

JIM

THE STORY OF A
BACKWOODS POLICE DOG



CHARLES·G·D·ROBERTS

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JIM

THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

BY
MAJOR CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

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JIM: THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

I. HOW WOOLLY BILLY CAME TO BRINE'S RIP

I

Jim's mother was a big cross-bred bitch, half Newfoundland and half bloodhound, belonging to Black Saunders, one of the hands at the Brine's Rip Mills. As the mills were always busy, Saunders was always busy, and it was no place for a dog to be around, among the screeching saws, the thumping, wet logs, and the spurting sawdust. So the big bitch, with fiery energy thrilling her veins and sinews and the restraint of a master's hand seldom exercised upon her, practically ran wild.

Hunting on her own account in the deep wilderness which surrounded Brine's Rip Settlement, she became a deadly menace to every wild thing less formidable than a bear or a bull moose, till at last, in the early prime of her adventurous career, she was shot by an angry game warden for her depredations among the deer and the young caribou.

10

Jim's father was a splendid and pedigreed specimen of the old English sheep-dog. From a litter of puppies of this uncommon parentage, Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff of Nipisiwaska County, chose out the one that seemed to him the likeliest, paid Black Saunders a sovereign for him, and named him Jim. To Tug Blackstock, for some unfathomed reason, the name of "Jim" stood for self-contained efficiency.

It was efficiency, in chief, that Tug Blackstock, as Deputy

Sheriff, was after. He had been reading, in a stray magazine with torn cover and much-thumbed pages, an account of the wonderful doings of the trained police dogs of Paris. The story had fired his imagination and excited his envy.

There was a lawless element in some of the outlying corners of Nipiswaska County, with a larger element of yet more audacious lawlessness beyond the county line from which to recruit. Throughout the wide and mostly wilderness expanse of Nipiswaska County the responsibility for law and order rested almost solely upon the shoulders of Tug Blackstock. His chief, the Sheriff, a prosperous shopkeeper who owed his appointment to his political pull, knew little and thought less of the duties of his office. 11

As soon as Jim was old enough to have an interest beyond his breakfast and the worrying of his rag ball, Tug Blackstock set about his training. It was a matter that could not be hurried. Tug had much work to do and Jim, as behaved a growing puppy, had a deal of play to get through in the course of each twenty-four hours. Then so hard was the learning, so easy, alas! the forgetting. Tug Blackstock was kind to all creatures but timber thieves and other evil-doers of like kidney. He was patient, with the long patience of the forest. But he had a will like the granite of old Bald Face.

Jim was quick of wit, willing to learn, intent to please his master. But it was hard for him to concentrate. It was hard to keep his mind off cats, and squirrels, the worrying of old boots, and other doggish frivolities. Hence, at times, some painful misunderstandings between teacher and pupil. In the main, however, the education of Jim progressed to a marvel.

They were a pair, indeed, to strike the most stolid imagination, let alone the sensitive, brooding, watchful imagination of the backwoods. Tug Blackstock was a tall, spare figure of a man, narrow of hip, deep of chest, with something of a stoop to his mighty shoulders, and his head thrust forward as if in ceaseless scrutiny of the unseen. His hair, worn somewhat short and pushed straight back, was faintly grizzled. His face, tanned and lean, was markedly wide at the eyes, with a big, well-modelled nose, a long, obstinate jaw, and a wide mouth whimsically uptwisted at one corner. 12

Except on the trail—and even then he usually carried a razor in his pack—he was always clean-shaven, just because he didn't like the curl of his beard. His jacket, shirt, and trousers were of brownish-grey homespun, of much the same hue as his soft slouch hat, all as inconspicuous as possible. But at his throat, loosely knotted under his wide-rolling shirt collar, he wore usually an ample silk handkerchief of vivid green spattered with big yellow spots, like dandelions in a young June meadow.

As for Jim, at first glance he might almost have been taken for a slim, young black bear rather than a dog. The shaggy coat bequeathed to him by his sheep-dog sire gave to his legs and to his hindquarters an appearance of massiveness that was almost clumsy. But under this dense black fleece his lines were fine and clean-drawn as a bull-terrier's. 13

The hair about his eyes grew so long and thick that, if left to itself, it would have seriously interfered with his vision. This his master could not think of permitting, so the riotous hair was trimmed down severely, till Jim's large, sagacious eyes gazed out unimpeded from ferocious, brush-like rims of stubby fur

about half an inch in length.

II

For some ten miles above the long, white, furrowed face of Brine's Rip, where Blue Forks Brook flows in, the main stream of the Ottanoosis is a succession of mad rapids and toothed ledges and treacherous, channel-splitting shoals. These ten miles are a trial of nerve and water-craft for the best canoeists on the river. In the spring, when the river was in freshet and the freed logs were racing, battering, and jamming, the whole reach was such a death-trap for the stream-drivers that it had come to be known as Dead Man's Run. 14

Now, in high summer, when the stream was shrunken in its channel and the sunshine lay golden over the roaring, creamy chutes and the dancing shallows, the place looked less perilous. But it was full of snares and hidden teeth. It was no place for the canoeist, however expert with pole and paddle, unless he knew how to read the water unerringly for many yards ahead. It is this reading of the water, this instantaneous solving of the hieroglyphics of foam and surge and swirl and glassy lunge, that makes the skilled runner of the rapids.

A light birch-bark canoe, with a man in the stern and a small child in the bow, was approaching the head of the rapids, which were hidden from the paddler's view by a high, densely-wooded bend of the shore. The canoe leapt forward swiftly on the smooth, quiet current, under the strong drive of the paddle.

The paddler was a tall, big-limbed man, with fair hair fringing

out under his tweed cap, and a face burnt red rather than tanned by the weather. He was dressed roughly but well, and not as a woodsman, and he had a subtle air of being foreign to the backwoods. He knew how to handle his paddle, however, the prow of his craft keeping true though his strokes were slow and powerful. 15

The child who sat facing him on a cushion in the bow was a little boy of four or five years, in a short scarlet jacket and blue knickers. His fat, bare legs were covered with fly-bites and scratches, his baby face of the tenderest cream and pink, his round, interested eyes as blue as periwinkle blossoms. But the most conspicuous thing about him was his hair. He was bareheaded—his little cap lying in the bottom of the canoe among the luggage—and the hair, as white as tow, stood out like a fleece all over his head, enmeshing the sunlight in its silken tangle.

When the canoe shot round the bend, the roar of the rapids smote suddenly upon the voyagers' ears. The child turned his bright head inquiringly, but from his low place could see nothing to explain the noise. His father, however, sitting up on the hinder bar of the canoe, could see a menacing white line of tossing crests, aflash in the sunlight, stretching from shore to shore. Backing water vigorously to check his headway, he stood up to get a better view and choose his way through the surge.

The stranger was master of his paddle, but he had had no adequate experience in running rapids. Such light and unobstructed rips as he had gone through had merely sufficed to make him regard lightly the menace confronting him. He had heard of the perils of Dead Man's Run, but that, of course, meant 16

in time of freshet, when even the mildest streams are liable to go mad and run amuck. This was the season of dead low water, and it was hard for him to imagine there could be anything really to fear from this lively but shrunken stream. He was strong, clear-eyed, steady of nerve, and he anticipated no great trouble in getting through.

As the light craft dipped into the turmoil, jumping as if buffeted from below, and the wave-tops slapped in on either side of the bow, the little lad gave a cry of fear.

“Sit tight, boy. Don’t be afraid,” said the father, peering ahead with intent, narrowed eyes and surging fiercely on his blade to avoid a boiling rock just below the first chute. As he swept past in safety he laughed in triumph, for the passage had been close and exciting, and the conquest of a mad rapid is one of the thrilling things in life, and worth going far for. His laugh reassured the child, who laughed also, but cowered low in the canoe and stared over the gunwale with wide eyes of awe. 17

But already the canoe was darting down toward a line of black rocks smothered in foam. The man paddled desperately to gain the other shore, where there seemed to be a clear passage. Slanting sharply across the great current, surging with short, terrific strokes upon his sturdy maple blade, his teeth set and his breath coming in grunts, he was swept on downward, sideways toward the rocks, with appalling speed. But he made the passage, swept the bow around, and raced through, shaving the rock so narrowly that his heart paused and the sweat jumped out suddenly cold on his forehead.

Immediately afterwards the current swept him to mid-stream.

Just here the channel was straight and clear of rocks, and though the rips were heavy the man had a few minutes' respite, with little to do but hold his course.

With a stab at the heart he realized now into what peril he had brought his baby. Eagerly he looked for a chance to land, but on neither side could he make shore with any chance of escaping shipwreck. A woodsman, expert with the canoe-pole, might have managed it, but the stranger had neither pole nor skill to handle one. He was in the grip of the wild current and could only race on, trusting to master each new emergency as it should hurl itself upon him. 18

Presently the little one took alarm again at his father's stern-set mouth and preoccupied eyes. The man had just time to shout once more, "Don't be afraid, son. Dad'll take care of you," when the canoe was once more in a yelling chaos of chutes and ledges. And now there was no respite. Unable to read the signs of the water, he was full upon each new peril before he recognized it, and only his great muscular strength and instant decision saved them.

Again and again they barely by a hair's-breadth, slipped through the jaws of death, and it seemed to the man that the gnashing ledges raved and yelled behind him at each miracle of escape. Then hissing wave-crests cut themselves off and leapt over the racing gunwale, till he feared the canoe would be swamped. Once they scraped so savagely that he thought the bottom was surely ripped from the canoe. But still he won onward, mile after roaring mile, his will fighting doggedly to keep his eyesight from growing hopelessly confused with the hellish, sliding dazzle and riot of waters.

But at last the fiend of the flood, having played with its prey long enough, laid bare its claws and struck. The bow of the canoe, in swerving from one foam-curtained rock, grounded heavily upon another. In an instant the little craft was swung broadside on, and hung there. The waves piled upon her in a yelling pack. She was smothered down, and rolled over helplessly.

19

As they shot out into the torrent the man, with a terrible cry, sprang toward the bow, striving to reach his son. He succeeded in catching the little one, with one hand, by the back of the scarlet jacket. The next moment he went under and the jacket came off over the child's head. A whimsical cross-current dragged the little boy twenty feet off to one side, and shot him into a shallow side channel.

When the man came to the surface again his eyes were shut, his face stark white, his legs and arms flung about aimlessly as weeds; but fast in his unconscious grip he held the little red jacket. The canoe, its side stove in, and full of water, was hurrying off down the rapid amid a fleet of paddles, cushions, blankets, boxes, and bundles. The body of the man, heavy and inert and sprawling, followed more slowly. The waves rolled it over and trampled it down, shouldered it up again, and snatched it away viciously whenever it showed an inclination to hang itself up on some projecting ledge. It was long since they had had such a victim on whom to glut their rancour.

20

The child, meanwhile, after being rolled through the laughing shallows of the side channel and playfully buffeted into a half-drowned unconsciousness, was stranded on a sand spit some

eight or ten yards from the right-hand shore. There he lay, half in the water, half out of it, the silken white floss of his hair all plastered down to his head, the rippled current tugging at his scratched and bitten legs.

The unclouded sun shone down warmly upon his face, slowly bringing back the rose to his baby lips, and a small, paper-blue butterfly hovered over his head for a few seconds, as if puzzled to make out what kind of being he was.

The sand spit which had given the helpless little one refuge was close to the shore, but separated from it by a deep and turbulent current. A few minutes after the blue butterfly had flickered away across the foam, a large black bear came noiselessly forth from the fir woods and down to the water's edge. He gazed searchingly up and down the river to see if there were any other human creatures in sight, then stretched his savage black muzzle out over the water toward the sand spit, eyeing and sniffing at the little unconscious figure there in the sun. He could not make out whether it was dead or only asleep. In either case he wanted it. He stepped into the foaming edge of the sluice, and stood there whimpering with disappointed appetite, daunted by the snaky vehemence of the current.

21

Presently, as the warmth of the flooding sun crept into his veins, the child stirred, and opened his blue eyes. He sat up, noticed he was sitting in the water, crawled to a dry spot, and snuggled down into the hot sand. For the moment he was too dazed to realize where he was. Then, as the life pulsed back into his veins, he remembered how his father's hand had caught him by the jacket just as he went plunging into the awful waves. Now, the jacket was gone. His father was gone, too.

“Daddy! Daddee-ee!” he wailed. And at the sound of that wailing cry, so unmistakably the cry of a youngling for its parent, the bear drew back discreetly behind a bush, and glanced uneasily up and down the stream to see if the parent would come in answer to the appeal. He had a wholesome respect for the grown-up man creature of either sex, and was ready to retire on the approach of one.

22

But no one came. The child began to sob softly, in a lonesome, frightened, suppressed way. In a minute or two, however, he stopped this, and rose to his feet, and began repeating over and over the shrill wail of “Daddy, Dad-dee-ee, Daddee-ee!” At the same time he peered about him in every direction, almost hopefully, as if he thought his father must be hiding somewhere near, to jump out presently for a game of bo-peep with him.

His baby eyes were keen. They did not find his father, but they found the bear, its great black head staring at him from behind a bush.

His cries stopped on the instant, in the middle of a syllable, frozen in his throat with terror. He cowered down again upon the sand, and stared, speechless, at the awful apparition. The bear, realizing that the little one’s cries had brought no succour, came out from its hiding confidently, and down to the shore, and straight out into the water till the current began to drag too savagely at its legs. Here it stopped, grumbling and baffled.

The little one, unable any longer to endure the dreadful sight, backed to the extreme edge of the sand, covered his face with his hands, and fell to whimpering piteously, an unceasing, hopeless, monotonous little cry, as vague and inarticulate

23

as the wind.

The bear, convinced at length that the sluice just here was too strong for him to cross, drew back to the shore reluctantly. It moved slowly up-stream some forty or fifty yards, looking for a feasible crossing. Disappointed in this direction, it then explored the water's edge for a little distance down-stream, but with a like result. But it would not give up. Up and down, up and down, it continued to patrol the shore with hungry obstinacy. And the piteous whimpering of the little figure that cowered, with hidden face upon the sand spit, gradually died away. That white fleece of silken locks, dried in the sun and blown by the warm breeze, stood out once more in its radiance on the lonely little slumbering head.

III

Tug Blackstock sat on a log, smoking and musing, on the shore of that wide, eddying pool, full of slow swirls and spent foam clusters, in which the tumbling riot of Brine's Rip came to a rest. From the mills behind him screeched the untiring saws. Outstretched at his feet lay Jim, indolently snapping at flies. The men of the village were busy in the mills, the women in their cottages, the children in their schools; and the stretch of rough shore gave Tug Blackstock the solitude which he loved.

Down through the last race of the rapids came a canoe paddle, and began revolving slowly in the eddies. Blackstock pointed it out to Jim, and sent him in after it. The dog swam for it gaily,

grabbed it by the top so that it could trail at his side, and brought it to his master's feet. It was a good paddle, of clean bird's-eye maple and Melicite pattern, and Tug Blackstock wondered who could have been so careless as to lose it. Carelessness is a vice regarded with small leniency in the backwoods.

A few minutes later down the rapids came wallowing a water-logged birch-canoe. The other things which had started out with it, the cushions and blankets and bundles, had got themselves tangled in the rocks and left behind.

At sight of the wrecked canoe, Tug Blackstock rose to his feet. He began to suspect another of the tragedies of Dead Man's Run. But what river-man would come to grief in the Run at this stage of the water? Blackstock turned to an old dug-out 25 which lay hauled up on the shore, ran it down into the water and paddled out to salvage the wrecked canoe. He towed it to shore, emptied it, and scrutinized it. He thought he knew every canoe on the river, but this one was a stranger to him. It had evidently been brought across the Portage from the east coast. Then he found, burnt into the inside of the gunwale near the bow, the letters J. C. M. W.

"The Englishman," he muttered. "He's let the canoe git away from him at the head of the Run, likely, when he's gone ashore. He'd never have tried to shoot the Run alone, an' him with no experience of rapids."

But he was uneasy. He decided that he would get his own canoe and pole up through the rapids, just to satisfy himself.

Tug Blackstock's canoe, a strong and swift "Fredericton" of

polished canvas, built on the lines of a racing birch, was kept under cover in his wood shed at the end of the village street. He shouldered it, carrying it over his head with the mid bar across his shoulders, and bore it down to the water's edge. Then he went back and fetched his two canoe poles and his paddles.

Waving Jim into the bow, he was just about to push off when his narrowed eyes caught sight of something else rolling and threshing helplessly down the rapid. Only too well he saw what it was. His face pale with concern, he thrust the canoe violently up into the tail of the rapid, just in time to catch the blindly sprawling shape before it could sink to the depths of the pool. Tenderly he lifted it out upon the shore. It was battered almost out of recognition, but he knew it.

26

“Poor devil! Poor devil!” he muttered sorrowfully. “He was a man all right, but he didn't understand rapids for shucks!”

Then he noticed that in the dead man's right hand was clutched a tiny child's jacket. He understood—he saw the whole scene, and he swore compassionately under his breath, as he unloosed the rigid fingers. Alive or dead, the little one must be found at once.

He called Jim sharply, and showed him the soaked red jacket. Jim sniffed at it, but the wearer's scent was long ago soaked out of it. He looked it over, and pawed it, wagging his tail doubtfully. He could see it was a small child's jacket, but what was he expected to do with it?

After a few moments, Tug Blackstock patted the jacket vigorously, and then waved his arm up-stream.

“Go, find him, Jim!” he ordered. Jim, hanging upon each word and gesture, comprehended instantly. He was to find the owner of the little jacket—a child—somewhere up the river. With a series of eager yelps—which meant that he would do all that living dog could do—he started up the shore, on the full run. 27

By this time the mill whistles had blown, the screaming of the saws had stopped, the men, powdered with yellow sawdust, were streaming out from the wide doors. They flocked down to the water.

In hurried words Blackstock explained the situation. Then he stepped once more into his canoe, snatched his long, steel-shod pole, and thrust his prow up into the wild current, leaving the dead man to the care of the coroner and the village authorities. Before he had battled his way more than a few hundred yards upwards through the raging smother, two more canoes, with expert polers standing poised in them like statues, had pushed out to follow him in his search.

The rest of the crowd picked up the body and bore it away reverently to the court-room, with sympathetic women weeping beside it.

Racing along the open edge of the river where it was possible, tearing fiercely through thicket and underbrush where rapids or rocks made the river’s edge impassable, the great black dog panted onwards with the sweat dripping from jaws and tongue. Whenever he was forced away from the river, he would return to it at every fifty yards or so, and scan each rock, shoal or sand spit with keen, sagacious eyes. He had been told to search the river—that was the plain interpretation of the 28

wet jacket and of Tug Blackstock's gesture—so he wasted no time upon the woods and the undergrowth.

At last he caught sight of the little fluffy-headed figure huddled upon the sand spit far across the river. He stopped, stared intently, and then burst into loud, ecstatic barkings as an announcement that his search had been successful. But the noise did not carry across the tumult of the ledge, and the little one slept on, exhausted by his terror and his grief.

It was not only the sleeping child that Jim saw. He saw the bear, and his barking broke into shrill yelps of alarm and appeal. He could not see that the sluice between the sand spit and the bank was an effective barrier, and he was frantic with anxiety lest the bear should attack the little one before he could come to the rescue.

His experienced eye told him in a moment that the river was impassable for him at this point. He dashed on upstream for another couple of hundred yards, and then, where a breadth of comparatively slack water beneath a long ledge extended more than half-way across, he plunged in, undaunted by the clamour and the jumping, boiling foam.

29

Swimming mightily, he gained a point directly above the sand spit. Then, fighting every inch of the way to get across the terrific draft of the main current, he was swept downward at a tremendous speed. But he had carried out his plan. He gained the shallow side channel, splashed down it, and darted up the sand spit with a menacing growl at the bear across the sluice.

At the sound of that harsh growl close to his ears the little one

woke up and raised his head. Seeing Jim, big and black and dripping, he thought it was the bear. With a piercing scream he once more hid his face in his hands, rigid with horror. Puzzled at this reception, Jim fell to licking his hands and his ears extravagantly, and whining and thrusting a coaxing wet nose under his arms.

At last the little fellow began to realize that these were not the actions of a foe. Timidly he lowered his hands from his face, and looked around. Why, there was the bear, on the other side of the water, tremendous and terrible, but just where he had been this ever so long. This creature that was making such a fuss over him was plainly a dog—a kind, good dog, who was fond of little boys.

30

With a sigh of inexpressible relief his terror slipped from him. He flung his arms about Jim's shaggy neck and buried his face in the wet fur. And Jim, his heart swelling with pride, stood up and barked furiously across at the bear.

Tug Blackstock, standing in the stern of his canoe, plied his pole with renewed effort. Reaching the spit he strode forward, snatched the child up in his arms, and passed his great hand tenderly through that wonderful shock of whitey-gold silken curls. His eyes were moist, but his voice was hearty and gay, as if this meeting were the most ordinary thing in the world.

“Hullo, Woolly Billy!” he cried. “What are you doin’ here?”

“Daddy left me here,” answered the child, his lip beginning to quiver. “Where’s he gone to?”

“Oh,” replied Tug Blackstock hurriedly, “yer dad was called

away rather sudden, an' he sent me an' Jim, here, to look after you till he gits back. An' we'll do it, too, Woolly Billy; don't you fret."

31

"My name's George Harold Manners Watson," explained the child politely.

"But we'll just call you Woolly Billy for short," said Tug Blackstock.

32

II. THE BOOK AGENT AND THE BUCKSKIN BELT

I

A big-framed, jaunty man with black side-whiskers, a long black frock coat, and a square, flat case of shiny black leather strapped upon his back, stepped into the Corner Store at Brine's Rip Mills.

He said: "Hullo, boys! Hot day!" in a big voice that was intentionally hearty, ran his bulging eyes appraisingly over every one present, then took off his wide-brimmed felt hat and mopped his glistening forehead with a big red and white handkerchief. Receiving a more or less hospitable chorus of grunts and "hullos" in response, he seated himself on a keg of nails, removed the leather case from his back, and asked for ginger beer, which he drank noisily from the bottle.

"Name of Byles," said he at length, introducing himself with a sweeping nod. "Hot tramp in from Cribb's Ridge. Thirsty, you bet. Never drink nothing stronger'n ginger pop or soft cider. Have a round o' pop on me, boys. A1 pop this o' yours, mister. A dozen more bottles, please, for these gentlemen."

33

He looked around the circle with an air at once assured and persuasive. And the taciturn woodsmen, not wholly at ease under such sudden cordiality from a stranger, but too polite to rebuff him, muttered "Thank ye, kindly," or "Here's how," as

they threw back their heads and poured the weak stuff down their gaunt and hairy throats.

It was a slack time at Brine's Rip, the mills having shut down that morning because the river was so low that there were no more logs running. The shrieking saws being silent for a little, there was nothing for the mill hands to do but loaf and smoke. The hot air was heavily scented with the smell of fresh sawdust mixed with the strong honey-perfume of the flowering buckwheat fields beyond the village. The buzzing of flies in the windows of the store was like a fine arabesque of sound against the ceaseless, muffled thunder of the rapids.

The dozen men gathered here at Zeb Smith's store—which was, in effect, the village club—found it hard to rouse themselves to a conversational effort in any way worthy the advances of the confident stranger. They all smoked a little harder than usual, and looked on with courteous but noncommittal interest while he proceeded to unstrap his shiny black leather case.

34

In his stiff and sombre garb, so unsuited to the backwoods trails, the stranger had much the look of one of those itinerant preachers who sometimes busy themselves with the cure of souls in the remoter backwoods settlements. But his eye and his address were rather those of a shrewd and pushing commercial traveller.

Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff of Nipsiwaska County, felt a vague antagonism toward him, chiefly on the ground that his speech and bearing did not seem to consort with his habiliments. He rather liked a man to look what he was or be what he

looked, and he did not like black side whiskers and long hair. This antagonism, however, he felt to be unreasonable. The man had evidently had a long and tiring tramp, and was entitled to a somewhat friendlier reception than he was getting.

Swinging his long legs against the counter, on which he sat between a pile of printed calicoes and a box of bright pink fancy soap, Tug Blackstock reached behind him and possessed himself of a box of long, black cigars. Having selected one critically for himself, he proffered the box to the stranger.

“Have a weed?” said he cordially. “They ain’t half bad.”

35

But the stranger waved the box aside with an air at once grand and gracious.

