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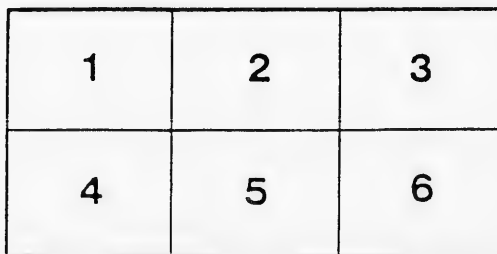
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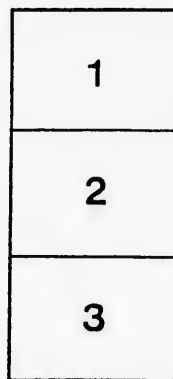
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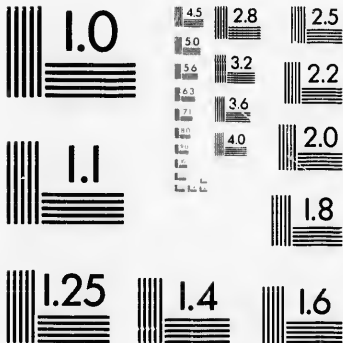
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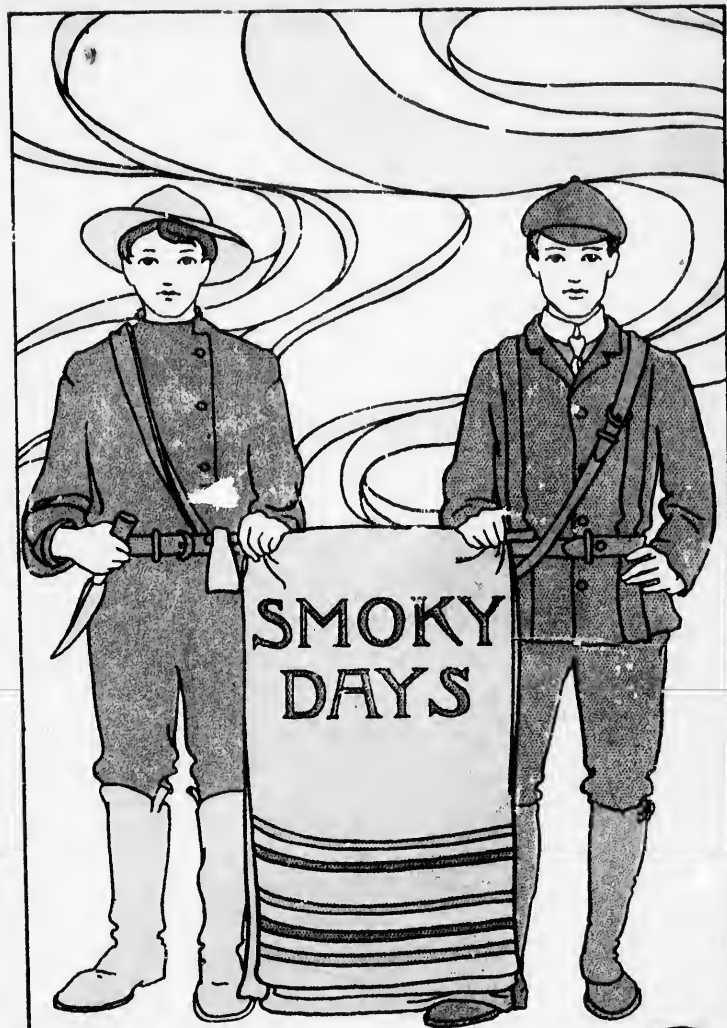
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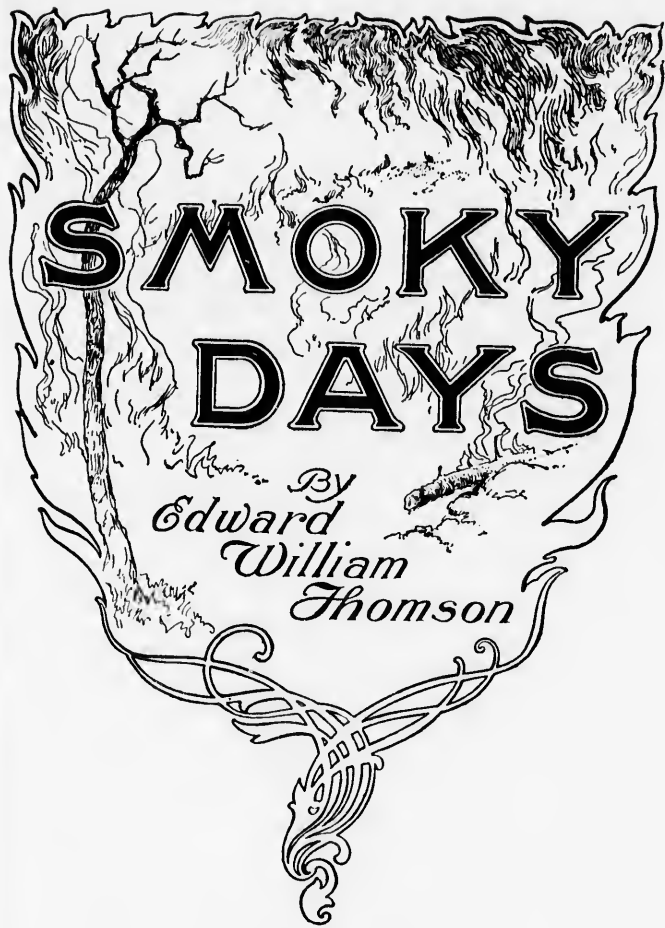
"SPLASHING, WADING, AND OFTEN PLENGING, THEY STAGGERED
ON." — Page 217.



STAGGERED

THE
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SMOKY DAYS.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRE-FIGHTERS.

“HUSH, there’s mother’s good little girl! Hush, Ann Susan! I thought I heard Peter shouting.”

“Shut yer head, Ann Susan! Don’t you hear yer maw?” said David Armstrong, the pioneer.

Ann Susan, weary of the smoky and still air that had covered her backwoods world for three days, rubbed her sore eyes and screamed more vigorously. By night the smoke shrouded away the moon and stars. By day the sun was never distinctly visible, except when in mid-sky, where it now hung, red and solid looking, apparently little farther above the Armstrongs’ clearing

than the pines on top of the small mountain they called the Hump.

"Hush, Ann Susan! Hush, baby!" said Mary, the eldest daughter, rattling two iron spoons together. "Look what Mary's doing. See what a good little girl Eliza Jane is. Listen if brother Peter's calling."

Ann Susan did not condescend to obey. Eliza Jane, the five-year-old, gazed across the table at the screaming "baby" with an air of superior goodness.

"Hush, there! What's Peter sayin', maw?" said the pioneer, with alarm. "Is he shouting fire? Can you make it out?"

His wife listened intently. "Oh dear, oh dear, it's too bad!" she cried, suddenly, in such anguish that Ann Susan was startled to silence.

For a moment nothing was heard in the log-cabin except the rhythmical roar of the rapids of the Big Brazeau. Then a boy's voice came clearly over the monotone of the river.

"Father! Hurry! There's fire falling near the barn!"

"The barn'll go, sure!" shouted Armstrong, and sprang up so quickly as to upset the table,

whose pannikins, black-handled forks and knives, coffee-pot, tin plates, fried pork, potatoes, and bread clattered to the floor.

As Ann Susau stared at the chasm which had suddenly come between her and Eliza Jane, Armstrong and Mary ran out. The mother, as she tottered after her husband and daughter, wailed, "The barn is going, sure! Oh dear, if only He could 'a' spared the hay!"

The children, left sitting in their high chairs, stared silently at one another, hearing only the hoarse pouring of the river and the buzzing of flies resettling on the scattered food.

"De barn is doin', sure!" echoed Eliza Jane, descending from her elevation. "Baby tum and see de barn is doin'." Ann Susau gave her hand to Eliza Jane, and the two toddled through the wrecked dinner things to the outside, where the sun, yellowed by the motionless smoke-pall, hung like a great orange over the clearing.

As David Armstrong ran toward his son Peter he saw brands dropping straight down as from an invisible balloon. The lighter pieces swayed like blazing shingles; the heavier, descending more quickly, gave off trails of sparks

which mostly turned to ashes before touching the grass.

When the pioneer reached the place of danger, the shower had ceased; but grass fires had already started in twenty places. Peter had picked up a big broom of cedar branches tied together, and begun to thrash at the blaze.

His father and sister joined without a word in the fight against fire that they had waged at intervals for three days, during which the whole forest across the Big Brazeau had seemed burning, except a strip of low-lying woods adjacent to the stream. Night and day one of the four grown Armstrongs had watched for "fire falling," but none of the previous showers of coals, whirled high on the up-draught from the burning woods, and carried afar by currents moving above the still smoke-pall, had come down near the barn.

Now the precious forty tons of stored hay seemed doomed, as scattered locks, strown on the ground outside the barn, caught from the blazing brands. The arid, long and trodden grass caught. Every chip and twig, dry as tinder in that late August weather, blazed

when touched by flame. Sparks, wavering up from the grass to drift a little on no perceptible wind, were enough to start fresh conflagration.

Peter thrashed till all was black around him, but a dozen patches flickered near by when he looked around. Beating, stamping, sometimes slapping out sparks with their bare hands, the father, son, and daughter all strove in vain, while the mother, scarcely strong enough to lift her broom, looked distractedly at the growing area of danger.

“Lord, O Lord, if you could on’y have merey on the barn! We could make out without the house, but if the hay goes we’re done!” she kept muttering. Eliza Jane, hand-in-hand with Ann Susan, watched the conflict, and stolidly re-echoed her mother’s words, till both were startled to silence by suddenly catching sight of a strange boy who had ascended from the Big Brazeau’s rocky bed to the Armstrong clearing.

None of the other Armstrongs had yet seen the stranger boy, who neither announced himself by a shout, nor stood on the bank more than long enough to comprehend the danger to the

barn. Quickly grasping the meaning of the desperate efforts of the pioneer family, perceiving clearly that the barn was in danger, the stranger remarked, "By Jove!" threw a light pack from his back, unstrapped it, ran down to the river with his large gray blanket, dipped this into the water, and trailing it, flew swiftly to aid in the fight against fire.

"Here, you boy," cried the newcomer to Peter, "come and take the other side of this blanket!" He had already drawn it over the flame-edge nearest the barn and was trailing its wet folds over the quickening blaze. "Hurry; help me to spread the blanket—this is the way!" he cried with decision.

Peter understood and obeyed instantly though he resented the tone of command.

"Take both corners!" cried the newcomer. "Now then! Do as I do." He and Peter walked rapidly over the wet blanket. When they lifted it the space was black.

"Again!" The stranger spoke in a calm imperative voice. They drew the blanket over another space of light flames, spread it, stamped on it, repeated the entire operation.

"Never mind the fire over there!" cried this commanding youth to David Armstrong. "Come here — gather between the barn and the blanket! Slap out any sparks that fly between!"

The stranger had brought into the struggle a clear plan and orderly action. Now all strove together — brooms and blanket as organs of one fire-fighting machine. In fifteen minutes there was not a spark in the clearing, and the smoke-blackened Armstrongs stood panting about their young deliverer, who was apparently quite cool.

"You give us mighty good help, young feller. Jest in the nick of time, too," said the pioneer, gratefully.

"Aw — very glad, I'm sure," drawled the lad, almost dropping his *r*'s while he flicked his fore-and-aft cap with a gray silk handkerchief. "I rather thought your barn was going, don't you know."

"So it was, if you hadn't jumped in so spry," said Mrs. Armstrong.

"Aw — well — perhaps not exactly, madam. It wasn't to *be* burned, don't you know."

The mystified family stared at this fatalist while he calmly snapped the handkerchief about

his belted blouse, his tight trousers, and even his thick-soled walking boots. When he had fairly cleared his garments of little cinders and dust, he looked pleasantly at the pioneer, and said with a bow: "Mr. David Armstrong, I believe?"

"Dave," said the backwoodsman, curtly.

Peter laughed. He had conceived for the ceremonious youth that slight aversion which the forest-bred boy often feels for the "city feller."

