THE SILVER STRAIN

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Title: The Silver Strain
Date of first publication: 1946
Author: Kathrene Pinkerton (1887-1967)
Date first posted: May 9, 2026
Date last updated: May 9, 2026
Faded Page eBook #20260509

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FOX ISLAND
WINDIGO

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THE *SILVER* STRAIN

NEW YORK
HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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ONE

EARLY morning activity in the big log house didn't waken Ann, although she had intended to surprise the family by joining them at breakfast. Usually she slept late on the first day of vacation, for even college eight o'clocks were not sufficient training for the hours kept on a fur farm in the Canadian wilderness. Her mother had told her to sleep late, since it was long past midnight when they reached Fox Island after the motorboat trip from the railroad.

It had been a strange homecoming, not at all the usual noisy Jackman family reunion. Ann had thought how different it was as she fell asleep. One reason had been the hour of her arrival. A midnight transcontinental train had halted beside the tiny station where not even an Indian hunter remained awake to share in the excitement of its arrival. The Hudson's Bay Post across the tracks was only a dim shadow against the black pine forest. A sleepy stationmaster with a lantern helped her father carry the trunk and bags to the landing and stow them in the motorboat and the Jackmans set out in the darkness. No one tried to talk against the noisy staccato of the motor. From Ann's seat amidships her father was a dim silhouette in the stern and only the red glow of his pipe gave her a sense of nearness.

She had missed Philip too. Close as she was to her younger brother, she had not quite realized the hole his absence would make. She had expected him to be home. His high school had closed before she even began to write June exams. Eagerness to see Philip and hear of his first year in school "outside" was one of the reasons she had refused to stop for even a short visit with Rita Trainor and her family, but now she discovered he had sent a laconic telegram not to expect him for another week. She had read the wire by the light of the stationmaster's lantern before they started for Fox Island.

"Philip doesn't even say what he's doing!" Ann exclaimed.

"Philip wouldn't," her father said, "but you can be sure he's got a good reason. All spring his letters have been filled with nothing but how anxious he is to get back here to Far Lake."

"Then what do you think is keeping him? Dad! Do you suppose it's a girl?"

"It didn't sound like a girl," her father chuckled. "He wrote us to send his mail care of Professor Robert Mears." He arranged the bags in the motorboat and threw a canvas over the luggage to keep off the spray. Ann knew he was amused by her question. "Philip's pretty young for romance," he said. "You both are, for that matter."

As the boat traveled up the lake in velvet darkness, Ann smiled. Too young for romance! Had her father forgotten her mother was just Ann's age, eighteen, when he had paddled into a town, met the new school teacher, and never since looked twice at another girl? He'd have laughed then had anyone tried to tell him eighteen was too young for romance.

Philip might be young, but he'd always seemed five years older than his real age. And as for a professor's address! Didn't professors have daughters? Of course it was a girl! And even if it were, that didn't necessarily spell romance. There was a difference between romance and that first awareness of another. But the awareness could be disturbing, and it had to be explored.

Ann knew the urgency of having to see someone again. There was no romance between her and Steven Dorland, but he was an exciting possibility. She might not have been so high minded about rushing home had she not known Steven was still east with college friends. And she had known too she would see him the coming August at Rita's house party at Emerald Lake. She had noticed Steven made sure she was coming before he definitely accepted Rita's invitation. Ann had observed this, and been pleased.

Steven's interest in her had been a reassurance. She had met him in Easter vacation when Jerry Sloane brought him home from college. Jerry lived in Chicago and Rita's family, who had spent the winter in one of the big hotels on the North Shore, had invited Ann for the Easter holidays. She had looked forward to the visit, and had dreaded it too. Both Jerry and Rita knew the north and loved it, but Ann wished they wouldn't insist on telling everyone what an adventurous and romantic life she led, how she grew up with Indians, spoke Ojibwa, drove a dog team, took long canoe trips through the wilderness and had even helped her brother capture a dangerous criminal. People would expect her to arrive on snowshoes. There was such a thing as being too different.

Most of all she had dreaded meeting Steven Dorland. Jerry's letters had made him sound exciting, and terrifying. Steven was older. He had read books she had only heard of and he had drawn cartoons for his college paper. Already he knew what he wanted to be and was studying architecture. He could talk about music, art, or any subject apparently. How all these

accomplishments had left him time to be "one of the most popular fellows on the campus" was a mystery.

Certainly any man of that wide experience would see no glamor in being able to drive a dog team, but astonishingly he had. Steven's instant admiration had made the whole week in Chicago breathlessly exciting. How much else it might mean, she wasn't sure, but she was looking forward to Emerald Lake in August. She could imagine Steven, wearing immaculate whites, on a sailboat or sunning on the beach at swimming parties, poised and sure at the hotel dances.

The motorboat entered the narrows where the near-by shores, returning the sound of the exhaust in a quick, sharp echo, brought Ann's thoughts back to the north. She had always loved the narrow passage which connected the two great traverses of Far Lake. In the blackness the two dark lines of trees drew close. There was no moon, but the northern night sky threw a silvery gleam on the black waters and made the bow wave a silver furrow.

"The narrows means we're almost home," her mother said above the noise of the motor.

Ann smiled and nodded. The narrows had always meant home just ahead, meant it in all seasons and at all hours. In a canoe she had listened to the gurgle of swift current against granite rocks and known that another spurt would take them across the last wide stretch and end the strain of tired muscles. In a blizzard which turned Far Lake into a world of driving white, she and Philip had once made a landfall in the dim outline of the steep-sided shores. And one moonlit January night they walked slowly in front of the team to prolong the magic of the narrows. Moonlight had glistened on wind-carved drifts and snow-laden branches to make a way of diamonds. The beauty of the night was unforgettable. The narrows held almost as many memories for Ann as did Fox Island.

Soon the boat swung toward Fox Island and a lantern waved at the landing. Hugh, the old trapper who had lived with the Jackmans so long he was one of them, had come down to meet her. When the boat touched the float, Ann leaped out and threw her arms around him.

"Hughie!" she cried. "It's so good to see you!"

"Not half as good as to see you," he said. "But where's Philip?"

"He wired he'd not be here for another week."

"So? What's keeping him?"

"He didn't say."

"Well, I'm glad one of you is through with outside schoolin' for a while."

Ann laughed. Hugh didn't hold with outside schooling any more than he held with fur farms or railroads, which meant he admired all three in secret.

Hugh helped Mr. Jackman carry Ann's trunk into the boathouse. "Suppose you can do without your city outfit until morning," he said. "It'll be easier for Dave and me to carry this up in daylight."

They followed Hugh up the path from the lake, walking single file. In the light of the swinging lantern Hugh's legs cast long grotesque shadows on the clearing beside the path. When they neared the house atop the slope, the dogs barked in the corral. Ann caught a note of joy and welcome in Ogema's deep voice and hesitated on the veranda, thinking she should go out to greet him. Then Hugh threw open the front door and Ann gasped with delight. A fire blazed in the great stone fireplace at the end of the big log room. On the mantel and in a high pewter candelabra on the table were freshly lighted candles.

"Hugh!" she cried. "You lit the candles when you heard the boat."

Hugh grinned. "Took a bit of hustlin'. But you always said the brown log walls look sort of pretty without the big lamp blazing away overhead."

Ann walked to the fireplace. On each return the great, two-storied room seemed more beautiful. She loved the big timbered roof and the balcony running the full length to lead to the bedrooms above. And it was wonderful to be home again. She wanted to sit before the fire and talk for hours. Hugh started up the staircase with a bag and her father followed with another. Before Ann realized the ceremony of homecoming was over, all were standing on the balcony before their bedroom doors. Hugh put Ann's bag in her room and started downstairs. He was almost across the living room on the way to his own quarters when Ann called good night over the railing.

"And thank you for waiting up to see me," she added.

Hugh smiled up at her, but his voice was gruff. "You didn't suppose I'd let you come home without waiting up," he said, and the front door closed behind him.

Her father kissed her. "See you in the morning," he said.

"But aren't we going to sit up and talk?" Ann demanded. "We always do. I thought—"

She stopped, embarrassed. She had sounded like a disappointed child, but it wasn't like the Jackmans to overlook an occasion because of the lateness of the hour. One of their finest celebrations had begun after midnight and she had never forgotten that exciting night when her mother made a pot of chocolate, cut a new cake and all five of them had talked until dawn. It was the time they'd had the incredible good fortune to dig silver foxes from a den. The pair, Pride and Princess of Fox Island, were still their proudest possession, but that night it had been a momentous matter to decide to spend the slender savings for hers and Philip's education in starting such an untried venture as a fur farm. Now time had proved them right. Pride and Princess and their descendants were the mainstay of the fur farm.

"We've hardly said six words to each other," Ann said a bit lamely. "And I've got a lot to tell you."

"We couldn't even hope to catch up at this hour," her mother said. "Morning will be here before we know it."

Later, as Ann undressed, she was conscious of disappointment and a strange disquiet. She told herself there was no reason for it. Everyone was well. Philip would be home in a week. It must be her imagination. Yet she recalled a new note of gravity in her mother's recent letters, a difference she had scarcely noticed at the time, and tonight in the boat she had caught an impression of despondency in the set of her father's shoulders. It had been so fleeting, and despondency was so unlike him, she'd been barely conscious of it.

A knock sounded on her door and her mother entered with a tray and two cups of hot chocolate.

"It was cold on the lake," she said. "Thought this would make us sleep."

Ann drank the chocolate sitting up in bed. "I knew you'd break down and come in for a talk," she said.

"Not at this hour," Mrs. Jackman said.

Ann studied her mother's face and found nothing to confirm her fears. The smile was quick and warm; her eyes glowed as always. She looked like a girl, Ann thought, with her dark wavy hair in two braids on her shoulders. They finished the chocolate quickly. Mrs. Jackman turned out the lamp and stopped to kiss Ann.

"Try to sleep in the morning," she said. "It's wonderful to have you home, daughter."

In the darkness Ann thought of how rarely her mother called her "daughter"—never unless deeply moved. And there had been a note of gravity, almost of sadness. She was certain of it. Something had happened which they dreaded telling her. In the morning she would ask them. She'd be up for breakfast.

But muffled sounds in the kitchen did not waken her, which was exactly as her mother intended. Ann stirred restlessly only when the whitethroat began to sing his heart out in the birch tree near the lake, where he always sang of a June morning. She opened her eyes, listened, and then suddenly awake, she threw off the blankets and rushed to the window.

The joyousness of a northern June morning always overcame her with fresh surprise. In May all growing things wakened, stretched and gave promise of summer, but in June, almost without warning, a whole new world was in the making. Every bud, every branch, even the tiniest grasses thrust out with new and lusty vigor. One could see and hear and even feel new life crowding forward. It was then the whitethroat sang his special song, not the plaintive lament which pierced the long northern twilights with poignant sweetness, but a celebration of the season.

Ann couldn't see the whitethroat hidden in his birch tree. But as he sang a morning breeze set the young leaves to quivering on their long slender stems until the birch itself was a magic thing of spinning tender green. Grass grew beneath the birch and covered the clearing. Brush crowded out from the surrounding forest to reclaim open spaces and new rushes lifted from the water at the head of the bay. Little cat's-paws speckled the blueness of Far Lake with dancing jewels.

Ann drank in the sights and sounds as she had so many mornings from that same window. The joyousness, the freshness, the aliveness of the morning made an absurdity of her misgivings of the night before. Nothing had changed. It was beautiful. It was perfect. She could laugh at herself for ever imagining anything was different. An outrageously late hour, weary people, the darkness of the lake, and she had conjured up a specter of disaster.

She watched Hugh and her father come up the path from the lake carrying her trunk and leaned out the window to call good morning. They nodded and waved and her father said he was getting hungry for his second breakfast. There was nothing despondent in his voice or the set of his shoulders. Even Hugh looked no different than the day he had stopped at their first cabin, stayed for dinner, and then remained to cut a "little jag of

wood." As a youngster she had thought Hugh old, but now he seemed no older. His hair was no grayer and his sparse frame moved with the same vigor. Her father had always said Hugh was made of seasoned hickory.

She heard the thud of the trunk set down in the living room and she began to dress, found her favorite breeches hanging in the closet. Woods clothes seemed good. She pulled on heavy woolen socks to protect her ankles from mosquitoes and slipped into shoepacks. Her feet were eager for the feel of earth.

She knotted a gay handkerchief about her neck as a festive touch for the reunion breakfast. Her slender figure moved quickly, but with an air of quiet certainty. Her hair was her most memorable feature—a glistening golden, and each hair seemed surcharged with energy. Even the waves were not regular but cropped up where they pleased and years of training had not disciplined them. Her hair might have suggested an unpredictable and wayward nature had it not been for her eyes. They were blue, held laughter and understanding.

She was just finishing dressing when she heard Hugh outside her door. He asked if she'd like her trunk brought upstairs.

"Of course not, Hugh," she said as she opened the door. "It's much too heavy. I'll unpack in the living room."

"When you're through unpacking, I'll carry the empty luggage to the storehouse. Saved a little corner for your stuff."

Ann knew Hugh's little corners. "Don't build too high a barricade in front of it," she said. "I'll need bags in August."

"Going away?"

"Rita's invited me to Emerald Lake. Isn't that wonderful? She's asked Philip too. And Jerry Sloane. Wants everyone who was at our Christmas house party. Of course a summer home in a resort like that is old stuff to Jerry, but Philip and I have never seen it. There's a big hotel, practically next door to Rita's, where they have dances. And everyone has a sailboat and a tennis court."

Hugh nodded. "I went through that country once. Shore was lined with high-toned houses. Almost as thick as Indian wigwams at blueberry dances."

"Rita will love that when I tell her," Ann said. "But don't say it to Philip. You'll have to help me talk him into going."

"Will Jerry go?"

"He didn't promise, but I know he will if Philip does."

"Bet Jerry'd rather come up here."

"Of course he would. But Emerald Lake will be new to Philip. I told Rita she could count on you to make him go."

"I don't know any girl I'd do more for—next to you."

"And you're prejudiced about me."

"Might be at that," he said. He started toward the stairs, then turned quickly. "Told your folks about going?" he asked.

"How could I? All of you scuttled off to bed like frightened rabbits." She stopped, then said, "Why did you ask me?"

"Rabbits don't scuttle," Hugh said. "Least none I ever—"

"You can't change the subject, Hugh. You must have had a reason. You've never asked a useless question in your life." Her voice had risen in quick uneasiness. Hugh knew as well as she how delighted her mother and father would be about the invitation, so that couldn't be his reason. Even to ask it wasn't like him, for Hugh hated anything that smacked of interfering. "Tell me, Hugh," she said. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't speak about it?"

Hugh hesitated and his eyes avoided hers.

"Well," he began at last. "It's sort of this way. Dave and the Missus ain't been thinking much beyond your coming. And—and—maybe it would be better if you waited a bit before you told them. You'll see how it is when you get to talking to 'em."

He went down the stairs and Ann knew by his abrupt departure he had told all he would say. He would never have said that much unless it had been important, and suddenly everything fitted together, the letters, her mother's tone, her father's dejected shoulders. Her misgivings had been justified. It was time she investigated.

In the kitchen Ann's mother called a greeting above the noise of a whirring egg beater. She lifted the beater from a bowl of foaming, creamy batter, struck it lightly to snap off the drops. "Just in time," she said. "The popovers are ready for the oven."

Ann poured the mixture into smoking hot muffin tins. "Why did you bother with these today?" she asked.

"I promised your father and Hugh they'd have popovers for their second breakfast. Besides, we have to do something with the eggs. Every hen on the place is laying."

"And every bud and every green thing is working overtime," Ann said. "I could hear them growing from my window. Isn't it wonderful and exciting?" She watched her mother's face. All that exuberance should bring out a denial, but her mother's expression did not change, even when Ann said, "Is there anything more perfect than an early morning in June?"

"Nothing," her mother said. "Except another early morning in June."

Mrs. Jackman drained the broiled bacon on a piece of paper, filled a dish with highbrush cranberry jam and told Ann to call the men. The big walnut table in the living room had been set for a gala breakfast with the old silver, best china and the pewter coffee service. Ann found herself being defeated by festivity, walled off from their real thoughts by determined gayety. She couldn't break through the barrier with questions about Fox Island. The merest pause in the conversation was filled immediately with a question about college or her trip home. Yet she noticed new lines of strain in her father's face. When she saw him staring at his plate in somber preoccupation, she broke off in the middle of her story.

"Dad hasn't heard a word I said for the last five minutes!" she burst out. "Why don't you people tell—"

"I heard every word," he said. "You were talking about a woman in the diner last night who couldn't believe you really had handled live silver foxes."

"Did she believe it after she called her husband and made you tell the story of the farm all over again?" her mother asked.

"No. He was sure I'd made it up," Ann said. "He was funnier than she was. No one could tell him anything about the north. He'd taken a canoe trip with two guides and—"

"I know the sort of trip," Hugh said. "The guides sit around the campfire and see who can tell the biggest yarn. It's a lot easier on the muscles than paddlin' and packin'. Done it myself. And pretty soon the sport gets so gun shy on nature lore he wouldn't believe in an animal he saw sitting on the trail in front of him."

Even Hugh had begun the game of making conversation. Ann felt as though she were treading water. Suddenly she leaned forward and stared around the table.

"You've all been wonderful," she said. "I love you for it. You've worked so hard at being gay and cheerful and making my homecoming happy. Now it's time to tell me what has happened."

Hugh looked at her father and Ann was sure she saw a little smile of triumph in the old trapper's eyes. "It's no use, Dave," he said. "I told you Ann wouldn't be here an hour before she'd guess. It's time we let her know the fur farm has started downhill on a toboggan, and is going fast."

TWO

In the silence which followed Hugh's speech, Ann tried to make the words seem real. In the first days of the fur farm when so much had depended on the slender hope of making a success of an untried project, she would have been quick to sense disaster. Then even to keep wild foxes and mink alive had seemed miraculous. There had been days of panic, of despair and of elation. Everything the Jackmans had come north to win—a home in the wilderness, a livelihood and a future—had hung on the enterprise.

Now two years of steady growth had lulled Ann's fears and for a moment Hugh's words held no meaning. She looked at her mother for confirmation.

"Things have been going badly since midwinter," Mrs. Jackman said. "Your father has been worried."

"And you never told me!" Ann cried.

"No sense in writing bad news," Dave Jackman said. "And we didn't want it to hit you the minute you came home."

"But last night I knew something was wrong."

Dave Jackman looked across the table at his wife. "Guess we're not good actors, Mary," he said.

"What has happened?" Ann demanded.

"A lot of things," he said as he filled his pipe. "I'll begin at the beginning so you can understand it better. Last November when we pelted, Hugh and I were worried. Mink pelts were selling low, even wild mink, and buyers had been saying ranch mink would never be any good. It's a new idea and they don't believe good fur can be grown inside a pen. I knew our mink might not bring much so I sent along a few silver fox pelts. Not our best ones. Fact is, the ones I pelted hadn't furred out the way I'd hoped. But I expected we'd get enough out of them to see us through a year."

"Why didn't you tell Philip and me when we were home Christmas?" Ann asked.

"No use squealing before you're hurt, and there was always the chance that by fur auction time things would be better."

"Were they?"

"If anything, they were worse."

"Dad! Why didn't you write us then? We'd have come home at Easter. I didn't have to go to Chicago. I wouldn't have enjoyed one minute of the visit if I'd known."

"Your mother and I decided not to tell you. A trip like that was part of outside schooling. You had a good time, didn't you?"

"The most exciting time I ever had. Rita and her family were wonderful. So were Jerry and his father. Parties, theaters and restaurants—it was marvelous. Just as I wrote you."

"Then you're ahead one good time anyway," her father said. "And at Easter Hugh and your mother and I were pretty busy. Didn't have time to miss you."

"What happened then?" Ann's voice sharpened.

"I don't really know. Hugh and I had boiled the rabbits and frozen them just as we always did. You know we've never been careless about the feed."

"Of course you haven't!" Ann cried. "A lot of babies don't have the care you give those foxes."

"But something was wrong. Every fox on the place was sick."

"Did you lose any?"

"More than I care to think about. But losing them wasn't the worst part. It was not knowing why we lost them. When anything is as important in a business as those foxes, a man can't afford not to know his mistakes."

"And you're not used to making them," Ann said, with a smile.

"Probably made plenty and didn't know it. That's the worst sort of good luck. Everything was sailing along in such fine shape I'd begun to think I knew fox farming. Only I didn't. Probably no one else does. It's less than ten years since fox farming really started. At least no one thought it could be done until the Prince Edward Island Companies sent those seventy-five pelts to London in 1910. And probably Dalton and his partners don't know how many mistakes they made in all the years they were experimenting."

"They certainly must have lost foxes," Mrs. Jackman said.

"Sure they did! But they won out. They had big enough herds to take losses. We haven't. We started on a shoestring. Main strength and

awkwardness got us this far."

"It's a lot farther than where we began," Ann said. "And we still have Pride and Princess. Even Hugh says there isn't a better pair in Canada."

Dave Jackman glanced swiftly at his wife. Ann's heart sank.

"We *have* Pride and Princess, haven't we?" she asked.

"We did have until a month ago," Dave Jackman said.

"Dad! You don't mean—Oh!"

Her voice ended in a gasp. Tears came to her eyes. The lovely Pride and Princess gone, and she knew from the faces of the others they were gone. No wonder they couldn't bear to tell her. She knew what the loss had meant to her father, and to Hugh, who had worshiped their patrician beauty. There wasn't anything she could say to make such a blow more bearable.

"I'm so sorry," she said, and her voice broke. "Sorry for them, but so much sorrier for you."

"It was hard to take." Her father's tone was gruff. "It was harder because it was partly my fault."

"Dave! You mustn't say that!" Mary Jackman cried. "In the daytime you practically lived beside their pen. Why should you spend the nights there?"

"As for that, if anyone was to make night inspections, it was my job," Hugh said.

"Were they sick?" Ann asked.

"They were never in better shape," her father said. "I was watching them so close because after we had lost the others I didn't want anything to happen to her pups. They'd be born any day. And you know how restless Princess always got just before her pups came. After all, she was a wild fox. Perhaps she never really got accustomed to a pen."

"Yes," and Ann's voice was urgent. She had to know the worst at once. She felt drawn out tautly like a thin rubber band.

"To make it short, we lost them in a cave-in. We'd had an early warm spell and the ground was soft from draining snow water. One night they dug deep enough so the earth fell in and caught them. They must have suffocated. We found them in the morning." His tone was terse, and then he burst out, "That pair belonged to all of us! I should have been down there to save them."

"You're wrong there, Dave," Hugh said. "It was just bad luck shooting with both barrels."

"Have you told it all?" Ann asked in a tight voice.

"Not quite," her father said. "The other vixens had their pups by late May, but for the first time on Fox Island we've got cross foxes. There are a few silver pups in the litters, but enough cross foxes to make our dream of building a silver fox ranch just a joke."

Ann stared at him. Until then his tone had not been bitter, but she knew this bitterness now was for himself. And it was understandable. Somehow, somewhere, they had made a dreadful mistake. What had happened to the royal silver strain? A cross fox was a commoner, interesting and pretty, with a distinct cross on the shoulders and a mixture of black and red, but he was not rare, or highly prized. He held no promise of a fortune.

For a moment she sat thinking how many years of effort had been directed toward the dazzling goal of a silver fox farm. Fur farming had been the reason for their coming to the wilderness. The fantastic rise of the silver fox industry had fired her with determination to find a wild silver fox for her father. It had been luck that she had seen one. Incredible luck. Many men had spent a lifetime in the north without even catching a glimpse of a silver fox. And perhaps it had been luck too that they had succeeded in digging the family from its den and had kept it alive afterwards. Then she had not thought so, nor had the others. They had tried to hide their pride in the achievement and it was only Philip who had dreamed openly of the day when Jackman silver foxes would be as famous as those of Prince Edward Island.

Now Philip must hear of this disaster as she had heard it. It would be much harder for him. All his plans and all his hopes had been bound up in the fox farm. Her father began speaking.

"Don't ask me the reason for those cross foxes. Perhaps we should never have kept that red fox in the first litter. But other breeders, men I wrote to, said the red fox had inherited the silver strain and he could be the father of silvers. Besides we needed every fox we'd found." He hesitated. "I've always thought sometime we'd buy stock, get fresh blood into our strain, but so far I've never been able to see my way clear to spend the money. We had to build our herd the way we've lived—the slow way—making what we had do."

"Because Philip and I were away at school," Ann said.

"Hold on there!" Her father sat up alertly. "Let's get this straight right now. I remember the night we talked it over. You and Philip insisted we should spend your school fund getting started on the fur farm. That was an investment. You two have been getting your return."

"Sure," Hugh said. "All four of you went in together. Philip was boastin' that once you got the silver fox farm going, none of you would ever have to worry about money."

"Wasn't he the happiest, most excited boy you ever saw that night," Mrs. Jackman said, and then she stopped.

"And all that crazy planning was my fault, Mary," her husband added. "I should have known better than to tackle a new game. Hugh had more sense. Remember how he used to laugh about people who mortgaged houses to start silver fox farms? I did better than that. I let all of you sink three years' work in a bust. Now—at least the dizzy ride is over."

He rose from the table. Ann sprang to her feet and faced him.

"We aren't giving up the fox farm, are we?" she demanded. She looked at her mother. "You're not going to let him do that, are you, Mother?"

"Your father says he can go back into the forest service," her mother said. "You remember, Ann, when he was with them in Minnesota, and he had to be away from home for months."

"Whatever happens, I won't risk the welfare of this family in a business where I can't even recognize my own mistakes," Dave Jackman said. "That's decided."

"But, Dave, how can we decide anything about the fur farm until Philip gets here?" his wife asked.

Hugh chuckled. "I've been wonderin' when one of you'd see that. First time I ever heard of a company meeting with an important partner missin'."

Ann went for a walk and she was glad no one offered to go with her. She wanted to be alone and turned toward the fur farm end of the island. On the way she stopped at the dog corral. At least there had been no canine tragedies. The team knew she had come and had been waiting for her. The dogs went mad with joy as she slipped the catch on the gate and stepped inside. She patted them, and called each by name. Ogema would always be her favorite. She had been afraid lest she would find him older, but apparently he was as ageless, or as durable, as Hugh. Ogema had a few new

white hairs on his black muzzle, but he was still deep chested and his flanks were firm.

She left the corral and crossed the narrow neck of land which connected the two ends of the island. The fur farm end was even larger than that on which the house stood. Once she and Philip had paced it, trying to estimate its size. Philip said it would hold enough pens for the farm of the future, and then he had added, "We could even spread to the mainland. Big as we'd be then, we'd have a lot of men working for us. We'd put their houses on the mainland to be near the foxes."

Now there wasn't any chance of the fur farm ever overflowing to the mainland.

Ann skirted the pens where mother vixens were housed with nursing families. Cross fox babies would be cunning, but she was in no mood for them today—not baby foxes which had brought such a bitter end to high hopes. She walked past the long line to the pen of Pride and Princess. She was glad to see it held no new inmates. She sat down. Until now she had been too numbed by the story of the disastrous months to realize how dreadfully she would miss the pair. They had been more than lovely foxes. They had been a symbol.

She did not know how long she'd sat there when she saw Hugh walking toward the shed where the fur farm food was cooked. She called to him.

"Thought maybe you wanted to be alone," he said as he sat down beside her.

"Not any more. That's over." She smiled at him.

"Pretty big dose to take all at once."

"I expected bad news after what you said this morning. And, Hugh! I'm so glad you warned me. I might have rushed downstairs and told them about Emerald Lake. Now I'll never tell them."

"Feel bad about not going?"

"I never thought about August from breakfast until this minute. That's how much it meant to me."

He looked relieved. "Now Jerry'll come up here," he said.

Jerry would, but Steven Dorland wouldn't. He liked sailboats, hotel dances, sunning parties on the beach. And then she flushed. It was dreadful even to be thinking about not seeing Steven when her family was in trouble.

"Will we have to give up the fur farm?" she asked.

"No use trying to decide while Dave's so bothered. He's been brooding till he doesn't know what's best to do."

"But we could go on. We have some silver foxes and they wouldn't cost much to feed—at least they don't cost money. Of course, there's our living, and—" She stopped.

"If you're thinking of my wages, I'm not taking any from now on. Told Dave to skip them."

"But he couldn't!"

"That's between Dave and me." Hugh's voice was curt. "As long as he isn't being mean about it, why should you be?"

"Mean!"

"Sure, it's mean to keep favors going all one way. I've been taking things from the Jackmans ever since the day I stopped by. A home, a family, folks I care about and who care about me—but I never chalked up the score. I just kept on taking. Being family together ain't like a river with the current running one way. Things have to go both ways." Hugh arose. Emotion showed rarely and always made him shy. "Got to go cook fish for the mink," he said. "No matter what happens, critters must be fed."

"You don't like mink ranching, do you?" Ann said as they walked toward the long mink house.

"Never said I did. The prices we got last winter shows fur buyers don't like ranch mink either. A fellow could get hisself a good mink line and make more money trapping, and with less bother. Besides," he stopped and smiled at her, "mink ain't showy like the silvers. You know how it is. You feel the same as I do." Ann nodded. "Don't make sense, but it's sort of like you feel about people. Some folks are all right, nothing really wrong with 'em, but you can't get stirred up about 'em. And others—well, they're all sparkle and full of bounce. Makes you happy to be around 'em and, right or wrong, you've got to throw in with 'em."

He stopped. He had revealed more than he had in all the years she'd known him. He must have been aware of it for he abruptly changed the subject.

"Net was crammed with fish this morning. Left a couple at the house. How long is it since you had whitefish fresh from icy water?"

"Too long," Ann said. "And I haven't had wild strawberry shortcake since last June. Is there a good crop?"

"Finest I ever saw. You'd better wear a head net."

Ann stopped at the house to get a net and a birchbark basket and went to the edge of the clearing. Mosquitoes rose from the tall grass in ravenous swarms but the berries were ripe and juicy and as large as Ann's finger nail. The sweetness was that of distilled sunshine. She ate a great many, but she carried an overflowing basket to the kitchen.

Her mother's eyes lighted. "Is there anything better than wild strawberries on hot rich biscuit?" She was already reaching for a yellow bowl. "There's been no one who's had the courage to fight mosquitoes for them."

At dinner no one spoke of the fur farm, unless her father's comment on the shortcake was a reference to disaster.

"Wild strawberries!" he exclaimed. "And after whitefish that jumped from net to frying pan. At least we eat in splendor."

In the next few days everyone avoided mention of silver foxes. Once when they were alone, Ann asked her mother what she really thought about giving up the fur farm.

"I've told you how I feel," her mother said. "We have no right to decide anything before Philip gets here. The silver foxes meant more to him than to any of us."

"I believe they did!" Ann was startled to think she hadn't realized it. "Yet he didn't talk about them as much as I did."

"Philip never talks about things which really count with him."

Ann nodded. Those two understood each other. In so many ways they were alike.

Every day they expected a telegram from Philip. They knew Alec Gillespie, manager of the Hudson's Bay Post, would make sure they received it promptly. Occasionally he sent an Indian by canoe, but usually he delivered a message himself in the Company motorboat. Sometimes he made an unusually heavy mailsack the excuse for a chat with his neighbors. Visiting between the post and Fox Island had become a habit and never before had Ann been home so long without seeing him. She missed him.

She had been so sure he would come she had hurried to write to Rita on her first day home, so that he could take the letter. She hadn't told Rita the real reason why they wouldn't visit Emerald Lake in August. Ann didn't want Rita feeling sorry for her, and Rita had loved and admired the silver foxes. The richness of their beauty had appealed to her and had made the Jackmans' history seem even more romantic. Now Ann couldn't bear to tell the disastrous ending.

Ann had also written Steven Dorland to thank him for the corsage which had arrived on the last day at college. That note had taken a long time to write. She wanted him to know how much it had pleased her, but not to guess that never before had she received flowers for a journey. She made three drafts before she achieved the proper blending of graciousness and sophistication. Writing a man of Steven's experience was terrifying in itself. For a year she had written long letters to Jerry, but with Jerry she never had to consider how a phrase might sound. Knowing a boy as well as she knew Jerry might not be exciting, but it did have compensations.

