A GOOD PARTNER

Kathrene Pinkerton

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by Kathrene Pinkerton



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A GOOD PARTNER

1

As the train swung into a long aisle in the forest, Neal Bartlett turned from the car window and reached for the bags on the luggage rack. The next station, White Pine, was his. Both bags were large. A man across the aisle rose to give a hand, but as Neal swung the first one easily, he settled back.

"You're huskier than I'd have guessed," he said.

Neal smiled. Strangers often misjudged his strength. Tall for his age and not yet filled out, his muscles were not apparent. Only when he walked was one aware of a smooth coordination. Boys in school said he walked like an Indian, and his hair was black enough to be an Indian's, except that it had a crisp aliveness. As Neal lifted the second bag the man still watched him.

"Got a kid at home about your age," he said. "Around seventeen, aren't you?"

"Not yet," said Neal, pleased by the guess. He was fifteen but people usually thought of him as older.

"Live in White Pine?" the man asked.

"Just stopping off," Neal said.

He regretted the admission. It would give an excuse for more questions, and for an hour he had been conscious of the other's desire to start a conversation, had known too that the questions would be personal, questions no one would dare ask of an older person. Too often, Neal had been the victim of those who invaded his privacy under the guise of friendly interest.

"Traveled far?"

"From Ohio."

"I thought you were an outsider. Live in Ohio? Cleveland, maybe?"

Neal nodded, and his smile made the nod seem friendly. He had never been in Cleveland, but there was no need to say he'd lived in Hayward, a little town no one ever heard of.

"First visit to north Wisconsin?"

Neal hesitated and then said, "Yes."

If he admitted he'd been born here, had left when a baby and had a special reason to return now, there'd be no end to the questions.

"Chances are you're visiting someone I know," the man said. "White Pine isn't a big place."

"Only five hundred, isn't it?" Neal said.

Perhaps the man knew Tom Clark. Neal was tempted to ask, and then decided not to. He would like to know what Tom Clark was like, but he didn't intend to explain to a stranger that although Tom was his guardian, all he knew about him was he had been his father's closest friend. "Partners" they had called themselves when his father was a timber cruiser and Tom the compassman. His mother had told him Tom was big, with flaming red hair and a bushy beard.

That was fifteen years ago and now Tom was probably old and gray and wondering what his partner's son could be expecting of him. Neal intended to let him know right off that he neither wanted nor expected anything. He'd promised to visit Tom to please his mother and in those last months when they knew she wasn't going to get well she had talked a lot about Tom and the country where Neal was born and of its forests, its lakes and its beauty. She had been a young schoolteacher from Ohio who had gone to the north woods of Wisconsin, where she married Neal's father.

Now Neal looked out of the window, hoping his absorption in the landscape would stop the man's questions. His mother had said the north country was lovely, but he had not dreamed how truly lovely it was as lake after lake, sparkling in the bright October sunshine, swept past. Each was different, and each was beautiful, lying in a dark green forest which seemed the greener because enlivened by patches of brilliant autumn foliage. Birch and poplar, like huge chrysanthemums, were reflected in the water. Maples splashed bright scarlet. The man leaned over Neal's shoulder.

"Pretty country," he said. "And you took the best month to see it."

The month had not been of Neal's choosing. He had come as soon as he could after his mother's funeral, but he did not say so.

"Most folks come up in summer," the man said. He waited for Neal's answer and then added, "Guess I'll see if there's any ice water in the cooler. Want to come? Ten minutes before we get to White Pine."

"No, thank you," Neal answered.

As the man walked down the aisle, Neal lifted a bag to the seat beside him. The two bags held everything he owned and although so much baggage might make Tom think he'd come to settle, he had to bring it, for he'd need his things when he went west. He planned to tell Tom right away of his intention to do so. He didn't want Tom to think a boy had been wished on him, especially a boy Tom had never seen or thought of for fifteen years. Tom probably hadn't wanted to be made a guardian any more than Neal had wanted him to be. Neal had never suspected his mother would turn his affairs over to a stranger. And Tom was a stranger, although Neal's mother had talked a lot about him in those last few months when she had stopped pretending her pain was only from being overtired.

"Tom Clark is the best friend your father or I ever had," she said. "When you know him you'll see why."

Neal did not answer. He didn't like to tell her what he thought of the friendship of a man who had never written in fifteen years to ask how things were going with his partner's wife and son. Then he was sure he never would see Tom or know him. His mother must have sensed his thoughts, for she added quickly, "It's my fault we lost track of each other. When your father was killed I wanted to get away from the sight of that country. And your grandfather wanted us to come home. Afterwards—well, Tom was never one for writing, and I guess I was too busy."

She had been busy. Neal could not remember when she had not been rushing to finish a dress for someone. By sewing for neighbors and owning their little house, his mother had managed to get along. As Neal grew older, he'd helped with money from odd jobs, and later he'd had regular work in the Pierce general store, Saturdays and after school in winter. In summer he'd worked full time, but his mother had known how he felt about a clerking job in Hayward, and that might have been one reason for making Tom his guardian. If she hadn't named Tom, the court would have appointed someone in Hayward. Mr. Weaver, the town's banker, who had helped to sell Neal's house, had explained this. A fifteen-year-old boy couldn't dispose of property and do what he liked with the money. Mr. Weaver had to get Tom's permission to sell the house. There had been no difficulty about it, because a new industry had come to Hayward and workers needed homes.

Money from the sale had paid the doctor and the nurse and for the funeral, and had left Neal a savings account. Mr. Weaver had called Neal into his office. It seemed strange to be sitting with a banker talking about

money. Until then Neal's only financial dealing with Mr. Weaver had been in the two winters when he had tended his furnace and shoveled walks. The banker had been fair, paying extra the week of the big blizzard, and now he motioned Neal to sit in the chair beside his desk and handed him his pass book. Neal looked at the deposit figure, nine hundred and fifty dollars.

"That's a large sum for a boy your age," the banker said. "Made plans about your future?"

"Any boy does that," Neal said.

"I hope you'll finish the last year in high school."

Neal nodded. He'd finish sometime, and there was no use in trying to explain why he intended to leave Hayward.

"That's wise," the banker said. "Then go to the university. Your savings won't pay all your expenses but you're the sort of boy who can manage. Your science teacher told me that even with your outside work you've made a fine record."

Neal looked up, surprised that the banker had been interested enough to inquire.

"Yes, Neal. I've been asking about you. I wanted to talk to you, not so much about college as afterwards. Ever thought what you want to do? I know you're young to decide anything so important, but I've wondered if you'd considered storekeeping. I mean a general store, like Pierce's. John Pierce says you've been the best clerk he's had. You use your head, you get on with people, and you know what they want. You might be a natural merchandiser."

Neal smiled. John Pierce hadn't thought so that month when he'd been sick and Neal ordered a new kind of poultry feed. Neal had heard about the feed, knew the customers would like it, but John Pierce thought he had fallen for a fast-talking salesman who had flattered him. Afterwards he admitted he was wrong when the farmers came back for more.

"I'm thinking as a banker," Mr. Weaver went on. "Good stores build up a community, and a good store must take account of the special needs of customers. We're an agricultural center; our prosperity depends on farming and our merchants should be familiar with the latest developments in growing grains and stock. Your biology teacher tells me you have a special bent in this direction. Undoubtedly you have already discovered this helped you in meeting customers, but you should make even more use of your natural ability in science. Take subjects along that line in college, become

familiar with the recent discoveries which have changed farming and when you come back here you can make a real place for yourself."

He paused, and Neal knew the long speech had been considered and weighed beforehand. "I've thought about you, Neal. It would not have been fair to advise you without first finding out about your aptitudes and interests. I'm talking of the years ahead. Some day you might even own a store like John Pierce's. It's not impossible. When I was your age I never thought I'd own a bank. Men like me have watched you, know you have ideas and you're not afraid of work. We have faith in you, Neal. That's half the battle."

Neal flushed. Mr. Weaver didn't often praise people. Neal knew he ought to thank him, and wasn't sure how to say it.

"I don't expect you to make up your mind now," the banker said. "No boy of fifteen can do that. But you should think about it. Having a goal steadies a man. Oh, I know all boys get ideas about seeing the country and meeting adventure. Growing pains, I call them. When I was your age I used to dream about going west and fighting Indians."

He laughed indulgently about that other boy of so long ago. It was funny to think that Mr. Weaver, who couldn't walk fast without puffing, had dreamed of fighting Indians. But Neal knew why the banker had told him of it. Neal's mother must have warned him about what she called Neal's restlessness, and Neal knew if he tried to explain what he intended to do with his money, Mr. Weaver would not consider it different from his own dream of fighting Indians.

"Perhaps you won't believe this now," and the banker was suddenly very earnest, "but I've found all the adventure I wanted right in this little bank in Hayward."

For a moment Neal was tempted to tell what he had been planning since he had first heard of the Grand Coulee Dam. The largest ever built, it would be completed next year and the semi-arid land of eastern Washington would be irrigated. The possibilities of this reclaimed desert country fascinated him. Even before he knew the truth of his mother's illness he had talked of going west, planning for her to join him in the home he would establish. But the plan had always meant more than just finding themselves a new home. More than anything else Neal wanted to grow something on land on which nothing had ever grown before. No one knew what this new land, and it would be new, could produce. He'd have a chance to prove something for himself, know the thrill of untried paths. Adventure no longer lay in fighting

Indians but in challenge and success through one's own invention. He considered saying this to Mr. Weaver, and then knew it was no use.

"I'm sorry to hear you're leaving the store," Mr. Weaver said.

"But I've got to go to Wisconsin and see my guardian," Neal replied. "I ought at least to know the man who decides how I spend my money."

Neal did not try to keep the resentment from his voice. He had never understood why his mother had named Tom Clark as guardian. After all the years they'd not asked anything of anyone, he should be able to get along without a man who had never seemed to be aware of his existence. But apparently Mr. Weaver had not seen anything unusual in the arrangement.

"Of course you two should know each other," the banker said. "By all means you make a visit and tell him what you plan."

Neal did not answer. Evidently the banker saw nothing dismaying in having to lay bare one's dreams and hopes to a stranger, or perhaps Mr. Weaver did not know Tom had not written in fifteen years. Neal did not want to talk about it.

"I'm sure you'll like him," the banker said. "I liked his letter. And any man your mother chose as guardian can be depended on. Your mother was a remarkable woman, Neal. You can feel proud of the stock you come from. Tell Clark about our talk and why you plan to save this money for an education."

Neal let the matter rest there. Since his mother's death, he had learned to keep his own counsel. After the house was closed and the furniture sold at auction, he was ready to depart. John Pierce paid his last wages. He had lived with the Pierce's since the funeral.

"You didn't take out anything for board," Neal said.

"Never yet charged a friend for a little food," John Pierce said gruffly, "but if it'll make you feel better, when you get back we'll come to some arrangement. Besides it'll be time to raise your wages."

The Pierces were at the station to see Neal off, as was his high school class and the Weavers. Neal wished Mrs. Weaver had not come. She was not like her husband, but was one of the women who reminded him of things he wanted to forget—the odd jobs, the hand-me-downs in clothing, the late nights his mother had sat up sewing.

Now the train was stopping in White Pine. Neal carried his bags to the little station platform. Tom Clark, and it could be no one else, came toward

him. He was a big man, and flaming hair and a bushy beard gave him a look almost of ferocity. He thrust out a hand.

"You've growed since I seen you," he said, and picked up a bag.

Neal followed with the other. Tom lifted the bags into the body of a small truck, climbed into the driver's seat and motioned Neal to follow. The truck started noisily. Apparently Tom was not a handy man around a motor. Neal had learned to notice such things. Not only had he kept the store's truck in order but he was always tinkering with electric power plants, refrigerators and washing machines which the store sold, and he'd learned a lot from trouble shooters the manufacturers sent to follow up sales.

Tom drove past two blocks of small stores, offices and a filling station, then scattered houses, each with a large garden. In a few moments they were outside of White Pine. At a crossroads a sprawling log building with a filling station at the entrance carried a "Dine and Dance" sign. Tom waved a hand.

"Only open summers and in hunting season," he said.

The roadhouse marked the end of the settlement, and the highway entered a forest. From a crest Neal caught the glint of a river and two small lakes.

"I live twelve miles out," Tom said. "Hope you're not getting hungry."

Neal said he wasn't. The sun had gone down when the train reached White Pine and now the last reds and yellows of an October sunset were fading from the sky. Tom left the cement highway and turned onto a road of black top. The surface was broken in places and he slipped into second gear. A few moments later, in a place where a creek had overflowed, he went into low through the deep ruts. The gears groaned.

"Betsy complains a lot but she keeps going," Tom said.

"Sounds like fouled plugs," Neal replied.

Tom looked at him sharply. "Know anything about machinery?"

"We'd have been out of luck if I hadn't," Neal said. "You wouldn't believe the things a customer can do to a new motor."

"Betsy don't need much attention," Tom said. "Besides, it never hurt anyone to take ten minutes longer to get anywhere."

The road wound through a forest. Ahead lay a clearing and a small house. Tom stopped at the door. The house was not as low as Neal had first thought—it was dwarfed by a tall straight tree. Tom pointed to it.

"Finest white pine in the country," he said. "Used to have whole forests of them before the rust got 'em."

Neal looked at the symmetry of the branches and understood Tom's tone of pride. The tree had an individuality which was inescapable. Tom lifted out the bags. Neal had first thought the road ended at Tom's house but now he saw it led into the woods.

"Someone live beyond you?" he asked.

"Dave Mead built the road," Tom said. "Fellow from Chicago. He bought a piece of land from me and the rest of the section from the state. Built a log cabin by a lake. Least he calls it a log cabin. Folks around here call it a palace. I watch it for him. It's handy having the only road to his place go right past my door."

"You mean he owns a whole section?" Neal asked.

"Six hundred and forty acres. Says there's going to be one section in this country without a fishing or hunting lodge. He's a fine fellow. Doesn't get up as often as he used to since the war in Europe started. Says he won't come even that much if this country gets into the ruckus."

Tom carried a bag into the house. As they entered the kitchen, Neal was struck with its extraordinary neatness. He wondered if a meal had ever been prepared there, and then knew one had, and recently. He caught a tantalizing aroma and saw that two places were set on a red-checked tablecloth.

"Started supper before I went to the train," Tom said. "It'll be ready as soon as you are. I'll show you where you sleep."

Neal followed Tom to a room upstairs. It was ceilinged with board and batten but the walls were of logs, nut brown from age, which toned in with the mellowed creamy strips of filling plaster.

"I didn't know this was a log house!" Neal exclaimed.

"Pa built it of four-squared timbers right from this place," Tom said. "When Ma had the downstairs prettied up with wallpaper and outside siding, I made her leave this room alone. I used to sleep here. Pa argued on my side. He wanted one room left just like he built it. No one could hew logs smoother. Wasn't a better broadax man in the country." Tom started toward the stairway. "Suppose you want to get off those city clothes. Come down when you're ready."

Neal decided to unpack as little as possible—he wouldn't need much for a few days' visit. He hung his suit in a corner, curtained off as a closet, and

put on corduroys and flannel shirt. There was a chill in the air. As he changed his clothes he thought how much he liked the room. History books had always made a childhood in a log cabin sound pretty grim but this room had an air of comfort. He examined the walls. He couldn't believe the smoothness could have been hand-hewn until he found the tiny marks of an ax. The faint pattern added to the beauty. No wonder the builder had refused to have the logs hidden. When Neal entered the kitchen, Tom was putting supper on the table. He stopped midway between stove and table.

"In a wool shirt you look more like your dad than ever!" he exclaimed. "Can't remember ever seeing him in anything else."

"How long did you know each other?" Neal asked.

"From the time we first drew wages. Always worked together. He wouldn't have had a different compassman, and I wouldn't run compass for any other cruiser. Wasn't a better in the country. When your dad looked at a piece of timber and said how many thousand feet it would run, the logging company knew it would cut just that much."

Neal suddenly realized that for the first time he knew a man who had known his father. He hoped Tom would tell him more, even tried to prod with questions, but Tom's answers were brief. After the logging railroad accident, Tom had gone back to trapping. He had always trapped some in the winter. Now he was still trapping, had the exclusive trapping rights on the Mead holdings.

"Do pretty well," he said, "and with the mink I raise I manage to get along."

"You mean a mink ranch?" Neal asked.

"Young fellows call 'em ranches," Tom said. "I call 'em farms. I've got a small herd, about as many as one man can take care of. Show 'em to you in the morning. Pelters are putting on their winter fur and look real pretty."

"Did you start with wild ones?" Neal asked.

"I bought breeding stock, and good stock," Tom said. "If a man's going to the trouble of raising mink, he ought to raise the best."

Neal was hungry and supper was good, although Tom apologized for the baked stew of canned venison.

"When the season opens we'll have some real meat," he said. "I always aim to get my buck the first day before the deer have all the fat run off by city hunters."

As they ate Neal told Tom about the sale of the house and how he had paid all the debts in Hayward.

"Glad you could do that," Tom said. "Mary wouldn't have wanted to be beholden to anybody. She was independent, like your dad. Bet she brought you up to be the same way."

Neal wondered if it were too soon to talk about the guardianship, but Tom left the table. He returned with a large chocolate cake, which he set down with a look of pride.

"Did you make that?" Neal asked. The baking powder biscuits had been good, but the cake was impressive.

"Miss Thorndyke baked it when she heard about your coming. Does my washing and would do a lot more if I'd let her, but I don't want a woman fussin' around the place. She says it takes an old bach like me to be particular about housekeeping. Maybe I am, at that."

Neal was sure of this as he helped Tom with the dishes. Each dish was scalded, washed, rinsed and examined.

"Takes a bit longer, but they're done right," Tom said. Then, cloth in hand, he went over table, stove and floor, and added, "No reason not to leave a kitchen shipshape."

They put away the food, Tom carefully plugging the opening in a condensed milk can.

"Maybe you'd like fresh milk," he said. "Buy it for the mink sometimes and we could have it on the table. It would keep in the icehouse."

"There's no reason for the little while I'll be here," Neal said.

Tom was trying to find room in the cupboard for the large chocolate cake. His back was toward Neal and he did not turn as he spoke in a carefully casual tone.

"Thought you was plannin' on a real visit, but I suppose you're anxious to get back to Hayward."

"I'm never going back there," Neal said.

Tom ignored both the statement and the passionate conviction in Neal's voice. He arranged the cake to his satisfaction. His speech might have been only thinking aloud.

“That banker fellow wrote you had to go to high school for another year,” he said. “Kids around here generally go to Union High School at Centerville and stay with relatives from Monday until Friday. But Mead told me you can get schooling by mail. A university and a couple of other schools send out lessons. Wouldn’t cost much. Only about a hundred dollars.”

“I’ll get to high school all right,” Neal said. “Went three years and earned my living besides.”

“Didn’t mean I doubted but what you’d manage,” Tom said. “Got an idea of where you want to go?”

“I’m going west,” Neal said. “I’m on my way there now.”

“Weaver wrote me you were going to save the money in the bank to get a start at college.”

“That’s what he thought,” Neal said. “I didn’t tell him any different. It wasn’t any of his business.”

“You figure it’s any of mine?”

“It has to be. You’re my guardian and I can’t get the money unless you say it’s all right.”

Tom filled his pipe and then looked at Neal. “I’m glad to hear you say that’s your understanding, because it’s mine,” he said. “It helps when two folks see alike.”

“I don’t want to be a bother to you,” Neal said. “I came here to tell you what I intend to do with the money. I don’t want it right away. I’ve got to look around first. The Grand Coulee Dam isn’t finished yet, but when it is that desert country will be good land and the people who get in early will have their pick. I’m going to buy land.”

“Figured what you want to grow?”

“I’ve got to look around. It might take a year, but when I’m sure about the place and what I can grow on it, I’ll write and tell you.”

“And then you expect me to turn the money over to you?”

“Why not?” Neal demanded. “It’s mine.”

“Sure it’s yours. Except I’m responsible as long as you’re a minor. That’s the job of being guardian and what your mother asked me to do. Least that’s the way Mead put it.”

"What's he got to do with this?"

"He's a guardian too, for his sister's girl. She's got a lot of money and a lot of ideas of ways to spend it."

Neal wondered if Tom meant he would not give his approval of the western venture. He had not said so, but his way of asking questions and not saying what he thought made Neal uneasy.

"If I'm willing to take time and look around to be sure I'm on the right track, you ought to be satisfied," Neal said.

"Did your mother ever think about you're going to college?"

"We talked about it, but didn't see much chance. I wouldn't take a cent of sewing money and besides she needed what I earned."

"Long toward the last she must have seen a chance for you to get a start."

"She didn't say so. The reason she made you guardian was to help me get away from Hayward. That's all I'm asking of you."

"You can get away from Hayward without losing your money in a country you don't know anything about and in a business you never tackled before," Tom said.

"You mean you wouldn't let me have my money?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"But I've got to have it!" Neal burst out. "There's no use in going west unless I can count on getting it when I need it. Why should you try to stop me?" His voice rose in anger. "We got on fifteen years without you."

Neal regretted the speech almost before it had been said, but the words were out. He looked at Tom and saw no change in his expression.

"I know you did, lad," Tom said quietly. "And after all those years, Mary still wanted me for guardian. So that's the way it is."

2

NEXT morning when Neal awakened he heard Tom in the kitchen and thought of their argument the previous evening. He was still angered by Tom's stand on the money and realized he should not have mentioned the western trip so soon. He'd never guessed Tom would regard his guardianship this seriously after fifteen years of silence. But Neal knew he had no right to remind Tom of those years and now he was even more ashamed, especially when he remembered Tom's quiet answer. It made him feel like a bad-mannered kid sounding off on something that was none of his business. Probably Tom thought so too, and couldn't be blamed if he didn't want him to stay. Yet Neal had to stay until he got his money. He couldn't return to Hayward, lose another year, and perhaps never persuade Tom to consent to his venture. He'd have to remain and prove he had enough sense to handle his own savings.

Neal rummaged through the bags for woolen socks and a pair of heavy shoes. He did not unpack. He might have to later, but this was too soon to admit defeat. As he entered the kitchen Tom looked at his feet approvingly.

"I was going to tell you to put on bush gear," he said. "This morning I've got to go to Mead's place. Getting it in shape for winter. Thought you'd like to see his house." Tom's tone was friendly. "We'll pack a lunch, but you'll wonder why when you see the fancy groceries we tote down cellar to keep from freezing. Mead used to laugh at me for bringing lunch until he ate at my place. Then he said he didn't blame me. DM's cook couldn't make a decent pot of beans if he tried."

"DM?" Neal said. "You mean Mead?"

"Yes, his first name's David. I never used one of those fancy double-initial names before, but everyone, even his niece, calls him that. Somehow it sounds like him."

After breakfast Tom said he had to fill the water dishes in the mink pens and Neal offered to help.

Tom nodded. "Won't take long," he said. "Don't have to feed 'em. They get a breakfast only when the kits are young and the mothers are nursing."

"What do you feed them?" Neal asked.

"Cereal and whatever meat I can get. Fish, rabbits or the carcasses of muskrats. I've got horsemeat in the icehouse now. Lucky to buy an old horse off a neighbor. Next month when trapping starts I'll buy muskrats. Sometimes in winter I get a shipment of frozen western rabbits."

They went to the fur farm. Neal had expected to find many mink in large enclosures but here were rows of small box-like cages of netting, raised above the ground and each holding a single mink. Most of the animals were hidden in the wooden nest boxes at the end of each wire pen. A few looked out of the round entrances and stared as Tom and Neal walked down the rows of pens dumping and refilling the water utensils. It was slow work. Neal wondered at the inconvenience of the long, narrow-funneled water dishes but did not like to ask. Tom saw him examine them.

"Have to build 'em so's a mink can always get a drink but can't get in 'em," he said. "Water's hard on fur."

"But wild mink live along creeks and rivers!" Neal exclaimed.

"And do a lot of things to fur. Why should they care about their pelts? Sometimes I catch a mink in the traps that's been fighting so his skin looks like a sieve. Their teeth are sharp as needles."

As they worked, Tom's remarks were divided between Neal and the mink so that sometimes Neal was baffled.

"These are the breeders," Tom explained. "The old girls and I've known each other for quite a spell." A mink put its head out of the nesting box and hissed. "Is that so?" Tom laughed. "Woke up feeling grouchy, did you?" He turned to Neal. "She's just pretending to be mad. Always does it. But you couldn't ask for a better mother."

They crossed to smaller pens under a stand of trees.

"Keep the pelters in deeper shade," Tom said. "Sun's hard on fur, and these fellows don't need much room. All they've got to do is grow good winter coats. Color is prime now but the fur is flat. Undercoat isn't dense enough to make the guard hairs stand away."

Neal looked closely at a mink. It was darker than he had expected, and larger. "Is this some special breed?" he asked.

"It's a strain from Alaska. Years past, a fellow went up to Kenai Peninsula, found this kind, brought it back and crossed it till he got a good fur bearer. Leather's light and fur is dense and silky. Took him years to get

what he wanted but all the work he put into building a new strain brings him real money now."

Neal had thought ranch mink were merely wild mink in pens.

"You mean a man bred a new kind?" he demanded.

"New and better," Tom said. "He was a real mink farmer."

Neal wanted to hear more about this, but Tom was watching a mink which had not eaten last night's supper.

"What's the matter with this grub?" Tom asked. "You're not getting sick, are you? You wouldn't do that to me after the months I spent to raise you."

He filled the last drinking fountain. Neal helped carry the watering cans to the feed and tool house.

"What's the next job?" he asked.

Tom hesitated. "You go to the house and I'll be along soon. Only a few chores left."

"I can help."

"Take me as long to show you as to do them. If you want to give a hand, I'd appreciate it if you slicked up the kitchen and put a stick in the fire. That pot of beans will be just right, time we get home."

Neal had a feeling Tom wanted to be rid of him, and that was queer. You'd expect a man who had fine mink almost prime for pelting to want to show them off and talk about them.

When Tom came to the house he placed tools in the truck.

"Never could use another man's ax," he said.

"Is Mead's place far?" Neal asked.

"Three-quarters of a mile. We could walk it easy, but old Betsy'd like a little ramble."

The road led through the woods and then skirted a lake. The trees extended almost to the water except for an occasional point of broad flat granite.

"Lake Atikwa," Tom said. "Most of the land here is what I sold DM. When I was a kid, the other fellows used to call it 'Tom's Lake'! Some people still do for that matter."

Neal saw a low building among the trees on the other side of the lake—built on a flat stretch above a sand beach.

"There's DM's log cabin." Tom laughed, but there was no ridicule in his laughter. "Finest log house in the country."

"Did you build it?"

"I felled the timber and did the hewing. Had a crew of men to build it. The fancy stuff, like plumbing and lighting, was put in by men from Chicago."

Tom stopped the truck in the driveway. From across the lake the house had not appeared so large, but now Neal saw long wings jutting out behind.

"It looks as though it grew there!" he exclaimed.

"That's what DM said he wanted!" Tom replied, and Neal knew the remark had pleased him.

They crossed a broad veranda and entered the front door. An enormous living room ran the full length of the building and directly opposite was a huge fireplace. The hewed logs were glowing brown, and drapes and chairs were of tawny shades of old golds, yellows and orange, with here and there a splash of scarlet.

"It's like the October woods," Neal said.

"DM told the man to make it that way. Said fall was the finest time of year."

Neal wanted to stop but Tom hurried on to the bedrooms, each with a sparkling bathroom, and then to a kitchen of gleaming metal tables and a huge refrigerator.

"He's got a deep freeze and a furnace in the cellar," Tom said. "The power plant is in a room behind the house."

"Why—why, he has everything!" Neal said.

"He said he wanted living easy, but nothing that didn't rightly belong in the north woods."

Belong was the word for which Neal had been searching and he understood its real meaning on their return to the living room. This fascinated him. One wall was filled with books. He noticed ax marks in the brown sheen of the chairs and tables.

"Did you make the furniture?" he asked.

"Some of it," Tom said. "DM brought the rest. Said it was homemade by French farmers a long time ago."

Neal stared at the pictures. He had never seen any quite like them. The Weaver house in Hayward had contained oil paintings, and once a year the reading circle held an art meeting there and Mrs. Weaver gave a talk about the artists. Neal had thought the paintings ugly and never dared say so, but these pictures were different. One which seemed at first only a vague jumble, made more sense the longer he looked at it.

"It's not supposed to mean anything," Tom said, "but the color's real pretty."

Neal crossed to another picture. It was of a road between two rows of trees.

"Those ain't like our poplars," Tom said. "The same fellow painted it as that one of the rocks and trees. Got a foreign name. I don't say it right, but it's something like Cezanney."

"I've heard of him," Neal said. He was still staring at the poplars and was conscious of a growing excitement. "I feel as though I were walking on that road," he said.

"It's funny how you can almost hear the leaves rustle," Tom said.

Neal returned to look at the jumbled picture. He liked it even better than at first. "It doesn't have to mean anything," he said to Tom. "It's nice to look at. Who painted it?"

"Another foreigner. Name's in the corner. Picasso. Ever hear of him?"

"No," Neal said. "Do you come here often?"

"Whenever I've got a job, and sometimes I just drop in. DM likes me to do that. Says I ought to borrow his books. If you see anything you want to read, he'd be glad to have you take it."

Later when they had carried the canned goods to the cellar and Tom was busy with outside chores, Neal looked at the books. There were almost as many as in the Hayward library, but these were not arranged by author or by subject. Travel, fiction, history, books about animals and journals of exploration ranged side by side. Neal wanted something about the Grand Coulee country and found two volumes, one old, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River*, and a second by a modern author. *The Purple Land*, by Hudson, attracted him because of its title and he took it too. Tom noticed the three books on the seat of the truck.

"DM'll be glad his books are working," he said.

The truck performed badly on the way home. Now, in addition to despondent coughing, the motor missed explosions. Neal suggested they stop and take a look.

"It's only that the old girl gets kind of peevish sometimes," Tom said. "She knows she's got less than a mile and there's no need to rush."

At the house Neal offered to help feed the mink. Tom refused uneasily.

"Strangers make 'em kind of nervous," he explained. "I'll be in for supper by the time you get the fire started and heat the beans."

As Neal built the fire he wondered why Tom didn't want him at the mink pens. The mink had not shown nervousness in the morning. Neal was sure that the trouble lay with Tom, not the mink, and decided that the next time he gave a hand at the pens, Tom would have to ask him. But after supper Tom let him wipe the dishes without protest and Neal stood, towel in hand, while Tom polished, rinsed and scrutinized each dish. Neal recalled how he and his mother had put away a big stack of clean dishes in half the time and wondered if Tom had puttered about so many years that every trivial job had assumed importance. Tom caught Neal's impatient glance.

"Takes me a little longer, maybe," he said, "but what's the hurry?"

"I like to get them over with," Neal said. "A lot of things are more fun than doing dishes."

After supper Tom lighted a big lamp in the sitting room and tonight the room seemed even smaller. The large pink roses on the wallpaper seemed to crowd in upon them. Tom turned the dials of the small radio while Neal read of the exploration of Alexander Ross.

"You must have got a good book at DM's," Tom said a half hour later.

Neal was so excited by the book he had wanted to read whole paragraphs aloud, and he told Tom of the early settlers and of the wasted dry area.

"Those fellows never dreamed a dam would make all that desert country good land some day!" he said.

"Ain't been proved yet," Tom answered.

"Suppose the government's putting so much money into Grand Coulee Dam without knowing what it's doing?" Neal demanded.

"Maybe not, but it's nothing for a lad to spend money on, and least of all when it's money his mother left for an education. Mary put a lot of sewing into it. Time enough to try desert farming after you've gone to school like she wanted."

Suddenly Neal knew what it was about Tom that always made him angry. Time enough!

"Time enough!" he exclaimed. "You've said nothing else since I got here. No one can get anywhere figuring that way, or having everything proved before he tries it. Didn't you ever want to do something new and different, something no one else ever did?"

He had wanted desperately to make Tom see this question from his side, had hoped to shock him out of his slowness, out of his caution, but he was startled by the effect of the sudden outburst. Tom did not look at him, or answer. He sat tensed as from a blow. Minutes went by as he stared across the room. Neal, knowing he had gone too far, waited almost fearfully for the silence to be broken. After a long time Tom arose, wound the clock on the wall and turned down the lamp.

"Time to get to bed," he said. "Good night, lad."

The next morning Neal did not offer to help at the pens, but began work on the truck motor. The spark plugs were as fouled as he had suspected. He cleaned them and adjusted the points, using a thin dime for a gauge. This wasn't machinist accuracy but it was all he had. The plugs probably accounted for the missed explosions but he removed the gas line and was blowing through it when Tom appeared.

"I was figurin' on using the truck," he said.

"I'll have this together in no time," Neal said.

Tom looked with disapproval at the spark plugs and hanging cables. "I've noticed, once a car gets tore apart, it don't get put together so soon," he said as he departed.

Neal replaced plugs and gas line, started the motor and, when it was hot, adjusted the carburetor. He drove the truck to the back door and called Tom.

"Wherever it is you want to go, we can get there faster," he said.

He knew this was rubbing it in, but a man who mistreated a motor had it coming. They turned into the road. The motor purred. After a half mile Tom grinned.

“I didn’t know the old girl had so much life in her,” he said.

“Where’d you want to go?” Neal asked.