“I never touch the weed, thank you kindly just the same,” said he. “But I’ve nothing agin it. It goes agin my system, that’s all. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll take a bite o’ cheese an’ a cracker ’stead o’ the cigar.”

“Sartain,” agreed Blackstock, jumping down to fetch the edibles from behind the counter. Like most of the regular customers, he knew the store and its contents almost as well as Zeb Smith himself.

During the last few minutes an immense, rough-haired black dog had been sniffing the stranger over with suspicious minuteness. The stranger at first paid no attention whatever, though it was an ordeal that many might have shrunk from. At last, seeming to notice the animal for the first time, he recognized his presence by indifferently laying his hand upon his neck. Instead of instantly drawing off with a resentful growl, after his manner

with strangers, the dog acknowledged the casual caress by a slight wag of the tail, and then, after a few moments, turned away amicably and lay down.

“If Jim finds him all right,” thought Blackstock to himself, “ther’ can’t be *much* wrong with him, though I can’t say I take to him myself.” And he weighed off a much bigger piece of cheese than he had at first intended to offer, marking down his indebtedness on a slate which served the proprietor as a sort of day-book. The stranger fell to devouring it with an eagerness which showed that his lunch must have been of the lightest. 36

“Ye was sayin’ as how ye’d jest come up from Cribb’s Ridge?” put in a long-legged, heavy-shouldered man who was sprawling on a cracker box behind the door. He had short sandy hair, rapidly thinning, eyes of a cold grey, set rather close together, and a face that suggested a cross between a fox and a fish-hawk. He was somewhat conspicuous among his fellows by the trimness of his dress, his shirt being of dark blue flannel with a rolled-up collar and a scarlet knotted kerchief, while the rest of the mill hands wore collarless shirts of grey homespun, with no thought of neckerchiefs.

His trousers were of brown corduroy, and were held up by a broad belt of white dressed buckskin, elaborately decorated with Navajo designs in black and red. He stuck to this adornment tenaciously as a sort of inoffensive proclamation of the fact that he was not an ordinary backwoods mill hand, but a wanderer, one who had travelled far, and tried his wits at many ventures in the wilder West. 37

“Right you are,” assented the stranger, brushing some white

cracker crumbs out of his black whiskers.

“I was jest a-wonderin’,” went on Hawker, giving a hitch to the elaborate belt and leaning forward a little to spit out through the doorway, “if ye’ve seed anything o’ Jake Sanderson on the road.”

The stranger, having his mouth full of cheese, did not answer for a moment.

“The boys are lookin’ for him rather anxious,” explained Blackstock with a grin. “He brings the leetle fat roll that pays their wages here at the mill, an’ he’s due sometime to-day.”

“I seen him at Cribb’s Ridge this morning,” answered the stranger at last. “Said he’d hurt his foot, or strained his knee, or something, an’ would have to come on a bit slow. He’ll be along sometime to-night, I guess. Didn’t seem to me to have much wrong with him. No, ye can’t have none o’ that cheese. Go ’way an’ lay down,” he added suddenly to the great black dog, who had returned to his side and laid his head on the stranger’s knee. 38

With a disappointed air the dog obeyed.

“’Tain’t often Jim’s so civil to a stranger,” muttered Blackstock to himself.

A little boy in a scarlet jacket, with round eyes of china blue, and an immense mop of curly, fluffy, silky hair so palely flaxen as to be almost white, came hopping and skipping into the store. He was greeted with friendly grins, while several voices drawled, “Hullo, Woolly Billy!” He beamed cheerfully upon the

whole company, with a special gleam of intimate confidence for Tug Blackstock and the big black dog. Then he stepped up to the stranger's knee, and stood staring with respectful admiration at those flowing jet-black side-whiskers.

The stranger in return looked with a cold curiosity at the child's singular hair. Neither children nor dogs had any particular appeal for him, but that hair was certainly queer.

"Most an albino, ain't he?" he suggested.

"No, he ain't," replied Tug Blackstock, curtly. The dog, detecting a note of resentment in his master's voice, got up and stood beside the child, and gazed about the circle with an air of anxious interrogation. Had any one been disagreeable to Woolly Billy? And if so, who?

39

But the little one was not in the least rebuffed by the stranger's unresponsiveness.

"What's that?" he inquired, patting admiringly the stranger's shiny leather case.

The stranger grew cordial to him at once.

"Ah, now ye're talkin'," said he enthusiastically, undoing the flap of the case. "It's a book, sonny. The greatest book, the most *interestin'* book, the most useful book—and next to the Bible the most high-toned, uplifting book that was ever written. Ye can't read yet, sonny, but this book has the loveliest pictures ye ever seen, and the greatest lot of 'em for the money."

He drew reverently forth from the case a large, fat volume,

bound sumptuously in embossed sky-blue imitation leather, lavishly gilt, and opened it upon his knees with a spacious gesture.

“There,” he continued proudly. “It’s called ‘Mother, Home, and Heaven!’ Ain’t that a title for ye? Don’t it show ye right off the kind of book it is? With this book by ye, ye don’t need any other book in the house at all, except maybe the almanack an’ the Bible—an’ this book has lots o’ the best bits out of the Bible in it, scattered through among the receipts an’ things to keep it all wholesome an’ upliftin’.

40

“It’ll tell ye such useful things as how to get a cork out of a bottle without breakin’ the bottle, when ye haven’t got a corkscrew, or what to do when the baby’s got croup, and there ain’t a doctor this side of Tourdulac. An’ it’ll tell ye how to live, so as when things happen that no medicines an’ no doctors and no receipts—not even such great receipts as these here ones” (and he slapped his hand on the counter) “can help ye through—such as when a tree falls on to ye, or you trip and stumble on to the saws, or git drawn down under half-a-mile o’ raft—then ye’ll be ready to go right up aloft, an’ no questions asked ye at the Great White Gate.

“An’ it has po’try in it, too, reel *heart* po’try, such as’ll take ye back to the time when ye was all white an’ innocent o’ sin at yer mother’s knee, an’ make ye wish ye was like that now. In fact, boys, this book I’m goin’ to show ye, with your kind permission, is handier than a pocket in a shirt, an’ at the same time the blessed fragrance of it is like a rose o’ Sharon in the household. It’s in three styles o’ bindin’, all reel handsome, but——”

“I want to look at another picture now,” protested Woolly Billy. “I’m tired of this one of the angels sayin’ their prayers.”

41

His amazing shock of silver-gold curls was bent intently over the book in the stranger’s lap. The woodsmen, on the other hand, kept on smoking with a far-off look, as if they heard not a word of the fluent harangue. They had a deep distrust and dread of this black-whiskered stranger, now that he stood revealed as the Man-Wanting-to-Sell-Something. The majority of them would not even glance in the direction of the gaudy book, lest by doing so they should find themselves involved in some expensive and complicated obligation.

The stranger responded to Woolly Billy’s appeal by shutting the book firmly. “There’s lots more pictures purtier than that one, sonny,” said he. “But ye must ask yer dad to buy it fer ye. He won’t regret it.” And he passed the volume on to Hawker, who, having no dread of book-agents, began to turn over the leaves with a superior smile.

“Dad’s gone away ever so far,” answered Woolly Billy sadly. “It’s an awfully pretty book.” And he looked at Tug Blackstock appealingly.

“Look here, mister,” drawled Blackstock. “I don’t take much stock myself in those kind of books, an’ moreover (not meanin’ no offence to you), any man that’s sellin’ ’em has got to larn to do a sight o’ lyin’. But as Woolly Billy here wants it so bad I’ll take a copy, if ’tain’t too dear. All the same, it’s only fair to warn ye that ye’ll not do much business in Brine’s Rip, for there was a book agent here last year as got about ha’f

42

the folks in the village to sign a crooked contract, and we was all stung bad. I'd advise ye to move on, an' not really tackle Brine's Rip fer another year or so. Now, what's the price?"

The stranger's face had fallen during this speech, but it brightened at the concluding question.

"Six dollars, four dollars, an' two dollars an' a half, accordin' to style of bindin'," he answered, bringing out a handful of leaflets and order forms and passing them round briskly. "An' ye don't need to pay more'n fifty cents down, an' sign this order, an' ye pay the balance in a month's time, when the books are delivered. I'll give ye my receipt for the fifty cents, an' ye jest fill in this order accordin' to the bindin' ye choose. Let me advise ye, as a friend, to take the six dollar one. It's the best value."

"Thanks jest the same," said Blackstock drily, pulling out his wallet, "but I guess Woolly Billy'd jest as soon have the two-fifty one. An' I'll pay ye the cash right now. No signin' orders fer me. Here's my name an' address."

43

"Right ye are," agreed the stranger cordially, pocketing the money and signing the receipt. "Cash payments for me every time, if I could have *my* way. Now, if some o' you other gentlemen will follow Mr. Blackstock's fine example, ye'll never regret it—an' neither will I."

"Come on, Woolly Billy. Come on, Jim," said Blackstock, stepping out into the street with the child and the dog at his heels. "We'll be gittin' along home, an' leave this gentleman to argy with the boys."

II

Jake Sanderson, with the pay for the mill-hands, did not arrive that night, nor yet the following morning. Along toward noon, however, there arrived a breathless stripling, white-faced and wild-eyed, with news of him. The boy was young Stephens, son of Andy Stephens, the game-warden. He and his father, coming up from Cribb's Ridge, had found the body of Sanderson lying half in a pool beside the road, covered with blood. Near at hand lay the bag, empty, slashed open with a bloody knife. Stephens had sent his boy on into the Settlement for help, while he himself had remained by the body, guarding it lest some possible clue should be interfered with.

44

Swift as a grass fire, the shocking news spread through the village. An excited crowd gathered in front of the store, every one talking at once, trying to question young Stephens. The Sheriff was away, down at Fredericton for a holiday from his arduous duties. But nobody lamented his absence. It was his deputy they all turned to in such an emergency.

“Where's Tug Blackstock?” demanded half a dozen awed voices. And, as if in answer, the tall, lean figure of the Deputy Sheriff of Nipiwaska County came striding in haste up the sawdusty road, with the big, black dog crowding eagerly upon his heels.

The clamour of the crowd was hushed as Blackstock put a few questions, terse and pertinent, to the excited boy. The people of Nipiwaska County in general had the profoundest confidence in their Deputy Sheriff. They believed that his shrewd brain and keen eye could find a clue to the most baffling of

45

mysteries. Just now, however, his face was like a mask of marble, and his eyes, sunk back into his head, were like points of steel. The murdered man had been one of his best friends, a comrade and helper in many a hard enterprise.

“Come,” said he to the lad, “we’ll go an’ see.” And he started off down the road at that long loose stride of his, which was swifter than a trot and much less tiring.

“Hold on a minute, Tug,” drawled a rasping nasal voice.

“What is it, Hawker?” demanded Blackstock, turning impatiently on his heel.

“Ye hain’t asked nothin’ yet about the Book Agent, Mister Byles, him as sold ye ‘Mother, Home, an’ Heaven.’ Maybe *he* could give us some information. He *said* as how he’d had some talk with poor old Jake.”

Blackstock’s lips curled slightly. He had not read the voluble stranger as a likely highwayman in any circumstances, still less as one to try issues with a man like Jake Sanderson. But the crowd, eager to give tongue on any kind of a scent, and instinctively hostile to a book agent, seized greedily upon the suggestion.

“Where is he?” “Send for him.” “Did anybody see him this mornin’?” “Rout him out!” “Fetch him along!” The babel of voices started afresh.

“He’s cleared out,” cried a woman’s shrill voice. It was the voice of Mrs. Stukeley, who kept the boarding-house. Every one else was silent to hear what she had to say.

“He quit my place jest about daylight this morning,” continued the woman virulently. She had not liked the stranger’s black whiskers, nor his ministerial garb, nor his efforts to get a subscription out of her, and she was therefore ready to believe him guilty without further proof. “He seemed in a powerful hurry to git away, sayin’ as how the Archangel Gabriel himself couldn’t do business in this town.”

Seeing the effect her words produced, and that even the usually imperturbable and disdainful Deputy Sheriff was impressed by them, she could not refrain from embroidering her statement a little.

“Now ez I come to think of it,” she went on, “I did notice as how he seemed kind of excited an’ nervous like, so’s he could hardly stop to finish his breakfus’. But he took time to make me knock half-a-dollar off his bill.”

“Mac,” said Blackstock sharply, turning to Red Angus MacDonald, the village constable, “you take two of the boys an’ go after the Book Agent. Find him, an’ fetch him back. But no funny business with him, mind you. We hain’t got a spark of evidence agin him. We jest want him as a witness, mind.”

47

The crowd’s excitement was somewhat damped by this pronouncement, and Hawker’s exasperating voice was heard to drawl:

“No *evidence*, hey? Ef that ain’t *evidence*, him skinnin’ out that way afore sun-up, I’d like to know what is!”

But to this and similar comments Tug Blackstock paid no heed whatever. He hurried on down the road toward the scene of the

tragedy, his lean jaws working grimly upon a huge chew of tobacco, the big, black dog not now at his heels but trotting a little way ahead and casting from one side of the road to the other, nose to earth. The crowd came on behind, but Blackstock waved them back.

“I don’t want none o’ ye to come within fifty paces of me, afore I tell ye to,” he announced with decision. “Keep well back, all of ye, or ye’ll mess up the tracks.”

But this proved a decree too hard to be enforced for any length of time.

When he arrived at the place where the game-warden kept watch beside the murdered man, Blackstock stood for a few moments in silence, looking down upon the body of his friend with stony face and brooding eyes. In spite of his grief, his practised observation took in the whole scene to the minutest detail, and photographed it upon his memory for reference.

48

The body lay with face and shoulder and one leg and arm in a deep, stagnant pool by the roadside. The head was covered with black, clotted blood from a knife-wound in the neck. Close by, in the middle of the road, lay a stout leather satchel, gaping open, and quite empty. Two small memorandum books, one shut and the other with white leaves fluttering, lay near the bag. Though the roadway at this point was dry and hard, it bore some signs of a struggle, and toward the edge of the water there were several little, dark, caked lumps of puddled dust.

Blackstock first examined the road minutely, all about the body, but the examination, even to such a practised eye as his, yielded

little result. The ground was too hard and dusty to receive any legible trail, and, moreover, it had been carelessly over-trodden by the game-warden and his son. But whether he found anything of interest or not, Blackstock's grim, impassive face gave no sign.

49

At length he went over to the body, and lifted it gently. The coat and shirt were soaked with blood, and showed marks of a fierce struggle. Blackstock opened the shirt, and found the fatal wound, a knife-thrust which had been driven upwards between the ribs. He laid the body down again, and at the same time picked up a piece of paper, crumpled and blood-stained, which had lain beneath it. He spread it open, and for a moment his brows contracted as if in surprise and doubt. It was one of the order forms for "Mother, Home, and Heaven."

He folded it up and put it carefully between the leaves of the note-book which he always carried in his pocket.

Stephens, who was close beside him, had caught a glimpse of the paper, and recognized it.

"Say!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "I never thought o' *him!*"

But Blackstock only shook his head slowly, and called the big black dog, which had been waiting all this time in an attitude of keen expectancy, with mouth open and tail gently wagging.

"Take a good look at him, Jim," said Blackstock.

50

The dog sniffed the body all over, and then looked up at his master as if for further directions.

“An’ now take a sniff at this.” And he pointed to the rifled bag.

“What do you make of it?” he inquired when the dog had smelt it all over minutely.

Jim stood motionless, with ears and tail drooping, the picture of irresolution and bewilderment.

Blackstock took out again the paper which he had just put away, and offered it to the dog, who nosed it carefully, then looked at the dead body beside the pool, and growled softly.

“Seek him, Jim,” said Blackstock.

At once the dog ran up again to the body, and back to the open book. Then he fell to circling about the bag, nose to earth, seeking to pick up the elusive trail.

At this point the crowd from the village, unable longer to restrain their eagerness, surged forward, led by Hawker, and closed in, effectually obliterating all trails. Jim growled angrily, showing his long white teeth, and drew back beside the body as if to guard it. Blackstock stood watching his action with a brooding scrutiny. 51

“What’s that bit o’ paper ye found under him, Tug?” demanded Hawker vehemently.

“None o’ yer business, Sam,” replied the deputy, putting the blood-stained paper back into his pocket.

“I seen what it was,” shouted Hawker to the rest of the crowd. “It was one o’ them there dokuments that the book agent had, up

to the store. I always *said* as how 'twas him.”

“We’ll ketch him!” “We’ll string him up!” yelled the crowd, starting back along the road at a run.

“Don’t be sech fools!” shouted Blackstock. “Hold on! Come back I tell ye!”

But he might as well have shouted to a flock of wild geese on their clamorous voyage through the sky. Fired by Sam Hawker’s exhortations, they were ready to lynch the black-whiskered stranger on sight.

Blackstock cursed them in a cold fury.

“I’ll *hev* to go after them, Andy,” said he, “or there’ll be trouble when they find that there book agent.”

“Better give ’em their head, Tug,” protested the warden. “Guess he done it all right. He’ll git no more’n’s good for him.”

52

“*Maybe* he did it, an’ then agin, maybe he didn’t,” retorted the Deputy, “an’ anyways, they’re just plumb looney now. You stay here, an’ I’ll follow them up. Send Bob back to the Ridge to fetch the coroner.”

He turned and started on the run in pursuit of the shouting crowd, whistling at the same time for the dog to follow him. But to his surprise Jim did not obey instantly. He was very busy digging under a big whitish stone at the other side of the pool. Blackstock halted.

“Jim,” he commanded angrily, “git out o’ that! What d’ye mean

by foolin' about after woodchucks a time like this? Come here!"

Jim lifted his head, his muzzle and paws loaded with fresh earth, and gazed at his master for a moment. Then, with evident reluctance, he obeyed. But he kept looking back over his shoulder at the big white stone, as if he hated to leave it.

"There's a lot o' ordinary pup left in that there dawg yet," explained Blackstock apologetically to the game-warden.

"There ain't a dawg ever lived that wouldn't want to dig out a woodchuck," answered Stephens.

III

The black-whiskered stranger had been overtaken by his pursuers about ten miles beyond Brine's Rip, sleeping away the heat of the day under a spreading birch tree a few paces off the road. He was sleeping soundly—too soundly indeed, as thought the experienced constable, for a man with murder on his soul.

But when he was roughly aroused and seized, he seemed so terrified that his captors were all the more convinced of his guilt. He made no resistance as he was being hurried along the road, only clinging firmly to his black leather case, and glancing with wild eyes from side to side as if nerving himself to a desperate dash for liberty.

When he had gathered, however, a notion of what he was wanted for, to the astonishment of his captors, his terror seemed to subside—a fact which the constable noted narrowly. He

steadied his voice enough to ask several questions about the murder—questions to which reply was curtly refused. Then he walked on in a stolid silence, the ruddy colour gradually returning to his face.

A couple of miles before reaching Brine's Rip, the second search party came in sight, the Deputy Sheriff at the head of it and the shaggy black form of Jim close at his heels.

54

With a savage curse Hawker sprang forward, and about half the party with him, as if to snatch the prisoner from his captors and take instant vengeance upon him.

But Blackstock was too quick for them. The swiftest sprinter in the county, he got to the other party ahead of the mob and whipped around to face them, with one hand on the big revolver at his hip and Jim showing his teeth beside him. The constable and his party, hugely astonished, but confident that Blackstock's side was the right one to be on, closed protectingly around the prisoner, whose eyes now almost bulged from his head.

“You keep right back, boys,” commanded the Deputy in a voice of steel. “The law will look after this here prisoner, if he's the guilty one.”

“Fur as we kin see, there ain't no 'if' about it,” shouted Hawker, almost frothing at the mouth. “That's the man as done it, an' we're agoin' to string 'im up fer it right now, for fear he might git off some way atween the jedges an' the lawyers. You keep out of it now, Tug.”

About half the crowd surged forward with Hawker in front. Up came Blackstock's gun.

55

“Ye know me, boys,” said he. “Keep back.”

They kept back. They all *fell* back, indeed, some paces, except Hawker, who held his ground, half crouching, his lips distorted in a snarl of rage.

“Aw now, quit it, Sam,” urged one of his followers. “’Tain’t worth it. An’ Tug’s right, anyways. The law’s good enough, with Tug to the back of it.” And putting forth a long arm he dragged Hawker back into the crowd.

“Put away yer gun, Tug,” expostulated another. “Seein’s ye feel that way about it, we won’t interfere.”

Blackstock stuck the revolver back into his belt with a grin.

“Glad ye’ve come back to yer senses, boys,” said he, perceiving that the crisis was over. “But keep an eye on Hawker for a bit yet. Seems to ’ave gone clean off his head.”

“Don’t fret, Tug. We’ll look after him,” agreed several of his comrades from the mill, laying firmly persuasive hands upon the excited man, who cursed them for cowards till they began to chaff him roughly.

“What’s makin’ you so sore, Sam?” demanded one. “Did the book agent try to make up to Sis Hopkins?”

56

“No, it’s Tug that Sis is making eyes at now,” suggested another. “That’s what’s puttin’ Sam so off his nut.”

“Leave the lady’s name out of it, boys,” interrupted Blackstock, in a tone that carried conviction.

“Quit that jaw now, Sam,” interposed another, changing the subject, “an’ tell us what ye’ve done with that fancy belt o’ yourn ’at ye’re so proud of. We hain’t never seen ye without it afore.”

“That’s so,” chimed in the constable. “That accounts for his foolishness. Sam *ain’t* himself without that fancy belt.”

Hawker stopped his cursing and pulled himself together with an effort, as if only now realizing that his followers had gone over completely to the side of the law and Tug Blackstock.

“Busted the buckle,” he explained quickly. “Mend it when I git time.”

“Now, boys,” said Blackstock presently, “we’ll git right back along to where poor Jake’s still layin’, and there we’ll ask this here stranger what *he* knows about it. It’s there, if anywheres, where we’re most likely to git some light on the subject. I’ve sent over to the Ridge fer the coroner, an’ poor Jake can’t be moved till he comes.”

57

The book agent, his confidence apparently restored by the attitude of Blackstock, now let loose a torrent of eloquence to explain how glad he would be to tell all he knew, and how sorry he was that he knew nothing, having merely had a brief conversation with poor Mr. Sanderson on the morning of the previous day.

“Ye’ll hev lots o’ time to tell us all that when we’re askin’ ye,” answered Blackstock. “Now, take my advice an’ keep yer mouth shet.”

As Blackstock was speaking, Jim slipped in alongside the prisoner and rubbed against him with a friendly wag of the tail as if to say:

“Sorry to see you in such a hole, old chap.”

Some of the men laughed, and one who was more or less a friend of Hawker’s, remarked sarcastically:

“Jim don’t seem quite so discriminatin’ as usual, Tug.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied the Deputy drily, noting the dog’s attitude with evident interest. “Time will show. Ye must remember a man ain’t *necessarily* a murderer jest because he wears black side-lights an’ tries to sell ye a book that ain’t no good.”

“No good!” burst out the prisoner, reddening with indignation. “You show me another book that’s half as good, at double the price, an’ I’ll give you—”

58

“Shet up, you!” ordered the Deputy, with a curious look. “This ain’t no picnic ye’re on, remember.”

Then some one, as if for the first time, thought of the money for which Sanderson had been murdered.

“Why don’t ye search him, Tug?” he demanded. “Let’s hev a look in that there black knapsack.”

“Ye bloomin’ fool,” shouted Hawker, again growing excited, “ye don’t s’pose he’d be carryin’ it on him, do ye? He’d hev it buried somewheres in the woods, where he could git it later.”

“Right ye are, Sam,” agreed the Deputy. “The man as done the deed ain’t likely to carry the evidence around on him. But all the same we’ll search the prisoner bime-by.”

By the time the strange procession had got back to the scene of the tragedy it had been swelled by half the population of the village. At Blackstock’s request, Zeb Smith, the proprietor of the store, who was also a magistrate, swore in a score of special constables to keep back the crowd while awaiting the arrival of the coroner. Under the magistrate’s orders—59 which satisfied Blackstock’s demand for strict formality of procedure—the prisoner was searched, and could not refrain from showing a childish triumph when nothing was found upon him.

Passing from abject terror to a ridiculous over-confidence, he with difficulty restrained himself from seizing the opportunity to harangue the crowd on the merits of “Mother, Home, and Heaven.” His face was wreathed in fatuous smiles as he saw the precious book snatched from its case and passed around mockingly from hand to hand. He certainly did not look like a murderer, and several of the crowd, including Stephens, the game-warden, began to wonder if they had not been barking up the wrong tree.