She sealed the letters, then removed the silver ribbon from the faded corsage and placed it beside Steven's card. His name looked well, and she ran a reverent finger across the engraving. Gifts from Jerry arrived with his name scribbled on a card. As she laid the ribbon away in a drawer she believed she would keep it always. And yet she wasn't sure of just what it would remind her. It was all still so vague, so mixed up in her own thoughts and emotions. But she couldn't help feeling a bit sad and very pensive. Perhaps never again would she meet anyone quite like Steven Dorland.

Half the week had passed and there was still no message from Philip. Mrs. Jackman began to speak of this more frequently. Ann knew her mother was becoming worried when she said it wasn't like Philip not to send any word of his arrival. And then late in the afternoon Ann and her mother were on the veranda and heard the sputter of a gas engine around the point. After half a dozen hoarse barks, the motor faltered, then stopped altogether. Ann leaped to her feet and started for the trail.

"That boat's not bringing any message from Philip," her mother said. "Alec Gillespie would never send a wire by the Morgans, and that must be the Morgans. No other boat sounds like their broken-down engine. I'm surprised they ever got this far from home."

Ann went back to the veranda and sat down. "Who are the Morgans?" she demanded. "I didn't know there was any other motorboat on Far Lake

except Mr. Gillespie's and ours."

"I'm sure I wrote about them. They came here last winter and put up ice."

"Of course!" Ann said. She did remember a letter telling about a man who intended to fish for the market. Had a camp in Deep Bay. But her mother had never mentioned them again and Ann had thought they'd gone. She'd never imagined they had neighbors only ten miles away.

Even now her mother seemed reluctant to discuss them. They intended to ship whitefish to the city, had filled an icehouse, left for a time and now had returned with nets, a tent and an aged gasboat. Ann waited for more details but her mother gave none. When Mrs. Jackman could not speak kindly of a person, she preferred to say nothing.

"Poor Mother," Ann said. "The only white woman who's ever come here had to be one you don't like."

"It isn't so simple a matter as liking," her mother said. "When you see Mrs. Morgan you'll understand. She doesn't belong here. She's a worrier. A nagger too, I think, and hasn't even the gumption to clean up the tent. It's worse than any wigwam. But I felt sorry for him, he looked so discouraged."

"And no wonder!" Ann said.

"Yet we ought to be better neighbors and go see her. But it will be a cheerless visit."

On the following day there was still no word from Philip. At the dinner table Mrs. Jackman said Alec Gillespie might not have been able to find an Indian to bring the wire. Hugh said they ought to go to town and learn what had happened. They always spoke of "town," although the settlement had only a railroad station and the Hudson's Bay Post.

They planned to go in and stay for supper at the post. Ann was in her room dressing for the visit when she heard a motorboat coming up the lake. That smooth purr could only be the Hudson's Bay boat.

Everyone had heard it. Ann and her mother ran down the path from the house as Dave Jackman hurried from the fur pens and Hugh crossed the clearing from the work shop.

"Alec is bringing the wire himself," Dave Jackman said.

"I knew he would," Mary Jackman said. "He wouldn't let us wait for it to come by canoe."

The boat rounded the point. Ann saw three passengers. An Indian boatman sat in the middle of the craft and Alec Gillespie's thickset figure was in the stern. She didn't know who was in the bow, but he waved.

"It's Philip!" her mother cried, and her voice broke. She had been more worried than she'd let them know.

Ann watched the boat swerve toward the landing. Philip was the first on the float. He turned to his mother and as he kissed her Ann noticed Philip stood inches above her head. Then he crossed the float to Ann, and as he came toward her she knew suddenly that not only was he taller, broader, but he was older. Not just six months older, but years older.

THREE

THEY walked to the house and sat on the veranda. From Philip's jubilant face, Ann guessed the post manager had not told the news of the fur farm, but she was sure the manager knew, for there was more than the usual blustery affection in his manner.

"Bless my soul, it's good to have the young 'uns home again, isn't it, Mary?" he said to Mrs. Jackman. "But it makes me realize I'm getting old. It seems only yesterday Philip was a knobby-kneed, skinny lad and Ann was all yellow hair and eyes. Wasn't she a fiery little tartar?"

"You make me sound like a terrible person," Ann said. "I'm surprised you ever invited me to the post."

"You never used up your welcome, my dear. None of the Jackmans did. It was a great day for me when you people came as neighbors."

He stood up and Dave Jackman asked why he must go.

"We'd hoped you'd stay for supper and the evening," Mary Jackman said.

"Wish I could, but I've got to be half way to Lake Caribou in time to camp. Going up Wolf Jaw River to see Po-a-gan. Poor old chap can't last out the summer and wants to see me. First time in fifteen years he hasn't been able to come to the post."

It was like the Scotch trader to take a long journey to visit an old and devoted hunter. Railroads might come to the wilderness, ancient posts become modern, but Alec Gillespie would always remain a servant of the Great Company, benevolent despot of a wide district, stern yet kind, dispensing justice with understanding and compassion.

"Then you'll be back this way tomorrow," Dave Jackman said. "Why not stop for dinner?"

The old Scotsman's eyes twinkled. "Exactly what I was leading up to. I'll be here by noon." He turned to Ann. "Can you leave Philip long enough to walk to the landing with me? I want to hear about all the young chaps whose hearts you've broken."

"Not a busted heart in my past," she said as she took his arm and started toward the lake.

She had hoped to see him alone, and hoped too he wanted to talk about the fur farm, but he didn't open the subject until they stood on the float.

He put out his hand to say good-bye. "I'm sorry, my dear, you found bad news awaiting. It must have been a shock. It was to me."

"But you didn't approve of trying to raise foxes," Ann said. "You never believed in fur farming."

"And I still don't," he said. "But I've never been sorrier to be proven right."

This was what he had wanted to say to her. She realized it as she watched the boat disappear down the lake. He had wanted her to know he was sorry. She stood on the float for a long time. The Company boat was only a tiny speck in the distance when she walked slowly up the trail. She dreaded the hour ahead. Philip's first thought would be the silver foxes.

Philip looked more natural when he came downstairs in woods clothes. A tousled black head, an old flannel shirt of bright plaid and sloppy trousers made him seem more like her younger brother. Growing up had not affected his appetite. At their early tea he devoured a plate of sandwiches and began on the cookies. He had brought his high school diploma and handed it to his mother with a show of carelessness, then had spoiled the effect by adding, "Better appreciate that. It took a lot of work at the last minute."

"But, Philip!" his mother exclaimed, the pride of his former teacher aroused. "You never had trouble with your studies."

Philip grinned and didn't answer.

As Ann watched her mother read the diploma she realized how much she must have wanted to be present at the graduation. Philip had attended Bluestone High School, because there he could live with his father's cousin, Ed Jackman, who owned a garage. Also a preparatory school had not seemed the place for Philip. He regarded boarding schools as sissy.

When Mrs. Jackman put down the diploma, Hugh picked it up and read it through very slowly. "I can frame it for you," he said. "Saved a piece of window glass that'll fit."

Philip shrugged, but he looked pleased.

While Mrs. Jackman was in the kitchen replenishing the tea pot and Hugh and her father were talking, Ann asked if the professor's daughter was pretty.

"She would have been if the Mears had a daughter," he said.

"Then who was the girl?"

Philip smiled mysteriously. "I'll tell you about it later."

"I'm not the only one you'll have to tell," Ann said. "Don't you suppose the others have wondered what's been keeping you?"

"Sure they have," said Philip cheerfully, "but they wouldn't ask. They'd wait until I was ready to tell 'em. But a sister never does wait."

He rumpled her hair and grinned. Ann smiled. It was wonderful to have Philip home again.

He munched the last cooky and stood up. "Let's go take a look at the silvers." He saw the quick exchange of glances. "What's wrong with that idea?" he demanded. "A trip around the island is the best part of getting home."

"Sit down, son," Dave Jackman said.

The second recital of disaster didn't take long. Philip nodded briefly when told of prices at the fur auctions. They were no news to him. He had kept track of sales. He frowned when he heard of the death of the sick foxes, but remained philosophical.

"We're not the first farmers to lose foxes with spoiled food," he said. "Now we know better than to let it happen again."

"How?" his father asked.

"We'll freeze plenty of meat in the fall and keep it frozen solid until we cook it. Freezing cooked meat can be tricky. Summers we can catch fresh fish and rabbit."

The death of Pride and Princess was a blow. His face whitened. Ann knew the news cut deeply.

"It wasn't your fault, Dad," he said. "Cave-ins have happened to others. When I heard about them I meant to write you to change their pen from that sandy soil. So if it's anybody's fault it's mine." He stopped until he could make his voice quite steady. "But I never really dreamed it would happen. It doesn't seem possible we've lost them both."

His father told of spring litters. Philip listened and then finished for him, "A lot of the pups were cross fox."

"How did you know that?" his father demanded.

"Bound to happen. There was a red strain in our stock. Eric was all red, and we never brought in outside blood. So the red strain showed up more and more. It's like this. Take a bunch of people with maybe a few who have squint eyes, and keep them off by themselves, away from other people. After a while most of their children will have squint eyes."

"Where did you hear that?" his father asked.

"Professor Mears told me when he heard about our silver foxes. It's all in books. Not about foxes, but about other animals, and even flowers. Mendelian law, he called it. Pride and Princess had a red pup in the litter when we found them. We should have known there was a lot of red strain in the family, and no matter how they looked they weren't real silvers. And we ought to have bought a real silver and improved the herd. Doing it the way we did we were bound to get cross foxes sometime. When you didn't write about the spring litters I sort of expected it had happened."

Ann was relieved. The blow wasn't as hard for Philip as she had thought it would be. He had known the silver fox farm was a failure. But she'd not expected him to be so cheerful.

"I'd figured that was probably the reason for those cross fox pups," his father said.

"Then you know we'll have to buy some good silvers," Philip said in relief. "I was afraid you didn't."

"Knowing what we should have done doesn't help much now," Dave Jackman said.

"Sure it does! Now we know how to go about it to have a real silver herd."

"Son," his father said, "perhaps you didn't understand what I've been telling you. We won't have a herd. We're through with silver fox farming. I'm sorry," and his voice softened, "but that's the way it has to be."

"Mean you're quitting?" Philip asked incredulously. "Why—why—we've just started!"

"We've gone far enough to know we can't go on. I never thought it was the easy, dazzling road to fortune that—"

"I never said it was!" Philip exclaimed hotly. "I always—"

His father went on as though Philip had not spoken. "It's time someone had sense. We've got to consider the future of this family. We can't stand these losses. I've been thinking about it all spring. There have been nights when I've been sorry we ever found those silver foxes."

"Dad!" Philip cried. "You can't say that! You don't mean it!"

"I suppose I don't," his father said. "It's—it's the bitterness of failure talking."

"But we haven't failed! No one's a real rancher until he's struck hard luck. Good thing it hit us when we'd just started. What if we had the whole end of the island crammed with pens and bad food had killed hundreds of foxes instead of just a few? It might have cleaned us out. Now we know better than to let it happen."

Little tremors of excitement started up Ann's spine. Philip had never lost the vision of what Fox Island might some day become. She remembered the early days when her father had talked of the Jackman fur farm of the future and wondered if he had forgotten. The lines around his mouth were set and determined.

She looked at Philip, flushed and resolute. Of course it was only the optimism of stubborn youth, but she was glad Philip was still eager, still undefeated. She smiled at him and he caught the smile.

"Thanks, Sis," he said and turned back to his father. "Quitting now would be crazy. We've come a long way. We'd be quitting just when we'd learned about the game."

"Learned!" Dave Jackman said. "Learned what?"

"Plenty! What did you know about foxes? What did Hugh know? Neither of you had ever seen a silver fox until we got Pride and Princess. But you raised the whole litter. Professor Mears could hardly believe it when I told him. That's how he happened to take an interest in me that first night. Soon's he heard I lived on a silver fox farm—why, I didn't get home till after eleven."

"It makes a good story," Hugh said, "but that don't prove we learned much. Just because a professor who never seen a silver fox says—"

"Don't fool yourself about Professor Mears!" Philip exclaimed. "He knows plenty. Knows enough to set you and Dad back on your heels when it comes to talking foxes. He's head of the laboratory in Bluestone College and

he'd been helping a man in Minnesota who had a fox ranch—they call 'em ranches, not farms, down there. Doing laboratory stuff, you know. How and what to feed and what made foxes die and why their coats didn't always fur out. That's how I happened to see him. I learned a lot, Dad."

"Theories! Sure! But it's different when—"

"I learned more than theories! Easter he fixed it up for me to work on Bill Daniels' ranch. You never saw such foxes! He's got a herd of sixty. He got top prices on his pelts last winter. I didn't write you about Easter because you'd sort of thought I was helping Ed in his garage in vacation."

He stopped and looked at his mother, but he was grinning.

"After Easter I just stayed on with Bill. A few weeks. Maybe a month or so. That's the reason I had to work so hard at the end to bring you the diploma."

"You notice, Missus, he brought it to you!" Hugh said with a chuckle.

"But, Philip!" Ann cried. "High school's been out three weeks."

"Sure," he said. "I went back to Bill's ranch. Some things I hadn't got straightened out. It's lucky I did, for a couple of reasons. Bill's been at it longer than we have. He knows what you can do with the silver strain. He hasn't done it yet. But he's working at it. You folks wouldn't believe the way he's improved his herd."

He stopped and took a deep breath, and then for ten minutes only Philip spoke. He began uncertainly, feeling for words until his passion for fox farming swept him up and away. His father leaned forward, suddenly intent and eager. Hugh had gone to the fireplace to knock out his pipe and he stood there, motionless. Mrs. Jackman sat very still, her eyes shining.

For a minute or two Ann watched Philip, a bit bewildered by the change which had come. And then suddenly she realized something more than Philip's body had grown. This explained the air of assurance and of competence she'd sensed the moment he had stepped onto the float. The boy, who even in his first years in the north had always had to puzzle out the right way, had skipped youth. He'd become a man.

Philip stopped at last and looked around. He smiled now.

"I haven't told you the finest thing that happened to us because I went back to Bill's ranch this summer," he said. "Wanted to save it till the last. Bill's offered to sell us a fox. Not a scrub one. A real silver! A son of Sir Gerald! You know about Sir Gerald?" Philip stared at their blank faces. "You

must know Sir Gerald! He's one of the finest foxes in the east. Got a pedigree that goes back eight generations. At first I couldn't believe Bill was willing for us to have that fox. I came near telling him we'd take it. If I'd known how bad things were up here, I'd have said yes on the spot. But wasn't it a piece of luck to have the chance for a fox like that just when we had to have fresh stock?"

"But I said—" Dave Jackman began.

"Don't you see what this will do for us, Dad? We've got a fair strain of silver now. If we bring in pedigreed foxes we can start to build a herd that'll make Jackman foxes famous. Why, we can't quit now!" His voice had risen with excitement, and then he laughed. "But I knew you didn't mean it, Dad. Anyone can get discouraged when all the bad luck comes at once. Only your saying it sort of hit me after I'd told Bill to hold the fox."

For a moment no one spoke. Ann's heart sank. Of course they couldn't buy pedigreed foxes. Even she knew their cost had always been far beyond them. Now more than ever. But she knew her father didn't have the heart to tell Philip. Hugh came from the fireplace.

"What's this extra-special fox cost, lad?" he asked.

"Bill's letting us have it cheap. Just think! a real silver, registered fox, and a son of Sir Gerald, for eight hundred and fifty dollars. I couldn't believe it!"

Ann gasped. Her father stared in amazed silence. She suspected he couldn't speak.

"It's the chance of a lifetime!" Philip exclaimed. "It's less than he paid for it. We're just lucky. It'd be worth its real price to us to get our silver strain built up. When did you ever hear such a price quoted for an eastern silver with blood like that behind it?"

"I never did," his father said. "But eight hundred and—"

"Haven't we got it? Can't we raise it?"

Silence met his question. Puzzled and hurt, Philip looked from one to another.

"Dave," Mrs. Jackman said at last. "Philip's earned an answer."

"He has," her husband said quietly. "We've got around a thousand, Philip, maybe a little more. But it's our back log, no more'n enough for the year ahead while I'm cruising a new trapping district or getting a job in the

forest service. I've got to do one or the other to make a living for this family." He paused, then he said, "It would be plain madness to spend that much money on one silver fox."

He'd been speaking to Philip and now he turned to the others. "It's too risky! Think of what could happen! Sickness! Accidents! Epidemics! Philip said even a big ranch can be cleaned out. We'd be asking for ruin!"

He stopped, and when he began speaking again the vehemence was gone from his voice. "Think it over, son," he said, "and you'll see I'm right."

Philip didn't speak at once. He had been as moved as Ann by the reasonableness of his father's tone.

"I haven't done anything since Easter but think about fox farming," Philip said at last. "And I still say we should buy that silver fox. What if we do have a tough time? We've had 'em before, when we didn't have the chance we've got today. We came through all right, so why throw everything away now?"

His father didn't answer.

"This is different, Dad! It's not like the time we dug out a den of foxes and thought we were fixed for life. We were dumb then. Now we know how to go at things. We know we can't expect to get far in one year. But five years from now! Ten years! We can make the Jackman name mean silver foxes. Isn't that something worth taking a chance for?"

Ann drew a long breath. Until Philip had stopped speaking she hadn't known how tense she'd been. Her eyes misted. Never had she been so proud of her brother.

"He's right, Dad!" she cried, and heard her own words with amazement. "We can't throw away such a future."

Dave Jackman made a gesture of hopelessness as he turned to his wife.

"I've tried reason, Mary. It does no good. Philip doesn't even listen. How can I make him understand I don't *want* to throw away three years' work? If I saw any assurance of success I'd be more anxious than he is to take a chance."

"Of course you would, Dave," she said, "but Philip has a right to be heard."

Hugh chuckled. "I'll say he has. Ever since the day I stopped here I've been listening to Dave talk silver foxes. Now he's listening to someone who

knows how to dream. Go ahead, Philip. I only wish Alec Gillespie was around to hear this. Many a night Dave's talked his arm off."

At any other time such a comment would have cleared the air and brought a laugh from Dave Jackman. Now he wasn't aware the old trapper had spoken.

"We've tightened our belts and taken tough times, and we can do it again," he said to Philip. "But this year—if I had the money I'd spend it to send you two back to school."

"School!" Ann burst out. "Think I'd go back to college on our last cent? That's settled whether we buy the fox or not."

"I don't want to go to school now," Philip said. "Plenty I can learn right on this island. Afterwards I'll take short courses in animal husbandry—I'll get those somehow even if we don't have money."

"If I can't work out a few credits at home this winter I'm not worth educating," Ann said. "Heavens, Dad! Didn't I study under Mother until my last year in high school?"

Hugh's eyes were twinkling. "Ain't we done all this before? Stayed up till daylight spending school money for a house and fur pens on Fox Island?"

"And that night none of us knew how slim our chances were," Philip said. "This time we know we've got to go at it like real fox farmers. One fox from Bill Daniels won't turn the whole trick, but we'll keep on plugging until we can buy more. We'll have a herd some day."

"This doesn't have to be decided now," Dave Jackman said. "Let's do the chores."

Later Ann and Philip went for a paddle. The motorboat was fine for long trips, but a canoe and the soft dip of paddles belonged to the quiet sunset hour. The lake was a warm gray, bathed in a rosy hue. The pine-clad shores were turning bronze in the golden light. It was the loveliest hour of the day.

Usually their evening paddle took them around the fur farm end of the island, but tonight Ann had waited, paddle poised, for Philip to decide. He had spun the canoe in the other direction. Then Ann knew he had been terribly hurt in the afternoon's argument. It had been the most vehement she remembered, and the least conclusive. Never before had the Jackmans failed to get together.

Out in the lake a loon called.

"Funny how those birds seem to say different things at different times," Philip said.

"What's he seem to be saying tonight?" Ann asked.

"It's something like 'Haw! Haw! Haw! You can't do it! You can't do it!'" He glanced at the high ridge to the west. "Sun will be down in no time. Let's beat the mosquitoes ashore!"

They dug in their paddles, reached the landing and raced to the house. They were at the front door when they heard the first sound of the mosquitoes' invasion, which began as a low hum, grew louder and more insistent until it resembled the noise of a distant train.

On the veranda the family were sitting in silence, but Ann knew conversation had been broken off abruptly. Words seemed to be still hanging in the air. Hugh and her father puffed their evening pipes. For a long time no one spoke.

"How does it happen Bill Daniels wants to sell this fox?" Dave Jackman asked at last. "You say he paid more for it."

"He's going in for the Peace River variety, so he can't have an eastern fox in his herd," Philip said. "If you mate even a real silver from the east with one from the west, you're liable to have cross fox litters."

"What's this?" his father demanded. "How did he find that out?"

"Same as fox farmers find out everything," Philip said. "By experimenting. And they've found out a lot. You'd be surprised how much Bill's learned. You'd like Bill. He's our kind. Guess that's why he got so interested in Fox Island. He says he's coming for a visit, but I told him to wait until next summer. Then we'd have a real ranch to show him."

"He sounds like a nice person," his mother said.

"Bill? I should say! I haven't even begun to tell about him, or what he taught me."

Philip talked for an hour, and as he talked he caught fire again, forgot even their immediate problem at Fox Island. Ann had never known fur farming could be so fascinating. She didn't speak. She didn't move. She was stiff with strain and chilled by the northern night when Hugh at last got to his feet.

"It's time the lot of us was in bed," he said. "First I'll take a look around the pens. Want to come along, lad?"

FOUR

NEXT morning Hugh and Philip were at the table when Ann went down to breakfast. Her mother brought coffee as her father entered. He looked at Philip.

"Still want to buy that fox?" he asked.

"More than ever," Philip said.

"Good!" and his father smiled. "But I was sure you'd feel that way about it."

"You mean you think it's the—" Philip began and his voice was eager.

"I know it's the thing to do," Dave Jackman said. "And the only thing. I see now how right you were. Of course we have to go on! We can't throw away the chance we've got here. Guess I knew it all along. Better wire Daniels today and I'll write him a letter." He looked at his wife. "Is it all right with you, Mary?"

"It's the way I wanted from the first." Her voice had a lilt of joy and her cheeks were pink.

"It's the way we all wanted, Mary. I knew that much last night on the porch. Sleeping on it made me surer than ever." He smiled. "Tightening up the belt a bit never hurt us yet."

The decision had been reached so suddenly Ann could not be sure it was final. Philip was very solemn, her mother smiling. Her father looked younger, happier, more alive than he had since her arrival. The moment had none of the exuberance of that other time when they were youngsters, yet it was somehow far more thrilling.

"Everyone has said how he feels except Hugh," Mary Jackman said.

The old trapper's gray eyes sparkled behind the mass of sun and smile wrinkles.

"You know I don't hold with fur farms," he said. "Only this time silver foxes make more sense."

Later, on the veranda, Philip showed Ann the wire. It was short. "Buying the fox. Letter and check follow. Sincerely, Philip Jackman."

"Sounds all right, doesn't it?" Philip asked. "Kept it under ten words, but Bill knows how I feel. Wasn't Dad great about spending all that money? Not many fathers would take such a chance. Wish we could think of some way to earn something this summer. Maybe I could get a job guiding."

"You've done enough now," Ann said.

"You mean talking them into buying a silver fox? Because I did talk them into it."

"That wasn't all you talked them into."

"If you and I had been here this spring and watched foxes getting sick and dying, and getting caught in cave-ins and having cross fox pups, we wouldn't have been so cheerful either."

"I'd have been more sunk than Dad was," Ann said.

Mrs. Jackman was busy in the kitchen and it seemed a good time to tell Philip about Rita's invitation.

"Did you want to go?" Philip asked.

"If things had been different here at home, I'd have had a wonderful time. So would you."

"Doesn't sound like fun to me. Jerry spent a month there last summer and he didn't like it. What's the use of sailing back and forth across a lake where you can see the other shore? Up here you can always reach new country."

Ann laughed. Philip had always been a map eater. His drive and energy demanded destination or purpose. For a moment Ann considered telling him about Steven and how fascinating he could make even a purposeless expedition, but she decided not to.

"Why don't you ask Rita up here?" Philip said.

"She couldn't leave Emerald Lake this summer!"

"What's so important about this summer?"

"Why, they took the house mostly for Rita. You know how it's been with her family in Europe so much. Rita didn't seem to belong anywhere in particular. Now she has to know people, get a crowd of her own. She says she's going to keep the house full all summer."

"Rita'll never have to worry about making friends," Philip said as he folded the telegram and put it in his pocket. His attention had already

strayed to more important matters. “I hope Dad will finish his letter to Bill Daniels in time for Mr. Gillespie to mail it this afternoon. I wouldn’t want any slip-up about that fox.”

“What’s his name?” Ann asked. “A fox that costs as much as he does—we can’t go on calling him just it.”

“He’ll have a name, and a good one,” Philip said. “Pride the Second of Fox Island.”

It was almost noon when the Hudson’s Bay craft stopped at the landing. Alec Gillespie declared he’d smelled blueberry pie far down the lake and looked hopefully at Mrs. Jackman.

“I’d intended to surprise you, Alec,” she said.

The manager’s fondness for blueberry pie was an ancient joke between them. At the table the grizzled Scotsman appeared to be in unusually good spirits. He talked almost continuously, scarcely waiting for an answer. His volubility surprised Ann until she realized he was really paying a visit of condolence and trying to keep their thoughts off the fur farm. He detailed trivial news of the household of the post and railroad station, even wigwam gossip of the hunters.

“By the way, you may be losing your neighbors,” he said. “At least that’s my guess.”

“You mean the Morgans in Deep Bay?” Dave Jackman asked.

“Who else could I mean?” He turned to Ann. “To hear your father, you’d think this was a settled country. The Morgans haven’t said they’re leaving, and I haven’t asked. I don’t talk to them any more than I have to, although they spend half their time hanging around the station or the post. I understand they haven’t done so well at fishing.”

“They ought to do well,” Dave Jackman said. “No better place in the north for whitefish than Far Lake.”

“There’s plenty of fish, but the man looks discouraged and sick. And no wonder. That wife of his is a mournful creature. If everything did go well, she’d be disappointed.”

“She could pitch in and make things go well,” Mrs. Jackman said.

The Hudson’s Bay man smiled. “She’s a long cut from your kind of woman, Mary. Your kind is rare. She doesn’t even measure up to wives of my hunters. And she hates the country, hates boats, hates Far Lake, hates

fishing, may even hate her husband. Her venom is enough to take the heart out of any man."

It was seldom the manager spoke with so much passion. Ann decided her mother's disapproval had been mild.

Later, as the men were having after-dinner pipes on the veranda they broke the news about the fox. Philip handed the manager his wire.

"And I've a letter I want you to mail, Alec," Dave Jackman said. "It's important. We're buying a new silver fox. It's costing plenty, but it sounds like a good buy."

Alec Gillespie stared as though he couldn't believe he'd heard correctly.

"Man! Man! Don't tell me you intend such folly!" and the Scotch burr in his voice showed his agitation. He slipped into it rarely and only when deeply moved. "Will you never give up? This spring should have proved to anybody there's no future in ranch bred foxes."

"It's the only kind that has a future," Philip said. "And it's a big one."

The Hudson's Bay man stared at Philip and his blue eyes held a mild wonder.

"I suppose, lad, you can't help believing so after all the years of listening to your father," he said. "But I'd hoped you'd forget it when you went to school."

"Seems like Philip just couldn't get it out of his system," Hugh said, and the merest quirk of a smile hovered at a corner of his mouth. "If anything, it's getting worse."

"Worse!" Philip flared, and then he laughed. "For a minute, Hugh, you had me bothered." He turned to Alec Gillespie. "Hugh means I've been at a fox ranch. Now I know what can be done with ranch foxes—what we can have at Fox Island some day."

"You telling me pens are as good as the forest?" the Hudson's Bay man demanded almost testily. "I've been buying fur from hunters for more than forty years."

"I know you have, Mr. Gillespie." Philip's tone was courteous, though slightly nettled. "But I don't see why you say the wild fox is better. It's this way. One of your hunters might trap a silver fox. It doesn't happen often, but he might. That doesn't mean the fox is a good silver or the pelt is prime or even the fox is a good size or the fur is silky. On ranches they are learning

how to feed them, how to take care of them and how to develop foxes of size and quality. Some day you'll see not hundreds, but thousands of silver pelts on the market, and every one so beautiful you can't believe it. Finer, larger, better marked and better matched than anything ever offered in the London market. What's the matter with that future?"

Hugh chuckled. "I thought, Alec, it was a long while since you'd heard talk about silvers. Maybe you'd missed it."

The manager was still staring at Philip. "And I thought Dave talked wild!" He turned to Mrs. Jackman. "Are you encouraging this folly, Mary? The lad is crazier than his father!"

"That might be one word for it, Alec," and Mary Jackman smiled at the Scotch trader, "but the Jackmans use another."

"I suppose you call it sense!"

"Sure we do, Alec," Dave Jackman said. "And you'll be at Far Lake long enough to agree with us."

Alec Gillespie got to his feet and faced them. "I'll say no more," he said. "It's plain you mean to do this. But remember! After this spring's disasters, you're going into this with your eyes open."

He started down the trail. The Jackmans followed, but before they reached the float the last trace of the manager's irascibility had disappeared. The old Scotsman might exhort, admonish, even disapprove of the Jackmans, but none of this would ever touch his friendship. It ran too deep.

He put out his hand to say good-bye to Mary Jackman. The boatman was holding the craft alongside the float when Philip asked suddenly, "Do you mind if I come along?"

The Hudson's Bay man's eyes grew bleak and stern. "Are you feared I'd hold up the wire?"

"I know you'd never do that, sir," Philip said.

Instantly the old Scotsman was mollified. "Come along, lad. I like you the better for wanting to take care of your own business. Do a thing yourself and you know it's done right."

Philip said he'd take a canoe so he could paddle home. The boatman helped Philip arrange the tow and Philip turned to his mother. "Might not be back before morning," he said.

"Of course you won't," the manager said. "Louise would never forgive me if you didn't stay the night."

Ann knew the Indian housekeeper admired all the Jackmans but she had always suspected Philip was her favorite.

As they walked up the trail to the house Mrs. Jackman turned to her husband. "Why do you imagine Philip decided so suddenly to go to town?" she asked. "He must have known Alec would send the wire."

Dave Jackman shrugged. "It isn't always easy to figure out Philip's ideas," he said.

"Alec'll regret his invitation," and Hugh's eyes were twinkling. "He'll have to listen to fur farming until midnight."

"You stirred Philip up on purpose," Ann said.

"Sure I did. It was time Alec found out he'd never really heard a Jackman talk about silver foxes."

Philip did not return until the next afternoon. Ann knew from the way he swung his paddle he was jubilant, yet he took time to carry the canoe ashore, place paddles under the thwarts, turn the craft over and weight it with the heavy chunks of wood kept on shore for the purpose. They watched him come up the trail, and Ann was sure she caught the suggestion of a swagger. He did not hurry, he stopped to brush mosquitoes from the screen door, and after he had entered he crushed the intruders which had come in despite precautions. Philip was letting the suspense build up. Ann wasn't really the dramatic member of the family. They waited for him to speak.

"I found them hanging around the station," he said. "Better luck than I expected."

"Found who?" they demanded in a chorus.

"The Morgans, of course. What did you think I went in for? Didn't you get the idea at dinner?"

"I do now," Hugh said, and he looked at Dave Jackman. "Dave, you and me was dumb."

"I bought the whole outfit," Philip said. "Icehouse, gasboat, tent, nets, all the fish boxes they had. The Morgans were glad to get three hundred dollars."

"Cash?" his father asked.

"They wouldn't wait for the money. At least she wouldn't. She's a mean one. He would have, I think. I felt sort of sorry for him. He never had a chance to make good."

"Where did you get the money?" his mother asked.

"From Mr. Gillespie. He knows I'll make that much in ten days with good luck. Twice as long with poor. Morgan gave me the name of the dealer in the city who will pay sixteen cents a pound. Sixteen dollars for every hundred-pound box of whitefish. That's not bad." He waited for the good news to sink in and then added, "I wrote and told him shipments would begin soon, and this time they'd be real ones."

"You seem to have covered everything," his father said.

"Did Alec offer to loan the money?" Hugh asked.

"Sure. He said this was the first time a Jackman had gone into a business he approved of; I didn't tell him the fishing money would buy silver foxes. At least, I didn't tell him until after the deal was closed."

"What did he say then?"

"He laughed and said he'd known it all along."

"When are the Morgans leaving?" his father asked.

"They've gone. That's what took me so long. I put them and their stuff on the morning train. Mr. Gillespie helped a lot. Said it was worth while to know Mrs. Morgan could smile. She certainly was tickled to get off."