Mrs. Armstrong and Mary did not share Peter's sentiment, but looked with some admiration on the neat little fellow who had shown himself so quick to plan and ready to act.

Peter had rashly jumped to the opinion that the stranger was a "dude"—one of a class much reprehended in the columns of the *Kelly's Crossing Star and North Ottawa Valley Independent*, in whose joke department Peter delighted. There he had learned all that he knew about "dudes."

The stranger in dusting himself, had displayed what even Mary thought an effeminate care for his personal appearance. Not only so,

but he somehow contrived to look smartly dressed though costumed suitably for the woods in a brownish suit of hard "halifax" tweed, flannel shirt, and gray silk tie. Indeed, this small city youth was so handsome, so gracefully built, and so well set up by drill and gymnastics that he could have worn overalls and looked nicely attired. To crown all, he was superlatively at ease.

"Who be you?" inquired the pioneer.

"Aw—my name is Vincent Algernon Bracy."

"A dood, for sure!" thought Peter, trying to suppress his laughter. "Them's the kind o' names they always have. Now if he'd on'y fetch out that eyeglass and them cigarettes!"

At Peter's polite but most unsuccessful attempt to keep his laughter down, his mother and Mary frowned, and into Peter's eyes young Bracy looked indifferently for a few seconds, during which the lads began to have a certain respect for each other.

"He'd be an ugly little chap to run up against," thought the young pioneer, who could not have fashioned what he thought a higher compliment to any boy. But a faint flicker of

amusement in Vincent Bracy's face so annoyed Peter that he wished circumstances were favorable for a tussle — "Just to show him who's the best man."

Vincent Algernon Bracy's thoughts during the same time were, "I wish I could hire this chap for the survey. He looks like the right sort to work. I wonder how I have offended him."

"Where ye from?" asked David Armstrong.

"My place of residence?"

"No. I seen ye're a city feller. Where'd you come from to-day?"

"About ten miles down river."

"Yas. What you doin' there?"

"Camped there last night."

"Alone?"

"Except for sand-flies."

"Yas, they'd give you a welcome. What you travellin' for in this back country all alone?"

"I'm not travelling all alone."

"You said you *was*."

"No, I said I camped alone last night. My chief is camped fifteen miles lower."

"Chief! There don't look to be no Indian in you."

"Chief engineer."

"Oho — now I size y' up. You're one of the surveyors explorin' for the railroad?"

"Not exaetly. But I'm on the engineering party."

"Same thing, I guess. When d'ye expeek to get the line to here?"

"Next week."

"Why! yer a-goin' it!"

"Yes — the work is to be pushed quickly."

"No — say? It's really goin' to be built this time?"

"Certainly. The company have plenty of money at last. Trains will be running here next spring."

"Hurray! Hear that, maw? The railroad's eomin' straight on. They'll want every straw of hay we've got for their gradin' horses."

"Certainly," said Braey. "It's lueky you saved your hay. How much have you? Ten tons?"

"Forty and more, I guess."

"Really! I congratulate you, by Jove."

"What you say?"

"I'm glad you saved your hay."

"Oh — now I understand. So'm I. It'll fetch mebbly eighty dollars a ton."

"Probably. I've seen hay at a hundred a ton on the Coulonge."

In that district of the great North Ottawa Valley hay frequently sold at such enormous prices before the railway came in. A tract of superior pine had been discovered far from the settlements and where wild hay was not to be found. Transportation over hills, rocks, and ravines was exceedingly costly. Horses were partly fed on bread, on wheat, on "browse" from trees, as well as on oats, but nothing to supply the place of hay adequately could be found. Lumbermen "had to have it," and Armstrong had "moved way back" on purpose to profit by their demand. Unprecedented prices must result from the competition between lumbermen and the advance construction-gangs of the incoming railway.

"Where you off to now all alone?" asked Armstrong.

"I'm going to Kelly's Crossing."

"What for?"

"Well, I suppose I may tell you. My chief could not spare a boat and men for a trip down to Kelly's. We heard of a path from here over the mountain. I am sent this way to hire all the men I can collect at Kelly's."

"I guess you must be a purty smart young feller to be trusted that way."

"You're very kind, I'm sure," and Vincent waved his hand with a deprecatory gesture that did not detract from his confident bearing.

"At any rate," he went on, "I do my best to obey orders. Now, perhaps you will be so good as to show me the path over the mountain."

"The Hump, you mean?"

"Yes, I've heard it called the Hump. How far to Kelly's Crossing?"

"Thirty mile."

"So much? I might almost as well have gone down river."

"No, it's a good, flat path on top there."

"Well, I'm glad of that. Good-day, Mr. Armstrong. Thank you very much. Good-day, madam. Good-bye, Miss Armstrong."

He raised his cap with a bow to each, and

concluding with Peter, remarked, "Good-day, my boy," in an intentionally patronizing tone.

This was Vincent's retort for Peter's grins at the Bracy name, but he had scarcely spoken before he regretted the words; not because they vexed Peter, but because Vincent felt that he had descended below that altitude of manly composure at which he had aimed ever since leaving Upper Canada College a year before.

Even pioneer boys are but mortal, and Peter now lost his temper.

"Ain't you afeard to be out in them woods all alone without your maw?" said he.

"Not at all, thank you. I'm sure it's very kind of you to inquire," replied Vincent, sweetly.

Mary laughed outright.

"He's too smart for you, Peter," said David Armstrong, laughing too. Quite at a loss to meet so affable an answer, Peter wrathfully watched the city boy striding away.

"But say," cried Mrs. Armstrong, "you've forgotten your blanket."

"No, madam," said Vincent, turning round.

"It's not worth my while carrying it. Too heavy, don't you know."

"It *has* got wet and dirty—and such a handsome blanket it was!" said Mrs. Armstrong. "But say, young gentleman, 'tain't fair you should lose your blanket helping us."

"Don't mention it, madam, I beg of you. Very glad to be of service, I assure you."

"Well, anyhow, take a dry blanket. We've got lots—ain't we, paw?"

"We have. Nights is often cold now. You can't sleep out without one—not to say in comfort."

"Well, I will take a dry blanket," said Vincent, after reflection. "I mean to camp at a creek that is about fifteen miles from here, I'm told."

"Yas—Lost Creek."

"Aw—why so called?"

"It gets lost after it runs a good ways, some say. I guess there ain't nobody ever follered it through to the Brazeau."

"Here's a blanket, Mr. Braey," said Mary, running from the cabin. "It's not such a good big one as yours was."

She was a pretty girl, though now begrimed with smoke and cinders, and Vincent, looking at her with fun twinkling in his eyes, lifted his cap once more off his yellow, curly, close-cropped hair, with an air at which Peter secretly said, "Yah-ah!" in disgust.

"Very good of you, I'm sure, Miss Armstrong," concluded Vincent, as he strapped the blanket. Having placed it back of his shoulders, he made one more grand and inclusive bow, and then rapidly ascended the Hump.

"Well, I'm teetotally blamed if we didn't let him go without a bite to eat," said Peter three minutes later. The pioneer boy, bred in a land where hospitality is given and taken almost as a matter of course, was aghast at the family failure to offer the stranger food.

"Dear, dear! I'm ashamed of myself, so I am," cried Mrs. Armstrong. "After all he done for us! And him that *easy* about it."

"I'll say this for him," remarked the pioneer, "he's eur'us and queer in his talk, but if it wasn't for the spry way he worked that blanket of hisn, the barn was gone sure. He saved me more'n three thousand dollars."

"He can fly round and no mistake, I allow that. 'Tain't the first fire-fightin' he's did," said Peter, forgetting his resentment at the vanished Vincent's overpowering airs. "We was near a spat, but I liked him first-rate, all the same."

"Such a name!" said Mary, wishing to justify Peter, now that he had spoken magnanimously.

"Well, he comes of respectable enough folks anyhow — I'll make no doubt of that," said the mother, "but laws! there ain't no denyin' — for if ever there was an outlandish name!"

"Next time I see Vincent Awlgehnnon Bracy, him and Peter Armstrong's going to try which is the best man," said Peter, who conceived, as all the men of the Brazeau do, that "best man" could signify nothing but the man most efficient in rough-and-tumble fighting.

"Better look out you don't go rastlin' with no thrashin' machines, Peter," said his father. "Them city chaps has got all the trips they is, you bet. And up to boxin' too — why, they're scienced! But say, maw, you wasn't never madamed and bowed down to like that in all

your born days before." And the pioneer, chuckling, strode off to watch the fire from a favorable place by the river.

"It's on'y the way he's got o' talkin'. I des-say that's the way he was fetched up," said the mother, indulgently, as she slowly walked with her children to the cabin. The woman moved weakly and was still gasping from the excitements she had undergone.

She was incessantly ailing, working, and overworked,—it is the fate of the pioneer woman, and because she does not chop, nor mow, nor share in the heavier labors that are easy to the great strength of pioneer men she commonly laughs at the notion that overwork is her bane. "I'm just kind o' wore out fussin' round the house" was Mrs. Armstrong's formula.

Striding beside her Peter and Eliza Jane and Ann Susan on his shoulders, for his good temper had returned, and the little girls were in high delight with their "horse." But suddenly Eliza Jane screamed, the younger child stared dumb with wonder, and Peter set both down hastily in his dismay. His mother had stumbled and fallen heavily forward.

As Peter lifted her he shouted, "Father — come — quick! Oh Mary, is mother dead!" and Mary, looking into the weary face and eating it to her heart doubted her own words as she said "No. Oh Peter, for the love of the Lord, no! I guess she's fainted."

David Armstrong running desperately to the group seized his wife in his arms.

"Stand back!" he cried as he laid her limp form on the arid ground. "Peter — hurry — git water — mother's tuckered out — it's the fear of the barn goin' that ails her. She ain't dead — it couldn't be — oh God it couldn't be!"

Meantime, Vincent Braey had reached the flat summit of the Hump, and stood on its edge gazing far and wide. Near the horizon, in every direction except toward Kelly's Crossing, the smoke-pall was lurid from fire below. Beyond the mile-wide, low-lying, green forest north of the curving Big Brazeau extended heights which now looked like an interminable embankment of dull red marked by wide patches of a fiercer, whiter glow.

No wind relieved the gloomy, evenly diffused

heat around Vincent on the top of the great hill. No sound reached him but the softened murmur of the rapids, the stridulous shrilling of locusts and tree-toads unseen, and the occasional barking of the Armstrongs' dog away down in the solitary clearing.

"It's almost hot enough up here to begin burning on its own hook," said Vincent, wiping streams of sweat off his forehead and neck. "Shouldn't I be in a pretty scrape if the Hump caught!"

But the thought gave him no pause, nor indeed, any alarm. He had been sent to Kelly's Crossing, and to get there speedily was the dominant point in his mind; so he plunged into the woods, and soon was beyond every visible evidence of the great forest fire, except only the smoke that lay dimly in the aisles of the pinery, and gave its odor and taste to the air.

CHAPTER II.

MOTHER'S CUP OF TEA.

"DON'T you stay in, Davy. I won't faint no more. I ain't sick now—not to say real sick. It's on'y I'm a kind of done out. I'd feel easier if I knowed you was out watchin' the barn."

"Peter's watchin' all right, maw," answered David Armstrong, gazing from the cabin door at the forest fire across the Big Brazeau. "It looks kind o' squenched some, Hannah."

"Yes. It's always like that about noontime. The sky's lightsomer when the sun's high, so's you can't see the red of the fire. But there it is—threatenin'—threatenin'—it's almost worse than in the night when you can see how big it's grew. *Oh*, if it'd go out; Lord, I feel s'if I couldn't *bear* it to be burnin', burnin', always burnin' and threatenin'. But I wisht you'd go, Davy. You can't do nothin' for me."

"S'posin' you was to faint ag'in, and me not nigh—and you didn't come out of it, Hannah?"

"But I ain't a goin' to, Davy dear," she said, fondly, moved by solicitude so unusual in the work-worn man.

"It'd be hard lines if it did come that way—and you and me so long goin' on together."

"But I ain't goin' to faint no more, Davy dear. It was on'y I got so excited when I thought the barn was goin'. Don't you be feard about me."

"I wisht I knowed what to do for you, Hannah."

