kept in a warm stable, the cutter stood with the logging sledges in an open shed, and as Shorty pulled it out Keith saw him wrinkle up his nose.

"Say, Keith," he remarked. "There's a mighty funny smell about this here sleigh."

As Keith came near he noticed it at once. "Phew!" he muttered. "I should rather think there was. It smells like rotten fish only worse. Not a skunk, is it?"

"It don't smell to me like a skunk," replied Shorty, in a puzzled tone, "but it's every bit as bad."

"It will wear off when we get started," said Keith as he slipped the bit into the mouth of one of the horses.

A few minutes more, and they were off. The snow was hard crusted and the going good, which was just as well, for Casey Creek was nearly thirty miles away, and they meant to be back by night. There was not a breath of wind, which made the cold just bearable. The horses were fresh as paint, and very soon the ring of axes on timber died away in the distance, and the two were speeding alone through the great silence of the frozen forest.

They came to a steepish hill, and the horses slowed to a walk. "Say, Keith," remarked Shorty, "that bad fish smell don't get any better."

"So I notice," replied Keith. "It's precious rum the way it sticks to the sleigh. You'd think this cold would kill it."

Shorty jumped out and walked behind the sleigh. "Phew!" he grunted. "The smell is real nasty. Seems to me like someone has poured a whole pot of the nasty stuff over the back of the sleigh."

"It's a poisonous reek whatever it is," replied Keith. "I only hope it wears off before we reach Casey Creek."

They reached the top of the little hill and Shorty got in again. Keith chirruped to the horses and they went off at a fast pace.

The country through which they were now passing was wild and desolate, and the trail ran between a belt of dark lonely forest and a long narrow sheet of water known as Spring Lake. Spring Lake was so called because it was full of springs. It had an odd way of rising and falling, and it never froze solid like other lakes in the district.

Shorty pointed to it. "Mush ice, Keith," he said. "Some parts a yard thick, and others where it wouldn't bear a kitten."

"Ugly-looking place," agreed Keith, "and those woods are thicker than any I've seen yet. It's a desolate bit of country."

"It sure is," replied Shorty. "Them trees isn't worth cutting, and I don't reckon there's a living thing within miles except deer and bar and wolves."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the silence was broken by a long-drawn, mournful howl. It was the most melancholy sound imaginable, and its echoes floated away across the icy expanse of Spring Lake.

"What was that?" asked Keith sharply.

Shorty looked at him oddly. "You mean to say you never before heard a wolf howl?"

"I don't think I ever have," Keith answered.

Shorty nodded. "I plumb forgot you'd only been out here a few weeks. Wal, I hopes for your sake as you won't never hear one any closer."

"Do you mean that wolves are dangerous?" questioned Keith.

"I sure do," replied Shorty soberly. "Not the little coyote as runs on the prairie, but this here is the big grey timber wolf, the hungriest, savagest thing as lives in the North-West."

At that moment the howl sounded again, and was immediately followed by an answering cry. And this second cry was nearer than the first.

Shorty glanced round and Keith saw an uneasy look cross his face. "Touch the horses up, Keith," he said briefly.

Keith did so, and the willing beasts quickened their pace to a canter.

"Are they following us, Shorty?" asked Keith.

"Sounds mighty like it," Shorty answered, and then for a third time the long-drawn howl came echoing down the valley.

The horses heard it, too, and broke into a gallop.

"Hold 'em, Keith," cried Shorty. "Don't let 'em break." As he spoke, he picked up his rifle, which lay in the bottom of the sleigh, and began to fill the magazine with cartridges.

CHAPTER XXIX

A RACE FOR LIFE

Keith had his work cut out to hold the horses, and very little attention to spare for anything else.

The wolf cry came again, and now it was not only much nearer but at least half a dozen wolves joined in it. Keith ventured to glance back over his shoulder, and there about a quarter of a mile behind the sledge, he saw the pack. There seemed to be about a dozen of the brutes, great, gaunt, mangy animals looking almost black against the snow.

"Hold your horses, Keith," snapped Shorty who was kneeling on the seat, facing backwards, with the rifle in his hands. "Keep 'em steady."

Keith hung on the reins like grim death, for the horses, although they could not see the wolves, were sweating with terror and pulling desperately. It was all that Keith could do to keep them from making a clean bolt.

A moment later, the ringing crack of Shorty's rifle sent the echoes flying and was rapidly followed by two more shots. "Stopped two on 'em anyway," grunted Shorty. "Don't worry, Keith. I reckon I can hold this lot so long as a fresh pack don't show up."

Keith could not answer, for every ounce of his strength and energy were employed in striving to control the maddened team. Shorty began to fire again, and with every shot it became more difficult for Keith to control the horses.

"Stop shooting, Shorty," he panted hoarsely. "I can't hold 'em much longer."

"I daren't," answered Shorty. "There's more'n a score of 'em now, and more comin' by the sound on 'em." He thrust fresh cartridges into the magazine, and set to firing again.

It was too much for the horses. They broke into a tearing gallop, the sledge swinging from side to side of the narrow track, and Keith, realizing that he could not stop them, devoted his remaining energies merely to keeping them on the trail.

The road was terribly narrow. To the left was a steep, stony drop down to the frozen surface of the lake, while to the right lay the level forest, a maze of stunted trees thickly covered with snow.

For a mile or more they went on at the same headlong pace, and still Shorty continued to fire steadily and deliberately. "I'm a-keepin' 'em back," he said over his shoulder to Keith. "There's a road-house down at the fur end of the lake, about three mile from here. If we kin make that, we'll be all right. Kin you keep 'em in the road?"

"I can do that," replied Keith, and the words were hardly out of his mouth before he caught sight of a large dark object lying exactly in the centre of the track about a quarter of a mile ahead. Next moment he realized that it was a great rock, and that there were no means of passing it. The horses might pass it, one on either side, but the sleigh would inevitably hit it, and at this mad pace be smashed to atoms. He and Shorty, if not killed on the spot, would be left maimed and helpless to the mercy of the wolves. As for pulling up, that he knew would be utterly out of the question, for the horses had the bits between their teeth, and were pulling at the reins alone.

He risked a glance back. The wolves were less than a hundred yards behind, a great black carpet of them, and although the trail behind them was littered with their dead bodies, the rest, maddened by hunger, kept up the chase.

It was plain to Keith that no help could be expected from Shorty. Whatever was to be done, he must depend upon himself.

He glanced at the wood to his right, and saw that the trees were not so close as they had been a mile back. It was just possible that there was room to drive the sleigh between them. The risk was fearful, for the ground was littered with fallen logs half hidden under the deep snow, but anything was better than hitting that monstrous lump of stone which barred the road.

"Hold on tight, Shorty," he shouted. "The track's blocked. I've got to take to the woods." Then he flung all his weight on the right hand rein, and by sheer strength swung the horses off the trail and into the forest.

The next few seconds were a nightmare of horror which Keith will never forget to the end of his days. Each moment a tree trunk loomed up exactly in their course, so that destruction seemed certain. Yet time after time Keith succeeded in avoiding the danger, and by sheer strength of wrist and arm wheeling his galloping team clear of the obstruction.

Twice the sleigh actually grazed a tree trunk, and once the runners struck a half hidden log with such force as would have flung Shorty clean out of the sleigh had he not been clinging with all his strength to the back of the seat.

Then suddenly Keith saw an opening to the left, and almost before he knew it, he had his horses back in the open road. The rock was behind them, and the worst was passed.

"Some driving, old-timer," said Shorty hoarsely. "Say, I'd never have believed in work like that unless I'd seed it."

In spite of his excitement, in spite of the danger which still threatened from the wolves, Keith felt a thrill of pleasure. "Old-timer" was the highest praise that Shorty could give to one who was still a tenderfoot.

"You can let 'em rip now," said Shorty. "The road is wider here."

Keith did let them rip, and the icy air whistled past his ears as the horses raced along the level stretch. Shorty was shooting again, and by the thuds and howls which followed each report, Keith knew that he was not wasting any cartridges.

"I see the road-house," shouted Keith, as the snow-clad roof of a long low building showed up among the trees to the right. "We shall be all right now."

But Keith had forgotten one thing, which was that the horses were again clean beyond his control. They knew nothing of the road-house, but only that the wolves were hot on their heels.

Keith stood up, hauling with all his weight upon the reins. It was useless, and he could not check their speed in the slightest.

"I can't stop them, Shorty," he cried despairingly.

"And I can't help you," Shorty said grimly, "for it's all I can do to keep these here blamed wolves back."

CHAPTER XXX

SHORTY TAKES A DAY OFF

Keith was in despair. He knew that there was no other help between the road-house and Casey Creek, a distance of about ten miles. He knew, too, that the horses could not last out that distance, that before they had covered half of it they would fail, and that one rifle alone would not be enough to check the wolf pack.

The sleigh was actually level with the roadhouse, and the horses travelling at the same frantic speed, when suddenly another weapon spoke. Keith knew that it was not Shorty's because the sound was heavier and deeper.

From Shorty came a sudden triumphant yell. "That's Bryson, Keith—Bryson the road-house man."

As he spoke, two men rushed out of the woods on to the road just ahead of the horses and flung up their arms, and the horses, startled, checked slightly. Keith put out the whole of his remaining strength, and to his intense relief found that the terrified animals were once more under his control. The two men ran forward, seized the horses' heads and brought them to a stop.

Instantly Shorty started shooting again, and was joined by Bryson, a great raw-boned backwoodsman, who was using a double-barrelled shot gun, loaded with buck-shot.

The combined fusillade was too much for the wolves, and as the storm of lead crashed through them, the pack turned tail and scattered like black evil shadows into the gloom of the forest. Bryson watched them as they went and fired both barrels after the nearest.

"Dog-gone if I've ever seed so many wolves since the big winter of '91," he remarked.

He turned and shook hands with Shorty. "You seem to have had a right tough time of it. Wherever did you collect all them there wolves?"

"Search me," replied Shorty. "I never knowed there was so many in this neck of woods."

Suddenly Bryson began sniffing the air. He was standing quite close to the back of the sleigh. He went nearer to the sleigh, bent down and sniffed again. Then he straightened up and turned to Shorty.

"Why, ye darn fool," he growled. "Whatever do ye expect, seeing as that sleigh of yours is plumb soaked in wolf dope?"

Shorty gazed at him with puzzled eyes.

"That's a new one on me, Bryson," he replied. "I never heard tell of wolf dope."