"You've planned quite a summer," his father said.

"Sure. A fur farm and now this! I've got to overhaul the engine."

"If you don't you'll have to fight the thing all season."

"I know that," Philip said, "but I'll tear it down and find out what's the matter. I know fishing will keep me humping, but I've got good fishing partners. I wired Jerry to come up." He grinned at Ann. "I told him we'd do the fishing and you'd run the camp."

FIVE

EARLY next morning Ann and Philip went to Deep Bay to take possession. The fishing camp was in a sheltered cove and could have been beautiful. The shore rose gently to a flat, cupped by dark green hills. On one side a point of smooth clean granite stretched into the lake and behind it, where granite merged with forest, was a small park-like meadow. In its center rose a white pine tree.

Like all white pines, it had individuality, for no white pine is like any other. Some are more beautiful than others. A happy accident of arrangement of branches with their great fluffy clumps of needles, and the tree takes on a majestic serenity. This was such a tree.

At the other side of camp a deep, dark spring bubbled up beneath the outspreading branches of a cedar. Ann tasted the water. It was sweet and very cold.

But the camp itself was utter squalor. Even an Indian family, and they were never squeamish, would have been ashamed of such surroundings.

"Seems even worse than it did yesterday," Philip said. "Guess packing the Morgans up so fast didn't improve it any."

Ann stared. Discarded trash had been trampled into the earth, empty cans were everywhere, paper, burlap, bits of rope, rusted pots—all the confusion of careless living was scattered wide. She decided for the present not even to investigate the inside of the tent. Philip saw her face.

"This stuff doesn't count," he said. "We can fix it later. I want to show you what we really bought."

They walked back to where the boat was moored. The trail led past the spring and through a fringe of jack pine out onto a narrow beach. In the center a log served as a float and beside it was the fishing boat, looking as shabby and neglected as had the tent and its surroundings. On the beach and among the pines behind were scattered all the equipment of a fish camp. Philip stopped beside a drying rack and held up a section of net.

"Holes big enough for a whale to swim through!" he said. "But when they're mended they'll last out the season. Three of them! And another five hundred feet of net he never used." He uncovered the white mesh to show

Ann. “And look! Corks and leads enough to hang it. We’ll do that first thing.”

They looked in the log icehouse. Ice covered with caribou moss reached to the roof. Philip’s eyes shone.

“Enough to last until next winter. He must have worked hard in the beginning.”

Evidence of the former owner’s first high hopes were everywhere, dozens of shipping boxes, a pile of inch boards for building more, even a work table for dressing fish. Philip shook it experimentally.

“All it needs is to be steadied. I’ll reinforce the legs. And I’ll get a couple more logs to make a real float. Did you see the size of the live box?”

They went to the shore to examine it. The crib of boards was sixteen feet long, half as wide, and weighted with rocks to sink it in four feet of water.

“It’ll hold a lot of fish,” Philip said. He examined the torn dip net. “We can mend this with cuttyhunk. But you notice he bought a good one?”

Ann’s excitement had been mounting. She stared at the fish camp. Icehouse, work table, shipping boxes, fish boat, live box, drying rack, even a tub for tanning nets, everything they needed.

“Philip!” she cried. “It’s wonderful! You’ve bought a real business. A little work and we’ll have it going,” and then she added quickly, “but the work is nothing!”

Philip flushed with pleasure. “I knew it all along,” he said. “Only I wanted you to see it. You and Jerry and I can ship plenty of fish out of here this summer! But we’ve got to get things ready. Every day we lose costs money.”

He proposed they tow the fish boat to Fox Island for overhauling near their own well-equipped work shop. Like all Philip’s ideas, it was extremely practical.

“If we take the nets along, I can work on them while you overhaul the motor,” Ann said.

“Grand idea, Sis.” His approving pat was as near as he ever came to an expression of affection. “You’ve got a job ahead of you.”

He loaded corks, leads, gilling twine, cuttyhunk and a net needle aboard the boat. Then he staggered beneath the nets. Each took two carries before he had it piled in the stern.

"Heavens, Philip! I can give you a hand!"

Philip grinned. "Your work comes later, and I might as well get used to dragging these things around. We'll have to take 'em up often for washing. Morgan didn't do it. Probably one reason for his poor luck."

They traveled up the lake with the fish boat in tow. Ann looked back at the shabby craft, following like a reluctant beast of burden.

"It ought to have a name," she said.

"It'll have one by the time we get it going," he said.

Ann watched the shadows on the shore. The sun was climbing higher, boring into the dark forest, searching out open spaces where its golden light splashed on the fresh tender green of birch and poplar. Occasionally she caught the vivid scarlet of a vine. Then the dark forest would close again, austere, impenetrable while she waited almost breathless for the next revelation of its intimacy and beauty.

Philip was whistling as he guided the craft. His head was thrown back and his dark eyes held tiny pin points of excitement. Suddenly he turned to Ann.

"Every box of fish we put aboard a train is just so much toward a silver fox!" he exclaimed.

"You mean it might buy one silver guard hair on a fox," Ann said and then was sorry she had teased him. But Philip was not even aware of her interruption.

"It's not whitefish we'll be catching this summer but silver foxes," he said. "Sixteen dollars a box, less express. Ten boxes, say a hundred and fifty dollars. One hundred boxes will be—"

"Stop!" Ann cried, and then became as serious as he. "A slogan does help, Philip! Every time I pick a fish scale off myself or watch you devour a pie that's taken me an hour to make, I'm going to say, 'Fuel for foxes.'"

"You don't like fishing, do you?" Philip asked.

"I like fish on a platter. But still wearing scales! And slippery!" She made a face.

"Good thing Jerry likes fishing. How soon do you suppose he'll get here?"

Philip had not doubted for a moment but that Jerry would come. And thinking of Jerry, Ann thought of Steven, and wondered if he would go to Rita's when he discovered she wouldn't be there. Of course he would, she told herself sternly. Steven would like the gayety of Emerald Lake, but he would have liked Far Lake too. He'd like paddling down a shaft of moonlight in a northern night. He'd like such mornings as this. Always when she saw something lovely she wished she could share it with him.

When they reached Fox Island everyone came down to examine the new boat. Hugh looked at it and grunted. Dave Jackman found the name plate on the motor.

"An orphan engine," he said.

"I knew that when I bought it. Morgan said he didn't know where I could buy parts, so I can't afford to bust any in overhauling."

Hugh helped Philip carry the nets ashore. Dave Jackman looked at the holes in the webbing, chuckled and turned to his wife.

"Ann's got a job, Mary. Now you'll find out if she can sew. Hadn't you been led to believe it was one thing she couldn't learn?"

"Fuel for foxes!" Ann said, and looked at Philip and laughed.

Hugh and Philip built a hanging rack for nets. They set two posts in the ground about sixty feet apart, stretched a line between and showed Ann how to sew the new net to the line and fasten floats at the top and leads at the bottom.

"It will be like sewing on a shaky fence," Ann said.

"When you've finished a section, call one of us to help move it along so you can hang the next," Hugh said. "I allowed plenty of line for five hundred feet of net."

Ann did some rapid mental arithmetic. Until then she had not considered all the unhung mesh on the ground. There would be nine installments.

"If I can get three finished this morning, I should do the other six by night," she said. "And the last one will be short."

"Figuring on what lies ahead makes any job seem longer," Hugh said. "Counting the parts you've finished makes it go twice as fast. That's what I do with winter wood. 'Tain't the cords I got to cut, but the piles I've made that I count."

Philip began at once to work on the motor. Hugh watched him a little enviously.

"It's a good thing you're handy round an engine," the old trapper said. "I'll give you a lift when we get the chores done."

"Which is his way of saying he can't help at all," Ann told Philip. "Did you ever know the time when the chores were finished?"

"They do keep Dave and me fairly busy," Hugh said mildly. "Between cleaning pens and cooking mink and fox food, let alone the catching of it, we don't sit around much. Snares for rabbits on the mainland. Net in the lake for fish. Wood pile and water barrel in the house. A garden to grow vegetables. And always things to fix and keep shipshape. Maybe some day one of those smart professors'll think of a way to raise humans with two pairs of hands instead of one. I could use an extra."

"Where'd you like the second pair to grow?" Philip asked. "From the waist or shoulder?"

Philip and Hugh had always made a pastime of discussing fantastic ideas with a show of deadly seriousness. Hugh considered.

"That would take a good deal of thinking out and right now I ain't got the time to give to it," he said. "I ought to be starting a pen for that new fox. Where'd you plan to put it, Philip?"

Ann went with them to choose the site. Philip drew the plans of the pen, much larger than any they had built.

"A fox is happier and quieter if it has a sense of space," he said. "And we'll have two houses, one at either end of the pen."

"What's the use in that?" Hugh demanded. "Even an extra-special fox can't use more'n one house at a time. Seems to me we're making—"

"But two houses will give a vixen a chance to move the pups if she gets nervous or frightened," Philip said. "You know how restless a mother vixen is, Hugh. A lot of pups have died because the mother went into a panic and carried them outdoors. A second house gives her a place to move to."

"That makes sense," Hugh agreed, but he argued against Philip's choice of site. "Why not put it farther off where it's quiet and they can't see people? That's what we done with Pride and Princess."

"Sure, it's the way all fox ranches used to do," Philip said. "But now they figure different. They're trying to domesticate foxes. I never thought

what the word meant until Professor Mears explained. We're taking a wild animal and putting it on a farm and the sooner it gets used to people the tamer it will be. If we keep them off by themselves they're apt to stay wild. He said long ago people tamed horses and dogs and cows just like we're trying to tame foxes."

"I see the point," and Hugh nodded. "That professor sounds all right! And it'll be handy having the new fox where we can see him every time we come down here. I'll start digging post holes tomorrow. Lucky we got netting."

"Only enough for one pen," Philip said. "I looked in the storehouse this morning."

"How many pens you figure to need?"

"Depends on the fishing season. But we want to be ready to build plenty before the ground freezes."

Hugh grinned and looked at Ann. "All I ask is to see Alec's face when Philip tells him that," he said.

Ann didn't make the progress she had hoped to in hanging the new net. Five hundred feet of mesh was a long stretch of sewing. In early afternoon her mother came down and helped her and the work went faster. Mrs. Jackman sewed until it was time to prepare supper, but Ann continued. She had grown accustomed now to the net needle, which wasn't like a needle but was a flat pointed piece of wood, wide enough to be hollowed in the center to hold a small spool of gilling twine. Ann had to stop often to wind fresh twine on the spool. She was doing this when she suddenly realized what a cleverly thought out tool the net needle was.

"Who do you suppose first invented this?" she asked Philip.

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose people have used something like it ever since they first fished with nets."

He showed no further interest in the subject, although usually Philip could be tempted into a discussion of almost any question. His afternoon's work had not gone well. He had tried for hours to get the rings off the pistons. They were caked with burned oil and stuck tightly and because he was not sure he could buy rings for the orphan motor he had not dared use force. It had been a matter of soaking in coal oil and then tapping gently. He

laid the last ring on a piece of canvas, spread on the float to hold the parts, as their mother called them to supper. Philip glanced at the sun.

"I'll have two hours of daylight after I eat," he said.

"I'll work too," Ann said. "I want to be ready to start mending the other nets tomorrow."

They worked until dusk and were at it again early next morning. Ann found she liked sitting in the sunshine sewing nets with Philip working companionably on the float near her. She learned to work deftly, rebuilding the torn webbing. It took only a few moments to snip off a broken or frayed piece, tie fresh twine at an intersection, run to the next, tie again and go on to another. The high rack held the wide net spread out before her. Sometimes she repaired a torn place above her head; at other times she sat on the ground. Her arms were tired, her back ached, but there was a satisfaction even in her weariness as she watched the pile of mended nets grow. Fishing equipment was becoming shipshape.

Hugh examined her work and said he wished he'd known she was so good at it. He'd have had her sewing on their own nets long before. He walked out to the float and watched Philip.

"Looks like you run into trouble, lad," he said.

Philip was dressing a crank pin with a file. "No worse than I expected," he said. "This pin's scored. When I've worked it down I can take shims out of the connecting rod bearings."

"Maybe you need a bit o' my main strength and awkwardness on this job," Hugh said, and Ann knew he was itching to get at the motor. "I got so much disrespect for those things I'll take chances a better man wouldn't dare to."

Philip cocked an eyebrow. "Just what I'm afraid of. If we busted something we might not get it to running again all summer. As it is, I'm afraid the propeller shaft's sprung a bit. I'll fix the loose intermediate bearing. After that all I can do is hope the shaft won't get worse."

"And keep your fingers crossed and remember not to hit a heavy sea with a big load," Hugh said.

The nets were mended by dark. Philip admired the imposing pile. After being washed and tanned they would be ready for use.

"We'll do that at camp," Philip said. "Morgan built a good drying rack. Washing will take a day, but we'll be fishing soon."

Ann had begun to doubt it. Enough loose parts to fill a bushel basket were still strewn on the canvas. She was even less sure the next morning when Philip resumed his painstaking task. Hours passed and he seemed to have accomplished nothing for all his filing, cleaning, fitting and trips back and forth from float to work shop. Ann grew impatient for him. Overhauling was such a long and arduous task.

"Do you think you'll ever get it put together?" she asked. An engine which ran even falteringly as it had for the Morgans was better than one which didn't run at all. "Perhaps we ought to have—"

"It's worth three days now to make sure we won't miss fishing time all summer," Philip said.

When Ann couldn't bear to watch him any longer she went to the storehouse to hunt up outdoor equipment. The fish camp would be headquarters and must be outfitted. Undoubtedly they would visit Fox Island often, but they couldn't make the ten mile trip for every small article they required. Gasoline and time would be precious.

At supper everyone avoided reference to the torn-down motor. Hugh reported he had cut the posts for Pride the Second's pen and asked how deep the ground netting should be sunk around the edge. They speculated on the day of Pride's arrival.

Mrs. Jackman had cooked baby carrots and everyone exclaimed about their tenderness and sweetness. Carrots and radishes were always the first harvest of the garden. Hugh said it had begun to look as though this June would be the only one they'd known without a killing frost. There was still time to have one and Ann suspected Hugh was merely making an effort to be cheerful.

Philip said nothing until supper was over. He paused in the doorway.

"Come down in half an hour if you want to hear something sweet," he said.

They were on the shore before the half hour had passed. Philip was in the boat doing last minute things to the assembled motor. Ann couldn't believe it was actually ready to start, but the set of Philip's shoulders was confident. He rocked the fly wheel and threw it over sharply. A stream of staccato explosions filled the air.

"It purrs!" Dave Jackman shouted. "Who'd ever think that old—"

The sound stopped abruptly. Philip had shut off the motor.

"What happened?" Ann demanded.

"It wasn't getting any oil." Philip's tone was flat. He rubbed the sight feed as though he still couldn't believe it. "I shut the motor off in time."

"Philip!" Ann cried and started for the float.

Her father touched her arm. "He feels bad enough without your saying anything. There's nothing you can say anyway."

Ann nodded. Men handled these things differently. Hugh walked onto the float.

"Is there light enough, lad, to find out what happened?" he asked, and his voice carried a wealth of sympathy and understanding.

"I don't think so," Philip said, but he had picked up a wrench.

Ann and her father and mother walked up the trail in silence. They stopped at the back door.

"To have that happen after all his work!" Mrs. Jackman burst out. "Philip has been down there every minute of daylight for three days!"

In the kitchen they stared helplessly at one another. Mrs. Jackman went to a cupboard.

"Isn't it lucky I've still a few bottles of raspberry shrub left from last year," she said. "Dave, if you get me a piece of ice from the icehouse I'll make a big pitcher of it. Philip likes shrub more than anything I know."

The pitcher and a plate of cookies were on the table when Hugh walked up the trail. His eyes lighted. The tangy shrub and thin ginger cookies were usually reserved for festive moments.

"If anyone likes shrub more'n I do, it's Philip," he said.

"Does Philip feel terribly disappointed?" Ann asked.

"Bad enough so he don't want to listen to how the rest of us feel." Hugh's tone was savage. "He'll be here in a minute."

When Philip came he looked exhausted, but he drank three glasses of shrub and finished the cookies. As he started for bed he stopped in the doorway.

"I figured what happened. I cleaned the sludge out of the base, but I didn't check the pump oil or the feed lines. Maybe the strainer's clogged, too. In the morning I'll tear down the motor."

Philip was the first to leave the breakfast table. Ann turned to Hugh and her father.

"Are you going to let Philip take down that engine by himself and spend another two days getting it together?" she demanded. "He's lost pounds already. Didn't you see his eyes at breakfast?"

"It won't take him that long this time," her father said.

"I don't care how long it takes. You shouldn't let him fight it any longer."

"Philip knows a lot more about engines than either of us," her father said. "He ought to after fooling around all year with cousin Ed's broken-down cars. He said Philip just about lived in his garage."

"I still don't care how much he knows. It's Philip I'm thinking of."

Hugh and her father looked at each other.

"Ann don't understand," Hugh said. "Anyone with as stiff a streak of pride as Philip's don't want folks butting in. Leave Philip alone and he'll be a whole lot happier." He turned to Mrs. Jackman. "Ain't that so, Missus?"

She smiled at the old trapper. "Ann still can't believe Philip has grown up," she said.

At dinner no one spoke of the fishing boat and from the Jackmans' conversation no one could have surmised that a decrepit motor had ever entered their thoughts. All afternoon Ann fought a desire to join Philip, but she noticed Hugh didn't go to the lake even to lift the net. Then in late afternoon a clamor suddenly filled the air. This time the motor didn't stop.

They rushed to the clearing and waved and shouted.

Philip waved back and then he cast off lines and made a circle of the bay.

The next morning Ann and Philip departed early for camp. The boat was heavily loaded with nets, tents, blankets, camping equipment, food, even half a baking of fresh bread. The camp cook would be backed by the home kitchen. At the last moment Hugh rushed down with a wooden rake.

"From what I know about the Morgans, you'll need this," he said. "Don't forget to give it back. Took me 'most half a day to whittle out those tines."

As they crossed the stretch toward Deep Bay they saw a birchbark canoe. The Indian waved his paddle and started toward them. Evidently he was looking for them, and he must have left town at daylight. Philip turned toward the canoe and the man gave them a telegram. Philip read it and handed it to Ann.

"Meet morning train Tuesday. Don't catch all whitefish Far Lake before I arrive. Love, Jerry."

Philip grinned happily. "Gives us two days to get ready," he said.

SIX

Two nights later Ann and Philip lingered over the evening campfire, almost too weary to go to bed. There were any number of things left to be done, but they could wait.

They had accomplished the necessities. Nets were set and the camp was clean. Ann wondered how they'd done so much in so short a time. Philip's energy had been spent on washing and drying the nets and dipping them in a bath of tan bark so that the white mesh wouldn't frighten fish.

Ann had helped to set them, running the boat while Philip stood in the stern, feet braced, and payed the net over. The plop of the first rock anchor had seemed a tremendous occasion. To Ann it marked the beginning of an undertaking. Philip had laughed and said that any net had to be anchored. He payed out anchor rope, then the float to mark the net on the surface of the water, then the net itself, corks from one hand, leads from the other so that the net would sink untangled, and stand upright on the bottom of the lake. Ann kept the boat moving forward slowly to stretch the net taut. Then Philip dropped a rock anchor.

It had taken half the afternoon to set four nets. Philip laughed at Ann's intent expression.

"Set a net in Far Lake and you're bound to catch whitefish," he said at supper.

Now that the nets were actually in water, he was relaxed and happy. For two days he had felt rushed and driven. The camp was Ann's job, but she had called on Philip for tent poles, balsam boughs, for bedding and a hand in putting up the tents. She scrubbed the Morgan tent inside and out, and now it served as storehouse and a place to eat when it rained. Philip built a cooking crane in front. It was sturdy and high.

"Might as well do it right," he said. Philip never could slack on any job. "Call it permanent improvements."

The crane looked permanent with the heavy crossbar resting on two strong, forked poles. Philip liked to use an ax and did it well. Fascinated, she watched him fashion the long hooks for kettles. In ten minutes he had made half a dozen. He used straight poplar saplings. One stroke of the ax

converted a branching fork into a hook to hang over the crane. His knife cut a notch to hold the bail of the kettle. He was careful to make the hooks of different lengths so Ann might have all degrees of cooking heat. After they were finished he drove a forked stake into the ground on which to rest the long-handled frying pan in which he hoped she'd make bannock often. The outdoor kitchen was luxurious. A cook need never stoop.

Philip and Jerry's tent faced the spring. It was a large wall tent the Jackmans had used their first summer. The beds at either side left a wide space in the center. Philip's packsack at the head of his bed looked almost lonely. Ann took extra care in thatching Philip's mattress for he was an expert on balsam beds and always buried the heavy bowed ends of the branches under a thick tufting of needle tips so that the bed had both spring and softness. Jerry being less skillful would be more charitable about imperfections. As she drew the mosquito netting over the door and tucked it firmly under the ground cloth she thought how attractive their tent was with the two high balsam mattresses covered by tan Hudson's Bay blankets.

Her own tent was smaller, pitched on the opposite side of camp and facing the white pine tree. Each morning she could look out and greet it. The tent stood in a small stand of jackpine and she knew that in the moonlight the branches would cast shadow etchings on the sloping canvas roof. As yet her quarters contained only a bed and packsack. It seemed severe, but there had been no time to evolve camp furniture.

Her only real innovation was a washing tent, a five-foot strip of canvas stretched around four poles, and open to the lake. In it was a shelf, a wash basin and a pail. She built it herself and Philip grinned when he saw it.

"You don't like fish scales?" he asked.

"Not with meals," she said.

Ann's biggest job was the site itself. Cleaning it took a precious morning. Tin cans and small trash were put in the canoe and dropped in the lake. Larger objects were piled and burned. A dozen times she thanked Hugh for the wooden rake. When evidence of Morgan tenancy had been banished she raked the ground and covered it with pine needles. Crushed under foot, the needles gave off a faint perfume, pungent and clean.

She was enjoying the aromatic odor as she stretched beside the campfire. Philip yawned.

"At first I was sorry Jerry's train got in so early in the morning and we'd have no chance to lift the nets," he said. "Wanted him to find the live box

crammed with whitefish. But now I'm glad. Jerry'll like bringing in our first load."

"So will I," she said.

"Coming along when we lift?"

"You couldn't keep me ashore," she said.

When Jerry's train arrived from the east they were waiting at the station. A porter lifted two plump packsacks to the platform and immediately Jerry followed. He hurried toward them. His smile, Ann thought, was the nicest thing about him. He had crisp black hair and intelligent blue eyes, and when he smiled his whole face lighted.

Jerry and Philip thumped each other. Jerry kissed Ann. It was the first time he had done so, but it had come so naturally even Philip didn't notice it. Philip picked up a packsack.

"The boat's down at the shore," he said.

"Mind if I take a minute to run in and say hello to Mr. Gillespie?" Jerry asked.

Ann was glad Jerry had thought of it. The Hudson's Bay manager met them at the door of his living quarters. He was evidently expecting them.

"Bless my soul! I'm glad to see you," and he shook hands. "Louise is putting breakfast on the table. Told her to remember you were working men."

Louise had taken her employer's warning seriously. The breakfast table was laden and Louise rushed in with platters of pancakes, eggs and bacon. All the time she beamed and kept saying, "It is good! It is good! All three together again!" For two years it had never occurred to Louise that Jerry had another home. Even Emil, the halfbreed clerk, who came from the trade shop to say "*bo'jou*," seemed to feel Jerry was now a regular member of the Jackman family.

After the post servants had departed Mr. Gillespie inquired about Jerry's father and asked whether he would come north that summer.

"I'm afraid not," Jerry said. "He's taken on some big cases."

"Time he had a real vacation from his law practice," the old Scotsman said. "The few weeks he snatches don't do him any good."

"He knows that," Jerry said. "Dad's one of those men who got started in the wrong game. You ought to hear him rave about the way the Jackmans live. They are the only people he really envies."

Ann and Mr. Gillespie exchanged glances. Very soon Jerry would have to hear about the fur farm.

Breakfast was soon over. Emil reported hunters waiting in the trade shop and Philip was impatient to depart. He led the way to the door.

"I've a driver for a boss," and Jerry laughed.

"Does he pay you well?" the manager asked.

"Bed and board and good company."

"Jackman company is better than good," the Scotsman said. "For a green hand you're doing well."

While the boys carried the packsacks to the boat, Ann stopped in the trade shop to buy the few things they needed. Emil had finished putting up the order when the stationmaster brought a telegram addressed to Philip Jackman. Ann took it and hurried down the trail. She met Philip halfway to the lake and he read the message.

"Good news?" she asked.

"Best ever. Bill is shipping Pride the Second. Let's see," and he computed train schedules. "Earliest he can get here is day after tomorrow. After that we'll meet every train."

The fishing boat performed so perfectly Jerry was impressed by Philip's bargain even before they reached the camp. But after an inspection of icehouse, work table, live box and shipping lumber, he was more excited than Philip.

"You've got a going business here," he said. "You can't lose!"

"We'll have to do better than not lose!" Philip said. "This fishing camp has got to make a lot of money."

He plunged at once into the history of the fur farm. Jerry was more distressed than Ann had anticipated. He was still deeply troubled when they sat down for the noon meal. Ann and Philip tried not to talk about the fur farm. Jerry looked up suddenly.

"This changes a good many things for you two, doesn't it?" he asked, his eyes sober.

"Why should it?" Philip said. "I always intended to be a fur rancher. This gives me a good reason to start now."

"And you?" Jerry turned to Ann.

"A winter in the north won't hurt me," she said.

Jerry looked relieved. "If that's all, I wish I were in your shoes. Know any better place than the north?"

"None half as good," Philip said. He finished his dessert. "That was grand pie, Sis. Everybody ready to see what's in the nets?"

Ann was definitely a spectator. She sat in the bow, out of the way, while Jerry managed the boat. He had a natural ability in the out of doors and without being told he shut down the motor and let the boat drift up to the buoy. Philip pulled the net to the surface, lifted the end high, then let it fall into the lake as he pulled the boat forward by the lead line.

No one spoke as he examined thirty feet of net without finding a whitefish. Once or twice Philip shook the mesh as though he couldn't quite credit its emptiness.

"How long is the net?" Jerry asked Ann.

When she told him it was five hundred feet he looked relieved and hopeful, but they traveled the rest of the net in silence. Philip let the end drop into the water.

"I suppose anybody can pull a blank," he said, but his tone was bleak.

"Let me lift the next one," Jerry said. "You know—beginner's luck."

They had traveled a quarter of the length of the second net when Jerry disentangled the gills of a whitefish from the webbing. He put it in the live box.

"It'll run about two pounds," Philip said.

The net yielded three more whitefish and a pike.

"We're doing better," Ann said with a ragged laugh as they went to the third net.

Jerry lifted it and took out five fish. Lifting was now only work. All the fine excitement of anticipation was gone. When they reached the fourth net, Philip left his seat beside the motor.

"I'll lift this one," he said. "Have to haul it in. Whitefish must have gone into deeper water."

He lifted the net into the boat, letting the webbing fall in folds, corks piled on one side, leads on the other. He took in seven good-sized fish, but the entire catch seemed lost in the live box.

"And I was afraid the boat's live box wouldn't hold all the fish we'd get from one net," Philip said. "We'll pick up the other nets and reset in deeper water. I'll have to do some sounding to make sure it is deeper."

Ann knew all this would take several hours and suggested they drop her at camp. "You fellows will be hungry when you've finished," she said.

After they'd put Ann ashore Philip transferred the whitefish to the storage live box. "And I don't want to eat fish for supper," he warned as they set out.

Ann couldn't have eaten fish for supper. She hoped no one would even speak about them. Her hopes had not been as high as Philip's, but it seemed incredible that two thousand feet of net could have yielded only sixteen fish. It would have been so wonderful if their first day had brought in a real load.

She gave considerable thought to the menu—brown stew from a jar of canned moosemeat, wild rice, bannock, and an Edam cheese Jerry had brought. Cheese and toasted crackers would end the meal with a truly festive touch. Supper was almost ready when she heard the gasboat turn into the cove. She waved from the granite point and rushed back to turn the bannock. It had risen and was golden brown. She moved it farther from the fire.

Philip's eyes lighted when he saw it. He didn't appear dejected as she had feared. He said they had set the nets in deeper water. "And if they've gone deeper we'll get 'em if we have to follow to China," he said.

They had planned to run to Fox Island that evening, but Ann knew Philip would dread having to talk about the first day's disastrous fishing. They needn't go were it not for Jerry's arrival. Her speech was a continuation of her thoughts.

"I suppose everyone would wonder what had happened to Jerry," she said.

"Why would they?" Jerry asked. "Didn't you get my wire on your way to camp?"

"For all they know, Jerry's still in Chicago," Philip said.

Jerry picked up an ax. "Come along, Philip," he said. "It's still light enough for us to find something to fancy up this camp."

As Ann washed the dishes she heard the sound of chopping, heard Philip laugh. Using an ax always made Philip feel better. It was dusk when she heard them on the trail. Philip's voice was as cheerful as though the live box were crammed with whitefish. He sat down big rolls of birchbark and a quantity of poles. Philip carried a load of white birch saplings.

"Latest thing in furniture is white rustic," he said. "I've an idea for a dressing table. Might even manage a chair. You won't know your tent when we're finished."

Philip built a campfire on the rocky point for sociability and to drive away mosquitoes. Jerry dragged up a log for them to lean against as they stared into the fire. They talked late, but no one mentioned whitefish. Philip told Jerry about Bill Daniels and his fox ranch. They caught up on the news of months. Philip asked Jerry if he had intended to go to Emerald Lake.

"Not if I could get you to take a canoe trip with me," Jerry said. "It was Ann and Steven who wanted to be social."

"Who's Steven?" Philip asked.

Jerry looked at Ann. "Didn't you tell him about Steven?"

Jerry's voice seemed to make the question more important than it really was. Ann was grateful for the darkness. She didn't answer, because she was not sure her voice would be natural.

"I supposed, of course, you'd talked a lot about him," Jerry said.

"Philip hasn't given anyone a chance to talk. He's been talking every minute about silver foxes."

"What's more important than fox ranching?" Philip demanded.

"Steven isn't," Jerry said. "He's a fellow I brought home from college last Easter and Ann met him." He stood up. "About time to turn in," he said.

They put out the fire. In the half moonlight the tents were only a gray blur. Philip looked overhead.

"I don't like the way those clouds are driving," he said. "We're liable to get a blow tomorrow."

Sunrise was only a golden flush when Ann awakened, conscious she'd heard someone walking. She looked out and saw Philip building the fire. She hurried to dress.

"Cooking's my job," she said as she joined him.

"Jerry and I were going to let you sleep," he said. "We're lifting early, before it blows."

Philip was a good weather prophet. There was a feeling of wind in the air as Ann looked up. Lower clouds were drifting but high above them others were scudding swiftly.

"It may hit by noon," Philip said. "And it's liable to be a good one. We've got to hurry."

The boys were off in half an hour. As they departed Philip said that with good luck they'd be back early and with bad luck they would stay out to reset the nets. By mid-morning Ann knew the luck was bad, and the wind began to blow as Philip had prophesied. It was blowing hard by noon when she heard the gasboat. She went to meet them. They looked tired.

"Resetting that last one was tough," Philip said. "But we made it."

"Did you get any fish?" Ann asked and then knew she shouldn't have asked it.

"A few," Jerry said.

With the dip net Philip transferred the catch to the storage live box. "Better than yesterday," he said, "but we haven't enough to ship."

There could be no thought of a trip to Fox Island that afternoon. Already the long traverse must be a tumbling stretch of white caps. They worked in camp. Philip built a dining table and benches in the shade and then started an elaborate cupboard of poles and birchbark, with a birchbark door which rolled back. Jerry made Ann's tent furniture. The dressing table was lovely with white birch legs, and a board top covered with birchbark. He added a chest and began a chair.

"If I had a strip of canvas, I could make a good one," he said.

Philip suggested he use the wash tent. "We've always got the lake," he said.

"That wash tent is one of Ann's best ideas," Jerry said. "I approve of it. I've even planned more luxury. I'm going to build a rock fireplace beside it so we can heat a big kettle of water."

"That's an idea," Philip said. "We'll get a kettle from home. And Hugh'll have canvas in the storehouse. We've never needed anything yet we couldn't find there."