"So you do, Davy, speakin' that soft—like it was old times come again. If you'd put your head down onet—just onet."

The grizzled pioneer looked sheepishly at Mary, who stepped out of the cabin, as he put his smoke-blackened face down to his wife's on the bed. She placed her hard hands behind his head and kissed him. Her eyes were tearful, though her smile was joyful, when he rose.

"Well, I s'pose I *had* better go," said the pioneer.

"Yes, Davy. Now I'm all right. You've

done me a heap of good. If I'd on'y a cup of tea!"

"Couldn't you choose a cup of coffee, Hannah? If Mary'd make it good and strong, now?"

"No. Someways I can't seem to relish it when I know it's on'y roasted peas. Don't you trouble, Davy. Go out and let Peter come nearer the house. When you're both watchin', maybe I can sleep. Oh, I *wisht* I could help more!"

"Why now, Hannah — you do help — eordin' to your stren'th — all you can. Say, maybe you could sup some of the labrador."

He took up a handful of leaves that Canadian voyageurs often infuse for warm drink when they laek tea — true coffee is an unknown beverage in that distriet.

"No, the labrador kind o' goes agen my inside, Davy — it's the tea I'm hankerin' after."

"If I dast leave I'd go out for you, Hannah."

"Out to Kelly's Crossing! Thirty mile and baek for a cup of tea for me! This weather!"

"I wisht I dast go. But if the barn'd catch? And hay the price it is!" he said, leaving the

sick woman, who, lying back on the rustling straw bed, drew her thin pillow of hen-feathers about her thin cheeks.

"If the flies'd let me be!" she exclaimed.

"I'll keep 'em off, maw, and you try to sleep," said Mary, waving her straw hat.

"But that's a comfort, Mary!" She lay still for a while, then said, "I'm that *weak!* Oh my!"

"If I'd 'a' thought, I'd 'a' saved up the tea, mother." Mary stooped and kissed her.

"Is Peter a-watchin', Mary?"

"Yes, maw, elost outside. The fire's low-like."

"I can't seem to get no rest for the fear of it. Oh, if the Lord ud send rain! Lord, Lord, Lord!" she wailed, "do hear my prayer for rain! It's been so long a-burnin' and a-burnin' yonder!"

She closed her eyes and listened to the pervasive tone of the rapids. Then, after a few minutes, when Mary had begun to hope she slept, the poor woman, as if dreaming of unattainable bliss, sighed: "*Oh, how I wisht I had a cup of tea!*"

Peter, who had been softly approaching the cabin door, overheard the words, and now the boy and girl looked fearfully at each other, as the misery vibrated in the tones of their usually uncomplaining mother. The son had no words to fashion his yearning for her, but it did not include fear that she was near death. Except that the wisps of straight gray hair beside her ears seemed wider and grayer, she did not look changed from the toil-worn mother he had always seen.

When they were sure she slept, Peter and Mary went outside. Both seemed to hear, over and over again, on the hot, still and smoky air their mother's voice: "*Oh, how I wisht I had a cup of tea!*"

"If we'd on'y thought to ask that young gentleman to fetech in a pound!" said Mary.

"Him? That Braey? You'd 'a' seen his young gentleman nose turnin' up!"

"No, you wouldn't! He was that friendly."

"Friendly! G'way!"

Mary prudently dropped the matter. After a while, looking at their father's figure outlined against the woods beyond the river, she said,

"If paw'd 'a' fetched in enough tea last time, or gone again."

"Father's gettin' too old for to walk thirty mile and back more'n onct a month. But mother'd ought to have her cup of tea. She's hankerin' bad."

"Hankerin'! Peter, I'm going to tell you right straight. I'm seared about mother. Mother's like to die as sure as you're settin' there, Peter, and then what's to 'come of Ann Susan and Eliza Jane?" sobbed Mary.

"Like to die! Say now, Mary?"

"If she ain't got her tea reg'lar, I mean."

"By cracky, mother's *got* to have her tea!" cried Peter. "What's to hinder me going out?"

"You're not able this weather."

"G'way! Abler nor father any day. Ain't that 'ere dood off for Kelly's Crossin' all alone? Nat'r'lly I ain't able like Vincent Awlgehnnon Bwacy is, but I'm as able as most common folks."

"Don't mock him, Peter. He didn't say his name like that. Not exactly. But you could go better'n that little feller, Peter. Only you can't go no more'n father — not now, for there's the fire and the barn."

"What's the barn alongside of mother's life? And if brands does come, ain't we keeping wet blankets ready now? I'll go and tell father I'm goin' out for mother's tea," and Peter ran across the clearing to speak with his father, who sat on a rail fence and chewed his quid in a mournful way.

"Paw, I'm goin' out to Kelly's. Mother's siek for her tea."

"S'pose you could?"

"Certain sure. Why not?"

"Well, I'm scared to leave maw myself, Peter. On'y it seemed a tur'ble trip for you."

"'Tain't nothing."

"Well, you could fetch in more loading than me. On'y if there's fire betwixt here and Kelly's?"

"Can't be. The Hump's all right," said Peter, and looked up to the mountain's crown of pine.

Around the precipitous Hump the Big Brazeau runs eircuitously in eighty miles of almost continuous rapids from Armstrong's plaece to Kelly's Crossing. The distance across the neck is but thirty miles.

"There's never been no fire on the Hump; too high, mebbly. I guess you might take an early start in the morning, Peter."

"No, I'm goin' straight away. Mother's needin' her tea that bad I couldn't sleep. I'll fetch in all the stuff we're lackin'."

In winter the Armstrong's could obtain perishable groceries from the stores and "vans" of neighboring lumber shanties, but from March to November, while the shanties were deserted, the pioneer went out once a month to Kelly's Crossing on foot.

"Well, if you're boun' to start, the sooner you're off the better. It'll be nigh dark when you strike Lost Creek. You'll find the young surveyor chap there, Peter."

"So I was thinkin'."

"Don't you quar'l with him! Mebbly he'd lick you, Peter," said the pioneer, laughing derisively at his own imagination, as Peter well understood.

"If he don't sass me, there won't be no quar'lin' nor fightin'!" said Peter. "I guess he don't mean no harm; it's on'y his ways is queer."

In ten minutes the pioneer boy, with a long-handled half-axe in his hand, a hunting-knife at his belt, a water-tight tin box of matches in his pocket, and a day's provision of pork and bread in a bag wrapped in his blanket, was on the track over which Vincent Braey had passed two hours earlier. Finding his mother asleep, Peter had not the heart to rouse her for good-bye.

On the plateau among the pines, where he had hoped for cooler walking, the swooning and smoke-flavored air seemed burned dry as from an over-heated stove. Peter soon regretted that he had brought no water-bottle. But the regrets were too late, — he must endure thirst, and hurry on to relieve it at Lost Creek.

When he reached the stream at about five o'clock in the afternoon Vincent Braey was not to be seen. Peter shouted in vain. There was no reply.

The young pioneer, after quenching his thirst, peeled off for a roll in the cold, spring-fed stream. After a few plunges he stood out on the bank, and shouted vainly again for the young engineer.

"Lost himself, I'll bet!" said Peter to himself. "Hey—yey—yey!" he yelled. No reply.

"Hey— you city fel-ler!" No response.

"Lost himself sure," said Peter.

"Dood— dood— dood!" he cried, convinced that Vincent was not within hearing. Peter at first thought this sounded "funny" among the solemn aisles. But as the words died on the great silence his mood changed. The quiet and high spirit of the inner forest touched him, he knew not how, to serious thought. At the reflection that the city boy might not be able to find his way out of the woods Peter speedily dressed.

"I believe I'd ought to go back and search him up. He did us a mighty good turn this morning," thought Peter, and just then he noticed two butcher-birds silently flitting about the trunk of a fallen tree.

"There's something dead there," thought Peter.

He went to the log. Behind it, directly on the path, lay the blanket, provision-bag and hatchet of Vincent Bracy.

"Hey — you! Where you hidin'?" yelled Peter.

No answer.

"Hey — Windego eatched you?" Peter laughed derisively, and as the great silence returned, felt as if he had laughed in a church.

The butcher-birds gave him close attention. When his shouts ceased, he listened long. As he listened, in the dim solemnity seemed sounds — sounds low, innumerable, indistinguishable, hardly to be called sounds, — tones as if the motionless myriads of pine needles had each its whisper, — and still he doubted whether he heard anything "but just his ears."

Peter sat on a fallen log and waited. He imagined Vincent might have concealed himself "for a joke." Or might he not be searching for a spruce, with little knobby exudations of Peter's favorite "chawing gum."

The strange boy would of course come back to his pack. But Peter's conviction of this began to waver at the end of five minutes without sight or sound of Braey.

"Hey — who's shootin'?" Peter sprang to

his feet. "The consarned fool—he'll set the woods afire! But it wasn't a gun,—more like a pistol,—likely there wasn't no waddin' in it."

"Hi-yi!" he yelled. "Hi, yi-yi! Hi, you Braey!"

Peter thought he heard a shout far away. Again he yelled and stopped to listen. But he caught no note of reply. Only the innumerable small sounds had become certainly sounds now.

Peter looked round with curiosity and surprise. The woods had become suddenly alive with small birds,—chicadees, gray-birds, camp-hawks,—they all flew as if from the direction of Kelly's Crossing, not flitting as usual from tree to tree, but going on and on.

Crows flapped steadily overhead, out of sight, cawing as if seared. Spruce partridges rattled past, low in the aisles. All one way—all toward the Brazeau! Peter could not imagine the cause. What could have frightened them? Surely two pistol shots could not have caused this strange migration? Possibly Vincent had followed and treed a wild-cat or bear. Possibly he was off there fighting for his life where the birds started.

Peter picked up his hatchet, felt his knife safe in his belt, and ran toward where he thought the pistol shots had been fired. Presently the innumerable small sounds became a murmur. Zephyrs were stirring. They increased to a breeze. The breeze carried a multitudinous crackling, Peter fancied. The air had warm breaths in it. The crackling grew more distinct. Peter stopped, with his heart beating the alarm.

Then Vincent Bracy came running into view, leaping logs, plainly flying for his life. Far behind him fluttered low what looked like a wide banner of yellow gleams and red, shifting, wavering, flaring. It wrapped and climbed five, fifty, five hundred trees in the next few seconds.

"Back — back — to the creek! Run. The woods are on fire!" shouted Vincent, and Peter was instantly in flight, a hundred yards ahead of the young engineer. A doe, followed at fifty yards' distance by her mottled fawn, sprang crazily past both boys. As Peter jumped into Lost Creek the little fawn, now far behind its maddened dam, scrambled up the opposite bank and went on.

Peter looked back over the shore that rose to the height of his chin. The water was up to his waist. Vincent was at that instant leaping the great log beside which his pack lay. A partridge flying wildly with all its speed struck him in the back just as his jumping body intercepted the bird's line of flight. With the breath knocked out of him, Vincent fell headlong. He did not rise at once. A brown hare leaped over him and came on.

Sparks were already flying in a swift storm overhead. The breeze created for itself by the advancing flame had risen to a furious gale, under which the forest roared and shrieked. The wall of fire poured off sparks and smoke in a prodigious shaken volume, that rolled on, now up, now down.

"What's the matter?" yelled Peter, as Vincent fell. He could hear no reply. He could not hear his own voice above the fire-fury. He could not see Vincent. Peter pulled himself up the creek's bank and faced the coming flame.

A blast of heat flew past him. Smoke hid the whole forest for an instant. As it whirled

up again Peter saw Vincent staggering aimlessly thirty yards away, with blood flowing over his face from the scap-wound he had received in falling on a branch. Blindly he swayed, trapped, fell.

"We're both goners," yelled Peter Armstrong; "but here goes!" and he ran straight at the prostrate boy.

Vincent rose again. In the next moment he would have been clinging round Peter had not the tall young pioneer stooped to elude the grasp. There was not an instant for parley. Peter knew exactly how he might best carry his load. Bending as he ran in he thrust his head between Vincent's legs, grasped them as he rose, turned, sped back.

"Don't move!" yelled Peter.

Bracy made no struggle. A roll of smoke and sparks enveloped the boys. It lifted, and again the path was visible. But the thick carpet of pine-needles had begun to flame under Peter's tread.