Bryson nodded. "I was forgetting as you had never done no trapping, Shorty," he said. "Every trapper knows wolf dope. They uses it to draw the wolves to their traps."

"And you means to say that there's wolf dope on this here sleigh?" said Shorty sharply. "Then this is a put-up job."

"Of course it's a put-up job," broke in Keith, "and that big rock in the road was part of the plot."

"Rock in the road," repeated Bryson. "Where was that?"

Keith explained, and Bryson and the two other men listened with evident interest.

When Keith had finished Bryson nodded again.

"Sure thing," he said. "It was a put-up job. There wasn't no rock on the lake road yesterday, for I come down there myself in the afternoon." He turned to Shorty. "You know of anyone as is special anxious for your decease, Shorty?" he asked.

It was Keith who answered. "Granite," he snapped.

Bryson whistled. "So you are up agen that there gent," he remarked. "Wal, I wouldn't wonder. He is a mean old cuss, is Granite Stone, and there's meaner than he as is working for him."

"That's so," agreed one of the other men. "Say, Shorty, what's the game up there on the hill? What's Granite got hid

in that there cave? I hear tell he's got a regular big force of men digging there."

"You better go and ask him," replied Shorty with a twinkle in his eye. "Myself, I'm not on speaking terms with the gent."

Bryson broke in. "Shorty, I reckon you've killed right smart of them wolves, and there's a bounty of ten dollars a head. You going to stop and help gather the pelts?"

Shorty shook his head. "We got business at Casey Creek," he said, "and we can't stop. I reckon you better gather in them wolves and we'll go shares in the cash, but we'd like to rest the horses a few minutes."

"You can put them right in the stable," said Bryson, "and while you rub 'em down I will get out my sleigh for you. It sure isn't safe to travel with the one you've got, for you are liable to collect all the wolves within twenty miles with that dope-soaked vehicle of yourn."

Shorty thanked him, and twenty minutes later, refreshed with hot coffee, Keith and Shorty started again. They saw no more wolves and reached Casey Creek in safety, where they were lucky enough to get hold of four good men. Hiring another sleigh to carry these and their dunnage, they were back at Cedar Camp just after nightfall.

A few days later Bryson called at the camp, and handed Shorty notes for fifty dollars, his share of the bounty on the wolves. Shorty insisted on sharing his windfall with Keith, and Keith blew his money at the canteen in purchasing delicacies which he shared with his chums at the camp.

On the following Friday evening Shorty called Keith aside. "See here, Keith," he said. "I guess it's about time we called on old Granite. The boss has given me a day off to-morrow, and I reckon you can have one if you likes to ask."

Keith was well ahead with his work, and his uncle made no bones about giving him the required permission, so very early the next morning he and Shorty left the camp.

Shorty's pockets were bulging, and Keith, too, carried a small but rather heavy bundle which Shorty had made up. As usual at this time of the year, the weather was fine but as cold as ever.

Keith noticed that Shorty was careful to avoid the path. He took short cuts through the thickest of the woods, coming out at last at a spot high above the blocked up mouth of the great cave.

Looking down, Keith saw at least a score of men at work clearing the big fall.

"That must be costing the old man something," he remarked.

Shorty grinned. "You bet it is," he answered. As he spoke, he took a pair of field-glasses from their case and focussed them on the working party.

"Hulke is there," he said presently. Then, after a pause, "By gum, Keith! Looks to me like the old man had collected every bad hat in the county."

He closed the glasses, put them back in their case, and rose to his feet. "Now I reckon we will go for a little walk over the hill," he said.

Keith wondered what the other was after, but did not enquire. He had already learned never to ask unnecessary questions.

It was very rough going, for the top of the mountain was a mass of great boulders all covered thickly with ice and snow. But Shorty clearly knew what he was about, and in a quarter of an hour or so the two came to a standstill at the mouth of a dark-looking shaft which resembled the mouth of a big well.

"Know what this is, Keith?" asked Shorty.

Keith nodded. "I think it's the top of the shaft which we saw from below that first day we were in the cave."

"You've got in once," replied Shorty, "and a mighty useful find it was." As he spoke he produced a short, pointed steel bar from his capacious pocket, and using a stone as hammer, proceeded to drive it into a crevice close by the mouth of the shaft. Then he made Keith open his bundle, and from this he took a coil of thin but very strong rope.

Fastening one end of the rope to the bar, he flung the other down the shaft, swung himself lightly over the edge and slipped away into the darkness. The next moment, Keith heard the scratch of a match and saw a light break out some twenty feet below.

"Come right along," said Shorty briefly, and Keith followed him down the rope.

Keith wondered greatly what was in Shorty's mind, but still he asked no question. Shorty walked off down the sloping tunnel and Keith followed in silence.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE CRACK IN THE WALL

Shorty made his way straight to the great cavern where they had first found the anthracite, and turning his light on to the wall, began picking away the surface with a small, sharp-pointed hammer. Keith watched him for a few moments, then took an electric torch from his own pocket, and switching it on began to explore the rest of the cave.

Some fifty or sixty feet to the left of the spot where Shorty was busy, Keith found a narrow crack in the wall of the cave. It was just wide enough to squeeze into, and shining his light into it, he noticed that it widened a little way in. He pushed into it, and after creeping for a little distance found himself in a hall so vast that his light could not reach the far wall. He kept along to the left, and at once noticed a dark band running just above floor-level all along the left-hand wall. It was about four feet wide, and when he had examined it, he realized that it was the same hard, shiny mineral of which he had found a specimen on that first day in the cave.

He stood staring at it for a minute or two. "It's a splendid seam of coal," he said to himself. "What a horrid shame that Granite should have swindled my uncle out of all this!"

Just then he heard Shorty calling to him, so made his way back into the other cavern.

Shorty had chipped quite a considerable hole in the wall of the cave, and was standing looking into it with a puzzled expression in his blue eyes.

"Say, Keith, I thought as I knowed something about coal, but this here plumb beats me. I reckoned the seam ran right-handed, but now I've opened it up it looks like it was only a pocket. I tell you straight, it beats me."

"Oh, the coal's here all right," replied Keith. "I've just found truck-loads of it in another cave."

"Which way?" asked Shorty crisply.

"I'll show you," said Keith, and led the way to his new find.

Shorty had some difficulty in squeezing through the narrow fissure, but he managed to do successfully, and Keith led him to the spot where the great black band of anthracite showed dark between two layers of gray rock.

Watching Shorty, Keith saw the little man's eyes fairly blaze with excitement. "Some seam, Keith," he snapped out. Then in a moment he was busy, first chipping the seam with his hammer, then rapidly following along it.

Keith walked slowly after. He could not understand Shorty's excitement, and he himself was sick and sorry at the thought that all this wonderful find should have fallen into the hands of that wretched old swindler, Granite.

Presently Shorty came back to him. "I'm a gump, Keith," he exclaimed. "Someone ought to kick me. I never was so plumb mistook in all of my born days."

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Keith in some surprise.

"Matter!" exploded Shorty. "Why, the seam don't run right-handed at all. It swings plumb to the left."

"Is there anything wonderful about that?" questioned Keith.

"Wonderful," repeated Shorty. "Providential, I'd call it, if you asked."

Keith shook his head. "Forgive me, Shorty. I know I'm awfully stupid, but I don't understand a bit."

Shorty gazed at him a moment. "It's me that's stupid. Of course you don't understand." Then he suddenly burst out into a chuckle which amazed Keith. "It's Granite I'm a-thinking of," apologized Shorty, and chuckled again. "I'd give a farm to see his face when he knows."

Then, as he saw the hopeless bewilderment on Keith's face, he proceeded to explain. "It's this way, Keith. When I first seed this here coal-seam, I made sure it ran right-handed and I said so, and that's why Granite was so desperate anxious to close the deal with Crab. You see he reckoned jest as I did, that the bulk of the coal lay under Crab's land."

He laughed again. "But it don't. The main seam runs clean the other way, and all that is worth digging is under the land that belonged to Granite until he was fool enough to trade it."

At last Keith understood, but the knowledge was so staggering that it was a moment or two before he could digest it. "Then—then—all that swindle of Granite's goes for nothing," he gasped out. "You are telling me that all this fortune in coal belongs to my—that is to Mr. Calvert?"

"Every bit of it worth having," declared Shorty gleefully. "And don't forget as it was you that made the find, Keith."

"Nonsense," retorted Keith. "That was pure chance."

"Most finds is chance if it comes to that," replied Shorty gravely. "Anyways you and me's partners in this here discovery, and we goes fifty-fifty in whatever's coming from it."

Shorty went on to describe in more or less technical language just how the main seam of coal lay, and why he felt sure that it was nearly all under Crab's land. But Keith was too excited to take it all in. His one idea was to get back to camp and tell his uncle of the discovery.

When he suggested this to Shorty, the latter at once put the veto on Keith's suggestion. "Don't you be in such a hurry, Keith," he said. "The coal won't run away."

"But Granite may find out," returned Keith, "and if he does he will go to the boss and try to buy back this part of the land."

Shorty grinned. "It's going to be quite a while before Granite gets in here," he said confidently, "and I'm a-going to see that he opens out that mouth good and proper before he knows who he's doing it for. There's no sense in having Crab spend his money in doing a job that Granite will pay for."

Shorty laughed again, and Keith had to realize that there was good sense in his arguments.

"What are you going to do now then?" he asked.

"I'm going to have a good look at this here seam, and follow it as far as I can see it," replied Shorty. "After that, I

reckon we'll pay a visit to the mouth, and see how old Granite is a-getting on. When that's done we can think of getting back to camp."

For the next hour Shorty was very busy over the coal seam. At the end of the hour, he told Keith that he was now certain that all the thickest and best of the coal belonged to Crab, and that the little that lay on Granite's side of the boundary was hardly worth digging.

"It won't begin to pay him for what he's spent on opening up that mouth which he blowed down," said Shorty, "and I'm a-looking forward to telling him that bit of truth my own self."

After creeping back through the fissure, Shorty set to work to block this up with loose pieces of rock, and he did this so cleverly that when he had finished it was fairly certain that no one passing that way would even suspect that there was an opening. Then he and Keith made their way to the old entrance. From within, the fall looked exactly the same as when they had last seen it, but through the mass of fallen rubble they could plainly hear the picks and shovels at work on the outside.

Shorty listened awhile. "I guess it won't be long before they are through," he remarked. "Seems to me that you and me had better hang them up a piece longer."

"How do you mean?" asked Keith.