No crow collected with greater assiduity than Hugh. Bits of metal, spikes, nails, the odd piece of lumber, leather, canvas, netting, tubs, pails and boxes—when their usefulness seemed completely done he was always sure they'd come in handy. And they usually did.

"I'll make a list of things we need," Ann said.

"Do that," Philip said. "We'll pick up the stuff tomorrow."

He spoke with assurance. Ann and Jerry looked up, startled. Philip must be sure the nets would yield a good catch, but no one had mentioned a trip to Fox Island.

"Are you sure—" Jerry began.

"Pretty sure," Philip said. "We'll have to go if Pride the Second arrives on the morning train."

SEVEN

It was the second time in a week they had met the early morning train. As they waited on the platform Ann thought she was even more excited than when they came to meet Jerry. Philip was certain Bill would have made sure of the best train connections. The royalty of fur land must not be inconvenienced by delay.

The train came to a stop and a moment later Pride's crate was lowered from the door of the express car. Ann and Philip and Jerry reached him even before the stationmaster. The crate was addressed to Philip Jackman. Through the netting and slats Ann could see a dark object.

"Going to look at him here?" Jerry asked.

"You bet I am," Philip said. "I've got to make sure he's in good shape. But the less looking that's done before he's in his pen the better."

Ann and Jerry stepped back while Philip examined Pride the Second. He looked at his eyes and studied the condition of the coat.

"He's in fine shape!" he said at last. "Came through just like I knew he would."

The stationmaster held out the receipt. Philip's hand shook as he signed it.

They carried the crate to the boat and departed. They passed the entrance to Deep Bay without a glance and no one spoke of the packsack of Jerry's city clothes waiting to be stored at Fox Island. The wind had gone down, but the traverse was still rough. Philip put his coat over the crate to shield it from the spray. Throughout the trip he scarcely spoke and as they approached the last point which hid Fox Island, Ann began to share his excitement. In a short time she would see Pride the Second in his pen.

Jerry joined Ann in the bow. He was smiling.

"I've just realized I'm making my entrance with a fabulous fox. Do you suppose any of your family will even notice my arrival?"

Ann laughed. "I'm sure Mother will."

Mrs. Jackman did kiss Jerry before she peered into the crate. Hugh and her husband looked at the fox first, and then shook hands with Jerry.

"Hope you didn't mind, lad," Hugh said, "but this fox comes before good manners."

"Why not?" Jerry said. "I'm not nearly so important."

Hugh and Philip carried the crate to the farm. The others followed close on their heels, but when they reached the pen Philip asked them to stand back.

"We don't want to make him nervous," he said.

"Of course he's traveled on trains all his life," Dave Jackman said with a chuckle.

No one noticed the bit of humor because at that moment Hugh and Philip moved the crate close to the pen and lifted both doors. Pride saw the way out and walked through the opening. Philip shut the small door to the pen and Pride was in his new home. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The transfer had been made so easily.

"What a beauty!" Dave Jackman's voice rose in excitement. "Look at the size of him! I never saw a fox like that!"

"It's the way they raise 'em now," Philip said.

"And his color!" Mrs. Jackman cried. "Why, Philip! You didn't tell us what a lovely thing he is!"

"How'd you go about describing anything as pretty as that, Missus?" Hugh asked. He stopped, gulped, and then he shook his head. "I never thought I'd have to admit you could better Pride and Princess. But you done it, lad."

There could be no higher praise than that.

Philip, his thoughts in the future, nodded absently.

"He's just the first," he said.

No one answered, but Ann caught the quick look of approval in her father's eyes. Hugh turned toward the trail.

"Best let him get used to the place," he said. "We can come back to see him later."

Mrs. Jackman slipped her arm into Jerry's. "We've been dreadful," she said. "I've hardly spoken to you or asked about your father."

Jerry and Mr. and Mrs. Jackman walked to the house. Ann and Hugh went to the storehouse. No one asked where Philip was because everyone

knew he was not far from Pride's pen. In the storehouse Hugh produced every article on Ann's list and several others he said might come in handy.

"Sounds like quite a camp you're building," he said. "I been meanin' to run down and see it."

"You must come, Hugh!" She hesitated. "But if you wait a few days we'll have the fishing really started."

Hugh nodded. He knew what she meant.

They joined the others in the kitchen, where Mrs. Jackman had already begun preparations for a meal. Philip appeared a moment later.

"Can we get a snack before we start for camp?" he asked.

"A snack, Philip! Of course you're staying for dinner."

Philip shook his head.

"But we haven't had a chance to visit with Jerry!"

"You can visit while he eats a sandwich," Philip said, his tone urgent. "We can't stay, Mother. We've got nets to lift."

Before they departed Ann ran back to Pride's pen. He was gorgeous. Even his summer coat was lovely and she could imagine how much more beautiful it would be in winter with the veiling of the silver and black guard hairs. The sheen of glossy black and the brilliance of silver! Even now, frightened as he was by travel and new surroundings, he carried himself with a royal air. His body was long and full, deep chested and with width to his shoulders. His back was straight from shoulder to rump and his brush was long and carried so that it seemed only a continuation of his body. He looked at her, ears erect. His eyes, set well apart, were alert and bright. She called his name. It seemed so right for him. He was indeed Pride the Second.

Philip had chosen the name well. It was an admission and an answer. Pride the Second was the fox to be a forebear of a silver herd.

When they turned into Deep Bay, Philip asked Ann if she wanted to go back to camp.

"Are you going to lift the nets?" she asked.

"Yes, and I'm betting we've guessed right this time," he said.

Ann considered. Watching hundreds of feet of empty net slip through Philip's fingers would be bitter, but waiting at camp to hear the outcome

would be even more difficult.

"I'll stay aboard," she said.

She had only to see the first ten feet of net to be glad she had. Whitefish, entangled by their gills, shook the mesh. Philip picked them out and dropped them into the live box, until they came so thickly Jerry had to help bring them aboard. Both boys were grinning. Ann had started to count fish, but the gleam of one followed another so quickly she lost count. It was enough to know they had them. When they came to the end of the first net the live box was filled to the top.

"Thought Pride would bring us luck," Philip said.

"Luck!" Jerry repeated. "That wasn't luck! That was knowing where the whitefish live!"

"Long as we found 'em you can call it anything you like."

The crowded live box brought a problem. Philip said they could run back to camp, transfer the fish and return to lift another net. In that way they could keep the fish alive and ship later.

"Or," he said, "we can go on lifting. But then we'd have to dress and ice 'em and get 'em aboard the train tonight."

"Isn't that what you intended to do all the time?" Jerry asked.

Philip laughed and admitted Jerry had guessed right. "But we'd have to hustle," he said.

Sometimes the eastbound train was late, but they couldn't count on it. They must have the fish on the platform of the Far Lake station before eleven-thirty. No time to eat. No time to rest.

"And no time to talk about it," Jerry said as he turned the boat toward the second net.

When at last they drew alongside the camp float the boat was filled with gleaming, glittering fish. They were beauties, firm and fresh and of good size. Philip leaped ashore and ran to the work table with scoop net full. Jerry started to do likewise, then picked up the canvas Ann had brought from the island storehouse and began to fill it with fish. Philip had already gone to work.

"We've got to get 'em dressed and packed before dark," he said. "We need to see at this job, but we'd have to be finished anyway if we make the train."

Ann helped Jerry carry the first canvas load. Philip was already in need of fish to dress.

"The next best thing I can do is bring you fellows something to eat," she said.

She built a fire, made coffee, opened cans with abandon, carried food and hot drink to the shore. Philip stopped work long enough to bite into a thick sandwich.

"Fish scales go with eating tonight?" he asked.

"I never dreamed they could look so beautiful," she said.

Jerry was cracking a sack of ice on a flat rock with the side of an ax. It would take quantities of ice if all those fish were to reach the city in good condition. Ann took the ax from Jerry's hand.

"I can at least pound ice while you help Philip dress," she said.

"Fine!" Philip said. "We could use an extra hand."

It was growing dark when the boxes were packed.

"Nine!" Philip said as he drove the last nail. "Count 'em! And figure what they'll bring."

"Even in our exhausted state, Ann and I can still multiply nine times sixteen," Jerry said. "I make it one hundred and forty-four dollars. How about you, Ann?"

"It is that, isn't it," Philip said. "I couldn't quite believe it. That's a start on a silver fox."

"It's a start on a whole herd of foxes!" Ann cried.

"Know what I was thinking when I stayed at Pride's pen?" Philip said. "Here we were with an eight hundred dollar fox and talking about a silver fox ranch, and we'd caught less than forty whitefish. I was sort of scared." It was the first time he'd admitted how low had been his spirits. "We just had to find these fish."

"I knew, feller." Jerry patted Philip's shoulder. "But I was sure you'd find them."

Twenty minutes before train time, Jerry and Philip carried the last box from the lake shore. The stationmaster's eyes widened when he counted nine.

"Morgan would never have shipped as many in a month," he said. "But what would have happened if you'd been thirty minutes later?"

"We wouldn't have been thirty minutes later," Philip said very quietly.

The stationmaster laughed, and then stared at Philip. "I don't believe you would," he said. "And from now on whenever you put a box on this platform before the train comes to a stop, I'll promise to get that box aboard. Somehow. You can count on that."

"Thanks, Chet," Philip said.

As they walked back to the boat Ann turned to Philip. "Chet Walker really meant what he said. I never liked him before, but tonight he seemed different."

"I never liked him either," Philip said. "Funny how wrong you can go about a fellow."

They traveled up the lake in silence. Jerry was in the stern, Philip huddled above the motor and Ann sat in the bow. The sky was overcast, but occasionally the moon slipped from behind a bank of clouds to touch the wavelets of the lake with silver gilding.

Ann couldn't remember when she'd been so tired. It didn't seem possible to ache in every muscle and yet be so ecstatic.

At camp they moored the boat. Jerry took the "bug" from under the bow deck. It was a simple but effective light—a candle in a tomato can fitted with a wire handle so the can could be carried on its side to reflect the beam. He lighted it and they walked up the trail.

"Anyone want a fire?" Philip asked as they reached the tents. He sounded a bit wistful.

"All I want is bed," Ann said. "Is there anything we have to do in the morning?"

"Only lift the nets," Philip said.

EIGHT

JUNE passed. On the Fourth of July the family came for a picnic, bringing enough food to feed a regiment. Mrs. Jackman admired the improvements since her first visit. No longer did the single log to shore demand tight rope agility. The float was now of three logs with boards on top. The table for dressing fish was strong and steady with a chute to carry waste into a tub.

Near the spring, in the shade beneath the outspreading branches of the cedar, was a cooler. Jerry had built it when Ann said she wished she had an icebox for cooked foods. The icehouse had been wonderful for keeping butter and bulk supplies, but the caribou moss had a way of working into pots. The cooler cabinet was shelved, made of poles and covered with burlap. A pan of water on the top held cotton wicks to carry moisture down the burlap sides so the cooler was chilled by evaporation.

"Jerry, you must build one for me!" Mrs. Jackman cried. "I've always wanted something like that on the back porch. It would save so many steps to the icehouse."

The wash tent was now complete with towel racks and a fireplace to heat a big kettle of water. The storehouse tent was equipped with shelves. The evening fireplace was furnished with heavy chunks of logs which could serve either as seats or backrests. Ann's canvas chair had finally materialized and was an impressive piece of furniture before her tent. The doorways of all the tents had carpets of fresh cedar branches, a trick Ann had learned from good Ojibwa housekeepers.

While the boys were fishing, Ann had explored the cove and found a wild raspberry patch in an old burn where enormous berries dripped from bushes. Now fresh fruit, berry pies and even preserves were regular items on their menu. She had also discovered an open meadow where blueberries would be ripe in August.

Mrs. Jackman exulted with them.

"Doesn't this remind you, Dave, of our camp that first summer in the north?" she asked.

"It's like that first summer in a lot of other ways, Mary," he said.

Hugh reported on the fur farms, although Philip and Ann and Jerry had gone to Fox Island as often as they could. Not only was Pride's care and feeding important, but they never ceased to enjoy looking at him. Hugh could never talk of him enough.

"The finest fox in Canada," he said, quite forgetting he had once said the same about Pride and Princess.

The oldest litter of young foxes had been taken from the mother and moved into a nursery pen. "Those cross fox pups may not be worth much, but they're awful cute," Hugh said.

Ann looked up startled. Weaning time on a fur ranch meant the approach of midsummer.

After supper they set off the fireworks Jerry had brought north. He'd been embarrassed when he produced them.

"It seemed silly for a country that has its own northern lights," he said. "But I remembered Philip telling me he hadn't seen fireworks since he was a boy in Minnesota."

The display consisted of Roman candles and sky rockets. They sat on the point and watched the colored balls break to form great fire flowers in the darkness above the lake.

"I liked 'em," Hugh said at the end. "It's ten years now since I fired a sky rocket. Seemed to belong somehow to a Jackman celebration. Ain't we all Americans?"

After the Fourth of July picnic they settled back into the routine of fishing. There were days when the nets held few fish, days when the catch was heavy, days when wind imprisoned them ashore, days when the nets had to be washed and mended, and one day when, to Philip's chagrin, the motor had refused to run. Evenings varied as did the days, those when they made no shipments, others when they delivered boxes of iced fish at the station in time to return for supper, and times when they hurried to make the train. But never had there been another evening when they shipped nine boxes.

Philip kept a record which he showed to Ann and Jerry. Mr. Gillespie had been repaid the three hundred dollars. Now they had only the cost of gasoline, expressage, replacements and camp supplies. Their daily average had been more than three boxes of fish.

"But from now on fishing will fall off," Philip said. "We'll have to work harder too. Deeper water and longer runs."

Until now only Philip had received telegrams. Ann was startled the afternoon Chet Walker handed a wire to Jerry. When he read it and smiled, she knew it wasn't bad news.

"Doesn't that sound like Steven?" he said as he handed it to Ann.

She read the message. "What do you mean by promising a trip to Canada and then running off without me? I am with your father. He advises me to demand an explanation. Why can't I come? Why wasn't I invited? Am awaiting your wire. Steven."

Philip read it and looked astonished. "Doesn't he care how many words he uses?"

"Steven wouldn't consider that if he really wanted something," Jerry said. "I had promised to take him on a canoe trip this summer. Forgot it when I heard about the fish camp. Now what am I going to do?"

"Invite him up here, of course!" Ann said instantly, and then she stopped. "But a fish camp isn't a canoe trip. Would he like it?"

"Certainly he would," Jerry said. "But I was thinking of Philip. Would you mind, Philip, if I asked him?"

"Why should I?" Philip said. "He's a friend of yours, isn't he?"

Jerry wrote a telegram and showed it to the Jackmans. The message was brief but warm. Ann frowned.

"But you didn't explain about the camp!" she said. "There's no telling what he might expect. It's only fair to warn him!"

"Dad's told him the setup," Jerry laughed. "Steven knows what he's getting into." As Ann still looked unconvinced he added, "Besides, when it comes to wires, I hold with Philip. Ten words is enough for anybody."

On the way to camp Ann sat in the bow alone. She wanted to be alone. Even yet it did not seem possible that Steven would actually come to Far Lake. She had thought of it often, even imagined how it would be to have him as a guest at Fox Island, but the daydream had no sense of reality. It had been only something she had conjured to soften the thought she might never see him again. And now he would soon be with them in the camp.

It shocked her into taking mental stock of their equipment and planning changes. It was all right for Jerry and Philip to be so casual about a guest, but the responsibility of the camp was hers. Of course they would go often

to Fox Island and no one would be more instantly aware of the attractiveness of the big log house than Steven. But he would stay in the fish camp.

Later as they sat around the evening campfire Philip asked about Steven. Evidently Philip had been having misgivings, too. And no wonder. Ann was sorry Jerry had showed that silly wire. It hadn't even sounded like Steven. Philip asked Jerry if Steven had ever been in the bush.

"I know he can't help in fishing the way you do," Philip said. "But can he take care of himself?"

Jerry gave Philip's question several moments of consideration. Ann knew his hesitation wasn't because he didn't admire Steven. It was like Jerry to give an honest opinion. He'd realize the truth was fairer to Steven than over-praise.

"He's an amazing sort of person," Jerry said at last. "You're always discovering things he does know. He doesn't talk about them. They just happen to pop out. I know he's been in Maine. He took a canoe trip one summer and one fall he hunted moose with friends. He learned to ski in Switzerland the year an aunt sent him abroad to school. And he rides well. I've seen him. I guess that covers all I know about his outdoor life." He stopped, and then his voice took on sudden warmth. "But I liked him well enough to ask him for a canoe trip. That means something. I'd say that anything he did, he'd do well. Wouldn't you, Ann?"

"And he's fun too," she said.

"Sounds all right," Philip said. "I knew all along any friend of Jerry's would be. But it's going to seem sort of queer with four of us."

"You sound as though you didn't want him to come, Philip!" Ann said almost sharply.

"You know better," Philip said. "Of course I want him. All I meant was the three of us have had a lot of fun."

Two days later Steven's second wire arrived and even Philip's frugality in telegraph tolls couldn't be shocked by its length. The message read "Coming. Steven."

"Now we don't know when to meet him," Philip said.

"He didn't want to make us an extra trip," Jerry said. "Dad's probably told him of the post and he knows he has a place to stay until we come."

The telegram speeded preparations for the guest. On their next trip to Fox Island, Ann collected blankets, pillows, extra towels and dishes. Mrs. Jackman sent a large tin of her delicious shortbread.

"A friend of Jerry's!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad. You say his name is Steven Dorland? Haven't I heard you speak of him?"

"Surely, Mother, you remember!" Ann said. "Steven's the one who was so nice to me at Easter."

"Of course."

The next morning Ann gave the camp a thorough housecleaning, even taking down the tents to remake the bough beds beneath the ground cloths. When the boys came in with the morning's catch she asked for balsam boughs.

"And bring enough to make a bed for Steven," she called as Philip started with an ax.

He stopped in the trail. "Can't that wait till he gets here? We've got to ice the fish."

"But I want everything ready when he comes."

"You're right, Sis," and Philip laughed. "Guess this is one time housekeeping comes ahead of fish."

The third bed in Jerry's and Philip's tent awaited the guest for several days. Philip teased Ann about being so forehanded.

"I knew he'd send another wire about his train," he said.

"I suppose that last one meant only he was accepting," Jerry said.

Ann decided to stop wearing her best shirt and breeches every day and to prepare no more special suppers. Steven's imminent arrival was becoming an anticlimax.

And then late one afternoon when they reached the railroad they heard Steven had arrived. It was astonishing how many people were aware of his coming. An Indian told them first as they moored the boat at the Company float. Chet Walker told them at the station, and as they followed the trail to the post two hunters stopped to tell them. Mr. Gillespie told them again when he opened the door.

"Been here since the morning train," he said, "and we've had a fine visit. Now he's in the kitchen showing Louise how to make a Welsh rarebit. She

thinks he means a rabbit that wears no fur."

As they walked toward the kitchen they heard gales of laughter. Evidently a party was in progress. Three wives of hunters sat in a row against the wall enjoying the spectacle of a white man giving a culinary lesson. A dozen children romped about the room. Louise was giggling with delight as she watched Steven stirring something on the stove. He wore a big apron of Louise's and was so absorbed he didn't hear the door open. Then he looked up and saw them.

"Hello," he said. "We'd begun to think you might not ship today."

So he knew about the fishing camp. In her relief, Ann's welcome was even warmer than she had intended. Steven looked pleased and turned to the others.

"You're Philip," he said as they shook hands. "Jerry's talked of you all year. Did he tell you how I had to insult him before he'd ask me up here?"

"Why don't you learn to write a decent telegram?" Jerry demanded. "After that long screed you send another with just one word. How'd we know when you were coming?"

"You knew I'd get here as soon as I could," Steven said.

Louise exhibited Steven's handiwork. The rarebit was smooth and creamy and tasted wonderful. Mr. Gillespie came out to inspect it and urged them to stay for supper.

"Every man should be made to eat his own cooking," he said, and his eyes twinkled.

Ann knew he was anxious for company. The old Scotsman had been lonely. They hadn't stopped to chat as often as they should. So many evenings they'd been too tired or too busy to do more than buy food in the trade shop and rush home. Now apparently he'd had a wonderful visit with Steven and already they were fast friends, and during the meal they did most of the talking. Steven knew London, had seen buildings the manager remembered when he'd gone "as a lad to London town." Even better Steven had taken a trip through Scotland and actually visited the small village in which Mr. Gillespie was born. The old Scotsman's eyes misted over when he heard the village church still stood as he had known it.

When at last they departed, the Hudson's Bay man walked to the shore with them.

"Come again," he urged. "Come often. Don't know when I've had a finer evening. Does an old man good to hear news of the homeland."

By the end of the week Steven was so much a part of camp life it was difficult to remember when he'd not been there. He had brought about a few changes in camp routine. One was a pre-supper swim and everyone enjoyed it so much they wondered why they'd not done it before. It was wonderful to feel fresh and tingling from the cold water when they sat down for the evening meal. When someone complained of eating after dark, Steven made candlesticks of brown bottles. To be sure the light attracted the mosquitoes, but it was pleasant nevertheless.

Steven was a natural organizer. He worked one afternoon anchoring a float to which they could race in swimming, but when he produced a soft ball and bat even Jerry laughed and asked where he expected to play ball.

"The beach is big enough to throw a ball around," he said. "I brought it because I knew we'd need some sort of game."

Oddly enough they often played in the evening.

Steven helped with meals. He knew many different ways to cook fish. He sent to the city for various herbs and seasonings and showed Ann methods he learned one summer in France. Philip and Jerry said the seasonings spoiled the real fish flavor, but Ann liked the novelty of trying something new.

"We ought to give them fish baked in leaves and clay," Steven said to Ann. "Nothing but fresh fish flavor in that dish. And all the flavor!"

"You mean like bean hole beans?" Philip asked.

"Do you know how to make them?" Steven demanded. "I've heard of them for years."

Philip flushed with pleasure. He was proud of his bean hole beans. "I'll make 'em tomorrow if it isn't blowing so we have to lift the nets early," he said.

"Jerry and I can lift nets," Steven said. "But we can't make bean hole beans."

Steven worked as hard at fishing as the others. He had a natural grace of movement and Ann noticed he handled nets even better than Jerry, who sometimes got the leads and corks tangled. Steven never did.

The next morning no one had to lift nets early for the summer breeze was a mere zephyr. Philip dug the bean hole in the dry sand of the beach. Ann had soaked the beans overnight and now she boiled them, added salt pork, brown sugar and seasoning as she did for baked beans at home. Philip started a fire in the hole and brought quantities of jackpine windfalls. Steven looked at the huge pile.

"First you cut down about half a forest," he said.

Philip grinned. "That's right," he said, "but wood's the easiest thing to get in the bush."

After the wood had burned nearly an hour, Philip raked out the coals, set the beans, in a tightly covered pail, in the hole.

"We could still put in a fish wrapped in clay and leaves," Ann said.

"Who wants baked fish when he can have bean hole beans?" Steven said. "I don't."

It was nice of Steven to be so quick in not wishing to spoil Philip's triumph. Ann smiled at him.

Philip raked the hot sand of the sides over the kettle until there was a mound where the pit had been dug.

"They'll be ready tomorrow noon," he said.

No one had to pretend to like those beans, and it wasn't just because they were hungry they ate three servings. Each bean was a separate brown berry of delicious sweetness.

"That's the best meal we've had," Steven said, and he meant it. "But not everyone could make them."

"Sure they could," Philip said. "Next time I'll show you how much water to use and how hot to get the sand."

At such times Ann was certain Philip liked Steven. At others she wasn't so sure, though nothing definite warranted her feeling that he didn't. And Philip would never admit it, especially when Steven was Jerry's friend. But so often Philip and Jerry talked fish and fur farms, leaving Ann and Steven out of things. The other boys didn't mean to do it, and Steven didn't mean to talk so much about outside interests. Anyone who had done so many different things couldn't be expected to talk only on north woods subjects. This had all come about gradually, but Ann was aware how often they were not a group of four, but two pairs of people.

She was sure the others liked Steven. Her father and mother had shown it the first evening they went to Fox Island. Ann had heard her mother tell Jerry how interesting and vital Steven was. Her father had been unusually friendly. Steven had liked the Jackmans too and was as enchanted by the big log house and their life on the island as she had known he would be. The next day he spoke of them.

"Now I can understand why you're so different from other girls," he said.

"I'm not different."

"Oh, yes, you are. You stand out in any crowd. Different, and fascinating." Now she was sure he was laughing at her. "Perhaps you don't deserve all the credit. You know that house, that island, and even your family are—Why—they're romantic!"

"Dad and Mother are wonderful," she said, "but they're not romantic. They're—"

"I was talking about you," he said. "Don't try to—"

He stopped as Philip came into camp with a dry poplar log. She'd forgotten she had asked Philip for wood to make a hot quick fire and hoped he hadn't heard the word romantic. He would have laughed at the idea of anyone considering the Jackmans romantic. She hoped too that sometime Steven would reopen the subject.

"We're packing early today," Philip said, and he sounded cross. "Fish won't run more than three boxes. We'll take 'em in right after dinner."

"I'll go down and crack the ice," Steven said.

Cracking ice had become Steven's job because he'd never learned to dress fish fast or well. But cracking ice was hard and monotonous. Steven didn't pretend he liked it.

That afternoon while Philip and Jerry were carrying the boxes from the lake to the station Steven walked down the track. He came back elated.

"I thought I'd seen a lot of junk just before we got to the Far Lake station," he told the boys. "Must have been a wreck there sometime. A quarter mile down, but an arm of the lake is near it."

"What about it?" Philip asked.

"I found the hopper of an ore crusher. Must have been on its way to a mine. And a roller with burrs on it, and a couple of gears from a cement

mixer. One of the gears is large enough for a fly wheel and I could put it on the roller shaft. Make wood bearings for it. And a long handle."

"And then what?" Jerry asked.

"We'd have an ice crusher. Why else would I get excited over junk? We could run the boat in there, pick up the stuff and take it back to camp."

Neither Jerry nor Philip thought much of the idea, but Steven was fired with it. They helped him get the junk to camp and the next morning when they departed to lift nets they left Steven working on his machine. Jerry said it would take more time to build it than crush all the ice they'd use in one summer, and that evening it looked as though Jerry was right. Steven had not stopped to pack fish, crush ice or even to deliver the boxes to the railroad.

The next morning they jeered openly.

"You don't need to keep on fiddling with that thing just to get out of lifting nets," Jerry said.

Steven didn't answer. Ann wondered if he wasn't angry, but he laughed when the boat was gone.

"Jerry'll take that back," he said.

"Do you really think you can make it work?"

"I'll tell you later. If you hear me call, come a-running."

Ann went to the tent to do the camp work. Steven didn't like to be beaten and he usually wasn't, even in games. It was too bad Jerry had said so much about the crusher. Now Steven would never give up. She decided to listen for the boat and be at the shore when the boys came and try to keep them from talking any more about it. And then she heard Steven call.

As she ran down the trail she heard a banging and a clatter. At the icehouse door she saw Steven turning furiously at a big crank. A cake of ice was bobbing up and down in the iron hopper. And from a spout below came a stream of cracked ice.

"Steven! You did it!" she cried.

"I knew it would work," he said. "Watch their faces when they see this!"

The boys came soon afterwards. Steven started the ice crusher before the boat stopped and the noise almost drowned out the motor. Jerry and Philip ran to the icehouse, both laughing.

“Good for you!” Jerry said. “I never thought that thing would work.”

Philip stared at it in amazement and examined it in detail.

“That’s quite a rig!” he said. “Wait until Hugh sees it. You were smart to think that up.”

Steven smiled. All his customary good nature had returned. He was as pleased as were the others.

“I wasn’t smart,” he said. “Just plain lazy. I was bound to find a way to get out of work. I’d rather use my head any day than go on cracking ice.”

NINE

FISHING fell off as Philip had predicted. In August it became so bad Jerry said Philip's phrase didn't do the situation justice. The boys worked harder, traveled farther, spent hours sounding for deeper water, set prospect nets to find fish, and caught fewer fish. Occasionally they had a good day, but on others they did little better than pay expenses. Gasoline, replacements and camp supplies mounted fast. Philip frowned as he entered items in the ledger, but he said little.

It was like Philip, Ann thought, not to talk when things went badly. Even as a boy he'd always hunched his shoulders and kept on going. But he didn't drive the others.

"Can't be much fun for you two," he said to Jerry and Steven one night at supper. "I've got to keep on, but you aren't trying to buy silver foxes."

"Who says we aren't?" Jerry demanded. "Why else are we dragging in miles of net every day? Isn't that right, Steven?"

"We certainly aren't fishing for fish," Steven said. "If I never see another whitefish, I could live."

They laughed. No one had seen many whitefish that day.

"I meant what I said." Philip was very much in earnest. "You could be having a good time on a canoe trip."

"When you give up fishing, I will," Jerry said.

"It must be dull for Ann, though," Steven said. "Not much fun for her with us away so much. It's almost a week since we've had a swim."

"I can go with you on the long trips," Ann said. "We could take a lunch and have picnics."

"Fine, Sis," Philip said. "It would be like old times."

Steven stared at them for a moment. He had often said he envied the three the good times they'd shared. "Don't you people ever enjoy yourselves until things get tough?" he asked.

His astonishment was so genuine they looked at each other and smiled. This was one of those rare times when Steven seemed an outsider.

"Perhaps we don't," Jerry admitted. "At least we've had a lot of fun when things were tough. Ever forget, Philip, the day Ann was ready to tackle that claim jumper singlehanded?"

"When was that?" Steven asked. "I'd hate to take on Ann if she were really mad."

"She was mad that day," Jerry said. "It was the summer I first met the Jackmans. We were kids then, and went north with Hugh to drive a couple of men off his claim. The mine wasn't any good. Philip and I proved that. But we sent the claim jumpers piling for the railroad."

"Was Hugh disappointed about his claim?" Steven asked.

"Hugh's never been bitten by the gold bug," Philip said. "Neither have we. Give me silver foxes."

"Or fish," Jerry added.

The laughter following this sally wasn't quite so hearty. Jerry's remark had been much too close to the truth.

The next morning Ann packed a lunch and was ready to go with the others. Fishing wasn't exciting. The catch of two nets barely filled the live box and the two prospect nets held little promise. But they picnicked on a beach Ann had never seen before. Each one toasted his own bacon sandwiches and afterwards they drowsed in the sun. It was pleasant, and somehow very peaceful. Even Philip seemed to have forgotten for the moment his relentless search for fish.

"Imagine finding such a bay practically in our back yard!" Ann said.

A birthday cake island lay before them, as trim as though it had been set there solely for decoration. Behind them the green forest rose gently. A moose trail cut through the center and the break in the dark pines was dappled by bright August sunshine. Ann wished there was time to explore.

"Too bad we didn't bring swimming suits," Steven said. "We'll know better next time."

Philip stood up as though he were suddenly recalled to the present. "We'd better get going," he said. "It'll take time to set those prospect nets and we've got to get fish to the station."

They carried the lunch pack to the boat and were off. Jerry dragged the sounding line for half an hour before Philip was satisfied there wasn't a deeper spot for a new set. Then followed the daily rush to get iced fish to the

railroad. After supper Philip tinkered with the timer of the motor, which had developed a stutter on the way home from town. When it was finally adjusted he picked up his ax and began to split a dead birch log at the edge of the beach.

"It's still light enough to play a little ball," Steven said. "Here, Jerry. Catch!"

Jerry caught the ball, threw it to Ann and she threw to Steven. They stepped back to make the triangle larger and Ann looked at Philip and wished he would stop and join them.

"Come on, old Sobersides!" Steven called. "You can't keep in condition without some exercise."

The exercise joke about their work-filled days was getting stale, but Ann laughed to make up for the fact Philip didn't. Steven batted the ball to Ann. She caught it and threw it back. Her throw went wide and Steven ran to catch it and, like everything he did, he hurled his whole body into the effort. His dash carried him farther than he'd intended and he crashed into Philip. Ann heard a yell, saw Philip sit down suddenly. She and Jerry ran to him. Philip was taking off his shoepack. His gray woolen sock was wet with blood. Steven was bending over him.

"He cut his foot with the ax," he said. "It was my fault. I should have looked where I was going."

Philip's face was white. He looked dizzy.

"Did you hit a bone?" Jerry asked.

"Feels that way," Philip said through tight lips.

Ann started for the camp. "I'll get the first aid kit," she called.