A blast as from an open furnace enveloped the two. Peter stumbled, staggered up, took three steps, fell headlong—into water. The

full roaring and tumult of the fire was in his ears as he rose spluttering from the water of Lost Creek, and pulled Vincent above the surface. With the cold plunge, the city boy had quite recovered his senses. He stood up, stared, recognized his rescuer, and remembered his manners even then:—

“Thank you. You saved my life!” he shouted in Peter’s ear.

“Saved it! D’you s’pose —”

The sentence broke off because both boys had plunged their heads, so intense was the hot blast that flew at them. When they came up Vincent shouted:—

“I said you saved my life. You were about to remark —”

“Remark!” roared Peter. “Saved your life! S’pose you’re going to get out of *this* alive?”

Down went both heads. When they rose again Vincent shouted:—

“We are in rather a bad hole, but—”

Under they went again.

Nothing more was said for what seemed a great length of time. The boys could endure

the intense heat but for an instant. Their heads bobbed out only that they might snatch a breath. At such moments they heard naught but crashing and the revelry of flame.

CHAPTER III.

FLAME AND WATER.

WITHIN twenty minutes after Peter Armstrong and Vincent Braey had sprawled into Lost Creek the draught from the forest fire was almost straight upward. No longer did volumes of smoke, sparks, and flame stoop to the floor of the woods, rise again with a shaking motion, and hurry on like dust before a tornado. But smoke rose so densely from decaying leaf-mould that the boys could see but dimly the red trunks of neighboring trees. Overhead was a sparkling illumination from which fiery scales flew with incessant crackling and frequent reports loud as pistol shots.

Out of the layer of clear air close to the creek's cool surface the boys could not raise their heads without suffocation. They squatted, staring into one another's fire-reddened faces. Deep edges of leaf-mould on the creek's banks

glowered like two thick bands of red-hot iron.

"Boo-oo! It's cold," said Peter, with chattering teeth.

"Yes, I'm shivering, too. Rather awkward scrape," replied Vincent.

"It's freeze in the water, or choke and burn out of it."

Their heads were steaming again, and down they plunged.

"See the rabbits! And just look at the snakes!" cried Peter, rising.

"The creek is alive!" Vincent moved his head out of the course of a mink that swam straight on.

Brown hares, now in, now out of the water, moved crazily along the shallow edges; land snakes writhed by; chipmunks, red squirrels, minks, wood rats—all went down stream at intervals between their distracted attempts to find refuge under the fire-crowned shores. The boys dipped and looked again.

"The smoke is lifting," said Vincent.

"If it'd only let us stand up long enough to get warm all over!" said Peter.

Down went their heads.

"You *do* think you're goin' to get out of this alive?" inquired Peter, as they looked round again.

"The menagerie has a plan." Vincent pointed to the small creatures moving past.

"Plan! No! no *plan*. They're just movin' on."

"Let's move with them."

"Can't walk squattin', can ye?"

"We can soon stand up."

"Then we'll bile."

"Then we'll dip."

"Well, you're good stuff. We'll push for the Brazeau. But I don't expect we'll get there."

"Why not?"

"Man, it must be thirty mile by this creek! S'pose we could wade ten miles a day! D'ye think you're goin' to stand three days' shiverin' and roastin'? Cracky, it's hot!" and they plunged down again.

"More'n that," said Peter, rising from his dip, "there ain't no knowin' where this creek goes to."

"It goes down hill, and it must reach the Brazeau somewhere. Perhaps within twenty miles."

"S'pose it does? What you goin' to do to sleep and eat? No livin' 'thout eatin', I guess. This fire'll burn fierce for three days. No gettin' through the woods for a week."

"But it may rain heavily."

"Yas? Mebby it'll rain pork and bread."

"Or chipmunks and squirrels," Bracy pointed to the swimming creatures.

"Jimimy, that's so! We might catch some of 'em. Cracky, my head's burnin' again!"

Down they went.

"We might stand up. The smoke has risen a good deal," said Vincent, after ten minutes more.

"Wadin's better'n standin'," remarked Pete, so they began to march with the procession.

Though the heat was still intense, it did not now fly in blasts. On rising they steamed quickly, and dipped again and again. Occasionally they saw far into the burning region, where the trunks of dry trees glowed fiercely. The living pines were no longer clothed with

columns of flame, for the resinous portions of their outer bark had been consumed. But from their denuded tops sparks blew upward incessantly, while branches swayed, snapped, and sometimes fell.

The up-draught could no longer carry away the heavier brands. Some wavered down into the creek, that soon became covered with a scum of half-burned bark and ashes, through which the swimming creatures made little gleaming lanes.

Flame moved continually to and fro on the forest floor, now dwindling, then rising suddenly from new-found pyres, always searching insatiably for fuel. The roar of hurrying fire had ceased, but the sounds of crackling and crashing branches were so great that the boys became hoarse with shouting their remarks.

Then dumbly they pursued their journey of the night through fifteen hundred square miles of fire. Across the glaring brook they saw one another as dream figures, with fire-reddened faces against a burning world. For what seemed many hours they marched thus in the water. Splashing, wading, often plunging, they

staggered on in various agonies until Peter's brain, tired by his days and nights of watching for falling brands in his father's clearing, whirled in the low fever of fatigue. The smoke-wraiths, as he stared at the encompassing fire, drifted into moeking, mowing, beekoning forms, and with increasing difficulty he summoned his reason against the delusions that assailed his soul.

Young Bracy, accustomed to long marches and having rested well the previous night, retained his clear mind, and watched his tall companion with the care of a brother.

"He risked his life for mine," Vincent felt deeply, and accepted the comradeship with all his steady heart. He guided Peter, he guarded him, he did not despair utterly, and yet to him it seemed, as that strange night went on, that the walk through fire had been longer than all his previous life. He was in a deepening dreamy dread that thus they must march till they could march no more, when Peter, wild to look upon something else than flame-lit water, went aside and climbed the bank. That newly roused Vincent; he crossed the creek and ascended, too. Up there the heat was more intense, the smoke

more pungent, the ground burning. They kicked up black ashes, saw sparks start as in smouldering straw, and jumped, half-scalded with steam from their clothing, back to the bed of the stream.

"It's dreadful work, Peter!" said Vincent, taking the young pioneer's arm.

"We're done, I guess. But it would be mean to give up. We'll push on's long's we can. Say — when I drop, you push on. Never mind me. No use us both dyin'."

"We shall stiek together, Peter," Vincent replied stoutly. "We shall pull through. See, the banks are getting higher. The water is running faster. We shall reach a gully soon and get rest."

Peter laughed hysterically at the prediction, and screamed derision at it; but the words roused some hope in his heart. He bent his gaze to watch the contours of the banks. They were certainly rising higher above the water. Gradually the creek descended. When they had passed down a long, shallow, brawling rapid, the fire-forest was twenty feet higher than their heads. They no longer needed to

dip often. In the hot night their clothing rapidly dried.

"Hello! Where is the procession?" cried Vincent. The boys stared far along the water. Not a snake, chipmunk, squirrel, mink, nor any other wild refugee was to be seen.

"They've gone in under the banks. We can stop, too," said Peter.

"No. Too many branches falling, Peter. Let us push on to a lower place."

"I won't! I'm going to sit down right here."

"Well, but look out for the branches. They are falling — whopping big ones too, in every direction. No chance to sleep yet. Trees may be crashing down here before morning. We must go lower."

"The hunger is sore on me. If we'd on'y catched some of them squirrels!"

"I've got a couple of hard-tack in my pocket. They are soaked, but all the better for that." He brought several handfuls of pulp from the breast pocket of his belted blouse. While Peter devoured his share, Vincent ate a few morsels and put the rest back in his pocket.

"You're not eating," said Peter.

"I shall need it more before morning."

"There won't be no morning for you and me. Is it all gone?"

"No. We'll share the rest when we stop for the night. Come on, Peter; you'll die here."

"I won't! I'll sleep right here, die or no die."

Peter stretched himself, steaming slowly, on the pebbles. The ruddy fire shone on his upturned face and closed eyes. Vincent looked down on him meditatively. He was easting about for words that would rouse the young pioneer.

"What do you suppose your mother is doing now?" cried Vincent, sharply.

But Peter had instantly fallen asleep. Vincent stooped, shook him powerfully by the shoulder, and repeated the question at the top of his voice: —

"What do you think your mother is doing now?"

Peter sat up.

"Burnt! Burnt out, as sure as we're here!" he cried. "The barn'll be gone. We're ruined!"

And mother's out in the night. My soul, how could I forget her! I was dazed by the fire. They'll think I'm burned. I'm afeard it will kill mother. She'll be lying in the root house. They'd run there when the house catched."

His distress was such that Vincent almost regretted the artifice he had employed.

"It's likely everything at your home is all right, Peter," he said. "I've seen a hill fire like this flaming for days, and nothing burned below in the valleys. The wind seemed to blow up to the high fire from all sides below."

"Yes — nobody can tell what a bush fire'll do," said Peter. "Mebby mother is all right. Mebby the hay *ain't* gone. But they'll all be worn out with fear for me. Come on. If the creech goes on like this, we may reach the Brazeau to-morrow."

"It's eleven o'clock now," said Vincent, looking at his watch. "I'm nearly tired out, myself. We shall go on all the faster for sleeping. Hello — what's that? — a fall?"

The sound of brawling water came faintly. Descending quickly, they soon reached a place

where the creek appeared to pour, by a succession of cascades, into a deep chasm. Below, they could see nothing, except the gleam of distant water, as flaming brands swayed down and down from the plateau now fifty feet over their heads.

Here the coping of the banks overhung a little. All about the boys lay brushwood that had been left by spring floods. Peter, seizing a piece of dry cedar, flung off long splinters with his big hunting-knife. When enough for two torches had been accumulated, the boys searched for a route down. In five minutes they were a hundred feet below the top of the Hump.

"Why, here's a good path," cried Vincent.

"Great place for bears," said Peter, closely examining it. "If we're goin' to stop, we'd better stop right here. The gully below may be full of bears and wolves. They'd be drove out of the woods and down the gully before the fire."

"Let's make a fire to keep them away from us," said Vincent.

"No need. No beasts will come nigh."

"But some may be coming down after us as we did, for safety."

"No! They'd burrow under the bank back there. No fear of them, anyhow. They'd be too scared to bother us. But a fire won't do no harm."

Finding no brands handy, they lit shavings from the matches in their little water-tight, tin boxes, piled on the heaviest driftwood they could find, and lay down on a flat rock partly under the bank. In a few minutes both fell asleep to the clashing of the cascades.

Brands fell and died out near them; their bivouac fire became gray; dawn struggled with the gloom overhead till the smoke ceased to look red from below, and became murky in the sunless morning. Still the tired boys slept well.

But by eight o'clock they had descended the rocky hill down which the cascades jumped, and were gazing at hundreds of trout congregated in the clear long pool below.

"There's plenty of breakfast if we could only catch it, Peter," said Vincent.

"Catchin' them trout ain't no trouble," said Peter, taking command. "You go down yonder and whale on the water with a stick. I'll whale

up here. We'll drive a lot of 'em into the shaller."

"But how can you catch them without hook or line?"

"Leave me alone for that. I've got a hook and line in my pocket, but that'd be slow."

As they thrashed the water while approaching one another, many of the crowded and frantic trout ran almost ashore. Rushing among them, Peter kicked vigorously at each step forward. Two fish flew far up the bank. Three more were thus thrown out. Several ran ashore. Vincent flung himself on these before they could wriggle back.

They split the fish open, skewered them flat on sticks, and broiled them "Indian fashion" in the smoke and blaze from a fire of dry wood. Having thus breakfasted, they considered what to do.

Going back was out of the question. Fire was raging two hundred feet above them, and for unknown leagues in every direction. Their only course was down the deep gully of the creek.

By eleven o'clock, having walked steadily

along the Lost Creek's now easy descent, they found the crags overhead so closely approaching that the gorge, now little illuminated from the burning forest, became ever more gloomy. At last the sides of the ravine, when more than three hundred feet above them, came together as a roof.

The boys stood at the entrance to a narrow cavern. Into this high tunnel, roughly shaped like a greatly elongated V turned upside down, the creek, now fed to a considerable volume by rivulets that had danced down the precipices, clattered with loud reverberation.