“I’ve got the idee,” remarked Stephens, “it’d take a baker’s dozen o’ that chap to do in Jake Sanderson that way. The skate as killed Jake was some man, anyways.”

“I’d like to know,” sneered Hawker, “how ye’re going to account for that piece o’ paper, the book-agent’s paper, ’at Tug Blackstock found there under the body.”

“Aw, shucks!” answered the game-warden, “that’s easy. He’s been a-sowin’ ’em round the country so’s anybody could git hold of ’em, same’s you er me, Sam!”

This harmless, if ill-timed pleasantry appeared to Hawker, in his excitement, a wanton insult. His lean face went black as thunder, and his lips worked with some savage retort that would not out. But at that instant came a strange diversion. The dog Jim, who under Blackstock’s direction had been sniffing long and minutely at the clothes of the murdered man, at the rifled leather bag, and at the ground all about, came suddenly up to Hawker and stood staring at him with a deep, menacing growl, while the thick hair rose stiffly along his back.

For a moment there was dead silence save for that strange accusing growl. Hawker’s face went white to the lips. Then, in a blaze of fury he yelled:

“Git out o’ that! I’ll teach ye to come showin’ yer teeth at me!” And he launched a savage kick at the animal.

“JIM!! Come here!” rapped out the command of Tug Blackstock, sharp as a rifle shot. And Jim, who had eluded the kick, trotted back, still growling, to his master.

“Whatever ye been doin’ to Jim, Sam?” demanded one of the mill hands. “I ain’t never seen him act like that afore.”

“He’s *always* had a grudge agin me,” panted Hawker, “coz I had to give him a lickin’ once.”

“Now ye’re lyin’, Sam Hawker,” said Blackstock quietly. “Ye know right well as how you an’ Jim were good friends only

yesterday at the store, where I saw ye feedin' him. An' I don't think likely ye've ever given Jim a lickin'. It don't *sound* probable."

"Seems to me there's a lot of us has gone a bit off their nut over this thing, an' not much wonder, neither," commented the game-warden. "Looks like Sam Hawker has gone plumb crazy. An' now there's Jim, the sensiblest dog in the world, with lots more brains than most men-kind, foolin' away his time like a year-old pup a-tryin' to dig out a darn old woodchuck hole."

Such, in fact, seemed to be Jim's object. He was digging furiously with both forepaws beneath the big white stone on the opposite side of the pool.

"He's bit me. I'll kill him," screamed Hawker, his face distorted and foam at the corners of his lips. He plucked his hunting-knife from its sheath, and leapt forward wildly, with the evident intention of darting around the pool and knifing the dog. 62

But Blackstock, who had been watching him intently, was too quick for him.

"No, ye don't, Sam!" he snapped, catching him by the wrist with such a wrench that the bright blade fell to the ground. With a scream, Hawker struck at his face, but Blackstock parried the blow, tripped him neatly, and fell on him.

"Hold him fast, boys," he ordered. "Seems like he's gone mad. Don't let him hurt himself."

In five seconds the raving man was trussed up helpless as a chicken, his hands tied behind his back, his legs lashed together

at the knees, so that he could neither run nor kick. Then he was lifted to his feet, and held thus, inexorably but with commiseration.

“Sorry to be rough with ye, Sam,” said one of the constables, “but ye’ve gone crazy as a bed-bug.”

“Never knowed Sam was such a friend o’ Jake’s!” muttered another, with deepest pity.

But Blackstock stood close beside the body of the murdered man, and watched with a face of granite the efforts of Jim to dig under the big white stone. His absorption in such an apparently frivolous matter attracted the notice of the crowd. A hush fell upon them all, broken only by the hoarse, half-smothered ravings of Sam Hawker.

63

“Tain’t no woodchuck Jim’s diggin’ for, you see!” muttered one of the constables to the puzzled Stephens.

“Tug don’t seem to think so, neither,” agreed Stephens.

“Angus,” said Blackstock in a low, strained voice to the constable who had just spoken, “would ye mind stepping round an’ givin’ Jim a lift with that there stone!”

The constable hastened to obey. As he approached, Jim looked up, his face covered thickly with earth, wagged his tail in greeting, then fell to work again with redoubled energy.

The constable set both hands under the stone, and with a huge heave turned it over. With a yelp of delight Jim plunged his head into the hole, grabbed something in his mouth, and tore around

the pool with it. The something was long and whitish, and trailed as he ran. He laid it at Blackstock's feet.

Blackstock held it up so that all might see it. It was a painted Indian belt, and it was stained and smeared with blood. The constable picked out of the hole a package of bills.

For some moments no one spoke, and even the ravings of Hawker were stilled.

64

Then Tug Blackstock spoke, while every one, as if with one consent, turned his eyes away from the face of Sam Hawker, unwilling to see a comrade's shame and horror.

"This is a matter now for jedge and jury, boys," said he in a voice that was grave and stern. "But I think you'll all agree that we hain't no call to detain this gentleman, who's been put to so much inconvenience all on account of our little mistake."

"Don't mention it, don't mention it," protested the book agent, as his guards, with profuse apologies, released him. "That's a mighty intelligent dawg o' yours, Mr. Blackstock."

"He's sure done *you* a good turn this day, mister," replied the Deputy grimly.

65

III. THE HOLE IN THE TREE

I

It was Woolly Billy who discovered the pile—notes and silver, with a few stray gold pieces—so snugly hidden under the fish-hawk's nest.

The fish-hawk's nest was in the crotch of the old, half-dead rock-maple on the shore of the desolate little lake which lay basking in the flat-lands about a mile back, behind Brine's Rip Mills.

As the fish-hawk is one of the most estimable of all the wilderness folk, both brave and inoffensive, troubling no one except the fat and lazy fish that swarmed in the lake below, and as he is protected by a superstition of the backwoodsmen, who say it brings ill-luck to disturb the domestic arrangements of a fish-hawk, the big nest, conspicuous for miles about, was never disturbed by even the most amiable curiosity.

But Woolly Billy, not fully acclimatized to the backwoods tradition and superstition, and uninformed as to the firmness and decision with which the fish-hawks are apt to resent any intrusion, had long hankered to explore the mysteries of that great nest. One morning he made up his mind to try it.

Tug Blackstock, Deputy Sheriff of Nipsiwaska County, was away for a day or two, and old Mrs. Amos, his housekeeper, was too deaf and rheumatic to "fuss herself" greatly about the

“goings-on” of so fantastic a child as Woolly Billy, so long as she knew he had Jim to look after him. This serves to explain how a small boy like Woolly Billy, his seven-years-and-nine-months resting lightly on his amazingly fluffy shock of pale flaxen curls, could be trotting off down the lonely backwoods trail with no companion or guardian but a big, black dog.

Woolly Billy was familiar with the mossy old trail to the lake, and did not linger upon it. Reaching the shore, he wasted no time throwing sticks in for Jim to retrieve, but, in spite of the dog’s eager invitations to this pastime, made his way along the dry edge between undergrowth and water till he came to the bluff. Pushing laboriously through the hot, aromatic-scented tangle of bushes, he climbed to the foot of the old maple, which looked dwarfed by the burden of the huge nest carried in its crotch.

Woolly Billy was an expert tree-climber, but this great trunk presented new problems. Twice he went round it, finding no likely spot to begin. Then, certain roughnesses tempted him, and he succeeded in drawing himself up several feet. Serene in the consciousness of his good intentions, he struggled on. He gained perhaps another foot. Then he stuck. He pulled hard upon a ragged edge of bark, trying to work his way further around the trunk. A patch of bark came away suddenly in his grip and he fell backwards with a startled cry.

67

He fell plump on Jim, rolled off into the bushes, picked himself up, shook the hair out of his eyes and stood staring up at a round hole in the trunk where the patch of bark had been.

A hole in a tree is always interesting. It suggests such

possibilities. Forgetting his scratches, Woolly Billy made haste to climb up again, in spite of Jim's protests. He peered eagerly into the hole. But he could see nothing. And he was cautious—for one could never tell what lived in a hole like that—or what the occupant, if there happened to be any, might have to say to an intruder. He would not venture his hand into the unknown. He slipped down, got a bit of stick and thrust *that* into the hole. There was no result, but he learnt that the hole was shallow. He stirred the stick about. There came a slight jingling sound in return.

68

Woolly Billy withdrew the stick and thought for a moment. He reasoned that a thing that jingled was not at all likely to bite. He dropped the stick and cautiously inserted his hand to the full length of his little arm. His fingers grasped something which felt more or less familiar, and he drew forth a bank-note and several silver coins.

Woolly Billy's eyes grew very round and large as he stared at his handful. He was sure that money did not grow in hollow trees. Tug Blackstock kept *his* money in an old black wallet. Woolly Billy liked money because it bought peppermints, and molasses candy, and gingerpop. But this money was plainly not his. He reluctantly put it back into the hole.

Thoughtfully he climbed down. He knew that money was such a desirable thing that it led some people—bad people whom Tug Blackstock hated—to steal what did not belong to them. He picked up the patch of bark and laboriously fitted it back into its place over the hole, lest some of these bad people should find the money and appropriate it.

“Not a word, now, not one single word,” he admonished Jim, “till Tug comes home. We’ll tell him all about it.”

69

II

It was five o’clock in the sleepy summer afternoon, and the flies buzzed drowsily among the miscellaneous articles that graced the windows of the Corner Store. The mills had shut down early, because the supply of logs was running low in the boom, and no more could be expected until there should be a rise of water. Some half-dozen of the mill hands were sitting about the store on nail-kegs and soap-boxes, while Zeb Smith, the proprietor, swung his long legs lazily from the edge of the littered counter.

Woolly Billy came in with a piece of silver in his little fist to buy a packet of tea for Mrs. Amos. Jim, not liking the smoke, stayed outside on the plank sidewalk, and snapped at flies. The child, who was regarded as the mascot of Brine’s Rip Mills, was greeted with a fire of solemn chaff, which he received with an impartial urbanity.

“Oh, quit coddin’ the kiddie, an’ don’t try to be so smart,” growled Long Jackson, the Magadavy river-man, lifting his gaunt length from a pile of axe-handles, and thrusting his fist deep into his trousers’ pocket. “Here, Zeb, give me a box of peppermints for Woolly Billy. He hain’t been in to see us this long while.”

70

He pulled out a handful of coins and dollar bills, and proceeded to select a silver bit from the collection. The sight was too much

for Woolly Billy, bursting with his secret.

“I know where there’s *lots* more money like that,” he blurted out proudly, “in a hole in a tree.”

During the past twelve months or more there had been thefts of money, usually of petty sums, in Brine’s Rip Mills and the neighbourhood, and all Tug Blackstock’s detective skill had failed to gain the faintest clue to the perpetrator. Suspicions there had been, but all had vanished into thin air at the touch of investigation. Woolly Billy’s amazing statement, therefore, was like a little bombshell in the shop.

Every one of his audience stiffened up with intense interest.

One swarthy, keen-featured, slim-waisted, half-Indian-looking fellow, with the shapely hands and feet that mark so many of the Indian mixed-bloods, was sitting on a bale of homespun behind Long Jackson, and smoking solemnly with half-closed lids. His eyes opened wide for a fraction of a second, and darted one searching glance at the child’s face. Then he dropped his lids slowly once more till the eyes were all but closed. The others all stared eagerly at Woolly Billy.

71

Pleased with the interest he had excited, Woolly Billy glanced about him, and shook back his mop of pale curls self-consciously.

“*Lots* more!” he repeated. “Big handfuls.”

Then he remembered his discretion, his resolve to tell no one but Tug Blackstock about his discovery. Seeking to change the subject, he beamed upon Long Jackson.

“Thank you, Long,” he said politely. “I *love* peppermints. An’ Jim loves them, too.”

“*Where* did you say that hole in the tree was?” asked Long Jackson, reaching for the box that held the peppermints, and ostentatiously filling a generous paper-bag.

Woolly Billy looked apologetic and deprecating.

“Please, Long, if you don’t mind *very* much, I can’t tell anybody but Tug Blackstock *that*.”

Jackson laid the bag of peppermints a little to one side, as if to convey that their transfer was contingent upon Woolly Billy’s behaviour.

72

The child looked wistfully at the coveted sweets; then his red lips compressed themselves with decision and resentment.

“I won’t tell anybody but Tug Blackstock, *of course*,” said he. “An’ I don’t want any peppermints, thank you, Long.”

He picked up his package of tea and turned to leave the shop, angry at himself for having spoken of the secret and angry at Jackson for trying to get ahead of Tug Blackstock. Jackson, looking annoyed at the rebuff, extended his leg and closed the door. Woolly Billy’s blue eyes blazed. One of the other men strove to propitiate him.

“Oh, come on, Woolly Billy,” he urged coaxingly, “don’t git riled at Long. You an’ him’s pals, ye know. We’re all pals o’ yourn, an’ of Tug’s. An’ there ain’t no harm *at all*, at all, in yer showin’ us this ’ere traysure what you’ve lit on to. Besides, you

know there's likely some o' that there traysure belongs to us 'uns here. Come on now, an' take us to yer hole in the tree."

"Ye ain't agoin' to git out o' this here store, Woolly Billy, I tell ye that, till ye promise to take us to it right off," said Long Jackson sharply.

Woolly Billy was not alarmed in the least by this threat. But he was so furious that for a moment he could not speak. He could do nothing but stand glaring up at Long Jackson with such fiery defiance that the good-natured mill-hand almost relented. But it chanced that he was one of the sufferers, and he was in a hurry to get his money back. At this point the swarthy woodsman on the bale of homespun opened his narrow eyes once again, took the pipe from his mouth, and spoke up.

73

"Quit plaguin' the kid, Long," he drawled. "The cash'll be all there when Tug Blackstock gits back, an' it'll save a lot of trouble an' misunderstandin', havin' him to see to dividin' it up fair an' square. Let Woolly Billy out."

Long Jackson shook his head obstinately, and opened his mouth to reply, but at this moment Woolly Billy found his voice.

"Let me out! Let me out! *Let me out!*" he screamed shrilly, stamping his feet and clenching his little fists.

Instantly a heavy body was hurled upon the outside of the door, striving to break it in.

Zeb Smith swung his long legs down from the counter hurriedly.

"The kid's right, an' Black Dan's right. Open the door, Long, an'

do it quick. I don't want that there dawg comin' through the winder. An' he'll be doin' it, too, in half a jiff."

74

"Git along, then, Woolly, if ye insist on it. But no more peppermints, mind," growled Jackson, throwing open the door and stepping back discreetly. As he did so, Jim came in with a rush, just saving himself from knocking Woolly Billy over. One swift glance assured him that the child was all right, but very angry about something.

"It's all right, Jim. Come with me," said Woolly Billy, tugging at the animal's collar. And the pair stalked away haughtily side by side.

III

Tug Blackstock arrived the next morning about eleven. Before he had time to sit down for a cup of that strenuous black tea which the woodsmen consume at all hours, he had heard from Woolly Billy's eager lips the story of the hole in the tree beneath the fish-hawk's nest. He heard also of the episode at Zeb Smith's store, but Woolly Billy by this time had quite forgiven Long Jackson, so the incident was told in such a way that Blackstock had no reason to take offence.

"Long tried *hard*," said the child, "to get me to tell where that hole was, but I *wouldn't*. And Black Dan was awful nice, an' made him stop botherin' me, an' said I was quite right not to tell *anybody* till you came home, coz you'd know just what to do."

75

“H’m!” said the Deputy-Sheriff thoughtfully, “Long’s had a lot of money stole from him, so, of course, he wanted to git his eyes on to that hole quick. But ’tain’t like Black Dan to be that thoughtful. Maybe he *hasn’t* had none taken.”

While he was speaking, a bunch of the mill-hands arrived at the door, word of Blackstock’s return having gone through the village.

“We want to go an’ help ye find that traysure, Tug,” said Long Jackson, glancing somewhat sheepishly at Woolly Billy. A friendly grin from the child reassured him, and he went on with more confidence:

“We tried to git the kiddie to tell us where ’twas, but wild steers wouldn’t drag it out o’ him till you got back.”

“That’s right, Long,” agreed Blackstock, “but it don’t need to be no expedition. We don’t want the whole village traipsin’ after us. You an’ three or four more o’ the boys that’s lost money come along, with Woolly Billy an’ me, an’ the rest o’ you meet us at the store in about a couple o’ hours’ time. Tell any other folks you see that I don’t want ’em follerin’ after us, because it may mix up things—an’ anyways, I don’t want it, see!”

76

After a few moments’ hesitation and consultation the majority of the mill-hands turned away, leaving Long Jackson and big Andy Stevens, the blue-eyed giant from the Oromocto (who had been one of the chief victims), and MacDonald, and Black Saunders, and Black Dan (whose name had been Dan Black till the whim of the woodsmen turned it about). Blackstock eyed them

appraisingly.

“I didn’t know as *you’d* bin one o’ the victims too, Dan,” he remarked.

“Didn’t ye, Tug?” returned Black with a short laugh. “Well, I didn’t say nawthin about it, coz I was after doin’ a leetle detective work on me own, an’ mebbe I’d ’ave got in ahead o’ ye if Woolly Billy here hadn’t a’ been so smart. But I tell ye, Tug, if that there traysure’s the lot we’re thinkin’ it is, there’d ought ter be a five-dollar bill in it what I’ve marked.”

“H’m!” grunted the Deputy, hastily gulping down the last of his tea, and rising to his feet. “But Woolly Billy an’ me *and* Jim’s a combination pretty hard to git ahead of, I’m thinkin’.”

77

As the party neared the bluff whereon the tree of the fish-hawk’s nest stood ragged against the sky, the air grew rank with the pungent odour of skunk. Now skunks were too common in the region of Brine’s Rip Mills for that smell, as a rule, to excite any more comment than an occasional disgusted execration when it became too concentrated. But to-day it drew more than passing attention. MacDonald sniffed intently.

“It’s deuced queer,” said he, “but I’ve noticed that there’s always been a smell of skunk round when anybody’s lost anything. Did it ever strike you that way, Tug?”

“Yes, some!” assented the Deputy curtly.

“It’s a skunk, all right, that’s been takin’ our money,” said big Andy, “ef he *don’t* carry his tail over his back.”

Every one of the party was sniffing the tainted air as if the familiar stench were some rare perfume—all but Jim. He had had an encounter with a skunk, once in his impulsive puppy days, and the memory was too painful to be dwelt upon.

As they climbed the slope, one of the fish-hawks came swooping down from somewhere high in the blue, and began circling on slow wings about the nest.

78

“That cross old bird doesn’t like visitors,” remarked Woolly Billy.

“You wouldn’t, neether, Woolly Billy, if you was a fish-hawk,” said Jackson.

Arrived at the tree, Woolly Billy pointed eagerly to a slightly broken piece of bark a little above the height of the Deputy’s head.

“*There’s* the hole!” he cried, clapping his hands in his excitement as if relieved to find it had not vanished.

“Keep off a bit now, boys,” cautioned Blackstock. Drawing his long hunting-knife, he carefully loosened the bark without letting his hand come in contact with it, and on the point of the blade laid it aside against the foot of the trunk.

“Don’t any of you tech it,” he admonished.

Then he slipped his hand into the hole, and felt about.

A look of chagrin came over his face, and he withdrew his hand—empty.

“Nothin’ there!” said he.

“It was there yesterday morning,” protested Woolly Billy, his blue eyes filling with tears.

“Yes, yes, of course,” agreed Blackstock, glancing slowly around the circle of disappointed faces.

79

“Somebody from the store’s been blabbin’,” exclaimed Black Dan, in a loud and angry voice.

“An’ why not?” protested Big Andy, with a guilty air. “We never said nawthin’ about keepin’ it a secret.”

In spite of their disappointment, the mill-hands laughed. Big Andy was not one to keep a secret in any case, and his weakness for a certain pretty widow who kept the post-office was common comment. Big Andy responded by blushing to the roots of his blonde hair.

“Jim!” commanded the Deputy. And the big black dog bounded up to him, his eyes bright with expectation. The Deputy picked him up, and held him aloft with his muzzle to the edges of the hole.

“Smell that,” he ordered, and Jim sniffed intently. Then he set him down and directed him to the piece of bark. That, too, Jim’s nose investigated minutely, his feathered tail slowly wagging.

“Seek him,” ordered Blackstock.

Jim whined, looked puzzled, and sniffed again at the bark. The information which his subtle nose picked up there was

extremely confusing. First, there was the smell of skunk— but that smell of skunk was everywhere, dulling the keenness of his discrimination. Then, there was a faint, faint reminiscence of Woolly Billy. But there was Woolly Billy, at Tug Blackstock’s side. Certainly, there could be no reason for him to seek Woolly Billy. Then there was an elusive, tangled scent, which for some moments defied him. At last, however, he got a clue to it. With a pleased bark—his way of saying “Eureka!”—he whipped about, trotted over to big Andy Sevens, sat down in front of him, and gazed up at him, with tongue hanging and an air of friendly inquiry, as much as to say: “Here I am, Andy. But I don’t know what Tug Blackstock wants me to seek you for, seein’ as you’re right here alongside him.”

Big Andy dropped his hand on the dog’s head familiarly; then noticing the sudden tense silence of the party, his eyes grew very big and round.

“What’re you all starin’ at *me* fer, boys?” he demanded, with a sort of uneasy wonder.

“Ax Jim,” responded Black Dan, harshly.

“I reckon old Jim’s makin’ a mistake fer once, Tug,” drawled Long Jackson, who was Andy’s special pal.

The Deputy rubbed his lean chin reflectively. There could be no one more above suspicion in his eyes than this transparently honest young giant from the Oromocto. But Jim’s curious action had scattered to the winds, at least for a moment, a sort of hypothesis which he had been building up in his mind. At the same time, he felt dimly that a new clue was being held

out to him, if he could only grasp it. He wanted time to think.

“We kin all make mistakes,” he announced sententiously. “Come here, Jim. Seek ’im, boy, seek ’im.” And he waved his hand at large.

Jim bounced off with a joyous yelp, and began quartering the ground, hither and thither, all about the tree. Big Andy, at a complete loss for words, stood staring from one to another with eyes of indignant and incredulous reproach.

Suddenly a yelp of triumph was heard in the bushes, a little way down towards the lake, and Jim came racing back with a dark magenta article in his mouth. At the foot of the tree he stopped, and looked at Blackstock interrogatively. Receiving no sign whatever from his master, whose face had lit up for an instant, but was now as impassive as a hitching-post, he stared at Black Dan for a few seconds, and then let his eyes wander back to Andy’s face. In the midst of his obvious hesitation the Oromocto man stepped forward.

82

“Durned ef that ain’t one o’ my old mittens,” he exclaimed eagerly, “what Sis knit fer me. I’ve been lookin’ fer ’em everywheres. Bring it here, Jim.”

As the dog trotted up with it obediently, the Deputy intervened and stopped him. “You shall have it bime-by, Andy,” said he, “ef it’s yourn. But jest now I don’t want nobody to tech it except Jim. Ef you acknowledge it’s yourn—”

“*Of course* it’s mine,” interrupted Andy resentfully. “An’ I want to find the other one.”

“So do I,” said Blackstock. “Drop it, Jim. Go find the other mitt.”

As Jim went ranging once more through the bushes, the whole party moved around to the other side of the tree to get out of the downpour of the noon sun. As they passed the magenta mitten Black Dan picked it up and examined it ostentatiously.

“How do ye know it’s *yourn*, Andy?” he demanded. “There’s lots of magenta mitts in the world, I reckon.”

Tug Blackstock turned upon him.

83

“I said I didn’t want no one to tech that mitt,” he snapped.

“Oh, beg pardon, Tug,” said Dan, dropping the mitt. “I forgot. ’S’pose it might kind o’ confuse Jim’s scent, gittin’ another smell besides Andy’s on to it.”

“It might,” replied the Deputy coolly, “an’ then agin, it mightn’t.”

For a little while every one was quiet, listening to Jim as he crashed about through the bushes, and confidently but unreasonably expecting him to reappear with the other mitten. Or, at least, that was what Big Andy and Woolly Billy expected. The Deputy, at least, did not. At last he spoke.

“I agree with Mac here, boys,” said he, “that there may be somethin’ more’n skunk in this skunk smell. We’ll jest look into it a bit. You all keep back a ways—an’ you, Long, jest keep an eye on Woolly Billy ef ye don’t mind, while I go on with Jim.”