"We'll take him to our tent," Jerry said. "Meet us there."

Ann was waiting in the boys' tent when they arrived. Steven and Jerry supported Philip, one on either side with his arms over their shoulders. The injured foot swung and as he crossed the tent to his bed, blood dripped on the tan ground cloth. Jerry cut away the sock. The gash was deep and the towel on which his foot rested was soon soaked with blood.

"You didn't hit an artery," Jerry said as he examined the wound.

"That would have been sweet, wouldn't it?" Philip said. "Wonder what I did cut." He moved his foot experimentally.

"It's a bad gash," Jerry said to Ann as she laid out gauze and bandage rolls.

"I'm a clumsy ox," Steven said. "I should have thought about his ax. I ought to be shot."

Jerry and Philip said nothing. Steven looked sick with remorse and Ann felt sorry for him, almost as sorry as she felt for Philip. In one way, it was harder for Steven.

"Philip knows how badly you feel about this, Steven," she said.

She began to dress the wound. Philip watched her in silence for a while. "Go easy, Sis," he said as she used an antiseptic. She thought the bleeding had begun to slow a bit, and she saw Philip wiggle his toes to make sure he could.

"No one but you could have hit a foot with an ax and not done more damage," she said, and then she felt a bit sick herself. Until now she had been too frightened and too rushed to think of possibilities. "Oh, Philip, you're so lucky!"

"Lucky!" Philip sat up in his excitement. "To cut my foot with an ax! An ax! Of all things! And after all the years I've swung one!"

"Take it easy, fellow," Jerry said. "Ann's only trying to tell you what a good axman she thinks you are."

Philip lay down again and his words faded into a mutter. Ann finished the bandage. It was a workmanlike job, secure and firm and thick, but she noticed a red spot already stained the white folds.

"Lie there," she said in an authoritative tone she hoped would impress him. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Jerry and Steven followed her outside.

"What do you think about it, Ann?" Jerry asked.

"I wish Mother could see that foot. I've done everything I can, but I don't want to be the one to decide about a doctor."

"I'll take you to Fox Island," Steven said.

Jerry nodded. "It's a good idea. I'll stay with Philip."

As Ann waited for Steven to cast off she thought how fortunate it was Philip had tinkered with the timer. She almost said it aloud, and then thought it might make Steven feel even worse, if that were possible.

It was dark when they turned in at Fox Island. Ann saw a light come on in the living room. Evidently her father and mother had already gone to bed. Hugh was standing on the float.

"Dave and the Missus will be down in a minute," he said. "What's happened?"

"Philip cut his foot with an ax," Ann said.

"Philip! With an ax!" Hugh repeated. "How'd that come?"

"I ran into him while he was chopping," Steven said. "We were playing ball and I was running."

"Is he hurt bad?" Hugh asked.

"I don't think it's very bad," Ann said. "But I wanted Mother to see it."

"Is that you, Ann?" her mother called from the trail.

A moment later Mr. and Mrs. Jackman walked onto the float. Before Ann had finished the story her father was starting the motor in his boat.

"It's best we go down there, Mary," and from his voice Ann knew how disturbed he was.

"I'll get a coat and our first aid box," Mrs. Jackman said.

The two boats set off in the darkness, but soon the fishing craft was far behind. It was a silent trip for Ann and Steven. When they reached the fish camp Jerry came to meet them with a light. He brought good news.

"Your mother doesn't think Philip needs a doctor," he said. "It's a bad gash, but it isn't bleeding so hard now. All he has to do is lie still and let it heal."

"Isn't that wonderful!" Ann cried.

"You don't know how wonderful," Steven said. "Now I won't jump into the lake. On our way back I was contemplating some such extreme measure."

They joined the others in the tent. Philip's pain had lessened. In their relief everyone pretended he'd not been the one who was worried. Philip said it was a fine trick to sneak off to Fox Island without telling him.

"But I'm glad, Ann, you came," her mother said. "It might have been very serious."

“Serious!” Philip repeated wrathfully. “What do you call being laid up in fishing season?”

“This gives you a good excuse to lay off while the fishing’s poor,” his father said.

“That’s just the time you have to fish harder.”

“Jerry and I won’t quit fishing,” Steven said. “I’ll work hard enough for two. It’s the least I can do.”

Jerry stared at Steven for a moment. “I never thought of quitting,” he said stiffly, and then he smiled. “It will be funny. Philip can stay in bed and send us off to work in the morning and when we come back with half loads he can tell us how much better he would have done.”

“And he might be right,” Dave Jackman said.

“He’s sure to be,” Jerry said.

“How long’s this thing going to take to heal?” Philip asked as his mother said good night.

“Ten days, or at least a week.”

“That long!” Philip’s voice was anguished. “I can’t stop for a week!”

Ann dreaded Philip as a patient. He had always resented illness and she knew he’d be more outraged by an injury. The next day even his pain didn’t reconcile him to staying in bed, and she was delighted when Hugh arrived in the afternoon. The boys were still fishing. Hugh brought books, the last copy of a magazine for fur ranchers and a huge chocolate cake. Hugh visited Philip for an hour.

“I’m so glad you came,” Ann said to the old trapper as she walked with him to the boat. “It did Philip good. I hope you’ve taken his mind off having to stay in bed.”

“Didn’t expect to do that,” Hugh said. “Ten days of fishing means a lot. And the way this happened didn’t help much. Philip’s never been the kind of axman who needed a tub to stand in when he chopped a stick o’ wood. Fact is I’ve known few better axmen than Philip. I don’t blame him for being proud.”

“But Steven didn’t think about Philip’s having an ax!” Ann said. There had been a tone of disapproval in Hugh’s speech.

"I'm not saying he did," the old trapper remarked mildly. "I was talking about Philip. Hope the lads bring in a good catch. It'll cheer him up."

Two boxes of iced fish weren't enough to cheer the fishermen. Philip was in the best spirits of the three that evening, and he continued to be optimistic the next day when Steven and Jerry reported gloomily they hadn't caught enough fish even to fill one box. He drew a rough map of Far Lake and suggested likely places to set nets.

"No one knows about the depths in this lake," he said. "You'll have to keep sounding until you find deep water. That's where the fish are in August."

"If I was running this show I'd let them stay there," Steven said. "We're only wearing out nets, Philip." He laughed good-naturedly and then added, "Of course we don't mind, if you don't. All we're using up is muscle."

Philip didn't answer, but for a moment Ann was frightened. She knew Philip was angry. Of course Steven had meant it for a joke. He was really doing his best to make up for his part in Philip's injury and it was like Steven to pretend to take things lightly. Jerry didn't, and that was one reason Jerry and Philip had seemed even closer since Philip's accident. Jerry realized, as she did, how difficult it was for Philip to lie helpless and have to hear of scanty catches.

For two days Ann ignored Philip's mood. She noticed small things. A difference in his voice when he spoke to Steven, a difference in the way he discussed the next day's fishing plans with Jerry. And most of all an air of not being present when Steven told a story. After all Steven was only trying to be amusing in an effort to cheer Philip.

These were small things, but small things could add up, and if this continued Steven might think Philip was still angry about his foot. It wasn't like Philip to be vengeful and unforgiving. She went to Philip's tent one afternoon when the other boys had taken the fish to the railroad.

"Surely you're not still holding that accident against Steven," she said.

"I never did," he said. "I knew he was a greenhorn."

"But you act as though you're peeved! You show it all the time! I've been watching your face when he talks!"

"How come?" he asked. "Why should you care?"

"How can we have good times at camp when one of you acts as though he's mad? Steven must have noticed it. He'll think you don't like him."

"I like him well enough," Philip said, "but he doesn't stack up with Jerry."

"They're different people! And how can you tell in so short a time? Besides," she hesitated a moment, "what has his stacking up with Jerry got to do with this?"

"Don't be dumb, Sis," Philip said.

Suddenly she found herself angry, more angry than she could remember ever having been with Philip. "What do you mean?" she demanded. She waited a moment for him to answer, and when he didn't, she went on with mounting indignation. "I'm not the one who's dumb. Why—why—we've known Jerry for years. We practically grew up together. The least we can do now is to like his friends and be pleasant to them. That's all I'm asking of you."

"All right, I'll be decent to him," Philip said. "I always have been."

She stared at Philip. He could be aggravating and she wasn't sure just what the talk had accomplished.

"It can't be very pleasant for Jerry when you act as though you didn't like his guest," she said.

"Have it your way, Sis."

An air of self-righteousness in Philip's tone left her helpless. This had come as nearly to a serious quarrel as she and Philip had ever had and she didn't want it to go farther. She didn't even want Philip to tell her what he had meant.

"I knew you wouldn't want Steven to think you were angry about his bumping into you," she said. "Heavens! He's done enough to show how sorry he is about it. Look at the way he's been fishing!"

"Sure," Philip said. "And he knew he didn't have to."

That evening Philip was much more affable with Steven. He laughed at Steven's jokes and he didn't talk fishing with Jerry. The four had one of the pleasantest evenings they had spent in a long time. Afterwards Steven spoke of it as he walked with Ann to her tent.

"Philip's feeling better," he said. "He'll be around in no time. I knew his foot wasn't going to keep him down long."

The next afternoon Philip surprised both boys when he came to the float on crutches. Hugh had brought them from Fox Island. They were leftovers

from Hugh's injury in the fight with the claim jumpers and Ann had never seen the crutches since the day Hugh had discarded them.

"I wasn't wishing anybody hard luck," Hugh said, "but I figured some day they might come in handy."

After two days on crutches Philip was able to go with the others in the boat. He couldn't lift nets, but he could steer and he could watch soundings and choose spots for sets. From then on his spirits rose. Also the catches grew larger. Jerry said Philip could smell fish even in deep water. More boxes of fish went out to the railroad and they started each day's work with higher hopes.

Ann never missed the boys' return or failed to see them off. They were about to leave one morning when they heard a gasboat. Philip listened.

"That's our boat," he said.

It was still early. Whoever was coming must have left Fox Island an hour and a half before. That fact gave Ann an uneasy feeling. No one spoke as they waited for the boat to come in sight. Hugh was alone and as he drew alongside the float Ann knew he must be bringing bad news.

"Came down to get you, Philip," he said. "There's sickness among the foxes."

"Oh, Hugh!" Ann cried. "That can't happen!"

Philip hobbled across the float and stared at Hugh.

"Is Pride sick?" he demanded.

"Not yet," Hugh said. "But two are down already and some others look bad. From what I've seen of dogs, I'd say we've got distemper on Fox Island."

TEN

FOR a moment no one spoke. Everyone looked at Philip. His face was white as he stepped into the motorboat with Hugh.

"Wait, Philip!" Ann cried. "I'm coming with you."

In another moment she was in the bow. As Hugh cast off, Jerry and Steven started forward. Jerry held the gunwale and looked at Philip.

"What can we—" he began.

"Hugh can't actually be sure it's distemper," Steven broke in. "Is it as contagious with foxes as with dogs?"

Philip nodded. "It's the worst thing that could happen on a fur ranch."

"What shall we do to help?" Jerry asked.

"I don't know," Philip said.

Hugh, bending over the flywheel, ready to spin it, turned to Philip.

"I looked at the medicines this morning," he said. "We got one bottle of distemper cure. Kept it for the team. But it wouldn't go very far with all those foxes."

"Can't we buy more at the Hudson's Bay?" Jerry asked.

"Mr. Gillespie always keeps it on hand for dog teams," Philip said. "But I don't know if it would be any good for foxes."

"We'll have it at the island by noon," Jerry said. "Come on, Steven."

The fish boat was getting under way as they started for Fox Island. Sitting in the bow, Ann remembered the afternoon her father had opposed Pride's purchase and said they could not afford the risk of an epidemic. Then such a disaster had seemed only a vague danger, something which would never happen. Now it threatened. Suddenly she realized it was more than a threat. Hugh had said two foxes were down and more were looking bad. The epidemic actually existed.

She looked at Philip in the stern. His face was bleak and she knew he was thinking of Pride the Second. The loss of Pride would be more than financial disaster. The blow might even end Philip's capacity to dream, and

that must never happen. Whatever else they accomplished, they must save Pride.

Mrs. Jackman met them at the landing. Philip's eyes asked a question.

"Pride was all right fifteen minutes ago," she said. "Your father's at the pens. Three more foxes are sick."

Ann, Hugh and Philip hurried along the trail to the fur farm. As Hugh held the outer gate open for them he said, "I moved the first two into the hospital this morning."

"That was smart," Philip said.

"But the hospital's only got two pens," Hugh said.

"I know," said Philip. "I thought we'd build a bigger one this fall. Now we've got to find some way to separate the sick ones."

Dave Jackman came from the storehouse shed. He was serious, but showed no signs of panic. In a crisis Ann was always most aware of her father's strength.

"We should have caught this sooner, Philip," Dave Jackman said.

"I'd noticed a couple of foxes was off their feed and sort of listless," Hugh said. "But I thought it was hot weather."

"It's hard to pick up early," Philip said. "They hide in their houses and you don't know how sick they are."

"These are sick," his father said. "I'm sure it's distemper. There's a discharge from their eyes and noses."

"Sounds like it," Philip said.

He ran to the hospital pens and looked at the sick foxes. The others waited.

"It's distemper, all right," he said when he returned. "Five down in one morning! We've got an epidemic!"

"How are we going about this, son?"

"First thing is separate the sick. Then we've got to keep the disease from spreading. Bill Daniels had distemper in his herd once. He told me about it."

Philip outlined the campaign. Pens of sick foxes must be screened so flies would not carry germs. Later, if Hugh had enough netting, it would be wise to screen all the pens. Feed and water pans must be sterilized.

Everyone should disinfect his hands and it was most important that whoever cared for sick foxes should not go near the others.

"Especially near Pride," Philip said. "It would be safer if one person took care of him and no other fox."

"Your mother could do that," Dave Jackman said. "I'll look after the healthy foxes and screen the pens."

"That leaves the sick ones to me," Hugh said.

"And I'll help Hugh," Ann added.

Philip's suggestions for nursing sounded simple and Ann wished there was more they could do. Sick foxes must be kept quiet, warm, dry and given nourishing food. Young foxes should have hot water bottles for extra warmth. All patients should be fed eggs, milk and quantities of rich broth. If they grew weak, doses of brandy should be given.

Hugh and Philip prepared to move the sick to isolation pens. Philip placed pans of disinfectant at the entrance of each pen so that in leaving he and Hugh could stand in the disinfectant bath to make sure their feet did not carry germs. Hugh spoke again of the distemper cure and Philip agreed it was worth trying.

"I'll make a gadget that helps in giving medicine," Philip said. "It's something Bill Daniels showed me. He always had a couple on hand. It's called a speculum."

He whittled the speculum from a piece of dry cedar. It was flat and narrow enough to be held in a fox's mouth and had two upright pieces to keep the speculum from sliding back and forth in the fox's jaws. He cut a long slit in the center through which to pour medicine. Hugh admired the ingenious contrivance.

"I'd never have thought of that," he said. "Whenever we've had to give medicine we've put 'em on their backs and fought it out."

"A speculum makes it easier and the fox doesn't get tired struggling," Philip said.

Isolation and hospital care were well started when Jerry and Steven arrived from town. They had bought every bottle of distemper remedy in the trade shop. And Jerry had thought of soup—had bought two dozen jars of Bovril.

"It's a good strong meat extract," he said. "It should be as good for foxes as for people."

"Of course it will be," Philip said, and he was so pleased Ann knew even if the meat extract didn't help the foxes it had already helped Philip.

"What's next?" Jerry asked.

"We'd better get this nursing business going," Hugh said.

All plunged into work. Jerry and Steven helped Dave Jackman screen the pens against flies. Mrs. Jackman made huge pots of soup and yet found time to visit Pride every hour. Ann turned the fur farm shed into a diet kitchen where she sterilized feed and water pans, mixed disinfectant, beat eggs, warmed milk, heated stones and wrapped them in pieces of blanket to serve as hot water bottles. Philip and Hugh nursed sick foxes, and although Philip had slim faith in canine distemper remedy they administered it. Between times they contrived isolation pens for future patients, building some in the storehouse shed to provide shelter for very sick foxes.

Supper was late. Philip and Hugh reported that some of the fox pups were shivering and sneezing and distemper symptoms had spread to the mink pens.

"We're liable to lose a lot of mink," Dave Jackman said.

"We'll be lucky if we bring a third of them through in good shape," Philip said absently, for his thoughts were on the foxes. "But we've got to keep Pride from catching distemper."

"His pen is screened and your mother scrubs up every time she goes near him, although she hasn't touched a sick fox," Dave Jackman said. "There isn't anything else we can do."

"Except to keep him built up with good food," Philip said. "He likes eggs and soup."

"Just say he likes good food and let it go at that," Hugh said. "That fellow's used to living high. The Missus'll have no trouble stuffing him. It's the sick ones I'm worrying about."

"How long will this go on?" Steven asked.

"Till it runs its course," Philip said. "Might be three weeks."

"And you can't stop it?" Steven looked incredulous. "Surely there's some way to handle an epidemic!"

"That's what we're doing," and there was an ominous restraint in Dave Jackman's voice. "We've isolated the sick. We're putting suspicious cases off for observation."

"It's got so a fox don't dare sit down and let his thoughts ramble lest Philip says he must be sickenin' with distemper," Hugh said, and he smiled at Philip. "And at that, lad, I think you're doing right."

"Someone's got to lift nets tomorrow," Jerry said. "Steven and I can do that."

"I'd better go," Philip said. "I want to find deeper water. We've never tried that bay in the east arm."

"There's no reason why Ann and I can't carry along here now you've got us started," Hugh said. "You can look in and see how we're doing."

"We can try it for a few days and see how it works out," Philip said. "Now more'n ever we need the fishing money."

After supper Hugh, Philip and Dave Jackman went to the pens. The others washed the dishes and sat on the veranda. Ann couldn't remember ever having been so tired and the others were as silent. She sat staring out at the lake in the darkness. Everything had happened so suddenly. And then she had to smile as she thought of the ironic twist to the long imagined visit of Steven to Fox Island. Who could have guessed that a battle against an epidemic would have been the occasion for his finally becoming a house guest? But she was too tired to care. It was dark when Hugh dropped in to say good night.

"Philip says one of you lads should use his bed," Hugh said. "He'll be in and out all night and sleep on the couch."

"Take Philip's room, Jerry," Mrs. Jackman said, "and we'll put Steven in the guest room downstairs. I got it ready this afternoon."

The room was attractive with old walnut furniture and gay draperies, but Ann was almost too tired to notice Steven's exclamation of delight. She left her mother making sure Steven had fresh towels and understood how the windows opened. Ann didn't care. All she wanted was sleep and rest. Jerry walked upstairs with her to the family bedrooms off the balcony. He stopped outside his door.

"Cheer up," he said and patted her shoulder. "This is only one of the tough times."

"If Pride gets distemper I can't bear it!" Ann cried. "Jerry, that just can't happen to Philip!"

"It mustn't happen," he said soberly. "Philip's—well, he's just one of a kind. You know how I feel about him." He went into his room and closed the door.

When Ann awakened next morning the house was quiet. She knew she'd overslept, but she was rested, ready for the day, even a day of which no one could foresee the outcome. She dressed, went downstairs and found her mother in the kitchen.

"Why did you let me sleep?" she demanded.

"You needed it," her mother said. "You and Hugh have three more patients."

"Where's Philip?"

"He's gone to lift nets, but he'll be back this afternoon." Her mother finished straining a kettle of soup into a pail and started toward the door. "I promised Hugh I'd take this to the pens as soon as it was ready," she said. "You'll find coffee on the stove."

Ann set a place at the kitchen table and made a piece of toast. She heard steps in the living room and Steven stood in the door.

Ann looked up. "I thought you'd gone fishing!"

"Jerry and Philip said one of us should stay to help." He entered the kitchen and came to the table. "Is there coffee enough for two? I've already had one breakfast."

Ann brought a second cup, set a place and put on another piece of toast. Steven didn't appear to be resentful about the others going off without him. She hoped he hadn't been left because Philip wanted to be alone with Jerry, or at least that Steven didn't suspect it.

"I knew your mother and you couldn't manage all this alone," Steven said. "I never saw two more exhausted women than you were last night."

"I don't remember walking up the stairs," Ann said.

She smiled across the table. The kitchen breakfast was cozy. It was strange how few times she'd been alone with Steven, yet it seemed right to be facing a crisis together. It was like him too, hurling himself wholeheartedly into their trouble. He had already visited the fur pens and knew of the new patients.

"It looks bad," he said. "We better give a hand."

Ann had been prepared for bad news, but not as bad as they received at the pens.

"I'm suspicious of four others," Hugh said. "If this keeps on we'll have more sick than well ones. It's spreading in the mink pens too."

The epidemic was really on.

That day, and the days which followed, became for Ann a vast confusion of sterilizing feed pans, mixing disinfectant solutions, preparing warm meals for sick foxes, helping Hugh give medicine and heating stones for shivering pups. She forgot even to be grateful to Steven for remaining. She was only glad he was there.

In the house was a similar confusion. Pots of soup. Meals at all hours. Meals for any number of people. Jerry and Philip arrived at odd hours. They were as apt to come before they lifted the nets in the morning as at midnight after they'd taken fish to the railroad. Both looked tired. Philip became so thin his mother was frightened. But his drive never faltered.

Steven was as stalwart in the kitchen as at the pens. He washed dishes, helped prepare meals and carried them to the table, and he never failed to be cheerful. It was a side of Steven Ann had not seen before. She was proud of him.

"And he's never cared about the foxes the way Jerry did," she said one evening to her mother.

"He's been a wonderful help. He has a way of plunging into things. At times I've thought he actually enjoyed it."

Something in her mother's tone aroused Ann and yet she couldn't have told what it was. It wasn't like her mother to be ungrateful.

"Of course he does," Ann said warmly. "He likes to do things for people."

As each day brought new cases of distemper they could only hope that soon the period of incubation would be over and that the measures they had taken would halt the dread contagion. They could only hope, too, that Pride had not contracted it. On each visit Philip asked about him even before he shut off the motor.

And now each morning they heard of deaths of both mink and foxes. They had discovered the malady too late to save all the victims, but by this

time they were too weary and too busy to give way to despair. Philip suggested he give up fishing. Hugh was nettled.

"If you think you can do more'n we're doing—" he began stiffly.

"You know I don't, Hugh!" Philip exclaimed. "Only this is too hard for you people."

"We'll sing out soon enough when we can't manage."

Afterwards Ann understood the old trapper's gruffness when she saw him carry away a dead fox.

"Didn't want Philip around when this happened," he said. "He was partial to this vixen. He'd planned to team her up with Pride."

Ann knew there would be more deaths. She didn't dare think of how many. Nor did she dare think of how many they had lost. Losing the mink was a disaster, but each fox she missed was a tragedy. Hugh tried not to let her see them when he carried them away. He abandoned all faith in canine remedies.

"We could pour it all down 'em and it wouldn't do any good," he said. "It's like Philip said. We got to count on nursing."

Ann and Hugh worked out a schedule of hours on duty, but Hugh rarely observed it. He prowled the pens at all hours. Ann protested that he never got enough sleep, but it did no good. She was angry the evening he barely took time to eat supper.

"I'm on duty until midnight," she said firmly. "You get some rest."

"One of the vixens is pretty sick," he said. "And that stove in the shed isn't a heater. All we ever expected to do was cook food on it."

"I can keep a fire going and I can give brandy," she said. "Don't dare step in that shed until midnight."

When Hugh gave in so readily she knew how tired he must be. After supper she and Steven went to the pens. Her mother loaned Ann a heavy sweater and said she'd leave a midnight supper on the table.

"Don't sit up," Ann said, but she knew her mother would.

It was dark before sick foxes in the outdoor pens were settled for the night. Steven held a bug with its lighted candle while Ann tucked heated stones beside shivering pups. After that they had only the very sick foxes in

the shed to care for. Ann put on tending gloves, heavy leather over cotton linings, and gave the patients hot broth.

"Wish I could do more to help," Steven said.

"You don't know how much you have helped!" Ann cried. "I—I—Why, Steven! I don't know what we'd have done without you!"

He smiled, and there was a warmly protective tenderness in the smile. "That makes it worth staying for," he said.

They sterilized feeding pans and made the cook camp infirmary shipshape for the night. Ann thought of the deeper tie which had grown between them. The past dreadful week had brought them closer. Once Steven had been exciting. Now she depended on him, and yet it was still exciting to be doing things with him. He walked to the pen of the sick vixen Hugh had warned them to watch.

"I'm afraid she's—" he began.

"Steven!" Ann cried. "We can't lose another!"

She poured brandy into warm milk and rushed over to the patient. Heavy tending gloves were scarcely necessary for the vixen was too weak to struggle. Ann managed to get the warm milk into her mouth and make her swallow. Afterwards they stood beside the pen. In a short time Ann was sure the dull eyes began to brighten. And then as the brandy gradually warmed and revived the fox she stirred slightly. Ann stared down, every particle of will power directed at her patient, begging her to rally. And then at last there was no doubt but that strength was returning.

The miracle of her living was the more wonderful because Steven shared it.

"Steven!" she cried. "I think we've saved her!"

Her hand was in his. His arms went around her. He bent his head to hers and kissed her. For a moment Ann stood there, in his arms, her thoughts whirling, entranced by the wonder of it.

The vixen moved, started to crawl toward her bed of blankets in the corner of the pen. Ann reached in and helped her and then rushed to warm woolen cloths to wrap around the vixen.

As she worked she thought of what a crazy place for it to happen. A rough log shed on a fur farm! She stared at the pens of sick foxes, the rusty cook stove, the work table heaped with feed pans, torn pieces of blanket,

bottles of medicine, tending gloves—all the paraphernalia of combating an epidemic. And even now she couldn't stop long enough to consider how important the kiss had been.

Of course Steven had kissed girls before. But never before had he kissed a girl in an infirmary for sick foxes. And a girl in worn breeches and a heavy woolen sweater much too large for her! A girl whose hair was stringy and whose face must be dirty and who undoubtedly smelled of disinfectant.

Ann put wood in the stove and began to heat a pan of broth for the vixen. Even a few tablespoons might carry her through. As she worked a low laugh escaped her.

"What's funny?" Steven asked.

"I was thinking about you. Coming north for a canoe trip with Jerry. He must have told you of wonderful lakes, lovely rivers and marvelous camps in a clean and beautiful forest. Instead you fished for the market. You spent your days lifting nets and cracking ice and taking heavy boxes to the railroad. And now you're nursing sick foxes. What a crazy summer it turned out for you!"

"That's what you think," he said. "But you ought to know better." His glance sought hers and she became absorbed in heating the broth. "I didn't come north to be with Jerry. I can see him at college. I came north to see you, Ann. You must have known it. Ever since last Easter when—"

They heard someone outside and Hugh opened the door.

"The Missus has got a hot snack ready for us," he said. "It's after midnight. I must have overslept a bit."

They told him of the vixen and her rally. Hugh looked at her.

"I believe you've pulled her through!" he said. "She looks better. I didn't think she'd live out the night. And she's the best vixen we had left."

He helped Ann give the soup and then walked to the house with them. He was more excited about the improvement of the vixen than Ann. He talked of nothing else as they ate. Ann was glad to have Hugh talk. She avoided looking at Hugh or her mother lest they read in her eyes the happiness she knew must be there. It was all too new, too confusing, to share with others.

Steven did not talk as much as usual, but that might have been because Hugh and her mother spent most of the mealtime in complimenting them on their successful nursing. Afterwards Hugh went to the pens and Steven and

Ann helped Mrs. Jackman carry the dishes to the kitchen. When Ann went up to bed, Steven stood at the bottom of the staircase and called good night. She was sure the tone of his voice carried a special message.

ELEVEN

THE sun was high when Ann awakened. Apparently it was hopeless to expect anyone to call her. Hugh was always finding reasons why he didn't need her, and her mother was almost as bad in devising excuses to let her sleep. But this morning she'd thought she'd surely waken. She must have been sleeping like the seven sleepers for when she looked out the window she saw the fish boat at the landing. Not even its noisy exhaust had wakened her.

She searched the closet to find something fresh and attractive. Her good clothes were at the fish camp and she began a mental list of sweaters and breeches that Philip could bring her.

As she dressed she wondered what Steven had been about to say when Hugh entered the hospital door, and what she would have answered. Obviously that was silly, for no one could decide how she'd reply to something she'd never heard, but at least Steven had said he had come north to see her. She'd wondered about that and had never quite dared to believe it.

Ann went downstairs as her mother entered the front door. She looked worried.

"When did Philip come?" Ann asked.

"An hour ago. Everyone's at the pens."

"Are things worse?" Ann asked.

"Hugh buried eight mink this morning and three more fox pups are down. But they're cross foxes."

"Then we haven't stopped it?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm glad you're up, Ann. I came to call you. I knew you'd want to see Steven before he leaves."

"Steven!" Ann repeated. She'd heard the words, but they had no meaning.

"A telegram and letter came from his aunt. The boys just brought them. She's sick and he has to go on tonight's train."

Ann listened with disbelief. It seemed incredible her mother was saying that Steven was to leave that night. And then, as the words began to make sense, she thought they'd still have a day. The train wouldn't pass through Far Lake until eleven-thirty. But a moment later she discovered they didn't even have a few hours. Everything had been decided while she'd been asleep. Steven was to go on the fish boat with Philip and Jerry. They must lift nets, pack fish and take Steven and the boxes to the railroad.

"But Hugh and I could take Steven in our boat," Ann said.

"Why, Ann! You know we couldn't spare either of you!" her mother cried. "Especially when the fish boat is going anyway. What can you be thinking of?"

Ann didn't answer. She couldn't share her thoughts with her mother, nor with anyone. And she couldn't blame Steven. He was as helpless as she. Jerry came down the trail a few moments later.

"It's tough about Steven," he said. "We'll miss him."

"Is his aunt very sick?" Ann asked.

"She's never been really sick the other times. Once when he rushed to her she dragged him off to Europe. That's how he happened to go to school in Switzerland."

"You mean just because a silly old woman thinks—"

"She isn't silly. I've met her and liked her. But she depends on Steven and she's done a lot for him. It puts him in a spot."

"Steven said his aunt has a bad heart," Mrs. Jackman said.

"That's as good a name as any other for what's the matter with her," Jerry said.

"What is the matter with her?" Ann demanded.

"Too much money. Nothing to do. And only Steven to look out for her. But she's taken care of him since he was a kid."

"Of course he can't forget that," Mrs. Jackman said.

"He doesn't," Jerry said. "He intended to stay north until I left, but he didn't hesitate a minute when he received the wire."

Steven arrived then. "You've heard about Aunt Nina," he said to Ann. "Poor old girl. She should never have tried to take Washington in summer. It

was partly my fault. She wanted me to go to Lake Louise with her. Now the doctors say she must get out of town."

Refusing Lake Louise for a fish camp in the wilderness was so fantastic Ann's thoughts reeled, but she suddenly felt better about his going. After all, he'd said the desire to see her again had brought him north.

"Where do you think she'll want to go this time?" Jerry asked.

"She mentioned a yacht cruise, or a few weeks at Mount Desert," Steven said. "But the Maine season is almost over."

Ann knew vaguely that Mount Desert was an island off the coast of Maine and the only people she'd heard of who owned yachts were in books. Steven's easy familiarity with such luxuries was exciting, and dismaying, but she remembered the other Steven, the Steven who had stood beside her watching a fox fight its way back to life, and then had kissed her.

Later she caught a glimpse of this Steven when they went to the end of the island to say good-bye to Hugh. As they passed the fox infirmary Steven said he'd left his knife there.

"Do you remember where I put it, Ann?" he asked:

As she went to help find it he pulled it from a pocket.

"I knew I didn't lose it," he said, "but I wanted to make sure you remembered last night. You know I'm coming back, don't you, Ann?"

She had time only for a nod. Then someone called on the trail to say they'd found Hugh. She went to the door and they were all together again in a group. That one short moment alone with Steven was her last before it was time to leave.

Everyone went to the float to see them off. Steven stood in the stern and waved until the boat turned the point. When it had disappeared Hugh squared his shoulders.

"Now let's go back and lick this thing," he said.

The new cases had filled Hugh with a great anger. Distemper was no longer merely a disease, but had become for him an implacable and ruthless force bent upon their ruin. All were frightened now, for with fresh cases they could not be sure any day or any hour that Pride would not be stricken. Mrs. Jackman redoubled her vigilance and found more excuses for visits to his pen. They talked about the situation that night at supper. Before he left, Philip had again suggested he give up fishing.