"What we goin' to do now? Seems we're stuck at last," said Peter.

"Let's see. This is where the creek is lost. The question is, Where does it come out?"

"We're in a bad fix. There's no goin' back till the bush-fire's done."

"Well—we can live here for a few days. Plenty of trout in that last pool."

"But there ain't no Armstrongs in it! I'm wild to get home. Lord, Lord, what's happened to mother? I tell you I'm just crazy to get back home and see."

"You must be, Peter. So we must push on if possible. No use trying to get up to the top of this ravine. It's all fire up there on both sides. Well, let us explore the cave. We can always find our way back. We will take torches."

"Did you see a creek coming out of a place like this when you came up the river to our clearing?"

"No, but there's one coming out of a cave away down below Kelly's Crossing."

"Yes, I know. But this ain't that one."

"No, of course not. It is likely this creek runs out some distance before reaching the Brazeau. Perhaps the cave is not a long one. We're safe to explore, at any rate."

"Do you mind the bears' path up back there? There's room for all the bears on the Brazeau in there ahead of us," said Peter.

"Our torches will scare them worse than they'll scare us. And I've got my revolver still."

"Say! I forgot to ask you; did you fire two shots just before the fire started in the woods?"

"Yes — at a partridge. Missed him."

"Then you started the fire!"

"No! It came roaring along a minute after that, though."

"Started itself—that's gen'ly the way," said Peter. "Well, s'pose'n we have dinner, and go in after."

They cooked more trout, supplied themselves with bunches of split cedar, and stood peering into the entrance of the cavern, both a little daunted by the absolute darkness into which the stream brawled. By anticipation, they had the eerie sensation of moving through the bowels of a mountain. So high and dark and awful was the narrow tunnel! So insignificant felt the boys beneath its toppling walls!

"Here goes," said Vincent, and marched ahead.

For some minutes the creek's bed was such as it had been since they left the cascades—gravel bottom alternating with rocks, and little pools that they walked easily around. What was high above could not be seen, for the torches found no reflections up there on the cavern's roof.

Instead of the reverberation increasing, it les-

sened as they went on. The brook babbled to them to advance, and now there was a singular trembling of the air in which a swashing and pouring sound could be heard.

"Got plenty of room over there?" cried Peter, from the left or north bank.

"Yes, there's ten feet of shore here. Cross if you're crowded."

"I will. There's no room on this side."

As Peter lowered his torch to peer at the water, in which he was about to step that he might cross it, he saw that the stream broke into a chute a little further on. Now Vincent had stopped to await his comrade.

The pioneer boy entered the water at the rapid's head, where he expected to find the usual shallow. But at the first step the currents rushed about his knees. Peter half staggered, found what he thought would serve for forward footing, threw his weight on it, slipped as from a boulder, and went down. His torch "sizzed" and disappeared. Vincent darted forward with a cry.

As Peter, struggling to reach his feet, drifted a little, he felt himself suddenly caught as by a

strong millrace, and was hurried away into the blackness of darkness. Vincent Bracy, swinging his torch, ran on almost blindly and at full speed, till he collided with a wall of rock and fell backward. His fallen torch went out just as Peter, now fifty feet down stream, righting himself, struck out to swim across the current. With a few strokes he touched the rock and strove to grasp it, but his hand slipped and slipped against a straight and slimy rise.

The pioneer boy, now wholly unable to see the space in which he was struggling, put down his feet, but touched no bottom. Swimming to the other side, he found the channel but a few yards wide. There, too, he grasped vainly for a hold. The water quite filled the space between the rock walls. He turned on his back and floated. The amazing, calm rapid swept him swiftly on.

And so, through what seemed a long and smooth stone slide, but once interrupted by broken water, Peter, while Vincent lay senseless in the cave, was carried away feet first as corpses go from the world to the grave.

CHAPTER IV.

RAIN ON THE BRAZEAU.

ALL night and all forenoon rain had poured, while the pious folk of the back country of the Big Brazeau blessed God that He had saved them from the fires of the forest. Rivalets clattered down the rocky sides of the Hump; the Brazeau waved in increasing volume; and a hundred wild tributaries tinged the great Ottawa with turbidity that slowly mingled in its brown central volume.

Dumb creatures rejoiced with men in the moist coolness after so long a period of drought, smoke, and flame. Ducks squawked satisfaction with new-filled farm ponds; cattle, horses, even hens forsook shelter as if they could not have too much assurance of the rain's actuality; dragged rats, flooded from their holes, scurried away as girls with petticoats over their heads went to the milking. By noon on the second

day after Peter Armstrong and Vincent Bracy had started for Kelly's Crossing, the rain had diminished to a drizzle that promised to continue long. Still Lost Creek brawled enlarged into the cavern, and still the forest on the Hump smouldered and poured up blue smoke to the sky.

David Armstrong's cabin and barn stood intact; all in the clearing were still alive, for the high fire had blown far across the river without dropping many coals into the opening of tillage by the Hump's side. But the strain of watching for Peter had brought his mother close to the grave.

"I'm not to say exactly dying. But I'm tired, Davy, tired to be alive. It's, oh, for Peter, poor, poor Pete," she wailed without tears, lying motionless on her rustling bed.

Mary was frying a pan of pork on the outdoor stove. Ann Susan and Eliza Jane, brisk with the fresh air after rain, played on the cabin floor, and watched the cooking with interest. When Mary brought in the frizzling food, David Armstrong did not rise from beside his wife's bed.

"Give the young ones their bite and their sup, Mary. Mebby I'll feel to set in after a bit," she said.

"Take your dinner, Davy," said Mrs. Armstrong, trying to release her thin, hard hand. "Eat a bite, do. It's not the sorrow that will strengthen you to get out them rails for building up the burned fences."

"No, Hannah, but I misdoubt I can't eat. Them molasses and bread I eat at breakfast has stayed by me good."

"But you've got to keep alive, Davy."

"Yes. a man's got to live till his time comes -- the hunger will come back on me, so it will, and it's druv to eat he is. But God help us -- it's to think we'll see Peter no more!"

The woman lying on the bed pressed her forehead down on his hand, and so they remained, close together, while Mary fed the children. Tears were running down the pioneer's cheeks, thus furrowed often that day and the day before. But the mother could not weep.

"I yant Pete," whined Ann Susan.

At that the lump of agony rose in Armstrong's throat; he could not trust himself to

speak, though he wished to order the child to be silent. Mary struggled with her sobs as she listened.

"I yant Pete," said Ann Susan again.

"Peter is dead! I wisht he'd come back quick," said Eliza Jane.

Mary had vainly tried to make the children understand what had become of the big brother.

"I yant Pete," persisted the younger.

"Peter's gone away dead. He's burned up. I wisht he'd come and ride me on his foot," returned Eliza Jane.

"I'll ride you," said Mary.

"No, I want Peter!"

"Hush, dear — poor brother Peter won't come back no more."

"Let 'em talk, Mary," said the woful mother. "Poor little things — they help me. Oh, I want Peter, too."

She sprang up, sitting, and broke into wild lamentation.

"Oh Peter, if you'd come back and kiss me good-bye! Why couldn't you wake me when he was going away? I'd 'a' stopped him. Thirty mile! Thirty mile and back — and the bush

afire!—only to fetch a cup of tea for his mother! I—I—my son's blood eries out of the woods against me!"

"No, Hannah, no, don't talk on that way again. It was me that let him go. Who'd 'a' thought fire would 'a' started up the Hump?"

"Oh, no, Davy, I—me—crying like mad for tea! Oh, my God!—how you can *want* me to go on livin'! And Peter up there—burned black in the smoke under the rain! Such a good boy—always—strong and good. There ain't no mother got a helpfuller boy nor my Peter. Davy, what you s'pose I was thinkin' all them days sinst the hay was got in—and the big prices there is? I was layin' out how we could give Peter a winter's schoolin' in to the settlements. Yes—he'll learn quick. Oh, if I wasn't always so tired, what'd I do for my Pete."

She lay still a long time before speaking again.

"You'll miss me sore, Davy," she whispered. "It won't be long now."

"No, Hannah, don't say it. You'll not leave me, Hannah."

"Ay—sore you'll miss me, Davy dear—I

know how I'd 'a' missed you. Old and gray we've got, and once we was young together. Davy, don't you understand? Don't talk on. I want to be with my boy."

The man clutched, sobbed, and choked for breath. Mary went to the bed, and clasped her arms about her parents' necks.

"Yes — you're good at lovin' your mother," the poor woman went on. "All of them is. God bless them for it! They give me what I wanted more than all. Sore you'll miss me, too, Mary, and you fendin' for them all alone. I wisht I could stay. You'll tell Peter — no, I was forgetting — but there is a chance, ain't there? There's a *chance!*"

"Yes, Hannah. S'posin' he was at the creek. Or the fire might 'a' jumped over a wide place?"

"Many's the day and many's the night and many's the year Peter's heart'll be glad thinkin' how he went thirty mile and out for tea for his mother," she said, as if dreaming. They thought she was fainting. But the vision of her son in the burning forest returned to her mind.

Then, with changed voice, rising on her elbow: —

“Davy, if on’y we could find his bones!”

“I’ll start first thing to-morrow, Hannah.”

“All night again I’ll be thinking of the rain fallin’ on him lyin’ there in the smoke. Rain and rain and *rain* and RAIN — it come too late to save my boy!”

“Think of the chances, Hannah. Maybe he ain’t dead at all.”

“He is — I seen him lyin’ there too plain. Peter won’t never come no more!”

“Peter won’t never tum no more,” repeated Eliza Jane.

“I yant Pete,” said Ann Susan, firmly.

“Give them to me,” said the mother. Taking the little girls in her arms, she lay still, thinking how soon Mary must mother them.

The children, awed by the silent passion with which she strained them to her breaking heart, lay still, breathing uneasily, with their faces close to her bosom.

After a time, the sense that they were suffering came to the poor mother, and she held them more loosely. Then her brain began to work on

the possibilities of Peter's escape. The woman had to hope or die, and her vitality was still active. Absorbed, she had again clutched close the wondering infants, when strange voices outside the door recalled her fully to her senses.

"Hey! Who's these men? Why, here's that surveyin' boy! No, it's another one."

A man, and a youth clad as Vincent Bracy had been, but taller, came up the steps into the cabin. The youth was Vincent's rodman.

"I have a letter for you, Mr. Armstrong," he said. "It's about your son."

The mother rose, and stood staggering.

"Where's Peter?" she cried.

"I don't know, Mrs. Armstrong. The letter—it's from Mr. Braey. He and Peter went through the fire together."

"The fire didn't get them?"

"No, ma'am."

"Oh, thank God, thank God! I can stand it if he's not dead that way. But where is he? Alive?"

"Bracy hopes so."

"Peter's lost, then?"

"He is—in a way. But let me read you

Mr. Bracy's story. He was up nearly all night writing it. He thought it would ease your heart to know all about it. The chief engineer sent me up on purpose that you should know what is being done."

"He didn't desert Peter, then? No—I'm sure."

"Not much! They were separated by a strange accident. Listen." He began reading the letter.

Vincent had written out pretty fully the story of his march with Peter down Lost Creek, through the fire and to the cavern's mouth. The letter went on:—

"When I picked myself up, my torch was almost out. I whirled it till it blazed, and then saw that I had run across the old channel of the creek and against a solid wall of rock that ran up to the roof of the cave, I suppose. Peter was gone down the water that was running within two yards of me. All I heard was its rushing into the passage that turned to the left.

"At that place, the cave forks like a Y. The water runs down the left arm of the Y, and fills the whole space between the high walls there.

That stream looks as if it had broken down slanting through the bed of its course and run into the left arm of the Y, after it had been running into the right arm for ages.

"I was lying at the fork of the Y, in the right-hand passage, while Peter had been swept away down the other passage into darkness."

"He's gone, gone forever!" moaned Mrs. Armstrong.

The young rodman read on in Vincent's letter: —

"When I got up and tried to look down the passage after Peter, I heard a pouring sound away ahead as well as the rushing of the water. That was while I was stooping over. The passage I was in was wider than the other, and I thought it must lead me into any place that Peter could be carried to. The other cave, down river below Kelly's Crossing, has passages that branch and come together again."