"Simple as pie," replied Shorty as he produced a dynamite cartridge and a length of fuse.

"You don't mean that you are going to blow it up again?" exclaimed Keith in startled tones.

"That's jest what I do mean," said Shorty. "Keith! I'm a-going to skin that old swindler. There isn't no way to send him to prison like he deserves, so it's up to us to see he's punished properly. Granite is a miser, and you can't hurt him worse than by taking his money away from him. That's what I'm a-going to do, and I'm going to do it good and proper. By the time I am through with him, he won't have five dollars to call his own."

CHAPTER XXXII

GRANITE GETS BUSY

Shorty worked with his usual silence and speed, and within a very few minutes a cartridge was fixed and the fuse cut and set.

"I am not a-going to put much explosive in this time," he explained to Keith, "only just enough to bring down a few more tons of rock and hang up Granite till we've had time to look around."

"But isn't it a bit risky?" suggested Keith. "Won't Granite be likely to hear the explosion? If he does, he'll certainly suspect that something is up."

Shorty grunted. "Pshaw! Even if he does hear, he won't know what it is. He'll only think there's been a bit of a rock-slide."

Keith was not satisfied, but he did not say so. After all, as he argued to himself, Shorty knew more of the game than he did, so he merely stood by and waited until Shorty had completed his task.

Shorty lit the fuse, and the two hurried away to a safe distance. There followed the thud of the explosion, then a great mass of rock and rubble came crashing down.

Shorty waited until the dust had cleared. "A mighty neat job," he said with an approving chuckle. "I reckon that means another three weeks' job for the gents outside."

He took Keith by the arm. "Come on, son," he said. "I guess we'll be getting back to camp."

It was a longish way back to the shaft, and Keith breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the rope still hung where they had left it. Shorty took hold of it and climbed up as easily as a monkey. The little man's strength was simply prodigious.

Then Keith followed, and was not sorry to find himself once more in the open air. He had not much use for any underground places.

Shorty pulled up the rope, and was in the act of coiling it neatly when Keith gave a sudden start. "Someone's coming, Shorty," he snapped out.

Shorty glanced round in the direction in which Keith was pointing. "Gee, but it's Granite," he muttered. "Blamed if I thought the old bushwhacker had that much sense."

Looking extraordinarily tall and gaunt against the background of snow-covered rocks, Granite came striding towards them. "He is in a rare rage," whispered Keith, but Shorty only grinned.

Granite came straight up to them. His parchment-like face was twitching with anger. He was not a pleasant sight.

"I got you this time," he burst out in a voice that cracked with sheer rage. "I got you, you dirty sneaking skunks."

Shorty took no offence at the abuse. "I hear you say so, Mr. Stone," he answered calmly. "What do you reckon to do about it?"

"Do about it," repeated Granite, bristling all over like an angry cat. "I'm a-going to take ye straight afore the nearest judge. I'll learn ye."

"What for?" enquired Shorty mildly. "What seems to be the trouble, Mr. Stone?"

"You got the impudence to ask me that?" spluttered Granite. "Didn't I warn yer what would happen next time I caught ye trespassing?"

"It do seem to me I remember something of the sort," Shorty answered sweetly. "But what proof have you got as we've been trespassing, Mr. Stone?"

"What proof?" roared Granite. "This is my ground you're a-standing on right now."

Shorty shook his head. "Was your ground, you mean," he replied. "This was your ground afore you traded with Mr. Calvert. It's Crab's now."

Granite made an extraordinary noise in his throat. "You lie!" he bellowed.

To give a man the lie in the North-West is usually a fighting matter, but Shorty kept his temper admirably. "Them words isn't what I call polite," he remarked, "but I reckon as you never had no one to teach you manners, so I'll merely say as you're mistook. Afore I come here, I took the trouble to look up the map, and the line runs jest about fifty yards the other side of this here shaft."

He paused, and grinned. "So the boot's on the other foot, Granite, and it's you as is doing the trespassing."

Keith watching Granite, saw his leathery cheeks go dull red. The man shook from head to foot, and for a moment Keith really believed that he was going to have a seizure of some sort. But he pulled himself together, and started on a new tack.

"If you are not on my ground now, you have been," he growled. "You've jest come up out of the cave, I seed you."

"I reckon we've got a perfect right to come out of the cave or to go into it," responded Shorty. "This here end of the cave belongs to Crab; you didn't buy all of it."

"But you've been in my part of it," snarled Granite.

Shorty laughed again, "It's up to you to prove your words, Mr. Stone," he answered. "But I likes to be fair. See here, you can have a loan of this here rope and we'll wait while you goes down and explores."

The suggestion did not seem to appeal to Granite, who in response made a remark that was certainly not a blessing.

"Naughty, naughty," chuckled Shorty reprovngly. Then he changed his tone. "We got to be moving, Mr. Stone. We are busy folk, we are. We haven't got no time to waste trespassing on other folk's property. We'll tell Mr. Calvert we met you. So long!" Picking up his things, he beckoned to Keith and the two walked off, leaving Granite standing by the mouth of the shaft.

It was not until they were well out of sight of Granite that Shorty spoke. "Say, Keith," he remarked more gravely than usual, "this is some mix up. I never reckoned that old Granite was smart enough to go hunting for that other hole."

"He must have heard us," replied Keith. "He didn't need to be very smart to put two and two together when he heard all that rock crashing down. I told you it was risky."

Shorty nodded. "I got to say you was right, Keith. This here business has kind of forced my hand."

"You mean that Granite will go down the shaft and find out the real lie of the coal seam," said Keith.

"I don't reckon as he'll find his way into that there inner cave," replied Shorty thoughtfully, "but I'll allow it's on the cards as he might do so. Anyways, we'll have to tell Crab right away how things stand."

"I am sure that will be best," agreed Keith. "Then the sooner we get back, the better."

By this time they were off the crown of the hill, and making their way through the scrub growth and the edge of the timber line. Keith noticed that Shorty was taking advantage of all the thickest of the cover, and that every now and then he would stop for a moment and look round carefully.

"Do you think he is following us?" he asked Shorty.

"I wouldn't wonder," Shorty answered briefly. "He is plumb scared, and when a feller like that is scared, he gets right down dangerous."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, before a whip-like report rang through the frosty air, and at the same instant a bullet zipped through the branches just over their heads and buried itself in the hillside with an ugly smack.

In a flash Shorty had seized Keith and pulled him down. "Creep," he ordered curtly. "Creep on your hands and knees, and whatever you do, don't raise your head unless you want a bullet through it. It wasn't no pistol, that bullet come from. It was a rifle, and an express if I'm not mistook. What's more, the chap as is using it is a long ways above us on the hilltop."

As he spoke so did the rifle, and two more nickel-pointed bullets plumped into the frozen ground within a few yards of their hiding-place.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GRANITE TRIES HARD

"It's all right, Keith," said Shorty reassuringly. "The fellow can't see us. He's only shooting by guess-work."

"Seems to me he's guessing pretty accurately," grumbled Keith.

Shorty did not reply. Lying quietly under cover of a snow-clad boulder, he was studying the hillside below them.

Presently he nodded as if satisfied. "See that there clump of bushes, Keith?" he asked as he pointed to a patch of scrub growth some thirty yards to their left.

Keith nodded.

"When I says go, you run for that jest as quick as your legs will take you."

Keith rose to his feet and stood bent double under cover of the boulder.

"Go!" said Shorty, and Keith shot away full speed. He heard the rifle crack again but the bullet went wide, and next instant he was safe in the thick patch of scrub. He had hardly time to turn, before Shorty was with him.

"One up on 'em this time," grinned Shorty.

"I reckon we are all right now, Keith. We are real close to that gully as cuts the hillside and runs right down to Cedar Camp."

"I know," said Keith eagerly, "the one that Mold and Fargus were going to chuck me into that morning. If we can get down into that, we ought to be safe enough."

"We'll get into it right enough," said Shorty. "You follow along right after me, and there won't be no trouble."

He started, and in spite of his short legs and square heavy body, no Red Indian scout could have moved more silently than he. Keith followed, doing his best to imitate every motion of his leader, and the proof of their success was that their unseen enemy did not find it worth while to fire another shot.

After ten minutes of creeping and crawling, the pair found themselves on the edge of the gully. At this point it was wider and not so steep-sided as higher up, yet even so, it was a difficult and dangerous scramble to reach the bottom.

Once there, however, it was plain that they were quite out of sight or reach of anyone shooting from the top of the hill.

"Euchred them this time, I reckon," said Shorty in a satisfied tone. "Now all we got to do is to walk right back to camp and have our talk with Crab."

Keith straightened his aching back. "Can we spare three minutes to get our breath and a drink of coffee, Shorty?" he asked.

"Sure," replied Shorty. "But not more'n three, son, for I reckon as old Granite is none too anxious for either of us to get back to camp alive."

Keith had cold coffee in a flask, and very refreshing they both found it after their strenuous morning. Keith was in the act of putting the stopper back in the flask, when from somewhere up the hill came the deep boom of a heavy explosion.

Keith started sharply. "What's that?" he exclaimed.

Shorty stood perfectly still, listening hard.

There came to Keith's ears a dull thunder of sound, a low rumble which went on and on. "They've started something," he muttered in a puzzled tone.

Shorty suddenly woke to life. "Started something!" he repeated. "By thunder, but you're right, Keith. That's water, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Water!" cried Keith. "You mean——"

"I mean," said Shorty sharply, "that old Granite is a bit more foxy than I reckoned. If I'm not a whole heap mistook, he's blowed out the bar of rock between the underground lake and the outside."

"What's he done that for?" demanded Keith.

"If you wait here, it won't be long before you knows," said Shorty grimly. "This here gulch——"

Keith broke in sharply. "I know—of course I know. Every drop of that water will strike the gulch and come down it. The old sweep means to drown us out."

"That's jest about the size of it," agreed Shorty. "He reckons to drive us out in the open, and shoot us up as we run."

"Then the sooner we get out of this the better," said Keith as he started for the bank.

"There isn't no such terrible hurry," Shorty told him. "We are all of a mile below the cave mouth, and the gulch turns and twists all the way down the hill. I reckon we've got all of five minutes before the water gets this far."

He glanced round. "We'll jest run a little ways further down the gulch and mebbe we can find an easier way out. Come right along."

He started running down the bed of the gorge, and Keith followed. The roaring sound was growing louder, and Keith felt anything but happy.