"If he could do anything we ain't already doing, I'd be for it," Hugh said. "But if he quits now he'll lose his market and he might not find another in September when fishing gets good."

"Jerry said he'd fish alone," Mrs. Jackman said.

"One man couldn't accomplish much," her husband said, "but it's like Jerry to be willing to try."

The epidemic raged two weeks longer. Ann lost count of hours, of days, even of deaths. It was enough each morning to make sure Pride was still well. She grew thin. She was tired. Even Steven's letter, written on the train, didn't help greatly. The world he wrote from, a world of well-being and security, seemed so apart from their own days of desperate toil and anxiety. Steven wrote with sympathy. He hoped everything was better and he added, "You know I wouldn't have left except I felt compelled to." Ann repeated his messages of sympathy at the supper table.

"Didn't he say he was going on a yacht trip?" Hugh asked.

His tone made a yacht sound almost sinful and Ann bridled. It wasn't fair to hold Steven responsible for the whims of a spoiled old woman.

"He'd have to go on a yacht if that's what his aunt decides," she said. "It's hard enough now for Steven. He can't help but feel at fault because he didn't go to Lake Louise this summer."

In early September the epidemic was at last under control. A few sick foxes were still housed in the infirmary and vigilance was still maintained. Hugh continued to prowl the pens at all hours, but Ann did not spend so much time there and Philip and Jerry did not visit the island so often.

The boys worked harder in the fishing. Lake trout had come into shoal waters to spawn and whitefish no longer lurked in the deepest places. This was the season when a fisherman could make up for scanty August catches.

Ann knew summer was almost over. Poplar and birch in the clearing had become gorgeous clumps of deep gold and pale yellow. On the ridges chrysanthemum colors enlivened the dark green of the forest. The September sun was warm at noon, but nights and mornings were chilly. Chores were finished before supper and evenings were spent, not on the veranda, but around the fireplace.

Soon Jerry would return to college. Steven had written he would be at Mount Desert for another month and that many of the large houses were

remaining open through the colorful Maine fall. He did not seem distressed about his aunt's health. Apparently his return had effected her complete recovery, but Ann did not tell the others. It was too difficult to explain it had not been a serious illness which recalled him.

No one talked of what the epidemic had done to their high hopes. They knew it had taken a dreadful toll of mink and foxes. The weeks of sleepless nights, constant anxiety and hard work had not been the time in which to reckon losses, but soon they must face the question of the depleted herd. The foxes were a pitiful remnant, seven adult, Pride the Second and thirteen pups. The mink herd had fared even worse. Its mortality was as high as Philip had predicted.

Ann knew, even in terms of pelts, the loss must run into thousands. In terms of stock it was even more disastrous. To be sure, theirs were still scrub foxes and not registerable. But Pride the Second's early ancestors had been scrub foxes and in time their own herd would have been eligible for registration as pedigreed. Philip had already started to record the histories and now many foxes whose family tree was known for two generations were gone.

If this sorry picture meant defeat, and Ann feared it could mean only that, they had not deserved the failure. An enemy had struck them down. Ann resented it more for Philip than the others. His insistence on the purchase of Pride the Second, despite all the hazards, might now appear merely headstrong. Her father had given no indication of his opinion. She thought he was waiting to talk to Philip and was sure of it the evening they heard the fish boat coming, and he looked up alertly.

Hugh lighted a candle in a bug and started for the door. "I'll give the lads a hand in tying up the boat," he said.

A short time later the three entered the living room.

"Shipped seven boxes this afternoon," Jerry announced. "Too bad we couldn't have had this kind of fishing when the days were longer."

"Then you lads could have made two sets a day," Hugh said with a twinkle.

Philip admitted the fishing wasn't that good and asked about Pride. "Suppose it's too dark to take a look at him," he said.

"Pride expects visitors any time," his mother said. "I've hardly let an hour go by without—" She stopped. "I'd intended not to mention the epidemic tonight."

"We've got to talk about it sometime," Philip said. "That's why Jerry and I came."

"You know what's left, Philip?" his father asked.

Philip nodded. "It's pretty bad," he said soberly, and then he added, "but it's still better than we started with."

"And the distemper didn't scare you?" his father asked.

"Sure it scared me," Philip said. "Never was more scared in my life. But it didn't scare me out, any more'n it did you."

"I was hoping—" Dave Jackman began, and then he got up quickly and poked at the fire, which didn't require poking. He stood with his back to them for a moment before he swung around. "I've been trying to think how to say this to you, son. The thing which would have made me feel the worst would have been to hear you say you were sorry we'd bought Pride."

Philip's eyes glowed. "Gosh, that's swell, Dad! Sometimes when things were bad I wondered how you felt."

"The same way you feel. Shake, son."

They stood up and gripped hands, Philip with sudden embarrassment.

"I know this has slowed us up," he said quickly.

"And we'll probably be slowed up a lot of times," his father said. "But we can't hit anything worse than we've been through. That's something. Now let's talk about getting this fox farm on its feet."

"I started a list of things we'll have to buy this fall while we can still bring the stuff by boat. We'll need new pens. Couldn't use the infected ones anyway. Big pens—and wire netting costs a lot of money."

"Let's see the list," his father said.

It was long. Philip explained the items.

Rolls of wire netting. Each pen was to be large enough to require a roll for enclosure. That meant two more rolls of narrow netting, one for overhang to prevent a fox from climbing out and another to bury inside around the edge to keep the fox from burrowing under. Sacks of cereal, wheat, rolled oats, cornmeal. Bone meal and oils for fat. Philip proposed they make their own fox biscuit, which would be better and far cheaper. This would require a mill to grind the cereals. And a new hospital under shelter

with a heater to keep patients warm. “That should be off by itself,” he said, “and big enough for six at least.”

“But we won’t need all this hardware, roofing and that many windows for one hospital,” his father said.

“I counted on a watch tower, too,” Philip said. “We ought to have one before spring so we can keep track of families. Hugh and I could build it this winter.”

Apparently Philip had overlooked nothing. He had listed medicines, tools and disinfectants. “I suppose you’ll need some things for the house, too,” and he turned to his mother.

“We’ll have to eat,” she said. “So will the chickens and the dogs. You know we always put in fall supplies.”

“Sure,” Philip said. “And we ought to buy at least two pairs of foxes. I’d counted on doing it with fishing money.”

“Let’s see what’s on the other side of the ledger,” and Dave Jackman brought out paper and pencil. “First, there’s our savings. Not much now. A few hundred. Say about four to be on the safe side.”

“By the time the season’s over Jerry and I’ll have made over two thousand dollars,” Philip said.

“You mean *you* will have made it,” Jerry said. “I’m only the paid hand. I’ve collected the wages we agreed on.”

“You’ve been cheated on the grub and good company the last few weeks,” Philip said.

“Jerry’s had a raw deal this summer,” Dave Jackman said. “But we’ve been the gainers. I don’t know what we’d have done without him. Now let’s get back to this fox ranch. We ought to get some money from our fur. There’s not much left of the mink herd. I counted thirty-five this morning.”

“If it was me, I’d pelt ’em,” Hugh said. “I always did believe in puttin’ all your eggs in one basket.”

“You’re right there, Hugh,” Dave Jackman said. “Anybody against the idea of giving up mink?” He looked around and heard no objection. “But we can do better than pelt ’em. We can sell live pairs to mink ranchers.”

“Sure we can!” Philip exclaimed. “We can advertise in the fur magazine and I’ll write Bill Daniels.”

"That leaves the fox pups," Dave Jackman said. "Had bad luck there. Saved only four silvers. The rest are cross, which will bring anywhere between twenty and a hundred dollars. We'll have to build up the ones that had distemper and get their coats in good condition. Can't count on more than five hundred dollars."

"Between the fur and savings we could run the house and take care of building," Philip said.

"But most of that money won't come in until pelting time and it's got to run this outfit for a year. That's the trouble with a fur ranch. Money comes only after fur is prime."

"But I'm going to fish again next summer," Philip said. "I'll put up ice on the mainland close to Fox Island."

"And either you or me, Dave, could fish with him," Hugh said. "A couple a thousand for a season isn't anything to overlook."

"It's going to be a tight squeeze," Dave Jackman said. He added figures and frowned. "We might not be able to stretch to buying silvers this fall."

"I could run a trap line," Hugh said.

"Thought you believed in keeping your eggs in one basket," Dave Jackman said. "You won't have time to get a trap line started with all the work we've got ahead. New pens, hospital, tons of stuff to bring from the railroad. And Philip wants to fish until freeze-up, don't you, Philip?"

"Have to," he said. "We need the money. I think I've got a man when Jerry leaves. I can afford five dollars a day while the fish are coming. Emil says his cousin, Charlie Burntside, might take the job. He'll have a little time before he starts tripping for the Company this winter."

"Any cousin of Emil's should be good," his father said.

"How soon do you think you can have the netting and stuff here, Dave?" Hugh asked.

"I'll get off the order tomorrow," Dave Jackman said.

"After fishing's over I can help with the pens," Philip said. "We can get them finished before winter."

"We should," his father said, and then he added, "I'm sorry, son, about not being able to buy those silver foxes right now. But I suppose waiting isn't going to hurt us."

"And maybe we won't have to wait," Philip said suddenly.

Ann saw her mother stare at Philip. Counting on fish yet in the water wasn't Philip's usual method, but his last speech had been unlike any he'd ever made. He must have realized it for he stood up.

"How about getting back to camp?" he said to Jerry.

They went to the float to see the boys off. Mary Jackman kissed them. Always chary of emotion, Philip pecked her cheek, but Jerry put his arms around her.

"It's been wonderful to have you with us through all this," she said.

"What's a home for if you don't stick around?" Jerry laughed.

Philip leaned out of the boat and shouted above the motor, "See you soon. Maybe in a couple of nights."

On the trail to the house Hugh stopped at the path which led to his cabin.

"I've stood all the figurin' I can take in one night," he said. "Makes me dizzy."

At the house Dave Jackman banked the fire and turned out the big lamp.

"Hugh's right about figuring," he said. "It's time for bed."

They went up the staircase and stopped for a moment to look down on the big room below. Little tongues of flame escaped the blanket of ashes to cast momentary reflections on satiny log walls. The room seemed so peaceful, and terribly secure.

"Aren't we a lucky family?" Mary Jackman said.

"How do you figure that, Mary?" her husband asked.

"Two men who can have a vision! It's better than the average."

Dave Jackman chuckled. "And how about the two women who back 'em up?" he asked.

The next morning had a reassuring everydayness. Knowing their enterprise would continue had put them on an even keel. Ann took charge of the convalescents. Hugh did his ordinary chores and then departed for the mainland to cut cedar posts. He reported he had cut fifteen, and seemed pleased.

"It's a start, anyway," he said to Ann. "Twenty posts to each pen'll make quite a heap."

“Each pen!” Ann said. “How many do you expect to build?”

“No telling,” he said. “We can’t afford to be runnin’ out of pens after the ground freezes.”

The next day at sunset the fish boat rounded the point. Mary Jackman smiled as she put two extra places at the table.

“I was sure they’d be here for supper,” she said, “but they must have worked like beavers to ship fish so early.”

The boys had shipped six boxes and brought the mail. Philip handed Ann a letter from Steven, which she laid beside her plate. She expected Philip to ask why she didn’t read it then, but he ignored the letter. His eyes were glowing.

“Jerry heard from his dad today,” he said.

“Is he well?” Mary Jackman asked.

“Better than that,” Philip said. “We didn’t want to tell you the other night. We weren’t sure yet. Tell them about it, Jerry.”

“I wrote Dad about a little money my mother’d left me,” Jerry said. “I wasn’t to get it until I’m twenty-one, but Dad says he’ll advance it. He’s as pleased as I am about my reason for needing it now.”

“Three thousand dollars!” Philip shouted. “I guess that makes Jerry a partner in this game. Who said we’d have to wait to buy a few pairs of silvers?”

TWELVE

Ann, like the others, was surprised, but after the first moment she wondered that she had been. It was so right, so natural, for Jerry to be one of them. And what a pair he and Philip would make! Each brought something to the partnership, and yet they looked at life alike. She was glad for them even while she felt a twinge of hurt that they had not told her. Yet she should have known. A year before, six months before, she would have. Then not an inflection in Philip's tone escaped her.

"Philip almost gave it away the other night," Jerry said. "I was sure Ann guessed it."

"She didn't even suspect," and Hugh chuckled. "I knew she didn't yesterday when we were talking about posts."

"Did you know, Hugh?" Ann demanded.

"Nobody had to tell me. Those lads teamed up a long time ago."

"But you didn't guess we'd have three thousand dollars to buy silvers," Philip said.

"I'm not used to thinking in that kind o' money, lad."

"Does your father know how it will be spent?" Mary Jackman asked.

"Certainly," Jerry said. "And he's for it! That was the idea. He'd always thought the money would give me a start when I knew what I wanted to do. Only trouble was, I never could decide. I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer. He didn't especially want it either."

"He always said he was in the wrong game," Dave Jackman laughed, "but I didn't think he meant it."

"I'm sure he did," Jerry said. "Perhaps knowing he meant it kept me undecided. At college all the other fellows knew exactly what they wanted. I was beginning to be afraid I wouldn't amount to much. That's what's so fine about this!" His words rushed out. "I know I want to be a silver fox rancher, but I never dreamed I'd have a chance to come in with you."

"It's the other way around," Dave Jackman said. "We never dreamed we'd have a chance to get you. Have you lads figured out the setup?"

"It'll work out all right," said Philip casually. "No chance of trouble between us and Jerry."

"That's no way to handle business," and his father's tone was sharp. "We'll have to make some kind of arrangement. Jerry has to be protected and—"

"Why not let John Sloane draw up the agreement?" Mary Jackman asked.

"It would take you, Mary, to think of that!" her husband said. "Anything John Sloane thinks is fair is more than fair to us. I'd only worry for fear he'd cheat Jerry."

"I'm the one who's lucky," Jerry said. "You've got a fur farm started, an island, foxes, paddock fence and pens, everything you've made in years of work. I'm buying in on a going concern. And that's the least I'm buying into."

"And we're getting a lot more than three thousand dollars, lad," Dave Jackman said.

Jerry and Philip had been making plans for weeks. Jerry had already decided not to go east for college, but to take business administration and some science at a university in the middle west.

"That'll give me a chance to spend vacations on fox ranches," he said. "And I want to visit Bill Daniels at Thanksgiving."

"Jerry's going to St. Louis Christmas," Philip said.

"It'll be too early for fur auctions," Dave Jackman said. "Ranchers will only be getting their pelts to market."

"I know," Jerry said, "but I'll have a chance to look at fur our competitors are raising. That's worth the trip."

Supper was almost over when Philip asked suddenly what they would call the company. "We could call it Far Lake Foxes or Fox Island Ranch," he said. "What's the matter with Big Six Company? Sounds a little like the Prince Edward Island people, but we—"

"There's only one name for this company," Jerry said. "We'll call it Jackman Foxes. That's a name which will mean something."

Sparkling September days rushed past. They worked through every hour of daylight, but it was work that sprang from high hopes and no one minded being weary. The motorboat made countless trips from the railroad. Food for people, dogs, chickens and foxes poured onto the island. Every square inch of storeroom was crammed. Building material piled up at the pens.

Everyone had something to say about plans. Pens were to be in a double bank with room for additions at each end. A five-foot space between pens held down a possible spread of contagion and also would keep fox neighbors from getting on each other's nerves. The new hospital would have pens for six and a connecting shed would permit patients a choice of fresh air, sunlight or heat from the stove. The Jackmans had learned a great deal about the care of the sick in the epidemic.

The watch tower would be two storied. The lower floor could be used for storage and the upper commanded a view of the pens. Next spring careless mothers would be detected, selfish fathers curbed and marital arguments smoothed over. The old utility shed must serve another year. Hugh had always called it the cook camp, but Philip and Jerry had ideas for a structure which they referred to as the administration building. Ann suspected, however, it would always be called the cook camp.

Hugh and Dave Jackman spent every spare hour digging post holes and a two-foot trench around each pen. Digging must be finished before ground froze. The posts for six pens made a huge pile. Hugh had towed them from the mainland. Each post was of cedar, twelve feet long and four inches in diameter. Hugh boasted that the posts were free, never counting the hours and labor which had gone into them.

In addition they had the usual fall chores. The garden was dug and its yield stored in the root house. A bin of assorted carrots, parsnips and chard held winter vegetables for foxes. Whitefish were dried on racks for dog food.

After the first hard frost Ann and her mother gathered highbrush cranberries. This was always one of the loveliest September expeditions. The bright berries on long graceful branches hung over the banks of the river, making a crimson aisle of the winding stream.

Ann and her mother filled pails and huge birchbark baskets and went home to make the jam. The tangy preserve brought out the flavor of moose, venison and partridge and was wonderful with hot homemade bread. Every winter the Jackmans used gallons of it. Late in the evening Ann screwed the cover on the last jar.

"Highbrush cranberry jam always means winter is just around the corner," her mother said.

"You're looking forward to it this year, aren't you?" Ann asked.

"It will be the most exciting winter we've ever had. Sometimes I feel as though we'd just started living in the north. I wonder if it will always be this way. I hope so."

"And you say Dad and Philip are the dreamers!" Ann laughed.

Jerry stayed as long as possible, carefully calculating the last train which would enable him to arrive in time for registration. He hated to go and spent the last day at Fox Island. Philip couldn't join them because he was inducting Charlie Burntside in the fishing job.

Ann and Jerry spent hours at the pens with Hugh and her father. Jerry's new rating as a regular member of the firm had wrought a change. Hugh, never prone to ask advice, turned to him for his opinion. Jerry's manner was the same as his father's, quiet but unhesitant, and what he said made sense.

"This here magazine has so many gadgets," Hugh said as he turned the pages of the latest issue. "What do you think about these catching tongs, lad?"

"I'll find out," Jerry said, "but I'd be against them. I don't see how they could help but frighten foxes. That's the very thing we don't want to do."

"I think you're right," Hugh said. "We'll go on handling our foxes the way we always have."

In late afternoon Jerry suggested a walk to Ann.

"Where would you like to go?" she asked.

"Is the spruce swamp too far?"

She had hoped he'd suggest it. The swamp would be lovely. The stream which meandered through would be lined with golden elder, and crimson vines would spot the dimness under the interlaced spruce branches. They paddled to the mainland, crossed a ridge and went down into the swamp, following a moose trail along the stream.

"This is the first place you ever brought me," Jerry said. "Remember the day we came here to gather caribou moss? That was the afternoon I first fell in love with the north."

"I remember how excited you were," she said.

"You didn't even know I was excited," he said. "You were too busy impressing Ken."

"Ken!" she repeated. "Why, I haven't thought of him for years! I don't remember I liked him even then. It was you and your father who brought him north! Weren't we a funny bunch of kids? You and Ken were the first outsiders Philip and I had ever met. We were really scared to death of both of you."

"You didn't act it. As I remember, you were rather bossy. And it bothered me to have a girl do so many things I couldn't."

They walked on. Ann stopped to admire a huge red mushroom. Bright crimson, with fragile white flesh underneath, it made a vivid splash against the deep bed of dark green moss.

"I suppose it has enough poison to kill a dozen people," she said. "But it looks wonderful."

Jerry wasn't even listening to her.

"Is it Steven, Ann?" he asked.

She'd been afraid he might ask. At least she'd been afraid in those rare moments when she was willing to admit even to herself that Jerry might think of her in any other way than just the girl he'd grown up with.

"I—I—I think it is," she said at last, and then when she saw his face she added swiftly, "But that doesn't hurt you, does it, Jerry? You know how it's always been between us. Why, I couldn't bear to hurt you!"

"Of course it hurts," he said. "I'd hoped it would be different."

He didn't look at her. They were standing by a spruce tree and he turned and began to strip off long streamers of caribou moss. As the cuplike roots came free from the rough bark they made a sound like tearing paper. Ann thought he wasn't going to say anything more. She was still searching for some way to fill the awkward silence when he looked up suddenly.

"I'm going to try not to let this spoil things," he said. "You know that, Ann."

She nodded miserably. This was much harder than she'd thought it would be. She put her hand on his arm. "Jerry! Sometimes I wish it had been you."

"That doesn't help much," he said grimly. "Let's go back."

She didn't blame him for being cross, and hurt too. It had been a stupid thing to say. Jerry couldn't help not having been the one. Neither could she. It was just the way things were. On their walk home it was the first time she and Jerry had difficulty in finding things to say.

All through supper and afterwards, when they took Jerry to the railroad, she kept wishing she could explain. She hated to have Jerry leave feeling as he must, but she couldn't explain something she didn't understand. It was as though she were being hurried along a path not of her choosing. Yet she didn't stop. And she knew she wouldn't. How could she tell a thing like that to anyone?

Philip had come to the station with five boxes of fish and the report that Charlie Burntside was a good workman.

"He won't stop to talk about fox ranching either," Philip said, and Ann knew Philip was only telling Jerry how much he would miss him.

October days had zest. They stirred Ann and yet there was something sad about autumn's last defiant stand. Winter was so inevitable. Already it had made encroachments. The bright foliage was gone and birch and poplar held bare branches to the sky. Scarlet vines which had masked the ground with gay color were now black and shriveled against bare granite boulders. At the lake, thin fingers of ice reached out from shore and when Ann set the canoe in water she heard the silvery tinkle of ice particles striking against each other.

Freeze-up was just around the corner.

Work continued on the pens. The new tenants had not as yet been ordered. Jerry and Philip wrote innumerable letters and compared points and ancestry of various herds. They didn't expect to be able to afford as fine a fox as Pride the Second, but they were determined not to jeopardize the future herd by an unwise decision. It had begun to look as though fishing money could be stretched into the purchase of a pair of foxes. Already profits from the previous year were coming in. They had sold pairs of live mink through Bill Daniels and also a few cross fox pups. Apparently not every rancher insisted on having only the royalty of fox land.

"The boys should have one pair of foxes out of all they earned," Mary Jackman said. "And we're provisioned for winter with everything but meat."

Moose season would open in mid-October. Hugh had discovered where two fat bulls were hiding, but he feared they'd not be there in hunting

season.

"Looks like they read game laws and carry a calendar," the old trapper grumbled. "Night before opening they'll light out for the ridges. I don't mind going in for them, but I hate to pack 'em out."

The morning Ann awakened to find a thin sheath of ice stretching from island to mainland she knew Philip would soon be home. He couldn't afford to risk being frozen in at Deep Bay. By noon the ice was gone, broken into tinkling fragments by a breeze. In the afternoon they heard Philip's boat. Tents, nets and camping equipment were piled in the stern. Charlie Burntside had been taken to the post. The fishing season was over. Philip had made twenty-three hundred dollars.

"Told you we'd run better than two thousand," he said. "Jerry and I knew we'd earn a pair of silvers."

"You earned 'em," his father said, and his eyes were proud.

Philip had brought two letters for Ann, both from Steven. He'd spent a few week ends with his aunt at Washington. "Poor old girl has missed me," he said. And he'd been to New York for new plays, art shows and a concert. It all sounded very exciting. "You'd love this city," he wrote. "Makes you feel you are really living." He asked why he'd not heard from her. "You know I like to hear what you are doing." And then he ended, "I miss you."

She read the letters and put them in a pocket. For a week she'd had an unfinished letter to him on her desk. It was difficult to make winter preparations at Fox Island sound exciting. She knew they were, yet somehow she couldn't write of them in that breathless style in which he wrote. Her letters always seemed so down to earth compared with his.

At the supper table Philip read the sheaf of Jerry's letters. He had searched book stores, found a volume on fox farming, had mailed it and some government pamphlets. He was on the trail of two pairs of silvers. Bill Daniels said they were good foxes and might be bought fairly reasonably. "I'll have a look at them Thanksgiving," he wrote. "It will be worth holding off to have Bill Daniels' advice."

"Jerry's got a good head on his shoulders," Dave Jackman said. "We won't have the pens finished until around the middle of November anyway."

"We can start putting in posts tomorrow," Philip said. "With three of us, it should go fast."

"Know what day tomorrow is?" Hugh asked.

"Something special?"

"Moose season opens."

Philip's eyes lighted. He and Hugh were old hunting companions. "Then it's no day to start fox pens," he said.

"I was hoping you'd feel so," Hugh said.

They were off at daylight. Hugh said they'd be home by dark with luck and otherwise not to expect them for two days.

It was three days later before they paddled home weary but triumphant. A quartered moose was in the canoe.

"And there's another down the shore aways," Hugh said. "Missus, we're going to eat this winter."

"I've never doubted it, Hugh," she said. "When are you going to get your moose, Dave?"

"Tomorrow. It's waiting for me behind the ridge. When I go after meat I don't make a fall picnic of it."

"And you won't have half as good a time as the lad and me did," Hugh said. "It's a long while since we been camping together."

The last week in October was a drive to beat the coming of deep frost. The three men worked on the pens. The posts were sunk and the carpet netting was laid two feet deep around the sides of the pens, and then all stumps and roots were cleared from the floor so that the foxes could not injure themselves. Now the pens could be finished even if the ground froze.

Ann and her mother spent an afternoon in the spruce swamp. They gathered a huge pile of caribou moss and left it to be taken back by dog team when Philip put up ice. It would be hard to gather in the winter when the interlacing branches held a canopy of snow. As they pulled the streamers from the branches and Ann heard the faint tearing sound, she thought of Jerry and how he'd looked that last day.

At supper Hugh said they were in for an early freeze-up. He had been saying it for a week, but now an icy chill in the air confirmed it. Bays and small streams had been frozen for days.

"I'll take the mail into town tomorrow," Philip said. "Might be our last chance for a couple of weeks."

They never knew how long it would take for the ice to form and until then they would be prisoners on Fox Island. Everyone wrote letters. Even Hugh sent an order for a shirt and socks. He had been intending to for weeks, but now the imminence of freeze-up had speeded him into action. Ann wrote to Steven. She hoped she'd made freeze-up sound dramatic.

Philip and his mother took the mail to town. They fought a northwest wind on the way home.

"But it was worth it," she reported. "We had dinner at the post and I met some hunters who were still trying to get their moose. I hope I didn't sound too smug when I told about our three."

After supper it suddenly grew very still. The stars were bright and the whole north seemed to be awaiting the hand of winter.

"She's here," Hugh said.

Ann knew that ice was making.

THIRTEEN

NEXT morning as Ann passed the open door of her mother's room she heard a call. Her mother was in bed. The mere fact was shocking, for Ann couldn't remember a morning when her mother had failed to be one of the first up.

"What's the matter?" Ann demanded.

"Don't look so tragic," her mother said. "It's only a strained muscle. I must have done it gathering moss, and perhaps that trip to town wasn't wise. It was cold and windy coming home."

She knew as well as Ann that no one could strain a muscle tearing caribou moss from spruce trees. Her face was drawn and there were fine beads of perspiration on her forehead.

"You're in pain!" Ann said.

"A little. It hurts me when I breathe. But it's only a sore muscle."

Ann felt of her mother's hands. They were dry and hot, and she was sure her flush was the flush of fever.

"Don't worry your father about this pain. I know it's nothing serious."

Ann went downstairs. The heater was roaring. Logs blazed in the fireplace and her father was in the kitchen. He had started coffee.

"What's the matter with Mother?" Ann asked.

"She's sick," he said. "And the first day of freeze-up! We've got to have a doctor."

"Then you didn't believe her story about the muscle."

"Of course I didn't! It's no use asking her the truth. She's afraid we'll worry."

"I'll take her temperature," Ann said. "Where's Hugh?"

"Down at the lake looking at the ice."

A few moments later Hugh returned. He hung up his coat and warmed his hands at the stove.

"She's frozen clean across and as far as I can see," he said. "It'll still be open at the narrows. But there's a good inch around the island. An inch and a half would bear a man's weight. He'd have to go careful, though. I'd take to shore at the narrows."

"No one could make it today, Hugh," Dave Jackman said.

"I suppose not," the old trapper said reluctantly. "But by late tomorrow it might be solid in time to catch the night train."

"But Mother couldn't travel!" Ann cried.

"I was figuring I could make that train, get to the city in time to catch myself a doctor and bring him back the next morning," Hugh said. "The Missus ain't going to have to take the risk of wiring for one of them birds!"

As worried as she was, Ann smiled. She could imagine Hugh arousing a doctor in the middle of the night and, if necessary, driving the man before him. There was comfort in the thought of how unshakable Hugh would be in his purpose.

"We can't count on making town by tomorrow," Dave Jackman said.

"Can't count on anything in freeze-up, Dave. You know that as well as I do."

Dave Jackman nodded. It was the first time Ann had ever seen him irresolute in a crisis, but it was the first time too her mother had been really ill. Philip entered the kitchen door.

"I got out the dog harnesses and looked the toboggan over," he said. "Everything's in good shape. How's Mother?"

"We'll know more when Ann's taken her temperature," his father said.

Mary Jackman watched Ann read the thermometer. "It's nonsense, everyone making such a fuss about a little pain," she said. "I'm sure I'll be all right in a few days."

"A temperature of a hundred and three isn't just a little pain," Ann said. "Don't dare get out of bed."

"I didn't plan to," her mother said. "But don't tell your father. He worries if he even sees a thermometer. All men do."

Ann reported the temperature before she fixed her mother's breakfast tray. Everyone looked serious.

"Is that dangerous?" Hugh asked.

"It could be," Dave Jackman said.

Hugh went to the back door and stared at the sky.

"Hope it turns cold fast," he said, "but I don't like the way the wind's shifting."

After breakfast Hugh helped with the dishes before he went to work on pens. "You got the job of two now," he said. "And none of us knows how much the Missus has done. She always acted as though it wasn't any work at all."

"For Heaven's sakes, Hugh!" Ann cried, and her tone was ragged. "Don't talk as though—" She stopped, then finished more quietly, "as though she would be sick long."

"Didn't intend to," Hugh said. "Want me to take care of Pride?"

"I think I'd better," Ann said. "He's grown used to having a woman bring his meals."

Dave Jackman came from the sick room. He carried the breakfast tray and appeared less worried.

"She ate it all," he said proudly. "I stayed long enough to make sure she did. You know, Ann, if a sore muscle has got anything to do with this pain, why wouldn't it be a good idea to tape it with adhesive? I suggested it and she agreed to try it."

"I'd thought of that," Ann said. "And we've got to keep her warm and quiet. I've given her a hot water bottle."

"Want me to put another log on the fire?"

"The house is like an oven now," Ann said. "Why don't you help Philip and Hugh with the pens? I'll call you if I need you." When he still looked undecided she added, "Really I will! I promise!"

At the door she kissed him. He looked so lost and helpless.

"Don't worry, Dad," she said. "I'm sure she'll be all right."

"We'll all feel better when we get a doctor," he said.

It was noon before Ann's work was finished. Pride had been fed, the housework done and her mother made comfortable. It seemed strange to be acting as nurse to her mother. It had always been the other way around. She combed her hair, gave her a sponge bath, taped her chest with adhesive and darkened the room. Her mother smiled.

"You're a good nurse, Ann."

"You've never given me much practice."

Her mother said the adhesive taping helped the pain. "And your father was so proud he thought of it."

"Did he think of it, or did you?" Ann asked.

"A little of both. But it helped to take his mind off freeze-up. What a time to choose to be sick! That's what worries me the most."

"You needn't sound as though you were to blame."

"I didn't plan it this way," and then her mother suddenly became very serious. "But I want to talk to you about it. I want you to promise not to let anyone start to the railroad. Not until it's safe to go. No matter how sick I am!" She sat up in bed in her excitement. "You know, Ann, men feel so helpless in an illness. They get panicky. I'm counting on you to keep your head."

"I will, Mother."

Ann meant it. Now she wondered that she'd smiled at Hugh's plan that morning. She would have been to blame had he started. This was a matter for women to decide, and her mother was counting on her.

"You're not to lie here and worry about such a thing any longer," Ann said.

"I won't now, Ann." Her mother smiled. "But I'm so glad you're here."

Ann brought a fresh hot water bottle and tucked it under the covers. Her mother said she felt much better already. She was sure she wasn't going to be really sick. Now a nap was all she needed.