"That's so," said the pioneer.

"So I thought it best to follow the right-hand passage instead of going in after Peter. I hope you will see that I did not wish to desert him. My idea was that I might reach him soon,

and if he was in any distress, I might be all the better able to help him if I went by the dry passage."

"He did right," said the pioneer.

"Vincent would be glad to hear you say that," said the rodman. "He was greatly distressed by his miscalculation."

"Then he didn't find Peter again?" cried the mother.

"He will find him. We know he must be still in the cave. Ten men went up before daylight to reach him. There's reason for hope. Listen again to Vincent's letter: I lit another bundle of eedars, and went on. Pretty soon the eavern began to rattle with the thunder outside. The air vibrated so much that one might almost fear the cave wall would fall in. I could not see a flash of lightning at all. How long I went on I don't know, but it seemed half a mile or more. My last toreh had just been lighted when I had a great scare, and saw the strangest sight!

"For some time there had been a strong smell as of wild animals. Suddenly the passage in front of me seemed alive with creatures

that snarled, growled, yelped, and ran. Now you'll understand that those beasts couldn't trouble Peter. He went with the stream—they had been forced into the dry passage by the fire. And they were much afraid of my torch. I could not see one of them at first—there was nothing but blackness and the yelling and snarling. It grew fainter as they ran away, without looking around, for I never saw a glint of their eyes.

“At last, as the course of the old channel turned, I saw daylight ahead of me, and a crowd of beasts going out of the cave's mouth. I made out some bears, that shuffled along at the tail of the procession, but I could not clearly see the others. But I'm pretty sure there were wolves, skunks, and wild-cats in the herd. I was anxious to reach daylight, for I supposed I should see Peter out there. But when I reached the mouth of the cave, I saw nothing of him or the creek.”

“Peter's lost! We shall never see him!” said his mother.

“Yes, you will. Listen to the letter,” said the rodman. “Vincent has something impor-

tant to tell of that he heard coming through. He says:

“I think we shall find Peter to-morrow morning. There must be a hole from the passage I came through to the passage he went down. The reason I think so is this: Just where I stood when I saw the animals go out of the cave’s mouth, I thought I heard a sound of falling water — that must have been the creek. The sound seemed to come from above my head. Perhaps I had passed the entrance to another corridor without noticing it, for I was a good deal taken up with fear of the beasts ahead of me.

“We are going as soon as the men have had a sleep, to look up the place where the sound of falling water came from. I think we shall find Peter there, for if he had come through before me, or soon afterward, I should have heard him answering to my shouts.”

Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong looked hopelessly at each other.

“Vincet,” said the rodman, “was so tired that he seems to have forgotten to write out here some things he told us in camp. For in-

stance, one of his reasons for supposing there must be a passage to Peter is this: the floor of the passage Vincent came through began to ascend while he was looking at and following the animals. He did not remember where he had passed off the gravel and sand of the old bed of the creek, but he found he had passed off it a good while before he reached the open air. After he began to think of something besides the beasts, he noticed that he was going up a slowly rising floor of rock, where no water had ever run. So you see the ancient channel of the creek turned off somewhere. It never flowed where Vincent came out, but took a turn to where Peter is. You can understand that?"

"Yes — the water had been kind of stopped by the rise of the rock, and turned off," said Armstrong; "and the idea is that the old channel the water used to follow will lead you to where Peter went by the channel that the water follows now."

"Exactly, that's what Vincent thinks. Now he is going, or rather he did go before daylight with ten men, to look up that passage through which the sound of water came. He'll find

Peter," said the rodman, confidently. "But listen—you may as well hear the rest of his letter:—

"I looked for the place where the creek came out of the mountain, but the air was dark with the storm, and the thunder was rattling. So I could hear no water running except the rapids of the Brazeau not far ahead. I thought I had better go to camp for men. So I climbed down the hill to the river, found I remembered the banks below, and went about four miles down stream to camp, where I am now. Tomorrow morning, long before you get this letter, I will find Peter if I have to follow him down the chute."

"He will do it, too," said the rodman, admiringly. "The little beggar has any amount of pluck. He'll risk his life to find your son."

"Peter is dead for sure," said his hopeless mother.

"Well, I don't b'leeve it, maw," said Mary. "Mr. Braey's going to fetch him back — that's what I think."

"It might be so, Hannah," said the pioneer. "Where you two going?" he asked of the rod-

man and axeman who had come with Vincent's letter.

"Straight back to camp."

"I'll join you," said David Armstrong.

"There's no use. Peter's gone—he'd be drowned anyway," said the poor mother, with the first burst of tears since her son left.

"He's a good swimmer, isn't he?" asked the rodman.

"First-rate," said Mary.

"Then why should he not escape? He'd go through a big rapid safely. What was the chute but a smooth rapid in the dark? Vincent will find him."

"Dead!" said the mother.

"No—safe and sound."

"But he'd be eat up by the bears."

The rodman looked uneasy, but spoke confidently:—

"Bears won't come to a fire, and your son had his watertight match-box, and could make a fire if he landed down below."

"With what?"

"With driftwood. Vincent says there was driftwood along the banks inside the cave

just the same as on the banks outside and above."

"It might be," said the mother, striving for hope. "Oh, mebbly my son will come back! Davy," she whispered, as her husband reappeared in readiness for the journey down the river, "if you don't find him, I'll die. I can't keep up without seeing Peter again. Carry him easy if he's dead — but no, I daren't believe but he's alive."

CHAPTER V.

IMPRISONED IN THE CAVE.

WHEN Peter Armstrong, with all his senses about him, floated on his back, on and on through the cavern's unmitigated darkness, down the steep slide of almost unbroken water, he was not without fear of the unknown before him. But the fear was not in the nature of despair—rather of wonder. A stolid conviction that the worst which could befall him would be less dreadful than the fire-death which he had escaped helped to console the young pioneer.

Wonder predominated in his mind—wonder at the smoothness, swiftness, and length of the chute. This wonder had almost become horror at being so borne on and on through darkness, when the current seemed to go from under him, and down he tumbled, head over heels, into a great depth of bubbling and whirling water.

Its currents pulled him this way and that,

rolling him helplessly. The forees pressed him deeper and deeper until, all in an instant, they thrust him aside. An up current caught him and brought him, gasping and spluttering, to the air. He perceived with joy that impenetrable darkness no longer filled the cavern. It was dimly lighted from the outer world.

Peter soon cleared himself from the indraw of the cascade which, jumping straight down thirty feet, seareely disturbed at a hundred feet distance the long pond into which it fell. The boy trod water, gazed, and listened amazed to the erashing of thunder that rolled over and reverberated in the high vault.

He knew a rain and thunder storm had begun. The cavern, during intervals between the lightning flashes that revealed something of its extent, was dimly lighted from a narrow crack or fissure, which was about three hundred yards distant from and directly opposite to the cascade down which Peter had dropped.

This crack, starting from the floor of rock, went up nearly straight two hundred feet to a hole in the roof. Peter, swimming now in smooth water, thought that this hole, so irreg-

ular in shape, looked like one that would be seen from the inside of his father's barn if some one had battered in its gable end.

Above this hole he could see a patch of sky and storm-clouds hurrying. They were distinctly visible—he saw the sky through the hole as one might see it from a place two hundred feet down a slanting tunnel. And the tall, narrow strip of sky which he saw through the narrow fissure that extended from the cavern's floor to the roof-hole was as if seen from one end of a cathedral aisle through a straight, narrow crack in its wall of masonry.

Peter swam to the right or south bank of the creek, landed, and stared all around the cavern. The ravine, though roofed, was, so far as he could distinguish by the lightning's gleams, much such a ravine as he and Vincent had followed before the creek became subterranean.

The main differences he noted were a considerable increase of the cavern's width, and its intersection by another ravine, also covered. The floor of this intersecting cavern was some sixty feet higher than where Peter stood. Its roof was as high as the roof of rock directly

over his head. He saw the intersecting cave as an enormous black hole high up in the side of the wall.

Evidently the creek had in former ages jumped down through that black, high hole out of the intersecting ravine into that from which the young pioneer looked up. He could see the discoloration left by flowing water on the now dry wall of rock.

He could see how the ancient creek, coming out as from a roofed aisle, had descended in two steps, the lower about twenty, the upper about forty feet in height. Even when the lightning flashed he could see nothing beyond the upper step. There absolute darkness was back of the outline of the high hole in the wall.

Peter turned to look at the pond's left or north bank. There the precipice which formed the cave's wall rose apparently straight up out of the water.

The boy stood on the right or south side of the pond on the edge of a bank about one hundred and twenty feet wide, which sloped gently to the foot of the wall out of which the creek had formerly jumped down.

After staring round till he had seen all this, Peter ran, as if alarmed by the solemnity of the cave, straight to the tall fissure, which gave a dim light to his path. He hoped to get through the crack.

He reached it, hesitated because of its narrowness, then endeavored to force his body through the fissure. Fancying to squeeze through between two towering walls of rough-faced stone less than a foot apart! Peter crowded in his head and right shoulder. There he stuck—the crack was too narrow! The length of the passage to the open air seemed about ten feet.

“I’d need to be rolled out like one of mother’s lard cakes,” said Peter as he drew back, faced the fissure and stood gazing at the open outside, so near and so unattainable.

The light from the free, outer world nerved and encouraged him. He was so much a boy of action that the dangers he had passed were scarcely present to his recollection. Nor did he yet wholly comprehend the danger in which he stood.

His main thought was that his people were homeless; that his poor mother was in the root-



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house, perhaps dying; that he must get to her; that freedom was within ten feet of him, and that he would somehow find or force a way out.

"If I had that surveyor chap to help," said Peter aloud, and looked back to the cascade.

Would Vincent Braey come through? Peter looked back at the dim cascade falling as from a narrow, high gothic window. The stream down which he had come filled the whole width of the aperture. It fell as unbroken as from the end of a flume. Peter could, when the lightning flashed, see a little of the sloping surface of the swift, smooth chute that had borne him away from his comrade of the night of fire.

While wondering whether Vincent would tumble over the cascade, Peter resumed his study of the interior.

A few yards north of him, and to the left side of the fissure, the pond narrowed to the ordinary width of the creek. There the stream turned, like an obtuse-angled elbow-joint, to the left, and flowed gently on into complete darkness.

Out of this darkness as if from far away

came a strange gurgling and washing of water, intermingled with a sound like *cloop* — *cloop* — *cloop* — such as water often makes when flowing a-whirl out of the bottom of a basin beneath a tap. At first the boy was almost terrified by the sound, — it so much resembled the gulplings of some enormous animal. But soon his fears departed and hope rose high, for he bethought him that the noise must be that of escaping water.

Not even by the lightning flashes could Peter see down the corridor into which the creek thus turned, and ran, and *clooped*. All that he could make out was that this corridor or ravine was nearly on a line with the higher-floored ravine out of which the creek had jumped in ancient days.

The three corridors, that in which the pond lay, that down which the dry, high old channel came from the south, and that into which the creek ran on a northerly course, did not connect exactly at right angles. They were all roofed at, apparently, pretty much the same height as the chute which terminated in the cascade down which Peter had tumbled.

The stream which had poured for ages into

the cave, by either the old or the new channel, could never have had a sufficient exit in flood time. From the hue of the walls up to a line some fifteen feet above where Peter stood, the water seemed to have accumulated often in the cave, swept round and round, and at the same time discharged part of its volume through the narrow fissure.

Peter's curiosity to know the cause of that strange *cloop* — *cloop* was strong, but not strong enough to lead him along the wall in the dark to what might prove another voyage down a slide and a cascade. But he determined to make the exploration by torchlight.

The sloping floor of the covered ravine's right bank, on which Peter stood, was littered with driftwood. As he searched among it for cedar, the easiest of woods to split with the hunting-knife he still carried, he noticed some entire but small trunks of trees. Then it came into his mind that he might escape by the old dry channel, if only he could find a pole long enough to help him up the forty-feet-high wall he could see behind the lower step of twenty feet.