Shorty heard it too. "I guess we'd better not take any chances," he called to Keith over his shoulder. As he spoke he swung to the left, and began clawing his way up the rocky side of the deep channel.

Reaching the top, he thrust his head cautiously above the rim. "Mighty little cover, Keith," he observed, "but there's a bunch of trees jest over there which will give a shelter till we can make up our minds which way we'll go. Watch out for bullets."

So saying, he scrambled up on to the level and raced for the cover which he had pointed out. As Keith followed he heard the rifle cracking again from up the hill, but the distance was great and he did not even hear the bullets strike. A moment later, he had flung himself into the thick cover, and dropped breathlessly by Shorty's side.

"All right so far," he panted. "What's the next move, Shorty?"

"Looks to me like we'll have to stay here till dark," said Shorty, "and a mighty cold job it's a-going to be."

Keith looked round. The little clump of scrub in which they were hidden was the only cover for a considerable distance in any direction. All around them was bare hill side, thickly covered with deep snow. Far away below lay the great cedar forest, and beyond it the broad frozen lake. From among the trees the smoke of the camp rose almost straight into the windless air.

"It looks as if you were right, Shorty," said Keith ruefully. Then all of a sudden he started up. "Good guns!" he gasped. "The camp! I'd clean forgotten. The gulch runs right through it. They'll be flooded out. We must warn them."

He was starting away, but Shorty caught him by the arm. "It's all right, son. You don't need to worry. The gulch is

big enough to hold all the water as'll come down out of that there pond. I don't reckon the camp will suffer any."

"Are you sure of that?" demanded Keith.

"I guess I wouldn't be here if I wasn't," replied Shorty dryly.

Before Keith could answer, a fresh sound broke upon their ears, a sound so loud that it completely drowned the roar of the flood. It came from high up the hill.

"W-what's that?" began Keith, but Shorty had left him and darted back in among the trees. Keith saw him disappearing among them up the hill.

He followed him, and came up with him on the upper edge of the little wood.

There was no need for any explanation. High above them, the white snow was blackened by an immense mass of rock and rubble which was leaping and thundering down the steep. Every moment the mass increased in size as fresh rocks and masses of ice and snow were shaken from their bed and came roaring down. The ghastly part of it was that this avalanche was descending straight upon the little wood which was the hiding-place of Keith and Shorty.

Keith grabbed Shorty by the arm. "Run!" he snapped out. "We must run. It's our only chance."

Shorty did not budge. "Where's your hurry, Keith?" he demanded.

"You're crazy," cried Keith. "The fall is coming straight down upon us. For any sake, let's get out of this before it hits us."

"Sit tight, Keith," advised Shorty calmly, "There's jest one thing as you've forgot, and I reckon Granite forgot it too. The gulch lies right between that there fall and ourselves."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Keith realized their truth, for with miraculous suddenness the great thundering, roaring avalanche absolutely disappeared. For a moment the roar of its fall continued, but of the hundreds of tons of rock and snow which composed it, there was no longer a sign.

Shorty turned to Keith. "Told you so, son," he remarked with a dry chuckle. "Granite's foxy, but he's not quite foxy enough, and now I reckon he's messed up things good and proper."

"How do you mean?" questioned Keith.

Shorty chuckled. "You watch and see, son."

CHAPTER XXXIV

GRANITE SKIDS

At first Keith had not the foggiest notion of what Shorty was talking about. But it was not long before he began to understand.

The spot at which the avalanche had disappeared into the gulch was about a quarter of a mile above their shelter, and presently Keith, still gazing at the spot, noticed that the pure white snow was taking on a grayish tinge. The stain spread rapidly.

Keith turned to Shorty. "The water's running over," he said eagerly.

"Took you quite a while to see it," grinned Shorty. "But jest watch."

"What's going to happen?" asked Keith.

"I'm no prophet," replied Shorty, "but I'm sure hoping."

Keith was puzzled, but held his peace. If Shorty didn't mean to talk, it was no use trying to make him.

The grayness spread with extraordinary speed. The whole of the snow below the dam in the ravine was rapidly turning into one immense sheet of solid ice. Presently, Keith was able to see the dammed back-water actually pouring over the lip of the ravine and trickling across the ice to soak the snow-field below. But this it hardly reached before it too turned into ice.

Keith was so interested that he almost forgot the bitter cold. The temperature was a long way below zero, and already his hands and feet were becoming numb.

Shorty had got out his glasses, and focussed them on the long terrace below the mouths of the cave. At last he lowered them, and shut them with a snap. "Jest as I reckoned," he remarked in a tone of deep satisfaction. "Some on 'em is a-coming. I reckon it's Granite hisself, and Hulke Hanson with him."

He was right. Two figures came into sight from among the rocks high up the hill, and began to make their way down the long slope. Keith noticed that they took all the cover they could find.

"Not taking any chances, be they!" remarked Shorty. "Still, if I'd got a rifle mebbe they wouldn't be so safe as they thinks they is."

"They've got rifles," said Keith uncomfortably.

Shorty patted his holster. "And I got a gun," he answered quietly. "You don't need to worry, Keith."

Granite and his companion reached the gorge, and apparently crossed it on the top of the dam. They were getting uncomfortably close to the wood, but when Keith glanced at Shorty he saw no sign of alarm on his friend's face, but instead a broad grin. He grew more puzzled than ever.

Hulke, who was leading the way, turned and spoke to Granite. The distance was too great to hear what he said. Granite came pushing on past him impatiently, and stepped out upon the frozen surface.

Shorty's fingers closed on Keith's arm. "Gee, but he's done it," he snapped out.

Granite had done it. No human being can walk upon a one-in-three slope of glare ice and the moment Granite tried to do so, his feet went from under him, he crashed down on his back, and came tobogganing downwards with ever increasing speed.

He shrieked with rage and fear. He grasped wildly in both directions with his long arms, making desperate efforts to pull up. It was all quite useless. The only result was to make him spin round and round like a great beetle. Sometimes he came head first, sometimes feet first. At one time he was on his back and another on his face.

"Oh!" gasped Keith, weak with laughter. "Oh! I understand now, Shorty."

"I thought mebbe you would," returned Shorty, grinning. "Foxy Granite has sure delivered himself into the hands of the enemy."

What Shorty said was no more than the truth, for by this time the ice extended very nearly as far as the upper edge of the wood, and Granite was shooting down towards this edge at the rate of knots.

Before he reached, Shorty walked calmly out of cover and up towards him, and Keith realizing that Hulke would not dare to shoot for fear of hitting Granite, followed.

Granite was lying in the snow a few yards below the edge of the ice. He had very little breath left in his long gaunt body, and very few clothes upon it. The ice was rough in places, and Granite's garments, such as remained, hung in tattered fragments.

"This is sure kind of you to come arter us in sech a hurry, Mr. Stone," said Shorty, as he took firm hold of the wretched man and set him on his feet. "Was you wanting anything?"

But Granite was beyond speech, and could only glare vacantly in the face of his tormenter.

Shorty turned to Keith. "The gent is hurt," he said gravely. "Take a hold of his arm, Keith. He's a-coming right down to the camp with us."

"I'm not a-going to no camp of your'n," returned Granite hoarsely. "You let me be. I'm a-going home."

"I'm right sorry to contradict a gent," said Shorty, "but you're not a-going home, and you are a-coming to Cedar Camp. Walk him right along, Keith," he added.

Granite struggled feebly, but he was far too shaken to make any real resistance, and one on each side of him Keith and Shorty led him down the hill. They did not hurry, for they knew that none of Granite's people would dare to shoot.

Half an hour later, they marched their prisoner into the bunk-house and left him under charge of Shorty's assistant.

"Take right good care of him," Shorty told the man. Then he turned to Keith. "Now I guess we'll go and see the boss," he said briefly.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SOUNDS IN THE NIGHT

"And what do you want to see the boss about?" came a voice, and Keith spun round to see his uncle standing just behind them. Crab Calvert always had that queer knack of turning up just when he was least expected.

"He's a-going to tell ye lies about me," protested Granite shrilly. "Don't you listen to him."

"All right, Granite. I'll hear his first and yours afterwards," said Crab. "Come into the office, Shorty. You, too, Hedley."

He led the way, and they followed. Crab flung himself into his big wooden chair and fixed his odd greenish eyes on Shorty. "Fire ahead," he said briefly.

Shorty returned his gaze. "Mr. Calvert, you got any notion why that there Granite was so anxious to do a deal with you over the cedars?"

Crab shrugged his shoulders. "I reckoned he was trying to do me down some way, but I haven't lost sleep hunting it out," he answered.

"What's the cedar worth?" asked Shorty bluntly.

"Fifty thousand, maybe," replied the other.

"And what Granite reckoned to get is likely worth ten times that," said Shorty. "That there cave up the hill is plumb full of anthracite coal."

Crab whistled softly. "The mischief, you say! Who found it?"

"Hedley found it."

"I didn't, sir," cut in Keith. "At least I shouldn't have known what it was except for Scott."

Crab paid no attention to his nephew. "Fire ahead, Shorty," he ordered.

Shorty did fire ahead. Without wasting any words, he told how Keith had found the coal on the day when they had been searching for the lost securities, how Granite had followed, overheard, sneaked out and blown the mouth of the cave in so as to prevent them from getting out again. "Then he come straight down to you," went on Shorty, "and fixed up the deal right away."

Crab chuckled grimly. "I wondered why he was in such an almighty hurry," he said. "And what did he say when he met you and Hedley again, Shorty?"

"He said a heap," replied Shorty dryly, "but there's more to this than I've told ye. Keith and me, we went there this morning and got into the cave by the back way, as I told ye of, and Keith here made another find. The seam which I reckoned ran left-handed runs out this way, an' all the best of it is under the land as was Granite's afore he swapped with you."

Crab sat up straight, and for once Keith saw him show some slight sign of excitement. "You're sure?" he asked curtly.

"Plumb sure. I knows jest whar your line runs."

"Does Stone know this?"

"No, and I don't want him to."

"That why you brought him along to camp?"

"No, sir. He brought hisself."

Crab frowned. "I'm not asking for any foolishness," he growled.

"No foolishness about it," retorted Shorty. "It's the truth I'm giving you. The old fool skidded right down the hill plumb into our arms. Ye see, he were trying to flood Keith and me out o' the gully, but his little joke went kind of wrong, and he was the one as suffered."

Crab made an impatient gesture. "What in sense are you talking about, Shorty? This is Dutch to me."

Keith broke in and explained, and when he told how the flood had gone wrong and how Granite had been caught in his own trap his uncle's grim face relaxed, and he actually smiled.