He whistled to the dog, and directed his attention to a spot at the foot of the tree exactly beneath the hole. Jim sniffed hard at the spot, then looked up at his master with tail drooping despondently.

“Yes, I know it’s skunk, plain skunk,” agreed the Deputy.

“But I want him. Seek him, Jim—*seek him*, boy.”

84

Thus reassured, Jim’s tail went up again. He started off through the bushes, down towards the lake, with his master close behind him. The rest of the party followed thirty paces or so behind.

The trail led straight down to the lake’s edge. Here Jim stopped short.

“*That* skunk’s a kind o’ water-baby,” remarked Long Jackson.

“Oh, do you think so?” queried Woolly Billy, much interested.

“Of course,” answered Jackson. “Don’t you see he’s took to the water? Now, yer common, no-account skunk hates wettin’ his fur like pizen.”

The Deputy examined the hard, white sand at the water’s edge. It showed faint traces of moccasined feet. He pursed his lips. It was an old game, but a good one, this breaking a trail by going into the water. He had no way of deciding whether his quarry had turned up the lake shore or down towards the outlet. He guessed at the latter as the more likely alternative.

Jim trotted slowly ahead, sniffing every foot of ground along the water’s edge. As they approached the outlet the shore became muddy, and Jackson swung Woolly Billy up on to

85

his shoulder. Once in the outlet, the foreshore narrowed to a tiny strip of bare rock between the water and an almost perpendicular bank covered with shrubs and vines. All at once the smell of skunk, which had been almost left behind, returned upon the air with fresh pungency. Blackstock stopped short and scanned the bank with narrowed eyes.

A second or two later, Jim yelped his signal, and his tail went up. He sniffed eagerly across the ribbon of rock, and then leapt at the face of the bank.

The Deputy called him off and hurried to the spot. The rest of the party, much excited, closed up to within four or five paces, when a wave of the Deputy's hand checked them.

“Phew!” ejaculated Black Dan, holding his nose. “There’s a skunk hole in that there bank. Ye’ll be gittin’ somethin’ in the eye, Tug, ef ye don’t keep off.”

Blackstock, who was busy pulling apart the curtain of vines, paid no attention, but Long Jackson answered sarcastically:

“Ye call yerself a woodsman, Dan,” said he, “an’ ye don’t know that the hole where a skunk lives *don’t* smell any. Yer *reel* skunk’s quite a gentleman and keeps his home always clean an’ tidy. Tug Blackstock ain’t a-goin’ to git nawthin’ in the eye.”

86

“Well, I reckon we’d better smoke,” said Black Dan amiably, pulling out his pipe and filling it. And the others followed his example.

Blackstock thrust his hand into a shallow hole in the bank quite

hidden by the foliage. He drew out a pair of moccasins, water-soaked, and hurriedly set them down on the rock. For all their soaking, they reeked of skunk. He picked up one on the point of a stick and examined it minutely. In spite of all the soaking, the sole, to his initiated eye, still bore traces of that viscous, oily liquid which no water will wash off—the strangling exudation of the skunk’s defensive gland. It was just what he had expected. The moccasin was neat and slim and of medium size—not more than seven at most. He held it up, that all might see it clearly.

“Does this belong to you, Andy Stevens?” he asked.

There was a jeer from the group, and Big Andy held up an enormous foot, which might, by courtesy, have been numbered a thirteen. It was a point upon which the Oromocto man was usually sensitive, but to-day he was proud of it.

“Ye’ll hev to play Cinderella, Tug, an’ find out what leetle foot it fits on to,” suggested MacDonald.

87

The Deputy fished again in the hole. He drew forth a magenta mitten, dropped it promptly, then held it up on the point of his stick at arm’s length. It had been with the moccasins. Big Andy stepped forward to claim it, then checked himself.

“It’s a mite too strong fer me now,” he protested. “I’ll hev to git Sis to knit me another pair, I guess.”

Blackstock dropped the offensive thing beside the moccasins at his feet, and reached once more into the hole.

“He ain’t takin’ no risks this time, boys,” said Blackstock. “He’s took the swag with him.”

There was a growl of disappointment. Long Jackson could not refrain from a reproachful glance at Woolly Billy, but refrained from saying the obvious.

“What are ye goin’ to do about it, Tug?” demanded Black Dan. “Hev ye got any kind of a *reel* clue, d’ye think, now?”

“Wait an’ see,” was Blackstock’s noncommittal reply. He picked up the moccasins and mitten again on the point of his stick, scanned the bank sharply to make sure his quarry had not gone that way, and led the procession once more down along the rocky shore of the stream. “Seek him,” he said again to Jim, and the dog, as before, trotted on ahead, sniffing along by the water’s edge to intercept the trail of whoever had stepped ashore.

88

The party emerged at length upon the bank of the main stream, and turned upwards towards Brine’s Rip. After they had gone about half a mile they rounded a bend and came in sight of a violent rapid which cut close inshore. At this point it would be obviously impossible for any one walking in the shallow water to avoid coming out upon dry ground. Tug Blackstock quickened his pace, and waved Jim forward.

A sharp oath broke from Black Dan’s lips.

“I’ve been an’ gone an’ left my ’baccy-pooch behind, by the skunk’s hole,” he announced. And grumbling under his breath he turned back down the shore.

Blackstock ran on, as if suddenly in a great hurry. Just where the shallow water ended, at the foot of the rapid, Jim gave his signal with voice and tail. He raced up the bank to a clump of

bushes and began thrashing about in them.

“What d’ye suppose he’s found there?” asked Big Andy.

89

“Scent, and lots of it. No mistake this time,” announced MacDonald. “Hain’t ye caught on to Jim’s signs yet?”

“Jim,” said the Deputy, sharply but not loud, “*fetch him!*”

Jim, with nose in air instead of to the ground, set off at a gallop down the shore in the direction of the outlet.

The Deputy turned about.

“Dan,” he shouted peremptorily. “Come back here. I want ye!”

Instead of obeying, Black Dan dashed up the bank, running like a deer, and vanished into the bushes.

“*I knew it!* That’s the skunk, boys. Go home, you Billy!” cried Blackstock, and started after the fugitive. The rest followed close on his heels. But Jackson cried:

“Ye’d better call off Jim quick. Dan’s got a gun on him.”

The Deputy gave a shrill whistle, and Jim, who was just vanishing into the bush, stopped short. At the same instant a shot rang out from the bushes, and the dog dropped in his tracks with a howl of anguish.

Blackstock’s lean jaws set themselves like iron. He whipped out his own heavy “Colt’s,” and the party tore on, till they met Jim dragging himself towards them with a

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wounded hind-leg trailing pitifully.

The Deputy gave one look at the big black dog, heaved a breath of relief, and stopped.

“‘Tain’t no manner o’ use chasin’ him now, boys,” he decreed, “because, as we all know, Dan kin run right away from the best runner amongst us. But now I know him—an’ I’ve suspicioned him this two month, only I couldn’t git no clue—*I’ll git him*, never you fear. Jest now, ye’d better help me carry Jim home, so’s we kin git him doctored up in good shape. I reckon Nipswaska County can’t afford to lose Mr. Assistant-Deputy Sheriff. That there skunk-oil on Dan’s moccasins fooled *both* Jim an’ me, good an’ plenty, didn’t it?”

“But whatever did he want o’ my mitts?” demanded Big Andy.

“Now ye *air* a sap-head, Andy Stevens,” growled MacDonald, “ef ye can’t see *that!*”

IV. THE TRAIL OF THE BEAR

I

The Deputy Sheriff of Nipsiwaska County had spent half an hour at the telephone. In the backwoods the telephone wires go everywhere. In that half-hour every settlement, every river-crossing, every lumber-camp, and most of the wide-scattered pioneer cabins had been warned of the flight of the thief, Dan Black, nicknamed Black Dan, and how, in the effort to secure his escape, he had shot and wounded the Deputy Sheriff's big black dog whose cleverness on the trail he had such cause to dread. As Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff, came out of the booth he asked after Jim.

"Oh, Black Dan's bullet broke no bones that time," replied the village doctor, who had tended the dog's wound as carefully as if his patient had been the Deputy himself. "It's a biggish hole, but Jim'll be all right in a few days, never fear."

Blackstock looked relieved.

"Ye don't seem to be worryin' much about Black Dan's gittin' away, Tug," grumbled Long Jackson, who was not unnaturally sore over the loss of his money.

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"No, I ain't worryin' much," agreed the Deputy, with a confident grin, "now I know Jim ain't goin' to lose a leg. As for Black Dan's gittin' away, well, I've got me own notions about that. I've 'phoned all over the three counties, and given warnin' to

every place he kin stop for a bite or a bed. He can't cross the river to get over the Border, for I've sent word to hev every bridge an' ferry watched. Black Dan's cunnin' enough to know I'd do jest that, first thing, so he won't waste his time tryin' the river. He'll strike right back into the big timber, countin' on the start he's got of us, now he's put Jim out of the game. But I guess I kin trail him myself—now I know what I'm trailin'—pretty nigh as well as Jim could. I've took note of his tracks, and there ain't another pair o' boots in Brine's Rip Mills like them he's wearin'."

"And when air ye goin' to start?" demanded Long Jackson, still inclined to be resentful.

"Right now," replied Blackstock cheerfully, "soon as ye kin git guns and stuff some crackers an' cheese into yer pockets. I'll want *you* to come along, MacDonald, an' you, Long, an' Saunders, an' Big Andy, as my posse. Meet me in fifteen minutes at the store an' I'll hev Zeb Smith swear ye in for the job. If Black Dan wants to do any shootin', it's jest as well to hev everythin' regular."

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There were not a few others among the mill-hands and the villagers who had lost by Black Dan's cunning pilferings, and who would gladly have joined in the hunt. In the backwoods not even a murderer—unless his victim has been a woman or a child—is hunted down with so much zest as a thief. But the Deputy did not like too much volunteer assistance, and was apt to suppress it with scant ceremony. So his choice of a posse was accepted without protest or comment, and the chosen four slipped off to get their guns.

As Tug Blackstock had foreseen, the trail of the fugitive was easily picked up. Confident in his powers as a runaway, Black Dan's sole object, at first, had been to gain as much lead as possible over the expected pursuit, and he had run straight ahead, leaving a trail which any one of Blackstock's posse—with the exception, perhaps, of Big Andy—could have followed with almost the speed and precision of the Deputy himself.

There had been no attempt at concealment. About five miles back, however, in the heavy woods beyond the head of the Lake, it appeared that the fugitive had dropped into a walk and begun to go more circumspectly. The trail now grew so obscure that the other woodsmen would have had difficulty in deciphering it at all, and they were amazed at the ease and confidence with which Blackstock followed it up, hardly diminishing his stride.

94

"Tug is sure some trailer," commented Jackson, his good humour now quite restored by the progress they were making.

"*Jim* couldn't 'a' done no better himself," declared Big Andy, the Oromocto man.

And just then Blackstock came abruptly to a halt, and held up his hand for his followers to stop.

"Steady, boys. Stop right where ye are, an' don't step out o' yer tracks," he commanded.

The four stood rigid, and began searching the ground all about them with keen, initiated eyes.

"Oh, I've got him, so fur, all right," continued Blackstock,

pointing to a particularly clear and heavy impression of a boot-sole close behind his own feet. "But here it stops. It don't appear to go any further."

He knelt down to examine the footprint.

95

"P'raps he's doubled back on his tracks, to throw us off," suggested Saunders, who was himself an expert on the trails of all the wild creatures.

"No," replied Blackstock, "I've watched out for that sharp."

"P'raps he's give a big jump to one side or t'other, to break his trail," said MacDonald.

"No," said Blackstock with decision, "nor that neither, Mac. This here print is *even*. Ef he'd jumped to one side or the other, it would be dug in on that side, and ef he'd jumped forrard, it would be hard down at the toe. It fair beats me!"

Stepping carefully, foot by foot, he examined the ground minutely over a half circle of a dozen yards to his front. He sent out his followers—all but Big Andy, who, being no trailer, was bidden to stand fast—to either side and to the rear, crawling like ferrets and interrogating every grass tuft, in vain. The trail had simply stopped with that one footprint. It was as if Black Dan had dissolved into a miasma, and floated off.

At last Blackstock called the party in, and around the solitary footprint they all sat down and smoked. One after another they made suggestions, but each suggestion had its futility revealed and sealed by a stony stare from Blackstock, and was no more befriended by its author.

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At last Blackstock rose to his feet, and gave a hitch to his belt.

“I don’t mind tellin’ ye, boys,” said he, “it beats me fair. But *one* thing’s plain enough, Black Dan ain’t *here*, an’ he ain’t likely to come here lookin’ for us. Spread out now, an’ we’ll work on ahead, an’ see ef we can’t pick up somethin’. You, Big Andy, you keep right along behind me. There’s an explanation to *everything*—an’ we’ll find this out afore long, or my name’s Dennis.”

Over the next three or four hundred yards, however, nothing of significance was discovered by any of the party. Then, breaking through a dense screen of branches, Blackstock came upon the face of a rocky knoll, so steep, at that point, that hands and feet together would be needed to climb it. Casting his eyes upwards, he saw what looked like the entrance to a little cave.

A whistle brought the rest of the party to his side. A cave always holds possibilities, if nothing else. Blackstock spread his men out again, at intervals of three or four paces, and all went cautiously up the steep, converging on the entrance. Blackstock, in the centre, shielding himself behind a knob of rock, peered in.

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The place was empty. It was hardly a cave, indeed, being little more than a shallow recess beneath an overhanging ledge. But it was well sheltered by a great branch which stretched upwards across the opening. Blackstock sniffed critically.

“A bear’s den,” he announced, stepping in and scrutinizing the floor.

The floor was naked rock, scantily littered with dead leaves and

twigs. These, Blackstock concluded, had been recently disturbed, but he could find no clue to what had disturbed them. From the further side, however—to Blackstock’s right—a palpable trail, worn clear of moss and herbage, led off by a narrow ledge across the face of the knoll. Half a dozen paces further on the rock ended in a stretch of stiff soil. Here the trail declared itself. It was unmistakably that of a bear, and unmistakably, also, a fresh trail.

Waving the rest to stop where they were, Blackstock followed the clear trail down from the knoll, and for a couple of hundred yards along the level, going very slowly, and searching it hawk-eyed for some sign other than that of bear. At length he returned, looking slightly crestfallen.

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“Nawthin’ at all but bear,” he announced in an injured voice. “But that bear seems to have been in a bit of a hurry, as if he was gittin’ out o’ somebody’s way—Black Dan’s way, it’s dollars to doughnuts. But where was Black Dan, that’s what I want to know?”

“Ef *you* don’t know, Tug,” said MacDonald, “who *kin* know?”

“Jim!” said the Deputy, rubbing his lean chin and biting off a big “chaw” of “blackjack.”

“Jim’s sure some dawg,” agreed MacDonald. “That was the only fool thing I ever know’d ye to do, Tug—sendin’ Jim after Black Dan that way.”

Blackstock swore, softly and intensely, though he was a man not given to that form of self-expression.

“Boys,” said he, “I used to fancy myself quite a lot. But now I begin to think Nipsiwaska County’d better be gittin’ a noo Deputy. I ain’t no manner o’ good.”

The men looked at him in frank astonishment. He had never before been seen in this mood of self-depreciation.

“Aw, shucks,” exclaimed Long Jackson presently, “there ain’t a man from here to the St. Lawrence as kin *tech* ye, an’ ye know it, Tug. Quit yer jollyin’ now. I believe ye’ve got somethin’ up yer sleeve, only ye won’t say so.”

99

At this expression of unbounded confidence Blackstock braced up visibly.

“Well, boys, there’s one thing I *kin* do,” said he. “I’m goin’ back to git Jim, ef I hev to fetch him in a wheelbarrow. We’ll find out what he thinks o’ the situation. I’ll take Saunders an’ Big Andy with me. You, Long, an’ Mac, you stop on here an’ lay low an’ see what turns up. But don’t go mussin’ up the trails.”

II

Jim proved to be so far recovered that he was able to hobble about a little on three legs, the fourth being skilfully bandaged so that he could not put his foot to the ground. It was obvious, however, that he could not make a journey through the woods and be any use whatever at the end of it. Blackstock, therefore, knocked together a handy litter for his benefit. And with very ill grace Jim submitted to being borne upon it.

Some twenty paces from that solitary boot-print which marked the end of Black Dan's trail, Jim was set free from his litter and his attention directed to a bruised tuft of moss.

"Seek him," said Blackstock.

The dog gave one sniff, and then with a growl of anger the hair lifted along his back, and he limped forward hurriedly.

"He's got it in for Black Dan *now*," remarked MacDonald. And the whole party followed with hopeful expectation, so great was their faith in Jim's sagacity.

The dog, in his haste, overshot the end of the trail. He stopped abruptly, whined, sniffed about, and came back to the deep boot-print. All about it he circled, whimpering with impatience, but never going more than a dozen feet away from it. Then he returned, sniffed long and earnestly, and stood over it with drooping tail, evidently quite nonplussed.

"He don't appear to make no more of it than you did, Tug," said Long Jackson, much disappointed.

"Oh, give him time, Long," retorted Blackstock. Then——

"Seek him! Seek him, good boy," he repeated, waving Jim to the front.

Running with amazing briskness on his three sound legs, the dog began to quarter the undergrowth in ever-widening half-circles, while the men stood waiting and watching. At last, at a distance of several hundred yards, he

gave a yelp and a growl, and sprang forward.

“Got it!” exclaimed Big Andy.

“Guess it’s only the trail o’ that there b’ar he’s struck,” suggested Jackson pessimistically.

“Jim, stop!” ordered Blackstock. And the dog stood rigid in his tracks while Blackstock hastened forward to see what he had found.

“Sure enough. It’s only the bear,” cried Blackstock, investigating the great footprint over which Jim was standing. “Come along back here, Jim, an’ don’t go foolin’ away yer time over a bear, jest *now*.”

The dog sniffed at the trail, gave another hostile growl, and reluctantly followed his master back. Blackstock made him smell the boot-print again. Then he said with emphasis, “*Black Dan*, Jim, it’s *Black Dan* we’re wantin’. Seek him, boy. *Fetch him*.”

Jim started off on the same manœuvres as before, and at the same point as before he again gave a growl and a yelp and bounded forward.

“*Jim*,” shouted the Deputy angrily, “come back here.”

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The dog came limping back, looking puzzled.

“What do you mean by that foolin’?” went on his master severely. “What’s bears to you? Smell that!” and he pointed again to the boot-print. “It’s *Black Dan* you’re after.”

Jim hung upon his words, but looked hopelessly at sea as to his meaning. He turned and gazed wistfully in the direction of the bear's trail. He seemed on the point of starting out for it again, but the tone of Blackstock's rebuke withheld him. Finally, he sat down upon his dejected tail and stared upwards into a great tree, one of whose lower branches stretched directly over his head.

Blackstock followed his gaze. The tree was an ancient rock maple, its branches large but comparatively few in number. Blackstock could see clear to its top. It was obvious that the tree could afford no hiding-place to anything larger than a wild-cat. Nevertheless, as Blackstock studied it, a gleam of sudden insight passed over his face.

"Jim 'pears to think Black Dan's gone to Heaven," remarked Saunders drily.

"Ye can't always tell *what* Jim's thinkin'," retorted Blackstock. "But I'll bet it's a clever idea he's got in his black head, whatever it is."

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He scanned the tree anew and the other trees nearest whose branches interlaced with it. Then, with a sharp "Come on, Jim," he started towards the knoll, eyeing the branches overhead as he went. The rest of the party followed at a discreet distance.

Crippled as he was, Jim could not climb the steep face of the knoll, but his master helped him up. The instant he entered the cave he growled savagely, and once more the stiff hair rose along his back. Blackstock watched in silence for a moment. He had never before noticed, on Jim's part, any special hostility

toward bears, whom he was quite accustomed to trailing. He glanced up at the big branch that overhung the entrance, and conviction settled on his face. Then he whispered, sharply, "Seek him, Jim." And Jim set off at once, as fast as he could limp, along the trail of the bear.

"Come on, boys," called Blackstock to his posse. "Ef we can't find Black Dan we may as well hev a little bear-hunt to fill in the time. Jim appears to hev a partic'lar grudge agin that bear."

The men closed up eagerly, expecting to find that Blackstock, with Jim's help, had at last discovered some real signs of Black Dan. When they saw that there was still nothing more than that old bear's trail, which they had already examined, Long Jackson began to grumble. 104

"We kin hunt bear any day," he growled.

"I guess Tug ain't no keener after bear this day than you be," commented MacDonald. "He's got *somehin'* up his sleeve, you see!"

"Mebbe it's a tame b'ar, a *trained* b'ar, an' Black Dan's a-ridin' him horseback," suggested Big Andy.

Blackstock, who was close at Jim's heels, a few paces ahead of the rest, turned with one of his rare, ruminative laughs.

"That's quite an idea of yours, Andy," he remarked, stooping to examine one of those great clawed footprints in a patch of soft soil.

"But even *trained* b'ar hain't got wings," commented

MacDonald again. “An’ there’s a good three hundred yards atween the spot where Black Dan’s trail peters out an’ the nearest b’ar track. I guess yer interestin’ hipotheesis don’t quite fill the bill—eh, Andy?”

“Anyways,” protested the big Oromocto man, “ye’ll all notice *one* thing queer about this here b’ar track. It goes *straight*. Mostly a b’ar will go wanderin’ off this way an’ that, to nose at an old root, er grub up a bed o’ toad-stools. But *this* b’ar keeps right on, as ef he had important business somewhere straight ahead. That’s just the way he’d go ef some one *was* a-ridin’ him horseback.”

105

Andy had advanced his proposition as a joke, but now he was inclined to take it seriously and to defend it with warmth.

“Well,” said Long Jackson, “we’ll all chip in, when we git our money back, an’ buy ye a bear, Andy, an’ ye shall ride it up every day from the mills to the post-office. It’ll save ye quite a few minutes in gittin’ *to* the post-office. It don’t matter about yer gittin’ away.”

The big Oromocto lad blushed, but laughed good-naturedly. He was so much in love with the little widow who kept the post-office that nothing pleased him more than to be teased about her.

For the Deputy’s trained eyes, as for Jim’s trained nose, that bear-track was an easy one to follow. Nevertheless, progress was slow, for Blackstock would halt from time to time to interrogate some claw-print with special minuteness, and from time to time Jim would stop to lie down and lick gingerly at his bandage, tormented by the aching of his wound.

Late in the afternoon, when the level shadows were black upon the trail and the trailing had come to depend entirely on Jim's nose, Blackstock called a halt on the banks of a small brook and all sat down to eat their bread and cheese. Then they sprawled about, smoking, for the Deputy, apparently regarding the chase as a long one, was now in no great hurry. Jim lay on the wet sand, close to the brook's edge, while Blackstock, scooping up the water in double handfuls, let it fall in an icy stream on the dog's bandaged leg.

"Hev ye got any reel idee to come an' go on, Tug?" demanded Long Jackson at last, blowing a long, slow jet of smoke from his lips, and watching it spiral upwards across a bar of light just over his head.

"I hev," said Blackstock.

"An' air ye sure it's a good one—good enough to drag us 'way out here on?" persisted Jackson.

"I'm bankin' on it," answered Blackstock.

"An' so's Jim, I'm thinkin'," suggested MacDonald, tentatively.

"Jim's idee an' mine ain't the same, exackly," vouchsafed Blackstock, after a pause, "but I guess they'll come to the same thing in the end. They're fittin' in with each other fine, so fur!"

"What'll ye bet that ye're not mistaken, the both o' yez?" demanded Jackson.

"Yer wages fur the whole summer!" answered Blackstock promptly.

Long looked satisfied. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and proceeded to refill it.

“Oh, ef ye’re so sure as that, Tug,” he drawled, “I guess I ain’t takin’ any this time.”

For a couple of hours after sunset the party continued to follow the trail, depending now entirely upon Jim’s leadership. The dog, revived by his rest and his master’s cold-water treatment, limped forward at a good pace, growling from time to time as a fresh pang in his wound reminded him anew of his enemy.

“How Jim ’pears to hate that bear!” remarked Big Andy once.

“He does *that!*” agreed Blackstock. “An’ he’s goin’ to git his own back, too, I’m thinkin’, afore long.”

Presently the moon rose round and yellow through the tree-tops, and the going became less laborious. Jim seemed untiring now. He pressed on so eagerly that Blackstock concluded the object of his vindictive pursuit, whatever it was, must be now not far ahead.