“Fishing. Let’s go back for tackle and some lunch. Mink ain’t had a feed of fish for a long time. I keep a skiff on a lake about ten miles from here and we can get a boatload of pickerel before dark. In cold water, they’d taste good even to us.”

Fishing was better than Tom had promised. With two trolling lines they filled the skiff by late afternoon. The sun was low as they rowed to shore. The flat granite point Tom used as a landing was cool and inviting.

“Sort of nice place to eat supper,” he said. “Can’t get fish any fresher.”

“We’ve got nothing to cook it in,” Neal said.

“Plenty of leaves and mud.”

While Neal built a fire, Tom dressed a large pickerel, wrapped it in wet green leaves and molded a jacket of mud around it. He raked the fire aside, laid the fish in the hot ashes and then heaped the burning wood over it.

“How long will it take?” Neal asked.

“About an hour. I’m getting hungry just thinking about it.”

Neal wondered if he could wait an hour, and was astonished at how swiftly it passed. They gathered fuel and when they had more than enough, Tom whittled tined forks from two sticks.

“Fingers taste better,” he said, “but having a job helps time go faster.”

At last he raked aside the fire and drew the fish onto the rock. A few gentle taps with his ax handle and mud jacket, scales and skin fell away, leaving steaming flesh exposed.

“Come and get it,” Tom said. “Mud beats an oven ’cause it holds in all the flavor.”

Neal had never known fish to taste like this. Long after hunger was satisfied, he ate because of its goodness. They did not talk a great deal, even when the meal was finished and they stretched out on the rock. Tom lighted his pipe. Neal watched the blue of the lake deepen as the last radiance of the sunset faded. Shadows crept from the shores. Occasionally a fish splashed. Smoke from the fire leveled out above the water. Neal looked at the fading colors and as the two sat in the hush of twilight, sharing the little campfire, he was strangely conscious of a new sense of friendship.

It was late when they reached home and put the pickerel on ice. Tom said they'd caught enough to feed the mink three days. The next morning he did not ask Neal to help him at the pens, but when Neal offered to dress the fish he said it would take a big job off his hands. As Neal worked he thought of that hour of warm companionship beside the campfire. It was funny, he thought. There were times when he liked Tom better than any man he'd known, yet he had never got madder at anyone. It was queer how you could feel two ways about the same person. Neal was packing the skinned, boned fish in boxes when Tom appeared, and it was evident he had something on his mind.

"Lad," he said at once, "why're you so set on this Grand Coulee country?"

Neal wondered if it was any use trying to explain. If Tom hadn't got the idea by this time, he never would. But at least he'd asked a question.

"Maybe you don't understand what living in Hayward was like," Neal began. "Doing what everybody else has done and always hearing you should do it the same as they did. What's so wrong about wanting to figure out something for myself?"

"Nothing."

"But you've been talking as though I were a half-baked kid who wanted to throw away money. You don't have to tell me how hard my mother worked to earn it. I used to wake up nights and see the light in the sitting room and know she was still sewing. Do you think a kid forgets a thing like that?"

"Of course you don't," Tom said. "All I said is nothing's been proved about that waste land. Nobody knows what it'll grow or if it will grow anything."

"If people had always waited for proof like you want, this country wouldn't have been settled west of the Alleghenies!" Neal exclaimed. He had intended to speak without heat, but when he argued with Tom he found himself becoming vehement. "How else has anybody ever discovered anything about raising new crops or better farm stock except by trying? It's men who took chances who've gotten somewhere, and in a new country, like this will be, they've got more chances than anywhere else."

He stopped and his tone became more reasonable. "How about mink farming?" he asked. "If some man hadn't tried to keep wild mink in pens, nobody'd know you could raise fur like you can raise wool or leather.

Instead, you fellows would still be setting traps like Indians. And how about that fellow you were telling me about the other morning, the man who went to Alaska and brought back a different mink, bred it and worked with it until he got the kind of breeding stock he wanted?" he demanded. "You said yourself it was a better mink than the ones the mink ranchers used to raise. He figured out something for himself. He got somewhere and took you fellows along with him."

"Sure he did," Tom said amiably.

"Then what's so wrong about someone else taking a chance on finding out something new? It might be a new thing he discovered, or a better way like with the Alaska mink. But it'd be the thing he'd rather do than anything else in the world."

He stopped. Speech had clarified his thoughts. In trying to put what had been a vague groping into words another could understand, he had discovered the springboard of his own compulsion, and he knew he would never express it better. If he had not convinced Tom now, he never would.

Tom did not look up as he drew little squares and circles in the loose earth at his feet. Neal felt he had failed. Then he wondered if he had, when Tom suddenly arose and turned to the trail.

"I want to show you something," he said.

He led the way to the pens, but went past the rows of mink without glancing at them and stopped at the thick stand of pine beyond.

"Maybe you noticed I didn't want you near the mink," he said.

"I thought you wouldn't take any help from me because you didn't want me to stick around," Neal said, and he was surprised at how easily the words came. "Wouldn't have thought about it except I was sore."

"You should have known anyone by your name was more than welcome," Tom said.

He thrust aside some dry brush to reveal a well-worn path.

"I'm going to show you something I never showed to anyone—not even DM," he said.

The path led through the pines to a gate in a fenced enclosure. Tom shut it carefully behind them. The fenced space held a row of mink pens. Tom stopped at the first. Evidently he had made the morning rounds, for the water pans were freshly filled. A mink peered from the entrance to his nest box.

Tom made a motion to be quiet as the long slim body flowed out and down the runway to survey the visitors. Neal stared. . . . It was like no mink he had ever seen. The coat, a strange shade of light metallic gray, glistened in the sunlight with a silver sheen. Neal caught his breath at the beauty of the soft elusive color. Tom's eyes were glowing.

"That color got you!" he exclaimed. "Gets me too, even after the five years I've been raising 'em. I'll put him in a catching box so you can have a good look."

The box was long and narrow with a wire mesh top and sides and a sliding door in one end. Tom held it out for Neal to examine, and Neal knew the other was only trying to conceal his own excitement when he said, "Handy outfits. Makes it easy to handle mink." He set the box in the pen, slid the end door shut when the mink had entered.

"Now you can really see his color," he said as he took out the box. "Ever hear of a mink like that before?"

Neal shook his head. Now that he could examine the fur closely he was the more captured by the subtle hue. He could think of no word to describe it. The undercoat was of a bluish-gray but the tips of the guard hairs had the aliveness of moonlight.

"As clear a color as a man could ask for," Tom said. "Not a tinge of red. And their coats are as soft and silky as my best naturals."

"What kind are these?" Neal asked.

"First I called 'em Clark mink, before I knew there were any others. Now I'm sort of puzzled what to name them."

"Other mink of the same color?" Neal asked quickly.

"At least they are bluish-gray. There's talk of a few on a couple of farms." Tom grunted contemptuously. "But they can't touch these for color."

"Have you seen them?"

"I don't have to. I know what I got. Look at 'em," and he waved at the row of pens. "Twenty! And every one as clear a shade as this fellow. The pick of four years' breeding."

They walked the length of the row. Neal examined one after another, all alike as Tom had said, and found his excitement mounting. He had no idea why Tom had decided to share his secret, but there was a thrill in knowing he was the first to be shown something very rare and very beautiful.

"I'll tell you how it happened," Tom said.

They sat on a windfall. Tom filled his pipe and was a long time in getting it lighted to his satisfaction.

"Remember when you asked me if I'd never wanted to do something no one'd ever tried before?" he asked at last. "I've been doing just that for five years."

Neal flushed. "I sounded off without ever waiting—"

"No reason you should 'a' known about these mink. No one else knows, not even the Indian who sold me the first pair."

"I wondered where you got them."

"But I noticed you didn't ask. You're like your dad in a lot of ways. He always said he'd learned to use his eyes by restin' his tongue. Might be that's how he got to be so good a timber cruiser."

Neal colored with pleasure. His father had become very real to him in the few days at White Pine.

"I bought the first pair from an Indian," Tom said. "He caught the mother and a litter of four kits on a creek north o' here. Saw the mother carrying food to the nest. Had she been brown like a regular mink, chances are he'd let 'em alone, planning to trap 'em in the winter. But she was different. He'd heard about freak-colored mink and he knew her pelt wasn't worth much, so he caught the whole litter. Two was regular brown in color and two was the same shade as the mother, and knowing I had some mink in pens, he thought I might pay him a few dollars. The mother died that first summer but I managed to raise the young pair. Only I didn't know how lucky I was until winter when fur was prime. They were the prettiest pair of animals you'd want to see. Bluish-gray and silvery, and coats as soft and thick as velvet. When I saw them I knew I was going to raise a new strain of mink."

"But how'd you know their young would be like them?"

"It was worth trying," Tom said. "And if I'd never managed to get any more I'd still be trying. Why wouldn't a man keep on trying to raise the prettiest mink he ever saw? Isn't that what you were sayin' awhile back?"

It had been, and Neal liked the way Tom reminded him they felt the same way about things. He wasn't trying to rub it in that he had been doing what Neal had only talked about. Tom went on with his story of the slow building of a herd from the first pair to the present number.

"Twenty don't seem like much," he finished, "but breeding mink takes time. They have only one litter a year, and sometimes a female don't have any young. Mink die too, and for no reason a man can see, and there are always mink a man don't want to keep for breeders. No sense trying to raise the prettiest mink in the world and using anything but the best for stock. Those twenty are the pick of four years' breeding."

As they walked to the house Tom told of his discovery that similar mink existed on other farms through an article in a fur breeders' magazine sent by a friend, Jack Colberg.

"Jack knew I was raising mink and thought I might want to take the magazine regular," Tom said. "At that it might be a good idea, but I figure there's always time enough to spend money on fancy fixings."

Neal laughed. The familiar words, "time enough," didn't bother him now. "Is Jack another mink rancher?" he asked.

"No, just one of my old partners."

"How many partners have you had?"

Tom thought a moment. "Jack was only a fellow I went trapping with one winter," he said. "Guess a fellow gets to using that word partner sort of careless. As far as real partners go, I've had only one." He paused before he added, "Just one, so far."

3

AFTERWARDS NEAL wondered if there had been purpose in that last careful statement. At the time he'd thought it only Tom's exactness, nor had he considered a possible implication when he helped Tom with the evening feeding. They had spent a long time in admiration of the new mink. That Tom had chosen him to be the first to see them had lifted a barrier, for now they shared a secret.

In the evening Neal asked more about mink of the same color raised by other ranchers and Tom got the magazines his friend had sent. As Neal searched for the article, he read a report on mink diseases and one on feeding in which a rancher gave his own food formula—90 per cent of fish or meat, 7 per cent of cereal and eggs and tomatoes to supply minerals and vitamins.

"Listen to what this fellow says!" Neal exclaimed. " 'No breeder in this country really knows yet the best possible mink foods. He can only try out ideas, watch for fur and weight. The proper foods must still be discovered through science.' "

Tom looked over Neal's shoulder to read the name of the writer. "That's the fellow who brought the strain of mink from the Kenai Peninsula," he said. "Ought to know what he's talking about. Been in the game a long while."

Neal finished the article. The man who had developed a new type of mink was aware of how much still remained to be discovered in mink farming. Neal liked the way he wrote and wished he could know him. Tom found the story of the new mink and watched Neal while he read. The color had appeared on two farms and ranchers were working out the theories of breeding. The shade was called platinum and was described as a mutation. Apparently other variations had appeared, as the article mentioned a white mink with black markings, called black cross, and warned ranchers to look for and save any mutations. The silver pointed mink might be the fur of the future.

"Then you've got a mutation!" Neal exclaimed.

"Whatever that is," Tom said.

"I studied about them in high school biology." Neal tried to remember the exact wording of the definition, for the subject had been exciting. "It means a change—when a plant or animal is different from the parents."

"Freaks you mean?" Tom asked.

"No, it's not like that. A mutation passes on the change. That's how plants and animals are changed, have variations. First one ever noticed was in Holland when a man found a new kind of primrose."

"Does the magazine say that's how this new-colored mink happened?" Tom asked.

"They aren't sure. Trying to find out. But they think it is a true mutation. Call it platinum."

"Don't prove mine are platinums."

"The name describes them."

"Think so?" and Tom seemed disappointed. "Mine might be different. Anyway, I'm going to keep my mouth shut, tend to my own business and some day I'll surprise them with the prettiest mink they ever saw."

"These other ranchers are trying to find out how to breed them," Neal said.

"They don't have to find out for me. Figured it out for myself. Mate the new color and you get young of the same. Litters look like the parents, and to get kits of quality fur you got to use fine parents. Same as any other mink."

"But breeding has a lot more to it than that!" Neal exclaimed. "You don't inherit just from your mother and father. You get traits from both sides and from away back. It's the genes that count."

"Who told you that?"

"Books on biology. Farmers use it all the time. They have to know about genes and chromosomes and how they act to get a new kind of corn or a different color in pigs. Genes even make the difference whether people have blue eyes or brown. The color can come down from grandparents."

"A lot of kids look like their granddaddies. I know that."

"But genes are the reason it happens," Neal insisted.

"And I suppose you say these gene things account for my new mink," Tom said.

"They might. Look what happened to Hereford cattle. Once all had horns, except a few they called 'mulleys.' But after cattle raisers learned about genes and chromosomes, they discovered how to breed Hereford cattle without horns. Now they've got thousands of them. But the mulley was just a new kind of Hereford in the beginning."

"Those cattle raisers probably did just like I'm doing," Tom said. "And I bet they did it without all this book learnin'. It's like I figured. Litter of kits look like the parents and—"

"Say, Tom!" and Neal sprang to his feet in sudden excitement. "This color might work just like that hornless strain in Herefords. Most mink are brown, and suddenly one is different. Call it platinum. You said the mother was the same color as the pair you bred. She might have been the one that was different from her parents. And she passed on the trait. And if you found out exactly how the genes worked you could have thousands of them!"

Neal's thoughts were in a ferment. The possibilities of what might be accomplished caught his imagination. To change the color of mink as other men had improved corn and cattle and pigs and chickens and fruit—he knew it could not be the simple process Tom imagined, but it would be fascinating and the opportunities were dazzling. Tom could be the man who took advantage of an experiment in nature and established a new color, a color more beautiful than that of any mink which yet existed. Neal wanted to talk to him about it but dreaded hearing Tom say there was nothing still to be discovered.

His thoughts played with the subject all evening. It was the first thing he thought of next morning and when they went to care for the platinum mink Neal was on the verge of talking to Tom about it. But he didn't, and he was not sure just why. Perhaps because it had begun to mean so much he couldn't bear it if Tom failed to catch fire. Raising platinum mink could be so much greater a project than Tom seemed to realize, and he must see it. All day Neal was silent, nor did he open the subject that evening. It was not until he went to bed that he wondered what Tom had meant by that speech about a partner. For now suddenly Neal knew the direction his thoughts had taken since he had first seen the platinum mink and believed them beautiful. The idea had grown so slowly he hardly knew when it started, but recognition of it had come in a blinding flash. More than anything else he wanted to raise thousands of the lovely creatures.

His first interest in them was only a pinprick compared to the desire which now drove him. He wished so desperately to be a partner in the venture he dared not believe it possible. There were so many reasons for Tom's refusal. Why should he believe that a boy, who only a few days before had been talking of the Grand Coulee country, could know what he wanted now? Tom would have a right to say he was just a kid who didn't know his own mind, and yet Tom must have had a reason for showing him those mink. He didn't have to do it. He could have let Neal depart without knowing of their existence.

And Tom needn't have added that last phrase about a partner. Neal tried to recall the exact inflection. If Tom really meant what Neal hoped he meant, he might be made to understand how much the chance to work with platinums had come to mean to Neal. He fell asleep wondering how he could dare suggest that Tom let him stay. Or even if he would dare suggest it at all. He had never spoken of anything more than a brief visit. Probably Tom knew he hadn't even unpacked his bags.

The next morning he still wondered if Tom's speech could possibly have carried meaning, but he'd know soon. If Tom opened the subject of the Grand Coulee country it could only mean he expected Neal to move along. Breakfast was ready when Neal entered the kitchen.

"About time to start our buckwheat pancake batter," Tom said. "Takes a month before it gets good."

"Why can't I take my turn cooking breakfast?" Neal asked.

"I don't mind getting it," Tom said. "I'm up early. But there's enough to do around here so's neither of us has to worry about holding up his end."

After breakfast they went to the pens. Neal carried water while Tom changed hay in the nests. Neal watched him shut the mink in the outer pen and clean the boxes and said it looked like a job he could manage.

"No reason why not," Tom said. "Might as well begin today. Bedding has to be changed often, especially in winter when frost forms. A wet nest box is liable to give a mink pneumonia. There's a lot more to mink farming than just feeding stock."

"I can see that," Neal said.

"This is the month I usually fuss around the pens. Gives me a chance to make sure I picked the right ones for breeders."

"How do you pick them?"

"By studyin' 'em for color and fur quality. Maybe pelters and breeders look alike to you now, but put mink alongside each other in catching boxes and you can see a lot of difference. Next month, when fur is prime, you'll know what I'm drivin' at. Coats will be thick and silky and like velvet. They're the breeders that'll give the kind of crop I want next year. But there's nothing about this year's pelters I need to be ashamed of."

"What's a pelt worth?" Neal asked.

"A farmer never knows what fur will bring until winter auctions. Last year a fine extra-dark Yukon brought as high as twenty dollars. That was tops. Dark brown went at more'n twelve dollars and the average was a lot less. This year mink are expected to go higher. Some claim real extra-dark might go as high as thirty. But that's talk. Nothing's certain in the fur game."

Tom seemed anxious to discuss mink farming. In a few hours he had said more than in previous days. Neal wondered if there was purpose in his talk.

"Hope they've guessed right about the price of the extra-dark," Tom said. "They're the mink that have to pay the way for those new ones."

He still did not refer to them as platinum, and he didn't use the name later when he and Neal went to the enclosure beyond the trees. They stood for a long time looking at the silvered mink.

"Pretty, ain't they?" Tom said. "A big herd of them would be something to be proud of."

"Wouldn't it!" Neal exclaimed, and his eyes shone. "It wouldn't matter what they called them, or if other ranchers had them. All you'd have to know is that these are better than any others."

"You're right, lad," Tom said. "I knew yesterday you liked 'em."

"Liked them!" Neal said. "I like them so well I'd rather raise them than do anything else in the world." The words came in a rush, were out almost before he knew what he was saying. "But I didn't mean—"

"Leave it that way, lad. I was hoping to hear you say it. I need a partner in this business."

"I didn't mean a real partner—" Neal began.

"Why not?" Tom asked. "Been a long time since I had a real one, and Clark and Bartlett ain't a new combination. Only, with your dad, it was the

other way around." He paused, and then he grinned. "Some day it might be that way again."

"But I wouldn't want it to be on account of him that you—"

"It is and it ain't," Tom said. "Knowing him helped me to understand when you came that night, all steamed up to get off to the Grand Coulee country. Your dad never walked when he could run. Took a few spills too. Never could learn all trails ain't made for runnin'."

Tom meant only that he realized they wouldn't always think alike, any more than had he and Neal's father. But the words reminded Neal of many things, of his resentment the night of his arrival, his feeling he need not ask anything of anyone, and then his discovery of his father as a man, of Tom's understanding, and of what the platinums meant as the end of his vague groping. All this had happened to him in a few days! He had found a real inheritance, when he believed he had none. It was queer. In a way he had stepped into his father's place, and yet he hadn't. He had found a point from which to carry on. That was the way Tom wanted it to be, the way his mother had hoped it would be. He'd have liked to be able to say all this to Tom, but it wasn't a thing a fellow could put in words. Neal choked up just thinking about it and walked away so Tom wouldn't see how it had hit him.

The way to show Tom how he felt was to be the finest partner a man ever had. And Tom understood. Neal was sure he did when he turned and found him at a pen. Tom lifted the hinged cover of a nest box and cleaned out the bedding. The outraged female hissed and scolded at her enforced stay in the outer pen.

"Listen to her," Tom chuckled. "But she's got a right to tell us off. Had three fine kits this spring and took good care of 'em. If every female did as good we'd have a herd of—I suppose we might as well call 'em platinums till we think of a better name."

"We ought to find out if they are platinums," Neal said.

"How'd you do that?"

"I thought if we wrote to this magazine, the editor could tell us if they are platinums, and how other ranchers breed them."

Tom put in fresh hay, closed the nest box and raised the barricade across the entrance while Neal waited for an answer.

"No one but you and me knows about these mink," Tom said.

"People are bound to sometime," Neal said.

"Not till we're all set."

"But we could explain we don't want them talked about until we've got something we want to show."

"That won't keep him from putting a piece in his magazine about us," Tom said.

"An editor like him? He must be on the square. And it's our only chance to find out about them."

"What are you so set on finding out?"

"There's a lot to breeding these mink we don't know," Neal said. "Perhaps it isn't like breeding hornless Herefords."

"Oh!" Tom said. "You're talking about that stuff in books."

"Perhaps it isn't in any books. Maybe scientists never heard of mink mutations. There was nothing in my biology book about them. But this editor could tell us if the government has gotten out a bulletin about them."

"I bet he's just as puzzled as the rest of the fur farmers. Stands to reason if he knew anything about 'em he'd have printed it in what you read."

Neal knew it was time to drop the subject. Tom had a way of returning to an argument when he'd had time to think about it, and Neal's knowledge of biology was too vague to be of much use. He couldn't expect to convince Tom of the importance of discovering whether a trait was a dominant or a recessive when he was unable to state the difference clearly. However, he was certain there was a difference and that it was important. He remembered brown was dominant over blue in man's eye color, but would it work out the same way in mink fur? Yet they must know these things before they could find the best and swiftest method to build a herd of platinums. Tom would realize this once he knew the facts. He might be stubborn about book knowledge but he wasn't dumb. A dumb man would never have been able to breed twenty platinums.

As Neal expected, Tom opened the subject at the midday meal. "I don't say book learning can't help a fur farmer," he said. "Any man figures out new wrinkles for hisself, but I was going to write the government fur farm before I built new mink pens. Chances are other farmers have figured out things I've missed."

"And we ought to buy the mink book the magazine advertised," Neal said.

"Notice the price? A book would have to tell an awful lot to be worth five dollars."

"But you sold extra-dark pelts for twenty dollars last year."

"You got me there, lad," and Tom grinned. "Guess we can afford five dollars."

"I'll spend some of the money I'd have used on my trip west," Neal said.

"Better put it in mail-order schooling. You still got another year to finish."

"I'll do that. I wouldn't be much use as a partner if I went away to school."

"I laid those addresses DM gave me on the kitchen shelf." Tom brought them to the table. "DM says the Chicago University would be as good, maybe better, and a lot cheaper. And while you're writing, might as well write that editor fellow. Ask him what he knows about platinum mink and order the mink book and his magazine. That's firm's expenses." He took bills from his wallet. "But be sure and tell him we don't want a piece in his magazine about us."

Neal wrote several letters. He asked his biology teacher in Hayward to send a textbook, inquired for prices of correspondence courses and wrote to the editor. The last was worded carefully. He used the word *mutation* so that the editor would understand he knew something about biology, and he explained his partner's desire for secrecy until he had something he wished to show. Tom approved of the letter and said they might catch the mailman on his return trip. They drove to the crossroads a half mile away. Tom's postal box was dwarfed by the larger one with the name of David Mead.

"How much mail does he get?" Neal asked.

"I've seen it crammed full," Tom said. "And half the time he doesn't read it." He brought a brush and small can of paint from the truck and asked, "You good at printing? We got to have your name alongside mine."

The black letters, *N. Bartlett*, below *T. Clark*, looked impressive. Tom and Neal stood off to admire. The two names made the new partnership official. Or so it seemed to Neal.

When they returned home, Tom asked Neal to give a hand in carrying the winter squash from the garden. Frosts were becoming heavy and it was time to get vegetables under shelter. Tom held up the trap door in the kitchen floor while Neal carried a load down the steep stairs. It was the first time he

had entered the cellar. When Tom put a lighted candle on the earthen floor, Neal was startled.

"Doesn't look as though we'd starve this winter!" he exclaimed.

The small vault was crammed with bins of potatoes, barrels of apples, a pile of cabbage heads and root vegetables buried in sand. Shelves held preserves and jars of blueberries and raspberries.

"Who canned those?" Neal asked.

"I did. Miss Thorndyke would but I always like to do my own. I put up my own venison too. It's easy since I bought a canning outfit. Not half as much work as my mother made of it. It's handy to have stuff on the place."

"We won't have to go to a store all winter."

"After we get in two nice fat bucks, we'll be set," Tom said. "Do you like hunting?"

"I've only shot a twenty-two at a mark," Neal replied.

"Lad, what you've missed! What kind of folks lived in Hayward anyway? Your dad would have had a rifle in your hand soon as you could walk! Tell you what we'll do. Generally I get my deer in day trips because I don't like to leave the mink too long. But this year we'll stay out overnight. We'll feed the mink early and get off in the late afternoon, make a good camp, be up before daybreak and ready to hunt soon as it's light enough to see. We'll be back with two fat bucks by noon, and we'll have a good time. A partnership ain't really set until the partners have made a woods trip together. Makes it regular somehow, and besides it would seem like old times."

4

Even Tom was amazed by the promptness of the editor's reply. Norman Whitlock's passionate interest in the domestication of fur bearers had led him to publish a breeders' magazine, and now this fervor crept into his short letter. He wanted to see the mink, would be in the vicinity soon and hoped to have a young chap with him, a university instructor in genetics, who would be of real help in their problem.

As Tom read the letter his scowl held a threat to the coming visit, but for Neal to have advice from a university instructor was luck Neal had not dared hope for.

"Tell one man something and he tells another," Tom said. "Pretty soon everybody knows. But what's genetics?"

"It's the study of heredity in breeding plants and animals," Neal answered. "It got started when they learned about genes and chromosomes."

"Oh!" Tom hesitated. "And I suppose this young fellow can answer all those questions that've been biting you."

"I hope so."

Tom reread the letter. "Chances are they'll be along soon. This Whitlock seems mighty anxious to see our mink. Well, he'll see something prettier than he expects. And maybe he's the sort who can keep his mouth shut if we ask him to."

The mink book arrived a few days later. Neal read it through the first evening. The chapter on the selection of breeders was especially timely as Tom was now engaged in it. The work was slow and painstaking. He examined each mink in a catching box, appraised the fur for density and silkiness and ruffled back the guard hairs to make sure the undercoat was slate blue and had no rusty tinges. He discarded any mink off-color or with uneven furring, but the final choice of breeders required even more rigorous tests and it was difficult to remember the exact quality of mink already passed. Often Tom had to compare them a second time to be sure he was keeping only the finest for the herd.

"If we had more catching boxes we could work with bigger lots," Neal suggested.

"Always intended to make more," Tom replied, "but there's a lot to do around a mink farm."

"We can make them at night," Neal said. "These self-locking kind where the mink works the trip board and lets down the sliding door. There's a picture of one in the book."

"I noticed it," Tom said. "That's the kind we ought to have. And plenty of 'em."

That evening Tom's neat kitchen was a carpenter's shop. Tom was a natural builder. Neal's first efforts were awkward, but he began to get the hang and enjoyed the work. He looked up from a finished box to find Tom watching.

"Your dad always was handy with tools," Tom said.

Neal had discovered this was Tom's left-handed way of paying a compliment and it seemed a good time for a suggestion he wanted to make. The mink book emphasized the importance of herd records and the author had described his own method of using metal tags bearing the serial number of the mink and pen. A record of the ancestry, breeding history and productiveness was kept in a notebook. Tom depended wholly on memory and, while this was practical with a few mink when he could remember the parents and even the grandparents of each, now that the herd was larger he became confused. Yet he was appalled at Neal's proposal of a record.

"Means a lot of work," he said. "And if you're raising good mink and each year's crop is better'n the last one, what difference does the mother's number make?"

"But you've got to keep track of your increase to know if a mink's worth holding over."

"There's an easy way to do that. When a female don't have a litter, I move her to the pelters' row."

"What if she had a big litter the year before? Then you've pelted a good producer."

"You got me there, lad," Tom said. "But who's going to have time to make these tags and write the records in the book?"

"I'll do it."

"You like head work, don't you?"

"Anything wrong with that?" Neal asked.

"Not a thing. It's the way your dad was. Maybe it's one reason we made good partners. Start your record. We'll get to be a real fur farm yet."

Next afternoon Neal began to make tags. He was working at the bench when he heard a car stop. A thick-set man with a friendly smile came toward him. A second, much younger, followed.

"We're looking for Mr. Neal Bartlett," the first said.

"I'm Neal Bartlett."

"You are!" And after a pause the stranger added, "Then you must be the one who wrote me. I'm Norman Whitlock." He shook hands and turned to his companion. "This is Peter Reese, the geneticist I mentioned."

The second man was no more than twenty-five, dark and slender, and his gray eyes were keen.

"Mr. Whitlock should have explained I hope to be a geneticist some day," he said. "When you know him better you'll understand he always puts a friend's best foot foremost." He shook hands. "I'm glad to know you, Neal."

Suddenly Neal felt very comfortable. "I was hoping you'd come," he said. "My partner's at the pens."

"Where we usually find mink ranchers these days," Mr. Whitlock said. "Shall we go there or do you want to call him?"

"You'd want to see the mink anyway," Neal said.

As they passed the door of the tool shed, Neal explained the litter around the work bench. "I was making metal tags so we can begin a herd record," he said.

"That's smart," Whitlock said. "Figured out your system?"

"We're doing it the way the mink book described."

"And you can figure out your own system later when you know what you need. Every rancher has his own way, but if you make a record of your matings and litters and your final book has the history of each mink on a separate page, you can't go wrong. Here's how I worked it when I owned a mink farm." He took an envelope from his pocket and wrote quickly, "Pen 15."

"That's her address," he said. "Number 3812 means she was born in '38 and her serial number is 12. F.Y. means she's a female Yukon mink. Below you give her ancestry. Sire might be 3710 M.Y., meaning he was male Yukon, born in '37, number 10. Dam might be 3715, F.Y. You understand what that means?" He waited for Neal's nod, and then went on. "After her number, description, and ancestry you enter her breeding history, the serial number of her mates, the date of her breedings each season, size of litter and the serial numbers of her kits. That record tells you what sort of producer she is. You can find out the quality of her pups by turning to the pages giving their records. It's best to use the year for your first two figures in the serial numbers. In that way you have a new series every year." He handed the page to Neal. "It's a good idea to keep a separate notebook on the matings. Write down everything about that female which will help you in the next breeding season. It's extra work but well worth while."

"Book work isn't hard," Neal said.

"Too bad all mink ranchers don't agree with you," and Whitlock laughed. "They'll have to come to it."

Neither man asked about the new mink as they walked to the pens. Tom saw them and Neal tried to read his first impressions of the visitors. So much depended on Tom's liking them.

"I thought you fellows would be along soon," Tom said as he shook hands. "Suppose you've come to see our mink."

"We hoped you'd show them to us," Whitlock said.

"I aim to," Tom replied, and smiled at Neal. "You'll be the only ones except for me and my partner who knows about 'em."

"And we'll continue to be the only ones, if that's the way you want it," Mr. Whitlock said. "But there are few ranchers who can boast of owning mutation mink."

"No sense in boasting until you've got something to show," Tom said. "We figure to do our boasting later. You'll understand better when you see 'em."

He led the way toward the fringe of trees. As they passed the pelters, Norman Whitlock stopped.

"You've good mink here," he said.

"No sense in raising poor ones," Tom said, but he was pleased. "Know much about mink?" he asked.

"Norman is one of the judges at the big mink shows," Peter Reese explained. "He's been doing it for years."

"I never saw any use to those fur shows," Tom said. "Any farmer could spend his time a lot better raising fur."

"I know men who feel as you do," Whitlock said amiably. "And fur is the real crop. But some ranchers like to see what others have accomplished, then go home and try to do as well or better. That's the only reason for a livestock show. It isn't very different from county fairs."

"When I was a kid I never missed one of them," Tom said. "My mother always got the prize for the best wild blackberry jelly. She made it different than anyone else, but she wouldn't tell even us how."

"My father spent five years trying to beat a neighbor who always took first prize for Poland China boars," Norman Whitlock said. "I'll never forget the night Dad finally brought home the blue ribbon."

"My mother had a special box made for her blue ribbons," Tom added.

He laughed as he unlocked the paddock gate to the mutation pens. He did not seem to be aware that for the first time strangers had stepped into the small enclosure. They crossed to the first pen, where Tom drove the female from the nest box and shut her in the outer pen. Neither visitor spoke. Tom waited and his face revealed how much their opinion meant.

"Platinum!" Whitlock exclaimed at last. "And what a platinum! Color as clear as crystal!" His voice held excitement as he demanded, "Are the others as good as this one?"

"Or even better," Tom said. "Look 'em over. And then we'll catch some up so you can compare 'em."

They walked from pen to pen. Neal brought several catching boxes to afford a closer view of the illusive shading and Tom told the story of their origin. Peter Reese turned to the editor.

"These might even be a different mutation than the others, Norman," he said.

"The answer is down your alley more than mine," Whitlock said. "But it could be. Same thing happened in Oregon."

Neal wished he knew what they meant. There were so many things he wanted to know, but Tom was asking about the origin of the other platinums. The editor told him of the first platinum female that had appeared in a

Wisconsin herd nine years earlier. A second female had cropped up in another Wisconsin herd four years after that.

"One mink wouldn't be much use," Tom said. "How'd they get a pair?"