"I get you," he said. "Gee, but I'd like to have been there to see that poor old boob come skating down the hill!" He paused. "So Stone knows the other way into the cave," he remarked thoughtfully.

"That's so," said Shorty, "but it won't do him a lot of good. If he reckons to get coal he'll hev to open up the main mouth, the one as he's working on right now."

Crab nodded again. "And how long do you reckon that will take him with the men he's got?"

"All of three weeks."

Crab raised his head. "Then I guess he can go right ahead," he said briefly.

Shorty looked doubtful, but Crab went on. "The coal won't run away, Shorty, and anyways if the old goat starts digging on my side of the line it's so much the worse for him. Let him go ahead and open up the seam if he wants to."

"You mean you're going to finish up this job first?" asked Shorty.

"I certainly am," replied Crab with decision. "And since I know that with you two it won't go further, I'll add that I've got to. I need the money to pay wages and camp expenses, and if the cut pans out as I hope it will I reckon to have a goodish bit over, enough maybe to open up that coal properly."

"You could sell it if you'd a mind to," suggested Shorty.

"I know that, Shorty, but I'd a heap rather work it myself. From what you tell me, I reckon there's big money in it."

"You can gamble on that," said Shorty briefly.

Crab smiled slightly. "Very good. Then for the present we'll keep on getting out the cedar, and if that pans out right, when the run is over, we'll start in the coal business. And if you want the job of mine-boss, it's yours, Shorty."

There came a gleam in Shorty's blue eyes. "I'm your man, boss," he said. "And now I reckon I'm to turn old Granite loose?"

"You are," replied Crab. "But I don't reckon you'll get any gratitude out of him for that."

In this Crab proved a true prophet, for Granite was as savage as a bear with a sore head. "You thinks yourself smart, Mr. Shorty Scott," he sneered, "but jest you wait. I'll get you."

"Then you'll hev to shoot a bit straighter than you did to-day," grinned back Shorty. "And next time ye comes down the hill you better borry a sledge o' some sort. It would sure save your clothes a heap."

Granite's leathery face was convulsed with rage. "I'll get you," he roared. "I'll be even with you fer this. You and your boss and this here cub"—pointing to Keith—"I'll see ye all three in the poor-house or the penitentiary afore I'm done with ye."

He went away up the hill with his tattered garments waving in a cold breeze which had sprung up, and Shorty and Keith stood and watched him. "He's a mean old cuss," said Shorty. "I'd like mighty well to know what he'll be up to next."

"I don't see what he can do unless he hires Hulke Hanson to shoot us from behind a tree," replied Keith.

Shorty shook his head. "He won't do that. He's too scared of the Sheriff. But he'll try something, and he'll try it soon. He hates us both that bad it's fair hurting him." He turned. "Guess I better go and see about supper," he remarked. "The boys will be in right soon."

Saturday night was always a jolly one in camp. Since there was no hurry about getting up next morning the men sat up late, and there was much singing and other fun. It was about eleven when Keith turned in. Usually he slept like the dead till turning-out time, but on this night he was roused by what sounded like a gun-shot. He sat up, and glancing at his watch saw that it was just two o'clock.

Bang! he heard again. Then bang—bang—bang! A dozen or more reports followed one another, and they were heavier than gun shots. He jumped up.

Others in the bunk-house had also been roused. "What's up? Who's a-shooting?" grumbled sleepy voices.

"I'm going to jolly well find out," said Keith, as he began quickly to fling on his clothes.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE BROKEN TRACK

It was one thing for Keith to announce his intention of finding out what caused the explosions; it was quite another to do it, for when he got outside the darkness was intense, and the cold so bitter that he began to seriously regret leaving his warm bunk.

Tony Brock was the only other member of the camp crew who had roused out, and Keith found the boy beside him.

"You heard it, Tony?" asked Keith.

"You bet I heard it," Tony answered, "but I haven't a dog's notion where it was."

"It didn't sound very close," said Keith doubtfully.

"I thought it came from the lake," declared Tony.

"Then come on," said Keith, whose teeth were beginning to chatter. "If we stand here we shall freeze stiff."

So the two started off in the direction of the lake. A stiffish breeze was blowing, and the only sound was the roar of the wind in the lofty summits of the cedars. The cold was almost unendurable.

Tramping along the ice-road, they reached the shore of the lake, and here the north-easterly wind caught them full. Thin drifts of hard frozen snow, fine as diamond dust, swept across the ice and cut their faces cruelly.

For some minutes the two stood staring out into the starlit gloom.

"I can't see a blamed thing," growled Keith.

"Nor I," shivered Tony. "Do you reckon it could have been Granite's people blasting up the hill?"

"It warn't up the hill," came a voice behind them, and Shorty, looking like a bear in a heavy wolf-skin coat, came alongside. "The noise come from the lake. I'm right down sure of that."

"It might have been ice bubbles bursting," suggested Tony.

"It warn't that," returned Shorty curtly. "When a ice bubble bursts, there's jest one pop, not eight or ten one arter the other."

"Then I suppose it's up to us to cross the lake and see," said Keith.

"That's so," agreed Shorty, "but walk mighty careful, Keith. Mebbe I'd better go first."

He did not explain the reason for his caution, but took the lead, and in single file the three moved out across the frozen surface of the lake. Shorty kept to the track along which the loads were hauled, but walked slowly and with evident caution.

They had travelled perhaps a quarter of a mile when Shorty pulled up abruptly, and Keith heard him say something under his breath which was certainly not a blessing.

"What's the matter?" demanded Keith.

"Matter," repeated Shorty. "Use your eyes, kid."

Keith, gazing into the gloom, became suddenly aware that the solid ice track came to an abrupt end a yard or two in front of the spot where they stood, and that little waves of black water were beating on its edge. Beyond, great chunks of broken ice floated in an open pool.

He turned to Shorty. "Someone's blown up the ice," he exclaimed.

"Someone," repeated Shorty, bitterly. "I don't reckon there's much doubt who done it."

"I suppose it was Granite," said Keith; "but why did he want to waste good dynamite on a silly game like this?"

"You'll think it silly if you tries to team a load of logs across here in the morning," replied Shorty, and by the tone of his voice Keith realized that the little man was badly upset.

"But we've only got to wait until it freezes up again," he said. "And in this cold that won't take long."

"Oh it'll freeze all right," retorted Shorty, "but what do you reckon the surface is going to be like when it's froze?"

"But we can go round," said Keith.

"Aye, a mile round, or mebbe more," growled Shorty, "for if I'm not mistook, Granite has blowed a gap all across the middle of the lake."

There was silence for a moment or two, while Keith slowly realized that there was method in Granite's madness, and that the cunning old scoundrel had managed to strike Crab a very heavy blow.

Shorty spoke again. "No use a-stopping here and freezing," he said harshly. "We'll hev to wait till daylight to find the extent of the damage."

The damage was every bit as bad as Shorty had prophesied, for when morning came, it was seen that the ice had been broken by the explosion of a number of dynamite cartridges for a breadth of more than a mile across the centre of the lake. The gaps had already frozen up with ice thick enough to bear a man's weight, and so intense was the frost that within another twenty-four hours the ice would be strong enough to carry a pair of horses and a five-ton load of logs.

But such ice! Great jags of broken floes were sticking up in every direction, and it was plain that it would take a large force of men and several days' hard work to smooth a sledge way across it. And delay of this kind was fatal to Crab's plans. The season was well advanced, and in less than six weeks the spring thaw was due. Short-handed as they were, every hour was of importance, if the whole of the cedars were to be cut and made ready for the spring drive.

Crab was angrier than Keith had ever seen him. "I've a mind to go up the hill and pull the whiskers off that old cuss," he remarked. "A fellow like that is too mean to live." Then without another word he stalked off into the woods.

CHAPTER XXXVII

KEITH'S "AIRYPLANE"

Shorty, busy in the cook-shack, found Keith at his elbow. "I want a good big sheet of canvas, Shorty," he said. "Is there any in the camp?"

"What do you want canvas for?" growled Shorty. "Are you a-going to make a airyplane or what?"

"Something of the sort," replied Keith with a grin. "But what about that canvas?"

"I reckon there's some in the store-house," replied Shorty. "Here's the key, but don't let the old man see you taking it, or there'll sure be trouble."

Keith took the key and departed, while Shorty went back to his cooking. All that morning Keith was busy in a shed. At twelve he came in and ate a hurried meal, then disappeared again.

Shorty had finished his washing up and was taking a short rest when Keith came in again. "Finished your airyplane, Keith?" jeered Shorty.

"She's done," said Keith. "Like to have a look at her?"

Shorty followed him into the big shed, most of which was occupied by something which resembled a large flat boat, with a mast stepped right forward and one huge sail.

"What do you think of it?" asked Keith.

Shorty shook his head mournfully. "I knowed as lumbering was a mighty trying occupation for a Britisher, but I didn't reckon it would drive him plumb loony. Was it just boating you was a-thinking of, or was you a-going fishing? Or mebbe you was thinking of hiring Granite to blow all the ice off of the lake."

Keith laughed. "That boat goes over the ice, not under it," he answered. "See, she's on runners, Shorty."

Shorty examined the machine more closely. "A ice boat," he remarked slowly. "But, say, Keith, do you reckon the old man is going to stand fer that sort of thing? I reckon if he sees it you'll get the order of the sack quicker than greased lightning."

"He's going to see it," replied Keith, "but not just yet. You and I have got to try it first."

"Me try that thing! You're crazy, Keith."

"Not a bit of it," said Keith cheerfully. "It's Granite who's going to do the crazy act. At least that's what I'm hoping. Now I'll get the sail down and we'll push her out."

Crab was somewhere away in the woods, and the men all at work. There was no one to watch as Shorty and Keith pushed the queer contraption down the ice track to the lake. Keith made Shorty get in, then he perched himself in the stern and proceeded to hoist the sail. The breeze still blew briskly, and the moment the sail was up, the ice boat darted away from the shore with a speed which almost took Shorty's breath.

"Gee," he gasped, "I said it was a airyplane. We sure are flying all right." The pace increased. The steel runners screamed against the hard ice. As Shorty had said, it really was like flying.

Presently Shorty spoke. "This is heaps of fun, Keith, but to come down to brass tacks, what's the use of it?"

Keith grinned. "We are moving a bit faster than a horse, eh, Shorty?"

"That's no lie. It would take a mighty good flivver to keep up with this here contraption."