Another hour, and the party came out suddenly upon the bank of a small pond. Jim, his nose to earth, started to lead the way around it, towards the left. But Blackstock stopped him, and halted his party in the dense shadows.

The opposite shore was in the full glare of the moonlight. There, close to the water’s edge, stood a little log hut, every detail of it standing out as clearly as in daylight. It was obviously old, but the roof had been repaired with new bark and poles and the door was shut, instead of sagging half open on broken hinges

after the fashion of the doors of deserted cabins.

Blackstock slipped a leash from his pocket and clipped it onto Jim's collar.

“I'm thinkin', boys, we'll git some information yonder about that bear, ef we go the right way about inquirin'. Now, Saunders, you go round the pond to the right and steal up along-shore, through the bushes, to within forty paces of the hut. You, Mac, an' Big Andy, you two go round same way, but git well back into the timber, and come up *behind* the hut to within about the same distance. There'll be a winder on that side, likely.

“When ye're in position give the call o' the big horned owl, not too loud. An' when I answer with the same call twice, then close in. But keep a good-sized tree atween you an' the winder, for ye never know what a bear kin do when he's trained. I'll bet Big Andy's seen bears that could shoulder a gun like a man! So look out for yourselves. Long an' Jim an' me, we'll follow the trail o' the bear right round this end o' the pond—an' ef I'm not mistaken it'll lead us right up to the door o' that there hut. Some bears hev a taste in regard to where they sleep.”

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As noiselessly as shadows the party melted away in opposite directions.

The pond lay smooth as glass under the flooding moonlight, reflecting a pale star or two where the moon-path grudgingly gave it space.

After some fifteen minutes a lazy, muffled hooting floated across the pond. Five minutes later the same call, the very voice of the wilderness at midnight, came from the deep of the woods behind

the hut.

Blackstock, with Jackson close behind him and Jim pulling eagerly on the leash, was now within twenty yards of the hut door, but hidden behind a thick young fir tree. He breathed the call of the horned owl—a mellow, musical call, which nevertheless brings terror to all the small creatures of the wilderness—and then, after a pause, repeated it softly.

He waited for a couple of minutes motionless. His keen ears caught the snapping of a twig close behind the hut.

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“Big Andy’s big feet that time,” he muttered to himself. “That boy’ll never be much good on the trail.”

Then, leaving Jim to the care of Jackson, he slipped forward to another and bigger tree not more than a dozen paces from the cabin. Standing close in the shadow of the trunk, and drawing his revolver, he called sharply as a gun-shot—“Dan Black.”

Instantly there was a thud within the hut as of some one leaping from a bunk.

“Dan Black,” repeated the Deputy, “the game’s up. I’ve got ye surrounded. Will ye come out quietly an’ give yerself up, or do ye want trouble?”

“Waal, no, I guess I don’t want no more trouble,” drawled a cool voice from within the hut. “I guess I’ve got enough o’ my own already. I’ll come out, Tug.”

The door was flung open, and Black Dan, with his hands held up, stalked forth into the moonlight.

With a roar Jim sprang out from behind the fir tree, dragging Long Jackson with him by the sudden violence of his rush.

“Down, Jim, *down!*” ordered Blackstock. “Lay down an’ shut up.” And Jim, grumbling in his throat, allowed Jackson to pull him back by the collar.

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Blackstock advanced and clicked the handcuffs on to Black Dan’s wrists. Then he took the revolver and knife from the prisoner’s belt, and motioned him back into the hut.

“Bein’ pretty late now,” said Blackstock, “I guess we’ll accept yer hospitality for the rest o’ the night.”

“Right ye are, Tug,” assented Dan. “Ye’ll find tea an’ merlasses, an’ a bite o’ bacon in the cupboard yonder.”

As the rest of the party came in Black Dan nodded to them cordially, a greeting which they returned with more or less sheepish grins.

“Excuse me ef I don’t shake hands with ye, boys,” said he, “but Tug here says the state o’ me health makes it bad for me to use me arms.” And he held up the handcuffs.

“No apologies needed,” said MacDonald.

Last of all came in Long Jackson, with Jim. Blackstock slipped the leash, and the dog lay down in a corner, as far from the prisoner as he could get.

In a few minutes the whole party were sitting about the tiny stove, drinking boiled tea and munching crackers and

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molasses—the prisoner joining in the feast as well as his manacled hands would permit. At length, with his mouth full of cracker, the Deputy remarked:

“That was clever of ye, Dan—durn’ clever. I didn’t know it was in ye.”

“Not half so clever as you seein’ through it the way you did, Tug,” responded the prisoner handsomely.

“But darned ef *I* see through it *now*,” protested Big Andy in a plaintive voice. “It’s just about as clear as mud to *me*. Where’s your wings, Dan? An’ where in tarnation is that b’ar?”

The prisoner laughed triumphantly. Long Jackson and the others looked relieved, the Oromocto man having propounded the question which they had been ashamed to ask.

“It’s jest this way,” explained Blackstock. “When we’d puzzled Jim yonder—an’ he *was* puzzled at us bein’ such fools—ye’ll recollect he sat down on his tail by that boot-print, an’ tried to work out what we wanted of him. I was tellin’ him to seek Black Dan, an’ yet I was callin’ him back off that there bear-track. *He* could smell Black Dan in the bear-track, but we couldn’t. So we was doin’ the best we could to mix him up.

“Well, he looked up into the big maple overhead. Then I saw where Black Dan had gone to. He’d jumped (that’s why the boot-print was so heavy), an’ caught that there branch, an’ swung himself up into the tree. Then he worked his way along from tree to tree till he come to the cave. I saw by the way Jim took on in the cave that Black Dan had been *there* all right. For Jim hain’t got no special grudge agin bear. Says I to myself,

ef Jim smells Black Dan in that bear trail, then Black Dan must *be* in it, that's all!

“Then it comes over me that I'd once seen a big bear-skin in Dan's room at the Mills, an' as the picture of it come up agin in my mind, I noticed how the fore-paws and legs of it were missin'. With that I looked agin at the trail, as we went along, Jim an' me. An' sure enough, in all them tracks there wasn't one print of a hind-paw. *They were all fore-paws*. Smart, very smart o' Dan, says I to myself. Let's see them ingenious socks o' yours, Dan.”

“They're in the top bunk yonder,” said Black Dan, with a weary air. “An' my belt and pouch, containin' the other stuff, that's all in the bunk, too. I may's well save ye the trouble o' lookin' for it, as ye'd find it anyways. I was *sure* ye'd never succeed in trackin' me down, so I didn't bother to hide it. An' I see now ye *wouldn't* 'a' got me, Tug, ef it hadn't 'a' been fer Jim. That's where I made the mistake o' my life, not stoppin' to make sure I'd done Jim up.”

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“No, Dan,” said Blackstock, “ye're wrong there. Ef you'd done Jim up I'd have caught ye jest the same, in the long run, fer I'd never have quit the trail till I *did* git ye. An' when I got ye—well, I'd hev forgot myself, mebbe, an' only remembered that ye'd killed my best friend. Ef ye'd had as many lives as a cat, Dan, they wouldn't hev been enough to pay fer that dawg.”

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V. THE FIRE AT BRINE'S RIP MILLS

I

When pretty Mary Farrell came to Brine's Rip and set up a modest dressmaker's shop quite close to the Mills (she said she loved the sound of the saws), all the unattached males of the village, to say nothing of too many of the attached ones, fell instant victims to her charms. They were her slaves from the first lifting of her long lashes in their direction.

Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff, to be sure, did not capitulate quite so promptly as the rest. Mary had to flash her dark blue eyes upon him at least twice, dropping them again with shy admiration. Then he was at her feet—which was a pleasant place to be, seeing that those same small feet were shod with a neatness which was a perpetual reproach to the untidy sawdust strewn roadways of Brine's Rip.

Even Big Andy, the boyish young giant from the Oromocto, wavered for a few hours in his allegiance to the postmistress. But Mary was much too tactful to draw upon her pretty shoulders the hostility of such a power as the postmistress, and Big Andy's enthusiasm was cold-douched in its first glow.

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As for the womenfolk of Brine's Rip, it was not to be expected that they would agree any too cordially with the men on the subject of Mary Farrell.

But one instance of Mary's tact made even the most irreconcilable of her own sex sheath their claws in dealing with her. She had come from Harner's Bend. The Mills at Harner's Bend were anathema to Brine's Rip Mills. A keen trade rivalry had grown, fed by a series of petty but exasperating incidents, into a hostility that blazed out on the least occasion. And pretty Mary had come from Harner's Bend. Brine's Rip did not find it out till Mary's spell had been cast and secured, of course. But the fact was a bitter one to swallow. No one else but Mary Farrell could have made Brine's Rip swallow it.

One day Big Andy, greatly daring, and secure in his renovated allegiance to the postmistress, ventured to chaff Mary about it. She turned upon him, half amused and half indignant.

“Well,” she demanded, “isn't Harner's Bend a good place to come away from? Do you think I'd ought to have stopped there? Do I look like the kind of girl that *wouldn't* come away from Harner's Bend? And me a dressmaker? I just couldn't *live*, let alone make a living, among such a dowdy lot of women-folk as they've got over there. It isn't dresses *they* want, but oat-sacks, and you wouldn't know the difference, either, when they'd got them on.”

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The implication was obvious; and the women of Brine's Rip began to allow for possible virtues in Miss Farrell. The postmistress declared there was no harm in her, and even admitted that she might almost be called good-looking “if she hadn't such an *awful* big mouth.”

I have said that all the male folk of Brine's Rip had capitulated immediately to the summons of Mary Farrell's eyes. But there

were two notable exceptions—Woolly Billy and Jim. Both Woolly Billy's flaxen mop of curls and the great curly black head of Jim, the dog, had turned away coldly from Mary's first advances. Woolly Billy preferred men to women anyhow. And Jim was jealous of Tug Blackstock's devotion to the petticoated stranger.

But Mary Farrell knew how to manage children and dogs as well as men. She ignored both Jim and Woolly Billy. She did it quite pointedly, yet with a gracious politeness that left no room for resentment. Neither the child nor the dog was accustomed to being ignored. Before long Mary's amiable indifference began to make them feel as if they were being left out in the cold. They began to think they were losing something because she did not notice them. Reluctantly at first, but by-and-by with eagerness, they courted her attention. At last they gained it. It was undeniably pleasant. From that moment the child and the dog were at Mary's well-shod and self-reliant little feet. 118

II

As summer wore on into autumn the dry weather turned to a veritable drought, and all the streams ran lower and lower. Word came early that the mills at Harner's Bend, over in the next valley, had been compelled to shut down for lack of logs. But Brine's Rip exulted unkindly. The Ottanoonsis, fed by a group of cold spring lakes, maintained a steady flow; there were plenty of logs, and the mills had every prospect of working full time all through the autumn. Presently they began to gather in big orders which would have gone otherwise 119

to Harner's Bend. Brine's Rip not only exulted, but took into itself merit. It felt that it must, on general principles, have deserved well of Providence, for Providence so obviously to take sides with it.

As August drew to a dusty, choking end, Mary Farrell began to collect her accounts. Her tact and sympathy made this easy for her, and women paid up civilly enough who had never been known to do such a thing before, unless at the point of a summons. Mary said she was going to the States, perhaps as far as New York itself, to renew her stock and study up the latest fashions.

Every one was much interested. Woolly Billy's eyes brimmed over at the prospect of her absence, but he was consoled by the promise of her speedy return *with* an air-gun and also a toy steam-engine that would really go. As for Jim, his feathery black tail drooped in premonition of a loss, but he could not gather exactly what was afoot. He was further troubled by an unusual depression on the part of Tug Blackstock. The Deputy Sheriff seemed to have lost his zest in tracking down evil-doers.

It was nearing ten o'clock on a hot and starless night. Tug Blackstock, too restless to sleep, wandered down to the silent mill with Jim at his heels. As he approached, Jim suddenly went bounding on ahead with a yelp of greeting. He fawned upon a small, shadowy figure which was seated on a pile of deals close to the water's edge. Tug Blackstock hurried up.

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"You here, Mary, all alone, at this time o' night!" he exclaimed.

“I come here often,” answered Mary, making room for him to sit beside her.

“I wish I’d known it sooner,” muttered the Deputy.

“I like to listen to the rapids, and catch glimpses of the water slipping away blindly in the dark,” said Mary. “It helps one not to think,” she added with a faint catch in her voice.

“Why should *you* not want to think, Mary?” protested Blackstock.

“How dreadfully dry everything is,” replied Mary irrelevantly, as if heading Blackstock off. “What if there should be a fire at the mill? Wouldn’t the whole village go, like a box of matches? People might get caught asleep in their beds. Oughtn’t there to be more than one night watchman in such dry weather as this? I’ve so often heard of mills catching fire—though I don’t see why they should, any more than houses.”

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“Mills most generally git *set* afire,” answered the Deputy grimly. “Think what it would mean to Harner’s Bend if these mills should git burnt down now! It would mean thousands and thousands to them. But you’re dead right, Mary, about the danger to the village. Only it depends on the wind. This time o’ year, an’ as long as it keeps dry, what wind there is blows mostly *away* from the houses, so sparks and brands would just be carried out over the river. But if the wind should shift to the south’ard, or thereabouts, yes, there’d be more watchmen needed. I s’pose you’re thinkin’ about your shop while ye’re away?”

“I was thinking about Woolly Billy,” said Mary gravely. “What

do I care about the old shop? It's insured, anyway."

"I'll look out for Woolly Billy," answered Blackstock. "And I'll look out for the shop, whether *you* care about it or not. It's yours, and your name's on the door, and anything of yours, anything you've touched, an' wherever you've put your little foot, that's something for me to care about. I ain't no hand at making pretty speeches, Mary, or paying compliments, but I tell you these here old sawdust roads are just wonderful to me now, because your little feet have walked on 'em. Ef only I could think that *you* could care—that I had anything, *was* anything, Mary, worth offering you—"

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He had taken her hand, and she had yielded it to him. He had put his great arm around her shoulders and drawn her to him,—and for a moment, with a little shiver, she had leant against him, almost cowered against him, with the air of a frightened child craving protection. But as he spoke on, in his quiet, strong voice, she suddenly tore herself away, sprang off to the other end of the pile of deals, and began to sob violently.

He followed her at once. But she thrust out both hands.

"Go away. *Please* don't come near me," she appealed, somewhat wildly. "You don't understand—*anything*."

Tug Blackstock looked puzzled. He seated himself at a distance of several inches, and clasped his hands resolutely in his lap.

"Of course, I won't tech you, Mary," said he, "if you don't want me to. I don't want to do *anything* you don't want me to —*never*, Mary. But I sure don't understand what you're crying for. *Please* don't. I'm so sorry I teched you, dear. But if

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you knew how I love you, how I would give my life for you, I think you'd forgive me, Mary."

Mary gave a bitter little laugh, and choked her sobs.

"It isn't that, oh no, it isn't *that!*" she said. "I—I *liked* it. There!" she panted. Then she sprang to her feet and faced him. And in the gloom he could see her eyes flaming with some intense excitement, from a face ghost-white.

"But—I won't let you make me love you, Tug Blackstock. I won't!—I won't! I won't let you change all my plans, all my ambitions. I won't give up all I've worked for and schemed for and sold my very soul for, just because at last I've met a real man. Oh, I'd soon spoil your life, no matter how much you love me. You'd soon find how cruel, and hard, and selfish I am. An' I'd ruin my own life, too. Do you think I could settle down to spend my life in the backwoods? Do you think I have no dreams beyond the spruce woods of Nipisiwaska County? Do you think you could imprison *me* in Brine's Rip? I'd either kill your brave, clean soul, Tug Blackstock, or I'd kill myself!"

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Utterly bewildered at this incomprehensible outburst, Blackstock could only stammer lamely:

"But—I thought—ye kind o' liked Brine's Rip."

"*Like* it!" The uttermost of scorn was in her voice. "I hate, hate, hate it! I just live to get out into the great world, where I feel that I belong. But I must have money first. And I'm going to study, and I'm going to make myself somebody. I wasn't born for this." And she waved her hand with a sweep that took in all the

backwoods world. “I’m getting out of it. It would drive me mad. Oh, I sometimes think it has already driven me half mad.”

Her tense voice trailed off wearily, and she sat down again—this time further away.

Blackstock sat quite still for a time. At last he said gently:

“I do understand ye now, Mary.”

“You *don’t*,” interrupted Mary.

“I felt, all along, I was somehow not good enough for you.”

“You’re a million miles *too* good for me,” she interrupted again, energetically.

“But,” he went on without heeding the protest, “I hoped, somehow, that I might be able to make you happy. An’ that’s what I want, more’n anything else in the world. All I have is at your feet, Mary, an’ I could make it more in time. But I’m not a big enough man for you. I’m all yours—an’ always will be—but I can’t make myself no more than I am.”

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“Yes, you could, Tug Blackstock,” she cried. “Real men are scarce, in the great world and everywhere. You could make yourself a master anywhere—if only you would tear yourself loose from here.”

He sprang up, and his arms went out as if to seize her. But, with an effort, he checked himself, and dropped them stiffly to his side.

“I’m too old to change my spots, Mary,” said he. “I’m stamped for good an’ all. I *am* some good here. I’d be no good there. An’ I won’t never resk bein’ a drag on yer plans.”

“You could—you could!” urged Mary almost desperately.

But he turned away, with his lips set hard, not daring to look at her.

“Ef ever ye git tired of it all out there, an’ yer own kind calls ye back—as it will, bein’ in yer blood—I’ll be waitin’ for ye, Mary, whatever happens.”

He strode off quickly up the shore. The girl stared after him till he was quite out of sight, then buried her face in the fur of Jim, who had willingly obeyed a sign from his master and remained at her side. 126

“Oh, my dear, if only you could have dared,” she murmured. At last she jumped up, with an air of resolve, and wandered off, apparently aimlessly, into the recesses of the mill, with one hand resting firmly on Jim’s collar.

III

Two days later Mary Farrell left Brine’s Rip. She hugged and kissed Woolly Billy very hard before she left, and cried a little with him, pretending to laugh, and she took her three big trunks with her, in the long-bodied express waggon which carried the mails, although she said she would not be gone more than a month at the outside.

Tug Blackstock eyed those three trunks with a sinking heart. His only comfort was that he had in his pocket the key of Mary's little shop, which she had sent to him by Woolly Billy. When the express waggon had rattled and bumped away out of sight there was a general feeling in Brine's Rip that the whole place had gone flat, like stale beer, and the saws did not seem to make as cheerful a shrieking as before, and Black Saunders, expert runner of logs as he was, fell in because he forgot to look where he was going, and knocked his head heavily in falling, and was almost drowned before they could fish him out. 127

"There's goin' to be some bad luck comin' to Brine's Rip afore long," remarked Long Jackson in a voice of deepest pessimism.

"It's come, Long," said the Deputy.

That same day the wind changed, and blew steadily from the mills right across the village. But it brought no change in the weather, except a few light showers that did no more than lay the surface dust. About a week later it shifted back again, and blew steadily away from the village and straight across the river. And once more a single night-watchman was regarded as sufficient safeguard against fire.

A little before daybreak on the second night following this change of wind, the watchman was startled by a shrill scream and a heavy splash from the upper end of the great pool where the logs were gathered before being fed up in the saws. It sounded like a woman's voice. As fast as he could stumble over the intervening deals and rubbish he made his way to the spot, waving his lantern and calling anxiously. There was no sign of any one in the water. As he searched he became 128

conscious of a ruddy light at one corner of the mill.

He turned and dashed back, yelling “Fire! Fire!” at the top of his lungs. A similar ruddy light was spreading upward in two other corners of the mill. Frantically he turned on the nearest chemical extinguisher, yelling madly all the while. But he was already too late. The flames were licking up the dry wood with furious appetite.

In almost as little time as it takes to tell of it the whole great structure was ablaze, with all Brine’s Rip, in every varying stage of *déshabille*, out gaping at it. The little hand-fire-engine worked heroically, squirting a futile stream upon the flames for a while, and then turning its attention to the nearest houses in order to keep them drenched.

“Thank God the wind’s in the right direction,” muttered Zeb Smith, the storekeeper and magistrate. And the pious ejaculation was echoed fervently through the crowd.

In the meantime, Tug Blackstock, seeing that there was nothing to do in the way of fighting the fire—the mill being already devoured—was interviewing the distracted watchman.

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“Sure,” he agreed, “it *was* a trick to git you away long enough for the fires to git a start. Somebody yelled, an’ chucked in a big stick, that’s all. An’, o’ course, you run to help. You couldn’t naturally do nothin’ else.”

The watchman heaved a huge sigh of relief. If Blackstock exonerated him from the charge of negligence, other people would. And his heart had been very heavy at being so fatally

fooled.

“It’s Harner’s Bend all right, that’s what it is!” he muttered.

“Ef only we could prove it,” said Blackstock, searching the damp ground about the edges of the pool, which was lighted now as by day. Presently he saw Jim sniffing excitedly at some tracks. He hurried over to examine them. Jim looked up at him and wagged his tail, as much as to say, “So *you’ve* found them, too! Interesting, ain’t they?”

“What d’ye make o’ that?” demanded Blackstock of the watchman.

“*Boy’s* tracks, sure,” said the latter at once.

The footprints were small and neat. They were of a double-soled larrigan, with a low heel of a single welt.

“None of *our* boys,” said Blackstock, “wear a larrigan like that, especially this time o’ year. One could run light in that larrigan, an’ the sole’s thick enough to save the foot. An’ it’s good for a canoe, too.”

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He rubbed his chin, thinking hard.

“Yesterday,” said the watchman, “I mind seem’ a young half-breed, he looked like a slip of a lad, very dark complected, crossin’ the road half-a-mile up yonder. He was out o’ sight in a second, like a shadder, but I mind noticin’ he had on larrigans— an’ a brown slouch hat down over his eyes, an’ a dark red handkerchief roun’ his neck. He was a stranger in these parts.”

“That would account for the voice, like a woman’s,” said Blackstock, following the tracks till they plunged through a tangle of tall bush. “An’ here’s the handkerchief,” he added triumphantly, grabbing up a dark red thing that fluttered from a branch. “Harner’s Bend knows somethin’ about that boy, I’m thinkin’. Now, Bill, you go along back, an’ don’t say nothin’ about this, *mind!* Me an’ Jim, we’ll look into it. Tell old Mrs. Amos and Woolly Billy not to fret. We’ll be back soon.”

He slipped the leash into Jim’s collar, gave him the red handkerchief to smell, and said, “Seek him, Jim.” And Jim set off eagerly, tugging at the leash, because the trail was so fresh and plain to him, and he hated to be held back. 131

The trail led around behind the village, and back to the river bank about a mile below. There it followed straight down the shore. It was evident to Blackstock that his quarry would have a canoe in hiding some distance further down. There was no time to be lost. It was now almost full daybreak, and he could follow the trail by himself. After all, it was only a boy he had to deal with. He could trust Jim to delay him, to hold him at bay. He loosed the leash, and Jim bounded forward at top speed. He himself followed at a leisurely loping stride.

As he trotted on, thinking of many things, he took out the red handkerchief and examined it again. He smelt it curiously. His nose was keen, like a wild animal’s. As he sniffed, a pang went through him, clutching at his heart. He sniffed again. His long stride shortened. He dropped into a walk. He thought over, word by word, his conversation with Mary that night beside the mill. His face went grey. After a brief struggle he shouted to Jim, trying to call him back. But the eager dog was 132

already far beyond hearing. Then Blackstock broke into a desperate run, shouting from time to time. He thought of Jim's ferocity when on the trail.

Meanwhile, the figure of a slim boy, very light of foot, was speeding far down the river bank, clutching a brown slouch hat in one hand as he ran. He had an astonishing crop of hair, wound in tight coils about his head. He was panting heavily, and seemed nearly spent. At last he halted, drew a deep sigh of relief, pressed his hands to his heart, and plunged into a clump of bushes. In the depth of the bushes lay a small birch-bark canoe, carefully concealed. He tugged at it, but for the moment he was too weary to lift it. He flung himself down beside it to take breath.

In the silence, his ears caught the sound of light feet padding down the shore. He jumped up, and peered through the bushes. A big black dog was galloping on his trail. He drew a long knife, and his mouth set itself so hard that the lips went white. The dog reached the edge of the bushes. The youth slipped behind the canoe.

“Jim,” said he softly. The dog whined, wagged his tail, and plunged in through the bushes. The youth's stern lips relaxed. He slipped the knife back into its sheath, and fondled the dog, which was fawning upon him eagerly.