Ann tiptoed downstairs and warned the others not to enter the living room lest they waken her. It was a hushed house. Late in the afternoon when Mrs. Jackman was still sleeping, Ann went to the fur farm. The men were working with a ferocity which seemed directed at some unseen foe. One pen was practically completed. The nine-foot fencing was in place, and they were putting on the overhang of two-foot netting at the top. Philip was building the nest boxes. They were elaborate with inclined ramps to the entrances, hinged covers so they might be easily cleaned and a space around the small inside compartment which was to be filled with caribou moss for insulation against cold.

Hugh stopped and looked at the sky. “It’ll snow before night, Dave,” he said.

“I’ve known it for an hour,” Dave Jackman said. “What’s your mother’s temperature, Ann?”

“I didn’t want to waken her to take it,” she said. “But I’ll do it now.”

Ann walked back to the house. A snowstorm would end their hopes of a speedy freeze-up. Ice couldn’t thicken under a blanket of snow. They might be shut in for days. She tried to think of the longest freeze-up time she’d known. Ten days had been their record. She didn’t dare think of what ten days might mean.

Her mother was awake and said she felt much better. The thermometer proved her wrong, but Ann didn’t tell her the temperature had gone up a degree. She left it unshaken to show the others. At supper the dread word pneumonia began to creep into the conversation. That was when snow began to fall. Great lazy flakes floated past the windows in the darkness. Then it had drive and menace.

Hugh went out, but returned a few moments later.

“It’s piling up fast,” he said. “What do we do about it? Starting right now maybe—”

“There isn’t a chance,” Dave Jackman said. “You know, Hugh, if—”

“I’d take any kind of a chance rather than have something happen to the Missus!” Hugh’s voice cracked in rage and desperation.

“We aren’t taking chances,” Ann said, and she heard her own voice with surprise for she had sounded like her mother. “What if it should be pneumonia! We can nurse her. I’ll keep her warm and quiet. Rest is what she needs! Not being made more sick with worry knowing someone has started to the railroad! I promised her it wouldn’t happen!”

She had gotten to her feet in her excitement. The others stared at her.

“She’s right, Hugh,” her father said at last. “That’s the way Mary would have handled it.”

Afterwards Ann went upstairs to get her mother ready for the night. She took her temperature again to make sure. Her mother watched her.

“It’s a bit higher, isn’t it, Ann? But that’s to be expected in the evening. I suppose everyone downstairs is talking about pneumonia.”

Ann nodded. There wasn't any use to try to fool her mother.

"But I've been thinking I know what it is. I should have known this morning. That sharp pain when I breathe. That little cold last week. I didn't pay much attention to it. Then the wind yesterday. I think it's pleurisy."

"We'd have thought of that this morning if we hadn't been so frightened!" Ann cried.

Pleurisy was serious, but it was infinitely better than pneumonia. Until now Ann wouldn't have admitted how the word had left her cold with dread.

"And we've done exactly the right thing," her mother said. "I'll get you to strap my chest even tighter. But first go down and tell the others so they can stop worrying about me."

Ann knew the situation wasn't as cheerful as her mother pictured, but her father looked relieved at hearing they had reached a diagnosis. Hugh scowled.

"No reason to quit worrying about pleurisy," he said. "I knew a fellow in the woods once who—"

"And none of those terrible things are going to happen!" Ann cried vehemently. She wasn't as confident as she sounded, but she could not have listened to Hugh's recital of disaster. "She will be sick for a long time. And very sick."

"And she ought to have a doctor," Hugh said. "You folks know that as well as I do."

It snowed all night. In the morning six inches lay on the ground. It sparkled in bright sunshine, wrought magic in the white forest, masked all the scars of living in the clearing. In other years Ann had rejoiced in the coming of the clean, white winter world, had loved the hush and the beauty of it. But today she felt as Hugh did when he glowered at the landscape.

"The Missus deserved a better break," he said. "Now there's no telling when we can get a doctor."

Snow blanketed Far Lake for five long days. Ann nursed her mother, kept her warm and quiet, scarcely permitted her to move in bed. During her mother's naps she cooked meals and did the housework. Everyone tiptoed and spoke in whispers. Dave Jackman slept on the couch and was wide awake at the slightest sound. There were afternoons when Mary Jackman's temperature went up alarmingly and Hugh stared at the snow-blanketed lake with grim eyes. It was then Ann realized that for him the north was an

enemy he must fight always, but a beloved enemy he could never bear to leave. Now he was resentful because for the first time his foe had caught him unarmed.

An afternoon came at last when her mother's temperature didn't soar. At supper Ann reported it had not gone above one hundred. She was proud of her nursing. Hugh looked at her across the table and his gray eyes were serious.

"The Missus never let anything lick her yet," he said.

The next day an unexpected thaw came. Rain fell and snow melted under its onslaught. Before evening the skies cleared. The next day was cold and still. That night winter really struck. In the morning Far Lake was a vast stretch of ice, sound ice which would bear a man's weight or even the weight of a dog team. Anyone could go safely to the railroad now, but the need to go was past.

Mary Jackman was getting well. She sat up in bed. Her voice was warm and vigorous.

"I knew I didn't need a doctor," she said. "It was silly of you people to worry. But it was sweet."

Hugh mumbled something about there not being too many people in the world worth worrying about, and she twinkled at him.

"Why, Hugh! If you keep on paying me these outrageous compliments, you'll have me spoiled completely."

During convalescence her mother and Ann had hours for talk. It was strange how little they had talked since spring. The fish camp, silver foxes, the epidemic, preparation for the winter, all the confusion and the hurry of living had crept between them. But now Ann could tell something of the summer. Steven's name crept more and more into her conversation, for it was a relief not to guard against speaking his name as often as it entered her thoughts. For months she had resisted the impulse to tell of things he'd said —things they'd done together. And then one afternoon as they were having tea before the fire she saw her mother's expression and broke off suddenly.

"You don't like Steven," she said.

"Of course we like him! No one could help liking him. He's so gay, and so refreshing, so alive." Mary Jackman hesitated before she said, "But liking and belonging are two different things."

"That's what I meant," Ann said. "None of you have let him feel he belonged here."

"You don't let people feel they belong, Ann! They just do!"

"I suppose so," Ann said quietly.

She was sorry she had opened the subject. Of course Steven was different. Different from Philip. Different from Jerry. Different from all of them. But being different shouldn't shut him out.

Logs for the watch tower had been cut and piled on the mainland and Philip was anxious to drag them to the island while the ice was clear of snow. He asked Ann to help him.

"Why don't you go, Ann?" her mother said. "You've hardly left the house for days!"

A chill wind was blowing and Ann put on her canvas parka. Winter trail clothes felt good. She hadn't driven the dogs this winter and always in other years on the first day ice was sound she'd taken at least a celebration run around the island.

Ogema's ecstatic greeting reminded Ann how she had neglected him. As Philip harnessed the team the eyes of all the dogs were gleaming. Now life had really begun again. In summer they lived an effortless and dull existence in the corral, but in winter each morning held the exciting possibility of a swift run on the trail.

Ogema looked back in astonishment when Philip did not fasten a sledge or toboggan to the traces, only a singletree and log chain. On the mainland, when he saw the pile of logs, he understood and studied his duties with the grave air of a leader. Philip turned the team and hooked the chain around two logs, then called, "*Marchon!*" Ogema started for the island. After the first trip he halted the team at the precise spot best for hooking and unhooking. No one had to give further directions, and his feelings would have been hurt had they done so.

Ann thought how good it seemed to be doing something with Philip again. In the past weeks she had sometimes wondered if it were possible she and Philip were not as close as they had been. Even the thought of such a possibility was frightening. They'd shared years in the north. They had years ahead together.

It was late when the team dragged the last log to the island. The sun had gone down in a cold sky and the night chill had settled on the land. They could see their breaths.

"I'll unharness the team," Philip said, and then as he started for the corral, he turned, "It's been fun, Ann. We ought to drive to town soon. There'll be a lot of mail."

At supper Hugh announced that the block of new pens was finished. He had even sandpapered the interiors and entrances of the houses lest precious silver fox furs should be damaged. These were the homes of royalty.

Next morning Pride was moved to his new home. Philip asked Ann to help in the transfer, for Pride had fallen victim to her blandishments, or it might have been the appeal of raisins which she carried with her to give him whenever she passed his pen. He had a special little double bark of delight to greet her. Philip carried the catching box, and Ann walked beside him so Pride could hear her voice and be encouraged about the move. Philip set the box at the open door of the pen and raised the end. Pride walked in, but he looked first at Ann for reassurance before he inspected his new quarters.

"He's your fox, all right," Philip said. "It's wonderful how tame you've made him."

Ann said he looked lonely in his solitary grandeur. She had hoped Philip would mate him with the vixen she and Steven had saved, but Philip and Jerry had decided to spend a part of their capital on a consort for Pride. Her pedigree would not be as impressive as his, but she must be of royal blood. She had already been selected and would arrive soon after Thanksgiving.

At noon it began to snow. It snowed all afternoon and all night, but no one cared now. Hugh reported ten inches of ice at the water hole. The next morning it had cleared. The sun was out and the lake was a jeweled stretch of white.

"Good day for town," Philip said to Ann.

"I'd love it!" Ann cried. "You'd be all right, wouldn't you, Mother?"

"Of course. Besides, it's time everyone stopped spoiling me. I'm actually getting helpless. Will you remember to invite Alec for Thanksgiving? Tell him we'll have a baron of moose for dinner."

"It's Christmas when you serve barons of beef," her husband said.

"But Alec can't come for Christmas," his wife said. "He's expecting a guest, an old Hudson's Bay man. They plan to spend the day just as they

used to spend it thirty years ago. He wouldn't even consider an invitation here."

"It'll seem queer not having anyone for Christmas," Philip said. "Not even Jerry's coming."

"The Jackmans'll manage to celebrate," Dave Jackman said and smiled at his wife. "If nothing better happens this year than your mother getting well, I'm satisfied."

Ann helped Philip harness the team. The dogs went half mad with joy when they saw the toboggan. They thrust their heads into their collars and leaped and pranced so it was difficult to fasten buckles. Ann rode as far as the water hole for the sheer exhilaration of their frenzied dash. The first ride of winter was always a high moment of excitement.

At the water hole she put on snowshoes. The trail to town must be broken. It would be their highway through the winter. Philip took a sight on a distant point to make sure the trail was straight. Ann followed him, breaking joints so a smooth and hard trail was provided for dogs and toboggan. Every hundred yards Philip thrust a branch into the snow beside the trail so that it could be found after a heavy snowstorm.

Ann looked back at the row of green jackpine branches and the trench beside it. Except for these, Far Lake stretched in sparkling and unbroken white. It was the beginning of the story of the winter.

"Don't you love the first trip to town?" she asked. "Makes you feel like the first person in the world."

Philip grinned. "We've come back in a blizzard that made me feel we were the only people in the world. That wasn't so good."

It was almost noon when they reached town. They opened the mailsack on the big black counter of the trade shop. There were letters for everyone—four from Jerry to Philip, but none from Steven. It was the first time he had failed to write and Ann looked through the envelopes twice to make sure. Afterwards she thought Philip had noticed it for he was gentle with her through dinner. That was worse than having him scowl when he brought a letter from Steven. She tried to think of reasons why Steven hadn't written—thought about them so intensely she sometimes didn't hear what Mr. Gillespie and Philip were saying. And she knew Philip noticed that too. Of course he had expected Steven to stop writing, just as he had thought Steven did not really need to leave when they were fighting the epidemic. Philip never had been fair about Steven.

Mr. Gillespie accepted the Thanksgiving Day invitation with delight. "But tell your mother she's not to wear herself out getting ready for me," he said.

"We won't let her," Ann said. "You may even have to eat my plum pudding."

"Worse things could happen." The old trader laughed. "I'd say the man Ann makes plum pudding for will be lucky. Eh, Philip?"

It was one of the old Scotsman's favorite jokes, but Ann wished he hadn't thought of it then. She was sure it bothered Philip too.

Afterwards it was easy to think of reasons why Steven had not written. She thought of some as she rode home on the toboggan. She thought of many more in the days that followed. Steven expected them to be shut in for months, and she wished she had not made freeze-up sound quite so dramatic. Or a letter could have been lost. Letters often were. Or it might have arrived even the morning after their trip to town. Or the next week. Undoubtedly a letter was waiting in the Jackman mailsack now.

The day before Thanksgiving a spirit of festivity seized the Jackmans. It was the first real celebration they'd had for months. Mary Jackman made mince pies. Ann waxed the old walnut sideboard until it shone. Then she went to the mainland and robbed a red squirrel's winter storehouse of pine cones for a table decoration. Dave Jackman brought in the huge baron of moose to thaw. Philip gave the foxes their first homemade biscuits, and the foxes showed their approval.

Dinner was to be at noon and the Hudson's Bay man arrived promptly. Manager, driver and even the dog team were arrayed for an official visit, for Alec Gillespie loved the pomp and ceremony of the ancient company. He brought a plump mailsack.

"And forget about me until you've read your letters," he said. "I've lived off in lonely posts enough to know what mail means."

Philip began to read Jerry's letters aloud and while everyone gathered to listen, Ann slipped up to her room with the two from Steven.

She had only to read the first to understand why he had not written. His aunt was ill, seriously ill, and he was in Washington. The second letter told of her death. The letter was brief, but it was like Steven to write as he did. "She was a wonderful person. She loved life and I'm so glad she didn't suffer. And I'm glad too that I could be with her so much this year. I'll write all about it later."

FOURTEEN

In early December Pride's consort made an unexpected entrance. Philip had gone to town hoping only for word of the vixen's coming. He returned with her traveling crate on the toboggan and was still so concerned that a royal personage had been threatened with waiting unmet at a wilderness station he had not really enjoyed her arrival.

The entire family went to the pens to witness her introduction to Pride. At first Pride was astonished and slightly outraged and Ann feared the usual male aversion to surprises might make him refuse to meet the queen. But after a moment he deigned to take a second look. Possibly he had been lonely, or it might have been her beauty which won him. Ten minutes later he had capitulated completely.

The vixen was lovely, fully as gorgeous as Pride. They made a stunning pair with December coats blue black and very glossy. The under fur was soft and dense so that the long lustrous king hairs stood out in gleaming splendor. The silver was bright and clear, lying in soft bands with no suggestion of chalkiness. There was not a rusty tinge in either coat to betray a faulty ancestry and each carried himself proudly as though he knew, in this month when fur is prime, he had reached a breath-taking perfection.

These were real silver foxes! No wonder they were acclaimed the royalty of fur land. Ann was entranced, and as she stood before the pen she realized it had not been for gain alone that men had dedicated years of effort to the production of such glorious creatures. A quest for beauty had been part of the hidden urge.

Philip, who had been crouching beside the pen, sighed and stood up. He wasn't ashamed of tears in his eyes.

"Some day every fox we have will look like them," he said, and it sounded like a promise.

That evening when they filled out the vixen's registration papers they realized they had not even considered a name for her.

"I named Pride," Philip said. "Ann should name this one. Like she named Princess."

Now that seemed a childish choice to Ann, but at the time it had been the only way she'd known to suggest royal blood. Philip's selection, Pride, had really carried the weight of his conviction, just as Pride the Second meant something to him now. The vixen should have a name which went well with her mate's.

"Let's call her Patricia," Ann said. "And we won't shorten it. I'll always think of her as patrician."

"So will I," Mary Jackman said. "Did you notice how delicate and finely molded she was compared to the sturdiness of Pride?"

And Pride and Patricia they became.

Other foxes came soon afterwards. Jerry sent two pairs from Minnesota. The Jackmans selected another from Prince Edward Island. All were lovely, but nothing ever quite touched that ecstatic moment when they'd stood before Pride and Patricia's pen.

The final pair was bought in Nova Scotia and wouldn't arrive until mid-December. Philip asked Ann to go with him to the railroad.

"It's about the last excitement we'll have this winter," he said. "That's the lot until another year."

When they reached the station the train had been gone an hour, but the crates awaited them. Ann was so absorbed watching Philip examine the foxes through the narrow strip of netting she did not notice the telegram Chet Walker held out for her. When he spoke she took it with surprise. Everyone except her had received wires that year. She hoped it was from Steven.

It was, and after she'd read it, the message still seemed incredible.

"What's happened now?" Philip asked.

"It's from Steven! He can come for Christmas! Isn't it wonderful?"

"That's fine!" Philip said. "When'll he get here?"

"He says if he receives any encouragement he will arrive the morning of the twenty-second," and she smiled. Steven would pretend he wasn't sure they'd want him for the holidays.

Philip looked up and saw the joy in her eyes. "Steven'll get the encouragement," he said.

"I'm sorting over my most encouraging words right now," she said.

She didn't care if Philip knew how glad she'd be to see Steven. Since the letter telling of his aunt's death she had felt differently about him. In some way it seemed to have exonerated him even of the suspicion of deserting friends in a crisis. To be sure the aunt had been a victim of pneumonia and not of a bad heart after all, but that made no difference. Even Philip's manner had changed, as though he wanted to make amends for an unjust charge.

Ann wrote the telegram. She said they would meet him at Far Lake on the morning of the twenty-second. "And plan to stay for the New Year's Day party at the Hudson's Bay Post," she wrote with a reckless disregard for words. Steven would enjoy the ancient ceremony when all the hunters of the district came to shake hands with the big trader and have cake and coffee.

As she rode to Fox Island behind the two crates of foxes, Ann thought how different Steven's visit would be this time. Now he would really see the graciousness and charm of their home in the wilderness and her family would have an opportunity to know him better. She was only sorry the suggestion of the Christmas visit had not come from her. She should have thought of it, and this year especially, when he had just lost his aunt. She wondered, too, what he had meant in his wire when he said, "I have something very important to tell you." It could mean everything—or anything.

At the house Ann waited outside the kitchen door for her mother while the men unharnessed the team. Mary Jackman read the wire.

"That's wonderful!" she said. "A guest at Christmas! But we should have realized Steven would be lonely. We should have invited him."

"I know I should," Ann said.

They walked as far as the corral and waited for the men to finish unharnessing the team so they could all go together and see the new foxes. Even though there had been other pairs, they were still excited by new arrivals.

"What do you think Steven meant by the important thing he had to tell you?" Mary Jackman asked quite suddenly. It was the first indication that she had noticed the remark.

"It's probably only some of Steven's nonsense." Ann's tone was carefully casual, but she was afraid she blushed.

Hugh and Philip carried the crates to the pens and two more tenants were added to the block. The Nova Scotians were as handsome as the others.

Hugh liked their added dash of silver.

"Makes 'em seem brighter," he said. "And I think they got longer brushes than some."

Immediately the three men were deep in a discussion of points and ancestry. Ann and her mother returned to the house. Dave Jackman commented on this at supper.

"We get the pair of silvers Philip and Jerry fished all summer to earn, and all you girls have talked is what we'll eat at Christmas," he said, but he made quick amends. "I'm glad Steven's coming. I didn't have a chance to know him in all that trouble we had last summer."

"When's a better time to get acquainted?" Hugh asked.

Ann looked up quickly. Hugh's eyes were guileless. She had always wondered just how Hugh felt. The only time she had taxed him with not liking Steven he had retreated behind his usual defense of, "I never said I didn't." There were times when Hugh was exasperating. He'd really like Steven if he allowed himself to know him.

The week went quickly. The house was cleaned for Christmas, the guest room put in apple pie order, candy, fruit cake and plum pudding made and presents prepared. Ann was glad she had not mailed Steven's gift, a beautifully embroidered pair of buckskin moccasins she had ordered early from their Ojibwa neighbor, *Wah-be-goon*. Philip made a special trip to *Wah-be-goon's* wigwam and asked her to make another pair of trail moccasins with white cloth tops for Steven. Ann was touched by the gesture. It had meant two long dog team journeys in one week.

Ann and Philip planned to go in early to meet the morning train. For two days Ann had watched the sky. There had been only one light snow fall in a week and now the trail to town was perfect. She could imagine how Steven would enjoy the swift dash out behind the team. It was cold, but only cold enough to be enjoyable. The north was behaving beautifully. Even Hugh spoke of it as he said good night. He stood in the door a moment.

"Every star's winkin' itself dizzy, Ann," he said. "Ought to be a fine day tomorrow."

That, from Hugh, meant a great deal.

Ann went to bed early, for she and Philip would start to the railroad at daylight. It was dark when she wakened and she was so drowsy she was snuggling down to sleep again when she became aware that it was the dogs'

barking which had aroused her. She had been hearing them for some time in her sleep. Hugh must be up very early, for the dogs always raised a rumpus at the first sound of humans in the morning. She thought this sleepily and was just about to drop off for another nap when she caught an excitement in their clamor which brought her wide awake.

Alert now, she knew the sound did not come from the corral. It came from the south and she could hear Ogema's voice above the others. This was no ordinary morning greeting from the team and she sat up in bed. The sound grew fainter, more distant.

Doors opened and her father and Philip came onto the balcony.

"The dogs are loose!" Philip shouted. "How could that happen?"

They were dressing when Hugh called to them from the living room.

"Get down quick! Half the moose in Canada's ripped the corral to pieces and the dogs are chasin' them to the mainland!"

FIFTEEN

ANN and her mother were the last downstairs and they hurried out the kitchen door. The starlight was bright. At the corral they could hear voices of the men and far away, toward the mainland to the west, the dogs were barking in shrill excitement.

"All along I knew something was bound to happen the morning Steven came!" Ann cried.

"There's still time to get the team back," her mother said. "But you may be late."

They started along the firmly packed snowshoe trail toward the corral. The three men met them. They were running and Philip was in the lead.

"Dogs chased 'em straight down the island past the pens!" he exclaimed. "All that racket! No telling how it's frightened the foxes!"

"We'll get them quiet," his father said. "Then go after the dogs."

Until that moment Ann had not even thought about the foxes. Her fear had been only that the moose might hurt the dogs. They started along the trail toward the pens, Philip in the lead. Ann, quicker than her father, was next. But Philip ran faster than Ann. His moccasins seemed barely to touch the trail. He turned and dodged and soon disappeared in the thick growth of jackpine. His need to know what had happened at the pens filled Ann with sudden dread. She thought of what the moose threshing through the forest and the wild, bloodthirsty yelps of the dogs must have done to nervous foxes. They must be in a panic. She ran faster, leaving her father behind on the trail.

She was gasping when she reached the abrupt turn before the outer gate. She stared incredulously. There was no gate. Her father came up behind her.

"They've smashed the paddock fence!" he shouted. "What's happened to the pens?"

Ann ran to the pen of Pride and Patricia, calling Pride's name. He didn't answer. A corner of the enclosure had been ripped away. Two posts were broken off. One house had been upset. Ann ran to the other, lifted the hinged cover. The house was empty.

For a moment she stood fighting her sick despair. Pride and Patricia loose! With a thousand miles of wilderness lying around the island! Pride, the mainstay of their hopes! Pride, who was to be the glorious forebear of foxes which would make the Jackman name famous!

Dave Jackman was in the next pen where one of the pairs Jerry had sent was housed. It too was smashed, and the houses empty. He let the covers fall back and started toward the outer entrance.

"Your mother can guard that break and see they don't get out," he said. "Hugh's got some netting in the storehouse."

It was the thing to do first of all, Ann knew. Even foxes loose in the big paddock would be hard to find. Purposely the Jackmans had left the paddock wild. Except near the pens and buildings, the outer enclosure was filled with trees, rocks, windfalls, all the debris of an untouched forest. In it a fox could hide for hours. But outside the big fence a fox could range the whole island, even cross to the mainland. And once beyond the open ice there was no limit to how far they'd go.

Hugh and Mary Jackman were standing in the demolished entrance. Ann and her father had not finished telling them what had happened when Philip arrived, panting from a long run in deep snow. He didn't speak for a moment.

"It's bad," Dave Jackman said.

Philip nodded. "They hit three pens. Must have been a bunch of them."

"Which beside Pride and Patricia and those from Minnesota?" Hugh asked.

"The Prince Edward Island pair," Philip said.

Dawn had come and Ann could see her brother's face. It was twisted queerly by despair and determination.

"But they can't get out of the paddock, Philip!" his mother said. "I'll stand guard until you get it mended."

"You ought to see the south fence," he said. "You'd think a train went through."

"Then that's the place to tackle first," Hugh said.

"But we don't know whether they're outside or in," Philip said. "It isn't light enough to see tracks."

"I'll go watch that they don't get out," Dave Jackman said.

"Keep hidden," Philip said as his father started. "You don't want to scare 'em if they try to get back inside the fence."

His father nodded and hurried away.

"Think they might try to get back, lad?" Hugh asked.

"Foxes have come back," Philip said. "They get scared in the bush. They're not used to it."

"I read about a pair in the magazine," Hugh said. "But they didn't come back for two days. They got hungry. I'll fix a patch for the paddock fence we can open, once we're sure they're not inside."

They made plans. Hugh was to repair the outer fencing, Philip scout for tracks and foxes, Ann feed and quiet the foxes in the pens. They were running frantically in circles, leaping at the netting, and they might hurt themselves.

"Good thing we got those hospital pens finished," Hugh said. "We can use them until we can fix up the others."

"Perhaps by afternoon we can make a rough job of the pens so if they do come back they'll find their homes," Philip said.

Ann went to the cook camp for biscuit and raisins to feed the frantic foxes. She called softly and she thought her voice did quiet them somewhat, but it would be days before they would really settle down again.

It was light now. Hugh found tracks where Pride and Patricia had left and followed them. After a short circle he came back.

"One went south and the other west," he said. "And the moose—five of 'em. I'd say there was a bull, two cows and a couple o' calves, with the dogs right on their heels. I heard 'em on the mainland a bit ago."

"Someone should go after them," Mary Jackman said.

"Dave will soon's I start work on the south side of the fence," Hugh said. "But I hope they don't get fresh with that bull. He's liable to kill a couple."

There was so much to do, and so little time to do it. Everyone had worked at breakneck speed since dawn. No one knew where Philip was. Hugh finished the repair at the paddock gate and Mary Jackman said she would free her husband so he could help Hugh.

"But don't you get all tired out, Missus," Hugh said. "No matter what happens to the foxes, we don't want you sick again."

"Heavens! This is no time to talk about anyone getting sick," Mary Jackman said.

Ann cooked a warm breakfast for all the foxes and filled water pans. A few of the original herd ate a little. They had been farther from the moose's path of destruction and knew Ann well. She had helped pull some of them through the distemper epidemic.

This done, she hurried back to the new block of pens. The four foxes still left must be quieted before they broke their necks in their frenzied dashes at the netting and she worked with them an hour. It was the first time she had been alone and had even a second to think of Steven. He would be at Far Lake now, wondering why she hadn't come to meet him. She'd planned on that meeting since she'd received his wire. She'd even planned what she would say and how she would act. It had seemed such an important moment.

They heard a shout from Philip and he came to the pens carrying a fox by the neck and hind legs.

"Patricia!" he shouted.

"Where'd you find her?" Hugh asked.

"Southwest corner. I ran her down in the deep snow, grabbed her by the tail. I'll put her in a hospital pen. Bring some food, Ann."

Ann brought a warm breakfast. The vixen didn't eat, but she did grow more quiet. She even seemed glad to be back.

"That's the first of the six," Philip said. "There were five moose. They went off the end of the island and across to the west shore. But between the tracks of the dogs and moose there's no telling how many foxes got away. Not until I've made a circle and searched the shore."

Everyone agreed that Philip should first hunt outside the fence. Half an hour later he came running back. One of the dogs was with him.

"The others are straggling in across the ice," he said. "We can't have 'em loose with the foxes. Come help me round 'em up, Ann."

Near the south end of the island they met three more dogs.

"Where's Ogema?" Ann cried. "He's not with them!"

"He'll come," Philip said. "He'd be the last to give up."

"And the first to tackle a moose, Philip! You know he would!"

Philip was silent for a moment. "All right," he said suddenly. "I'll have a look on the lake. You take these and tie 'em up."

Ann led the dogs back to the house. They were tired and also ashamed of being caught outside the corral. As there were not collars and chains for all, she harnessed them and made them fast in a line between two trees. She had finished and was on her way back to the pens when she saw her father and Philip coming. Dave Jackman carried something in his arms, and at once she knew it was Ogema.

She ran to them, spoke his name, but he did not stir.

"Passed out," Philip said. "He'd got as far as the island though. I carried him to the fence."

Ogema had tried to reach them. Ann saw blood dripping from his head. A patch of his scalp dangled to expose the skull.

"Moose must have clipped him with a forefoot," her father said. "He's lost a lot of blood. We can't tell if his skull's cracked. Your mother's on her way."

They carried Ogema to the kitchen. Mary Jackman appeared as Ann brought a blanket to wrap him in. Her mother heated warm water to bathe the wound.

"Ann and I can sew this scalp," she said to her husband, and she smiled at him. "Women on a fox farm have to learn to do almost anything, or they're not worth having around. You two men go find those foxes."

Ann was glad Ogema was unconscious and could not feel the needle. After the scalp had been sewed they bandaged him, bathed the blood from his hair, tucked him into a warm corner near the stove. As Ann patted his shoulder he lifted an eyelid.

"Mother!" she cried. "He knows us! Do you think we've saved him?"

"I hope so," Mary Jackman said. "But we can't do any more for him now. Rest is what he needs."

"One of us should stay here."

"Both of us will." Mary Jackman put a pot of coffee on the stove. "We've got to make the men something warm to drink and sandwiches. No one's had a thing to eat today."

Neither spoke as they spread sandwiches. Ann found she had nothing to say. She was still too stupefied. There had been something almost awesome in the disaster. It was like being struck by a bolt of lightning which had no personal menace or definite intention. Of all the islands in the north, and of all the moose which roamed the forest, theirs had to be the place those five moose chose. And if they had not been maddened by the dogs the fox pens might have escaped devastation.

But she couldn't think about the part the dogs had played. Not after Ogema's injury. He had been hurt in a courageous defense of the island, disastrous and unwise as that defense had been. She went to his bed and looked down at him.

Ogema had shared their life since that first year in the north. He had given unstintingly of loyalty and devotion. Never in all those years had he failed them. Ogema must have sensed her nearness for he opened his eyes. He was too weak from loss of blood to raise his head, but she knew he was trying to make her understand.

She brushed away the tears and leaned close to him. "Poor old boy," she said. "We do understand."

If they lost him, she thought, she would never drive another dog team, but even as she thought it she knew she would. She'd have to, though something would be gone forever from the north. Trails would be lonely. It frightened her to think how much she cared, how deep was the tie between them. The depth of her affection eluded words. It was made of so many things, so many memories—happy days on the trail, the thrill of sharing adventure, an understanding all the deeper because it must be wordless. And now that love might hold tragedy and sorrow.

Her mother crossed the room and put her arms around Ann. "Don't feel so badly, dear. We'll save him."

"We must!" Ann cried. "If there was only some way to know how badly he is hurt—"

"Perhaps Hugh can tell when he comes."

But Hugh couldn't come for hours, Ann thought, as she helped her mother finish the sandwiches.

"Those men must be weak from hunger," Mary Jackman said as she packed the food in a birchbark basket. Ann strained coffee into a pail. The lunch was ready when the four dogs, tied outside the door, set up a furious barking.

“Someone must be on the lake,” Ann said.

She ran to a front window. Turning up the trail was a dog team, pompoms waving, bells jingling, a driver running at the rear. In the cariole sat Steven.

SIXTEEN

As Ann waited on the veranda she realized she hadn't thought of Steven for hours. She made a fleeting inventory of the house—kitchen in confusion, an injured dog beside the stove, disordered living room, a cold fireplace, and she and her mother in the first garments their hands had touched that morning. It was so different than she had planned, yet it didn't seem to matter.

The dog team reached the house and Steven stepped from the Hudson's Bay skin cariole, which was only used for official visits. He was smiling and looked well in Alec Gillespie's fur-trimmed caribou parka.

"I came out in style," he said. "All the regalia of the Company of Gentlemen Adventurers trading—" He broke off and stared. "What's happened?"

"Everything," Ann said. "A herd of moose broke down the pens and let the foxes out."

"You look as though you'd been chasing them yourself."

"I have, and I'm so sorry we couldn't meet you. I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

"Mr. Gillespie was wonderful about sending me with his team. Isn't he a prince?"

Before Ann could answer, Mary Jackman joined them. She was as poised as though everything were in perfect order.

"You've found us in another crisis, Steven," she said as she shook hands. She turned to the driver. "Marcel, tie your team and come to the kitchen. Coffee's ready and you must have something to eat before you start back."

"Mr. Gillespie think maybe something wrong," Marcel said. "He say for me to stay and help."

"He didn't tell me anything of the sort," Steven said.