"We haven't got any flivvers, as you call them," said Keith, "and I don't fancy they'd be much good if we had. But what's the matter with using a few of these ice-boats to shift the logs? It would make up for a lot of lost time, wouldn't it?"

Shorty gazed at Keith. "And I never seed it. Gee! My head must be solid bone."

"Think it all right?" asked Keith.

"The greatest scheme ever. Crab'll take to it like a duck to water. Let's go right back and tell him."

"There's no hurry," said Keith. "He's not there yet. Besides, I want to learn how to handle the machine before I take him for a ride."

Shorty chuckled. The idea of Crab Calvert hurtling through the air on this machine tickled him immensely.

Keith steered past the break in the ice. Granite had not had time or dynamite to blast the ice all across the lake, and there was a considerable space between the broken floes and a rocky point which ran out from the left-hand bank.

They were shooting past this point when Keith saw Shorty start sharply. "Keith," he hissed, "Can you stop the blame thing? Right now, I mean." His tone was so urgent that Keith realized Shorty was very much in earnest. He nodded, and with a touch on the tiller threw the boat right up into the wind, where it hung with the big sail quivering.

The moment it came to a standstill Shorty flung himself off, and started running across the ice towards the point. Just as he reached it Keith, who was gazing in wonder at his friend's odd performance, caught sight of a gaunt figure crawling away among the rocks, bent double.

It was Granite.

Shorty gave vent to a loud shout, and Keith saw him swoop down upon the fugitive and grab him by the collar of his coat.

"What's your hurry, Mr. Stone?" enquired Shorty with mock politeness. "Mr. Hedley and me could see you was sure interested. We wants you to take a ride."

"Ride! I'll see you——" The rest of Granite's remarks will hardly bear cold print, and Keith saw him struggling violently to get away from his tormentor.

It was quite useless, for Shorty, when he chose to exert it, had the strength of two; and with the utmost ease he hauled his wretched captive off the rocks across the ice up to the boat.

"He's sure a-shrinking violent," said Shorty to Keith. "He's that modest, I couldn't hardly persuade him to take a trip." Giving the wretched man no chance to reply, Shorty forced him down on one of the cross-bars which did duty as a seat, and signed to Keith to let her go.

Keith did let her go. The breeze was stiff, and the pace at which Keith made the ice-boat travel was fairly paralyzing. The sound of her runners rose to a harsh scream. She lay over until her windward runner was clear of the ice. The bitter air shrieked past their ears, and it would have taken a real aeroplane to match the pace at which she travelled.

Keith took her right down to the far end of the lake, then tacked and came back. As for Granite, he was hanging on to a cross-piece with both hands, while his gaunt face was twisted with terror and his eyes were nearly popping out of his head. Since Shorty had dumped him into the bottom of the boat, he had not said a single word.

Keith steered the boat back to the upper end of the lake where, the ice track ran down from the woods, and there brought her to a standstill.

"Some ride!" said Shorty, with a broad grin. "I hopes you've enjoyed it, Mr. Stone."

Between sheer terror and the bitter cold, Granite's teeth were chattering so that he could hardly speak. "You—wait," he quavered. "You jest wait. I'll be even with yer. I'll have the law on ye fer this."

"That's what you said afore," jeered Shorty. "Seems to me as we been waiting a mighty long time already."

"And the longer you waits, the wuss it's a-going to be for ye. I'll fix the lot o' ye from Crab hisself down to this here new chum Britisher afore I'm finished with ye."

"You'll find us right here when you gets ready," smiled Shorty. "And now, as it's getting nigh dark, mebbe you'd like

Keith to take you back where you come from."

Granite turned on Shorty a glare that ought to have frozen him, but did not. "I'll see ye in a warmer place first," he snarled. Then with a great effort he scrambled to his feet, and went lurching away up the slope in the direction of the cave.

Shorty watched him go. "That'll learn him to spy on us," he remarked. "I sees Crab coming, Keith. Let's you and me load up a few of these here logs, and show him what we can do."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE FLOOD IN SNOWY RIVER

Keith's ice-boat proved such a success that Crab had four built, and whenever the wind served, these were busy carrying cedar logs down to the big dump at the far end of the lake. It was mainly owing to this invention that the last of the cedar was got out before the spring thaw, and the winter's work completed in good time.

On a raw day in early April, Keith stood at the door of the office looking out towards the lake. It had been raining all night, and a strong southerly wind was blowing. What snow was left was little but slush, and water several inches deep covered the ice upon the lake.

Not a man was in sight, and the camp seemed curiously quiet and deserted. Keith himself had just finished up the winter accounts, and was getting a breath of fresh air before going across to the bunk-house for supper.

"Hullo, Keith!" came a cheery hail, and here came Kirby Hart riding up to the camp.

"Hello, Kirby!" cried Keith. "Where do you come from?"

"I've been down with the boys on the river, where they are building the boom."

"What are they building a boom for?" questioned Keith.

"To hold the timber back. The notion is to let it go down a few logs at a time."

Keith nodded. "I understand. So as to prevent it jamming."

"That's the idea," agreed Kirby. "There's two or three ugly rapids down below, and if they let the whole lot go at once, it's a sure thing that one or two big logs would get across the stream and we'd have a jam that dynamite couldn't shift."

"I'd like to go and see," said Keith.

"And so you can, Keith," Kirby told him. "I brought word from Crab that you and Shorty are to close up here and come down to the river. He says he'll need every hand when once the logs begin to run."

"That's top hole," declared Keith. "Let's go and tell Shorty."

The two strolled over to the cook-shack, where Shorty was alone in his glory. Keith told him what was on foot, and Shorty nodded. "It's no use going to-night," he said, "for it'll be dark in less than an hour. I reckon we three will eat supper here, and sleep under cover. From this on for the next fortnight none of us will be dry, day or night."

Shorty cooked an extra special meal, and while the three ate, they talked.

"What are you going to do when you've finished this job, Kirby?" asked Keith.

"My job isn't finished," replied Kirby quietly. "It never will be finished until I know what Granite did with that loot."

Shorty spoke. "I wouldn't take it too hard if I was you, Kirby," he told him. "So far as I can see that there cash is plumb gone. You better come right in with us on that there coal. Crab'll give you a good job, and if he don't I will."

"That's mighty good of you, Shorty," said Kirby gratefully, "but it isn't the loss of the money that I mind so much. You have to remember that I'm in this to clear my father."

Shorty nodded. "I'd sure forgotten that," he said. "But say, Kirby, how do you reckon to do it? We can break old Granite, and we're a-going to. But broke or not, he's not a-going to own up to that there steal."

Kirby sighed. "I know that as well as you do, Shorty. But somehow I'll get proof."

"I sure hope you will," said Shorty, but the tone in which he spoke showed that he really had not much hope of Kirby's success.

Next morning they shut up the camp, leaving one watchman in charge in case, as Shorty said, Granite took it into his blamed head to call. The rain had ceased, and the sun was shining, so that the long tramp around the lake to the river was quite a pleasant one.

The river known as the Snowy came down from the hills to the east through a deep valley, and was joined by the creek from Cedar lake.

Long before they reached it, they could hear it roaring as it came thundering down, foaming with the snow broth from the melting ice fields, and when they reached its bank they saw that the ice was all gone, and the torrent running with tremendous force.

Just below the point where the branch from the lake joined the main stream, some tents were visible, pitched on a piece of rising ground above the water, and just opposite the boom of which Kirby had spoken lay all across the river. Above the boom, the whole river for a mile or more was choked with logs.

They found Crab standing on the bank watching his men who were completing the boom. He looked up and nodded as the three approached. "She's rising fast," he remarked, with something almost approaching a smile on his hard old face. "I'm reckoning to start the first lot of logs this afternoon."

Shorty looked at the river for a moment or two. "I reckon there's nigh enough water to let 'em all run at once," he said.

Crab shook his head. "I daren't do it, Shorty. There's a sight too much rapids just below, and if one big stick got across the stream the whole lot would be jammed before you could do a thing.

"You better come and have some dinner," he continued. "There'll be work for all hands once the run starts."

They went into Crab's tent, where Shorty's assistant had got ready a meal. Crab was more nearly human than Keith had ever known him. He talked much more than usual, and told Keith many interesting stories of his own experiences in many lumber camps. Keith learned for the first time that his uncle had started at the very bottom and worked up by sheer ability to his present position.

"And now I am going to give it all up and turn to coal," he said at last. "Well, I reckon there's more money in coal, but there won't be half the fun and excitement. You can't float coal down a river except in a barge."

At that moment, the fly of the tent was lifted and a man came in quickly. It was Keith's old friend Blacky Cole. "Boss," he said abruptly, "the river's falling."

Crab stared at him for a moment as if he could not believe his ears. "The river falling," he repeated. "You're crazy, Cole."

Cole shrugged his shoulders. "You come and look," was all he said.

Crab jumped up and hurried out, and the others followed.

Even Keith could see that Cole was right, for the line of froth along the bank which marked the high-water mark of half an hour earlier was now at least two feet above the present level of the river.

Crab stared as if he could not believe his eyes. "A two-foot fall in less than an hour," he exclaimed. "This is the strangest thing I ever saw in my life."

"She's falling still," said Shorty. "Gee, but she's shrinking like a bath when someone has pulled up the plug."

Keith spoke. "Perhaps there's been a snowslide up in the hills," he suggested. "I've heard of rivers getting dammed that way."

"That is possible," replied his uncle, "but with this weight of water coming down, it would take a mighty big slide to hold up the river for even half an hour."

"And when she does break," added Shorty, "there'll sure be some flood coming down."

Crab nodded. "You are right, Shorty. Enough maybe to break the boom. Cole! Call all hands and get to work to strengthen up the boom."

A whistle shrilled, and the men came filing out of the tents down to the water's edge. Keith and Shorty ran to help, and inside five minutes every available man was at work strengthening the boom. They worked at top speed, each moment expecting that the obstructions above would wash out, and release the flood behind it.

But the minutes went by, and so far from this happening the river continued to fall. Glancing up stream, Keith saw that the river was now at least six feet below its previous level, and what was more, was still shrinking rapidly. Most of the logs were bunched together in the centre, and those that remained near the edge were hard aground. Big rocks, previously hidden far beneath the water, were now thrusting their wet heads above the surface.

Another hour had passed. It was two o'clock, and the river was almost down to summer level. The men had used the last of their material and the boom was as strong as they could make it.