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“You'd never go back on me, would you, Jim, no matter what I'd done?” said he, in a gentle voice. Then, with an expert twist of his lithe young body, he shouldered the canoe and bore it down to the water's edge. One of his swarthy hands had suddenly grown much whiter, where Jim had been licking it.

Before stepping into the canoe, this peculiar youth took a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket, and an envelope. He scribbled something, sealed it up, addressed the envelope, marked it “private,” and gave it to Jim, who took it in his mouth.

“Give that to Tug Blackstock,” ordered the youth clearly. Then he kissed the top of Jim’s black head, pushed off, and paddled away swiftly down river. Jim, proud of his commission, set off up the shore at a gallop to meet his master.

Half-a-mile back he met him. Blackstock snatched the letter from Jim’s mouth, praising Heaven that the dog had for once failed in his duty. He tore open the letter. It said:

Yes, I did it. I had to do it. But *you* could have saved me, if you’d *dared*—for I do love you, Tug Blackstock.—MARY

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A month later, a parcel came from New York for Woolly Billy, containing an air-gun, and a toy steam-engine that would really go. But it contained no address. And Brine’s Rip said that Tug Blackstock had been bested for once, because he never succeeded in finding out who burnt down the mills.

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VI. THE MAN WITH THE DANCING BEAR

I

One day there arrived at Brine's Rip Mills, driving in a smart trap which looked peculiarly unsuited to the rough backwoods roads, an imposing gentleman who wore a dark green Homburg hat, heavy, tan, gauntleted gloves, immaculate linen, shining boots, and a well-fitting morning suit of dark pepper-and-salt, protected from the contaminations of travel by a long, fawn-coloured dust-coat. He also wore a monocle so securely screwed into his left eye that it looked as if it had been born there.

His red and black wheels labouring noiselessly through the sawdust of the village road, he drove up to the front door of the barn-like wooden structure, which staggered under the name, in huge letters, of the CONTINENTAL HOTEL. There was no one in sight to hold the horse, so he sat in the trap and waited, with severe impatience, for some one to come out to him.

In a few moments the landlord strolled forth in his shirt-sleeves, chewing tobacco, and inquired casually what he could do for his visitor.

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"I'm looking for Mr. Blackstock—Mr. J. T. Blackstock," said the stranger with lofty politeness. "Will you be so good as to direct me to him?"

The landlord spat thoughtfully into the sawdust, to show that he was not unduly impressed by the stranger's appearance.

“You'll find him down to the furder end of the cross street yonder,” he answered, pointing with his thumb. “Last house towards the river. Lives with old Mrs. Amos—him an' Woolly Billy.”

The stranger found it without difficulty, and halted his trap in front of the door. Before he could alight, a tall, rather gaunt woodsman, with kind but piercing eyes and brows knitted in an habitual concentration, appeared in the doorway and gave him courteous greeting.

“Mr. Blackstock, I presume? The Deputy Sheriff, I should say,” returned the stranger with extreme affability, descending from the trap.

“The same,” assented Blackstock, stepping forward to hitch the horse to a fence post. A big black dog came from the house and, ignoring the resplendent stranger, went up to Blackstock's side to superintend the hitching. A slender little boy, with big china-blue eyes and a shock of pale, flaxen curls, followed the dog from the house and stopped to stare at the visitor.

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The latter swept the child with a glance of scrutiny, swift and intent, then turned to his host.

“I am extraordinarily glad to meet you, Mr. Blackstock,” he said, holding out his hand. “If, as I surmise, the name of this little boy here is Master George Harold Manners Watson, then I owe you a debt of gratitude which nothing can repay. I hear that

you not only saved his life, but have been as a father to him, ever since the death of his own unhappy father.”

Blackstock’s heart contracted. He accepted the stranger’s hand cordially enough, but was in no hurry to reply. At last he said slowly:

“Yes, Stranger, you’ve got Woolly Billy’s reel name all O. K. But why should *you* thank me? Whatever I’ve done, it’s been for Woolly Billy’s own sake—ain’t it, Billy?”

For answer, Woolly Billy snuggled up against his side and clutched his great brown hand adoringly, while still keeping dubious eyes upon the stranger.

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The latter took off his gloves, laughing amiably.

“Well, you see, Mr. Blackstock, I’m only his uncle, and his only uncle at that. So I have a right to thank you, and I see by the way the child clings to you how good you’ve been to him. My name is J. Heathington Johnson, of Heathington Hall, Cramley, Blankshire. I’m his mother’s brother. And I fear I shall have to tear him away from you in a great hurry, too.”

“Come inside, Mr. Johnson,” said Blackstock, “an’ sit down. We must talk this over a bit. It is kind o’ sudden, you see.”

“I don’t want to seem unsympathetic,” said the visitor kindly, “and I know my little nephew is going to resent my carrying him off.” (At these words Woolly Billy began to realize what was in the air, and clung to Blackstock with a storm of frightened tears.) “But you will understand that I have to catch the next boat from New York—and I have a thirty-mile drive before me now

to the nearest railway station. *You* know what the roads are! So I'm sure you won't think me unreasonable if I ask you to get my nephew ready as soon as possible."

Blackstock devoted a few precious moments to quieting the child's sobs before replying. He remembered having found out in some way, from some papers in the drowned Englishman's pockets or somewhere, that the name of Woolly Billy's mother, before her marriage, was not Johnson, but O'Neil. Of course that discrepancy, he realized, might be easily explained, but his quick suspicions, sharpened by his devotion to the child, were aroused. 139

"We are not a rich family, by any means, Mr. Blackstock," continued the stranger, after a pause. "But we have enough to be able to reward handsomely those who have befriended us. All *possible* expense that my nephew may have been to you, I want to reimburse you for at once. And I wish also to make you a present as an expression of my gratitude—not, I assure you, as a payment," he added, noticing that Blackstock's face had hardened ominously. He took out a thick bill-book, well stuffed with bank-notes.

"Put away your money, Mr. Johnson," said Blackstock coldly. "I ain't taking any, thank you, for what I may have done for Woolly Billy. But what I want to know is, what authority have you to demand the child?"

"I'm his uncle, his mother's brother," answered the stranger sharply, drawing himself up. 140

"That may be, an' then again, it mayn't," said Blackstock. "Do

you think I'm goin' to hand over the child to a perfect stranger, just because he comes and says he's the child's uncle? What proofs have you?"

The visitor glared angrily, but restrained himself and handed Blackstock his card.

Blackstock read it carefully.

"What does that prove?" he demanded sarcastically. "It might not be your card! An' even if you are 'Mr. Johnson' all right, that's not proving that Mr. Johnson is the little feller's uncle! I want legal proof, that would hold in a court of law."

"You insolent blockhead!" exclaimed the visitor. "How dare you interfere between my nephew and me? If you don't hand him over at once, I will make you smart for it. Come, child, get your cap and coat, and come with me immediately. I have no more time to waste with this foolery, my man." And he stepped forward as if to lay hands on Woolly Billy.

Blackstock interposed an inexorable shoulder. The big dog growled, and stiffened up the hair on his neck ominously.

"Look here," said Blackstock crisply, "you're goin' to git yourself into trouble before you go much further, my lad. You jest mind your manners. When you bring me them proofs, I'll talk to you, see!"

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He took Woolly Billy's hand, and turned towards the door.

The stranger's righteous indignation, strangely enough, seemed to have been allayed by this speech. He followed eagerly.

“*Don't* be unreasonable, Mr. Blackstock,” he coaxed. “I'll send you the documents, from my solicitors, at once. I'm sure you don't want to stand in the dear child's light this way, and prevent him getting back to his own people, and the life that is his right, a day longer than is necessary. Do listen to reason, now.” And he patted his wad of bank-notes suggestively.

But at this stage, Woolly Billy and the big dog having already entered the cottage, Blackstock followed, and calmly shut the door. “You'll smart for this, you ignorant clod-hopper!” shouted Mr. Heathington Johnson. He clutched the door-knob. But for all his rage, prudence came to his rescue. He did not turn the knob. After a moment's hesitation he ground his heel upon the doorstep, stalked back to his gig, and drove off furiously. The three at the window watched his going.

“We won't see *him* back here again,” remarked the Deputy. “*He* wasn't no uncle o' yours, Woolly Billy.”

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That same evening he wrote to a reliable firm of lawyers at Exville, telling them all he knew about Woolly Billy and Woolly Billy's father, and also all he suspected, and instructed them to look into the matter fully.

II

Several weeks went by, and the imposing stranger, as Blackstock had anticipated, failed to return with his proofs. Then came a letter from the lawyers at Exville, saying that they had something important to communicate, and Blackstock hurried off to see them, planning to be away for about a week.

On the day following his departure, to the delight of all the children and of most of the rest of the population as well, there arrived at Brine's Rip Mills a man with a dancing bear. He was a black-eyed, swarthy, merry fellow, with a most infectious laugh, and besides his trained bear he possessed a pedlar's pack containing all sorts of up-to-date odds and ends, not by any means to be found in the very utilitarian miscellany of Zeb Smith's corner store.

He talked a rather musical but very broken lingo that passed for English, flashing a mouthful of splendid white teeth as he did so. He appeared to be an Italian, and the men of Brine's Rip christened him a "Dago" at once. There was no resisting his childlike *bonhomie*, or the amiable antics of his great brown bear, which grinned through its muzzle as if dancing to its master's merry piccolo were its one delight in life. And the two did a roaring business from the moment they came strolling into Brine's Rip.

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"Tony" was what the laughing vagabond called himself, and his bear answered to the name of Beppo. Business being so good, Tony could afford to be generous, and he was continually pressing peppermint lozenges upon the rabble of children who formed a triumphal procession for him wherever he moved.

When Tony's eyes first fell on Woolly Billy, standing just outside the crowd, with one arm over the neck of the big black dog, he was delighted.

"Com-a here, Bambino, com-a quick!" he cried, holding out some peppermints. Woolly Billy liked him at once, and adored the bear, but was too shy, or reserved, to push his way through

the other children. So Tony came to him, leading the bear.

Woolly Billy stood his ground, with a welcoming smile.

The big black dog growled doubtfully, and then lost his doubts in curious admiration of the bear, which plainly fascinated him.

Woolly Billy accepted the peppermints politely, and put one into his mouth without delay. Then, with an apologetic air, the Italian laid one finger softly on Woolly Billy's curls, and drew back at once, as if fearing he had taken a liberty.

"Jim likes the bear, sir, *doesn't* he?" suggested Woolly Billy, to make conversation.

"Everybody he like-a ze bear. Him vaira good bear," asserted the bear's master, and laughed again, giving the bear a peppermint. "An' you one vaira good bambino. Ze bear, he like-a you vaira much. See he shak-a you ze hand—good frens now."

Encouraged by the warmth of his welcome, the Italian had from the first made a practice of dropping in at certain houses of the village just at meal times—when he was received always with true backwoods hospitality. On Woolly Billy's invitation he had come to the house of Mrs. Amos. The old lady, too rheumatic to get about much out of doors, was delighted with such a unique and amusing guest. To all he said—which, indeed, she never more than half understood—she kept ejaculating, "Well, I never!" and "Did ye ever hear the likes o' that?"

And the bear, chained to the gate-post and devouring her pancakes-and-molasses, thrilled her with a sense of "furrin parts." In fact, there was no other house at Brine's Rip where Tony and his bear were made more warmly welcome than at

Mrs. Amos'. The only member of the household who lacked cordiality was Jim, whose coolness towards Tony, however, was fully counterbalanced by his interest in the bear. Towards Tony his attitude was one of armed neutrality.

On the fourth evening after the arrival of Tony and Beppo, Jim discovered a most tempting lump of meat in the corner of Mrs. Amos' garden. Having something of an appetite at the moment, he was just about to bolt the morsel. But no sooner had he set his teeth into it than he conceived a prejudice against it. He dropped it, and sniffed at it intently. The smell was quite all right. He turned it over with his paw and sniffed at the under side. No, there was nothing the matter with it. Nevertheless, his appetite had quite vanished. Well, it would do for another time. He dug a hole and buried the morsel, and then went back to the house to see what Woolly Billy and Mrs. Amos were doing.

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A little later, just as Mrs. Amos was lighting the lamps in the kitchen, the rattling of a chain was heard outside, followed by the whimpering of Beppo, who objected to being tied up to the gate-post when he wanted to come in and beg for pancakes. Woolly Billy ran to the door and peered forth into the dusk. After a few moments Tony entered, all his teeth agleam in his expansive smile.

He had a little bag of bon-bons for Woolly Billy—something much more fascinating than peppermints—which he doled out to the child one by one, as a rare treat. And for himself he wanted a cup of tea, which hospitable Mrs. Amos was only too eager to brew for him. Jim, seeing that Woolly Billy was too interested to need *his* company, got up and went out to inspect the bear.

Tony was in gay spirits that evening. In his broken English, and helping out his meaning with eloquent gestures, he told of adventures which made Woolly Billy's eyes as round as saucers and reduced Mrs. Amos to admiring speechlessness. He made Mrs. Amos drink tea with him, pouring it out for her himself while she hobbled about to find him something to eat. And once in a while, at tantalizing intervals, he allowed Woolly Billy one more bon-bon.

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There was a chill in the night air, so Tony, who was always politeness itself, asked leave to close the door. Mrs. Amos hastened also to close the window. Or, rather, she tried to hasten, but made rather a poor attempt, and sat down heavily in the big arm-chair beside it.

“My legs is that heavy,” she explained, laughing apologetically. So Tony closed the window himself, and at the same time drew the curtains. Then he went on talking.

But apparently his conversation was less interesting than it had been. There came a snore from Mrs. Amos' big chair. Tony glanced aside at Woolly Billy, as if expecting the child to laugh. But Woolly Billy took no notice of the sound. He was fast asleep, his fluffy fair head fallen forward upon the red tablecloth.

Tony looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was not as late as he could have wished, but he had observed that Brine's Rip went to bed early. He turned the lamp low, softly raised the window, and looked out, listening. There were no lights in the village, and all was silence save for the soft roar of the Rip. He extinguished the lamp, and waited a few

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moments till his eyes got quite accustomed to the gloom.

At length he picked up the slight form of Woolly Billy (who was now in a drugged stupor from which he would not awake for hours), and slung him over his left shoulder. In his right hand he grasped his short bear-whip, with its loaded butt. He stepped noiselessly to the door, listened a few moments, and then opened it inch by inch with his left hand, standing behind it, and grasping the whip so as to be ready to strike with the butt. He was wondering where the big black dog was.

The door was about half open, when a black shape, appearing suddenly, launched itself at the opening. The loaded butt came crashing down—and Jim dropped sprawling across the threshold.

From the back of the bear Tony now unfastened a small pack, and strapped it over his right shoulder. Then he unchained the great beast noiselessly, and led it off to the water-side, to a spot where a heavy log canoe was drawn up upon the beach. He hauled the canoe down, making much disarrangement in the gravel, launched it, thrust it far out into the water, and noted it being carried away by the current. He had no wish to journey by that route himself, knowing that as soon as the crime was discovered, which might chance at any moment, the telephone would give the alarm all down the river.

Next he undid the bear's chain, and took off its muzzle, and threw them both into the water, knowing that when freed from these badges of servitude the animal would wander further and more freely. At first the good-natured creature was unwilling to leave him. Its master, from policy, had always treated it kindly,

and fed it well, and it was in no hurry to profit by its freedom.

However, the man ordered it off towards the woods, enforcing the command by a vigorous push and a stroke of the whip. Shaking itself till it realized its freedom, it slouched away a few paces down stream, then turned into the woods. The man listened to its careless, crashing progress.

“They’ll find it easy following *that* trail,” he muttered with satisfaction.

Assured that he had thus thrown out two false trails to distract pursuers, the man now stepped into the water, and walked up stream for several hundred yards, till he reached the spot which served as a ferry landing. Here, in the multiplicity of footprints, he knew his own would be indistinguishable to even the keenest of backwood eyes. He came ashore, slipped through the slumbering village, and plunged into the woods with the assurance of one to whom their mysteries were an open book.

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He was shaping his course—by the stars at present, but by compass when it should become necessary—for an inlet on the coast, where there would be a sturdy fishing-smack awaiting him and his rich prize. All was working smoothly—as most plans were apt to work under his swift, resourceful hands—and his hard lips relaxed in triumphant self-satisfaction. One of the most accomplished and relentless of the desperadoes of the Great North-West, he had peculiarly enjoyed his pose as the childlike Tony.

For hour after hour he pushed on, till even his untiring sinews

began to protest. About the edge of dawn Woolly Billy awoke, but, still stupid with the heavy drugging he had received, he did not seem to realize what had happened. He cried a little, asking for Jim, and for Tug Blackstock, and for Mrs. Amos, but was pacified by the most trivial excuses. The man gave him some sweet biscuits, but he refused to eat them, leaving them on the moss beside him. He hardly protested even when the man cut off his bright hair, and proceeded to darken what was left with some queer-smelling dye. 151

When the man undressed him and proceeded to stain his face and his whole body, he apparently thought he was being got ready for bed, and to certain terrible threats as to what would happen if he tried to get away, or to tell any one anything, he paid no attention whatever. He went to sleep again in the middle of it all.

Satisfied with his job, the man lay down beside him, knowing himself secure from pursuit, and went to sleep himself.

Meanwhile, after lying motionless for several hours, where he had dropped across the threshold, Jim at last began to stir. That crashing blow, after all, had not fallen quite true. Jim was not dead, by any means. He staggered to his feet, swayed a few moments, and then, for all the pain in his head, he was practically himself again. He went into the cottage, tried in vain to awaken Mrs. Amos in her chair, hunted for Woolly Billy in his bed, and at last, realizing something of what had happened, rushed forth in a panic of rage and fear and grief, and remorse for a trust betrayed. 152

It was a matter of a few minutes to trail the party down to the

waterside. Then he darted off after the bear. The latter, grubbing delightedly in a rotten stump, greeted him with a friendly “Woof.” A glance and a sniff satisfied Jim that Woolly Billy was not there, and his instinct assured him that the bear was void of offence in the whole matter. He knew the enemy. He darted back to the waterside, ran on up stream to the ferry-landing, picked up the trail of Tony’s feet, followed it unerringly through the confusion of other footprints, and darted silently into the woods in pursuit.

At daybreak an early riser, seeing the door of Mrs. Amos’ cottage standing open, looked in and saw the old lady still asleep in her chair. She was awakened with difficulty, and could give but a vague account of what had happened. The whole village turned out. Under the leadership of Long Jackson, the big mill-hand who constituted himself Woolly Billy’s special guardian in Blackstock’s absence, the “Dago” and bear were traced down to the waterside.

Of course, it was clear to almost every one that the “Dago”—who was now due for lynching when caught—153 had carried Woolly Billy off down river in the vanished canoe. Instantly the telephones were brought into service, and half-a-dozen expert canoeists, in the swiftest canoes to be had, started off in pursuit. But the more astute of the woods-men—including Long Jackson himself—held that this river clue was a false one, a ruse to put them off the track. This group went after the bear.

In an hour or two they found him. And very glad to see them he appeared to be. He was getting hungry, and a bit lonely. So without waiting for an invitation, with touching confidence he attached himself to the party, and accompanied it back to the

village. There Big Andy, who had always had a weakness for bears, took him home and fed him and shut him up in the back yard.

In the meantime Jim, travelling at a speed that the fugitive could not hope to rival, had come soon after daybreak to the spot where the man and Woolly Billy lay asleep.

He arrived as soundlessly as a shadow. At sight of his enemy—for he knew well who had carried off the child, and who had dealt that almost fatal blow—his long white fangs bared in a silent snarl of hate. But he had learnt, well learnt, that this man was a dangerous antagonist. He crouched, stiffened as if to stone, and surveyed the situation.

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His sensitive nose prevented him from being quite deceived by the transformation in Woolly Billy's appearance. He was puzzled by it, but he had no doubt as to the child's identity. Having satisfied himself that the little fellow was asleep, and therefore presumably safe for the moment, he turned his attention to his enemy.

The man was sleeping almost on his back, one arm thrown above his head, his chin up, his brown, sinewy throat exposed. That bare throat riveted Jim's vengeful gaze. He knew well that the man, though asleep and at an utter disadvantage, was the most dangerous adversary he could possibly tackle.

Step by step, so lightly, so smoothly, that not a twig crackled under his feet, he crept up, his muzzle outstretched, his fangs gleaming, the hair rising along his back. When he was within a couple of paces of his goal, the sleeper stirred slightly, as if

about to wake up, or growing conscious of danger. Instantly Jim sprang, and sank his fangs deep, deep, into his enemy's throat.

With a shriek the sleeper awoke, flinging wide his arms and legs convulsively. But the shriek was strangled at its birth, as Jim's implacable teeth crunched closer. The great dog shook his victim as a terrier shakes a rat. There was a choked gurgle, and the threshing arms and legs lay still.

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Jim continued his savage shaking till satisfied his foe was quite dead. Then he let go, and turned his attention to Woolly Billy.

The child was sitting up, staring at him with round eyes of question and bewilderment.

“Where am I, Jim?” he demanded. Then he gazed at the transformation in himself—his clothes and his stained hands. He saw his old clothes tossed aside, his curls lying near them in a bright, fluffy heap. He felt his cropped head. And then his brain began to clear. He had a dim memory of the man cutting his hair and changing his clothes.

Upon his first glimpse of the man, lying there dead and covered with blood, he felt a sharp pang of sorrow. He had liked Tony. But the pang passed, as he began to understand. If *Jim* had killed Tony, Tony must have been bad. It was evident that Tony had carried him off, and that Jim had come to save him. Jim was licking his face now, rapturously, and evidently coaxing him to get up and come away.

He flung his arms around Jim's neck. Then he saw the biscuits. He divided them evenly between himself and Jim, and ate his portion with good appetite. Jim would not touch

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his share, so Woolly Billy tucked them into his pocket. Then he got up and followed where Jim was trying to lead him, keeping his face averted from the terrible, bleeding thing sprawled there upon the moss. And Jim led him safely home.

When Tug Blackstock, two days later, returned from his visit to Exville, he brought news which explained why a certain gang of criminals had planned to get possession of Woolly Billy. The child had fallen heir to an immense property in England, and an ancient title, and he was to have been held for ransom. From that moment Blackstock never let him out of his sight, until, with a heavy heart, he handed him over to his own people.

Thereafter, as he sat brooding on a log beside the noisy river, with Jim stretched at his feet, Tug Blackstock felt that Brine's Rip, for the lack of a childish voice and a head of flaxen curls, had lost all savour for him. And his thoughts turned more and more towards the arguments of a grey-eyed girl, who had urged him to seek a wider sphere for his energies than the confines of Nipsiwaska County could afford.

THE EAGLE

He sat upon the very topmost perch under the open-work dome of his spacious and lofty cage. This perch was one of three or four lopped limbs jutting from a dead tree-trunk erected in the centre of the cage—a perch far other than that great branch of thunder-blasted pine, out-thrust from the seaward-facing cliff, whereon he had been wont to sit in his own land across the ocean.

He sat with his snowy, gleaming, flat-crowned head drawn back between the dark shoulders of his slightly uplifted wings. His black and yellow eyes, unwinking, bright and hard like glass, stared out from under his overhanging brows with a kind of darting and defiant inquiry quite unlike their customary expression of tameless despair. That dull world outside the bars of his cage, that hated, gaping, inquisitive world which he had ever tried to ignore by staring at the sun or gazing into the deeps of sky overhead, how it had changed since yesterday! The curious crowds, the gabbling voices were gone. Even the high buildings of red brick or whitish-grey stone, beyond the iron palings of the park, were going, toppling down with a slow, dizzy lurch, or leaping suddenly into the air with a roar and a huge belch of brown and orange smoke and scarlet flame. Here and there he saw men running wildly. Here and there he saw other men lying quite still—sprawling, inert shapes on the close-cropped grass, or the white asphalted walks, or the tossed pavement of the street. He knew that these inert, sprawling shapes were men, and that the men were dead; and the sight filled his exile heart with triumph. Men were his enemies, his gaolers, his opponents, and now at last—he knew not how—he

was tasting vengeance. The once smooth green turf around his cage was becoming pitted with strange yellow-brown holes. These holes, he had noticed, always appeared after a burst of terrific noise, and livid flame, and coloured smoke, followed by a shower of clods and pebbles, and hard fragments which sometimes flew right through his cage with a vicious hum. There was a deadly force in these humming fragments. He knew it, for his partner in captivity, a golden eagle of the Alps, had been hit by one of them, and now lay dead on the littered floor below him, a mere heap of bloody feathers. Certain of the iron bars of the cage, too, had been struck and cut through, as neatly as his own hooked beak would sever the paw of a rabbit.