"That was the trouble," Whitlock said. "The first fellow lost three breeding seasons trying to get platinum kits, but after we guessed the color was a recessive trait and could be recovered if she was bred to her son, he got two platinum kits. You were lucky. You had a pair to start with."

Neal wished Tom would ask more questions about the breeding of the single female platinum, but he knew Tom had not understood a word of the explanation. Neal thought he understood what the editor meant, but he determined to ask Peter Reese about it. As they returned to the house he found an opportunity when they fell behind the others.

"Is there a book or magazine that tells about breeding platinum mink?" he asked.

"Not yet," Reese said. "Mink mutations are too new, but scientists understand mutations in other fields. How much do you know about genetics?"

"A little, Mr. Reese. My high school biology had a chapter on it."

"The name is Peter, and I'm as interested in this mink mutation game as you are. In biology you learned the difference between a dominant and a recessive trait. A dominant shows in the first generation. A recessive appears only when both parents carry the recessive genes. Stop me if you're confused."

"I remember that much," Neal said. "But with these mink, and the rancher who lost three breeding seasons—what happened?"

"He was dealing with a recessive and didn't know it. He bred a mutant female to a standard male, with no recessive genes in his strain. The recessive trait in the offspring was hidden. He had gone the first step, but he didn't know it. The kits were half bloods, hybrids, and carried genes for both the dominant natural and the recessive platinum. But because he couldn't see the platinum color, he became discouraged. Remember Mendel?"

"The monk who experimented with sweet peas!" Neal exclaimed. "And no one paid any attention to what he had discovered until almost forty years later."

"Even yet some ranchers never heard of him," Peter said. "It's too bad they haven't. If the rancher who owned that first female platinum had known

of Mendel's law of the recessive, he needn't have lost three precious years."

"Then there is a way to build up a platinum herd fast!" Neal exclaimed.

"We're sure there is. At least as sure as anyone can be about any new mutation. Other ranchers have used half bloods and proved that the method works."

"I want Tom to hear this!" Neal said. "It's what I was talking about the other evening."

They caught up with the others, but Tom and the editor were deep in a discussion of the future of platinum mink.

"I tell you it don't make any difference how many platinums those other ranchers have ready for the market in three years," Tom exclaimed. "It's the quality and the color that counts. They can't produce that fast and have anything worth selling. I know. I've been raising these mink for five years, carried 'em through four breeding seasons. I've gotten twenty of 'em. And I bet they haven't got a mink to touch ours."

"Yours have the finest color I've seen," Whitlock said. "But the other ranchers are improving their herds every years."

"Ours don't need improving," Tom retorted. "I figured what I wanted, figured how to get it, and we're not going to spoil things now by being in a hurry."

"That's how the other ranchers feel. They don't intend to offer platinums until they have enough choice pelts to make a showing and to set a fashion. That means thousands. It's a big gamble. Not many ranchers can afford to take it, especially now when dark mink are popular. No one knows if the public will accept platinums."

"People couldn't help liking them!" Neal exclaimed. "Once they see—"

"All mink mutation breeders say that," Whitlock laughed. "And I believe them, although no one can be sure until the fur has been put on the market. But if they do capture the public favor, the man who pelts a big crop will make a killing."

"I suppose just a few fine pelts would be lost in all those thousands," Neal said. "If a rancher amounts to anything he's got to have a lot of pelts by then."

"Exactly what I've been telling Tom," Whitlock said. "You people have good mink, fine mink, but only twenty of them. It's time to build up your

herd like the other ranchers. Two men are even selling breeding stock to fur farms. That's one way to meet the expenses of changing a herd over."

"We've got our own way," Tom said. "As long as we breed good dark naturals and the public likes 'em, we'll be able to feed our platinums."

Neal did not look at the visitors. He knew Tom was unchanged in his opinion. He had neither understood nor even listened to the history of platinums. But at least Peter had confirmed Neal's surmise that there was a speedier way to build a herd of mutations, and as they returned to the house he asked Peter more questions. Peter offered to send books on genetics.

"You'll find them stiff reading, but I'll be in this neighborhood again and perhaps I can clear up tough points for you."

"That will be swell," Neal said. "And I'll need help."

The visitors refused to stay for supper, although Tom urged them to spend the night. Neal thought Peter would have liked to, but Norman Whitlock had promised to visit a ranch a hundred miles away.

"Stop in any time," Tom said as he shook hands. "We'll be glad to have you. Writing you in the first place was my partner's idea but I'm glad he done it."

"I'm not in this vicinity often," Whitlock replied, "but I won't miss a chance to see how your platinum herd comes along."

"You'll see me before next breeding season," Peter added, and Neal was sure the remark was addressed to him. "Meanwhile, good luck on the mutations."

At supper Tom was in high spirits. "Nice fellows," he said. "Both of them. Notice their faces when they saw that first mink? Never expected to see anything so pretty. Whitlock couldn't get over it. Said there wasn't a platinum on any ranch could touch ours. Not that I didn't know it, but it was good to hear a fellow say so. What's eating you, lad?" he demanded. "You ought to be as set up as I am, but you've hardly said a word since they went."

"But you heard Mr. Whitlock say the other ranchers will put platinums on the market in three years."

"What of it? Ours will be better than any of 'em."

"And how many will we have?"

"Depends on luck. Ought to have a good-sized bundle."

"We've got to have more than that!" Neal exclaimed. "We've got to have the best bundle, and that means a lot of skins to choose from and match up. We've got to have hundreds!"

"Can't do more'n nature lets us," Tom said. "Females have only one litter a year, and not always that. You know how many platinum females we've got now."

"But every female on this place should work to get us platinums."

"To hear you talk you'd think that by telling a standard female we want platinums she's going to have 'em!"

"Standard females can have half bloods and the half bloods could be—"

"Cross the two strains!" and Tom's voice rose in horror. "What kind of talk is that? Lad, have you gone crazy! All we'd do is ruin a fine herd of dark naturals and get nothing that even looked like platinum."

"But they'd have the genes for platinum, and the next year we could breed them to pure platinums and have half a litter of platinum kits."

"Book breeding! Is that what you and Peter was talking about so long?"

"I was making sure it would work. It's the way those other ranchers built up their herds. They've been doing it through enough breeding seasons so that they have a stock of pure breds."

"Like that fellow who lost three breeding seasons, I suppose."

"He didn't know what he was doing. He had half bloods but didn't understand their value or how to use them. He was discouraged on account of the way they looked."

"Enough to discourage anyone," Tom said. "And as far as that goes, you wouldn't know what you were doing either. You heard Whitlock say these platinum mink are new. Farmers ain't learned yet how to breed them."

"But they have!" Neal protested. "A few men have already tried it. That's how they built their herds. Peter knows them. So does Mr. Whitlock. That's what they were talking about this afternoon. They're the ranchers who'll have pelts to send to market three years from now."

"And what sort of pelts? You ain't seen their mink, and neither have I. Whitlock has, and you heard what he said about ours being prettier. We got something mighty fine, lad, and we ain't going to spoil it by experimenting. We know my way worked. There's no use in taking chances."

“It isn’t a chance,” Neal insisted. “You said yourself we had more platinum males than we needed. We could use them to mate with standard females. We’d only have to carry those half bloods through one year.”

“And how’d we run a mink farm if we didn’t have dark pelts to sell? Feeding mink for a year on a guess they might have some sort of queer platinum kits! It don’t make sense. I know my way seems slow to you but at least it’s sure. And we aren’t taking any spills along the trail.”

“You mean I’m like my father.”

“Sure you are,” Tom said. “But I don’t mind that. Seems like old times to be arguing whether to go whole hog, hell-bent, or take it sure and easy. Only this time there’s only one way to do it.”

“If I get books and prove to you there is another way, will you listen?” Neal asked. “Peter is going to send me some. And I can show you pictures of what a monk did with sweet peas that is exactly what we could do with platinums.”

“Book learning is only guessing when it comes to mink,” Tom said. “We got to stick to ways we know.”

5

NEAL was sure Tom regretted their failure to agree on the value of half bloods, but it was like Tom, having been stubborn on one point, to make amends by meeting Neal more than half way on others. In the days that followed he read the mink book carefully and it was he who suggested they add bone meal and cod liver oil to the feed and put the pelters on a special diet suggested in the book.

"Not that I ever noticed too much muscle meat could singe fur," he said. "But if there's a way to put better coats on 'em, let's find out."

"We can put half the pelters on the special diet and see if it makes a difference," Neal said.

"Good notion, lad. Prove it for ourselves."

Tom also found new ideas in the chapters on pen construction.

"I notice this fellow had a lot to say about frostproof nest boxes, and they're important," he said one evening. "Moisture from the bodies freezes on the underside of the roof and when it melts on warm days it wets the bedding and is liable to give the mink pneumonia. He says holes drilled at the top of the box don't give enough ventilation and he built covered vents in the roof. But I don't see why a hinged cover, one we could open and clean easy, wouldn't work."

"Of course it would!" Neal exclaimed. "And if we hinged the bottom too we could clean out the bed material in a tenth the time."

"Two heads always did pay on a job," Tom said as he added this feature to the plan. "Some hinges and good strong catches—and we've a slick way to keep mink houses shipshape. Between us we'll get a real farm going. We can build new nest boxes at odd times through the winter."

"Odd times!" Neal laughed, for in the month since he'd arrived Tom's small farm had kept them busy. "When are they?"

"Not often, and this winter I'll run a longer trap line. With a partner, I won't have to be so careful about getting home at feeding time."

Tom had repaired his cubbies for wild mink and weasel and built others. He had prospected a marsh for muskrat to supply both fur and mink food and he had found a poplar bench where he hoped to get lynx and perhaps fisher.

"This firm could use more trapping money," he said, "but I got to remember about your lessons. No use spending money on mail-order schoolin' and not have time to learn it."

Neal had already begun his year of school work. The arrival of the package of books and outlines in the four subjects he must complete to obtain a high school diploma had gratified Tom, who'd spent an evening building a special shelf on which to keep them. Nothing pleased Tom more than to come in and find Neal at work, and he worried lest the fur farm rob the study hour.

"I can keep up those courses in the evenings," Neal said.

His tone was confident. In Hayward, despite his hours in the store, he had always managed to do his home work, and now with a mink farm in the making and a definite reason to make time count, he discovered what concentration could accomplish. He was surprised, too, to find that studying by himself was more interesting. Instead of short lessons in several subjects, he could finish a whole chapter, and the work went faster by momentum. Biology had significance. He often found himself turning to the textbook to clear up points in the literature Peter Reese had sent. This was as stiff as Peter had warned, but it was exciting to find the answers by himself. He had been a good student, but now he discovered the difference between mere study and having to know facts.

And if he were ever to convince Tom of the importance of scientific breeding, he must have many facts. The question need not be decided now. March, the minks' breeding season, was five months away and Neal resolved to be ready with arguments Tom could not doubt. Tom was reasonable about most things and would be reasonable about half bloods once he was sure Neal knew what he was talking about. Besides, Tom was the finest partner a fellow ever had. He'd been careful not to remind Neal of things he did not know about the bush, and even the way he had brought out his rifle had been considerate.

"I figured you'd take my thirty-thirty," he said one evening ten days before the hunting season. "A man likes to get the heft of a gun he's going to use when he sees a buck. Bought a couple of boxes of cartridges last time I was in town."

“But what will you use?” Neal asked.

“I got a ’06 Springfield DM gave me when he had a rifle made to order. I ain’t shot the thirty-thirty in three years.”

Tom did not appear when Neal first tried the weapon. The second time he stopped only long enough to ask if Neal liked the gun, but the third afternoon he watched as Neal punctured a can at forty yards.

“You’re pretty good, lad,” he said. “Only a can ain’t like a deer.”

“I know,” Neal said. “A deer doesn’t stand still.”

“And a can don’t give you buck fever. Everybody gets a touch of it. First time DM run into a nice fat buck, his hands shook so we never did know where the bullet lit.”

That a man whom Tom admired had failed was encouraging. “Isn’t there any way to keep from having it?” Neal asked.

“Nope, nor any way to know you won’t get it,” Tom said. “Though I never heard of a man who was real hungry having buck fever. First buck I ever shot, we hadn’t had anything but rabbits for a long time, and a feller can get awful tired of rabbit meat. I knew if I didn’t get a deer, we’d go on eating rabbits. I just naturally had to hit that buck. But with a city fellow it’s different. He’s got a butcher shop on every corner and, when he hunts, he’s only thinkin’ of how the stuffed head’ll look on the wall and how his friends will think he’s a fine hunter. Maybe he gets scared for fear he won’t be.”

“I’m glad we need venison.”

“Two fat bucks’ll make a lot of difference to the kind of eating we’ll have this winter.”

The day before hunting season opened they started in the early afternoon. The mink were fed and everything was in order. Tom camouflaged the trail to the mutation pens with brush.

“Last time I did that was the day you came,” he said.

“Is that why I didn’t see the path!” Neal said. “But maybe I wasn’t thinking much about a mink farm that first morning.”

“Funny how a fellow’s ideas change,” Tom said.

Neal brought the truck to the kitchen door and Tom carried out two packsacks. One held a tarpaulin and blankets, the other food and dishes.

"Just tossed in some grub and kettles," Tom said. "Had we been going to pack it far, I'd have padded it with a blanket. But we'll camp near shore."

He had selected the northeast bay of the lake where he often hunted, a two hours' paddle from the Mead place. Neal drove to DM's boathouse, where Tom lifted a sixteen foot canoe from its rack and carried it to the water.

"We'll write DM his canoe brought in two fat bucks as usual," he said. "Make him feel better about missing hunting season."

"Is this the first he's missed?" Neal asked.

Tom nodded. "And it's breaking his heart. Says with this war on and Europe needing railroad supplies, he don't know when he'll get away. But you'll see him sometime."

Neal hoped so, although in a way he already knew DM. He'd been in his house, seen his paintings, borrowed his books and heard his opinions quoted, but the pieces did not fit into any sort of person he had ever known.

Tom placed the packsacks in the canoe and handed Neal a paddle. "Take the bow," he said.

Neal had never paddled. Pictures of canoes had made them seem so familiar it had not occurred to him to warn Tom that he had not been in anything more exciting than a rowboat.

"I paddle on my knees," Tom said. "Like this," and he knelt and leaned against the stern seat. "Keeps the weight down low and gets the leg muscles into the stroke. I paddle like an Indian with a quick, short thrust. See!" and he demonstrated. "It don't give the canoe a chance to lose headway." He spun the craft around and brought it alongside the float.

Neal cautiously lowered himself in front of the bow seat. "I'm a greenhorn, remember," he said.

"At least you ain't got any bad habits to get rid of," Tom replied.

They went up the lake. Neal wondered how long his knees could endure the cramping position. He looked back at Tom swinging his paddle with tireless regularity.

"You're doing fine," Tom said. "Quit when your knees can't take it any longer."

Neal resolved to last through the trip if it killed him, and then gradually, although the cramp had not left his leg muscles and his knees had not lost

their numbness, he swung his paddle without having to think of each stroke. He had time to look around. The day was sunny, with a slight breeze. The small bow wave made a cheerful gurgle. Little diamond drops were flung from the flashing blades. Points, rocks and trees, landmarks which had seemed hundreds of paddle strokes ahead, passed astern. Neal found he was exhilarated by the steady rhythm.

"Finest way in the world to travel," Tom said. "Too bad we don't have time to do it oftener. I ain't been in a canoe since DM and I went hunting last year."

"How long since you've been camping?" Neal asked.

"Not since I started keeping mink," Tom said. "I'm not complaining. It's only when a fellow starts out like this with a couple of packsacks in a canoe that he gets reminded of all the good times he's had. Your dad and me used to hit a river and keep on paddling just to see where the river went. We wouldn't get home till snow fell, and sometimes not even then."

Neal paddled in silence, thinking of what Tom said, and of much more. This was fun, and free. A canoe did not need a path. It could go anywhere, stop anywhere. Yet Tom had given up the job and contentment and adventure he had always known to build a mink farm. He had tied himself to it, and if ever a man had earned success, Tom had. He could have it too. It was in his grasp right now if he would only see the right way to breed platinums. In a few years they could build a real farm.

The paddle caught in the water and Neal missed a stroke as a vision came, a vision of what that farm could be. They would have hundreds of mink. Thousands! They would have adequate buildings, a crew of men to do the work. Tom could go hunting and camping any time he wished, could forget all the years he'd been held to the pens and hadn't been able to get away for more than a few hours.

Neal's stroke quickened as he saw it all, the long rows of pens, the painted buildings, the thousands of pelts they'd send to market, and Tom free to enjoy life.

"Hey!" Tom called. "You're setting a pace that'll have me bushed."

Neal held his blade poised. It was as if Tom had read his thoughts.

"Was I paddling fast?" he asked.

"And faster and faster. A bow paddler's supposed to have a heart. Besides, we're almost there. We'll make camp at the head of this bay."

They beached the canoe on a narrow strip of sand and lifted out the packs. Tom carried the craft into the brush, turned it over and laid a long windfall across it.

"To make sure it'll be here if a wind comes up," he said. "And it looks like one will."

He took the ax and the blanket pack and climbed to a little bench above the beach. Young spruce grew thickly except in a recess.

"You'd think they left that place clear just for us," Tom said, as Neal set down the grub pack. "When I was hunting last year I thought what a good fall camp this would make. Snug in a northeast storm, plenty of bedding and poplar and jackpine firewood handy, and the lake right in front."

"Looks fine to me," Neal said. "What shall I do?"

"I'll cut and you pack. Come along."

Tom led the way to the base of a ridge a few yards back of the camp site and began cutting poplar saplings, and the ease and skill and speed with which he handled his ax astonished Neal. Soon a collection of long and short poles, forked stakes and short sticks lay on the ground.

"Pack 'em in," Tom said, "and I'll cut bedding."

He had a small balsam down before Neal had gathered his load, and he slashed off the limbs with long sweeps of the ax. Neal returned to find a heap of boughs ready and Tom felling a large poplar. The tree had crashed and was being cut into six-foot lengths by the time Neal had carried the boughs into camp.

"Might as well finish everything at once," Tom said. "Pack 'em in."

He cut a dead poplar and a dead jackpine and limbed them.

"You can drag the poles easier," he said. "I'll make 'em into firewood later."

While Neal carried in the heavy green poplar logs, Tom made camp. His poles seemed to have been cut the right length, for the big tarpaulin was quickly stretched on a frame and staked down at the rear. At an angle of forty-five degrees, it would give shelter and reflect heat.

"Lay the bedding," Tom said. "This way, butt ends to the fire. Thicker it is, the warmer we'll be. Thatch with the small stuff last and we'll sleep soft."

He drove stakes in front of the lean-to, and when Neal turned for more boughs he found a fireplace had been built of green poplar logs tiered three feet high. Magic came from Tom's ax. It drove two tall forked stakes into the ground, and quickly pothooks hung from a cross pole. It cut the jackpine into four-foot lengths and its glancing blows chopped and split slabs from the dead poplar. It heaped a pile of firewood, slashed down spruce saplings which Tom stood at the ends of the lean-to. Before Neal had the bed finished he found himself working in a snug shelter open only toward the fire which Tom was building.

"Just enough to cook on now," Tom said, "and poplar because it don't smoke up the kettles. After supper, when it gets real chilly, we'll build up a snorter. That green poplar will throw heat into the lean-to and by morning the logs will be dry enough to burn fine when we roll out and find ice in the teakettle. I cut a birch back there for a night fire. You might lug it in."

When Neal came back with his first load, Tom had browned a can of venison and onions and potatoes in bacon fat and was hanging them in a kettle on a long pothook.

"Mulligan's easy but it rates high of a cold night," he said. "But it needs bannock. Ever eat one?"

"Never even heard of it," Neal said.

"It's not like bread, not like biscuits, or even cake, but when you bite into it you know it's all three."

Neal went for another load of birch. When he dropped the heavy log beyond the fire, Tom was spreading a rich biscuit dough in melted bacon grease on the frying pan. The pan had a six-foot handle, made of a poplar sapling squared to fit into a steel band. This rested in a forked stick and the pan was held high above the fire. Soon the dough began to rise and Tom drove the stake down, thus lowering the pan.

"Stir the mulligan," he said, "and move it to one side. Smells done."

He lifted the bannock with a knife, poured in more bacon grease and turned the cake over. The top side was a golden brown. Neal thought the odor was far finer than that of the stew.

"You got something here better'n you ever tasted before," Tom said.

They ate bannock and mulligan and drank cups of strong tea. The last pieces of bannock were spread with wild raspberry jam and they wiped their plates with the crumbs.

"I didn't know anything could taste so good," Neal said.

After the dishes were washed, Tom took down the cooking crane and placed green birch and dry jackpine logs on the fire. Then they lay back on the blankets and watched the flames climb higher. It was warm and cozy under the lean-to. The cold night crowded about the small circle of firelight but could not get in. Here were the warmth and snugness of a fall camp and two humans alone in all the world. The oneness Neal had sensed the evening of the picnic supper was now a reality. He knew how he felt about Tom, and how Tom felt about him. This was something close to perfect.

Tom laid two more logs of dead pine and two of green birch on the fire.

"If we're going to be where the deer are by daylight," he said, "we got to get some sleep."

For a time Neal lay on the soft bough bed. Firelight glinted on the slanting tarpaulin above. He heard Tom snuggle into his blanket, and then Tom wasn't there. The flames still lighted the lean-to, and it was colder, but he smelled bacon and coffee and pancakes.

"Breakfast's coming up!" Tom called. "Like I said, it's goin' to blow. We'd better get those bucks and beat it out o' here."

Neal stumbled to the lake and washed in icy water. They ate breakfast, and then started back into the forest, carrying their rifles. Neal was alert as never before. They walked slowly, but he had difficulty in breathing. In the first light he was sure every shadow moved. Small animals scurried in dry leaves and set his heart to thumping. He wondered if this were buck fever.

Tom walked easily and quietly, edging through brush so as not to rustle it, stepping carefully. Neal tried to do the same, but he could not release the tight grip on his rifle and his foot snapped a dead branch. Tom turned, but he was grinning.

"You did fine up to then," he said in a whisper. "Light's better and you can see where you walk. Runway crosses this ridge just ahead. Deer work the two swamps and they'll be movin' now. We can see 'em coming either way and we'll be down-wind."

They went on, more cautiously. Neal wondered that Tom could talk so casually. His own mouth was dry and his lips were stiff. He put each foot down as if he were walking on eggs.

Tom held up a hand in warning, slipped through thick brush and stopped. When Neal followed and found an open space ahead he could look down

both sides of the low ridge. It was light now and details emerged from shadows.

"Runway's just this side o' that burned pine stub," Tom said close to his ear. "Angles over to that thick spruce on the right and goes straight down on the left. Liable to come either way. First shot's yours."

After a while the sun rose at their backs and the whole forest changed. Neal imagined each bush was a tawny, moving body, each dead branch an antler, and then he wondered what a deer would look like. He realized he'd never seen one, that if he did it would be half-hidden by dense growth. He tried to keep his glance moving easily as Tom's did, for when he concentrated everything became a deer. The thud of his heart roared in his ears and his hands were stiff from gripping his weapon.

"Make sure he's wearin' antlers," Tom whispered. "Law's tough on doe shooting."

That was another hazard, and he had to get this buck. They needed the meat and he couldn't let Tom down. He looked along one side of the ridge, then the other, and had a strange taste of brass in his mouth. He looked again, where the runway had been empty a moment before, and saw a deer. It had no body, no legs, only a head and wide antlers like those on the wall in DM's big living room. Neal fired, but he did not know he had aimed or pulled the trigger until the rifle butt shoved hard against his shoulder.

"Got him!" Tom whispered excitedly. "And I didn't even see it till you swung around on him. Go ahead easy. He might come out o' that brush."

Neal pumped another shell into the barrel and walked along the slope. Nothing moved. The deer was dead when they reached him.

"Through the head!" Tom exclaimed. "Didn't spoil a pound o' meat. Can't do better shooting than that. I knew you'd be a hunter. You was as cool as they come."

"I wasn't," Neal said. "I don't even remember aiming."

"But you aimed. And you hit him. Bet he'll go two hundred pounds. Fat, too."

Tom dressed the deer and they hung it in a tree. Not a pound of meat need be wasted. Even the viscera could be used as mink food, but Tom set aside the liver.

"Fresh liver makes a second breakfast," he said. "I could eat it now, but we got to get my buck first. Or maybe you'd like to try for a second."

Neal knew this was pure generosity and he was glad to be able to refuse. He did not want to shoot another deer, but at least he had contributed his share of venison to the winter's larder.

They crossed to a second ridge, then a third. Tom walked ahead, his rifle held easily hip-high. He seemed scarcely aware he carried a weapon.

Then so suddenly Neal could not have told how it happened, he heard a heavy crashing of brush, caught a flash of a leaping deer and heard Tom's rifle. The three seemed almost simultaneous. They went forward. A deer sprawled in an open space between two thickets.

"Got him when he jumped," Tom said. "Through the shoulder. 'Fraid I spoiled some meat, but we got him."

The buck was small, a "spike-horn" Tom called him, but Tom seemed only glad Neal's was larger. When the deer was dressed Tom slung it across his shoulders.

"Won't have much trouble packing this to shore," he said.

They ate their second breakfast of fresh liver, and after the first bite Neal knew why Tom considered this a delicacy. When the meal was finished Tom picked up his ax.

"We can quarter your deer where he lies or pack him in whole," Tom said. "Which you want?"

"He's my first deer," Neal said, wondering what the twinkle in Tom's eyes meant. "I wouldn't know."

"After you've killed a lot o' deer, you don't care about it, but the first one, hanging up whole, horns and all, it's something to look at—four-five times a day. It's like meat tasting better when you pack it in yourself."

"Let's keep him whole," Neal said.

They tied the deer's feet together, slipped a stiff pole through and carried it to the lake. The load was heavy and the pole hard on a shoulder. Tom was looking at the treetops.

"Sooner we get home the better," he said. "When she blows this hard so early she'll get worse."

It was worse when they were ready to leave. The deer put the canoe down so they had only two inches of free-board.

"We'll catch it rough in the open stretch," Tom said as they started. "With a load like this, we got to sneak around the shore. Liable not to get home by noon."

"But the mink haven't had fresh water since yesterday!" Neal exclaimed. "We've got to get there."

"'Got' is a big word in the bush, and it's led to a lot o' trouble. All we can do is our best. But if we didn't have those mink to think of, you and me'd cook ourselves another meal of liver and stay in camp till this wind blew itself out. Some of the best times I've had was when I was windbound."

As they left the little bay the full force of the wind caught them, and in the open lake waves raced high. Turbulence and menace were in the angry hiss of combers running along the gunwales. The bow reared and plunged. One moment Neal looked down into a deep trough, the next he soared high on a crest and experienced that helpless feeling of a bow man when his paddle reaches for water and finds nothing.

"Take it easy," Tom called.

They reached shelter in the next bay, but as they followed the indented shore, taking advantage of each point, Neal realized they were adding miles to the homeward journey. He chafed at the delay, worried about the mink, but in that wind he knew they could do nothing else. Tom seemed satisfied.

"A lot o' lakes around here where you can't sneak like in this one," he said. "Takes more paddle strokes but they're worth it."

Neal wondered if they were worth it when noon came before they reached the last point, and they had the final mile to the home cove before them, but one look at the open stretch convinced him. He wondered if they could make it.

"An hour later and we'd have had trouble," Tom said. "Got to take this on the beam."

One white crest followed another, their unceasing march as threatening as their height. Neal had heard that a beam sea was the most dangerous for a canoe. He dug in his blade as they went out into the racing waves, but after a moment Tom called.

"Sit still," he said. "All you got to do is not move. Don't paddle, no matter what happens. When I figure how to take a wave I got to know where your weight is."

His voice held no panic and his words were leisurely. Neal wondered if Tom had made them so purposely as a reassurance, and then he forgot to wonder as they started out into the smother. He did not look around, did not move, but he could see the big waves coming and was aware of the delicacy of Tom's balancing as the canoe rode over them. Each wave was a separate problem, to be appraised and dealt with. At times Neal saw a big curler which he was sure would turn them over, but Tom angled into it, the bow rose and the craft had a queer corkscrew motion as it lifted and dropped safely into the trough. Neal became so absorbed by Tom's skill he forgot to be afraid. He believed nothing could turn them over.

At last they slid behind the point of Mead's cove and came to a stop beside the float.

"That was quite a blow," Tom said. "But we did all right."

"We!" Neal said. "I didn't take a stroke. Couldn't help you."

"Kept your weight steady, didn't you? There's times when that's the best thing a partner can do. The fellow who has the savvy has to go ahead."

Neal stepped onto the float. He was stiff and sore and weary, yet strangely excited.

"I wouldn't have missed that last stretch for anything!" he said. "But I'm going to learn to paddle."

"No reason why not," Tom said. "There's three canoes in the boathouse that ain't working."

6

THE farm's annual harvest was close at hand. Neal read the chapter in the mink book which described the qualities of prime fur. The writer said he examined each mink in a catching box before he pelted, to make sure the skin was ready.

"Good idea," said Tom. "Might take a little longer but it stands to reason all fur don't prime the same day."

That was like Tom. There was no way of guessing what he'd accept and what he wouldn't. He was still distrustful of genetics. Genes meant nothing to him, although Neal had drawn checkerboards showing how traits were inherited, in an effort to convince him. Now Tom caught Neal's smile.

"You think I don't believe in book learning," he said. "But any time a fellow tells me how to get better pelts I'm willing to listen, no matter how much extra time it takes. Newfangled ideas are different. Let some other farmer prove they'll work."

It was impossible to get mad at Tom, even when he closed his mind to accepted facts. He was so fair about other things, Neal could not bear to make the obvious rejoinder that when other fur farmers had proved the breeding value of half bloods, it would be too late to become big producers of the new platinum shade.

They spent a late November afternoon inspecting pelters. Some were prime. The leather was white when they blew on the fur or spread it with their fingers, and the fur, when thus ruffled, flowed back to its erect position because the underfur was dense enough to give good support to guard hairs. Neal entered the serial numbers of these mink on the sheet for immediate pelting. Others had pinkish skins, and were not quite ready and these were listed for an examination a few days later. Those with bluish skins would be late pelters.

"A numbered tag saves us a lot of trouble going through the lot again," Tom said. "And we'll get 'em when they're right. Other years I've let some go off in color, waiting to be sure. That book has more'n paid its way already."

This too was like Tom. No one was more ready to acknowledge an error. Neal wished he could find a way to say so and not sound sappy. He could argue with Tom, but was always embarrassed when he wanted to tell how much he liked him.

"But I don't need to read a book to find out how to pelt a mink," Tom said. "I've done that since I can remember."

Early the next morning they moved the early pelters to a small building Tom called the "furring house." Tom fastened a heavy swab to the end of a long wire, dipped it in a solution of potassium cyanide and held it before a pelter. The mink bit the swab and died instantly.

"Beats a trap," Tom said. "One thing I like about a farm." Neal did not offer to assist in pelting. Here he was less than a novice and Tom was an expert. Tom slit the back of the hind legs and loosened the pelt by working his thumbs between flesh and skin. With a quick snap he freed the tail from the tail bone and removed the pelt as one would peel off a glove. The skin had only to be cut from front toes, ears, eyes and nose, but Tom cut with care. He slipped the pelt over a drying board, skin side out. The board was slightly wider at the base than the shoulders and with a round point at the end to stretch the head.

"All we got to do now is flesh," Tom said. "Have to scrape it clean of fat."

"Can I do that?" Neal asked.

Tom handed him a table knife. "Use the back of it and be careful at the edges of the board," he said. "Scrape from the tail towards the head with the grain of the leather."

When the pelt was clean, Tom showed Neal how to split the tail, wipe it, and then tack the tail and feet to the board. He pulled the skin firmly but not too hard.

"Overstretching spoils the leather," he said. "Only way to put size on mink is by feeding." He slipped a slender stick between the skin and the board, down the center of the belly. "When the skin is dry, we pull the stick out and it's easy to get the pelt off the board. Can't afford to be rough with a fur that brings real money." He tacked the upper lip over the pointed end of the board and tied a string around the tack. "Ready to dry," he said. "Maybe you think I'm fussy, but it's a fussy crop. You can take five dollars off the value of a pelt easy."

Late pelters were prime by mid-December. The skins of early pelters were dry, off the boards and strung fur side out, in a bundle. Neal was amazed to discover how much he had learned about fur quality. He could discern slight variations in a shade, recognize that the finest pelts, which were soft and silky, had an even coverage of guard hairs. These were not too long and gave the skin a feel of velvet.

"There's a lot of difference between mink," Tom said. "A smart fur farmer learns to grade his fur, know how good a crop he sent to market. Helps him too in raising a better crop the next year." He let the soft pelts run through his fingers, felt the leather, held several skins out in the light. "Them's fine extra-dark," he said. "Ought to bring top prices. Buyers are yelping for good dark mink. Wish we had more of 'em, but we'll have them next year. Got to, if we keep this fur farm going. We got to bring in money somehow. There's not much work at the Mead place and trapping's getting slimmer every season."

Tom never "talked poor," seldom spoke of money, and Neal knew he was pleased with the quality of the fur crop. He was leading up to something and Neal waited.

"That's why we can't take any chances of mixing up the platinums and the standards," Tom went on. "No telling what we'd get, and besides we got to have good extra-dark mink to sell when that's what buyers want."