"I sure don't like it," said Shorty to Keith, as the two stood on the bank watching the strange scene. The little man's tone was so grave that Keith realized he was seriously disturbed.

"You mean the flood will be a big one when it does come?" questioned Keith.

"Won't be no flood. It'll be a deluge," said the little man. "I don't reckon no boom as ever was built will stand when it do come."

"But if it's so big, perhaps there'll be enough water to take the logs right through the rapids," suggested Keith hopefully.

Shorty shrugged his shoulders. "I'm hoping too," he remarked, "but not expecting."

And even as he spoke, from far up the river came a dull roar, sounding like distant thunder.

"She's a-coming," said Shorty briefly. "Get right back from the river, Keith."

Keith moved back, but not rapidly enough to please Shorty, who caught him by the arm and dragged him quickly to the very top of the steep bank.

"It'll never rise to here," expostulated Keith.

"Watch her," was all Shorty said.

He pointed as he spoke, and Keith saw a sight such as he had never seen before, and was never likely to see again. Thundering down the deep bed of the Snowy came a wall of water fully twenty feet in height, and crested with tawny foam. It came rushing down, faster than a horse could gallop, and the roar of it was beyond any sound that Keith had ever heard.

The wave picked up the great cedar logs as though they had been straws, and they and it together came thundering down the gorge.

Shorty gave one glance at the boom. "If she was built of solid steel she couldn't stand that," he said. "Keith, we're sure in for trouble. I feels it in my bones."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the flood wave struck the boom. Keith never saw it go, never even heard the snapping of the wire ropes which bound it together. One moment it was there, the next it had vanished, and the mighty flood, burdened with thousands upon thousands of great tree trunks, went sweeping in majesty down towards the sea.

Shorty shook his head. "Old Mother Nature has sure played a nasty trick on us this time," he said.

Crab striding up, caught this last remark. "Mother Nature," he repeated bitterly. "Not much Mother Nature. It was Father Granite did that to us."

Shorty whirled round. "How d'ye know?" he demanded sharply.

"Simpson just told me," Crab answered bitterly. "He was up the river, trying to shoot a buck, and saw the whole job. Granite and a dozen of his men blew the cliff down at the head of Gray Wolf Gorge."

He stopped, and Keith saw that both his fists were tight clenched. He had never before seen his uncle show such signs of excitement.

"But you can get him for this," he said. "You can prosecute him, sir."

"Prosecute him," repeated Crab. "What's the use of that if I've lost my cut? Where's the money coming from, either to prosecute Stone, or to open up the coal?"

CHAPTER XXXIX

ON THE FACE OF THE "JAM"

When the first great rush of flood-water had passed, not a log was visible in the whole of the stretch, either above or below the spot where the boom had been built. Of the boom itself, nothing was left except the two great posts to which it had been fastened, and some broken ends of wire rope.

Crab had wasted no time. Already most of his men had hurried on down stream, and the few who remained were rapidly taking down the tents and packing up the cooking-pots and pans. Keith and Shorty helped in this work, and when it was done, followed the others down the river.

"Surely there can't be a jam, Shorty," said Keith. "When that flood came down there was water enough to float a liner, let alone a parcel of logs."

Shorty refused to be comforted. "You haven't seen them rapids, Keith," he answered. "The whole river runs through a crack in the rocks as isn't more than fifty feet wide. Even if you turned Niagara loose down that place it wouldn't make no difference. It's bad enough when you are running just a measly hundred or two of logs through it. With all these here thousands there's plumb sure to be trouble."

"And if there is a jam," said Keith, "it can be broken, I suppose?"

"I've seed a jam on which a hundred men worked three weeks," said Shorty, "and when they did break her, there wasn't water left to take the logs down."

Keith said no more. The going was rough as it well could be, and Shorty was setting a hot pace across it.

"Here's the head of the first rapid," said Shorty at last. "And there's the men. And, by crikey, there's the jam!"

The scene on which Keith found himself gazing was simply terrific. At this point, the snow-swollen river was hemmed in a narrow channel between walls of rock thirty or forty feet in height. A couple of hundred yards below the spot where he and Shorty stood, and just where the channel was narrowest, the river was obstructed by a gigantic mass of timber piled up almost level with the banks.

The timber itself was matted and interlaced in a most amazing manner. Great logs stuck straight up into the air. The whole formed a mass fully thirty feet above the ordinary level of the water.

Behind the jam the river was dammed bank high, and was pouring in torrents through and over the tremendous obstruction.

"So that's a jam," said Keith rather breathlessly.

"I never seed a worse one," observed Shorty. "There's the boss. Let's see what he's got to say."

They found Crab Calvert standing on a ledge half-way down the bank, and just below the jam, staring sombrely at the ruin of all his hopes. He looked round as the other two joined him. "Granite's got his own back," was all he said.

Blacky Cole came climbing down. "Mr. Calvert," he said, "I reckon I kin see the key-log."

"I've been looking at nothing else for the last five minutes," returned Crab grimly. "Any fool can see it, but no one except a fool would try to shift it."

Shorty pointed. "Thar she is," he said in a low voice to Keith. "Kin you see her?"

"I see it plain enough," replied Keith. "But the boss is right. It doesn't look as if anyone could get near it."

Shorty did not reply at once. He was gazing at the tangled face of the great jam, and frowning a little as if he was thinking hard.

"Cutting her would be the best way," he said, "if we could only get to her."

"Shorty," said Keith eagerly. "I believe I could get there. I think I can see a way. Most of the water is coming over the sides of the jam.

"See that tree," he continued, "the scrub pine that grows just opposite the jam. If we felled that I believe it would make a bridge out to the centre. Then I could get a rope round the trunk and drop down over the face of the jam with a saw."

Shorty looked first at the tree, then at Keith. "It's quite a notion," he agreed, "and I think maybe you could reach the key-log that way. All the same, Keith, it would be plumb suicide, for jest as soon as the key-log is cut, the hull jam will bust, and——"

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Keith. "There's no need for me to cut the log right through. My notion would be to take a stout rope down, and tie it to the key-log, then cut the log nearly through. When I had done that I could clear out, and the men on shore could tail on to the rope and break the stick."

"I reckon it's the best plan yet," said Shorty, who had listened attentively. "I'll ask the boss what he thinks."

Crab's dour face lightened a little as he listened. "As you say, Shorty, it's the best plan yet. Good enough to try anyhow." He turned to Cole. "Throw that tree so she falls across the top of the jam."

To Cole such a task was child's play. He set to work at once, and within ten minutes the tree went crashing over exactly across the end of the jam. The pine trunk was short and gnarled, not long enough to reach the opposite bank. But its bushy head fell among the tangle of sawn sticks and remained firmly wedged.

"Good business," exclaimed Keith. "Now for a rope."

Cole spoke. "This here's no job for you, Hedley. I reckon the boss will let me try."

"That's not fair," exclaimed Keith. "It was my idea." He turned to his uncle. "You will let me go, sir, won't you?"

Crab hesitated. For perhaps ten seconds he stood gazing at the boy's eager face, and there was a curious expression on his own. "It's about even chances whether you come out of it alive," he said slowly.

"Oh, not so bad as that," returned Keith gaily. "Anyhow I'm going, sir, unless you absolutely forbid it."

"You can try it," said Crab briefly.

The furious roar of the pent-up rapid was enough to try the strongest head, but luckily for himself, Keith was too keen on his job to pay much attention to anything else. Crawling along the trunk of the pine, he reached the centre of the jam without much trouble. Then sitting astride the trunk, he fastened to it one end of the coil of strong rope which he had taken with him, and dropped the loose end down over the face of the jam. He had his saw slung across his back, and he was carrying one end of a ball of stout string which Shorty held and let out as required. The idea was to use this string to tow out the heavy rope which he would fasten to the key-log.

Dropping down across the face of the jam was not a pleasant business. Jets of icy water squirting through chinks among the logs soaked Keith to the skin. The whole mighty mass of logs vibrated with the tremendous pressure behind them, and although he did his best not to think of it, Keith could not help fancying what must happen if the jam broke.

Another minute his feet touched something firm, and he found himself standing on a great baulk of timber which jutted out immediately above the key-log. He turned and waved his hand to the anxious watchers on the bank, then loosening his saw set to work on the key-log.

Although it was some time since Keith had wielded a saw, he had not forgotten his lessons with Blacky Cole. The saw was as sharp as file could make it, and its crooked teeth bit rapidly into the great log.

Suddenly above the thunder of the river Keith heard a sharp crack of a pistol, and looking round quickly saw that it was Shorty who had fired into the air in order to attract his attention. Shorty was beckoning eagerly, and Keith took it that he meant that he had cut the log to a sufficient depth, and that it was time to get the rope out with which to break it.

And just then he heard a loud crunch beneath him, and to his horror saw that the key-log was in the act of breaking.

CHAPTER XL

DOWN THE RAPIDS

Long months of hard work in the open had toughened Keith's muscles and hardened his nerve. He made one leap for the rope, and went up it with the speed of a professional gymnast.

Luckily for him, the jam did not burst all at once, but bulged out slowly, and Keith, helping himself on his upward way by getting his feet on projecting sticks, gained the summit of the swinging pile.

Five seconds earlier, and he might have been safe, but now it was too late. As he grasped at the pine trunk, the log on which he was standing shot forward and he with it.

Keith was wearing the caulked boots which every lumberman wears, and which are provided with spikes so that their wearer may stand upright on a floating log. Since the ice first broke he had had some practice in water jumping, but he was not, of course, as expert as the older hands. Still, he knew enough to keep his balance, and once the first shock of alarm had passed he did not believe that his case was hopeless. Looking round he noticed a place where the water eddied into the shore, and felt certain that by jumping from log to log he could get in there and so reach the bank.

Leaping desperately from log to log, he tried to reach the spot. But by this time the whole jam had fallen to pieces, and the logs which composed it were being driven down at terrific speed by the immense mass of water which had been ponded up behind the dam. To his horror, Keith found himself carried past the eddy, and shooting faster and faster towards the worst of the rapid.

A huge trunk came grinding down behind him. He jumped for it and reached it. His hope was that it might be large enough to float him down to safety in the quieter water below.

Shorty saw his danger, and he and Blacky Cole raced along the bank abreast of Keith. Each had his peavie—the long pole used by all lumbermen—and Keith saw Shorty clambering recklessly down the steep bank towards a ledge which jutted out over the river.

Shorty gained the ledge, and stood there with his pole stretched out over the water, making signs to Keith to catch it as he passed.