It is necessary to understand clearly the aspect which the old channel presented to the boy. Conceive, then, a church door forty feet wide and two hundred feet high. Conceive the door to be as wide as the corridor into which it offered an opening. Conceive two steps, the lower of twenty, the upper of forty feet in height, barring you from entering the corridor. Thus did the old channel, its mouth shining high and black above Peter, step up from the cave where he stood. He determined to reach that high up old channel if possible, for he believed it would give him a passage to the open air.

His search for a long pole was rewarded, after he had built a bright fire of cedar. Its smoke drifted in various directions for awhile, some going up the old channel, some down towards the passage whence the *cloop*—*cloop* came. But the greater cloud, which soon drew all the smoke with it, went out of the hole in the roof at the top of the narrow fissure.

The young pioneer found a tall cedar, perfectly dry, for the cavern was not damp. With little difficulty he ascended the lower or twenty-foot-

high step of the old channel. All the bark had been torn from his cedar as it came down the rapids in flood time, but short bits of the branches remained. These assisted him to climb.

He had reached the top of the first step, and nearly hauled the cedar up after him when he bethought him that a torch would be needed after he should have attained the top of the next or forty-feet-high step.

So Peter descended and split a bundle of cedar. While engaged at this work he thought he heard, as from far away, sounds as of snarling and yelling wild beasts. He listened with cold creeping over his skin. Were wild beasts coming toward him?

But the sounds ceased. He doubted whether his ears had not deceived him. Only the swishing of the wind away off in the old channel had, he hoped, reached him. Yet he felt the edge and point of his hunting-knife after he had drawn himself again up the lower ledge.

Soon he had dragged his pole to the upper step. It was barely long enough to reach the top. Piling many broken rocks that he found

strewn there around the foot of the pole to hold it steady, he soon had his head above the upper ledge. Lifting himself by his hands and elbows, he stood joyfully on the floor of the high intersecting ravine. Sixty feet below him lay the floor of the main cave, the pond into and out of which the creek flowed, and the dying fire that he had built of driftwood.

Peter whirled the small torch that he had carried as he climbed. From it he lit another, and went bravely ahead. For a hundred yards the floor of the ancient channel was of gravel, sand, and bits of fallen rock. His torches showed him nothing more except the towering and jagged walls. He wondered what stealthy creatures, far up there in the blackness of darkness, might not be watching him. Put trusting his torches to scare away any wolves or bears that the forest fire might have driven into the cavern, he went boldly on. Thunder rolled more frequently, but he could no longer see ahead of him by the lightning flashes which had illuminated the main ravine that he had left.

When Peter stopped he stopped with a cry of despair. The passage was blocked by

enormous masses of rock. The foot of the pile was of pieces that he could climb over for some forty feet. But there the pile, consisting of fragments as high as small houses, towered up without any visible end into the blackness above.

It was plain that part of the roof of the ravine had fallen in, ages and ages before. Peter could see high enough to understand that his pole was useless here. Hope went out of his heart as he sat down and contemplated the enormous confusion which blocked his way.

He seemed to see himself away off in the clearing by the Brazeau and here in the darkness at the same time. He seemed to see the eyes of them all at home staring from infinite distance at him lost in the barred ravine.

Then the events of the yesterday came to his mind with full force. He fancied the fire sweeping through the forest toward his mother's home—he fancied the destruction of the cabin and the precious barn! At the thought of his mother lying—was she dead?—in the root-house, Peter's despair for her roused him from despair for himself.

"I must see mother again. I must! I will!" he thought, and remembered again the *cloop*—*clooping* sound in the main cave.

"Where the creek gets out I can get out," he said, with new hope, and returned with difficulty down his pole to the lower floor of the vault. Now his fire of light wood had quite died out. To renew it was his first care. Then, going again to the fissure, he stood by it, pondering whether he could not get through. He bethought him of how he had seen boulders broken by building a fire round them. They sometimes fell apart on cooling. Could he not reasonably expect that a fire built in the fissure would cause its sides to seale off and afford him the little more space needed to give him escape.

But time? The plan would occupy days. How could he live in the meantime?

Peter went inquisitively to the pond and looked in. He whirled his torch close to the water. What he saw must have pleased him, for he actually laughed and felt in his trousers pocket with a look of satisfaction. His hook and line were still there.

But first he would ascertain where the creek

went out of the cave. The place was not far away. He soon was standing by the one singular feature of his prison. Other caves have intersecting vaults far more amazing than those that were above and around him. But perhaps no body of water elsewhere has so strange an escape as that by which Lost Creek goes its way to the Brazcau.

Where the end of the north-going ravine stopped short, the creek, after gliding smoothly down the south edge of a truly circular basin, ran whirling around and down as straight as if into a perpendicular pipe. The water, ridged and streaked with bubbles as it circled into the funnel, was clearly illuminated at the bottom.

The stream went down like water out of a basin under a tap. It might drop ten, twenty, or a hundred feet, Peter thought, but light certainly struck into it not very far below.

As the water gurgled and swashed around and around, a sucking sound sometimes was followed by the *cloop—cloop—cloop* that had first caught his attention.

“I can go down there,” thought Peter; “go down fast enough — that’s sure.”

He threw in a piece of driftwood. It stood on end and was out of sight in an instant.

"Should I get tore up?" thought Peter. "Or should I fall far enough to get smashed on the bottom? There's plenty of room—it's fifteen feet aerost at the funnel. But I guess I'd better explore all around before I risk my life in such a whirling hole."

He returned along the high tunnel to the main cave. Again he stopped at the fissure. Blackness, merely punctuated by his fire, was behind him and in that great darkness was no sound save the hoarse voice of the cascade.

Standing at the fissure his sense of imprisonment deepened as he turned from the vastness, gloom, and roar of the huge vault behind him to gaze at the free and flying clouds. Inward draughts of air brought him the smell of freshly wet earth. Heavy rain slanted along, scurry-ing into mist on a rocky hillside opposite his jail. Poplar-trees bent and thrashed there under mighty gusts of wind.

As the boy thought of the burning woods and the parched country and his father's clearing, he blessed the Lord for the swift rain that his

mother had prayed for so often. He could hear her, he fancied, as he fell into the reverie that such rain commonly gives — he could hear his mother's piteous prayer, as if the woe of it were compelling the rain to descend.

Then he exulted in the fresh breeze and the drops that were blown to his face. That joy vanished as he turned to the pouring echo of his prison. Now he could not see, but only hear the cascade, so dim had the cave become by the cessation of lightning and the darkening of the hole in the roof. Night was closing in upon the outer world, and uttermost darkness succeeded.

But Peter's fire soon burned hugely. After he had busied himself at the water's edge for half an hour he heaped up piles of driftwood by the light of the flame. Between the throwing down and going forth for more wood he stood listening and looking into the high portal of the south, or old channel ravine.

Peter thought as the night went on that he heard again the sounds of wild animals that he had fancied before. Were fierce eyes glaring at him from the great pile of fallen rocks that had barred him from escape? Were soft feet

sheathing cruel claws coming silently toward him?

The night drew on toward dawn, and intenser darkness prevailed in the cave. At longer intervals thunder rattled through the cavern. The lightning that had preceded might have revealed, to any eye looking down from the hole in the cave's gable, the figure of a boy sleeping in the space between four guardian fires that slowly waned to smouldering brands.

The eye looking down would also have seen the water of a rapidly rising creek lapping on the coals of the most northerly fire, and sizzling as it extinguished them. Still Peter Armstrong slept profoundly. He had not reckoned that the rain now pouring down outside, would raise the water in the cave.

Inch by inch its level ascended. Soon the brands of the extinguished fire were afloat and drifting toward the whirlpool. Even when the water had encroached upon the two fires further in, the boy still slept. His cowhide boots were lapped by the rising flood, and yet he lay quiet as a log.

Down from the cascade poured a larger vol-

ume. Driftwood came tumbling with it. Lost Creek was in half flood with the steady and great rain. No longer could the *cloop*—*cloop* have been heard by any one in the cave, for the funnel was gorged too full.

By morning neither flame nor coal of Peter's fires could have been seen from above. Nor was there any sign of Peter Armstrong near the dispersed ashes of those inner fires that had not been overflowed by the rising stream. The cave's floor was nearly covered by a tumult of whirling water, and no sign of Peter's tenancy remained except the relics of his trout supper and the ashes and dead brands of the most inward of the fires that he had built to guard his life from the wild beasts of the cavern.

CHAPTER VI.

VINCENT DOWN THE CHUTE.

AT noon on the third day, long before Mrs. Armstrong had received Vincent Bracy's letter, Vincent stood, with one man, at the place where Peter had disappeared. Both carried camp lanterns with reflectors.

"Grosbois," said Vincent, "the creek has risen a good deal here since yesterday."

"Yessch! *Baptême* — it's de rain."

"Do you hear that pouring sound?"

"Yessch — dass a fall down dere, 'way far. Can't be ver' high — no sir, not ver' big fall."

"No. I dare say the chute runs into deep water. That would account for the sound, eh?"

"Mebby. I don't know, sir, for sure."

"How would you like to go down?"

"*Sapree!* Not for all de money in de *Banque du Peuple.*"

Vincent had brought ten men with him from

camp. Eight were now at the Brazeau end of the cave looking for the longest tree they could hope to carry into the curved ravine.

Early in the morning they had found the channel by which Lost Creek discharged from the cave to the Brazeau. Looking into an irregularly-walled, tunnel-like passage about twenty feet high, they saw how the water came whirling down straight from the *clooping* funnel that Peter had seen from inside the cave.

After dropping into a deep, narrow basin it spread wide and shallow over the level rock where the search party were, gathered again into a narrow brook, and prattled on gently to the Big Brazeau River, a quarter of a mile distant.

It seemed clear to them that Peter's body, if he had been carried down the funnel, would have been found on the shallows, where sticks that had descended were widely strown. Between and under these sticks the water ran. Vincent's inference that Peter had not been carried down but was alive within the cave looked reasonable.

He took his men into the passage whence he had escaped, and soon found the south side

of the enormous barrier of fallen rocks whose north side had blocked Peter's way out the day before. They stood opposite where Peter had stood, and found that end as impracticable as he had found the other.

Vincent sent one man to camp with a note to the chief engineer. With himself he kept old Grosbois. He ordered the eight others to ascend the Hump, cut down one of the tallest pines growing there, and wait for the chief engineer to arrive with ropes and the rest of the men, twenty-two in number. Then he and Grosbois walked away through the cave to the upper entrance with the two camp lanterns.

An hour passed. The men had felled a great tree, and it lay stripped on the upper plateau. After clearing away the branches the gang found they could not stir the trunk. They went below to the cave that they might gain shelter from the incessant rain. There they lighted a fire and waited.

Another hour passed. Grosbois now sat with his comrades by the fire. He had returned to the party without Vincent Bracy. Sometimes the superstitious men turned their heads and

peered into the blackness of the cave. They half-expected to see Vincent's ghost coming toward them.

Another hour had nearly passed when the chief engineer and his twenty-two men came into the cave from the Brazeau side.

"Where's Mr. Bracy?" cried the chief.

"Ah, M'sieu, Mr. Bracy's gone," said Grosbois, almost crying.

"Gone?"

"Yessch — gone for sure."

"Gone where?"

"Down de chute."

"What chute?"

"Down where he see dat boy go yesterday — de boy what he's tell us about last night."

"You are out of your senses, Grosbois."

"No, sir, I hain't out of no senses — for sure, I wish I was. But I'll toll de trut'. Mr. Bracy he's say to me, 'Mebby Peter is starved before we find him.' He say, 'Mebby we don't get up in dere all day, mebby not all to-morrow.' He's say, 'Mebby dere hain't no way to get to de boy except only one way.'"

"Go on — what did he do?"

"He make me help him for cut off a big chunk off one hollow cedar. He put his hax in de hollow, an' he put in a piece of rope, and some pork and biscuit, and he put in his pistol, and his lantern. Den he plug up de two end. An' he say to me, 'Grosbois, you tell 'em to keep climbing up de ole channel back dere. Good-bye, Grosbois,'—and dat's all."

"But where did he go?"

"M'sieu, in two seconds he's away down de black chute!"

"In the water?"

"Yesséh, in de water—straddle on de log."

"Vincent must have gone crazy."