It was the first time Tom had opened the subject of breeding half bloods, and from his tone Neal knew he had thought about it and reached an opinion. If this were final, and Neal feared it was, he was helpless. The hours of talk about scientific breeding and the checkerboards showing how genes paired in offspring had been wasted. For the first time, Neal doubted if he ever could convince Tom the slow, sure way would prove most costly in the end. Nor could he hope for outside help. Peter Reese, on whom he had counted, wrote he would not be in their district until the Easter recess. That would be too late, even if Peter could be of help. Norman Whitlock, the editor, offered even less hope. His letter was friendly. He congratulated them on the quality of their platinums and concluded, "You mutation breeders face the hard years, but some day the whole industry may be grateful for your work as pioneers."

Tom found great satisfaction in the letter. "He liked our mink, all right," he said. "And he was square about not putting a piece in his magazine about us. He's right too about the hard years. He knows we got a long, hard slog

ahead. Looks at it like I do. No, lad. You and I might as well get set to ride it out. That's what I been saying."

It was hopeless even to try to convince Tom he and the editor did not see alike and that Mr. Whitlock had not intended to support Tom's opinion on the value of half bloods. Nor would it be of any use to write the editor about their argument. What went on between two partners was no one's business but their own. Neal must find some other way to persuade Tom that scientific farming was their only way out and up.

He wondered if he had found it two days later when Tom got a letter from David Mead.

"DM's coming up for Christmas!" he exclaimed. "Wants everything ready. Be here night of the twenty-third and stay two days." Tom's excitement revealed how much this news meant. "But it'll keep us humping to get the place in shape."

"How many are coming?" Neal asked.

"Just DM and his Chinese cook. We got to get the light plant going, start the furnace, heat the pipes, pump the tank full of water and clean up a bit. Lucky we've had an open winter and there's no need to call the snowplow. DM says he telephoned White Pine and made sure about the road. He don't slip up on anything. You'll like him, lad. Can't help it."

Neal had never been more eager to meet anyone, but it was even more important that Tom admired him and respected his opinion. A man of Mr. Mead's ability must be aware of the importance of modern farming methods and perhaps Tom would listen to him about the vital necessity of quickly building a large mutation herd.

Tom stood up with sudden energy. "Got to spring the traps," he said. "Won't have time for 'em with what there's to do at Mead's place and around the pens."

December work on the fur farm was heavy, even after pelting. It was time to think of next year's crop and make sure breeders went through the winter safely. Nest boxes were examined weekly for damp bedding. Each morning ice in the drinking dishes had to be chipped and melted with hot water. Food must be warmed. Running boards had to be placed on the floors of pens so mink need not run on cold wire. And this year there was extra building. They were preparing for the deeper cold of midwinter by installing small inner den boxes which, placed away from nest box walls, insured the dwellers a frostproof bed.

Neal found no time to study except in the evening, but from his progress he was sure he would easily complete the course before June. Tom held study hours in deep respect, tiptoeing about the kitchen and giving up his customary radio news hour until Neal complained of the quiet.

"I could work faster if I knew someone was alive around here," he said. "What do you think it's like in high school?"

"I wouldn't know, lad," Tom said. "By the time I'd learned to read and write and figure a bit, it was time to earn a living. Maybe that's how I happened to understand how your mother'd feel if you didn't get an education."

Tom revealed himself so rarely, Neal was always at a loss for a comment. It was queer how two fellows could live together and never be able to say how they felt about each other. Now Neal wanted to tell Tom he admired the way he always thought things out for himself. Even in the job of guardian—and he certainly had never expected to be one—he'd reached his own decision as to what Neal's mother would have wanted. Tom had not needed the advice of a Hayward banker, or even of DM, on his obligations. He'd quoted DM that first night only because he had such respect for his opinion.

The day of DM's arrival his house was warm and in running order. Tom drove to town to meet the early evening train. He had made a big pot of beans.

"DM'd rather have baked beans than anything his cook could turn out in a hurry," he said. "And eating here will give the cook a chance to settle in."

Neal set the table for three. The red-checked cloth and the heavy dishes were the best they owned. He put another stick of wood in the stove to keep the beans on the bubble. They were brown and nutty and smelled good. He heard the truck and went to the door.

"Hello, Neal," DM called. "Get those beans hot. We'll take Sang to the house and be back in no time."

Neal had imagined DM would be a big man. He was slight beside Tom, and yet Neal got an inescapable impression of competence. His most remarkable feature was the way his face lighted when he spoke. It wasn't quite a smile. Any man could smile but few could establish such an immediate sense of friendship with a simple greeting.

"Supper'll be on the table when you come," Neal said.

A short time later the truck returned and Neal removed the brown bread from the steamer. This was his own contribution. In Hayward, brown bread and beans had been their regular Saturday night supper and he had found a recipe in a cookbook Tom almost never opened.

"Steamed brown bread!" DM exclaimed as he entered the kitchen. "Haven't had it since I was a kid, but I can still remember how it tasted. Tom, this new partnership was certainly needed. You never thought of anything more exciting than plain bread and butter with your beans. Every firm needs younger blood and new ideas."

Neal wondered if Tom had told of the argument over the half bloods, but supper was spent in catching up on news. Tom reported on their fur crop and DM spoke of the problems of his business.

"When I saw a chance to spend Christmas here, I grabbed it," he said. "But I realized all the work my coming meant to you fellows."

"We'd 'a' done a lot more to have a visit," Tom said. "You being so busy —think we're going to get into this war?"

"I hope not. That's one of the things I came to forget. Unless"—he looked around the table—"you really want to talk about it."

"Don't seem much use," Tom said.

DM laughed and turned to Neal. "Everything seems so simple when I'm here," he said. "I find myself longing for the place."

Later he spoke of the new mink. Tom must have told of them on the drive home and DM did not seem to resent not sharing the early secret.

"I should have guessed Tom had something up his sleeve," he said, "but I wouldn't have suspected a mutation. Like them, Neal?"

"They're beautiful," Neal said, and stopped. Tom always called them pretty. "And they're new and different. Any rancher would want to raise them."

"Your first reason was enough," DM said. "All of us like beauty."

Neal liked the way he used the word. Neal had always been a bit afraid to say it.

"We'll show you the mink tomorrow," Tom said. "They're prime still and look mighty nice."

Soon after supper DM went home. He was tired and Sang had never been in the north woods. “Probably expects to be attacked by wild animals, or even Indians,” DM said.

“What you going to do this trip?” Tom asked.

“I’ve planned every hour. A day like tomorrow doesn’t happen often. In the morning I’ll sit at my own fireplace. Might read a bit. Might take a walk and look at trees. Trees have a great deal to tell a fellow. In the afternoon I’m coming to see the new mink. In the evening you two spend Christmas Eve with me. Sang’s planned a turkey dinner.”

“Do I have to wear a boiled shirt?” Tom asked.

“Sang’s the only one who will notice.”

The next day DM arrived as Tom and Neal were finishing their noon meal, and Tom was so eager to show the platinums he suggested they leave the dishes.

“No other mink have received such a tribute,” said DM, winking at Neal.

As they entered the enclosure behind the fringe of trees, Neal hoped his expression did not reveal how much DM’s opinion meant. Tom led the way down the row of pens. The mink were lovely in their winter coats. Silvery guard hairs glistened in the sunlight. DM knelt to stare at a female which stared back at him.

“Neal is right,” he said. “They’re beautiful. No other word to use. What a glorious experiment for nature to achieve!”

He asked what geneticists knew about them and Neal told what Peter Reese had said. DM listened, then asked a few questions which showed he understood.

“It’s a recessive, isn’t it?” he asked. “Tom, you were lucky to have a pair to start with. And the fur trade is fortunate that you had the gift to see their beauty.”

“But will the fur trade think so?” Tom asked.

“It’s the public that makes the final decision,” DM said, “and the man never lived who could be absolutely sure of what it will like. Besides, women are your public. But I can’t believe you’ll lose. Beauty is a basic thing.” He turned to Neal. “You two fellows recognized it. Why wouldn’t others? I envy you an exciting gamble.”

“First thing we’ve got to prove is that we can raise a lot of them,” Neal said. “That’s our biggest problem, Mr. Mead.”

“That’s usually a factor in any production,” DM said. “And by the way, Neal, all my friends call me DM. I’m sure even the office boy refers to me that way and I’d feel more comfortable if you dropped the Mister.”

“Tom and I never speak of you as anything but DM,” Neal said.

“Fine! Bring it out in the open.”

That evening when Neal changed his clothes for dinner he found his jacket, which had been large a year before, now was a snug fit. His mother and he had bought it for a Christmas party and the suit had been called a family present. His gift to her had been a handbag, which she had insisted was the only thing she needed, and now he wished he had bought her the dressing gown and slippers he had first selected.

In the kitchen Tom looked at Neal’s sport clothes with approval. “That’s the kind DM’ll be wearing,” he said.

Tom had changed into his dark serge town suit and was having trouble with his tie. As Neal knotted it for him he mumbled, “Collar always chokes me but I don’t want Sang to think DM don’t know anyone but lumberjacks.”

They drove to the Mead place. DM opened the front door and they found the big room aromatic with freshly cut spruce boughs. Logs crackled in the fireplace and Neal saw how the flames burnished the brown walls. A few moments later Sang, in a white coat, entered with a tray. DM took a glass of tomato juice.

“Neal and I being younger can get along on this,” he said, “but there’s something stronger on the tray for Tom.” He lifted his glass. “To the platinum mink,” he said, “and while we’re drinking a toast we might as well add Merry Christmas.”

Sang passed another tray and Tom took several of the wedge-shaped pieces. Neal took one and stood beside his host at the fireplace, a glass in one hand and a canapé in the other. Canapés were never served in Hayward but he found the custom gave him a pleasant sense of well being.

“What are these made of?” Tom asked.

“Fresh caviar,” DM said. “Sang had a waiter in the dining car keep it on ice.”

“It’s a good thing we got the refrigerator going,” Tom said. “These things alone are worth the trouble.”

“Ice box velly good,” Sang said, and bowed to Tom.

Sang called them to dinner. The long dining table was attractive. The centerpiece of fruit and pine cones was flanked by candles. The table was bright with glass and silver, and colored mats brought out the mellow shades of the china. The soup was clear and its taste was unfamiliar.

“Sang make this soup?” Tom asked. “It’s good.”

“It came out of one of those cans you’re always growling about,” DM said. “It’s green turtle.”

DM carved the turkey, and so expertly Neal knew he enjoyed doing it, just as he found pleasure in all the simple details of living. So many things held savor for DM—trees, reflections from an open fire, a well-set table, the luster of fur, the taste of food, books and the colors of a painting. Tom enjoyed small things, too, but different things. Perhaps that was why the two got on so well together. But the sudden recognition of this quality in DM was important. It made all Neal’s discoveries about the man fit together, and now he felt he really knew him.

When Sang served after-dinner coffee before the fireplace, Tom was startled.

“Sang’s making a real party of this,” he said. “Didn’t you tell him we’re only neighbors?”

“Even neighbors enjoy coffee before an open fire,” DM said. “And perhaps Sang wants to clear the table.”

“There’s sense to that,” Tom said. “Now I can take plenty of time over my second cup.”

When they rose to go, no plans had been made for the next day. DM turned to Neal.

“Would you like to take a walk with me Christmas afternoon?” he asked.

“Do Neal good,” Tom said. “He ain’t taken two hours off since we went hunting.”

“It will do us both good,” DM said. “I haven’t been in the winter woods for so long I waken in the night and remember the quiet of a spruce swamp.”

Neal had hoped to have a talk with DM, but the next afternoon as he went to the Mead place he wondered how he could begin. He didn't want either DM or Tom to think he was talking about a partner behind his back. When Neal arrived, DM was putting on his snowshoes.

"Saw you coming," DM said. "We don't really need webs, but they make a walk more fun."

"I don't miss a chance to wear them," Neal said. "Never owned a pair until this winter."

They struck over a ridge and from the rise saw a spruce swamp stretch before them. Intertwining branches of the dense growth held the snow aloft and made a white canopy between the hills. They descended, and at the edge of the swamp DM slipped off his snowshoes.

"Even I can't find an excuse for webs in there," he said.

They followed a game trail. The deep muskeg was soft beneath their feet. Snow had sifted from above to spangle the green floor. Long streamers of moss hung from branches. It was quiet and peaceful, and instinctively their voices lowered. They did not talk much and from the few questions DM asked, Neal knew he had already learned a great deal from Tom. At last Neal opened the subject of the platinum mink.

"Tom and I thought you liked them," he said.

"More perhaps than I told you," DM said. "I was thinking of them this morning. It isn't just that they are new and different. It's a strange shade, and so subtle one can't describe it. Platinum doesn't do justice to its delicacy. Neither would silver. It's a breathtaking blend of an exquisite blue and gray which glistens."

"The other ranchers named them platinum," Neal said.

"Are there many mink of that color?"

"There will be. Mutation breeders say they'll have them on the market in three years. One fellow is selling breeding stock. He gets more than a thousand dollars for a trio."

"A trio?"

"Male and two females. Mink don't come in pairs."

"I see. They're polygamous like farm stock. That simplifies things, doesn't it? Gives you a chance to breed carriers of the recessive strain."

"Sure it does!" Neal exclaimed. "That's how the two men who had single platinum females built up their herds. And we could do it. Tom thinks he's had bad luck in getting almost as many males as females, but it's really good luck. We could mate those males with standards and have half bloods."

"Talked to Tom about it?"

"He says we'd only spoil good dark mink when they're bringing high prices," and then Neal's voice flattened. "Besides, he wants to go on breeding platinums his way. Says he knows it works."

They walked on in silence. Neal knew he might have sounded disloyal to a partner, but no one could talk about recessive platinums and not discuss breeding methods.

"I can understand how Tom might feel so," DM said at last. "He's been carrying this secret around for five years, didn't know other platinum mink existed, dreamed of astonishing the world with a new color, planned how and when he'd do it. Naturally his opinions have been set."

"But he might listen to you about half bloods," Neal said.

"In mink?" DM said. "I've been as close to Tom as anyone in the last five years but he never told me about his platinums. Had he thought I knew anything about fur farming he would certainly have shown them to me. Tom respects my opinion in many things but in this I would be only an outsider. If he asks me, I'll tell him the little I know about modern breeding, but to offer my advice might only confirm him in his opinion. Tom is one of the most stubborn of men, and also the most reasonable."

"You mean this is something partners have to handle," Neal said. "He didn't listen to anything Mr. Whitlock or Peter Reese told him. But when other ranchers are building up big herds of platinums, when we've got a chance—"

"Tom should be convinced, for his own sake," DM said. "Is that what you mean?"

"You wouldn't want to see him lose out now after all the years he spent getting twenty mink from one pair. It would be a crime to let him miss his chance to be a big mutation breeder!"

"I agree, Neal. And you must not let that happen."

"But how?" Neal demanded.

"I don't know. I'm the last person in the world to advise you."

“Why?” Neal asked. “You know how much I like him. You know how swell he’s been to me, took me in, made me a partner. You’re the only one I can ask.”

“And the worst. I knew you would ask me. I had a partner once. One of the best, and just as stubborn as Tom. I didn’t convince him, and we parted. We would have gone farther if we had worked together. I know that now. I’ve known it every time I hit a bad place in the road. But I’ve never known just why I failed.”

“Haven’t you ever figured what you should have done?”

“No.” DM’s tone was thoughtful. “I was right in the argument. I proved it later. Perhaps if I’d been tougher, compelled him to accept my judgment, the whole difficulty between us would have blown over. Or perhaps I tried to rush him too fast.” He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s something a partner must determine for himself.”

“You mean,” Neal said, “because Tom won’t listen—”

“I don’t think I meant anything especially,” DM said. “I only wanted you to know why I can’t help you—perhaps why no one can.”

7

Tom was waiting at the house. DM had told him they would have an early supper and finish the turkey.

"I was just about to set out looking for you," Tom said. "Once a fellow gets mixed up in a spruce swamp, he is liable to go to hell and gone. What's been keeping you?"

DM looked at Neal. "I don't suppose we could convince him we climbed a hill just for the fun of seeing what was on the other side," he said.

Neal and DM did not have another talk alone. DM visited them the next morning, looked at the platinum mink again, chatted awhile, and then it was time for Tom to take him to the train.

"I'll be back for a week this summer," DM said, "and my niece may stay a month. At least that's her plan now. Mrs. Meadows, an old friend, will be with her. I'm counting on you fellows to look after them. Don't let Peggy put anything over on you, and don't get the idea she's as scatter-brained as she sounds."

"Will they bring a cook?" Tom asked.

"Sang will come. He'll manage the house, but he won't be any help outside. I noticed the supply of wood is getting low and the girls will want a fire in the evenings. Can you cut a few more cords this winter, Tom?"

"We'll do it in March when I've quit trapping," Tom said. "Got to get up ice and tend to spring chores before breeding season starts."

DM shook hands with Neal. "This was a real Christmas," he said. "And I'd hesitated about asking you two fellows to open the house for so short a visit."

"Any time you see a chance to come, all you got to do is send a wire," Tom said.

The Mead house was closed for winter, pipes drained, motors oiled. Neal said the light plant needed adjustments before it was used again.

"You're being handy around machinery helps a lot," Tom said. "Saves getting a mechanic from town every time a motor stutters. I talked to DM and he says to keep track of your hours."

"How does he pay you?" Neal asked.

"By the day, the only decent way to figure. He pays for the time I put in. Keeping my eye on the place is just neighboring, same as I'd expect of him. We settle wages at the end of the season, but maybe you need your pay sooner. Buying that mail-order schoolin' might have left you short. I wouldn't want you to draw on your savings."

"I'm all right," Neal said. "I've still got money I didn't spend on the trip west. And put my hours at the Mead place in with yours. We're partners, aren't we?"

"If you feel that's square."

"Square!" Neal said. "I couldn't square my end if I worked ten years! You know that."

"I know no such thing," Tom said. "Being partners ain't anything you can ever figure out exactly. Least it was always that way with your dad and me."

In the following weeks Neal often thought of Tom's speech and of his talk with DM. Every partnership was different, yet there were times when Neal's problem seemed unique and beyond solution. Neal continued to talk scientific breeding and Tom continued to remain obdurate about employing what to him was only theory. Sales of their pelt crop only confirmed his opinion. Their first quality extra-dark mink brought twenty-four dollars a skin.

"Stands to reason we can't afford not to have good dark mink at that price," Tom said. "Cross the two strains and there's no telling what we'll get."

"But there is," Neal insisted. "We'll get half bloods the first season and the next year we'll get half litters of platinum mink."

"That's what the college professors say, but we got to produce the mink."

Yet Tom accepted other facts. He read the mink book and the breeder's magazine and made changes in his preparation for the mating season. He watched breeders and made sure they were in good condition but not too fat, and he painstakingly drew up a mating program. He employed his own

knowledge of the ancestry but he designated the mink by Neal's serial numbers.

"It's handy having figures to show what mink you mean," he said. "All that book work was a big job, lad, but it'll save time in the end. Mating isn't any different than it's always been, though. Mate the best to the best and you can't help but have better kits. Next year we'll close out those mink with a mite of reddish in the undercoat. I notice that color is bound to show up in a litter."

"Because it's a dominant," Neal said.

"Call it what you like. All I know, it's a good thing to get rid of."

Neal drew up his own breeding program. They had sixty standard females. Half could be mated to standards to produce a kit crop for next fall's pelting. These would bring in money, though not enough, but Tom and he could take some tough years. The other half of the standard breeders, the thirty with the deepest, silkiest coats, the choicest of all, could be mated to the platinums and produce hybrids which would be the beginning of a large mutation herd. Neal did not show his mating sheet to Tom, though he would before the breeding season. For Neal had not yet accepted defeat, and loss of a year in hybridization would be defeat. DM said perhaps he should have compelled his former partner to accept his judgment, but how could anyone compel another, especially a man Neal admired as he did Tom? Yet somehow, someway, he must break down Tom's stubborn distrust of science.

In late February they put up ice. It was hard work, and cold, and the cakes had to be hauled from Lake Atikwa in the truck. Tom cut the blocks with an ice saw while Neal slid them ashore. It required the strength of both to move the cakes from the truck into the icehouse, where they were covered with sawdust.

"Before we kept mink we never bothered with ice," Tom said. "The spring was cold enough to keep our food, but mink are different."

"Some day we'll have a refrigerating plant like the big fur farms," Neal said. "Then we'll only turn a switch."

Tom chuckled. "And I suppose we'll have trick gadgets to feed the mink and change bedding," he said. "Got any ideas on how we'll get up that firewood for DM? That's the next chore."

"Not an idea," Neal said. "I'm not much good with an ax."

"Nobody is unless he starts swinging one before he's ten, but you'll be enough help if you do the swamping and bucking."

Tom's axmanship was a delight to watch. He felled trees while Neal limbed and sawed them into twelve-foot lengths. Tom selected trees with care, taking only birch and jackpine and never too many in one place.

"DM enjoys his woods," he said. "No need to spoil 'em for him."

Early March was cold and zestful. The snow, worn by wind and a thaw, had flattened into a crusted cover on the forest floor. The sun of winter's end rose earlier and remained later in the sky. They cooked their lunch over a campfire, and all day they smelled the clean, freshly cut pine. For the first time in many weeks, Neal forgot his problem of the coming breeding season. Tom was fun to be with on a job like this. He threw himself into it and made it seem a game. One evening as they gathered their tools Tom looked skyward.

"Liable to snow by morning," he said. "We'd better haul tomorrow while we can still find the logs. Besides, it will keep the road open."

In a swirl of snow flakes they hauled logs to the house, where a power saw would cut them into fireplace length. Neal was amazed at how large the pile was and even Tom was gratified.

"Another week and we'll have wood enough to last two women for a year," he said.

The storm cleared in the night. The woods were cold and glittering. Snow muted forest sounds and when a bough dropped its burden the snow fell with a muffled whoosh. Tom started work with more than even his usual morning vigor. Neal heard the sharp clips of his ax and then the sound of a falling tree. Bucking behind Tom kept a man on his toes. Neal counted three trees, then a fourth, but the sound of its fall was different.

"Jumpin' jee Jeruselum!" Tom's voice roared through the forest. "And a couple o' holy old mackinaws to boot!"

Tom never swore and rarely used common woods phrases, saying he didn't feel any more comfortable with another man's words than he would with his ax, which wouldn't be hung to suit him. Neal ran to see what had happened and found Tom looking up at a tall jackpine, its top caught in a birch tree.

"Ain't done a trick like that since I was a kid!" Tom said. "Goes to prove nobody should get a conceit for himself. I been thinkin' I was showin' you

some fancy ax work, and I go and hang a tree. Couldn't 'a' done it neater if I'd never had an ax in my hand before."

The pine, in falling, had crashed into the top of a birch tree and hung there, halfway down.

"Why don't you just leave it?" Neal asked.

"Leave it!" and Tom's tone was savage. "For DM to find! He'd never stop riding me about it, and I couldn't blame him. It takes an awful greenhorn to do a job like this."

His chagrin was great. He walked around the birch, muttering.

"I was sure I was pulling the pine enough to miss it," he said, "but a pine top and a birch've got a way of drawing to each other. They'll do it every time, and more men've been killed or hurt by it than anything else in the camps."

He kicked snow from the foot of the birch, slashed down a couple of saplings and trod a path.

"Got to have a way out," he said. "Things happen fast with all that weight hankering to get to the ground. Go back and stay clear. No telling which way she'll go when she goes."

He cut a deep kerf in the birch on the side farthest from the pine stump, pausing often to look up, and when the kerf was cut he went to the other side and took a couple of half swings. With the second, straining fibers let go, snapping and crackling, and the birch started down, driven by the weight of the pine.

Tom jumped, with a swift movement Neal had never seen him use before, as the pine rushed down. Neal found himself calculating Tom would be gone before the tree reached the ground, but Tom stumbled over a snow-buried root. At that moment the pine swung toward him, caught him half erect. The jagged end of a broken branch hit his head, the trunk itself struck his shoulder. He went down, rolling clear of the pine. And he did not get up.

Neal stood still for a long moment before running forward. Tom lay in the snow, and near his head the snow turned red, a red that became deeper and spread farther. Neal knelt beside him, not hoping. Tom's eyes were closed. Snow on his face melted and ran in red streams. A piece of scalp lay over one ear, like a muff, and blood flowed from his exposed skull. Tom's lips parted and he groaned.

Neal jumped to his feet. Tom was not dead, and the knowledge brought a rush of ideas, of thoughts, and of fears. The road was two hundred yards away and the truck could not be brought closer. Tom would freeze if he lay in the snow, and he was too big to carry.

Neal jerked the ax from the snow and slashed saplings, piled them beside the unconscious man. He dragged Tom onto the dry bed, arranged his arms and legs comfortably, piled more brush on top. He felt of Tom's pulse. It beat regularly, but not as Neal's own heart was pounding then, or as it did when he raced through the woods to the truck.

The motor was still warm and started at once, but he had been thinking. He couldn't drag Tom to the road, and he had seen a toboggan in the Mead house. That would do the trick, with a plank to slide the toboggan into the truck.

Keys to the Mead house hung in Tom's home, but getting them would take time, and Tom couldn't wait. Neal drove to DM's. As he braked sharply, he jumped from the cab, ran to the kitchen, smashed a mittened hand through a windowpane and reached in to unfasten the lock. Tom would need blankets too, and Neal collected them, tossed them and the toboggan on to the truck, got a plank and raced back into the woods.

Tom lay as before. His pulse still beat but he was unconscious, and Neal was glad. At least he would not feel pain while being rolled into blankets, lashed to the toboggan and dragged to the truck. Getting the injured man, toboggan and all, up the plank into the truck took more strength than Neal knew he had, but it was done, and the fifteen-mile drive to the hospital at Lakewoods began.

Roads were rutted, heavy with snow, and the truck skidded and swayed until it reached the main highway and smoother going. Neal didn't look back at his passenger. He didn't dare until he stopped at the hospital door.

Two attendants lifted the toboggan from the truck and carried it to an operating room. Neal followed until the doctor stopped him.

"Wait downstairs," he said. "We'll call you."

Neal sat in a chair near the door and a few moments later a nurse came to ask questions for the hospital record. Neal gave Tom's age as fifty-two. He remembered Tom having said he was eight years older than Neal's father. Neal did not think Tom had ever had any serious illness.

"Probably not," the nurse said, and departed.

Neal watched the door. It was a long time before another nurse beckoned and led him to the doctor's office. The doctor shook hands.

"Sit down," he said. "We've gone over Tom. He has a bad scalp wound, some cracked ribs, a broken shoulder and possibly a skull fracture. If not that, a concussion. We'll know more about the head injuries when we see the X rays. He has also suffered from exposure. How long did he lie in the woods?"

"It couldn't have been more than an hour before I got him into the truck," Neal said.

The doctor looked at Tom's history. "His age is a bit against him but, thanks to sulpha, pneumonia isn't the threat it once was."

"Can I see him?" Neal asked.

"No, but I'll tell him you'll be here in the morning. I'll want to have a talk with you then." The doctor put a hand on Neal's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "These old lumberjacks are tough, and I've seen a lot of woods accidents. Bringing him on a toboggan was a swell idea. Got him here with the least damage."

"It was the only way I could have brought him out of the woods by myself," Neal said.

"Wasn't there anyone to help you?"

"We've got no neighbors and I couldn't let him lie there while I chased around the country."

"No, you wouldn't," and the doctor smiled. "And don't worry. We'll have good news for you tomorrow."

As Neal drove home he remembered how confident the doctor's tone had been and this carried him through the next few hours as he fed the mink, brought in wood and water and cooked a late supper. It seemed strange to be doing these things without Tom. When the dishes were washed he began to study, but the quiet and loneliness got between him and the book. Fears nagged. Perhaps the doctor was not as confident as he appeared and Neal should never have left the hospital. He could have spent the night in the waiting room, ready if Tom should need him. The more he thought of this, the surer he became that this was what he should have done. People in the hospital had no way of reaching him if Tom suddenly became worse. Head injuries were serious and there was no predicting what the developments might be. And he was fifteen miles away.

Neal closed his book. It was a few minutes of midnight. He could drive to Lakewoods in less than an hour, and if he gave the mink fresh water now they could get through the morning. Neal put three large kettles on the stove and when the first was boiling he carried it to the pens. He made three trips before each drinking utensil was freed from ice and filled with hot water. The mink, always active at night, watched him curiously. They seemed so grateful for the unexpected drink that Neal warmed food and distributed extra rations. It was a good idea, he thought, in case Tom should need him, but he didn't want to finish that thought.

When the mink were cared for, he returned to the house, put out the light and departed. The night was cold and still. The tires cut through the crisp snow and threw frozen chunks against the fenders. Neal was surprised to discover he was not drowsy. He seemed to have drawn on a second store of energy. On either hand lay the dark countryside. Only once did he see a lighted window in a farmhouse, and he wondered if its people too were in trouble.

At last he drove down the main street of Lakewoods, turned a corner and stopped before the lighted hospital entrance. A nurse at the desk looked up inquiringly.

"I'm Tom Clark's partner," he said. "Neal Bartlett."

"I thought you'd gone home," she said.

"I did, but I had to come back. How is he?"

"He's fine," she said. "Sleeping. There's no reason to bring you racing into the hospital at this hour."

"But how's his head?" Neal demanded.

"You'll have to ask Dr. Morton in the morning," she said crisply, and then her tone softened. "But I'm sure he'll tell you there is no skull fracture. That's what worried you, isn't it?"

Neal nodded. He knew it was useless to try to see Tom. He looked at the empty waiting room and asked, "Can I sit in there until the doctor comes?"

"Haven't you any other place to go?"

"Only home. That's fifteen miles and I've driven it three times already."

Her eyes, which he'd thought a cold gray, had warm lights in them. "You can sleep in one of the treatment rooms," she said.

He followed her down the corridor to a cubbyhole which held a chair and a leather couch. She left him and closed the door. Neal took off his shoes and lay down. A few moments later he was aware of a blanket being tucked around him. The next thing he knew a hand touched his shoulder.

"I thought I told you not to worry," Dr. Morton said.

Neal sat up. Sunlight was coming in the window. "I must have gone to sleep," he said.

"Miss Graves left orders not to waken you until I came," the doctor said. "Your partner's doing fine. You can see him when you've had breakfast. He's expecting you."

Now that Neal's fears had been proved groundless, this friendliness left him the more embarrassed. "I'm sorry about all the trouble I made," he said, "but last night I got to thinking and—"

"All of us have done that at some time or other," Dr. Morton said. "Right now your greatest worry is how to keep your partner in the hospital. When I told him he might be here a month, he was ready to tear the place apart. He appears to think a mink farm can't be run without him."

"He's worried about breeding season."

"That's not as important as a concussion and a fractured shoulder. Can't you manage the breeding season?"

"Of course I can," Neal said.

"Try to convince him. Then he'll be an easier patient to have around," and Dr. Morton smiled. "But no matter how he feels about it, he's going to lie flat on his back until he's over this concussion."

"Tom won't make any trouble for you. Once he understands about things, he'll—"

"I'm not worried about that. Patched up plenty of those old fellows and the more cantankerous they are, the better I like it. That's the spirit which works for a doctor. A lumberjack can take more punishment and get well faster than any breed I know."

After breakfast Neal went to Tom's room. He paused in the doorway. The man lying in bed seemed a stranger. The familiar flaming hair was hidden by a helmet of white bandage and the face beneath was astonishingly subdued. Tom grinned sheepishly.

"If I had a partner like you've got," he said, "I wouldn't bother to come to see him, much less come in the middle of the night."

This sounded like the old Tom and Neal felt better. "Nothing wrong about my partner," he said.

"No? A fellow who gets cracked up just before breeding season? And gets knocked out by a greenhorn's hang-up? You couldn't say anything to me half as bad as I've been saying to myself. But I'll be home by breeding season if I have to climb out a window."

"Just try it!" Neal said. "Leave before the doctor lets you and I'll run you off the place with a gun. To hear you, a fellow'd think your partner is awful dumb. Maybe I am, but you don't have to rub it in."

"I didn't mean you couldn't do it, but it's a big job. It'll keep you going all day and every day for more'n a month."

"What right have you got to talk as though I was afraid of a little work?" Neal demanded. "Did I ever give you cause to say a thing like that?"

They grinned at each other. It seemed good to be able to joke again, and Neal knew Tom had accepted the inevitable when he said, "What bothers me the most is, I loaded this job on you by acting smart. Trying to show off as an ax-man! Getting a hang-up at my age!"

"At least you got it down," Neal said.

Tom managed a faint chuckle. Already he looked better. The argument about his stay in the hospital had been good for him, and he had faced the situation.

"Better write DM about me being crippled," he said. "Might be he'd want us to hire someone to get up the wood."

"I'll telephone," Neal said. "He'll want to know what the doctor thinks about you."

"Long distance!" Tom began his objection, and then he laughed. "That's the way DM would do it. But let him pay the charges. He wouldn't like it if you didn't."

A nurse entered and from her manner Neal recognized dismissal, but when he arose to go, Tom protested.

"We ain't even talked about the breeding," he said. "Good thing I listed all the matings. You'll find the paper behind the kitchen clock and I—"

"Tell him that later," the nurse said. "Young man, your partner has talked enough."

"Wait!" Tom exclaimed. "I got to tell him—"

"I'll come back," Neal said. "After I've had dinner and phoned to DM."