But Keith shook his head. "It's no use," he cried. "I should only pull you in."

Next instant, the butt of a log forced upwards out of the mass of timber which filled the centre of the channel struck Keith in the back and sent him flying off his log.

By all the laws of chance Keith should have been pinched between two logs and the life crushed out of him. What actually happened was that he struck a small patch of open water, and went down head foremost into the freezing depths beneath the rushing logs.

Keith was a fine swimmer, and even as he struck the water it occurred to him that if he could keep below the timber and swim under water as far as the end of the rapid, he still had a chance for life.

The roar in his ears was deafening. Overhead raced hundreds of huge logs. Beneath and on either side were jagged rocks. Keith could not see them, but he knew well that to strike one meant the end of things so far as he was concerned.

The ordeal seemed endless. Keith was choking, and knew that within a very few seconds he would drown, when suddenly he caught a glimpse of light overhead. With a last effort he struck out for the surface.

Dizzy, breathless, bruised all over, he had just strength left to clutch the nearest log; and as his senses came back found himself lying on a stick of timber which was whirling round in an eddy at the foot of the rapid.

He was out of the worst of it, but his situation was still extremely dangerous. He felt paralysed with the blow he had received when knocked into the water, and had barely strength left to cling to the log.

Luckily for Keith, help was not far off. "Hold on! Hold on!" he heard Shorty shouting at the top of his voice. "Hold on, Keith! We'll have you in a minute."

It was Blacky Cole who first managed to reach Keith, and he and Shorty between them got hold of the log to which Keith was clinging and towed it in to the bank.

Crab was waiting with a thick blanket over his arm.

"Strip him," he ordered curtly.

By this time poor Keith was quite helpless. What between the bitter cold of the water and the frightful hammering he had had, he was so weak and numb that he could not raise a hand to help himself.

"Don't speak," Crab told him. "Don't try to move." Crab himself helped the others to strip Keith of his soaked clothes and wrap him in the dry, warm blanket. Then they carried him to a tent which had been hastily rigged up, where Keith was dosed with hot coffee, sweetened with condensed milk.

Shorty, who among his other accomplishments was something of a doctor, examined Keith all over.

"Is he badly hurt?" asked Crab, and Keith could hardly believe his ears, for Crab's voice was actually quite shaky.

"One rib busted," said Shorty, "and in course he is bruised all over."

"Have you sent for a doctor?" demanded Crab.

Keith spoke. "Don't bother about a doctor, sir. A broken rib is nothing to make a song about."

"You keep your mouth shut," retorted his uncle. "It'll take a doctor to set that broken rib, and you are going to have one if there's one in Orde County."

"Say, boss," struck in Shorty. "Don't you reckon as it would be best to take Keith to the doctor instead of bringing the doctor to him? We could fix him up on a mattress in a waggon and Kirby and me could drive him to Orde City."

Crab hesitated. "You'd bump the life out of him on those rough roads," he said anxiously.

"I guess not," replied Shorty. "We'll go real slow, and you can trust us to take right good care of him."

"You mind you do. And see here, men. Before he goes I've got something to tell you. Keith here is my nephew."

Shorty's eyes bulged. "Your nephew!" he repeated.

"My nephew, Shorty, and don't you forget it."

Shorty nodded. "Well," he said slowly, "I reckon he's a nephew as any man might be proud of." He turned to Cole. "Come on, Blacky," he said. "You and me will hitch up the waggon."

They wasted no time about it, and ten minutes later Keith, warmly wrapped up, was lifted on to a mattress which lay on the floor of a light spring waggon. Yet short as the time had been, a score or more of the men had collected to see him off, and by this time every one of them knew that the Britisher who had broken the jam was the boss's nephew.

"Hooray for the Britisher!" they roared. "Hooray for Crab junior." And Keith, aching all over, yet happier than he had ever been in his life, braved Shorty's threats and sat up and waved back.

CHAPTER XLI

GRANITE'S LAST BID

Shorty drove so carefully that Keith suffered very little from his long journey over the rough tracks. Just before dark, the waggon pulled up in front of a neat house on the outskirts of Ordeville.

"Where are you taking me?" demanded Keith.

"Never you mind where we are taking you. Jest lie still, and we'll fix you up all right."

So saying, Shorty disappeared in the direction of the house, but was back in a couple of minutes with another man, whom Keith at once recognized as his old friend, Sheriff Austin Gregory.

"Hello, Hedley!" he exclaimed cordially. "I am sure glad to see you, though I must say I'd rather see you driving the waggon than lying inside it."

He turned to Shorty. "Help me in with him," he said.

Keith began to remonstrate. "I can't be bothering you like this, Mr. Gregory."

The Sheriff cut him short. "When you begin to be a bother I'll tell you. For the present you do what you are told to do. I reckon my wife has been aching for a chance to nurse someone."

So Keith was carried in and put comfortably to bed, and presently a doctor arrived who set the broken rib, and comforted Keith by telling him that if he would be good and lie quiet for a week, he would be as fit as ever.

Shorty stayed the night, and took the horses back next morning, but Kirby Hart remained in town for the present.

For the next three days Keith was so stiff and sore that he could not have moved if he had wanted to. Indeed he found it very pleasant to lie quiet in a comfortable bed, to be fed with all sorts of delicacies and waited on like a child.

On the sixth day Keith was out of bed, and next morning, to his great delight, Crab himself turned up.

"What about the logs?" was Keith's first eager question. "Was there another jam?"

"No. We got through without that, and we saved every stick. Thanks to you, Keith, I have cash in hand to open up that coal properly."

"Now you can tackle Granite," said Keith with a grin, and just then the door of the room was flung open and in burst Kirby Hart.

"Granite's in town," he announced, "and Hulke Hanson with him."

Crab got up quickly. "Then follow him, Hart. See what he's about. Wait, I'll come with you."

"And so will I," said Keith to himself, as the other two left the room.

As it happened, Mrs. Gregory was out shopping so there was no one to stop Keith. He slipped out of the house, and spotted his uncle and Kirby just turning the corner into the main street.

The two walked quickly up the street, and Keith saw them stop opposite the Second National Bank. They paused there a moment, looking through the window, then went in. A moment later Keith was at the door.

Granite and Hanson were at the counter, and Granite with a quantity of papers in his hand was talking to the bank president. He had not seen Crab or Kirby, who were standing behind him.

Keith heard Granite's creaky voice. He was saying something about securities upon which he wished to raise a loan.

Next moment Kirby stepped forward. "Those are stolen bonds," he cried in a ringing voice.

In a flash Hulke Hanson pulled a pistol and levelled it at Kirby's head, but before he could pull the trigger Crab was on him. For a man of his age the speed at which he moved was almost miraculous.

His fist shot out, catching Hulke under the jaw, and sent him crashing against the counter. The pistol exploded, but the bullet buried itself harmlessly in the ceiling, bringing down a quantity of plaster.

Before Keith quite knew what was happening, Granite had bolted. Keith tried to stop him, but was not quick enough. Granite ran for his horse, which was hitched to a post a few yards away, flung himself into the saddle and was off at full gallop.

Crab and Kirby came out of the bank like shots from a gun, but Crab pulled up short. "No use," he snapped. "We shall need our horses to catch him. He'll go straight for the mine."

Neither of them saw Keith, but he followed them to Hyer's livery stable, and watched them saddle up and start.

The moment they were gone, Keith ordered the negro who looked after the horses to give him the best animal in the stable.

The man, knowing that Keith was a friend of the Sheriff, made no objection, and almost before the other two were out of sight, Keith was after them. It was a big Kentucky mare that he was riding, and he had no difficulty in keeping about a quarter of a mile behind the others.

The pace was hot, and within less than an hour Keith was walking his sweating horse up the steep slope towards the mouth of the cave. As he reached the broad ledge outside the cave, he saw Granite's tall figure standing under the great arch of the rock, and opposite to him Crab and Kirby.

"It's my land. I dare you to lay a finger on me," snarled Granite, scowling down at his enemies.

"It's your land right enough," replied Crab in his deadly level voice. "But those bonds were not yours, Mr. Stone, and I shall trouble you to ride back with us to Orde City."

Granite stood biting his lip, his leathery face working oddly. "See here, Mr. Calvert. Can't we fix this thing? I'm willing to go shares in this here mine, if you puts up the capital."

Crab smiled grimly. "The mine is mine—all that is worth having of it. You have over-reached yourself, Mr. Stone. The big seam of coal lies under the land that was yours before you tried to swindle me."

Granite bent forward a little, and stood glaring into Crab's face, but something told him that Crab was speaking the simple truth.

Keith saw the man's features twisted by a hideous spasm of rage.

"Is that so?" he screamed. "Then if it is, you shan't live to enjoy it."

His hand shot to his hip pocket, and Keith shrieked a warning which in his heart he knew was useless. Crab never carried a pistol, and Kirby, too, was unarmed.

As he shouted Keith ran forward, yet was only too well aware that he could give no help.

Yet help came. From somewhere behind Keith a rifle cracked, and Granite, in the very act of raising his pistol, toppled forward with a scream of pain.

Crab turned, and Keith could almost have laughed at the look of amazement on his uncle's face.

"You, Keith! Was it you shot him?"

"No, Uncle. I hadn't a gun."

"Then who the mischief——" began Crab, and just then the low bushes parted and a short, square figure burst into view.

"Shorty!" gasped Keith.

"Was I in time? Did I get him?" demanded Shorty.

"You got him all right," said Crab grimly. "Just in time, too."

"I haven't killed him?" asked Shorty anxiously, as he came panting up.

Crab was bending over Granite. "No," he said shortly, "you've only shot him through the leg."

Shorty looked much relieved. "Gee, but I'm glad of that," he said. "I'd hate to have killed the old geezer. He's more fun than a barrelful of monkeys."

"He'll do his monkeying in the county gaol for some time to come," said Crab dryly, as he took out a handkerchief and set to work to tie up Granite's leg.

The damage to Granite's leg was not serious, and after a while they lifted him into his saddle and took him back to the county town. Once in gaol he went all to pieces, confessed everything, and offered to return the securities to Kirby Hart.

Neither Crab nor the Harts pressed their charges against him, so the old scamp got off cheaply with six months' imprisonment. But his teeth were drawn, and when he came out he left the country, and was never seen there again.

Hulke Hanson got it hotter. He was sent up for five years, so he, too, had ceased to be a danger to the community. And Crab, Keith and Shorty are peacefully at work, making fortunes for themselves and others out of the coal.

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