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The air was full of tremendous crashing, buffeting sounds and sudden fierce gusts, which forced him to tighten the iron grip of his talons upon the perch. In the centre of the little park pond, some fifty feet from his cage, clustered a panic-stricken knot of eight or ten fancy ducks and two pairs of red-billed coot, all that remained of the flock of water-birds which had formerly screamed and gabbled over the pool. This little cluster was in a state of perpetual ferment, those on the outside struggling to get into the centre, those on the inside striving to keep their places. From time to time one or two on the outer ring would dive under and force their way up in the middle of the press, where they imagined themselves more secure. But presently they would find themselves on the outside again, whereupon, in frantic haste, they would repeat the manœuvre. The piercing glance of the eagle took in and dismissed this futile panic with immeasurable scorn. With like scorn, too, he noted the three gaunt cranes which had been wont to stalk so arrogantly among the lesser fowl and drive them from their meals. These once domineering birds were now standing huddled, their

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drooped heads close together, beneath a dense laurel thicket just behind the cage, their long legs quaking at every explosion.

Amid all this destroying tumult and flying death the eagle had no fear. He was merely excited by it. If a fragment of shell sang past his head, he never flinched, his level stare never even filmed or wavered. The roar and crash, indeed, and the monstrous bufferings of tormented air, seemed to assuage the long ache of his home-sickness. They reminded him of the hurricane racing past his ancient pine, of the giant waves shattering themselves with thunderous jar upon the cliff below. From time to time, as if his nerves were straining with irresistible exultation, he would lift himself to his full height, half spread his wings, stretch forward his gleaming white neck, and give utterance to a short, strident, yelping cry. Then he would settle back upon his perch again, and resume his fierce contemplation of the ruin that was falling on the city.

Suddenly an eleven-inch shell dropped straight in the centre of the pool and exploded on the concrete bottom which underlay the mud. Half the pool went up in the colossal eruption of blown flame and steam and smoke. Even here on his perch the eagle found himself spattered and drenched. When the shrunken surface of the pool had closed again over the awful vortex, and the smoke had drifted off to join itself to the dark cloud which hung over the city, the little flock of ducks and coot was nowhere to be seen. It simply was not. But a bleeding fragment of flesh, with some purple-and-chestnut feathers clinging to it, lay upon the bottom of the cage. This morsel caught the eagle's eye. He had been forgotten for the past two days—the old one-legged keeper of the cages having vanished—and he was ravenous with hunger. He hopped down briskly to

the floor, grabbed the morsel, and gulped it. Then he looked around hopefully for more. There were no more such opportune tit-bits within the cage, but just outside he saw the half of a big carp, which had been torn in twain by a caprice of the explosion and tossed up here upon the grass. This was just such a morsel as he was craving. He thrust one great talon out between the bars and clutched at the prize. But it was beyond his reach. Disappointed, he tried the other claw, balancing himself on one leg with widespread wings. Stretch and struggle as he would, it was all in vain. The fish lay too far off. Then he tried reaching through the bars with his head. He elongated his neck till he almost thought he was a heron, and till his great beak was snapping hungrily within an inch or two of the prize. But not a hair's-breadth closer could he get. At last, in a cold fury, he gave it up, and drew back, and shook himself to rearrange the much dishevelled feathers of his neck.

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Just at this moment, while he was still on the floor of the cage, a high-velocity shell came by. With its flat trajectory it passed just overhead, swept the dome of the cage clean out of existence, and whizzed onwards to explode, with a curious grunting crash, some hundreds of yards beyond. The eagle looked up and gazed for some seconds before realizing that his prison was no longer a prison. The path was clear above him to the free spaces of the air. But he was in no unseemly haste. His eye measured accurately the width of the exit, and saw that it was awkwardly narrow for his great spread of wing. He could not essay it directly from the ground, his quarters being too straitened for free flight. Hopping upwards from limb to limb of the roosting-tree, he regained the topmost perch, and found that, though split by a stray splinter of the cage, it was still able to bear his weight. From this point he sprang straight

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upwards, with one beat of his wings. But the wing-tips struck violently against each side of the opening, and he was thrown back with such force that only by a furious flopping and struggle could he regain his footing on the perch.

After this unexpected rebuff he sat quiet for perhaps half a minute, staring fixedly at the exit. He was not going to fail again through misjudgment. The straight top of the roosting-tree extended for about three feet above his perch, but this extension being of no use to him, he had never paid any heed to it hitherto. Now, however, he marked it with new interest. It was close below the hole in the roof. He flopped up to it, balanced himself for a second, and once more sprang for the opening, but this time with a short, convulsive beat of wings only half spread. The leap carried him almost through, but not far enough for him to get another stroke of his wings. Clutching out wildly with stretched talons, he succeeded in catching the end of a broken bar. Desperately he clung to it, resisting the natural impulse to help himself by flapping his wings. Reaching out with his beak, he gripped another bar, and so steadied himself till he could gain a foothold with both talons. Then slowly, like a dog getting over a wall, he dragged himself forth, and stood at last free on the outer side of the bars which had been so long his prison.

But the first thing he thought of was not freedom. It was fish. For perhaps a dozen seconds he gazed about him majestically, and scanned with calm the toppling and crashing world. Then spreading his splendid wings to their fullest extent, with no longer any fear of them striking against iron bars, he dropped down to the grass beside the cage and clutched the body of the slain carp. He was no more than just in time, for a second later a

pair of mink, released from their captivity in perhaps the same way as he had been, came gliding furtively around the base of the cage, intent upon the same booty. He turned his head over his shoulder and gave them one look, then fell to tearing and gulping his meal as unconcernedly as if the two savage little beasts had been field mice. The mink stopped short, flashed white fangs at him in a soundless snarl of hate, and whipped about to forage in some more auspicious direction.

When the eagle had finished his meal—which took him, indeed, scarcely more time than takes to tell of it—he wiped his great beak meticulously on the turf. While he was doing so, a shell burst so near him that he was half smothered in dry earth. Indignantly he shook himself, hopped a pace or two aside, ruffled up his feathers, and proceeded to make his toilet as scrupulously as if no shells or sudden death were within a thousand miles of him. 167

The toilet completed to his satisfaction, he took a little flapping run and rose into the air. He flew straight for the highest point within his view, which chanced to be the slender, soaring spire of a church somewhere about the centre of the city. As he mounted on a long slant, he came into the level where most of the shells were travelling, for their objective was not the little park with its “Zoo,” but a line of fortifications some distance beyond. Above, below, around him streamed the terrible projectiles, whinnying or whistling, shrieking or roaring, each according to its calibre and its type. It seemed a miracle that he should come through that zone unscathed; but his vision was so powerful and all-embracing, his judgment of speed and distance so instantaneous and unerring, that he was able to avoid, without apparent effort, all but the smallest and least 168

visible shells, and these latter, by the favour of Fate, did not come his way. He was more annoyed, indeed, by certain volleys of *débris* which occasionally spouted up at him with a disagreeable noise, and by the evil-smelling smoke clouds, which came volleying about him without any reason that he could discern. He flapped up to a higher level to escape these annoyances, and so found himself above the track of the shells. Then he made for the church spire, and perched himself upon the tip of the great weather-vane. It was exactly what he wanted—a lofty observation post from which to view the country round about before deciding in which direction he would journey.

From this high post he noticed that, while he was well above one zone of shells, there was still another zone of them screaming far overhead. These projectiles of the upper strata of air were travelling in the opposite direction. He marked that they came from a crowded line of smoke-bursts and blinding flashes just beyond the boundary of the city. He decided that, upon resuming his journey, he would fly at the present level, and so avoid traversing again either of the zones of death.

Much to his disappointment, he found that his present observation post did not give him as wide a view as he had hoped for. The city of his captivity, he now saw, was set upon the loop of a silver stream in the centre of a saucer-like valley. In every direction his view was limited by low, encircling hills. Along one sector of this circuit—that from which the shells of the lower stratum seemed to him to be issuing—the hill-rim and the slopes below it were fringed with vomiting smoke-clouds and biting spurts of fire. This did not, however, influence in the least his choice of the direction in which to journey. Instinct, little by little, as he sat there on the

slowly veering vane, was deciding that point for him. His gaze was fixing itself more and more towards the north, or, rather, the north-west; for something seemed to whisper in his heart that there was where he would find the wild solitudes which he longed for. The rugged and mist-wreathed peaks of Scotland or North Wales, though he knew them not, were calling to him in his new-found freedom.

The call, however, was not yet strong enough to be determining, so, having well fed and being beyond measure content with his liberty, he lingered on his skyey perch and watched the crash of the opposing bombardments. The quarter of the town immediately beneath him had so far suffered little from the shells, and the church showed no signs of damage except for one gaping hole in the roof. But along the line of the fortifications there seemed to be but one gigantic boiling of smoke and flames, with continual spouting fountains of *débris*. This inexplicable turmoil held his interest for a few moments. Then, while he was wondering what it all meant, an eleven-inch shell struck the church spire squarely about thirty feet below him.

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The explosion almost stunned him. The tip of the spire—with the weather-cock, and the eagle still clinging to it—went rocketing straight up into the air amid a stifling cloud of black smoke, while the rest of the structure, down to a dozen feet below the point of impact, was blown to the four winds. Half stunned though he was, the amazed bird kept his wits about him, and clutched firmly to his flying perch till it reached the end of its flight and turned to fall. Then he spread his wings wide and let go. The erratic mass of wood and metal dropped away, and left him floating, half-blinded, in the heart of the smoke-cloud. A couple of violent wing-beats, however, carried him clear

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of the cloud; and at once he shaped his course upwards, as steeply as he could mount, smitten with a sudden desire for the calm and the solitude which were associated in his memory with the uppermost deeps of air.

The fire from the city batteries had just now slackened for a little, and the great bird's progress carried him through the higher shell zone without mishap. In a minute or two he was far above those strange flocks which flew so straight and swift, and made such incomprehensible noises in their flight. Presently, too, he was above the smoke, the very last wisps of it having thinned off into the clear, dry air. He now began to find that he had come once more into his own peculiar realm, the realm of the upper sky, so high that, as he thought, no other living creature could approach him. He arrested his ascent, and began to circle slowly on still wings, surveying the earth.

But now he received, for the first time, a shock. Hitherto the most astounding happenings had failed to startle him, but now a pang of something very like fear shot through his stout heart. A little to southward of the city he saw a vast pale-yellow elongated form rising swiftly, without any visible effort, straight into the sky. Had he ever seen a sausage, he would have thought that this yellow monster was shaped like one. 172

Certain fine cords descended from it, reaching all the way to the earth, and below its middle hung a basket, with a man in it. It rose to a height some hundreds of feet beyond the level on which the eagle had been feeling himself supreme. Then it came to rest, and hung there, swaying slowly in the mild wind.

His apprehension speedily giving way to injured pride, the eagle flew upwards, in short, steep spirals, as fast as his wings

could drive him. Not till he could once more look down upon the fat back of the glistening yellow monster did he regain his mood of unruffled calm. But he regained it only to have it stripped from him, a minute later, with tenfold lack of ceremony. For far above him—so high that even his undaunted wings would never venture thither—he heard a fierce and terrible humming sound. He saw something like a colossal bird—or rather, it was more suggestive of a dragon-fly than a bird—speeding towards him with never a single beat of its vast, pale wings. Its speed was appalling. The eagle was afraid, but not with any foolish panic. He knew that even as a sparrow would be to him, so would he be to this unheard-of sovereign of the skies. Therefore it was possible the sovereign of the skies would ignore him and seek a more worthy opponent. Yes, it was heading towards the giant sausage. And the sausage, plainly, had no stomach for the encounter. It seemed to shrink suddenly; and with sickening lurches it began to descend, as if strong hands were tugging upon the cords which anchored it to earth. The eagle winged off modestly to one side, but not far enough to miss anything of the stupendous encounter which he felt was coming. Here, at last, were events of a strangeness and a terror to move even his cool spirit out of its indifference.

Now the giant insect was near enough for the eagle to mark that it had eyes on the undersides of its wings—immense, round, coloured eyes of red and white and blue. Its shattering hum shook the eagle's nerves, steady and seasoned though they were. Slanting slightly downwards, it darted straight toward the sausage, which was now wallowing fatly in its convulsive efforts to descend. At the same time the eagle caught sight of another of the giant birds, or insects, somewhat different in shape and colour from the first, darting up from the opposite

direction. Was it, too, he wondered, coming to attack the terrified sausage, or to defend it?

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Before he could find an answer to this exciting question, the first monster had arrived directly above the sausage and was circling over it at some height, glaring down upon it with those great staring eyes of its wings. Something struck the sausage fairly in the back. Instantly, with a tremendous windy roar, the sausage vanished in a sheet of flame. The monster far above it rocked and plunged in the uprush of tormented air, the waves of which reached even to where the eagle hung poised, and forced him to flap violently in order to keep his balance against them.

A few moments later the second monster arrived. The eagle saw at once that the two were enemies. The first dived headlong at the second, spitting fire, with a loud and dreadful rap-rap-rapping noise, from its strange blunt muzzle. The two circled around each other, and over and under each other, at a speed which made even the eagle dizzy with amazement; and he saw that it was something more deadly than fire which spurted from their blunt snouts; for every now and then small things, which travelled too fast for him to see, twanged past him with a vicious note which he knew for the voice of death. He edged discreetly farther away. Evidently this battle of the giants was dangerous to spectators. His curiosity was beginning to get sated. He was on the point of leaving the danger area altogether, when the dreadful duel came suddenly to an end. He saw the second monster plunge drunkenly, in wild, ungoverned lurches, and then drop head first, down, down, down, straight as a stone, till it crashed into the earth and instantly burst into flame. He saw the great, still eyes of the victor staring down inscrutably upon the wreck of its foe. Then he saw it whirl

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sharply—tilting its rigid wings at so steep an angle that it almost seemed about to overturn—and dart away again in the direction from which it had come. He saw the reason for this swift departure. A flock of six more monsters, of the breed of the one just slain, came sweeping up from the south to take vengeance for their comrade's defeat.

The eagle had no mind to await them. He had had enough of wonders, and the call in his heart had suddenly grown clear and intelligible. Mounting still upward till he felt the air growing thin beneath his wing-beats, he headed northwards as fast as he could fly. He had no more interest now in the amazing panorama which unrolled beneath him, in the thundering and screaming flights of shell which sped past in the lower strata of the air. He was intent only upon gaining the wild solitudes of which he dreamed. He marked others of the monsters which he so dreaded, journeying sometimes alone, sometimes in flocks, but always with the same implacable directness of flight, always with that angry and menacing hum which, of all the sounds he had ever heard, alone had power to shake his bold heart. He noticed that sometimes the sky all about these monsters would be filled with sudden bursts of fleecy cloud, looking soft as wool; and once he saw one of these apparently harmless clouds burst full on the nose of one of the monsters, which instantly flew apart and went hurtling down to earth in revolving fragments. But he was no longer curious. He gave them all as wide a berth as possible, and sped on, without delaying to note their triumphs or their defeats.

At last the earth grew green again below him. The monsters, the smoke, the shells, the flames, the thunders, were gradually left behind, and far ahead at last he saw the sea, flashing gold and

sapphire beneath the summer sun. Soon—for he flew swiftly—it was almost beneath him. His heart exulted at the sight. 177
Then across that stretch of gleaming tide he saw a dim line of cliffs—white cliffs, such cliffs as he desired.

But at this point, when he was so near his goal, that Fate which had always loved to juggle with him decided to show him a new one of her tricks. Two more monsters appeared, diving steeply from the blue above him. One was pursuing the other. Quite near him the pursuer overtook its quarry, and the two spat fire at each other with that strident rap-rap-rapping sound which he so disliked. He swerved as wide as possible from the path of their terrible combat, and paid no heed to its outcome. But, as he fled, something struck him near the tip of his left wing.

The shock went through him like a needle of ice or fire, and he dropped, leaving a little cloud of feathers in the air above to settle slowly after him. He turned once completely over as he fell. But presently, with terrific effort, he succeeded in regaining a partial balance. He could no longer fully support himself, still less continue his direct flight; but he managed to keep on an even keel and to delay his fall. He knew that to drop into the sea below him was certain death. But he had marked that the 178
sea was dotted with peculiar-looking ships—long, narrow, dark ships—which travelled furiously, vomiting black smoke and carrying a white mass of foam in their teeth. Supporting himself, with the last ounce of his strength, till one of these rushing ships was just about to pass below him, he let himself drop, and landed sprawling on the deck.

Half stunned though he was, he recovered himself almost instantly, clawed up to his feet, steadied himself with one

outstretched wing against the pitching of the deck, and defied, with hard, undaunted eye and threatening beak, a tall figure in blue, white-capped and gold-braided, which stood smiling down upon him.

* * * * *

“By Jove,” exclaimed Sub-Lieutenant James Smith, “here’s luck: Uncle Sam’s own chicken, which he’s sent us as a mascot till his ships can get over and take a hand in the game with us: Delighted to see you, old bird: You’ve come to the right spot, you have, and we’ll do the best we can to make you comfortable.”

THE MULE

The mule lines at Aveluy were restless and unsteady under the tormented dark. All day long a six-inch high-velocity gun, firing at irregular intervals from somewhere on the low ridge beyond the Ancre, had been feeling for them. Those terrible swift shells, which travel so fast, on their flat trajectory, that their bedlam shriek of warning and the rending crash of their explosion seem to come in the same breathless instant, had tested the nerves of man and beast sufficiently during the daylight; but now, in the shifting obscurity of a young moon harrowed by driving cloud-rack, their effect was yet more daunting. So far they had been doing little damage, having been occupied, for the most part, in blowing new craters in the old lines, a couple of hundred yards further east, which had been vacated only two days before on account of their deep-trodden and intolerable mud. All day our 'planes, patrolling the sky over Tara Hill and the lines of Regina, had kept the Boche's airmen at such a distance that they could not observe and register for their batteries; and this terrible gun was, therefore, firing blind. But there came a time, during the long night, when it seemed to reach the conclusion that its target must be pretty well obliterated. Squatting in its veiled lair behind the heights of Ancre, it lifted its raking muzzle, ever so slightly, and put another two hundred yards on to its range.

The next shell screamed down straight upon the lines. The crash tore earth and air. A massive column of black smoke vomited upwards, pierced with straight flame and streaked with flying fragments of mules and ropes and tether-pegs. Deadly splinters of shell hissed forth from it on all sides. The top of the column

spread outwards; the base thinned and lifted; a raw and ghastly crater, like some Dantesque dream of the mouth of Hell, came into view; and there followed a faint, hideous sound of nameless things pattering down upon the mud.

Near the edge of the crater stood a big, raw-boned black mule. His team mate and the three other mules tethered nearest to him had vanished. Several others lay about on either side of him, dead or screaming in their death agonies. But he was untouched. At the appalling shock he had sprung back upon his haunches, snorting madly; but the tethering-rope had held, and he had almost thrown himself. Then, after the fashion of his kind, he had lashed out wildly with his iron-shod heels. But he was tough of nerve and stout of heart far beyond the fashion of his kind, and almost at once he pulled himself together and stood trembling, straining on the halter, his long ears laid back upon his head. Then his eyes, rolling white, with a green gleam of horror at the centre, took note of the familiar form of his driver, standing by his head and feeling himself curiously, as if puzzled at being still alive.

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This sight reassured the black mule amazingly. His expressive ears wagged forward again, and he thrust his frothing muzzle hard against the man's shoulder, as if to ask him what it all meant. The man flung an arm over the beast's quivering neck and leaned himself against him for a moment or two, dazed from the tremendous shock which had lifted him from his feet and slammed him down viciously upon the ground. He coughed once or twice, and tried to wipe the reek of the explosion from his eyes. Then, coming fully to himself, he hurriedly untethered his charge, patted him reassuringly on the nose, loosed the next mule behind him on the lines, and led the two away in

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haste toward safer quarters. As he did so, another shell came in, some fifty yards to the left, and the lines became a bedlam of kicking and snorting beasts, with their drivers, cursing and coaxing, according to their several methods, clawing at the ropes and hurrying to get their charges away to safety.

At any other time the big black mule—an unregenerate product of the Argentine, with a temper which took delight in giving trouble to all in authority over him—might have baulked energetically as a protest against being moved from his place at this irregular hour. But he was endowed with a perception of his own interests, which came rather from the humbler than the more aristocratic side of his ancestry. He was no victim of that childish panic which is so liable, in a moment of desperation, to pervert the high-strung intelligence of the horse. He felt that the man knew just what to do in this dreadful and demoralizing situation. So he obeyed and followed like a lamb; and in that moment he conceived an affection for his driver which made him nothing less than a changed mule. His amazing docility had its effect upon the second mule, and the driver got them both away without any difficulty. When all the rest of the survivors had been successfully shifted to new ground, far off to the right, the terrible gun continued for another hour to blow craters up and down the deserted lines. Then it lengthened its range once more, and spent the rest of the night shattering to powder the ruins of an already ruined and quite deserted street, under the impression that it was smashing up some of our crowded billets. A little before daylight, however, a shell from one of our forward batteries, up behind Regina Trench, found its way into the lair where the monster squatted, and rest descended upon Aveluy in the bleak autumnal dawn.

This was in the rain-scoured autumn of 1916, when the unspeakable desolation of the Somme battlefield was a sea of mud. The ruins of the villages—Ovillers, La Boisselle, Pozières, Courcellette, Martinpuich, and all the others which had once made fair with flowers and orchards this rolling plateau of Picardy—had been pounded flat by the inexorable guns, and were now mere islands of firmer ground in the shell-pitted wastes of red mire. Men went encased in mud from boots to shrapnel helmet. And it was a special mud of exasperating tenacity, a cement of beaten chalk and clay. The few spidery tram-lines ran precariously along the edges of the shell-186holes, out over the naked, fire-swept undulations beyond Mouquet Farm and Courcellette, where they were continually being knocked to pieces by the “whizz-bangs,” and tirelessly rebuilt by our dauntless pioneers and railway troops. Scattered all about this dreadful naked waste behind our front trenches lurked our forward batteries, their shallow gun-pits cunningly camouflaged behind every little swell of tumbled mud.

This foul mud, hiding in the deep slime of its shell-holes every kind of trap and putrid horror, was the appropriate ally of the Germans. Stinkingly and tenaciously and treacherously, as befitted, it opposed the feeding of the guns. Two by two or four by four, according to their size, the shells for the guns had to be carried up from the forward dumps in little wicker panniers slung across the backs of horses and mules. It was a slow process, precarious and costly, but it beat the mud, and the insatiable guns were fed.

After the night when the mule-lines at Aveluy were shelled, the big black mule and his driver were put on this job of carrying up shells to the forward batteries. The driver, a gaunt, green-eyed,

ginger-haired teamster from the lumber camps of Northern New Brunswick, received the order with a crooked grin.

“Say your prayers now, Sonny,” he muttered in the mule’s big, waving ear, which came to “attention” promptly to receive his communication. “You’ll be wishing you was back in them old lines at Aveluy afore we’re through with this job. Fritz over yonder ain’t goin’ to like you an’ me one little bit when he gits on to what we’re up to. It ain’t like haulin’ fodder, I tell you that. But I guess we’ve got the nerve all right.”

Instead of rolling the whites of his eyes at him, in surly protest against this familiarity, the black mule responded by nibbling gently at the sleeve of his muddy tunic.

“Geezely Christmas,” murmured the driver, astonished at this evidence of goodwill, “but it’s queer, now, how a taste o’ shell-fire’ll sometimes work a change o’ heart, even in an Argentino mule. I only hope it’ll last, Sonny. If it does, we’re goin’ to git along fine, you an’ me.” And the next time he visited the canteen he brought back a biscuit or two and a slab of sweet chocolate, to confirm the capricious beast in its mended manners.

Early that same afternoon the black mule found himself in new surroundings. He was at the big ammunition dump which lay concealed in an obscure hollow near the ruins of Courcelette. He looked with suspicion on the wicker panniers which were slung across his sturdy back. Saddles he knew, and harness he knew, but this was a contraption which roused misgivings in his conservative soul. When the shells were slipped into the panniers, and he felt the sudden weight, so out

of all proportion to the size of the burden, he laid back his long ears with a grunt, and gathered his muscles for a protesting kick. But his driver, standing at his head, stroked his muzzle soothingly and murmured: "There, there, steady, Son! Keep your hair on! It ain't goin' to bite you."