As he drove down the street, Neal thought of Tom's list of matings behind the kitchen clock. This was the plan he had been determined should be abandoned. He'd planned how he'd do it, planned what he'd say. He'd go further than he ever had. He'd get tough, tell Tom off. He wouldn't mean it, in a way, but it was so terribly important that he'd compel Tom's acceptance.

Now it was too late. You can't argue with a sick man. The nurse would throw him out, and if Tom suspected what was in Neal's mind he would make good his threat to climb out a window. That would be a fine way for Neal to keep his understanding with Dr. Morton that he'd convince Tom the farm could run without him.

Yet breeding season was upon them. Tom's injury had caused more damage than even Tom realized, for until this moment Neal had never accepted the possibility of losing a precious year. A year would make the difference between a great success and just grubbing along.

The old problem had settled back on Neal's shoulders, and with it the added weight of this last disaster. In his anxiety for Tom, Neal had nearly forgotten there was a breeding season. Now he could think of nothing else.

After he'd had dinner he called DM. As he waited in the booth he wondered if he should not have written or sent a telegram. DM was a busy man, but the pleasure in DM's greeting was reassuring. Neal told of the accident and concern sharpened DM's voice as he asked details. But when Neal repeated Dr. Morton's speech about the recuperative powers of a lumberjack, DM laughed.

"That's the sort of doctor Tom needs," he said. "Phone me often. I want to know how he's coming on."

They talked for a few moments and DM said he would send a box by express.

"Tell Tom that if he doesn't like flowers or fruit or candy, nurses do," he said. "The old porcupine'll need something to make him popular in a hospital."

There was a moment of silence and then DM asked, "How did he take being laid up in breeding season?"

"He's bothered most by thinking too much work's put on me," Neal said.

"On you?"

Neal hesitated. He thought he'd caught a significant inflection in DM's voice.

"Tom thinks so," he said. "Seems more worried about me than about himself."

"Tell him to forget it," DM said. "No one should worry about a fellow who has his chance to be a good partner."

Again there was a pause, and then DM said, "Be sure to call me about Tom. Good-bye." Then he added, "And the best luck in the world to you, Neal."

Neal held the receiver, but DM had hung up without telling what he meant. And yet had he told? Neal's thoughts flashed back to Christmas Day in the spruce swamp and he remembered the bleakness in DM's face when he spoke of his own former partner. "Every man has to figure things out for himself." Was that what DM had meant just now?

The second visit in Tom's room was brief. The patient was drowsy and Neal suspected the doctor had given him something to ease pain. Tom roused himself long enough to tell what bothered him. He remembered mink by pens and as individuals while Neal thought of them by numbers. If Neal would draw a plan of the pens, giving the serial number of each occupant, they could know they were talking about the same mink.

"You won't have time for much book work or visiting me," Tom said. "But this way, if you have trouble getting a mating, I can tell you how the female acted other seasons."

As Neal promised to draw the layout of the pens, Tom fell asleep.

Neal drove home in late afternoon, and his problem rode with him. It was dark when his work at the pens was finished and not until after supper could he draw the plan Tom had asked for and prepare his notebook for the breeding record.

He ruled off spaces for serial numbers, dates of matings and size of litters. He hoped the last column would be filled, though he knew blanks would appear. "Misses" were an unavoidable loss in fur farming, yet if hard work could earn high production, the mark of a successful fur man, Neal was determined to attain it.

But he realized all this preparation had been only a means to delay a decision which had faced him since he left the hospital. It must be his way or Tom's. The finest partner in the world! And the most pig-headed! Tom had said the partner with the savvy must sometimes take the lead, but that day in the canoe Tom's skill as a paddler was beyond question. This was different. Nothing had been proved about platinums and Tom, sick in the hospital, could not be told of the decision. Yet Tom's very helplessness demanded strength and courage in his partner. If they did not become great mutation breeders, Neal must always remember failure was due to his own timidity.

He crossed the room and opened the kitchen door. Night cloaked the path to the pens with their few rows of mink. It hid the rude icehouse, the tool shed with its hand grinder, stove and cooking kettles. But darkness unshackled Neal's imagination. He saw not these small beginnings of a fur farm but the great spreading enterprise it might become. If he had the courage! Tom had glimpsed the possibilities, but until the fullness of the vision came to Tom, Neal must hold tight to it for the sake of both.

Slowly Neal closed the door. He laid the two mating sheets, Tom's and his own, side by side on the table. Then he crossed the room, placed Tom's sheet behind the kitchen clock. His own way was the right way. To adopt any other would not be the act of a good partner. For the first time in weeks, Neal felt at peace.

8

In the weeks that followed Neal learned how much can be crowded into a single day. Breeding season came with a rush. Males and females made soft clucking noises and ran restlessly about their pens. Neal's decision to cross naturals with platinums brought an extra problem. The thirty females must be the cream of the stock and selection was a task in itself. He examined and re-examined and compared mink in catching boxes, and when he had made sure he had chosen the best he still had to make certain of their histories as good and prolific mothers. He could not afford misses and Tom's records of previous performance were kept in his head. Neal noted the serial numbers and location of the pens and asked Tom about them on his next visit.

"They're all good mothers," Tom said. "That's why I figured mating 'em to our best males. Didn't you find that sheet of paper behind the clock?"

"It didn't give the history or size of litters," Neal said.

Tom laughed. "Trying to make sure you'll have no misses, eh? You're bound to have 'em, and you'll have more your first breeding season than later when you get the hang of it."

Neal felt like a traitor, and he knew this was not the last time he would feel so. Chance remarks were bound to pop up. Neal was glad when Tom went on talking.

"Any fur farmer is nervous in his first breeding season," he said. "So much depends on that one month. If he don't manage matings right, he's out of an increase for a year—and out of fur farmin' too. But mating's natural to a mink, same as other critters. I suppose when mink just happened to meet along a stream in the spring, the female didn't have any trouble tellin' a male whether she wanted him to stay around or go on about his business. It's pen life that makes trouble. But if a rancher watches, he can tell if a real fight's starting. If you see mink bite each other on the head or at the root of the tail, it means trouble. Separate 'em before they hurt each other. Best way is to drive the male into the nest box, shut him in and get your female into the catching cage and back home to her pen. And don't let a cantankerous

female bother you too much either. Some are pretty fussy and it takes a lot of patience to carry them around to different pens day after day. But I've gotten some of my biggest litters from females I'd almost give up hope of breeding. You'll understand all this better after your first spring."

"I start trial matings tomorrow," Neal said.

"Once the season is on, you'll be too busy to visit a hospital," Tom said. "It's mostly hard work and you're making it a lot harder with serial numbers, cards, book figurin' and all those records."

Neal soon learned what Tom meant. He was at work in the pens at daylight, seldom finished before dark. Mink fed, bedding changed, pens cleaned, females carried to mate's pens, records kept, mink behavior watched—he needed to be everywhere on the farm at once. A few real fights started. He separated other pairs because he didn't dare risk the loss of a valuable animal, but gradually he became more confident. He was learning to be a real mink rancher, and the hard way.

He thought of short cuts and schemes to insure accuracy of records. The mink looked so alike Neal doubted if Tom had been really sure of their histories and he filled out duplicate cards for each female, one to remain on the pen, the other to go with her during mating. Thus the cards could be checked against each other, but the second set of cards meant a long evening's work and he was so drowsy he could scarcely write the numerals.

Long days in the cold and snow demanded all his energy, and scanty meals, the only kind he had time to prepare, left him hungry. He gave up all thought of study. When breeding season was over he could complete the courses, and he hoped to have them finished before whelping began in late April. Those weeks too would be busy.

His visits to the hospital were brief and many evenings he was too exhausted to face the thirty-mile drive. Tom understood, and asked few questions. Neal was glad. He told of the setbacks, difficulties with refractory females, and one evening he reported that a young male had been so cowed by a female bully he might be useless as a sire for the season.

"Only one?" Tom asked. "You've been lucky, or else smart. With all the young males you had this year, I'd have expected more."

Tom was becoming more reconciled to a hospital existence. He was a pet of the nurses and this was not because of the weekly gift baskets from Chicago. Tom's unique sense of humor made his room a meeting place and

he attributed his cheerfulness to a new way of making money he'd discovered.

"DM wrote me the insurance company was paying for all this," he told Neal. "I'm even collecting wages for laying in bed. Seems DM paid premiums since I first started working for him. Now's my chance to get even."

This was a relief to Neal. He had worried about hospital and doctor bills in a year when he was cutting the income by half. Tom wouldn't mind having to do without, but he would hate to be in debt. He was like Neal's mother, didn't want to "be beholden to anybody." Neal had heard that phrase since he could remember and now it seemed only one of the basic and expected virtues.

Early in April Tom began to plan on going home. "Doc ain't said so yet," he said, "but a month was what him and me agreed on."

When Neal arrived the next evening, Dr. Morton stopped him in the hall. "Everything getting on all right at the fur farm?" he asked.

"Sure," Neal said.

"Tell Tom that tonight. I'm keeping him another week."

"Is he worse?"

"No, the concussion cleared up nicely. You notice I've let him sit up lately. But the shoulder needs more time. I know those fellows. Let him go home and no one could keep him from overdoing."

"You're not trying to fool me about how he is?" Neal demanded.

"You're not the sort I'd lie to," the doctor said. "I want Tom's ribs and shoulder to be past even his ability to tear things loose. I'll break the news to Tom in the morning."

That evening Neal's report on the fur farm was so rosy it appeared things went on even better when Tom wasn't around. Neal feared he had made the report so strong Tom might think he didn't want him to come home. The next evening Neal drove to the hospital although it was so late visiting hours were almost over.

"Fine partner you are!" Tom jeered. "Lying about how little work there was until I thought maybe you didn't think it took two men to run the place. And all so Doc could spring that extra week on me. It'd have served you right had I found my pants and left by the window."

Neal laughed. No one could put anything over on Tom Clark, but he was relieved that Tom would not return until the breeding season was past. In one more week the last of Neal's thirty females would have had been mated. He'd do it anyway, but it would be easier if he didn't have to talk about it. He'd tell Tom as soon as he could after he left the hospital, but a completed project had finality. And that too was terrifying, in a way. Neal planned his speech, rehearsed it during his solitary meals and as he worked at the pens. It was the last thing he thought of at night.

One morning in mid-April they drove home. Tom was in fine spirits. The sun had warmth. The snow was almost gone from the fields and beside the roads.

"Seems like I can smell spring," Tom said.

Neal told of the farm. There had been no illness. Every female had been mated, and now that breeding season was over he had begun a thorough housecleaning. Nest boxes were being cleaned and disinfected.

"Don't want to disturb the mothers just before whelping time," he said.

Tom smiled in approval. "You don't have to tell me you've not had time for a decent meal since I went to the hospital," he said. "But now I'm home I can at least do some cooking. And I want to read all the records you been keeping. Bet you've got a bookful."

"Almost," Neal said. "Things I might forget about a mink the next year."

"Just like I did," Tom said. "I used to lay there and wish I'd had the sense to keep records. They'd have helped you. Think I don't know how lucky I was in finding a real partner?" He stopped, and then the words came with a rush. "Funny, when I first heard you was coming I sort of hoped it would turn out this way, but it wasn't until I showed you the platinums I knew I'd got myself a mink man."

"You mean you got someone who wanted to be a mink man," Neal said.

It was strange how much easier it was for them to say such things to each other since the separation. In Tom the dam of weeks of silence had broken.

"Never expected to find anyone who'd feel as I did about that color," he said, "and then I knew you did. Could see it just looking at you. Your dad would 'a' felt the same way. When I first had 'em, and thought maybe I was crazy to try to raise 'em, I used to miss him more'n I had for years. Funny I

never said this to you, but lying in the hospital I wished I had. Made up my mind to do it."

Neal concentrated his attention on a stretch of mud in the road. There were a lot of things he'd never said, and now it was too late to say them, especially to a partner who was going to hear the news Tom must hear.

"How about my luck?" he said. "I was only a cocksure kid with a crazy western bug. Then you showed me a mutation that would drive any mink man crazy, and took me in as a partner. I had no right to expect anything like that. A partnership with a man"—he paused—"well, a man I like and admire like I would have liked my dad. That's something," he went on almost fiercely, "that I ought to have said a long time ago, too."

He gripped the wheel. In another minute they'd be crying on each other's shoulders. Funny how saying things you really felt always sounded sort of sappy. But Tom's answer made it seem right.

"Thank you, lad," he said. "How'd the platinums go? I didn't like to ask."

"Fine," Neal said.

"Didn't think you'd run into any trouble. Had more males than we really needed. It was better to be on the safe side and maybe next year we'll get a lot of females to build up the herd."

"Maybe," Neal said, and suddenly he knew he'd tell Tom that afternoon. He couldn't take much more of this.

There was time before dinner for a walk through the pens. Tom moved slowly but his smile told how glad he was to be home. He noticed everything and stopped before the row of Neal's thirty females.

"Moved 'em about a bit," he said.

"Yes," Neal said, his throat dry.

"Good idea," Tom said. "Put the best breeders by theirselves." He chuckled. "And you picked the best. Not a tinge of red in any of 'em."

They returned to the house. Neal put dinner on the table. He had been nervous about making a venison meat pie. Tom had always done the major cooking and he had been eating fancy meals in the hospital. But Tom sighed with content as he took his accustomed place.

"Ain't this grand?" he said. "Nothing beats home cooking and at your own table."

When the meal was over Tom said almost sheepishly that he had promised to rest in the afternoon.

"But Doc would understand if I stayed up long enough to read the mating sheets," he said. "First time anyone has ever kept 'em proper on this farm."

Neal laid the records before Tom and walked around the table to face him.

"I bred those thirty best female standards to platinums," he said in a flat voice. "Maybe you think it wasn't square, only—it was the thing I had to do."

It was not the speech he had rehearsed. Tom did not answer or look up but began to read the records. As Neal washed the dishes he looked at Tom occasionally but got no idea of what he was thinking. After a long time Tom stood up.

"I got to lay down an hour like I promised Doc," he said.

Neal listened until he heard Tom's bed creak. Then he went out to clean nest boxes. He worked hard and furiously. Perhaps he hadn't told Tom the way he should, but there wasn't anything else for a partner to say. He went to the tool shed for an auger to bore extra holes in a nest box and saw Tom had built up the fire. He wouldn't want Tom to think he was skulking outdoors, afraid to face him, so he picked up an armful of wood and went to the kitchen. Tom was making a pot of tea.

"Lad," he said. "Sometimes your dad was right and sometimes he was wrong, dead wrong. Same thing went for me. But we never thought of being anything but partners." He carried the teapot to the table and set out two cups. "Besides," he said, "there's no use in arguing about something that'll take more than a year to prove."

9

SPRING had come, and with the suddenness of northern springs. Almost overnight delicate green lined the bare branches of birch and poplar. Snow was gone from the levels and everywhere could be heard the trickle of rivulets as snowbanks on northern hillsides melted. Tom thought they could put in an early garden.

"But we won't get brash," he said. "I've learned better than to let a May snowstorm nip young plants."

A May snow might leave only a faint frosting on the green of the forest, or it might blanket the countryside. People and plants waited, but were conscious of the leashed surge of an impatient summer.

The lull of weeks following the breeding season, in which fur farmers recharge their energy in preparation for the arrival of the young, had not been a lull for Neal. Tom refused the role of invalid and took chances with his shoulder. Neal's protests were ineffective and he tried to finish the heavier jobs before Tom could plunge into them. But at last the fur farm was in order. Expectant mothers need not be disturbed until after whelping. Fresh bedding was scattered on the runways and the mink carried it into the nest boxes. Tom said this was a good sign females were preparing a cozy home for a coming brood.

"And it looks as though every female was getting ready for a litter," he said.

Neal hoped this might be true but he knew he must expect some misses. He watched the females which were to bear hybrids and all were zealous bedding carriers. Perhaps he would be lucky. Thirty litters would give them a fine backlog of the platinum strain. Tom never glanced at that row of pens, nor did he again mention the cross breeding except by indirection. But Neal knew it was on his mind the night he stopped at the kitchen table where Neal was still at work. For weeks Neal had studied until midnight.

"I wouldn't want anything I said to drive you to speed up this schooling," Tom said. "What's your rush?"

"Want to get the job behind me before whelping season," Neal said. "I figure I can do it."

"Why? We ain't going to hand-raise the kits. Give a mink mother plenty of food and water, keep her nest box dry, and she does a better job than we could."

"But we have to be free to work at DM's place."

"Opening his house ain't such a job."

"There's plenty to do," Neal said. "It costs a lot to bring a mechanic from town and DM said he'd let me have a try. He's promised to send a couple of books on motors."

"When did he tell you this?"

"Over the phone when you were in the hospital."

"Oh!" and Tom seemed relieved. "You fixed that up before I came home."

"Why shouldn't I?" Neal demanded. "This year we'll send only half as many pelts to market and you got twenty-four dollars for extra-dark last winter. Cross breeding has cost us real money, and we'll need anything we can earn."

"You may be right there, lad, but power and refrigerating plants are tricky. I never put a wrench on 'em less I had a mechanic alongside."

"I'll begin work early. Then there'll still be time to get in an expert."

"DM tell you when they were coming?"

"No."

"That's funny. Generally he starts plannin' six months ahead." The next afternoon Tom was even more bewildered when he brought a telegram from the mailbox.

"Listen to this!" he said. "'Have a pot of beans and a bed ready for me Wednesday. Will arrive before dark.' What do you make of that?"

"Probably he's driving," Neal said.

"He never come by car before."

The next afternoon a pot of beans was in the oven and Neal's bedroom was clean and ready. At six o'clock there was no guest and Tom said he had never known DM to fail to arrive on schedule. At six-thirty a truck stopped

outside and DM shouted. He sat beside the driver. Behind the truck was a horse trailer, and over the shield a horse peered at them.

"What in—?" Tom began.

"Didn't expect to take so long," DM said. "I've promised Bill a baked bean supper. Got a place to put this boy in the trailer?"

"Supper's ready and waiting," Tom said. "I'll put the horse in the old stable. Ain't in good shape, but it'll do for a night. Who's the horse belong to?"

"To me," DM said. "His name is Murphy. And he's a fine worker. Oats, a bale of hay and a harness are in the truck. He's ready to start plowing in the morning."

"Plowing what?"

"Your garden, or mine—it doesn't make any difference. Murphy expects to work out his board money."

At the supper table, DM could talk of nothing but the horse. "Haven't bought one since my dad used to take me shopping when the farm needed a new team," he said. "He knew horses."

"You ain't forgot anything he ever learned you," Bill said. No one knew the truck driver's last name and no one seemed to think it important. He turned to Tom. "Picked the best horse soon's he laid eyes on him," he said, "and it wasn't the one we intended to sell him."

DM glowed at this praise. Neal marveled that any man who could afford a herd of horses should be so jubilant over a single purchase. DM was as pleased as though he had wanted a horse for years and had been too poor to buy one. That was one of the finest things about DM. Everything had meaning for him, big things and little things. It was the way it should be, no matter how much money a man had.

When supper was eaten, Bill departed and the others went to see that Murphy was comfortable for the night. Tom examined the old stable and said a few days' work would put it in shape. DM planned Murphy's future. He said he would buy a sleigh so there'd be no danger of Tom being snowed in. Tom shouldn't have gone through a winter without one. Murphy could more than earn his keep in plowing, building new roads and hauling wood.

"We have to have a horse for skidding building timber," DM finished.

"Building timber?" Tom repeated. "What for?"

"The new guesthouse. We can manage this summer. Peggy and Mrs. Meadows will be here only a month and I'll not be around much. But later we'll need room for the overflow and it should be a place where Peggy feels free to do as she pleases."

When they returned to the house DM showed the rough plans he had drawn. Tom looked at the dimensions and whistled.

"That'll take almost as much timber as your place," he said.

DM nodded. "Have either of you any ideas about a guesthouse?" he asked. "Neal, what do you think it ought to have?"

"A big room where you can play records without bothering anybody," Neal said instantly. "Or dance maybe, or sit around a fire and talk."

"I'd thought of a room about thirty by forty, with a lot of windows and a fireplace," DM said. "What else?"

"And you'd want to be able to cook something without bothering Sang."

"We could build a kitchen at the rear," DM said. "What next?"

"Plenty of places to sleep," Neal said. "I mean for a gang."

DM sketched in two long wings. "With two big bathrooms," he said. "Bunks for the fellows, but I imagine the girls' quarters should be fancier. We'll ask Peggy about them." He rolled up the plans. "Anyhow, this is something to show the architect."

Everyone was ready for bed. DM started for the stairway, stopped. "Thanks, Neal, for the ideas about the house," he said. "I wanted to be sure I was on the right track when I showed the plan to Peggy."

"You don't even know she'll like it up here," Tom said.

"I'm as sure as I ever allow myself to be sure of anything," DM said. "She fits the country," and then he laughed, "or perhaps you two will think it's the other way around. Peggy's the kind who seems to set the pattern. But even if she doesn't like this country, I'll be here and I'll need a guesthouse. You can pick out good building logs, but Tom's not to touch an ax until his shoulder's healed."

They were awake early. DM had to leave on the afternoon train and they spent the morning at the Mead place planning the spring work. Canoes must be painted, float put in the water, runabout overhauled, house cleaned, power plant checked and a big garden planted.

"When you folks coming?" Tom asked.

"Peggy and Mrs. Meadows will drive up about the middle of June," DM said. "Sang comes with them. I'll be here when I can get away."

"We'll have to keep moving to be ready," Tom said. "May and June are busy months on a fur farm."

"Can you take care of everything?" DM asked.

"Of course we can," Neal said.

"Keep account of your time, and remember, mechanics don't work for ordinary wages. Want separate checks?"

"Tom handles the money for the partnership," Neal said.

"While the girls are here, the firm draws a regular salary. They'll call on you for all sorts of jobs."

"That's just neighboring like always," Tom protested.

"It will be more than that," DM said firmly. "They'll have you over if a light bulb flickers. And I'll want to know you're keeping an eye on them, especially in the runabout. Peggy doesn't give weather the proper respect. One of the things she's yet to learn."

Neal tried to fit this fact with the others. At times he thought he'd like Peggy, at others he was not sure. But a niece of DM's would have to be looked after. He and Tom owed more than that to DM, no matter what sort of brat she was.

After the noon dinner there was time for only a short visit to the pens. An air of quiet, almost of waiting, pervaded the fenced enclosure. DM laughed.

"Bet you fellows would give a lot to know what those females know," he said. "I think they look smug."

"We'll know soon," Tom said. "Litters are due any day now."

They walked down the aisle between the rows. DM read the cards and nodded as Neal explained the abbreviations. When they came to the thirty females Neal had cross bred, DM studied a card for a moment.

"What's P.M. mean?" he asked.

"Them's the mates of the thirty standard females Neal crossed up with platinums," Tom replied.

"To get half bloods?" DM asked.

"Some might call 'em that," Tom said. "But I wouldn't take a guess on what we'll get."

A silence followed. DM looked from one to the other. Neal flushed but said nothing. After all, DM had known what he was stepping into, and Tom wouldn't mind telling him how he felt about hybrids. At last DM looked directly at Tom.

"I take it the cross breeding is a lone wolf affair," he said.

"It's nothing of the sort!" Tom exclaimed. "Any partner's got a right to make mistakes."

The day after DM's departure, three females remained secluded, did not even emerge to eat supper, but twenty-four hours later they appeared, eager for food and water. From inside the nest boxes came a sound like that of twittering birds.

"Three litters!" and Tom's voice was squeaky with excitement. "By the noise, I'd guess they're big ones!"

It seemed to make no difference to him that two of the litters were hybrids. Increase on the fur farm had begun!

Neal entered the date of arrival on the record, and this was only the first of many exciting days. Each morning whimpering could be heard in more nest boxes. In some, however, although the females had disappeared for hours, there was no sound.

"But we can't find out what's happened," Tom said. "Should there be kits and we scared her, she's liable to kill them."

In the first week, four mothers laid limp babies on the runways to their nests.

"Dead kits," Tom said. "Got to expect that."

"Maybe they're not dead," Neal said, and he picked up a kit and warmed it in his hands. It stirred feebly. "Look! This one's alive yet! We might save them."

Tom was skeptical as Neal carried the kits to the house, wrapped them in warm cloths and drove to town for hot water bags. Later he chuckled as Neal played nurse, but two of the four lived and greedily drank warm milk from a medicine dropper.

"If these turn out to be extra-dark and bring twenty-five dollars next fall, that trip to town will pay off," Neal said.

"You're like your dad," Tom said. "He'd spend money like a drunken jack at the end of a drive, and he'd work to save a dime."

When all the litters were whelped, Tom said it was safe to take a first rough census if they were careful not to disturb the families by too thorough a search. Neal entered the size of the litters on cards while Tom examined the nests. Six in one box. Four in another. Five in a third. None in the fourth. It was the first miss. Neal was crestfallen.

"Bound to have misses," Tom said. "And there's no telling whether she didn't have kits or had 'em and destroyed 'em."

Neal drew a large zero on the female's card. "There's your record," he told her. "And for that you're apt to be a pelt next fall."

The mink finished her meal cheerfully. She neither knew her crime nor was aware of her possible fate. When they'd inspected every nest, Neal added the figures.

"Three misses in fourteen platinums, six in the thirty I cross bred for half bloods, and seven in the dark standard," he said. "That's a total of sixteen mink that gave no increase. I was sure I'd done better."

"What did you expect?" Tom demanded. "I'll bet the increase will average more than three-and-a-half kits a female. Any rancher would be proud of such a record, and it might run higher. We're bound to find kits we've missed when we make a real search. Won't be safe to do that until the young's eyes are open."

"Suppose you've missed many?" Neal asked.

"Might have," Tom admitted, "but the kits we find may only keep us even. We're sure to lose a few in the meantime. Kits born don't mean mink raised."

Tom knew the hazards—pneumonia from damp and cold, anemia among nursing mothers, kidney stones from no cause veterinarians had yet discovered, food poisoning which had wiped out whole herds, and, more feared than anything, distemper. This could run like a prairie fire through a densely populated mink farm. Also large litters could prove a handicap, for too many nursing kits put a strain on one small mother and mink succumb to starvation very quickly.

Tom had learned to meet some of these hazards, but he could only hope to be spared distemper as no remedy for this disease had been found. Food poisoning could be avoided by zeal. Questionable food was never used, meat and fish were kept frozen, cooking kettles scalded, and uneaten food cleaned from the feed pans. Pneumonia was averted in some measure by supplying fresh bed material to the mothers, and even careless mink housekeepers mended their ways when they had young. In addition to all these precautions a constant guard was maintained against all minor illness. Neal and Tom watched the mink, especially as they climbed the wire netting. If a female seemed wasted through the loins, or her feet were not pink, her mouth red or her fur lacked a healthy bloom, she was sick and was immediately relieved from maternal duties and given a special diet. Her appetite was tempted with liver, a warm rabbit or a freshly killed bird. Nor was illness the only cause for concern. Constant crying in the nest might indicate hunger and if, on investigation, the kits were found to be puny and lying scattered about the nest instead of dozing in a contented compact group, the food was increased. In case of too large a family, a few kits were given to mothers which did not have so many. These foundlings were laid on the runways to nest boxes.

"That's all we can do about it," Tom said. "If she takes the kit in, it's adopted. If she don't, we have to hunt another home. Mink make up their own minds."

But the matter was always decided promptly. In a few minutes the mink would peer out the entrance and either seize the strangeling by the nape of the neck and whisk it into the nest box or she would retire, leaving the kit ignored.

But eventually the nursery was on a going basis and when, after a month, the kits opened their eyes, the more ambitious mothers began to drag their broods into the sunshine for naps. All the mothers carried food in their mouths to the babies to supplement their own milk, though the more robust kits staggered out and helped themselves. Soon drinking dishes were emptied as though by suction. Water was carried to the pens three times a day.

"We've come through in fine shape," Tom said. "It's time to find out just how we stand on increase."

The average was not quite four kits to a female. Neal was disappointed, Tom elated.

"Do that well every year and we stay in mink farming," he said. "When I was laying there in the hospital I never figured we'd come out anywhere near so good this spring."

That was like Tom. He leaned backwards trying to square his disapproval of the half bloods. On that one point, however, he made no pretense of concealing his real opinion, and Neal formed the habit of never speaking of them. For Tom's sake, he was almost sorry the day Peter Reese arrived on his long-promised visit. Almost the first thing Peter asked was about the hybrid kits. The three went to the pens to inspect them.

"What d'you think they'll look like?" Tom asked.

"They'll probably be lighter than your dark mink," Peter said, "but it's not important what they look like. You need them for their breeding value."

Tom shrugged and walked away.

"So Tom doesn't yet believe in hybrids," Peter said.

Neal did not answer.

"He will a year from now," Peter said. "Then he'll be like all other mutation breeders. Once the light breaks on recessives, they can't talk anything else."

"I hope so," Neal said soberly. He didn't want to discuss the matter, not even with Peter. What went on between partners was their own affair, but, for fear Peter had sensed his thoughts, he added quickly, "It's grand to have you here. There've been a lot of things I've wanted to talk over."

Peter spent the night, and at Tom's insistence.

"We don't often get a chance to hear news of other fur farms," he said. "How are the platinums coming?"

"Ranchers are practically certain they'll be able to send a big crop to market two years from next winter."

"Good pelts?" Tom asked.

"They're improving but, as you know, I'm not a fur grader."

"Do they look like ours?"

"I can't carry a shade in my mind as Norman Whitlock can but I think he's right about yours being of an unusual blue and clarity of color. You have beautiful mink, Tom."

"We're going to keep 'em that way," Tom said. "Once you've got what you went after, there's no sense in spoiling it to try out a new scheme."

Peter smiled, but in so friendly a fashion Tom could not feel hurt, and Neal was glad Peter had not taken up the challenge. There was plenty for the three to talk about without arguing the value of half bloods, and he needed no special pleader with Tom. They were partners. Later Tom told of Neal's high school diploma, which had arrived a few days earlier. He did not hide his pride and Peter knew how much hard work had gone into earning it.

"Going on to the university?" Peter asked.

"He ought to," Tom said. "He's got almost a thousand dollars towards an education."

"I'll have a lot more than that when we get our platinums on the market," Neal said. "And I'll know what I want to study. Plenty to learn around here yet."

"The mutation breeders are talking of an organization," Peter said. "You fellows ought to join."

"Think they'd want us?" Neal asked.

"Why not? Tom is one of the early pioneers in platinums. They'd be glad to have his opinions."

Tom snorted. "Opinions don't put good fur on mink!" he said. "And there's no sense talkin' about a thing till you've done it."

During the evening the talk wandered from care and diseases of fur bearers to gossip about fur ranches. Peter told of two new colors which had appeared, a frosted sable mink and a blond which ranged from pale to chocolate. Only a handful of each existed, but the ranchers who owned them were trying to breed more.

"Funny how new colors are cropping up," Tom said.

"They're not new," Peter said. "Almost fifty years ago a naturalist listed all of them, but now fur farmers have recognized their value."

"Like I did with that platinum pair," Tom said. "Man! Was I excited when I saw 'em!"

"The excitements of mink farming have only begun," Peter said.

At ten o'clock Tom no longer pretended to stay awake. Neal and Peter went upstairs, where Neal had put an extra camp cot in his room. They

talked in the darkness. During the past winter, Neal had not been aware of missing young people, but now it was tremendously exciting to find the enthusiasm of youth, a keen mind and mental curiosity in another who shared his own absorption.

"Fur farming has only come of age," Peter said.

Neal sat up in bed. "And look where we can be in another ten years!" he exclaimed. "We can do for fur bearers what has been done for other farm stock. And won't that be exciting! We can grow fur of any color or any texture. Trappers had to take pelts as they came."

In the morning Peter went to the Mead place with Tom and Neal. They wanted him to see it. He stood in the living room and looked about him. It was moments before he spoke.

"The man who planned this house is a rare person," he said. "I'd like to know him."

"DM's of bigger caliber than most folks," Tom said. "Why don't you come back next month and meet him?"

"That's one more reason for another visit," Peter said. "And I didn't need it."

He departed in midmorning. Tom and Neal waved as he drove around the turn.

"Nice fellow," Tom said. "Maybe a little crazy, but for a college professor, he's quite a man."

Neal let it go at that. Tom was still unconvinced about half bloods, as he showed a few days later when he called Neal's attention to an article in the fur breeders' magazine.

"Look!" he said. "This fellow who's raising platinums says they're working out the rules for breeding, and when they learn 'em they'll tell other farmers."

"That's only fur ranchers' genetics," Neal said.

"And who'd know more than they do?" Tom demanded. "Ain't they the ones who are handling the mink? If they don't know, who does?"

"Maybe we'll know a year from now." Neal grinned.

"We will, all right—one way or the other," Tom said.

Through late May and early June every hour they could spare from the fur farm was spent in preparation for the visitors. Murphy's plowing proved as time-saving as DM had said it would, but a day's work was required to repair the fence of Murphy's pasture. However, Tom thoroughly approved of Murphy.

"We always used to have a horse around," he said.

Neal worked on motors as long as daylight lasted, and fortunately June days were long. The marine engine in the runabout needed tuning up and the neglected hull demanded scraping and revarnishing. The light plant in the house required a complete overhaul.

"Seems like you got yourself a job, lad," Tom said. "How's it coming?"

"Everything will hum by the time they get here," Neal said. "Ten days ago I wouldn't have dared to claim that."

"I knew some bugs had you puzzled," Tom said. "But nobody'll be more tickled than DM when he hears you've beat 'em."