"Of course he wouldn't want to worry you."

"What you want me to do?" Marcel asked.

"We'll be glad to have you stay, Marcel. You'll find the men at the pens."

As they entered the disordered living room, Ann saw Steven glance around.

"We've been up since long before daylight," she said. "Mother and I just came from the pens to make sandwiches and coffee."

"And the men are waiting for them," Mary Jackman said. "I'll take them, Ann. Stay and talk to Steven. He must be hungry."

"After one of Louise's breakfasts!" Steven laughed. "I couldn't eat again until night."

Ann turned the damper in the big heater and opened the guest room door so the room would warm. Steven took off his parka and carried his bag to his room. When he came back he was smiling.

"My magnificent entrance was certainly an anticlimax," he said. "Don't you have any peaceful moments on this island? I leave you in an epidemic and come back to find you chasing foxes."

"And Ogema is hurt," she said.

"One of the dogs?"

"You remember Ogema!" she cried. "I'm so worried. We don't know how badly he is hurt." She was thinking of the night they had saved the fox. "Do you suppose you could—"

"That's tough," he said, and then he smiled at her. "It's good to see you. It's been a long—"

"But you didn't even ask what happened to him!"

He looked chagrined. "Listen, Ann. I'm sorry about the foxes. I'm sorry about the dog. But darn it all, I haven't seen you since last summer. It's me! Steven Dorland. Remember him? I came back. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"You know I am," and she remembered how glad she had been to get his telegram. "This isn't at all the way we expected you to find us."

"I know," he said. "You couldn't help it because this happened."

For a moment Ann stared and then realized he hadn't intended to sound magnanimous and forgiving about their confusion. Nor had she been a very gracious hostess. After all it was hard for Steven to arrive amid such turmoil.

She built a fire. Steven helped her and she asked about his winter. "It sounded so exciting," she said.

"It was," he said. Even Maine had been gayer than he'd expected. The bigger houses had remained open and he'd had a chance to know people better. And it had been nice to know them later in New York. It had made a difference. She nodded. It was important, but she wondered if the other foxes had been found and wished they were at the pens helping in the search. But she didn't like to suggest it. After all, he'd just arrived. Steven was telling about his week ends in New York. "You really can't know that city until you meet the people who are really doing things," he said.

"What things?" and instantly she was sorry she had asked such a silly question.

"But I wrote you in my letters!"

"Of course," she said contritely, remembering the man who was writing a play and the girl who painted. "The parties sounded like such fun."

She added the last almost desperately, trying to make Steven understand she really had enjoyed his letters, but it was a happy speech, for Steven plunged into stories of other parties. He had gone to New York every week end he could manage. Occasionally his Aunt Nina had gone with him and everyone had been crazy about her. She'd given a wonderful party at the Waldorf. "That was only a short time before Thanksgiving," he said. "She was one of the gayest people there."

"I was so sorry when I heard about your aunt," Ann said. "It must have been terribly hard for you, Steven."

"It was, but Aunt Nina would be the last person in the world to want anyone to mourn. I've tried not to."

A few minutes later Ann said she must see how Ogema was. He seemed stronger and opened his eyes. She knew Steven was waiting for her, but she stood for a moment in the silent kitchen. She couldn't understand it, but Steven did seem different. It wasn't merely his assurance, which she had always admired, or his gaiety. She had liked that too, but she wished he'd asked more about the lost foxes. Perhaps he had been away so long he'd forgotten how much the fox ranch meant. She went back to the living room determined to suggest that they go to the pens.

"You haven't asked about the important thing I came to tell you," he said. "Hadn't you wondered?"

"Of course I did."

"I'm going to study at the Beaux Arts. Imagine, Ann! Paris in spring! I'd always wanted to go but I never dared believe I'd get there. Now it's settled."

"You mean—"

"I didn't write because I wanted to tell you. Of course Aunt Nina's money has made it possible. I'd always known she'd leave me something, but I hadn't expected her to be so generous. She had a lot of nephews and nieces, although I've always been her favorite. She depended on me more than the others."

Ann looked up. Suddenly she understood his new assurance. She was shocked, and yet knew how unreasonable she was. Being able to go where he pleased, do what he liked, buy what he wished naturally would bring him confidence. She thought of all this even before she realized how much his going would change things. The fact that she hadn't thought first of all how much she'd miss him was her most startling discovery. But she knew she wouldn't miss this new Steven, knew it in a blinding flash and with clarity. Nothing about his coming, or even the Steven she had thought she knew, had been as she had imagined it would be. She was still struggling with the surprise of that discovery when he spoke again.

"I had a reason for wanting to tell you myself," he said. "Because I want you to go with me." He waited a moment. "Darn it all, Ann! I'm proposing to you!"

Her thoughts reeled. It was incredible. She, Ann Jackman, sitting in a log house in the Canadian wilderness, was being told by the man she'd thought was the most exciting person she had ever known that he wanted her to go to Paris with him. And that was all it was—incredible. She was aware of a dreadful flatness.

"But I can't go, Steven," she managed to say at last.

"Can't!"

She nodded miserably.

"You mean you don't want to go!"

He seemed more angry than hurt. Ann realized it was true. She didn't want to go. This Steven seemed almost a stranger. She looked at him and wondered suddenly why she had ever thought he was attractive.

"You did care, Ann! You can't deny it!"

"I thought I did," she said. "Until—"

"Until what?" he demanded and there was resentment in his anger now. This was the first time she'd seen his face without gaiety and laughter. "Until what?" he said again.

"It must have been your coming when we were so worried about the foxes, and your not seeming to notice or to care. All you talked about was parties and—"

"You mean just because there happened to be a few foxes loose I should have—"

"But they aren't just a few foxes!" she flared. "Last summer you'd have known what they meant. How they counted. It isn't only the foxes, or the fox farm, or even Ogema. It's—it's everything!"

She was angry, but it was anger at herself, anger that she hadn't known all this last summer, that she'd spent months thinking of him. He wasn't really any different. She should have known that the only one who really counted with Steven was himself. Looking back now she wondered why she had not been aware of how little others mattered to him. Philip had known it. Hugh had known it. Even her mother had tried to say it to her. It was she who had gone on imagining a Steven who never existed.

"You're just upset," he said.

"Of course I am!" she cried. "And why shouldn't I be? For an hour we've been talking about silly parties while out at the pens they've been searching for foxes that mean everything to a whole family." She knew she was being dramatic, and she didn't care. "But that wasn't important to you. All you wanted to talk about was Paris, and how glad you were that you could go there. Why—why—anyone I've ever known would have waited to tell me about that later—wouldn't even have thought about it until we'd found the foxes."

"Which makes me all wrong, I suppose!" He was really angry now. "I thought how two people felt about each other was more important than a few foxes. On the train coming here, all I thought about was what a wonderful time you and I could have in Paris. Why wouldn't I want to talk about it instead of chasing foxes? That was when I thought you cared." He stopped, and then added bitterly, "Now I know I was a fool even to think you did."

"But I did believe I cared, Steven!" she cried. "Only—when you came, everything was so different." She wanted to placate him for she hated to see

his face twisted with hurt vanity and rage. “I suppose it wasn’t your fault.”

“Of course it wasn’t my fault! How was I to know that all you think about is what happens on this island. I thought you’d be glad to know I was going to study in Paris, and that you and I—”

She was angry then. It wasn’t any use trying to explain. “All you thought about was Steven Dorland,” she said.

His face darkened and he stood up.

“That seems to cover everything,” he said. “And the next time I travel three days to see a girl it won’t be someone who’s all mixed up in a fox farm.”

Even when he went to his room, brought out his bag and put on the parka, she couldn’t believe he was really going. It was all part of a crazy day.

“It’s a good thing we kept the team.” His eyes were smoldering. “I can make the train tonight.”

He really meant it. And it was, she thought, the easiest way out. A week with this Steven would be dreadful.

“Will you tell your family good-bye for me,” he said.

She smiled then. Only Steven would have remembered to send messages to the family. She put out her hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have said all the things I did.”

“But you meant them?”

“Yes,” she said.

They heard the jingle of dog bells outside. Steven opened the door. Marcel was untying the team.

“Mr. Jackman say to go back now,” he said.

“I’m going with you,” Steven said, and Ann knew he was enjoying the drama of his departure.

Marcel nodded indifferently. Nothing a white man did could possibly awaken curiosity in the halfbreed mind, for white ways would always be a mystery. Steven carried his bag to the cariole, stepped in and pulled the lynx paw robe around him. Marcel called, “*Marchon*,” and the team set off.

Ann watched them go. Steven did not look back and she was glad he didn't.

She went into the kitchen, suddenly very hungry, and made herself a sandwich and a pot of tea. She was eating when her mother entered.

"Where's Steven?" Mary Jackman asked.

"Gone. He wants to catch the train tonight." Ann devoted herself to the sandwich. "He wouldn't stay for lunch, but Louise will give him an enormous supper."

Mary Jackman looked at Ann, and her eyes held understanding. There was relief too, and a hint of laughter.

"Are you sure you won't be sorry?" she asked.

"I was never surer in my life," Ann said. "And I'm not angry any more. I don't think I was angry at all. At least not with Steven. Would you mind if we didn't talk about it for a while?"

She knew some day she'd want to talk about it. Now that it was all over, she was only embarrassed. What would the others think? For a week she had talked of little except Steven's visit. But the day's events had been so fantastic, his abrupt departure seemed to fit the general picture. Nothing could surprise a Jackman now.

"Have they found more foxes?" she asked.

"Three." Mary Jackman's voice was tired. "They've been over every square foot inside the big fence. Now they're searching outside."

"Which are still lost?"

"A vixen from Minnesota and—and Pride."

"Not Pride, Mother!" Ann thought of his little double bark of greeting, his friendliness, the cunning way he teased for raisins. She thought of his life spent behind wire fencing and how terrified he must be in a forest familiar only to his ancestors.

Ann looked out the window. In two hours it would be dark, and never had Pride spent a night outside his pen. Would he even know how to protect himself from wolves? She started toward the door.

"I can find him," she said. "He'll answer if I call."

"I'd thought of that," Mary Jackman said. "It was why I let Hugh and your father send me to the house. I meant to entertain Steven while you

helped them."

Lines of weariness and strain showed in her face.

"You've been working at the pens while I've been sitting here!" Ann cried.

"Someone had to stay with Ogema. Is he better?"

"I'm sure he is. The last time I looked he tried to raise his head."

"I'll mix a little brandy in hot water," Mary Jackman said. "It may give him strength."

"And afterwards, you must lie down, Mother. You've been going every minute since before daylight this morning."

"So have the others. It is Philip who is really tired."

Ann nodded as she slipped on her parka. Outside the door she took her snowshoes, stuck upright in the drift. Only her mother's remained. The others were packing down deep snow in the search for lost foxes. The three men would circle the island and examine every foot of it, and that left only the lake and the mainland. Ann decided to try there. She might pick up Pride's tracks in the short time before dark.

She stopped in the fur shed for a catching box, heavy handling gloves, raisins and biscuit. Hugh came as she was leaving.

"You can't carry a fifteen-pound critter and that box too," he said.

"I can if I find him," Ann said.

"But where do you figure to look? Not a fox has crossed to the mainland. Philip made a circle and I made another. So we're searching the island."

"Pride must have left tracks somewhere."

"Tracks are hard to pick up, what with five moose, six dogs, six foxes and five people chasing around. This island's stomped like a barnyard. I figure Pride's right close somewhere."

"He'd answer us!" Ann said. "He's the tamest fox we have."

Hugh pretended to be seeking something on a shelf.

"Ever think Pride *couldn't* come?" he asked quietly. "Rampagin' moose, busted fence posts, dogs losing their heads—most anything could happen. Philip's begun to wonder about it."

"Hugh! You don't think he's killed!"

"I can understand how the vixen might 'a' hid. She was wild. But not Pride."

"Nothing like this ever happened to Pride and he'd lose his head worse than the dogs. Just because you haven't found tracks—"

She slipped her feet into the snowshoe thongs and went through the gate. She'd already made up her mind what she'd do. The men had circled the island and were searching it, but even Hugh had admitted, with so many tracks, Pride's might have been overlooked or buried. And if he wasn't on the island, he had gone to the mainland.

Snow was deep and soft outside the paddock fence, beneath the trees, and as she made her way around to the south end of the island she thought of how a fox would sink in with every leap. Pride must have some natural instincts of his wild forebears, and forest animals always sought the easiest way—beaten trails. The history of a day's traffic could be read on any runway. If Pride had left the island he would take the track beaten by moose and dogs.

She examined this path when she started across the lake, but it told nothing. As she walked beside it, looking for smaller footprints of a fox, the toes of her snowshoes caught on a thin crust three inches beneath the surface. She tested the crust. It would, she thought, hold a fox.

Ann passed trails Philip and Hugh had made when they circled the island and still she found no signs of Pride. The sun was setting now and as she looked west the last rays touched a line of dots in the snow, turned them black. She hurried on to find that a fox had left the beaten track and turned to the nearest shore of the mainland. She was triumphant. Only Pride could have made this trail. In the thin snow on the crust, each claw and pad had left cameo-clear marks, but she knew Pride might have passed here before dawn.

She followed the tracks to the mainland, on along the shore until Pride had turned into the forest. He'd sought refuge beneath a windfall, had lain for a long while, for his body had melted a hole in the snow. He might have gone on only when he heard her coming.

"Pride!" she called. "Come, Pride!"

Silence, and not the little chirping double bark, answered. She followed the trail, and it was becoming dark now in the forest. Pride had struggled in the crustless snow here, leaping frantically, but he had crossed the point at last and emerged on the lake.

Fox Island, in the twilight, was only a black blotch on the lake. Against the mainland shore nothing could be seen. The long winter night had come. Ann had found Pride's trail, but Pride might be miles away.

"Pride!" she called. "Come, Pride!"

She listened, was about to start on, when she heard a faint bark. Far along the shore a shadow flitted past a point.

"Pride!" she called. "Pride! Pride!" and ran forward.

She didn't see anything more. Tracks on the snow were faint. At the point where she had seen the dark shadow she stopped and called again.

A chirping, double bark answered from the shore.

Ann waited, motionless. She called again, pleaded that he come, but Pride had retreated to the forest after answering her. A few minutes later he came out, only to dart back.

She forced gentleness into her tone and steel into her patience. Terror and the suspicion of wild ancestors pulled against what Pride knew to be kindness and safety, and gentleness must win. At last he came again, and stood watching. Ann tossed a raisin, then a piece of biscuit, and he crept forward to investigate.

Cold bit deep as Ann knelt in the snow and redoubled her coaxing. Pride drew closer, went back, came again. Each time the approaches were longer until at last he took a raisin from an outstretched hand. He sniffed at a piece of biscuit in the door of the carrying case, ate it, smelled more food inside. Suddenly, without hesitation, he went in, but she wondered whether it was her kindness or his own desire for protection that had prompted him.

Ann closed and fastened the door and stood up, lifting the case. It was heavy, and in the reaction of victory her strength fled. She had told Hugh she could carry Pride, and she couldn't. All in a moment she was very tired, and very cold. She wanted to sit down and never do anything, ever again, but she must light a signal fire.

She turned to a point where a blaze could be seen from the island. She cleared snow, built a fire, broke off boughs for a seat before the fire. She put an arm around the carrying case, as if around Pride himself, and waited.

It was the first time she had been alone all day. So much had happened, so many things had been decided, she wondered if she were the same girl who had wakened to the clamor of the dogs, and she knew she was. Steven's

coming had only defined things, or had it been that moment when they found the pens destroyed and she'd seen Philip's despairing face?

A distant cry came across the lake and she knew they'd seen her fire. They would be here soon. In the meanwhile she could wonder about things. It seemed good to get them straightened out. Had Steven arrived in an ordered household and had he been his usual self, the Steven she had always thought of, would things have been different? She knew they would not. The very idea of going off with him was terrifying.

Yet there was regret in finding her first proposal so untempting. She would have enjoyed thinking of it as a danger she had avoided. Now it was like looking back over a rapids and trying to imagine a huge rock in the center as a menace, knowing all the time the current would carry her safely past.

No, Ann thought, she couldn't dress it up to make it anything but what it was, an embarrassment, and she hoped her mother had explained to the others. Understanding was a part of Fox Island and the Jackmans.

She heard voices on the lake now and could see dark figures against the snow.

"I found Pride!" she called.

A little later the men entered the circle of firelight.

Philip kissed her, and she could count on her fingers the times he had done so. "Gee, Sis," and his voice broke, "if you never do anything again, you've done enough today."

As she walked back on a well-broken trail to the island, somehow she no longer felt tired. Philip had found the vixen on the island. Now Pride would go into the sixth pen in the hospital. At last they closed the temporary gate of the outer fence and started to the house.

"The Missus and I don't think Ogema's got a cracked head," Hugh said.

"Oh, Hugh!" Ann cried. "But I don't think I can stand any more good news."

"It has come in a bunch," Dave Jackman said, and Ann felt the firm pressure of his hand on her arm. "We've all had good news."

Then Ann knew they'd been told of Steven's going, and that evening his name was not mentioned. The Jackmans, Ann thought, were the finest family in the world.

Next morning the men began repair of the havoc wrought by the moose invasion. Hugh seemed to enjoy the task of undoing the destruction caused by such tremendous force and energy. Ann and her mother fed and pampered the foxes and gradually they recovered from their fright. Ogema, beyond doubt, would recover.

At first Ann braced herself for questions about Steven's abrupt departure, but when none came she began to wish they would. She wanted to assure her family his going had left no regrets, that the curtailed visit was only part of that incredible day.

At supper, two nights later, Dave Jackman announced all damage wrought by the moose to pens, fences and dog corral had been repaired.

"Which makes everything just right for celebrating Christmas Eve," Hugh said. "You folks forget?"

They had, but the forgetting only amused them.

"And I don't know any family that's got more to celebrate," Dave Jackman said.

"Let's do it now!" Philip exclaimed.

Ann and her mother washed the dishes. Hugh brought in great branches of fragrant balsam until the room smelled fresh and clean as the northern forest. Dave Jackman popped corn, Mary Jackman produced fruit cake and a bowl of punch. Everyone carried in presents. The table was heaped with gay-colored packages. And after these had been opened, exclaimed over and passed around, they sat on the floor in the glow of a great heap of coals.

Mary Jackman led in Christmas carols and all joined in the singing. Even Hugh's voice was audible, the first time Ann remembered hearing him sing above a hum. Dave Jackman put his arm around Ann.

"Happy, daughter?" he asked.

"I've been waiting for a chance to tell you just how happy I am," she said.

"That's all I need to know."

SEVENTEEN

In mid-February the watch tower was completed. It was built in the north's severest weather, when cold gripped the land with force and malice. Days were short and logs were frozen so hard an ax could not bite deep. The men worked through every hour of daylight, drove themselves in numbing temperatures, to finish before the season when constant vigilance was necessary.

The upper story of the tower had windows on four sides and contained a stove and a bed. Philip spoke of it as the office because he kept records and books of the fox ranch there. In reality it was his bedroom, for now that the most important time on a fox ranch was approaching, he slept in the tower more often than in the house. Until the pups were born in spring and the increase was a proven fact, success or failure hung in the balance.

They faced a period of suspense, anxiety and need for constant watchfulness. The foxes must be kept quiet, happy and well, and now Philip's vigilance was unceasing. He slept in his "office" every night and scarcely took time for meals. Even Hugh thought he carried this to an extreme.

"It's got so the lad won't let a pair work off a bit o' steam by snarling at each other," the old trapper said. "I figure foxes are a good deal like people. Don't do 'em any good to keep things bottled up."

"We'll all be on tenter hooks till the litters come," Dave Jackman said. "I'll never forget last spring."

"Whatever happens, we shouldn't have cross fox pups," Philip said.

In pelting time in December, when they had sold the last of the mink, they had rigorously culled the foxes and now only four pairs of the original herd remained.

Ann thought of other possible disasters, and June seemed so far away. This year she was more conscious than usual of the lag of late winter. She knew she shouldn't be. Already the days were growing longer and the pale sun held a promise of future warmth, but she could not escape her depression.

In midwinter she had thought it was because she missed dog driving. She had driven the team only on necessary errands because she couldn't bear to see Ogema's grief-stricken eyes when they went without him. But now he had taken his old place as leader and proved his complete recovery in the firm measures by which he restored discipline. His substitute had permitted the others to get slightly out of hand. Yet even with Ogema leading, as in the old days on the trail, Ann's spirits did not revive.

Fortunately she didn't have much time to think about herself. There was so much to do. She kept watch at the pens when the men were working elsewhere. The wood pile needed replenishing and logs were cut for what Philip referred to as the "administration building." Its plan had become more elaborate. Jerry sent a blueprint which Philip showed to Ann one day when she went to the tower. In the same envelope were enlargements of pictures Jerry had taken the previous' summer. One was of Pride.

"We should frame that for the office," Philip said. "Have pictures of the rest of the herd too. And I need a good file for Jerry's letters. I'm always hunting things we've been writing about."

"Let me fix this corner as a real office," Ann said.

"Wish you would."

Ann looked at the photograph of herself and Jerry which Philip had taken while they admired the white birch dressing table Jerry had made in the fishing camp.

"Didn't we have a good time there?" she said.

"The best ever. At least until—" He didn't finish, and then he said abruptly, "I got to help Hugh with those logs."

After Philip had gone, Ann sorted Jerry's letters. There were so many, and all written to Philip, with only an occasional message to her. It hurt to think Jerry hadn't written to her except once at Christmas, and then only in thanks for the knitted socks. Once they had written such long letters to each other.

On a cold, windy day Alec Gillespie brought the mailsack. He was on his way to an outpost, a last inspection trip by dog team, and stopped for dinner. At the table they resumed their old argument of wild versus ranch fur, but now it was only facetious. Long ago the old Scotch trader had given up hope of convincing the Jackmans.

"My hunters' jobs will soon be over for the year," he said, "and you people have just begun your real worries. Give me the forest for a nursery every time."

"But your hunters won't know how many young they've lost or what their increase is," Philip said.

"I'm not sure about that. A good hunter can always tell how many beaver he can take from his district. Of course he misses some excitement, like moose crashing across an island."

"That ain't likely to happen again," Hugh said. "I'm bettin' this country's about run out o' tricks to play on the Jackmans."

"I should hope so," the manager said. "If anyone earned a fox ranch it's you people."

He departed soon and they read the mail. A letter from Jerry and another from his father announced they were coming at Easter to spend a week. "It's not as long a visit as I'd like," John Sloane wrote, "but it's my first chance to get away." Easter would come in the first week in April.

"Wish we could have had some pups to show them," Philip said, "but maybe this is better. It'll be May before we can know anything. We'll put another bed in the watch tower for Jerry."

Mary Jackman started to protest and then laughed.

"It's exactly where Jerry would prefer to sleep," she said.

The morning of the Sloanes' arrival Philip started early to the railroad. He took the sledge instead of the toboggan because snow on the ice had melted and water stood in pools. By mid-morning Ann and her mother began to watch for the guests. The dogs could make fast time on spring ice.

"John Sloane won't ride," Dave Jackman said. "He'll walk every step."

At last the cavalcade appeared at the point, three men trotting behind the team. Mary Jackman beamed.

"Dear John Sloane," she said. "It's almost two years since I've seen him."

When they reached shore John Sloane kissed Ann and then her mother, but he kept an arm around Mary Jackman. "You don't know how I've looked forward to this visit," he said.

Everyone was shaking hands and laughing. Ann thought how wonderful it was to have the two families together again, but even in the confusion she noticed that while Jerry kissed her mother he only shook hands with her. His eyes met hers squarely. She could see no hint of their last talk together. Otherwise he seemed the old Jerry.

Mary Jackman led them into the living room. "What would you like first?" she asked. "Coffee or foxes?"

"I'd say coffee," John Sloane said, "but I know what Jerry's choice will be."

"No reason why he can't look at foxes," Philip said. "We'll see you later."

The two boys went out and did not return for an hour. Jerry was ecstatic.

"You should see them, Dad!" he said. "Bill Daniels hasn't anything finer."

John Sloane put his coffee cup on the small table and stood up. "Can anyone bear to look at foxes again?" he asked.

"It's all we do here," Hugh said. "Come on, everybody."

Dinner was late, but no one minded. They were too busy talking fox ranching. John Sloane was more excited than the others. When the meal was over Philip and Jerry went back to the pens and the three men gathered in a corner.

"I didn't write you, Dave, how delighted I was when Jerry decided on this," the lawyer said, "but I knew you'd understand. I've always envied you people. It's a life I would have loved, only things didn't break that way. Now what pleases me most is that Jerry found it for himself."

"I never knew when Jerry and Philip figured all this out," Dave Jackman said. "We were as surprised as you, John, but you couldn't be more tickled."

Hugh snorted. "If ever I saw a pair of pards at first meetin' it was those two lads."

"Which makes us seem a little dumb, eh, Dave," John Sloane chuckled. "What are you fellows doing? We didn't come to be a nuisance."

"There's ice to haul," Hugh said. "Got to fill two houses this year, one on the mainland for fishing, the other for here. And there's logs to bring to the island for the new building the lads've been planning."

"Which comes first?" the lawyer asked.

"Ice," and the old trapper turned to Ann. "Think your team could haul it?"

"They'd love to," Ann said.

They hauled ice until dark. Ogema's eyes gleamed as he studied his job. He knew ice hauling from years past, recognized even the sound of a cake being hooked to the singletree. He started without command, returned to the lake before the cake was stowed inside.

"If Ogema could use an ice saw, we could sit in the house on this job." John Sloane laughed. "Jerry and I are the only greenhorns."

"Why make it plural?" Jerry said. "Didn't I earn my keep fishing last summer?"

The week sped by. Each day was different, and each was fun. They hauled logs from the mainland, eating lunch in a dense spruce thicket. John Sloane said he'd never known toasted bacon sandwiches and hot tea could taste so good.

Hours were spent at the pens, and the upper room of the tower became a club. Anyone wanting Philip or Jerry had only to look there. Jerry installed cost accounting. Hugh said he'd never heard of keeping track of what a critter ate, but he was impressed when the boys told him the expenses per fox.

"Who'd 'a' thought it runs that high," he said. "Only it don't seem right to charge a fox rent for wire netting."

Ann formed the custom of making afternoon tea in the watch tower while the two boys drew plans for a larger fox ranch. She liked to see them work together. Philip had already chosen a site for ten more pens. "And we can add another block to the south," he said.

Jerry looked up alertly. "Think we'll be that lucky?" he asked. "The best increase we can expect is three and a half pups per pair. And some ranchers have had none."

"I know," Philip said, and he was disturbed even by the thought of such a possibility, "but that's not the sort of thing I want to talk about."

"Neither do I," Jerry said. "Now this administration building. We want to plan it for years, have a room too where we can grind meat, bones and all. It's what they do in Eastern Canada with old horses."

"That means power."

"We'll get an engine some day. And a boiler for hot water to sterilize pans. Maybe we could hook the engine to a pump so you wouldn't have to carry water to the house. Just turn a faucet."

"Jerry!" Ann cried. "That would be wonderful!"

He grinned. "But don't tell Dad. He likes discomforts. He'd say a faucet was indecent in a log house."

Philip's eyes were glowing. "You know, Jerry, there's no telling where we might get some day."

"Sure. I wish you people could have been in St. Louis with me. Ann thinks we're crazy, but she ought to know other ranchers. We can't even guess the kind of silvers we'll have ten years from now."

"That's what I tried to tell them when I came back last year," Philip said.

Those were high moments. Others came when Jerry and Philip looked morosely at the nine pairs of foxes on which this dazzling future rested.

"You'll let me know when the first litter comes," Jerry said.

"I'll be glad to," Ann said. "Philip will be so excited he won't be able to write."

The day the Sloanes left Jerry mentioned Steven. Ann had wondered if Philip had written about his brief visit. Evidently Philip hadn't, for Jerry's voice was carefully casual when he spoke of Steven's departure for Europe.

"He came here just before he left," Ann said. "He stayed only an hour."

"Philip didn't tell me," Jerry said.

"I wasn't thinking about anything but moose Christmas time." Philip sounded a bit confused. "You'd have forgotten Steven too if you'd seen what those five did to the island."

Ann hoped she wasn't blushing, and there wasn't anything she could add. In so many ways, Jerry was like Philip. When a matter was settled, it was settled. And she couldn't blame him. She had seemed very sure about Steven.

Philip was to take the Sloanes to the railroad and after an early supper Ann watched the three start off in an early April twilight. Jerry looked very serious when he shook hands.

"Don't forget, Ann, you promised to let me know about the pups and I'm counting on you. Good or bad news, you're to send it."

"Of course, I will!" Ann cried. "I'll wire the minute we have news, and write about it, too. Why, Jerry! Of course I would! Aren't you one of us?"

The real drama of the fox farm began ten days later when Philip rushed in to report one of their own yearlings had her litter.

"Only two pups," he said. "But they're silvers."

Ann knew from his tone he was disappointed in the size of the family. He was more cheerful the next morning when he found five new Nova Scotians in the nesting box.

"They'll be the prettiest ones in the lot," Hugh said. He'd always admired their silver markings. "And she'll make a good mother."

But this was only seven pups. Three days went by and it was still seven. This was not news to wire to Jerry, despite Ann's promise, and Hugh said break-up might come any time. Ann wavered between a last moment dash to town and indefinite silence, but next morning the matter was settled for her. The ice had broken from shore and a moat of water surrounded the island. They were shut in by break-up, but her conscience was freed completely.

She was sorry the next day when one of the vixens Jerry had selected produced four beautiful pups. Jerry would have been so glad to know that.

Then they settled down to wait. Each morning they never knew whether they would be overjoyed or disappointed. There was a dreadful blank space and then Hugh wakened them at dawn to report three litters of four each had come.

"What a day for quadruplets," he said. "Philip's been up all night."

"This is better than I even hoped," Dave Jackman said. "But what's bothering Philip? He should be tickled to death."

Ann knew he wasn't. He couldn't be until Patricia had her litter.

Two more pups arrived the next day, then a family of five, and Ann was eager for a trip to town and a wire to Jerry. But ice lay solid across Far Lake, gray ice, riddled by the sun. The merest breeze would break it up, but one calm day followed another. Ann began to pace the shore. This was dreadful.

"Never knew of good news that wouldn't keep," Hugh said.

"This won't," she said almost savagely. "What can Jerry think is happening?"

"He'll figure on break-up," Hugh said. "Ain't it queer about Patricia? Philip's worried."

Ann didn't speak. She didn't like to have anyone mention Patricia.

That night Ann heard the wind. Next morning Far Lake was open and Patricia, as was her queenly right, took the center of the stage, even against break-up, and produced her family. Seven pups! The largest litter yet born!

Philip was too excited to speak when he came to report the news.

"That makes thirty-seven silver fox pups on this island!" Dave Jackman said, and his voice cracked with excitement.

"Better than we had any right to hope!" Philip shouted. "We beat the average."

And that was the news Ann and Philip carried to town to telegraph Jerry. Philip's hands trembled when he wrote the wire.

"You finish, Sis," he said, and thrust it toward her.

She thought a moment and then wrote, "Congratulations to a fox rancher from Ann."

Jerry, in his letters, lamented he couldn't arrive at Far Lake before the first week in June, but Philip and his father were glad it was so and planned a grand climax. It would be two weeks before the pups' eyes were open and a month before their mothers would permit them outside the nest boxes.

"I want 'em out in the sunshine when Jerry comes," Philip said. "Thirty-seven silver pups in sight at once!"

"We won't have thirty-seven by June," Hugh said. "Stands to reason we're bound to lose some before then."

For once Hugh was wrong. There had not been a single infant tragedy on Fox Island when he and Philip went in to meet Jerry. Ann and Dave Jackman were at the pens when they heard the boat returning.

"Jerry'll come here first," Dave Jackman said.

Ann nodded. She hoped he would and she wanted to watch his face when he saw proof of their triumph.

Jerry walked from pen to pen, marveling, incredulous, but his slow smile had a deep-down quiet happiness. Hugh, Philip and Dave Jackman did all the talking. Ann and Jerry were silent, but they stood with shoulders touching, and when at last the others started back to the house, they fell behind on the trail. Jerry put his arms around her.

"I had to wait until I was certain I really was a fox rancher," he said. "But are you sure this time, Ann?"

"I've always been sure, Jerry, only I didn't know it."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Silver Strain*, by Kathrene Pinkerton.]