Thus adjured, he composed himself with an effort, and the lashing kick was not delivered.

"What a persuasive cuss you must be, Jimmy Wright!" said the man who was handling the shells. "I wouldn't trust you round with my best girl, if you can get a bucking mule locoed that way with your soft sawder."

"It ain't me," replied the New Brunswicker. "It's shell-shock, I guess, kind of helped along with chocolate an' biscuits. He got a bit of a shaking up when they shelled the lines at Aveluy night afore last, an' he's been a lamb ever since. Seems to think *I* saved his hide for him. He was the very devil to handle afore that."

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For some way from the dump the journey was uneventful. The path to the guns led along a sunken road, completely hidden from the enemy's observation posts. The dull, persistent rain had ceased for a little, and the broad patches of blue overhead were dotted with our droning aeroplanes, which every now and then would dive into a low-drifting rack of grey cloud to shake off the shrapnel of the German "Archies." Of German 'planes none were to be seen, for they had all sped home to their hangars when our fighting squadrons rose to the encounter. The earth rocked to the explosions of our 9.2 howitzers ranged about Pozières and Martinpuich, and the air clamoured under the

passage of their giant shells as they went roaring over toward the German lines. Now and again a vicious whining sound would swell suddenly to a nerve-racking shriek, and an enemy shell would land with a massive *cr-r-ump*, and a furious blast of smoke and mud would belch upwards to one side or other of the sunken road. But none of these unwelcome visitors came into the road itself, and neither the black mule nor Jimmy Wright paid them any more attention than the merest roll of an eye to mark their billet.

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“Change o’ heart hain’t spoiled old Sonny’s nerve, anyhow,” thought the driver to himself, with deep approval.

A little further on and the trail up to “X’s Group,” quitting the shelter of the sunken road, led out across the red desolation, in the very eye, as it seemed to the New Brunswicker, of the enemy’s positions. It was a narrow, undulating track, slippery as oil, yet tenacious as glue, corkscrewing its laborious way between the old slime-filled shell-pits. From the surface of one of these wells of foul-coloured ooze the legs of a dead horse stuck up stiffly into the air, like four posts on which to lay a foot-bridge. A few yards beyond, the track was cut by a fresh shell-hole, too new to have collected any water. Its raw sides were streaked red and white and black, and just at its rim lay the mangled fragments of something that might recently have been a mule. The long ears of Wright’s mule waved backwards and forwards at the sight, and he snorted apprehensively.

“This don’t appear to be a health resort for us, Sonny,” commented the New Brunswicker, “so we won’t linger, if it’s all the same to you.” And he led the way around the other side of the new shell-hole, the big mule crowding close

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behind with quivering muzzle at his shoulder.

However urgent Wright's desire for speed, speed was ridiculously impossible. The obstinate pro-German mud was not lightly to be overcome. Even on the firmer ridges it clung far above the fetlocks of the black mule, and struggled to suck off Wright's hobnailed boots at every labouring step. Though a marrow-piercing north-easter swept the waste, both man and mule were lathered in sweat. Half their energy had to be expended in recovering themselves from continual slithering slides which threatened to land them in the engulfing horrors of the shell-holes. For all that he had so little breath to spare, Jimmy Wright kept muttering through his teeth strange expletives and objurgations from the vocabulary of the lumber camps, eloquent but unprintable, to which the black mule lent ear admiringly. He seemed to feel that his driver's remarks, though he could not understand them, were doubtless such as would command his fullest accord. For his own part he had no means of expressing such sentiments except through his heels, and these were now all too fully occupied in their battle with the mud.

By this time the black mule had become absolutely convinced that his fate was in the hands of his ginger-haired driver. Jimmy Wright, as it seemed to him, was his sole protection against this violent horror which kept bursting and crashing on every hand about him. It was clear to him that Jimmy Wright, though apparently much annoyed, was not afraid. Therefore, with Jimmy Wright as his protector he was safe. He wagged his ears, snorted contemptuously at a 5.9 which spurted up a column of mud and smoke some hundred yards to the left, and plodded on gamely through the mud. He didn't know where he was going, but Jimmy Wright was there, and just ahead of his

nose, where he could sniff at him; and he felt sure there would be fodder and a rub down at the end of the weary road.

In the midst of these consoling reflections something startling and inexplicable happened. He was enveloped and swept away in a deafening roar. Thick blackness, streaked with star-showers, blinded him. Though half-stupefied, he kicked and struggled with all his strength, for it was not in him to yield himself, like a stricken horse, to any stroke of Fate.

When he once more saw daylight, he was recovering his feet just below the rim of an old shell-hole. He gained the top, braced his legs, and shook himself vigorously. The loaded panniers thumping heavily upon his ribs restored him fully to his senses. Snorting through wide red nostrils, he stared about him wildly. Some ten paces distant he saw a great new crater in the mud, reeking with black and orange fumes.

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But where was Jimmy Wright? The mule swept anxious eyes across the waste of shell-holes, in every direction. In vain. His master had vanished. He felt himself deserted. Panic began to clutch at his heart, and he gathered his muscles for frantic flight. And then he recovered himself and stood steady. He had caught sight of a ginger-haired head, bare of its shrapnel helmet, lying on the mud at the other side of the shell-hole from which he had just struggled out.

His panic passed at once, but it gave place to anxious wonder. There, indeed, was Jimmy Wright, but what was he doing there? His body was buried almost to the shoulders in the discoloured slime that half filled the shell-hole. He was lying on his face. His arms were outstretched, and his hands were clutching at the

slippery walls of the hole as if he were striving to pull himself up from the water. This effort, however, seemed anything but successful. The mule saw, indeed, that his protector was slowly slipping deeper into the slime. This filled him with fresh alarm. If Jimmy Wright should disappear under that foul surface, that would be desertion complete and final. It was not to be endured. 194

Quickly but cautiously the mule picked his way around the hole, and then, with sagacious bracing of his hoofs, down to his master's side. But what was to be done next? Jimmy Wright's face was turned so that he could not see his would-be rescuer. His hands were still clutching at the mud, but feebly and without effect.

The mule saw that his master was on the point of vanishing under the mud, of deserting him in his extremity. This was intolerable. The emergency quickened his wits. Instinct suggested to him that to keep a thing one should take hold of it and hold on to it. He reached down with his big yellow teeth, took hold of the shoulder of Jimmy Wright's tunic, and held on. Unfamiliar with anatomy, he at the same time took hold of a substantial portion of Jimmy Wright's own shoulder inside the tunic, and held on to that. He braced himself, and with a loud, involuntary snort began to pull.

Jimmy Wright, up to this point, had been no more than half conscious. The mule's teeth in his shoulder revived him effectually. He came to himself with a yell. He remembered the shell-burst. He saw and understood where he was. He was afraid to move for a moment, lest he should find that his shoulder was blown off. But no, he had two arms, and he could 195

move them. He had his shoulder all right, for something was pulling at it with quite sickening energy. He reached up his right arm—it was the left shoulder that was being tugged at—and encountered the furry head and ears of his rescuer.

“Sonny!” he shouted. “Well, I’ll be d——d!” And he gripped fervently at the mule’s neck.

Reassured at the sound of his master’s voice, the big mule took his teeth out of Wright’s shoulder and began nuzzling solicitously at his sandy head.

“It’s all right, old man,” said the New Brunswicker, thinking quickly, while with his left hand he secured a grip on the mule’s headstall. Then he strove to raise himself from the slime. The effort produced no result, except to send a wave of blackness across his brain. Wondering sickly if he carried some 196 terrible injury concealed under the mud, he made haste to pass the halter rope under his arms and knot it beneath his chest. Then he shouted for help, twice and again, till his voice trailed off into a whimper and he relapsed into unconsciousness. The mule shifted his feet to gain a more secure foothold on the treacherous slope, and then stood wagging his ears and gazing down on Jimmy in benevolent content. So long as Jimmy was with him, he felt that things were bound to come all right. Jimmy would presently get up and lead him out of the shell-hole, and take him home.

Shell after shell, whining or thundering according to their breed, soared high over the hole, but the black mule only wagged his ears at them. His eyes were anchored upon the unconscious sandy head of Jimmy Wright. Suddenly, however, a sharp voice

made him look up. He saw a couple of stretcher-bearers standing on the edge of the shell-hole, looking down sympathetically upon him and his charge. In a second or two they were beside him, skilfully and tenderly extricating Jimmy's body from the mud.

“He ain't gone west this time,” pronounced one, who had thrust an understanding hand into the breast of the tunic.

Jimmy Wright opened his eyes wide suddenly.

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“Not by a d——d sight I ain't, Bill!” he muttered rather thickly. Then, his wits and his voice coming clearer, he added: “But if I ain't, it's thanks to this here old —— of an Argentino mule, that come down into this hole and yanked me out o' the mud, and saved me. Eh, Sonny?”

The big mule was crowding up so close to him as to somewhat incommode the two men in their task on that treacherous incline. But they warded off his inconvenient attentions very gently.

“He's some mule, all right,” grunted one of the bearers, as they got Jimmy on to the stretcher and laboriously climbed from the shell-hole.

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STRIPES THE UNCONCERNED

On the edge of evening, when the last of the light was gathered in the pale-green upper sky, and all the world of the quiet backwoods clearings was sunken in a soft violet dusk, a leisurely and self-possessed little animal came strolling among the ancient stumps and mossy hillocks of the open upland sheep-pasture. He was about the size of an average cat, but shorter of leg, with a long, sharp-muzzled head, and he carried his broad feathery tail very high in a graceful arch, like a squirrel in good humour. Unlike most other creatures of the wild, his colouring was such as to make him conspicuous rather than to conceal him. He was black, with a white stripe down his face, a white patch on the back of his neck, and a white stripe all the way along each side of his body. And, also, unlike the rest of the furtive folk, he seemed quite unconcerned to hide his movements from observation. Neither was he for ever glancing this way and that, as if on the watch for enemies. Rather he had the air of being content that his enemies should do the watching—and avoid him.

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The skunk—for such was the undignified appellation of this very dignified personality of the wilderness—was pleasantly engrossed in his own business. That business, at the moment, consisted in catching the big, fat, juicy, copper-brown “June-bugs” as they emerged from their holes in the sod, crawled up the bending grass-stems, and spread their wings for their heavy evening flight. It was easy hunting, and he had no need of haste. To snap up these great, slow and clumsy beetles as they clung upon the grass-stems was as easy as picking strawberries, and, indeed, not altogether dissimilar, as he would nip off the hard,

glossy wing-cases of the big beetles as one nips off the hull of the berry before munching the succulent morsel.

Having slept the day through in his snug burrow, in the underbrush which fringed the forest edge of the clearing, he had come forth into the dewy twilight equipped with a fine appetite. He had come with the definite purpose of hunting “June-bugs,” this being the season, all too brief, for that highly-flavoured delicacy. At first he had thought of nothing else; but when he had taken the edge off his hunger, he began to consider the chances of varying his diet. As he seized an unlucky beetle, close to the edge of a flat, spreading juniper bush, a brooding ground-sparrow flew up, with a startled *cheep*, from under his very nose. He dropped the beetle and made a lightning pounce at the bird. But her wing had flicked him across the eyes, confusingly, and he missed her. He knew well enough, however, what her presence there among the warm grass-tussocks meant. He went nosing eagerly under the juniper bush, and soon found a nest with four little brown-mottled eggs in it. Tiny though they were, they made a tit-bit very much to his taste, all the more so that they were very near hatching. Having licked his jaws and fastidiously polished the fur of his shrewd, keen face, he sauntered off to see what other delicacies the evening might have in store for him. 203

A little further on, toward the centre of the pasture, he came upon a flat slab of rock, its surface sloping toward the south, its southward edge slightly overhanging and fringed with soft grass. He knew the rock well—knew how its bare surface drank in the summer sun all day long, and held the warmth throughout the dew-chill nights. He knew, too, that other creatures besides himself might very well appreciate this genial warmth. 204

Stealthily, and without the smallest disturbance of the grassy fringe, he sniffed along the overhanging edge of the rock. Suddenly he stiffened, and his sharp nose darted in under the rock. Then he jerked back, with the writhing tail of a snake between his jaws.

The prize was a big black-and-yellow garter snake, not far from three feet long,—not venomous, but full of energy and fight. It tried to cling to its hiding-place; but the shrewd skunk, instead of attempting to pull it out straight, like a cork from a bottle neck, ran forward a pace or two, and, as it were, “peeled” it forth. It doubled out, struck him smartly in the face with its harmless fangs, and then coiled itself about his neck and forelegs. There was a moment of confused rough-and-tumble, but the skunk knew just how to handle this kind of antagonist. Having bitten the reptile’s tail clean through, he presently, with the help of his practised little jaws, succeeded in getting hold of it by the back, an inch or two behind the head. This ended the affair, as a struggle, and the victor proceeded to round off his supper on snake. He managed to put away almost all but the head and tail, and then, after a meticulous toilet to fur and paws—for he was as fastidiously cleanly as a cat—he sauntered back toward his burrow in the underbrush, to refresh himself with a nap before seeking further adventures.

Directly in his path stood three or four young seedling firs, about two feet high, in a dense cluster. Half a dozen paces beyond this tiny thicket a big red fox, belly to earth, was soundlessly stalking some quarry, perhaps a mouse, which could be heard ever so faintly rustling the grass-stems at the edge of the thicket. To the skunk, with his well-filled belly, the sound had no interest. He rounded the thicket and came face to face

with the fox.

Neither in size, strength, nor agility was he any match for the savage red beast which stood in his path, and was quite capable, indeed, of dispatching him in two snaps of his long, lean jaws. But he was not in the least put out. Watchful, but cool, he kept straight on, neither delaying nor hastening his leisurely and nonchalant progress. The fox, on the other hand, stopped short. He was hungry. His hunting was interfered with, for that rustling under the fir-branches had stopped. His fine red brush twitched angrily. Nevertheless, he had no stomach to tackle this easy-going little gentleman in the black-and-white stripes. Showing his long white teeth in a vindictive but noiseless snarl, he stepped aside. And the skunk, glancing back with bright eyes of vigilance and understanding, passed on as if the twilight world belonged to him. He knew—and he knew his enemy knew as well—that he carried with him a concealed weapon of such potency that no fox, unless afflicted with madness, would ever willingly run up against it.

Reaching his burrow in the underbrush without further adventure, he found it empty. His mate and her young ones—now three-quarters grown—were scattered away foraging for themselves over the wide, forest-scented clearings. It was a spacious burrow, dug by a sturdy, surly old woodchuck, who, though usually as pugnacious as a badger and an obstinate stickler for his rights, had in this case yielded without a fight to the mild-mannered little usurper, and humped off in disgust to hollow a new abode much deeper in the forest, where such a mischance would not be likely to happen him again. Under the tenancy of the skunk family the burrow was sweet and dry and daintily kept. With a little grumble of content deep in his throat

he curled himself up and went to sleep.

When he woke and set forth again to renew his foraging, although he had only slept an hour, his vigorous digestion had quite restored his appetite. He had no more thought for June-bugs. He wanted bigger game, more red-blooded and with some excitement in it. He thought of the farmyard, half a mile away across the clearings, down over the round of the upland. It was weeks now since he had visited it. There might be something worth picking up. There might be a mother hen with chickens, in a pen which he could find a way into. There might be a hen sitting on her clutch of eggs in a stolen nest under the barn. He had discovered in previous seasons that most sitting hens had their nests provided for them in secure places which he could in no way manage to come at. But he had also found that sometimes a foolish and secretive—and very young—hen will *hide* her nest in some such out-of-the-way place as under the barn floor, where the troublesome human creatures who preside over the destinies of hens cannot get at it. Here she keeps her precious eggs all to herself till she has enough to cover comfortably, and then she proceeds to the pleasant task of brooding them, and has things all her own way till some night-prowler comes along and convicts her, finally and fatally, of her folly.

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A full moon, large and ruddy like a ripe pumpkin, was just rising behind the jagged black tops of the spruce forest. It threw long, fantastic, confusing shadows across the dewy hillocks of the pasture. Hither and thither, in and out and across the barred streaks of light, darted the wild rabbits, gambolling as if half beside themselves, as if smitten with a midsummer madness by the capricious magic of the night. But if mad, they retained

enough sound sense to keep ever at a prudent distance from the leisurely striped wayfarer who appeared so little interested in their sport. Though they were bigger than he, they knew that, if they should venture within reach of his pounce, his indifference would vanish and his inexorable fangs would be in their throats.

Knowing his utter inability to compete with the speed of the rabbits, now they were wide awake, the skunk hardly noticed their antics, but kept on his direct path toward the farmyard. Presently, however, his attention was caught by the rabbits scattering off in every direction. On the instant he was all alert for the cause. Mounting a hillock, he caught sight of a biggish shaggy-haired dog some distance down the pasture. The dog was racing this way and that as crazily, it seemed, as the rabbits, with faint little yelps of excitement and whines of disappointment. He was chasing the rabbits with all his energy; and it was evident that he was a stranger, a new-comer to the wilderness world, for he seemed to think he might hope to catch the fleet-foot creatures by merely running after them. As a matter of fact, he had just arrived that same day at the backwoods farm from the city down the river. His experience had been confined to streets and gardens and the chasing of cats, and he was daft with delight over the spacious freedom of the clearings. The skunk eyed him scornfully, and continued his journey with the unconcern of an elephant.

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A moment later the dog was aware of a little, insignificant black-and-white creature coming slowly towards him as if unconscious of his presence. Another rabbit! But as this one did not seem alarmed, he stopped and eyed it with surprise, his head cocked to one side in inquiry. The skunk half turned and moved off slowly, deliberately, at right angles to the path he had been

following.

With a yelp of delight the dog dashed at this easy victim, which seemed so stupid that it made no effort to escape. He was almost upon it. Another leap and he would have had it in his jaws. But the amazing little animal turned its back on him, stuck its tail straight in the air, and jerked up its hindquarters with a derisive gesture. In that instant something hot and soft struck the inexperienced hunter full in the face—something soft, indeed, but overwhelming, paralyzing. It stopped him dead in his tracks. Suffocating, intolerably pungent, it both blinded him and choked him. His lungs refused to work, shutting up spasmodically. Gaspng and gagging, he grovelled on his belly and strove frantically to paw his mouth and nostrils clear of the dense, viscous fluid which was clogging them. Failing in this, he fell to rooting violently in the short grass, biting and tearing at it and rolling in it, till some measure of breath and eyesight returned to him. Thereupon, his matted head all stuck with grass and moss and dirt, he set off racing madly for the farm-house, where he expected to get relief from the strange torment which afflicted him. But when he pawed and whined at the kitchen door for admittance, he was driven off with contumely and broomsticks. There was nothing for him to do but slink away with his shame to a secluded corner between the wagon-shed and the pig-pen, where he could soothe his burning muzzle in the cool winds and fresh earth. On the following day one of the farm hands, with rude hands and unsympathetic comment, scrubbed him violently with liquid soap and then clipped close his splendid shaggy coat. But it was a week before he was readmitted to the comfortable fellowship of the farmhouse kitchen.

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For a moment or two, with a glance of triumph in his bright eyes, the skunk had watched the paroxysms of his discomfited foe. Then, dropping the tip of his tail into its customary disdainful arch, he had turned back towards his burrow. This was a redoubtable foe whom he had just put to rout, and he had expended most of his armoury upon him. He had no wish to risk another encounter until the potent secretion which he carried in a sac between the powerful muscles of his thighs should have had time to accumulate again. He dropped, for that night, all notion of the distinctly adventurous expedition to the farmyard, contenting himself with snapping up a few beetles and crickets as he went. He was lucky enough to pounce upon an indiscreet field-mouse just as she emerged from her burrow, and then a few minutes' digging with his powerful and expert fore-212paws had served to unearth the mouse's nest with her half-dozen tiny blind sucklings. So he went home well satisfied with himself. Before re-entering he again made a careful toilet; and as the opening of the sac from which he had projected the potent fluid into his enemy's face had immediately closed up tight and fast, he carried no trace of the virulent odour with him. Indeed, that fluid was a thing which he never by any chance allowed to get on to his own fur. Always, at the moment of ejecting it, the fur on his thighs parted and lay back flat to either side of the naked vent of the sac, and the long tail cocked itself up rigidly, well out of the way. It was a stuff he kept strictly for his foes, and never allowed to offend either himself or his friends.

On entering his burrow he found there his mate and all the youngsters, curled up together in the sleep of good digestion and easy conscience. He curled himself up with them, that the supply of his high-explosive might accumulate during another forty

winks.

About an hour before the dawn he awoke again, feeling hungry. The rest of the family were still sleeping, having gorged themselves, as he might have done had it not been for that encounter with the misguided dog. He left them
whimpering contentedly in their cosy slumber, and crept
forth into the dewy chill alone, his heart set on mice and such-
like warm-blooded game.

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The moon was now high overhead, sailing honey-coloured through a faintly violet sky. The rough pasture, with its stumps and hillocks, was touched into a land of dream.

Now, it chanced that an old bear, who was accustomed to foraging in the valley beyond the cedar swamp, had on this night decided to bring her cub on an expedition toward the more dangerous neighbourhood of the clearings. She wanted to begin his education in all the wariness which is so necessary for the creatures of the wild in approaching the works and haunts of man. On reaching the leafy fringe of bushes which fringed the rude rail-fence dividing the forest from the pasture, she cautiously poked her head through the leafage, and for perhaps a minute, motionless as a stone, she interrogated the bright open spaces with eyes and ears and nostrils. The cub, taking the cue from his mother, stiffened to the like movelessness at her side, his bright little eyes full of interest and curiosity. There was no sign of danger in the pasture. In fact, there were the merry rabbits hopping about in the moonlight undisturbed. This
was a sign of security quite good enough for the wise old
bear. With crafty and experienced paws she forced a hole in the fence—leaving the top rail, above the binder, in its place—and

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led the eager cub forth into the moonlight.

The special notion of the bear in coming to the pasture was to teach her cub the art of finding, unearthing, and catching the toothsome wild mice. Keeping along near the fence, she sniffed the tussocky, uneven grass with practised nose. But the first thing she came upon was a bumble-bees' nest. This was far more to her taste than any mice. She gave a low call to the cub; but the cub was preoccupied now, sniffing at the rabbit tracks, and lifting himself on his hindquarters to stare longingly at the rabbits, who were hopping off to discreeter distance. The mother did not insist on his coming to watch her tackle the bees' nest. After all, he was perhaps a bit young to face the stings of the angry bees, and she might as well have the little hoard of honey and larvæ and bee-bread for herself. The cub wandered off a little way, with some vague notion of chasing the elusive rabbits.

Just then through the edge of the underbrush appeared the skunk, stretching himself luxuriously before he started off across the pasture. He saw the bear, but he knew that sagacious 215 beast would pay him no attention whatever. He trotted out into the moonlight and pounced upon a fat black cricket as an appetizer.

The cub caught sight of the pretty little striped creature, and came darting clumsily and gaily to the attack. He would show his mother that he could do some hunting on his own account. The striped creature turned its back on him and moved off slowly. The cub was delighted. He was just going to reach out a rude little paw and grab the easy prize. Then the inevitable happened. The pretty striped creature gave its stern a

contemptuous jerk, and the deluded cub fell in a heap, squealing, gasping, choking, and pawing convulsively at the horrible sticky stuff which filled his mouth and eyes.

Just before the catastrophe occurred, the old bear had looked up from her business with the bees, and had uttered a loud *woof* of warning. But too late. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was to try any fooling with a skunk. But now her rage at the suffering and discomfiture of her little one swept away all prudence. With a grunt of fury she charged at the offender. One glance at the approaching vengeance convinced the skunk that this time he had made a mistake. He turned and raced for the underbrush as fast as his little legs would carry him. But that was not fast enough. Just as he was about to dart under the fence, a huge black paw, shod with claws like steel, crashed down upon him, and his leisurely career came to an end.

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The bear, in deep disgust, scraped her reeking paw long and earnestly in the fresh earth beneath the grass, then turned her attention to the unhappy cub. She relieved her feelings by giving him a sharp cuff which sent him sprawling a dozen feet. Then, relenting, she showed him how to clean himself by rooting in the earth. At length, when he could see and breathe once more with some degree of comfort, she indignantly led him away back into the depths of the consoling forest.

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[The end of *Jim: the story of a backwoods police dog* by Charles George Douglas Roberts]