David Mead heard the news sooner than they expected. One morning a crew of men drove up in a truck loaded with poles and coils of wire.

"We're to put in a telephone at Mead's house," one said. "It's to be installed by the fifteenth."

"If he said the fifteenth, he meant it," Tom said.

"We'll string on trees where we can, and use poles where we have to," the man said.

Three days later the wires were up and the men appeared at Tom's door.

"Where do you want the telephone?" one asked.

"You've made a mistake," Tom said. "It's to go in Mead's house."

"Order says both houses."

Tom waved them to the kitchen, but he grumbled to Neal. "DM ought to know we'll never use it. No sense in his spending all that money."

But the next evening the phone rang. Tom rushed to answer and Neal knew he was talking to DM for Tom's voice was almost loud enough to carry to Chicago. He was grinning when he hung up the receiver.

"DM needed two subscribers to get the phone," he said. "Asked how things were going and when I told him the boat and power plant was working slick as frog's hair he said to tell you he always knew he'd hired

himself a good mechanic. The girls will be here the afternoon of the fifteenth."

And at precisely three o'clock on that day, Peggy Ware's car halted at the door. Her convertible was low and its perfection gave Neal a pang of envy. Tom greeted the two women and shook hands with Sang. Peggy smiled at Neal. Her red gold hair and gray green eyes were somehow what he had expected, but her voice reminded him of DM.

"Hello, Neal!" she cried. "This is Mrs. Meadows. And Sang, of course, you know."

As he shook hands, Neal noticed Mrs. Meadow's mouth had a humorous quirk and her eyes looked as though nothing could surprise her. Sang grinned from beside a heap of luggage in the rear seat.

"House is ready," Tom said. "Door's unlocked. Even ice cubes in the refrigerator. We'll help you settle in."

"Good!" Peggy said.

She took a quick glance around, slipped into reverse, made a turn and pulled out in front of the two men. "See you at the house," she said.

The car leaped ahead, the rear tires spewing a hail of pebbles.

"It's a crime, doing that to a car like hers," Neal said.

"She didn't waste any motions turning around," Tom said with admiration.

"Oh, she can handle a car all right," Neal granted. "But that cowboy getaway!"

When they reached the Mead house, Sang was carrying in luggage. Neal heard Peggy's voice from a wing.

"Of course the larger one is yours, Janet. You'll be in your room more than I will!" She came out and saw the men. "Everything is wonderful!" she cried. "We're so excited!" The phone rang. "That's for me. Hello, DM. I called the instant we arrived. The house is just as marvelous as we knew it would be. Yes, Tom and Neal are here now. They even had ice cubes ready. But Janet and I are very mad at you to think you never asked us here before. Why did you keep this place to yourself so long! You've never been stingy with anything before." They talked for a few minutes. "Yes, I'll tell Tom," Peggy finished. "Don't worry, DM. Janet and I will be careful."

She turned to Tom. “DM says he can’t get here for ten days. And we’re to ask you about the weather before we take long trips on the lake. To hear him, you’d think Lake Atikwa was the Atlantic Ocean.”

“It can get dirtier for its size,” Tom said. “But Neal or I’ll be around. Neal will show you about the runabout. I couldn’t work one of those things if I had to.”

“Has it any special failings?” Peggy asked.

“None the last time I had it out,” Neal said. He was about to add he’d show her how to operate it, but she was speaking.

“Then we’ll be all right,” she said. “Is it in the water?”

“Take only a minute to put it in,” Tom said.

“Would you?” Peggy asked. “We might want to take a little run this evening.”

“There’s a rock or two you ought to know about,” Tom said. “Neal wouldn’t mind coming over after supper and showing you the lay of the lake.”

“Of course we must learn that.” Peggy nodded. “But if we go out this evening it will be only for a short turn around the bay.”

“That’d be safe enough,” Tom said. “We’ll put the boat in water.”

As they moored the squat varnished craft to the float, Neal looked at it with affection. He had spent many hours tuning up the three-year-old motor and Tom had refused even to ride in it. Tom liked canoes and disdain showed in his manner as he tied the mooring lines.

“Before we go home we ought to show Sang the garden,” he said. “We could pick something fresh for their supper.”

Sang’s eyes glowed when he saw the beds of vegetables. Tom began to pull young carrots but Sang leaped between him and the plants. Carefully he selected those which grew thickest.

“Thin ’um! Thin ’um!” he wailed. “Let lest glow big. I do it. I do it. You no do.”

“Guess he means he’s going to run the garden,” Tom said to Neal.

Sang nodded. He looked over the neat rows and in his eyes was the joy of complete possession.

“Good eat,” he said. “I do ’um. DM he like ’um. Miss Peggy like ’um.”

Tom and Neal returned to the house and when they had helped Peggy unpack a phonograph, the women walked to the truck with them.

"Anything you folks need, just let us know," Tom said. "If we're not around, send Sang to get us."

"Or telephone," Peggy said. "But I can't imagine what we could need. You and DM have thought of everything."

"We'll try not to be a nuisance," Mrs. Meadows said. "But do come and see us often. We'll need the reassurance of your visits."

No woman ever appeared less in need of reassurance, Neal thought, but it was nice of her to put it that way. As they drove home he said, "I liked that Mrs. Meadows."

"She's all right," Tom said. "So's the girl. A bit cocky, but she's like DM in a lot of ways. I'd been afraid she might be spoiled, a good looking girl with plenty of money. But she don't seem so a bit."

Neal did not answer. He was still trying to decide just what he thought of Peggy. She was good looking. There could be no question about that, and smooth too. She had Tom eating out of her hand. He'd almost purred while she told him how wonderful the house was and how he must watch the weather for her. But she looked as if she would do as she pleased about the weather or anything else. She didn't know and she didn't care how hard they'd worked getting things ready for them. And after the time spent getting the runabout in shape, she might at least have gone down to take a look at the boat. She'd probably have it ruined before the month was over.

"Didn't you think she was all right, lad?" Tom asked.

"She's fine," Neal said. "But I wouldn't be too sure she isn't spoiled."

10

THE next morning promised to be one of those June days, clear and joyous, in which the north excels, with grass and buds thrusting toward the sun.

"Glad the folks'll know what this country can do when it sets its mind to it," Tom said as he and Neal walked to the pens.

They gave the mink their regular six-thirty breakfast. This had to be served promptly for hungry mink are quarrelsome, and once blood flows, the vanquished may be eaten. There is nothing gentle about their home life. Afterwards Neal scalded the kettles, put the shed in order and began making pens. Weaning time was almost upon them, when kits must be separated from mothers and from each other. A year's increase demanded housing.

"We ought to see how the folks are getting on," Tom said, and when Neal did not reply, he added, "Seems only neighborly, and DM probably expects it."

"No need for both to go," Neal said.

"No, only you ain't had much sociability and I thought you'd do the neighboring." Tom hesitated, and Neal knew what he was thinking, but just because Peggy and he were about the same age didn't mean they had a lot to say to each other. Tom waited, and then said, "I'll run over for a minute. Tell 'em we'll both come in the evening."

Neal heard the truck leave and felt a bit uncomfortable. It wouldn't have hurt him to knock off long enough to show Peggy the lake, but she hadn't wanted advice from him. She'd made that plain enough. Tom could tell her where the rocks were or they could take a spin that evening. Neal had almost completed a pen when Tom returned.

"You should 'a' been the one to go," he said. "Peggy thinks she's jammed the rudder of that boat."

Neal threw down the hammer. "I thought she knew all about a boat!" he exclaimed. "It's what she said! And she wouldn't have time for more than a turn around the bay! Did you tell her we were building pens?"

"She felt bad enough without me making her feel worse. I told her you'd fix it. I can build pens, but I can't do nothing about a rudder."

As Neal drove to the Mead place he wondered how long the job would take him, but even if he lost a day he had no right to complain. DM had warned them they'd be called on often. Still this needn't have happened, and the first evening. At the boathouse he slid the cradle into the water and hauled out the runabout with the power winch. While he was examining the rudder, Peggy arrived. She seemed even slimmer and more efficient in slacks and sweater than in a dress. He saw too that sunlight did something wonderful to red gold hair.

"I thought I heard you," she said. "Is it very bad?"

"The skeg is bent and the rudder post was knocked off the pintle."

"Which means?"

"I can fix it, if that's what you're asking," and then he tried to sound more amiable. "Good thing you didn't jam the propeller and really put the boat out of commission. Where'd it happen?"

"Out in the middle, more than a mile from here."

He was startled. "How'd you get in?" he asked.

"I steered with a paddle. Janet ran the motor slow, shut it off just before we reached the float."

"Not many would have thought of trying that!" he exclaimed, so impressed he forgot to be anything but natural.

"I'm glad I managed to do something you approve of."

Neal flushed and slid beneath the craft to loosen the bolts holding the skeg. They were back right where they'd started, but if she expected him to think cracking up a rudder was a bright trick, she'd be disappointed. Peggy watched him work. Someone would have to say something soon.

"You must have hit that rock off the second point," he said.

"Which I wouldn't have if I'd been a good girl and taken a first lesson."

Neal emerged to glare up at her. He wondered if she knew how mad she made him. "I didn't say that!" he said furiously.

"You meant it," Peggy said. "And it's true. And I got slapped down by a rock. You ought to be pleased instead of lying there scowling at me."

Neal scowled the harder. He might have known she'd find some way of putting him in the wrong. There ought to be something a fellow could say which she couldn't twist and turn. He had not yet decided what it could be when he heard a voice say, "Good morning."

Mrs. Meadows was wearing slacks and a soft blue coat and seemed years younger. Neal stood up.

"I didn't expect you'd speak to us," she said. "We don't deserve it, and we're very much ashamed."

"I've already abased myself, Janet," Peggy said. "You'd have been proud of my humility."

"Or astonished," Mrs. Meadows added. "Was she really humble, Neal?"

"No need to be," he said. "She couldn't see the rock."

"I hope Peggy told you it was my fault. We wouldn't have been out so far if I hadn't wanted to look down the lake. Then, coming back, I dropped my scarf. No woman should wear things that flutter. Peggy went astern fast to pick it up, couldn't see where she was going, and we hit the rock."

So Peggy hadn't told about the scarf, and most girls would. Suddenly everything seemed more understandable and Neal smiled. But Peggy had turned to Mrs. Meadows.

"We're only in Neal's way, talking, when he has a big job," she said.

"Not so big," he said. "I'll have the boat in the water this afternoon."

"I'll tell Sang you'll be here for lunch," Mrs. Meadows said.

Neal watched them go up the path and considered begging off from lunch. He could tell them Tom expected him, but decided not to. They might think he was mad. He removed the skeg, put it in a vise, straightened it, and was bolting it in place when Sang came to the boathouse.

"You eat now," he said. "Fix 'um bye 'n' bye."

Neal felt grimy when he joined the two women. Soap and hot water had improved his hands but lying on his back beneath the boat had not helped his shirt. Peggy said little. She wasn't at all as she'd been the previous afternoon and Neal wondered if she were sore because of anything he'd said. Mrs. Meadows asked questions about fur farming and he found he was talking more than usual. DM's house always seemed to weave a spell upon him. As they left the table he said the job would be finished in an hour.

"I'll come down when I hear the motor," Peggy said. "I think the clutch is slipping."

Later, out in the bay, Neal admitted she was right. He made an adjustment and she took the wheel and brought the boat to an expert landing. He made the craft fast and then walked to the truck.

"What were you doing when Tom went to get you?" she asked.

"Building pens," he said. "We've got to separate the kits this month."

"I'd love to see a mink family."

He held the cab door open. "Come along," he said.

Mrs. Meadows was sitting on the porch and they stopped to invite her.

"You'd love to see baby mink," Peggy said.

"I'm sure I would," Mrs. Meadows said. "But this view, a sparkling lake, a comfortable chair, a book, and such a day—not even baby mink could tear me from it."

"Maybe she wouldn't like a mink ranch anyway," Neal said as they drove away.

"She likes everything!" Peggy said. "That's why she's so much fun to be with and why everybody is so crazy about her."

"Do you live with her?"

"When I'm not at school or at DM's. Everyone thinks she is my aunt and I've always thought of her that way. She's one of the first people I remember."

It was queer, he thought, that neither of them had a mother or a father. "I've known Tom less than a year," he said.

"I probably know him better than you do," she said. "DM has always talked about him. I'm crazy about Tom. So is DM, and that means something. DM is fussy about people he likes."

"DM can afford to be."

"Can't he! There's nobody in the world quite like him. I've always felt that way, even—even before he was my guardian."

"I'd never seen Tom when he was made mine."

"I know," she said. "DM told me. He talked a lot about you when he came home after Christmas."

Neal wondered what DM had said, but they were turning in at the fur farm. Tom came out to meet them and as they approached the fenced enclosure he motioned to Peggy to be quiet.

"If you want to see the kits," he whispered, "don't let the old ones hear you coming."

All the families were out sunning and the mothers, taken unawares and belated in their discovery of the presence of a stranger, went into a panic as they whisked their kits, one by one, inside the nest boxes. This was accomplished with astonishing speed and sometimes a kit's head would bump sharply as its mother dragged it through the entrance hole.

"Don't hurt them!" Peggy begged. "I'm not dangerous. Tom! Isn't there some way to make them stop rushing off with their babies in that fashion?"

"Not while a stranger's about," he said. "But it don't hurt the kits. A young-un almost as big as his mother will go limp and let her drag him. Listen to the old gals tell what they think about it!"

After each family was safely hidden, the mother emerged to hiss and scold, her beady eyes bright with resentment at this interruption of the napping hour.

"They're looking right at me," Peggy said. "Good thing I can't understand mink language. It's a shame to disturb them."

"They'll be out soon again," Tom said. "Probably are now in the first pens we passed. They get upset awful fast and settle down as quick."

"I see what you mean," she said as they walked down the aisle. "A wave of excitement goes on ahead of us."

It was like a wave. As the three moved forward, the mother of a serenely sleeping family quickened to alertness, verified the danger and dashed into action. Small litters could be secreted before the humans arrived but the last of larger families were just disappearing.

Peggy stopped at the rear of the enclosure and turned to look at the pens stretching in long rows. Sunshine filtered through the trees above the little community of families.

"What a lovely nursery!" she said. "I'm so glad I saw it."

"It's fun to watch them when they know you," Neal said. "The kits play and chase each other and the mother carries food and watches. A good mink mother is always busy."

"I can see that," Peggy said, "but they seem so tiny for so much responsibility."

She leaned over a pen to listen to an irate mother. Tom made an almost imperceptible motion toward the fringe of trees and his eyes asked a question. Neal shook his head, and then was amazed at how instinctively he had decided.

Later at supper, Tom spoke of it. "I was glad you felt like I did about showing her the platinum mink," he said. "I'd never have thought of doing it except maybe DM told her. I wouldn't have wanted him to think anyone related to him wasn't one of us."

"DM wouldn't feel that way about it," Neal said. "Besides, I don't think he ever told her about them."

"Maybe. DM knows we ain't telling people yet."

Tom asked about DM's coming and Neal reported that he had telephoned Peggy he might not arrive as early as he first hoped, and Peggy and Mrs. Meadows had planned to fill the time with visits. Friends at a house party in one of the summer homes were expected the next day and the two had already accepted several invitations.

"Doesn't sound as if they would be lonesome," Tom said. "But DM never mixed up much in that summer crowd."

"No reason why they can't," Neal said. "Everybody's home from school and college. Who do you think lives in all these summer places and keeps the dine and dance joints open?"

"I guess it's all right," Tom said. "Mrs. Meadows has a lot of sense."

Tom and Neal grew accustomed to directing cars to the Mead house or seeing Peggy's convertible speed by. She always waved, and sometimes stopped to chat or ask if she could do an errand for them in town. Occasionally they found Peggy and Mrs. Meadows home when they went to cut wood or make sure everything was going well. Peggy always urged Tom and Neal to stop although it was seldom they could do so.

Hours were precious on a fur farm in late June. The making of pens barely kept abreast of the demand for housing. Kits were growing fast and battles were becoming serious. However, two kits in one pen got exercise by playing together, and if they were matched in size and strength were not apt to injure each other in a fight. The weakest of the litter was the last to be taken from the mother. But by mid-July all the kits would be large enough to

need separate homes, and Neal and Tom spent every spare hour building pens, nest boxes, feeding pans and water dishes.

They were at work one afternoon when Peggy arrived.

"I'm having a party," she began at once, "and I expect you two. It's tomorrow night. A beach supper, and afterwards we'll dance." She was speaking to both, but she looked at Neal. "The others are bringing scads of new records."

"I'd like to come," Neal said. "If we can't get there for supper we'll—"

"No reason why you can't get away by then," Tom said. "I'll come later."

"Good!" Peggy said. "You two have refused so many invitations I'd made up my mind that this time I was going to argue."

"It isn't that we didn't want—" Tom began.

"Oh, I know that," Peggy said quickly. "DM warned us you'd be busy."

At noon the next day Tom began to prepare for the party. He examined his town suit, pressed a tie and laid out a white shirt. Neal's clothes were ready. New slacks and sport jacket were hanging as they had come from the store. Tom had insisted on the purchase although Neal did not want to spend the money.

"You can't even button that old coat," Tom had said. "Winter put a dozen pounds on you. If that last check at mechanic's wages don't entitle you to cover up your wrists and ankles, what you working for?"

Neal had not put in so many long hours on the motors to buy new clothing, but he was glad now that Tom had insisted. It was a long time since he'd gone to a party, or danced, or heard new records. Tom filled the reservoir of the kitchen stove and put on kettles for bath water. In his mounting excitement he was now planning to get away for the six-o'clock supper.

"We'll surprise the mink by giving 'em their grub early," he said.

Neal got frozen meat from the icehouse. He never strained at the crank of the grinder without thinking of the day when they'd have a power-driven machine, and now, before Tom fed a chunk into the hopper, he threw his weight against it and got the heavy fly wheel to spinning.

The first piece went through easily, the speed increased, and then a new noise rose above the usual clatter. The meat was no longer being shredded.

Neal stopped the machine and felt of the steel grinding fingers.

"Something's loose," he said.

He didn't think it was serious, or consider possible consequences, as he unbolted the hopper, but when he'd cleaned out the shredded meat he found the gear shaft had snapped.

"Bad?" Tom asked.

"So bad we can't use it!" Neal exclaimed. "Can't grind meat! Can't feed the mink! We got to feed 'em! Get a grip on the main shaft with the big Stillson."

He attacked the grinder with wrenches, soon had it dismantled and the two pieces of the shaft on the bench.

"Half-broken through before!" he exclaimed. "See how bright the metal is at this new break?"

"We can get it welded," Tom said.

"And it would break at the weld. Carries too much power. Got to take this to Lakewoods and have a new one turned on a lathe."

"But it's three o'clock and—"

"And we have a few hundred mink that'll be eating each other if they're not fed," Neal said in a savage voice. "Get me some money. I'm heading for town."

He reached Lakewoods at three-thirty, but another job was in the lathe and it was after four before the mechanic would take Neal's work. They lost half an hour finding the right piece of shafting; the man took great pains in his measurements, maddening pains Neal thought, and it was nearly six before he started home. It was after seven before the grinder was reassembled.

"I can handle the rest of it," Tom said. "You go to DM's."

Neal had forgotten there was a party. "I'm not leaving you alone on a job like this," he said. "Even with two of us working, the mink won't get supper for another two hours."

It was after nine o'clock before the last was fed. Meat for breakfast must still be ground and the feeding room cleaned up. Tom said it was not too late for Neal to go to the party.

"Do you want to go?" Neal asked.

"Lord, no!" Tom said. "You couldn't drag me there after what we've been through."

Neal grinned. Every muscle ached, he was hungry and grimy. He'd never felt less like dancing, and it would be another hour at least before he'd be cleaned up and ready to go.

"I ought to telephone we're not coming," Neal said.

"No sense in calling Peggy away from a party just to tell her something she already knows by now," Tom said.

"I guess you're right."

When they had eaten supper, Neal staggered up to bed. He'd been asleep and it was after midnight when cars from the Mead place passed the house. Shafts of light shone in his window, he heard voices and laughter and from one car came singing. It was a new song. Neal had heard of it and wondered how it went. The clear voice of a girl rose higher than the others' and she sounded as though she would be fun to know. It would have to be this day of all days that the grinder broke down.

Next morning Neal was in the tool shed putting wires on a half dozen water dishes when Peggy came to the door.

"Hello," he said. "I'm sorry about—"

"I suppose you stayed home to nurse a sick mink," she said.

"If a mink was that sick, there wouldn't be much we could do about it. The gear shaft in the meat grinder broke and I had to get one made in Lakewoods. After that it was too late to come."

"Especially if you didn't want to, and hadn't intended to come anyway," she said. "But at least you took the trouble to think up a new excuse."

"You sound as though I broke the gear shaft on purpose," Neal said.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Why—why—you—"

He stopped. He had almost called her the spoiled brat she was, but he decided not to give her the satisfaction of knowing how mad she made him.

"It doesn't really matter," she said. "I wasn't even surprised that you didn't bother to telephone."

She swung around and a moment later he heard her motor roar. Neal was still scowling when Tom appeared.

"That Peggy's car?" he asked.

"She stopped for a minute."

"Did you explain about the grinder?"

"Yes, I explained," Neal said.

But on his next errand to the Mead house, Peggy was as friendly as ever. She asked about an adjustment of the carburetor in the runabout. He made it, as they took a spin in the bay.

"Thanks, Neal," she said as he moored the boat.

Driving home Neal wondered about girls. With mink, a fellow knew what to expect. A female might get scared and nervous and kill her young, but usually they were earnest and predictable creatures. He was glad mink were all he had to worry about.

Two days later Peggy stopped to say she was on her way to meet DM's train. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glowing.

"Isn't it wonderful he's finally arriving!" she said. "He isn't sure how long he'll stay. Bringing two friends."

Next morning DM came to the fur farm. He admired Murphy's sleekness and said the horse didn't look as though he'd worked hard enough to pay for his feed. As they walked through the enclosure, DM saw the new pens crowding close to the fence.

"Next spring you'll have to build an addition," he said.

"We will," Tom said, "and that woven wire costs real money."

"Any better way to spend it?" DM asked.

"You're right there," Tom said. "It's the nature of a fur farm to spread. When I started I intended to have only enough mink to keep one man busy. Now look what we got!"

When DM started home he turned to the others as he stepped in the car. "Promised my guests some fishing. If we don't find it in Atikwa, we'll try the lakes north of here. When that's done, there'll be time for a visit."

Only DM would have thought to explain why they saw so little of him in the days that followed. The Mead car passed their house at daylight and often returned after dark.

"DM must be chasing fish to the state line," Tom said. "But if he promised fishing he'll find it."

Apparently he found it. A week later Mrs. Meadows stopped at the farm.

"Tom," she said, "is there any legal way to kill some meat? I've eaten fish until I'm sure I must look like one. But DM's guests went home happy. He and Peggy must feel as I do. They didn't take even a trolling line when they went out in a canoe to spend the day. Sang is baking a ham for supper. Won't you come and share it?"

"We'd like nothing better," Tom said.

Supper was gay. DM and Peggy made a game of recounting jokes on each other. She teased him shamelessly but DM laughed even harder than the others. After they had eaten, DM got out the architect's drawings for the new house and they went to inspect the site.

"The veranda will be here," DM said. "You couldn't beat it for watching a sunset. Look at those colors over the point!"

Neal had thought a great deal about the guesthouse and now he walked a hundred feet beyond to a place he had often passed.

"Come look at it from here, DM," he called. "You can see into the next bay. And those pines in that farthest dip—they turn bronze when the sun goes down."

DM joined Neal, and for a long time he looked at the opalescent lake, the two tips of jutting granite and the olive bronze of the bay beyond.

"Neal's right!" he exclaimed at last. "This is where the house belongs!"

Tom glanced at the sunset and then studied the site. "Gives us even more level ground," he said, and began to pace off the length of the wings.

"Surely it won't reach that far!" Peggy said. "No guesthouse should be that size!"

"From what I've heard about this summer, I'd say it should be even larger," DM said. "I'm buying peace at any price."

"Listen to the man!" Peggy jeered. "We won't be able even to shoo you out of the place."

"And I have to consider Tom," DM added. "He has all those nice big trees spotted and his hands are aching for an ax."

"I'm fooling you there," Tom said. "We'll fell 'em with a two-man saw. Why else have a partner?"

Dusk had come when they returned to the veranda. Peggy put a record on the phonograph. Neal stood up and held out his arms. She danced well and he said so.

"You know what music means," she said. "We could have had some good times this summer."

Later, when he and Tom drove home, Neal hummed a dance air. It had been the last they played and he liked it.

"Had one of the best times I've ever had at DM's," Tom said. "It's fine having real folks for neighbors."

A few days later the Meads' summer ended. Neal and Tom went out to the car to say good-bye. Peggy was driving and DM sat beside her. He said he would try to return for hunting season, but he and Peggy would surely spend Christmas at Lake Atikwa.

"And I hope it snows," Peggy said. "Then Neal will have to meet us with Murphy and the sled."

11

ALMOST as soon as weaning was past, Tom and Neal began to select pelters. Some stock was to be eliminated, including older mothers which had begun to have smaller litters or had carried the improvement of the strain as far as possible. Neal examined the half bloods and marked a few for pelting or a later decision when he could make sure their fur was not of the fine quality needed for the future platinum herd. The hybrids were easily recognized as they were of a lighter color than standard. Tom said they wouldn't bring much. When the selection was finally completed, the pelters' row was far from filled.

"Usually I'm pushed to find pens for 'em," Tom said.

"We'll be pushed two years from now," Neal said. He noticed Tom was keeping a large number of standard males. "We could pelt some of those fellows this year if we change the herd over to platinums."

"Can't change a herd to something we ain't even seen yet," Tom said. "It's the extra-dark that keeps us going."

Neal did not argue. He still hoped Tom might agree to produce more half bloods in the spring. Even ten litters of hybrids would help, but they could build a platinum herd without them. It would not be as large as he would like, but large enough to make a showing.

After pelters were selected, other work was waiting. Tom plunged into canning vegetables and berries, and when that was finished he complained because they had no hay to cut for Murphy.

"DM said it was cheaper to buy feed," he said, "but next year I'll sow timothy and clover, no matter how DM feels. I could 'a' made the sled easy but he'd already ordered one in town."

Neal experimented with improvements. Water dishes must be redesigned so they could be cleaned more easily, and the mink book suggested several models. Catches of the top gates of the pens were faulty. Mink were quick and could slip out in the few seconds it took to ladle food onto the pans. It wasn't difficult to run them down in the fenced enclosure, but there was no sense in having to catch so many. Also something must be done about

keeping the food frozen. Neal had seen a picture of a unit made with a lined barrel. The idea had been sent to the fur breeders' magazine by a rancher who had no refrigerator. Neal made one. It worked, but required a great deal of ice for a small amount of food. Yet they must do something, for it was wasteful to buy frozen horse meat and not keep it frozen. Things like this lost money for a rancher. Tom said they'd better build a second icehouse, and Neal suggested they keep the second one as a storage plant for the main supply and not open the door more often than they had to.

He planned where they could build it and then, because plans held a fascination for him, he sketched in the location of the new mink unit they would need after spring breeding season. He made the gate and aisles wide so Murphy could haul the food and eliminate the labor of carrying it in pails.

"That'll take a lot more fencing," Tom objected.

"But it's the way we've got to have it later," Neal said.

"Later" meant many things to him, meant the time when Murphy would draw a food cart, stopping at each pen, when they'd have electrical refrigeration, might even slaughter their own meat as did the big fur farms. It meant when they had not hundreds but thousands of pens, had a separate unit for pelters in the deep shade of the forest and others for the different kinds of mink they'd raise.

He drew plans and slipped them into his notebook which, with records, breeders' magazines and books on genetics, was kept on the shelf that had once held his school work. Tom said if he added any more he'd need an office.

That too they must have some day.

DM telephoned he would not be able to come for hunting season, but he and Peggy would arrive for Christmas without fail. Neal and Tom shot their deer the day the season opened. They did not stay out overnight, but the hunt was a reminder of their trip the previous fall. This year they could not afford time for camping. The cold had set in early and fur was almost prime. They finished pelting on Thanksgiving Day.

"Half the pelts we had last year," Tom said. "Hope the price goes up."

"We'll get money for cutting DM's timber," Neal said.

"And we'll need it. We're carrying over a lot of stock. Liable to be mink poor yet."

They began to cut DM's timber early in December, for Tom did not intend to trap.

"I know where the trees are, but I'm not sure about the fur," he said. "Besides, a year's rest will do the trap line good. Might be fur will come in even handier next year."

Tom and Neal felled timber every day, were in the woods by midmorning and worked until it was time to feed the mink. Neal had become more proficient with an ax, and Murphy hauled the logs to the Mead place on the go-devil.

Tom was eager to get them up before DM came for Christmas, and this was necessary if they were to have timber ready for building before breeding season. Hewing logs on three sides and decking them for drying would take all the time they could spare from the fur farm in the next two months. In their eagerness to make this schedule, they overlooked quitting time and had late suppers. Tom often missed his news broadcast and one evening he tuned in on the last of a later news hour. The commentator was talking of Pearl Harbor. It was some time before Neal or Tom could believe it. They were still struggling with the idea of a confused and unreal world when Tom thought of David Mead.

"Wonder what this will do to DM," he said.

Tom's question was answered before they went to bed. Late that evening the phone rang. DM had been trying to reach them for hours, and his call confirmed the news. Tom was serious, and sad too, as he sat down and filled his pipe. For a long time he did not speak, and then he remembered to tell Neal that DM would not come for Christmas.

"We might as well button his house up tight," he said.

"He won't want us to go on cutting timber," Neal said.

"You know, I never asked him!"

The phone rang again. Neal answered. "I was afraid you fellows might think I didn't want the guesthouse," DM said. "We'll need it more than ever when this mess is behind us," and his voice was unusually earnest. "We'll get it behind us, Neal. Don't believe anything else. I'm sure of it. Go right ahead with the house as we planned it."

"We've got a pile of logs down now," Neal said.

"Good! And Peggy sends her best to you both. She's as staggered as we all are. Write me how things are coming. And good luck!"

Neal repeated the message to Tom.

"Might have known he'd take it that way," Tom said. "He's just planning to work harder."

DM's words had done something to steady their own reeling universe. Next morning they were in the woods earlier than usual. Toil filled their days and Christmas did not bring a pause. It could not be otherwise with fuel to cut for both houses, a new icehouse to build, ice to harvest, mink to care for, new pens to construct and DM's timber to hew.

Tom said Murphy worked harder than they did, and the horse was invaluable. He skidded logs for fuel, hauled ice and with block and tackle pulled the cakes up a chute in the icehouses. He dragged timber to the Mead place and once, after a blizzard, hauled the sled through drifts to town.

"I'm ashamed to ask any more of him," Tom said.

They hewed the building timber. Neal scored the logs, clipping along one side so that, when Tom followed with the eleven-pound broadax, the chips fell off easily. Tom enjoyed the perfection of hewing.

"Fun doing it for DM," he said. "He knows good ax work and he likes his walls."

After the logs were hewed on three sides, they were decked in a neat pile to dry. Murphy hauled them up skids with block and line.

"Best buy DM ever made, that horse," Tom said. "We'd 'a' made hard work of this, not being able to use canthooks."

The timber was finished before breeding season. Tom had spent his evenings working out the mating sheets. Although he consulted Neal on the best and darkest standards, he had studiously avoided all mention of half bloods. To him, it was Neal's project. Neal had spent hours among the platinums, weighing the perfection of one gorgeous male against another, and when his program was complete he asked Tom's opinion of his choices. They walked past the row of platinum mink while Neal explained the reasons for each decision.

"You got a good eye for fur, lad, and you've learned fast," Tom said. "I'd 'a' picked those sires myself." He leaned over a pen and became absorbed in scraping the last vestige of food from a pan.

"If you don't get platinums this year, will you still want to go on trying?" he asked suddenly.

"Trying!" Neal exclaimed. "We're not trying. There's no chance of our not getting—"

"I know how you feel," Tom said. "I'd never 'a' given up trying to get mink like that first pair."

Tom's words reminded Neal of the first day he saw the platinums. It was queer how well Tom understood some things, and yet was so blind about others.

"That's why I've set twenty-five of the best standard females aside for you to breed to platinums this year," Tom went on. "Figured it would give you another lot of half bloods to try next spring."

Tom had spoken so casually it was moments before Neal realized the full implication—and moments more before he could speak.

"Twenty-five!" he exclaimed. "That means we can have many more platinums the next year! And we'll need every platinum we can raise. It's what I wanted, only I couldn't ask you. You won't be sorry."

"Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb," Tom said.

Neal let it rest there. His first thought was that Tom had changed his mind about hybrids, but that last speech denied it. Neal realized this more each day as they worked through breeding season. When that ended, they could only wait for the whelping.

Tom never spoke of a mutation herd. Neal thought of little else. He was as certain as anyone could be, and yet the possibility of failure haunted him. And it would not be only his own failure. He would have brought disaster upon Tom. He found himself thinking of this at the pens, during mealtime, in the evening. Each night he was grateful that one more day of the strain was over. The tension grew. Tom dug up all sorts of odd jobs, but they didn't help.

At last whelping began. Neal listened at nest boxes, but it would be at least six days before he could know the color of the kits. Then one morning Tom said it would be safe to take a rough census.