"He hain't *look* crazy," said Grosbois. "He's look like he's see something bad what hain't scare him one bit. He's say, 'Good-bye, Grosbois,' an' he's make me a bow same as he's always polite, and he's smile, easy, easy. Den's he's roll his log in before I b'leeve he's goin' to be so wild, and I don't see him no more."

"Up with you—up for the tree!" cried the chief. "Not you, Grosbois—all the rest. Grosbois, you go down to the outlet and watch

for the body. Little Vincent Bracy! My life and soul — what will his father say!”

The party were climbing the hill by various paths to get the long tree when one of them stopped, held up his hand, and looked round fearfully at those nearest him.”

“I hear Mr. Bracy’s ghost,” he said.

The startled men stood still, listening. All now heard the faint call. As from the bowels of the earth the cry floated up:—

“*Hello! Hello! Hello!*”

“He’s alive, wherever he is,” cried the chief, arriving. “He’s shouting in the hope he’ll be heard. Hello! Bracy! Vincent! Hello!”

Still Vincent’s voice ascended monotonously. “*Hello! Hello! Hello!*” at intervals of some seconds.

“Yell all together!” cried the chief to the men, who were coming from all directions. They shouted and listened again. And again the far voice cried, “*Hello! Hello!*” with the same tones and intervals as before.

“It’s from over there. And there’s smoke coming up,” said one.

They approached the edge of the plateau and

looked down — down the hole that Peter had seen high up — the hole in which the tall fissure ended.

“Why, here is smoke. And here’s a hole,” cried the chief, getting down on his hands and knees. “He must be down here. Yes! Vincent! Hello!”

“Hello yourself, chief!”

“You’re alive then?”

“Yes, sir. All alive.”

“Hurt?”

“No — as sound as a nut.”

“Had a rough passage?”

“Pretty rough, sir. But I’m not hurt.”

Down by a bright fire they saw Vincent Bracy standing alone. He looked up at the faces crowding round the hole in which the fissure terminated.

“Have you the ropes there?” he shouted.

“Go down for the ropes,” cried the chief engineer, and away went four men.

“Rope is coming, Vincent. Keep your heart up.”

“Oh, I’m all right, sir.”

“Where’s the Armstrong boy?”

"Gone. He was here this morning."

"How do you know?"

"The rock under his dead fire was quite warm."

"Where's he gone? Have the bears got him?"

"No sign of it."

"What's become of him, then?"

"I fancy he went down the creek before the water rose in here."

"But you saw no sign of him down there?"

"Better send Grosbois to look for his trail, sir. Perhaps he got out alive."

"Grosbois is down there now."

"Hey, Grosbois! Grosbois!" shouted the chief. But no answer came. Grosbois had gone out of hearing.

"Is the water rising, Vincent?"

"Yes. It's risen three inches since I got here."

The pond within the cave now presented the aspect of a stream incessantly returning on itself by an eddy up one bank and a current down the other.

Vincent could not reach the fissure without

wading. From that crack flowed a rivulet a foot deep. No sound except the surging of a whirlpool came from the corridor where Peter had heard the *cloop* — *clooping* sound.

“Young Armstrong must have been starving!” shouted the chief.

“No, sir. He seems to have lived on the fat of the water.”

“Fat of the water?”

“Yes; trout. Look here!” Vincent held up two fish.

“How could he catch them?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. But he certainly did. The place is all heads and tails. I shouldn’t have supposed any fellow could eat so many trout in the time. He was here only a day altogether.”

“Can you get straight under this hole, Vincent?”

“Yes. I waded down to the crack a while ago.”

“Well, the ropes are coming.”

Vincent waded down the fissure and stood. In the course of half an hour the rope had descended, Vincent had placed the loop under

his shoulders, and the exulting men had drawn him safely up. Then the whole party walked down to the whirling outlet.

"It's impossible young Armstrong could have come through here alive," said the chief, looking into the tunnel out of which the rising water rushed.

"There wasn't so big a volume this morning early when we were here before," said Vincent. "And Peter must have come down before that."

"You seem very sure he did come down."

"Well, sir, so I am. It's what I should have done myself in the circumstances. I was beginning to think of it when you answered my call."

"Lucky you didn't. Perhaps you are right. But it's surprising that he took the risk when he had plenty to eat."

"You forget how alarmed he was about his mother. Besides, he probably thought I had been lost, and he had no hope of a rescue."

"But what can have become of him if he got out here?"

"He would make for home up the river."

"Well, I hope your theory is sound," said the

chief. "What's become of Grosbois, I wonder? Grosbois! Grosbois!" he shouted.

But Grosbois was far away, following what he thought a trail through the woods. It took him up the river. Meantime another voyageur had picked up the trail of Grosbois and brought the news back to the chief.

"He must have found Peter or his track," said Vincent. "I'll follow, too, sir, if you'll allow me. I have to go to Kelly's Crossing, anyway, and I may as well try to get to the Armstrongs' to-night."

About three o'clock that afternoon Mary Armstrong was giving Eliza Jane and Ann Susan a "piece." She stood with her back to the cabin door, when Ann Susan suddenly cried, "Peter! Peter!" and held out her hands.

"Peter's here!" cried Eliza Jane, coolly.

Mary turned. Peter, indeed, staggered up the path. His face was covered with dry blood from many scratches, his shirt and trousers were in strips, his feet bare and bleeding.

"Mother! It *is* Peter! Peter's come back! He's not dead at all," cried Mary, running out into her brother's arms.

Mrs. Armstrong tottered to her feet.

"Is mother dead? Where is she?" cried Peter, as he caught sight of Mary.

"Why, mother! Ain't you glad to see me?" he said, holding her in his arms a minute later. She was weeping as she clung to him.

"Oh Peter, Peter, Peter, I thought you was burned to death!" was all she could say.

"There, mother! there, mother! I'm all right. Only tore up a little, running through the woods. I've been travellin' since daylight, and I lost my boots out of my hand coming down a whirlpool out of a cave, and I couldn't find them amongst the driftwood below. I was in too big a hurry. I was most scared to death for fear you wouldn't be here. My! it was good to see the barn and house standin'. I come up along the river till about two hours ago. Then I worked up top of the Hump for easier walkin'. Where's father?"

"A boy came for him. He went down river two hours ago to look for you."

"I'd have met him, then, if I'd kept straight on. Maybe he'd miss my track up the Hump."

But the father had not missed it, for he had

met Grosbois, who held to Peter's trail like a hound to the slot of a deer. Scarcely had the boy entered the cabin when David Armstrong and the voyageur came down the Hump's side. The father, swept by his emotion beyond self-control, caught Peter in his arms.

"God — God — oh God," cried Dave Armstrong, "you've give me back my boy. Oh God, just see if I ain't a better man from this out."

Eliza Jane and Ann Susan roared, weeping at the top of their lungs because mother and Mary were crying, and father talking so loudly.

Ann Susan, stopping suddenly, said decidedly, "I want Pete!"

"Peter's dead, and he's come back," said Eliza Jane.

"Take them, Peter," said the mother; "take them. They've been hankering after you most as bad as me."

He lifted the little ones in his arms. They drew back from his dirty and bloody face. Peter laughed.

"Mother," said he, "I didn't fetch you your tea."

"That young Mr. Braey sent some up by the messenger, Peter."

"Mr. Braey? oh, Vincent," said Peter. "He got out of the cave, then? I was planning to start back and find him!"

"Guess what this man says he did this morning, Peter," said the pioneer, turning to Grosbois. "He went down that chute in the cave after you."

"Yessch, I see him myse'f," said Grosbois.

"Well, ain't he a good one!" said Peter. "Why, I wouldn't have gone down there this morning for the price of the hay. The creek was beginning to rise before I went out. But say! Is Vincent lost like I was?"

"No. Just as I started on your trail I heard them yellin' they found him safe," said Grosbois.

Peter had hardly eaten his supper that evening when Vincent arrived.

"Peter!"

"Vincent!" The boys shook hands.

"You went into the chute after me," said Peter, choking. "If it hadn't been for you keepin' me goin', I'd 'a' died in the fire by the creek — so I would, and —"

"Oh, please don't," interrupted Vincent.

"And I'd been abusin' you," said Peter. "I'd said you was a dood!"

"Deuce you did! Well, I dare say I am. But what matter? It's not really a crime, don't you know. There's just one thing I want you to tell me, Peter. How did you catch those trout in the cave?"

Peter pulled a fish-line with a hook on it from his pocket.

"Forgot I had it for a long time in there," he said. "Don't you mind I said I had a hook and line that time we was kickin' the trout out of the creek?"

"But what bait did you use?"

"Bait? They didn't want no better than a bare hook."

You may be glad to learn that David Armstrong's hay sold for ninety dollars a ton that winter. The comfortable situation into which this put the pioneer family gave Mrs. Armstrong a new lease of life, and Peter three winters' schooling in the settlements. There he learned so much that he is able to transact the business of the large lumbering interest which he has long since acquired.

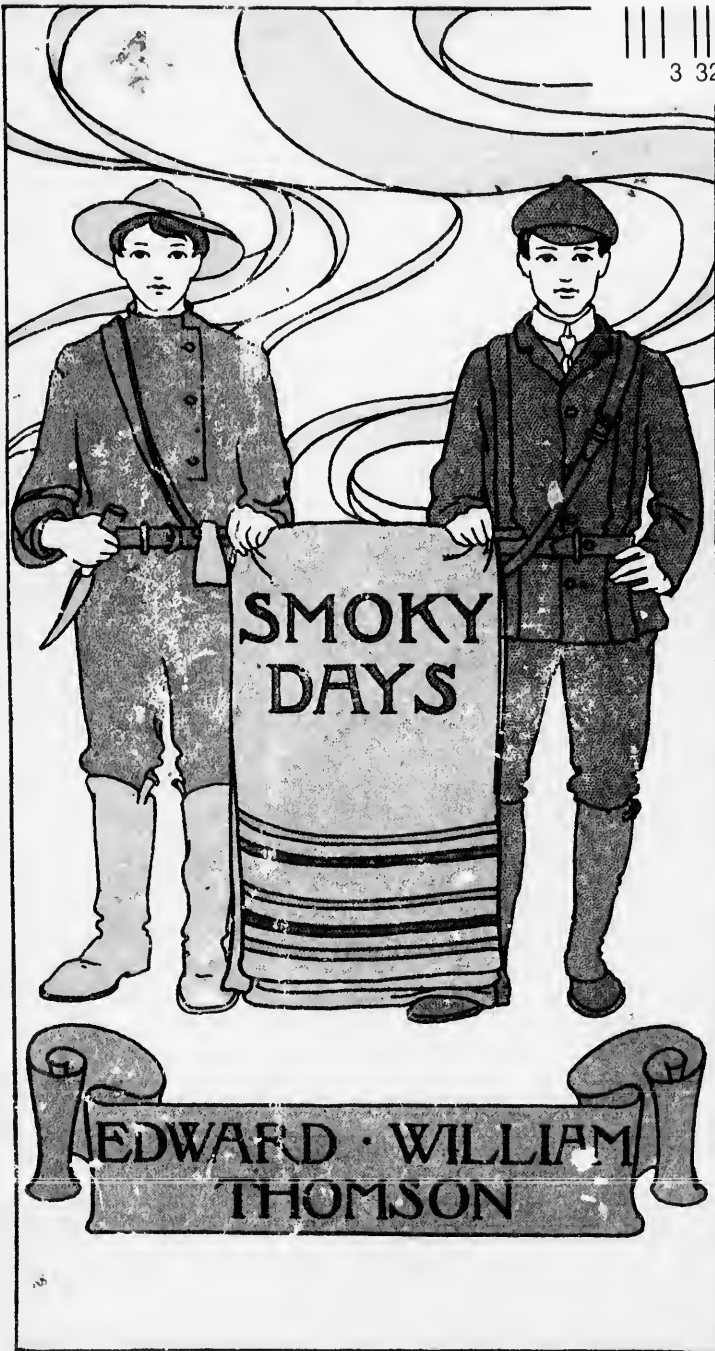
Peter Armstrong is worth ten thousand dollars to Vincent Bracy's one, but they are fast friends, and agree that Mr. Bracy's comparative lack of fortune is due to his having practised a profession instead of going into business.



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