"You want to look in the nests, or shall I?" he asked.

"We'll do it like we did last year," Neal said. "I'll take the record." His voice was ragged even though he tried to make it sound matter-of-fact. "You're better at handling young kits than I am."

Tom lifted the cover of a half blood nest box, searched through the hay. Neal watched him, a pulse pounding in his temple.

"Three standards," Tom said.

He dug deeper in the hay. When he spoke his voice had a rough crack of amazement.

"And three platinum!"

He let the cover fall. In his face was a curious mixture—joy, bewilderment and elation.

"Lad," he said, "you done it!"

12

NEAL heard, and he didn't. He had been so sure, but now he felt weak and giddy. For more than a year he had carried a heavier load than he knew.

"You done it!" And this time Tom shouted. "Done it! Don't you hear? Half the litter's plats! Don't you want to see 'em?"

Neal lifted the cover of the nest box and looked down at the three light-colored kits. He'd known they'd be there, but the sight of them lifted that load forever. He smiled crookedly.

"Look pretty fine, don't they?" he asked Tom.

"Finest thing that ever happened on this farm!"

To Tom their victory was complete, but Neal was already wondering about the other litters. The total was the real suspense. Every litter could not possibly be half light. The chances of genes pairing was exactly like that of tossing a penny. In a thousand cases the penny might throw an equal number of heads and tails, but in the first fifty tosses either heads or tails could run wild. It was so with genes, and now, with only a few dozen mink, litters could run heavily to dark.

"Let's look at the rest," Neal said. "That's what I've got to know!"

Tom lifted the cover of the second nest box. He searched for a long while, and when he spoke his voice was empty. "Five standard, two plats, and one of them looks puny. Sorry, lad, but that's all—"

"Get the next box," Neal said gruffly.

Tom hurried to the third. "Five platinum, and only two dark!" he exclaimed. "That squares the second. And no misses yet!"

They went down the row and Tom's spirits were like mercury, lifting and sinking as he called small litters, misses, more standards than platinums, but often more platinums than standards. He worked so fast Neal had only time to enter the record. He made no effort to keep a rough tab in his mind and he was so excited he couldn't have added figures had he tried. When all the nest

boxes were reported, he totaled the two columns but didn't believe the results. He added again while Tom watched impatiently.

"Little more than half platinums!" Neal's voice was hoarse, and then, because Tom didn't seem astonished, he added, "We couldn't ask for better luck than that!"

"How many misses?" Tom asked.

"Only seven. That's less than fifteen per cent."

"Few old mink men do that well. But you worked hard on that bunch of females. What'll we look at next, the half blood kits?"

"Thought you'd want to count dark kits," Neal said.

Tom chuckled. "Rub it in," he said. "You can't make me mad today."

Increase among the half bloods was disappointing. Misses ran almost thirty per cent. Tom frowned.

"Just when you needed a lot of half bloods for next year!" he said. "And you might have had 'em if I'd showed sense."

"But we've got a lot of hybrids," Neal said. "Those kits in the mixed litters you've been calling standard are all half bloods."

"How do you figure that?"

"It's this way," and Neal began to draw a checkerboard of inheritance. "With a half blood dam and a pure-bred sire, we've got platinum strain in both and—"

"Don't show me one of those tick-tack-toe things!" Tom exclaimed. "When you say it's so, I believe it."

Neal grinned. Tom was the swellest partner a fellow ever had. Wasn't another man in the world who'd be so quick to admit he'd been wrong. Tom seemed even happier in the admission than about the big jump they'd made toward a real herd of platinums. That they had done the latter, neither doubted. They were even more sure when they'd counted the increase of the platinum mink behind the fringe of trees.

"Next year we'll have a big crop," Tom said when Neal tallied the herd. "That is, if we don't run into bad luck and can earn enough to feed 'em."

No longer could dark standards pay for platinums on a fur farm which had become so unbalanced. There would be too small a pelt harvest and too

many mink to be carried over, but Tom did not mourn the passing of the slow and sure method he had once defended.

"Won't do us any harm to tighten our belts," he said. "And we'll make some money on DM's guesthouse."

"How much of the building will we do?" Neal asked.

"Depends on when he wants it. Last time I hired a crew to rush the inside and do plumbing, lighting and that stuff."

"We can do some of it."

"DM would like us to, but everything depends on when they plan to move in. We can dig the cellar soon's frost is out of the ground."

A week later DM called from Chicago, and his first question was about the platinum kits. Tom's voice was a hoarse squeak as he gave the totals. To him, they were still so astounding he could not believe DM would accept them without challenge and, as though to establish the veracity of his statements, he insisted on repeating the kit tallies until at last DM broke in. Tom listened.

"What's that?" he shouted. "You knew all the time I was the dumb one? Then why in heck didn't you say so?" He waited for DM's reply, and then, ignoring toll charges, turned to Neal. "DM says there ain't no sense in trying to reason with a stubborn mule. Guess he's right at that, lad."

DM and Tom talked several minutes and Neal knew before Tom hung up the receiver that DM was coming to Lake Atikwa.

"He'll be here tomorrow night," Tom said. "Can only stay a day. Wants to see about the house before he goes to England. Got a little job there that may take most the summer."

Next evening DM gave few details of the work in England, except to say it was connected with railroad supplies and the war. He was tired and anxious, eager to change the subject. Mrs. Meadows had gone to California, he told them. Her son would undoubtedly be sent to the Pacific theater.

"Naturally she wants to be near him the next few months," DM said. "She's also doing a fine job organizing surgical dressing units in the west. Peggy will spend the summer with her. Since we'll be so scattered, there's no need to rush the guesthouse."

"Won't hurt the logs to season another year," Tom said.

"I'd hoped you fellows could start this summer. Take your time, two years if you want. Or can you handle those long logs?"

"Murphy, with a block and line, is better'n three men," Tom said.

"Told you he was a fine worker." DM seemed to think the matter settled and announced he was ready for bed. "Put in the time you can spare, send in a bill every month and my secretary will mail a check," he said, and then became suddenly aware of Tom's silence. "What's the matter, old grouch?" he asked. "Want a raise in wages?"

"You know what's biting me," Tom said. "You don't need that guesthouse any more'n I do. Least, you don't know when you'll need it. Think Neal and me couldn't get along without those wages?"

"I never saw the time you two couldn't manage," DM said. "As for the house, if I didn't think we will need it, if I didn't believe so with all my heart, I wouldn't be much use on the job in England. I'm not offering charity. Neal, can't you make that dumb partner of yours see sense?"

"I would be dumb if I didn't see how building fits in with feeding mink," Tom said.

"I'd hoped so. I'll get a better house for less money than if you had to rush it. If the money feeds mink, all the better. Am I sleeping in Neal's room?"

They watched him ascend the stairs. Tom put out the big overhead lamp. Neal wondered if he was going to be stubborn.

"They don't make 'em like DM," Tom said. "Most fellows would 'a' wrote a letter and jumped off for England. He took time to come up and make sure we seen it like he did."

Next morning the three went over plans and talked details. In the first summer they could dig and cement the cellar, raise the outer walls and partitions, roof the building and put in doors and windows. The house would then be protected. Floors, finishing, heat and light could be installed the second summer. DM said he would put oil furnaces in both houses.

"Oil!" Tom exclaimed. "With all the woods you got around here!"

"The fireplaces will use enough fuel to keep the forest tidy," DM said. "With oil it will be easy to keep the house open until Christmas, and no one will have to stoke all the time. Just press a button."

"Neal can see what you mean," Tom said. "He's always talking gadgets."

"We should have electricity too," DM went on. "Neal won't have time to overhaul light plants forever. I'll tell the power company it has two consumers on this road and to get busy installing a line."

Later when DM and Neal were alone, DM asked if they had heard anything of the fur trade's reaction to platinums.

"Not yet," Neal said.

"Have you shown them to many people?" DM asked. "Did Peggy or Mrs. Meadows see them?"

"No."

"The opinion of two women wouldn't mean much, but some platinums must have been shown in New York."

"Mr. Whitlock can tell us," Neal said. "He and Peter Reese will be here in June."

"Good! Let me know what they say, though I imagine no one, not even the fur trade itself, can form much of an opinion until platinums are on the market."

"That's what Peter said. But I can't see how anyone could look at those mink and not—"

"That's the way to feel!" DM said. "Go on believing it, no matter what you hear. Even if the public refuses them, you and Tom will know you've raised fur of real beauty."

Neal was silent. He had always been aware of this possibility. He'd thought he knew how he felt, but now he found himself facing the possibility of failure. Another year must pass before they could produce a crop of platinums. Not until six months after that would the crop be ready for market. In those eighteen months, with the herd of fur bearers increasing, hundreds of mink must be fed, housed and cared for. And not a pelt could be sold.

This, he understood, was what DM was asking him to consider, and DM was waiting for an answer.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Neal said, "and you'll think I'm nuts, but—if the new color doesn't bring two dollars a pelt at the auction, Tom and I'll still find a way to go on raising platinums."

"Fine!" DM exclaimed. "Nothing can break a man's heart if he feels like that."

Later, when they had driven DM to the train and were waiting on the platform, all three were conscious this was not the usual parting. DM was flying to bomb-shocked England.

"Take care of yourself, DM," Tom said. "And get back here for Christmas."

"I'll try to be here," DM said, "but that's not a promise, just a wish of Peggy's and mine."

As they drove home, Tom said it would be a queer summer with the Mead house closed, and then he added that with all the work they had ahead they wouldn't have time to miss even good neighbors.

When the mink nursery was well regulated, foundlings adopted and mothers settled to maternal problems, they finished fencing the new platinum unit. Pens must be made in odd moments and on rainy days. They broke ground for DM's guesthouse. Time was divided, a few hours at the Mead place, often in the long northern evenings, the rest at the pens. They were so busy and so tired they sometimes forgot to go to the mailbox. One evening Tom went down the road and brought back the latest issue of the breeders' magazine. He read it while Neal cooked supper.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed. "A fur farmer's finally got around to telling how to breed platinums. Same stuff you've been talking for two years. Genes and chromosomes! But all he gets down to is, if you mate half bloods with pure platinums, you get some platinum kits. Took him a long while to find that out."

"A lot of ranchers will try it now," Neal said.

"Let 'em! We're a year ahead. Must have took this fellow as long to figure it out as it did us."

It hadn't taken that long, Neal knew. A year ago Peter Reese had told of ranchers who had succeeded in hybridization, but Neal said nothing to destroy Tom's elation. He wondered, though, how large other herds might be.

In May, Peter and Norman Whitlock found them working in DM's cellar. Tom pointed at the deep hole.

"That's paying to feed platinums," he said.

"Puts you one up on other mutation breeders," Whitlock said. "They're biting their fingernails, wondering how to pull through. Don't suppose you've got anything we'd care to look at."

"And will you see something!" Tom called as he got into the truck. "Come over to the farm."

At the pens he led them to the hybrid females and stopped at the first.

"I'll shut the old one out of the box so's you can get a good look at the litter," he said, and slid a screen over the nest box entrance and lifted the cover. "Look at 'em! Half platinum! Came out just like Neal said they would!"

His manner suggested Neal had achieved an act as magical as pulling rabbits from a hat. The visitors looked down at the squirming kits.

"They promise to be a good color," Norman Whitlock said. "I'd like to see them next winter. You won't be sorry you spent a year in hybridizing."

"Have you many?" Peter asked. "Enough for a good crop next year?"

"Besides these plats, we've got a bunch of half bloods to mate with plats next season," Tom said. "And there's no reason their kits won't be just as fine as these."

Peter's eyes twinkled as he glanced at Neal.

"Some breeders complain the first generation from half bloods went off a bit in color," Norman Whitlock said.

"These won't!" and Tom's voice had conviction. "Use fine platinum sires and a herd of good standards, and you're bound to hold to that clear color."

As they walked from the pens, Whitlock told of plans for marketing platinums. Mutation breeders were confident they could offer at least two thousand pelts after another breeding season.

"Have any New York buyers seen them?" Neal asked.

"And are they excited! Naturally they're cautious, since nobody knows how the public will react. For years women have been told extra-dark is the finest. These will be revolutionary."

"A woman's got to take only one look," Tom said.

"Unfortunately it isn't quite so simple," the editor said, "but mutation breeders are aware of their problem. They know the necessity of promotion. That's one reason they have organized. A marketing board will handle arrangements, offer pelts in one big sale, and every pelt will be dressed. That's important with so delicate a color. Haven't you fellows joined?"

“We been so busy raising mink we ain’t had time to think about it,” Tom said.

“You’d better begin thinking,” Norman Whitlock said. “I’ll send you an association leaflet.”

It arrived a few days later. Neal read it and gave it to Tom. A statement of the purposes of the organization sounded practical, but membership was expensive.

“I didn’t think it would cost so much to join,” Neal said. “Maybe we could ship our pelts to an auction company.”

“That mink book cost five dollars,” Tom said, “but it more’n paid for itself the first year. Write ’em Clark and Bartlett want to join.”

That evening as Neal wrote the letter he wondered if he would ever be able to foresee Tom’s reactions. He had kept the secret of platinums from his best friend for five years, and now he was willing to join a group of strangers and pay a fee when every dollar was precious. Almost anything might be expected.

“This association holds meetings,” Neal suggested.

“What good would meetings do us?” Tom demanded. “Those mutation farmers don’t know any more than the fellow told in the article we read. We knew that much already! What we got to do this next year is raise plats and earn enough to feed ’em.”

These two drives, raising and earning, ate up the summer. No hour was wasted. Neal had never realized how many ax strokes went into a log cabin. He could never hope to be the artist Tom was, but Tom’s work was a joy to watch, and a challenge. Neal had never worked more carefully.

“You’re getting even handier with tools than your dad was,” Tom said after watching him one day.

“That’s the first time you ever admitted I was as good!” Neal exclaimed.

“There’ve been times when I wondered if you weren’t a bit better. Lot of Mary in you.”

On a sunny afternoon in mid-October the house was finished for the year. Inside it was only a shell but from the outside it seemed a home. Tom cleared the last debris of building.

“Place to see it is from the lake,” he said. “Let’s set a canoe in water.”

They paddled out and drifted as they looked at their summer's work. The new house belonged with the main dwelling and yet carried a sense of remoteness.

"Couldn't 'a' set it in a prettier place," Tom said.

Neal looked at the bench above the sparkling blue of the lake. It was ablaze with golds and yellows of birch and poplar, with low bushes clothed in pinks and sunset shades, and the forested slope enclosed all in a frame of dark green pine.

It was such a day as this that Neal had first seen the north country two years earlier. Then he had thought it beautiful; now he loved it. So much of him had gone into this land.

"Wish DM could see it," he said. "No wonder he wants to stay here. I wouldn't live anywhere else."

Tom took a deep strong stroke, let the canoe drift.

"Buildin' a log cabin does things to a man," he said. "Sometimes I feel sorry for DM."

The electric power line was completed so quickly, Tom was shocked into telephoning DM's secretary. She was mystified by his concern and suggested he engage electricians and make the change-over so everything would be ready for DM's Christmas visit. Neal was alert when he heard this.

"We can have them wire our place at the same time," he said.

"This log shack!" Tom exclaimed, and then he chuckled. "Maybe I been washin' lamp chimneys and filling lamps long enough. And electric lights won't cost much more."

"Yes," Neal said, "and we've got to have a line run to the feed room for a deep freeze."

"No!" Tom said flatly. "A thing like that runs into real money."

"Not the real money it would cost to lose a hundred mink from food poisoning. I don't mean to get a real set-up, the kind we should have," and Neal thought of freezing rooms holding many quarters of horse meat. "We'll still use the icehouses, but we've got to have something to keep ground meat safe in summer."

"That large a deep freeze would cost more'n we got in the bank."

“Not more than I have,” Neal said. “Better than a thousand dollars, with the two years’ interest.”

“I ain’t changed my mind about that money from the night you came,” and Tom’s voice was obstinate.

“Mean you won’t let me use it on the fur farm?” Neal demanded. It seemed strange, after all that had passed, to find themselves back on the same old ground. “We’re partners in this.”

“Which don’t change the fact that money is for an education.”

“By the time I want to go to college, there’ll be plenty more.”

“Hope so,” Tom said, “but if platinums don’t bring a good price, there’ll be nothing,” and it was the first time he had admitted the possibility of disaster. “You’ve more’n put in your share, and even if you hadn’t, you ain’t going to spend that money on a deep freeze.”

Neal knew Tom was adamant, and yet he couldn’t be angry. He wondered how he could have been angry that first evening they’d spent together.

“All right,” he said. “Then what’s to stop us from buying a deep freeze on time?”

“I never yet bought a thing I couldn’t pay for.”

“And you never had a herd of mink like ours to carry through a year.”

“Maybe we could ship more fur than we planned on,” Tom said. “If we pelted all the standard and—”

Once Neal would have grasped at this opportunity to raise money, but that was before he had considered the possibilities of all sorts of mutations. No one could forecast what strains they might need for crossing, what colors they might use in the fur palette of the future.

“No,” he said, and as stubbornly as Tom. “We’ll pelt as many as we can afford to get rid of, but we’ll save the best of the standards. You spent too many years building up a fine blood strain to throw it away now.”

Tom frowned, was on the point of protest, and then a grin spread across his face.

“But we got to stretch payments on a deep freeze mighty thin,” he said. “We’ve got a tough year ahead.”

13

THE day before Christmas, Tom drove to town to meet DM and Peggy. It was DM's first visit since his return from England. As Tom departed he said he doubted if the threatening snowstorm would hold off until train time. It did, but the air was filled with swirling flakes when Neal, waiting at the Mead house, threw open the door to greet them.

Tom and Neal helped Sang carry in the bags and then, before Neal had time for more than a few words with DM and Peggy, Tom led them to the deep freeze to show his preparations for the Christmas dinner. He had begun to plan it in hunting season, refusing to shoot the first deer he saw and waiting for the largest, fattest buck. He had dressed the saddle in one piece and stored it in DM's deep freeze.

"Read once how they used to serve a baron of beef in England on Christmas Day," he said.

Sang looked at the big saddle, thick and coated with fat, and was reduced to wordless cries of admiration. DM's eyes glowed.

"Sent to the border for wild rice, too," Tom said, and produced a ten-pound bag. "Used to buy it by the flour sack, but this should last you. And I wrote to Jack Colberg, a fellow I trapped with, and got highbush cranberry jam. He gets the berries along a river after frost. If you ain't ate highbush cranberries along with venison, you're going to find out something."

"This makes turkey second class," DM said. "Sang, roast him like lamb, brown outside and pink and crumbly in the middle."

"I fix 'um," Sang said.

"Sounds like he knew how," Tom said.

"He'll prove it," DM said. "Tomorrow night we'll have a banquet. Come over early."

Next morning a foot of fresh snow had fallen. When the sun rose, every pine tree was bejeweled and the landscape was clean and white and sparkling.

"The kind of Christmas DM likes," Tom said.

He and Neal were ready to break paths to the pens when the phone rang. DM asked what they were doing and Neal told him.

"We're coming over," DM said.

"I'll hitch up Murphy and get you," Neal said.

"Not on the first morning I've had a real reason to wear snowshoes. Peggy's out now, walking around as though she'd used them all her life. There are times when I wonder if I like the young."

Soon DM and Peggy came tramping through the snow.

"Isn't this wonderful!" she cried. "If we had a hill we could make a ski run."

"And break our legs," DM said.

"DM! You know you'd be as good on skis as Neal or I."

"I'm glad I don't have to prove it," DM said.

They broke out paths through the units, stopping at each pen to chip ice and fill water dishes. Occasionally a mink thrust its head out an entrance hole, surveyed them and scampered up the netting wall.

"They're as happy about the snow as we are!" Peggy cried.

They reached the platinum unit, and suddenly everyone remembered Peggy had never seen them. The three men watched her as she stopped at the first pen. A mink looked out.

"This one is different," she said. "I never saw— What is it?" she demanded.

"Platinum," Tom said.

"It's a mutation," Neal added.

DM put an arm around her. "It doesn't concern you how it happened," he said. "Do you like it?"

As he waited for her answer, Neal realized she was the first woman who had ever seen these mink. He stared at her, wanting to make sure she really meant what she'd say. At that moment the mink came out. In the sunlight each guard hair was a separate glistening shaft of silver, and the delicate shading of the fur against the sparkling snow was as subtle as warm moonlight. Peggy caught her breath.

"He's lovely!" she cried. "Why have I never seen them?"

"It's a long story, Pegs," DM said, "and neither Tom nor Neal would do justice to it. I'll tell you at luncheon."

As they walked back Neal explained something of their history and how the color had been retrieved from hybrids. They stopped at the pens of the half bloods.

"What a name to call such beautiful mink!" she said. "Tom, I like these even better than your dark ones!"

"They ain't supposed to be worth anything as fur," Tom said.

"But they should be! See how wonderful that dark stripe is against the lighter sides! Why, there's no comparison between these and those dark ones!"

Neal looked at the hybrids. For so many months he had thought only of their value in the herd. He had never really seen them as a fur.

"Peggy's right!" he exclaimed. "They are good looking."

DM walked down the row, studying one after another. He was smiling when he joined the others.

"Peggy may have an idea there," he said. "Perhaps women do make up their own minds about what they like. You might have another gauge for mink—standards, platinums and half bloods."

That evening at dinner Peggy was still excited about the new fur. DM had told her the story of the platinum mink and she knew of the platinum foxes from Norway which had startled New York. She had even seen a scarf of them. Neal and Tom knew the history of this mutation. A single platinum fox, named "Mons," had been born in a litter of silver foxes, and Norwegian ranchers had succeeded in raising litters of this new color. DM suggested that such successful promotion of a new shade in foxes might be helpful to mutation mink ranchers when their pelts went to market.

"People have discovered fur bearers may be different," he said.

"And nobody knows how different," Neal replied. He told of other shades and variations which had cropped up on ranches. "They've got pattern coats, white with black markings, sable shades with white frosting, pure white and even blonds."

"Have you seen them?" DM asked.

"We ain't had time to do any visiting," Tom said.

"But I'm going to," Neal added.

After dinner DM brought out a box of books. He never arrived without one. Tom said they'd have to build more shelves.

"I should sort over this library," DM said. "I've started several times but I can't decide which to get rid of. Can you, Neal? You use them more than I do."

Neal was suddenly amazed at how many volumes he had read. He had formed the habit of picking up a book at odd moments. DM had told him the busiest men he knew managed to keep up their reading by this method.

"I never found a book here I didn't like," Neal said. "Tom and I'll put up more shelves."

They discussed summer plans. DM hoped to come often and Peggy and Mrs. Meadows would spend some weeks at Lake Atikwa. Workmen would be needed for plumbing, and electric wiring and oil furnaces must be installed.

"Much of that must be completed before you lay the floors and finish inside," DM said. "Keep your eyes on the work. After a fine start, we don't want the house spoiled."

"Janet and I will have ideas too," Peggy said.

"Sixteen-year ideas or Janet's?" DM asked.

"Seventeen. Don't forget a birthday in March, DM."

Neal looked at her sitting on the couch beside him. She was younger than he, and that pleased him. He had been seventeen in August, yet at times he'd thought her older. You could never tell about a girl's age. DM and Tom spread house plans on the table and bent over them.

"Then you were only fifteen that first summer!" Neal said to Peggy.

"When I was such a brat?"

"Well, once in a while."

"You knew why though, didn't you?" she asked. "Expect me not to be jealous?"

She appeared to think this explained everything, but Neal's face was a blank.

"DM had belonged to me since I could remember!" she said. "Why should I enjoy hearing him rave about you when he came back after that first Christmas?"

So that was what DM had said about him. Neal felt suddenly very happy.

"You feel different now, or doesn't DM rave any more?" he asked.

"I'm older," Peggy said. "And naturally I want DM to keep his illusions."

She stood up and joined the others at the table. Soon afterward Tom said it was time to start home.

"Can't build this house tonight," he added, "and tomorrow I've got to break out the road to the highway."

"Not for us," DM said. "I'd like to be snowbound for a month."

"As he tells it!" Peggy said. "But when the phone rings we'll hear DM say he'll be on the next train."

It happened like that. Three days after Christmas DM asked Tom to drive them to the station.

"The turkey you were invited to eat this evening is in the oven," he said. "We'll drop it off at the house, and hot. All Neal need do is to keep it warm."

Tom drove them to the train. As they started, Peggy called to Neal.

"Happy New Year!" she said. "Traveling with DM, I don't know where ours will be, but it'll be fun."

They were gone, and January was always dull. Days were short and the cold deepened. The pelts were sold. Extra dark standard brought a good price, thirty dollars. It was the highest Tom had ever received. The fall crop was not large but the check assured Tom and Neal they could get through the year with the wages from DM and extreme caution—if nothing happened. They built mink pens, planned the breeding season, and Neal read the books DM had brought.

Late in January Peter Reese called long distance.

"Sorry for the short notice," he said to Neal. "But if you can be in Madison tomorrow morning I'll take you to a meeting of mutation mink breeders. Not a regular association affair, but you'll meet men you'd like to know."

Neal looked at the clock. He could catch the last bus at White Pine.

"I'll be in Madison at eight," he said.

"Good! We'll go to Fort Atkinson in my car."

Tom had one comment on the meeting as he drove Neal to town.

"No need to talk too much about our platinums," he said.

On the night-long bus trip, Neal thought of what a meeting with other mutation breeders could mean. So many questions cried for answers, and he was more aware of this when he found Peter waiting.

"Swell of you to ask me," Neal said.

"Wanted you to know these men," Peter said. "One especially, Ned Baxter. He's keen on mutations."

He explained his errand as they drove south. A series of talks was being arranged for the coming year and it was time the geneticist and the rancher worked together more closely. The day's meeting was largely a matter of accident, when four important mutation breeders had planned to be together.

"Don't let these men scare you," Peter said as they entered the hotel in Fort Atkinson. "They're just as puzzled as you and I are."

Neal singled out Ned Baxter before Peter introduced him. He was a large man with a kindly smile and Peter put him next to Neal at the luncheon table. The other names were important in news of mutation breeding.

"So you're the Bartlett of our new member, Clark and Bartlett," Baxter said. "Sorry you fellows weren't at our last meeting."

"We do the ranch work ourselves and it's not easy to get away," Neal said.

"I know about running short-handed, and this year we're all digging in."

"You mean ranchers who're raising platinums?" Neal asked.

Baxter nodded. "But you'd better learn to call them silverblus," he said. "The association finally decided on that. It's wise. 'Platinum' was confusing. People might think of foxes instead of mink."

" 'Silverblu' describes them exactly," Peter said. "I hear you fellows held a big christening party."

"Had to do something about all those names," a rancher said.

A man across the table looked up. "Seems to me a man should have the right to name the mink he originated."

"That was the trouble," the first one said. "Every breeder was naming mink after himself, or some part of the country he fancied." He turned to Peter. "From now on, all variations of the Black Cross, and you know even better than we how many there are, will be called Royal Kohinur. We're not allowed to spell it like the famous diamond, but you get the idea. Blufrost is another classification. It includes the silver sable of all tones, anything of that dominant mutation with the silver lacing. Blond mink are called pastels. We even changed the name of the association. Dropped 'platinum' and we're now the Mink Mutation Breeders' Association."

"Should have done that long ago," another said. "A lot of work has been done on the new mutations."

"Any idea when the others will be ready for market?" Peter asked.

"Royal Kohinur and blufrost should be offered two years from now," Baxter said. "Pastels will take longer. Not many of them yet, but I'm lucky to have quite a few. That's a honey of a mutation. Allover color, like the silverblu, a recessive—blond instead of silver-gray. What more could a breeder ask! You've never seen my pastels, Peter."

"I'm hoping to see them tomorrow," Peter said. "Driving home by way of your ranch."

"Good! And bring your friend." He turned to Neal. "I understand you people are working with silverblu. How many will you have for the winter sale?"

"We won't know until after breeding season," Neal said. "We're trying for a crop."

"Aren't we all!" Baxter said, and Neal still liked his smile. "We hope to offer twenty-five hundred skins. Make the trade sit up and take notice."

Peter asked about promotion work the association had been doing, and Neal looked at him gratefully for he knew the subject was brought up for his sake. Reade, a rancher who until this time had been silent, answered. Neal had thought him inconspicuous. His face was of the ruddy outdoor type and his features seemed passive. Now his gray eyes blazed.

"We'll have to do a lot more in the months ahead," he said. "Last November, when we took the silverblu to a style show, the leading stylists went crazy over them. But that isn't enough. We've got to educate the public, tell people silverblus are coming on the market. If fur houses know their customers will buy, they won't be afraid to bid at the auction."

The talk turned to genetics, and this was what Peter had really come for. One rancher complained that science had not done much for the mutation breeder.

"So far, we've had to figure out all this stuff for ourselves," he said.

Peter smiled. "I'm afraid we're guilty," he said, "but the fur ranches have been our laboratories. You ranchers have not uncovered new laws in genetics but you have proved that known laws work. Now we'd like to get into the game."

"We need you more than ever," Baxter said. "We may have handled a single mutation, but now that we're crossing mutations with each other, most of us don't know what we've got or how we got it."

This was the first time Neal had heard that mutants could be crossed with each other and he leaned forward in excitement. This fact opened so many doors. He hoped someone would tell what had been done in the field, but as the men asked questions of Peter, talked of hybrids, crossing and back crossing, inquired about the inheritance in second and even third generation offspring, Neal became lost. Glancing around the table, he saw some of the others too were mystified, and as eager. This wasn't shop talk. It was glimpsing the first faint blazes on new trails.

Late in the afternoon the group broke up. Peter had suggested several topics for future talks and promised to outline others. Each would be of practical value to a rancher who was trying to discover what might be accomplished in mutations.

"Don't make your stuff too scientific," Ned Baxter said as he shook hands. "We're ranchers. We've got to feed and raise these mink and get the pelts to market, as well as study books. See you two at the ranch tomorrow."

When they were alone, Peter said, "Let's go to a movie. We've had enough genetics."

Neal was grateful for the darkness of the theater. His thoughts raced like a motor without a governor. He knew some of his ideas were sound, and he suspected others might be plain crazy, but he was not ready to talk to Peter about them. He might not even tell Tom. It was as though he had climbed a mountain, to behold a new land beckoning him to the hazards and the thrills of exploration. Until this afternoon he had been proud of his knowledge of genetics. Now he realized he had only begun his ABC's.

Next day they arrived at the Baxter fur farm in midmorning. The visit must be short for Neal planned to take the afternoon train home.

"At least you'll see the new mutations," Peter said. "Ned Baxter has them all."

Neal had imagined what a large mink ranch might be, but as they walked through refrigerator rooms, feed room with electric grinder and big mixer, a pelting house, carpenter shop and laboratory where a veterinarian treated sick animals and made autopsies, Neal realized how far he and Tom had still to go. Afterward Ned Baxter led them to the pens.

"You'll see different types of housing in each unit," he said. "We're always trying to make a better pen."

They stopped first to look at silverblus. It was strange to see this mutation on another ranch, for somehow this color had been Tom's and his own project. But after his first glance Neal knew what Norman Whitlock had meant when he had said theirs were different.

"We've gone in for a medium shade," Baxter said. "The lighter tones are apt not to be so clear a color."

"But they can be!" Neal exclaimed.

Ned Baxter looked up sharply. "You have light ones?" he asked. "Peter told me you had a fine strain. I'd like to see them."

"Why don't you make us a visit?"

"I will sometime. Can't this year but I'll probably see your skins at the winter sale."

"We hope you will," Neal said.

"Whitlock and I had wondered if theirs wasn't a different mutation than silverblus on other ranches," Peter said.

"They might be," Baxter said. "Like those in Oregon. We never knew until we crossed them and the kits went back to standard. It would be interesting to find out."

They walked past the pens of Kohinur and blufrost. Neal was fascinated by these new variations but was not drawn to them as he had been so instantly when Tom had shown him the platinums.

"You don't care for pattern mutants, do you?" Ned Baxter said. "Neither do I, but they may be valuable in the combinations. We're beginning to think they'll sharpen color." He walked on and stopped at a separate group of pens. "Here's what Peter came to see. The pastels. That's a fine male. I'll get

a catching box so you can see him." Peter bent over the captive mink. "You've got a real blond tone here!" he exclaimed. "And a warm one!"

"That's what I'm trying for," Baxter said. "Give me a couple more years and I'll have something every bit as beautiful as the silverblu."

Neal believed he would. The mink's coat carried a promise of beauty. Already it had the hint of an elusive shading which made the silverblus so captivating.

"Were the mink you sold to Jack Kenyon this shade?" Peter asked.

"Yes. He bought a couple of trios and he'll buy another if he can afford it."

"You're not selling breeding stock!" Neal gasped.

"Why not?" Baxter said. "He's paying a thousand dollars a trio. Perhaps I figure a bit differently than some ranchers. Spread a new mutation. Give another breeder a chance to see what he can do with it. That way, when you put them on the market, you've got enough to make a showing. Besides," and he rapped sharply on the wooden frame, "any of us can be hit by food poisoning or distemper, and you wouldn't want a whole mutation to be cleaned out, would you?"

"How many will you sell?" Neal asked.

"Only one more trio before this breeding season. The male here and those two females yonder. All proven producers."

"And a good color," Peter said. "I'd like to get a picture. Think the shade would show up well?"

"Should against the snow," Baxter said.

"I'll get my camera. We'll have time, Neal, to catch your train at the junction." He started toward the house. "I'll be back in a minute."

Baxter handed a pair of heavy leather gloves to Neal. "We might as well get ready to hold the mink," he said.

"Would you sell this trio to Clark and Bartlett?" Neal asked.

"If they take 'em before Kenyon does." Baxter looked up. "You want to work with pastels, don't you?"

"I'd like nothing better," Neal said, "but I'd have to see my partner. When must you have the money?"

"On delivery's soon enough, though I got to be sure you're serious about it."

"Like ten per cent down?"

"Fair enough."

Neal looked toward the gate and saw Peter returning. "Wait here," he said.

He started on a run and Peter, a few feet inside the fence, stopped.

"Can you let me have a hundred dollars?" Neal asked. "I'll pay you back as soon as I get my money out of the bank."

"Would a check do?" Peter asked.

"Baxter'll take your check and hold the trio until I talk to Tom."

"Do you always make up your mind as fast as this?"

"I'd thought it over all the time you two were talking. I've got the money in the bank. Only Tom has got to sign a release."

It was settled in a few moments. Peter photographed the trio, promised Neal a picture if the color came out well.

"By that time we'll have the mink," Neal said.

In late afternoon, as the train approached White Pine, Neal had not yet decided on the exact wording of what he must say to Tom. It would be an argument, and Tom must be convinced. And then he realized with a start that only little more than two years ago he had been traveling on this same train determined to have Tom release his money for a western venture. So much had happened in those years. He flushed, thinking how childish had been his arguments. He owed Tom a lot for not letting him have that thousand dollars then. Now he had the money for something he really wanted.

14

Tom turned off his evening news broadcast and said for the tenth time since Neal's return, "I can't see why we got to have a new kind of mink when we ain't yet put over platinums."

Neal had told of the pastel trio almost as soon as he got off the train. On the drive home and through the evening meal, he recounted many of his other discoveries. Tom listened and asked questions. He was delighted with the association's promotion, although he refused to use the new name, silverblu, and probably never would.

Neal didn't care what Tom called them. This was not the important issue. He knew that somehow, some way, he must make Tom glimpse the vision of what mutation breeding might really be. It had captured him so completely he found difficulty even in talking about it, but he knew beyond question that working with these mutants would be a never-finished adventure. It held so much—a quest for untried paths, an unceasing search for the way to new beauty, fresh successes, and even failures. Tom should understand this. He might not know genetics but he had spent five lonely years raising a new mink because he thought it pretty.

But after the dishes were washed, Tom acted as though this were a usual evening, until suddenly he turned off the radio and demanded again why they needed this new color. Neal tried to phrase his reply. Once he had thought that never again would they fail to see alike as partners. Now he knew this could not be, although the bond that held them would always grow stronger.

"After we've put over platinums, what are we going to do?" Neal asked.

"Go on raising 'em," Tom said, and then his tone became slightly combative. "They're pretty enough so's a man would want to. You and me would always enjoy platinums. Raising 'em ain't like buildin' a log cabin and seein' the thing finished of a sudden. Fur is different. Every breeding season you got new young and—" He stopped and saw the trap he had fallen into. "Besides," he ended almost fiercely, "that thousand dollars is for your education."

"Do you suppose I wouldn't get one now, even if I don't have a dollar?" Neal demanded.

He waited, and then when Tom did not answer he went on with growing conviction. "Because, Tom, I've got to have an education! It's what I've been trying to tell you! When I sat in that hotel and listened, and sometimes didn't know what Peter was talking about, when I knew the others didn't, I made up my mind I'd get to the bottom of genetics. I won't do it this year. I won't do it next. But some day I'm going to go as far as anyone who isn't a real geneticist can go."

"You've done right well so far, lad."

"I thought so until I discovered how little I know. Now I see what I've got to learn! One mutation isn't enough and these pastels won't be enough either. But they'll be a beginning, and when other ranchers are only getting started. We're late now but we can catch up. Maybe we can make the new color better. Cross pastels with something else. We'll buy other mutants. Some day we'll have all there are." His voice rose. "That's the only way to be a real mutation breeder!"

Neal hadn't meant to say so much. Probably Tom thought he was crazy. He'd even thought so himself as he sat in that darkened movie theater, watching a picture he couldn't remember. He stood up. His hands were shaking.

"Well, you asked—" he began.

"I didn't know it meant that much to you, lad," Tom said. "We'll go to Bill Danby tomorrow early and he'll know how to get money right away. I've been keeping what little cash I had in his bank for a long time and he'll be glad to do us a favor."

At ten o'clock next morning Neal and Tom were in Mr. Danby's office. The banker listened and smiled.

"Doesn't seem too difficult," he said. "We can have the money telegraphed. Cost you a little, but if you're in a hurry—"

"Hurry!" Tom said. "Neal don't like owing a friend a hundred dollars any more'n I would."

"Under what name do you want the deposit?" Mr. Danby asked.

"Clark and Bartlett," Neal said.

"And while you're fixing things, switch my savings over to that partnership," Tom added. "Might as well have everything shipshape."

So the new firm became official. Tom signed the necessary papers, the thousand dollars did not remain in the bank overnight, and the pastel trio arrived in time to be thoroughly at home before breeding season. Neal planned to raise both pure-bred pastels and half bloods from which to retrieve the color the next year.

"Pure-bred standard, pure-bred platinum, pure-bred pastel, half blood plats, half blood pastels!" Tom said. "All those letters and figures on the cards—we'll have to hire a bookkeeper to tell us what they mean."

"I was thinking about that last night," Neal said. "Next year we'll cross pastels and platinums. Kits will be brown but they'll be half bloods for both strains. Then when we've mated them we'll get litters with three times as many dark kits as pastels and platinums."

"That's going backwards!" Tom said.

"Just to get a running start. Out of those litters we're sure to have one kit that's a blend of the mutations."

"And no telling what it will look like?"

"A blend of those two colors can't help being beautiful!" Neal exclaimed. "It's the one-in-sixteen animal that breeders dream about. I'll show you how the genes would pair up," and he reached for paper and pencil.

Tom moved away. "Don't draw any more of those things for me," he said. "From now on you cook up the mixtures. Get the mink, and I'll help raise 'em." He stopped and chuckled. "And I'd say we're going to have plenty of kits this year, if any man can guess the mind o' a female mink. Even the old girls who've usually been a bit slack around their nests are carrying in bedding."

Whelping could never fail to be a time of tension with a farm's increase hanging in the balance, but this year so much depended on the outcome—a trio of a new mutation which had cost a thousand dollars, a platinum crop after eight years of work, everything they had planned and dreamed of. Tom and Neal listened at nest boxes, wouldn't believe the chorus of chirps could mean large litters, doubted even that the percentage of misses could be as low as the tiny sounds indicated.

“Stands to reason we couldn’t have so few blanks in a year when every kit counts,” Tom said pessimistically.

He continued to maintain this until they took the first rough count, and then refused to believe the tally. Neal began to figure the percentage of production but Tom stopped him.

“Maybe I’m superstitious,” he said, “but that’s askin’ for bad luck. Something would be sure to happen before we could make certain we done that well.”

Two weeks later even Tom could no longer doubt good fortune. Pastel females had young, litters of the half bloods ran heavily to platinum, and platinum mothers had been big producers.

“They couldn’t have done better had they known how much we needed plats,” Tom said.

“Why don’t you give some credit to the fellow who started all this and made sure the parent stock was prolific?” Neal asked.

Tom said any fur farmer had to know that much, and then waited as Neal worked out the percentages.

“Three point three young to each female!” Neal announced. “That’s almost a record with mutations! I’d never hoped we’d have such luck.”

“Luck!” Tom jeered. “That was work and using the head.” Then he added, “Your head maybe.”

“Both heads,” Neal said.

They solemnly shook hands, and Neal realized that this was the first time they had done so since their first meeting. They looked again at the percentage and still found it difficult to believe. Both were silent, and that was strange, for fellows who’d had such news should be laughing and making jokes. Neal didn’t even want to. He was thinking of the winter sale, wondering if people would like the platinums, or if they’d even buy them. And he knew Tom was thinking of the same thing.

“Looks like we’ll pelt close to three hundred platinum,” Tom said. “And three years back I was set up about having twenty! Three hundred is a lot of skins when you got no idea what they’ll bring.” Then he brightened. “Do you suppose, lad, three hundred is enough for them to grade out a top bundle?”

“Don’t,” Neal said. “That’s where I’m superstitious.”

"Neither of us likes to be topped," Tom said, "and after all these years of saying nothing could touch our platinums, I don't know how we'd take it if the trade felt different."

Neal did not answer. He felt like one who thought he had run a race, only to discover it was but half over. Few men had examined their platinums. He was sure they were clearer and more glamorous than the only other herd he had seen, yet that did not carry the reassurance it had five months earlier. Their crop would be but a handful in the big January offering, and perhaps the promotion scheme would fail. No one could guess how eastern fur houses would feel until the actual day of the auction, when the result of years of work would be determined in a few hours.

Tom arose. "Ought to see how the wiring is coming at DM's," he said, but a few feet away he stopped. "Six months isn't so long to wait, specially when anyone's as busy as you and me'll be this summer."

Work on the guesthouse had begun with the warm days. The fireplace was built and drew perfectly; the local mason had never made a better. Two oil furnaces had arrived and installation would be finished in a week. Tom had become a driver, and as demanding of perfection in others as in himself. Neal was often called on to smooth out misunderstandings.

"But we got to be the more particular since DM can't be here until July," Tom said.

Peggy and Mrs. Meadows were coming too and expected to make a longer stay, although DM had written that nothing could be definite in a year of shortages and war effort. His warning proved prophetic for in the first week of July he telephoned that he was leaving immediately for England. He had hoped to spend a few days at Lake Atikwa since the job in England might take six months.

"But the girls and Sang will be there for a few weeks anyway," he told Tom, "and they'll have ideas on the finishing touches of the house." Then he asked for Neal, to say good-bye. "Take care of that crop of platinums," he said. "If you need anything, extra money, anything at all, call my secretary. She knows about you fellows. I want to feel that—well, if you happened to hit a tough spot, you'd call on me."

"We will," Neal said, "and thanks, DM. But from now on in, we ought to be all right."

Neal repeated the message. Tom was touched, although he said, "DM ought to know that if we couldn't raise a crop, once we got it, we don't

deserve help. Any bad luck that's going to hit us will be in January."

This was as close as either admitted the doubts which dogged them when they looked at the kits growing so lustily, built new pens or moved pelters to the furring row. The last required discrimination. They could not afford to weaken the herd, nor did they wish to ship pelts which would not do their platinums justice.

"By New Year we'll be scraping pennies from the bottom of the barrel," Tom said. "We got to bring in money. Not that you and me won't manage to tough it out," he added quickly.

Of course they'd "tough it out," Neal thought, though toughing it out was different from the fur ranch he had planned. He was young, could afford to wait, but Tom deserved some leisure after the years he'd worked. At such times Neal wondered if he'd had a right to urge Tom to wager three hundred skins of a strange new color.

Peggy and Mrs. Meadows arrived in August. Many of the large summer houses had not been opened. There was no gas for the runabout and little possibility of having visitors.

"We'll just have to be a nuisance to you and Neal," Peggy told Tom cheerfully.

"If it gets too bad," Tom said, "we'll start you building the house."

Neither woman wielded a hammer but every discussion of shelves and cupboards or arrangement of closets became a conference of four. That Peggy's ideas were practical, astonished the men. She was quick to spot a wasted space or an inconvenience.

"More and more, I can see how much she's like DM," Tom said. "Notices little things like he does."

Inevitably the gas shortage made the life of the two families communal. They pooled shopping trips to town, fished from canoes, gathered vegetables from the Clark garden and often shared meals. When at last the house was completed, Peggy said they must have a housewarming.

"But the place ain't even furnished!" Tom said. "All I got built is the table."

"We'll manage," Peggy said. "You have only to come for supper."

Tom and Neal were amazed at the transformation. Rugs and furniture had been carried from DM's house and worked magic in what had been a bare room. The evening was cool enough for a fire and they ate at the candle-lighted refectory table. Tom looked about the room, at the drapes, chairs and pictures.

"You people took a lot of trouble dragging all this stuff over just to show what this house could look like," he said. "Some ways, I like it better'n DM's."

"So do I," Peggy said. "I helped build it. It's been fun—this summer."

Afterwards from the veranda they watched the moonlight on the water. Peggy said the lake looked wonderful and she and Neal went for a paddle. They had used a canoe so often in the last weeks they paddled well together. She had learned the short quick Ojibwa stroke from Tom, and Neal enjoyed the pace she set as bowman. He thought how companionable paddling was, almost like dancing—two people sharing a common rhythm. He and Tom almost never talked in a canoe and he and Peggy had fallen into the same habit.

They swung down the lake. Her figure in the bow was outlined in the shaft of moonlight. She seemed so small, and yet had strength and vigor, and he liked the way her hair curled around her head. She was different than any girl he had known. He was thinking of this and wondering what her life was like in the city when she said suddenly that it was time to go home.

"But wasn't it marvelous to have a night like this before I leave," she said.

Until then he hadn't thought their visit was almost over. They were leaving in two days. "It will be lonesome around here," he said.

"I hope so, Neal."

"Will you be here for Christmas?" he asked.

"DM doesn't expect to be back from England. I wish he were. Then we'd come and watch you and Tom get the platinums ready for market."

"They'll be in New York by Christmas. Sale's in January."

She stopped paddling and turned. "I don't see how you and Tom can stand the waiting! I couldn't. Janet says you aren't half as calm as you pretend to be."

"We couldn't be after three years," Neal said. "Next time you see us we'll either be real mutation breeders or—"

"Or what?"

"Or mutation breeders."

"Yes," she said. "DM told me that's the way it is with you."

They had reached the float. Neal carried the canoe into the boathouse. He thought she had gone on but she was waiting when he came out. She thrust out a hand.

"Good luck, Neal," she said. "You know I'm pulling for you."

They walked up the path. Somehow, he felt they had really said good-bye.

In October the pelters were color prime and Neal thought their coats were the loveliest Tom's strain had yet produced, clear as crystal and of an incredible delicacy of hue.

"In another month, when they've furred out and lost that flatness, they'll be something to see," Tom said.

Week by week the mink became more glorious. Neal often walked past the rows of pelters and frequently he found Tom there. As the fur neared perfection they examined animals and estimated the approximate pelting schedule. Each mink would be prime only a few days, and each must be harvested at the moment of its supreme excellence. Tom said it was lucky they had worked out a good system when they had only a small crop. Pelting almost three hundred mink would be a big job for two men, but when the first had primed, Tom and Neal were ready. Stretching boards were made and the tool shed converted to a pelting room.

They went at it hard, every day and all day. Tom stripped the skins, Neal scraped off fat and bits of tissue. They worked fast but carefully. Each pelt was precious and must be handled delicately. How precious could not be known until after the fur auction. The two talked of it often as they worked.

"No matter what they bring," Tom said, "when critters have done as good a job growing fur as these mink, it's up to us not to slack our job."

They knew they hadn't when the skins were dry at last and laid out in a long row on the pelting table.

"Two hundred and ninety-seven!" Tom said. "Why didn't we make it a round three hundred? But we're sending every one we can spare at that."

They sorted and compared. Lying side by side, the pelts showed minute gradations of color imperceptible in the live animal. Tom put the lightest skins with the sharpest clarity of color at one end.

"There's more'n eighty here that'll make a bundle which can't be beat by anyone," he said.

They tied these together, even though they knew the fur grader of the auction company would have the final decision as to assortment and size of lots, but making up the bundle seemed the last service they could pay their harvest. Dressing, lotting and selling must be done by others. Neal thought of this when they left the pelts at the express office. He wished he could go with them. Prosperous ranchers did attend the auction in New York and for the first time Neal almost regretted the thousand dollars, until he thought of what that trio of pastel meant.

"Suppose there's anyone at the auction company we can ask to send a telegram when the sale is over?" Tom asked as they drove home.

"We can telephone them," Neal said.

"Might be spending money to hear bad news," Tom said, and after a moment he added, "and if it is bad, we ain't got anything to spend."

The next year might be hard. Last summer's wages would carry them through the next few months, and no further. If platinums brought even as much as dark standards, they could get through another season but could not expand. If the public refused platinums, it meant disaster. Neal knew all this even better than Tom. Figures based on the various suppositions were all set down in his notebooks, and until the auction they could be only suppositions.

Christmas was near, and they had no plans. Tom, who'd always made much of it, said they might celebrate in mid-January but two days before Christmas he succumbed to the holiday spirit and drove to town for his annual shopping trip. He loved to prowl through stores and buy presents and when Neal heard the truck as he was cooking supper, he expected Tom to appear package-laden. Tom's arms were empty, however, when he entered the kitchen.

"Got something for us both," he said, and laid an envelope on the table. Excitement was in his voice. "We don't need to wait for Christmas to open this."

Neal drew a check from the envelope.

"Think four hundred will be enough?" Tom asked. "You got to get to New York and stay three days or more. Bill Danby said this would do it, but he'll loan what I ask him."

"You went to the bank and borrowed money!" Neal exclaimed.

"You got to be in New York, lad. If platinums don't go over, we need to know why. I've never put a mortgage on the farm before, but if our mink ain't as good as the others—well, we got to know that too."

15

NEAL arrived in New York the day before the auction. It was midmorning and he had not eaten breakfast. He had spent the previous night sitting in a day coach and as he went through the station gates with a throng of fellow travelers he knew he should eat, find a hotel room and freshen up. Instead he looked for a sign directing him to the Hotel Pennsylvania. The pre-showing of silverblu pelts was being held there and had dictated his choice of railroad. He could not afford to lose precious hours getting lost in one of the world's largest cities, and the White Pine ticket agent had told him the station and hotel were across the street from each other and connected by a tunnel.

Neal asked directions and went through to the hotel lobby. He stopped before a bank of elevators and was about to inquire where the fur was being shown when the starter waved toward a car.

"Takes you to the fur show," he said. "Top floor."

Neal thanked him and was wondering how the man had known his destination when four men entered the elevator. There could be no doubt but that they were ranchers, outdoor men in their best town suits. One, who reminded Neal of Tom, asked another how he thought the show was going.

"I don't know," was the answer. "You never can tell. They don't say anything. They never do."

Neal wondered who "they" were, and hoped the next remarks would explain this, and then the elevator stopped. The four stepped out, checked their coats at a long counter and walked through a wide doorway to a large room beyond. The check girl looked at Neal inquiringly. He picked up his bag and turned to the elevator. Now that he had found the fur show, he could get settled.

On the street he looked around. Somewhere, and not too far away, there must be a hotel he could afford. Carrying his bag, he walked south, and within a few short blocks he found it. The narrow red building was dingy and the lobby shabby.

"The room will be three dollars," the girl at the desk said. "Unless you want it by the week."

"I'll be here only two nights," he said.

Tom had urged him to stay longer, but he planned to leave the day of the auction. Borrowed money should not be wasted. The room was small and its only window faced a brick wall. If this cost three dollars a day, he wondered what the Hotel Pennsylvania would charge, and Tom had suggested he stay there. Neal washed, changed his shirt and went out to find a restaurant.

Now that he was settled he could think about New York. The only large city he had been in was Chicago, and then just to change from one railroad to another. He had known New York would be different, but he was not prepared to find the streets so jammed with trucks and the sidewalks so filled with people. Men dashed out of doors and hurried into others. Boys pushed wheeled racks of women's suits and dresses through the throngs and between vehicles. Suddenly Neal found himself dodging a rack of pelts, then one of short fox jackets, and he realized he was in the center of the fur world.

This was where skins were dressed, fur prices established and pelts transformed into garments. To this very spot, he and Tom had been shipping their mink. In these streets were the men who would determine the future of silverblus—his own future. Everything he and Tom had planned depended on what was decided by their bids tomorrow, and he wondered if these were the men the rancher had meant by "they."

After he had eaten, Neal returned to the mink show. The great room was crowded now. Groups of men talked in the center. Others in long white coats worked at tables beneath great windows so closely spaced the wall seemed made of glass. In the rear, racks of pelts were banked one behind another, and from each rack hung bundles of silverblus. Neal had wondered what an offering of twenty-five hundred would look like. Now he knew. He was conscious of a thrill as he walked toward them. These were skins which never would have existed had not fur ranchers worked so many years to produce them.

White-coated attendants wheeled racks to men working at the windows, wheeled other racks back. Neal walked down the long rows looking for his and Tom's pelts. He had begun to fear they were not there when a rack was pushed into an empty space beside him and he saw names on a ticket, *Clark and Bartlett. Number 1820*. The pelts were held on a large wire ring and he lifted them down. The bundle contained seventy. Dressed, they seemed

softer and more delicate. Neal was thinking these were the very skins he and Tom had bundled when an attendant reached for them.

"This 1820?" he asked. "It's wanted."

He carried it to a man working at a table and Neal followed. The man did not seem aware of Neal as he laid the ring on the table and went over each skin carefully. Neal wanted to say he wouldn't find a cut or blemish, and then realized this man wouldn't care to hear another's opinion. His face was expressionless. Occasionally he wrote something in a notebook. Neal, studying the impassive features and the eyes behind glasses, could not decide if he liked or even detested the color. The inspection took a long time as he felt of the leather, turned pelts inside out, laid them beside each other fanlike, stood off to survey them, and then repeated the performance in comparing sides and bellies. Neal could not have torn himself away. At last an attendant appeared.

"There's a call for 1820 when you're through," he said.

"Take it," and Neal thought there was only disdain in the voice. "And bring me," he stopped to consult his notes, "1819 and 1818."

These were laid on the table. Neal moved closer to see the name and was amazed to find *Clark and Bartlett*. He hadn't thought the man would look at more of theirs, but the same painstaking inspection was begun. Neal was almost at his elbow and he looked up.

"Did you want something?" he asked, irritated.

"No," Neal said, and moved away.

He considered approaching another table, but all these white-coated men worked alone, with only an attendant to carry bundles of pelts. Perhaps they did not like to be watched, so he returned to the rack where he had found their skins, hoping to see the others. The rack was empty but a card listed 1817, 18, 19 and 20. Apparently those were the offerings of Clark and Bartlett.

Neal walked past other racks and he recognized names of breeders and ranches, even those of the four men he had met in Fort Atkinson. He'd like to meet them again, especially Ned Baxter, and as he walked to the center of the room he saw Norman Whitlock.

"Neal!" the editor exclaimed. "I'd looked for you and thought you hadn't come. Where's Tom?"

Neal said he had come alone, arriving that morning.

"That's too bad. You missed the ranchers' banquet last night. Now everything's about over—except the shouting. Yesterday was the big day here. All the ranchers were in, and the fashion experts and every buyer." He looked around. "I don't see any of the mutation breeders here now. They and their wives are seeing the sights. Their one big bust of the year. I wouldn't be here except I had to see a fur man."

"Are they the ones in white coats at the tables?" Neal asked.

"Yes. I'd forgotten this is your first auction. Know who any of them are?"

"No, but I'd like to, especially that big man wearing glasses, halfway down the room."

Whitlock grinned. "You pick 'em," he said. "That's Becker. One of the biggest and toughest. Hardest worker of them all. He'll be making notes until there's not enough daylight to see the fur."

"Do you think he likes silverblus?"

"If he did he wouldn't tell even himself for fear someone might guess he was going to bid."

"He was looking at our bundles," Neal said.

"So were all the rest. Those are fine pelts. I never saw silverblu any clearer than in that 1820 bundle, and you've got another almost as good. Everyone will be watching those two lots at the auction."

"How do you think it will go?" Neal asked.

"Mink is a strong seller. Extra dark Yukons brought thirty-two dollars last week. That's getting close to record prices."

"But will the silverblu sell?"

"It'll sell, but don't ask me to guess what it'll bring. You can hear anything, believe anything! Some say it's the finest mink ever produced. Others say they wouldn't have it as a gift, that it won't hold its color and people will be tired of it before coats get into the shops. Guesses run anywhere from twenty dollars up. We'll know before noon tomorrow. Sale will be over quick. They're offering only silverblus in the morning."

A man at a nearby table took off his white coat, handed it to an attendant and closed his brief case. "I'll be with you in a minute, Norman," he called.

Whitlock nodded. “That’s George Zires, one of the best fur men in the country,” he told Neal. “I promised to go to his shop. He has something he wants to show me,” and then as Neal started to move away, he said quickly, “Wait until he comes. I’d like to introduce you.”

As the man came toward them, stopping to shake hands or say a few words to friends, sensitivity showed in the keen thin features, and intelligence too. His dark eyes were arresting and in startling contrast to the thatch of white hair.

“This is Neal Bartlett of Clark and Bartlett,” Norman Whitlock said.

Mr. Zires glanced sharply at Neal, then thrust out a hand. “I’m very happy to meet a member of your firm,” he said. “You have beautiful mink. That is, if silverblu can be called beautiful. I’ll still have to think about that.”

“You’ll have decided by tomorrow morning, George,” Norman Whitlock jeered. “Don’t expect Neal to be impressed by your caution. He made up his mind years ago.”

“Not too many years,” Mr. Zires said, smiling.

“My partner’s been working with them for nine years,” Neal said. “He was one of the early pioneers.”

Zires nodded. “Yes, I understand it’s taken a long time.”

As they left, Whitlock turned to Neal.

“I’m sorry I didn’t know you were here,” he said. “I’ll be busy early, but we might get together later, if you’re free. Do you know people in New York?”

Neal saw the other was concerned about him and said he had promised to visit friends. He did not dread a solitary evening. He was too tense, too excited, in no mood to meet strangers. His spirits soared to elation, plunged to despair, soared again as he reviewed the afternoon. He had expected to learn at least something of the expectations for silverblu and had only discovered no one knew, nor could know, until the auction. He considered sending Tom a night letter about the 1820 bundle and then saw its uselessness.

After he had eaten supper, he went to Fifth Avenue, boarded a bus and rode past stores, apartment buildings and old mansions to the north end of Central Park. On his return he got off at the shopping district and walked, stopping to look in windows, at clothes, furs and jewelry, things the public, which must pass judgment on the silverblus, would buy. The names of shops

which appeared in national magazines were familiar to him. Others he recognized as authoritative by the luxuriousness of the display. This was a different New York than he had seen in the morning, but it rounded out the picture. And it carried a challenge. Even if silverblus proved a disastrous failure, some day he and Tom would raise mink of such beauty New York could not refuse them.

He went to bed, but his sleep was troubled. Toward morning he awakened often and looked at his watch to make sure he would not be late for the auction, and he was one of the first to arrive at the big room. Buyers drifted in, found seats in the front and studied catalogues. Fur ranchers, usually accompanied by wives who seemed as concerned as their husbands, sat in the rear. Now there was no mistaking ranchers and buyers. Not only did they look different, they were different. Ranchers were anxious and preoccupied, buyers evasive and uncommunicative, defending their thoughts even from men next to them.

Gradually the room filled up. Neal saw the ranchers he had met at Fort Atkinson. Ned Baxter waved. Norman Whitlock entered, saw Neal and joined him.

"Let's find seats farther front," he said, "and on the side so we can see the bidding signals. Fur, as you probably know, is a silent auction."

Neal hadn't known. "I've never been to a fur auction," he said, as much to make it easy for the editor as to encourage information.

"You should study the buyers' signals," Whitlock said. "Each is different. Becker raises his pencil point when he ups his bid. Zires twiddles his left ear. Some rub their noses. Brown, the big man in the third row, only raises his eyes. At first you won't know who's bidding against each other. Half the time the bidders themselves don't. But you'll get on to it after a while."

The auctioneer entered and arranged his papers. Four men followed and took their places, two at either side.

"Callers," Whitlock said. "Need that many to watch the edges of the crowd for bids. You're lucky in the auctioneer. Costain keeps the crowd happy but he never lets the bidding stop as long as there's a chance to start a contest."

Neal realized that without the editor he would have been lost. Whitlock opened his catalogue and Neal saw he'd made notations under lot numbers —names of producers and impressions of the fur. Now Neal knew what he

should have done the previous afternoon. Next year he'd come two days before the auction.

The first lot number appeared on the board behind the auctioneer. A hush settled over the room.

"One of Baxter's bundles," Whitlock whispered. "A bit dark, but clear."

The bidding began at fifty dollars, went up so quickly a caller's recognition of a new offer came almost simultaneously with the preceding cry of "Up." Neal had only a confused impression—a group of men, silent and apparently not moving a muscle, an auctioneer repeating astounding figures, the callers' "Ups" a sharp staccato. The hammer fell at one hundred and eighty dollars a skin. Neal blinked.

"What an auction!" Whitlock exclaimed. "Almost six times the price of standard! We're seeing history!"

A buzz ran around the room. Ranchers leaned forward, eyes alight. Buyers sat immobile as bidding began on the second lot. It closed at ninety dollars.

"Reade's mink were a bit muddy," Whitlock said.

As lot after lot was offered, a growing tension seized the room. A few brought as low as sixty but many went to a hundred and more, and there was no foretelling when a contest might begin. Bundles sold quickly.

"Costain's smart," Whitlock said. "He's keeping them on their toes. The buyers know they've got to pay to get these silverblus!"

The auction continued. Men turned pages of their catalogues. Neal had learned to watch for signals, had seen an upraised pencil, a hand go to a face, a head lifted. Yet often fur was sold when neither he nor the editor knew who had bought it. At last they reached the eighteen hundred lots. Neal saw the number 1817 and stiffened. A moment later the hammer marked the price at one hundred and five dollars.

"That was fair," Whitlock said. "It's your poorest bundle."

Neal was thinking this was seventy-five dollars more than they'd ever received for their best dark standard. He tried to multiply eighty-seven pelts by one hundred and five. He thought it came out around nine thousand dollars, but he couldn't believe it. Then 1818 and 1819 were offered. The first a seventy-five pelt bundle, sold at one hundred and fifty. Neal gave up trying to figure that total. When the next appeared on the board, Whitlock jabbed him with an elbow.

"It's your second best," he said. "Watch Zires."

The sixty-five pelt bundle sold at two hundred dollars a skin. Neal had not seen Zires move a hand, but Whitlock's eyes were gleaming.

"Told you George would go for that!" he said. "Saw him looking at it yesterday."

When 1820 appeared on the board, Neal was beyond speaking. A pulse pounded in his temple. He felt the very atmosphere gathering voltage. Norman Whitlock leaned forward, absorbed and excited as though he were witnessing a spectacle.

"This will be a scrap," he said. "Don't take your eyes off Becker. When he wants something, he'll pay anything to get it."

Neal listened to the auctioneer. "One hundred and fifty!" Up by five-dollar jumps to two hundred! On to two hundred and twenty-five! On again to two hundred and fifty. Neal was choking. He saw Becker raise his pencil, not once but again and again. The hammer came down at last. Two hundred and sixty-five!

"That, gentlemen," the auctioneer said, "is more than two hundred dollars better than I've ever seen a mink pelt bring. And I've been selling mink for more than thirty years."

Whitlock was shaking Neal.

"You've topped the auction!" he shouted. "If I never see mink sold again, I won't miss anything. Seventy pelts in that lot?"

Neal didn't answer. He couldn't. He knew he should be able to figure what the bundle had brought, but when he tried he couldn't believe eighteen thousand dollars. It wasn't possible. A real ranch with the right equipment had tantalized him too long.

The few lots to follow sold quickly. After the 1820 bundle, anything was an anticlimax. Only dimly did Neal hear sums repeated and the sharp sound of the hammer.

"And that, gentlemen, finishes the offering of silverblus," the auctioneer said. "A hundred-per-cent sale. That too is a record."

Neal heard chairs pushed back, saw excited groups forming.

"I've got to phone Tom," he said.

Tom was all he could think of as he pushed his way toward the door. He knew he should give Tom totals, be able to tell him to the dollar what the sale had brought them. But how could he be definite when he still wasn't used to a sum like fifty thousand dollars? Tom would understand that.

Neal was dimly conscious a few ranchers tried to shake his hand, but he didn't stop. Time enough for that after he'd told Tom the news. He didn't stop when he heard a girl's voice, though it was vaguely familiar.

"Neal! Neal!"

He pushed on, heard it again.

"Neal! Neal! Stop!"

He swung around. That Peggy should be rushing toward him was only a part of the general unreality. She was laughing, and crying too. He blinked stupidly.

"How'd you get here?" he demanded.

"Think I'd be in New York when they held this auction and not come!" she cried. "Think I'd miss it after knowing how you and Tom had worked! A man next to me said there had never been an auction like it. Oh, Neal! I'm so glad! I'm as excited as you are!"

"You couldn't be," he said. "Now I've got—"

"And we'll go to meet DM this afternoon when he gets in from England. He'll be so excited when he hears it. And so happy!"

"I got to phone Tom," Neal repeated.

"And I want to talk to Tom too. Oh, Neal! To have this happen to him after all these years! Let's find a phone! And quick!"

"We can talk an hour if we want to!" Even Tom would forget toll charges. "He doesn't know any of this yet. And he's got to hear about this auction. It's a crime he couldn't watch us top the sale. And he's waiting beside the phone right now."

She fell into step beside him. Their feet were eager as they crossed the hallway hand in hand.

THE END

by the same author

WILDERNESS WIFE
THREE'S A CREW
TWO ENDS TO OUR SHOESTRING
ADVENTURE NORTH
FARTHER NORTH
FOX ISLAND
WINDIGO
THE SILVER STRAIN
BRIGHT WITH SILVER

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.

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[The end of *A Good Partner*, by Kathrene Pinkerton.]