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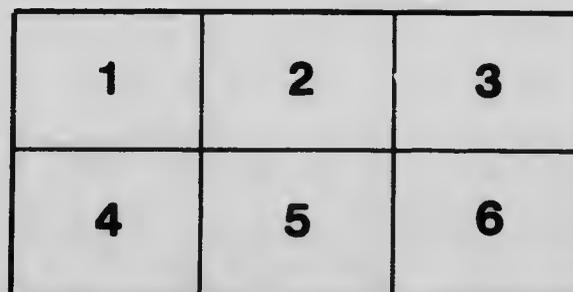
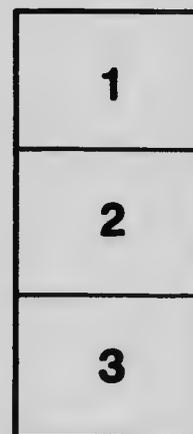
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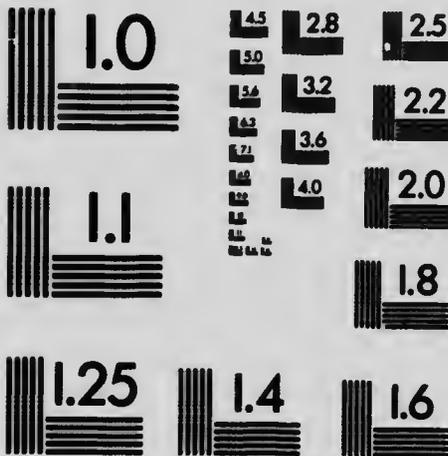
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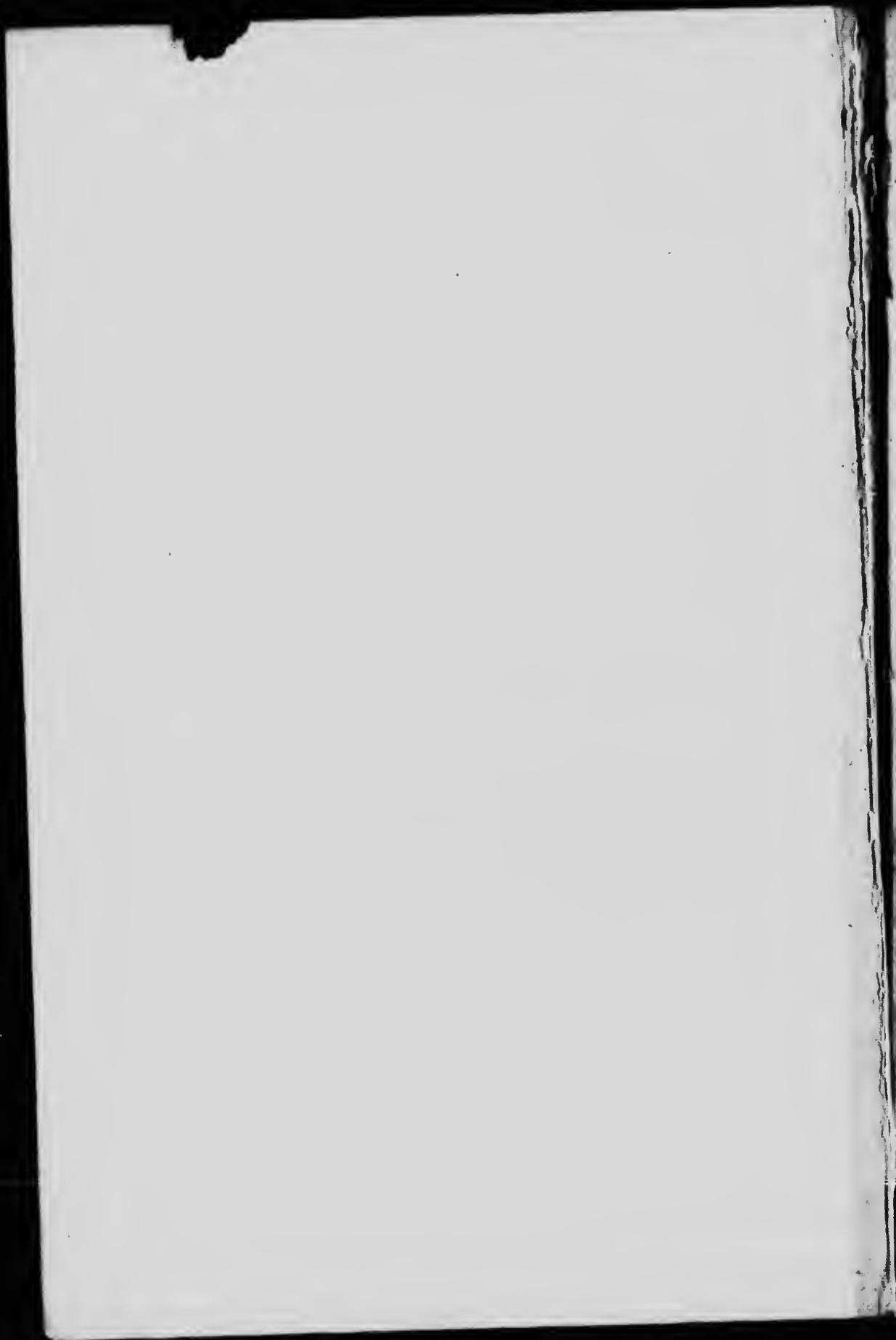


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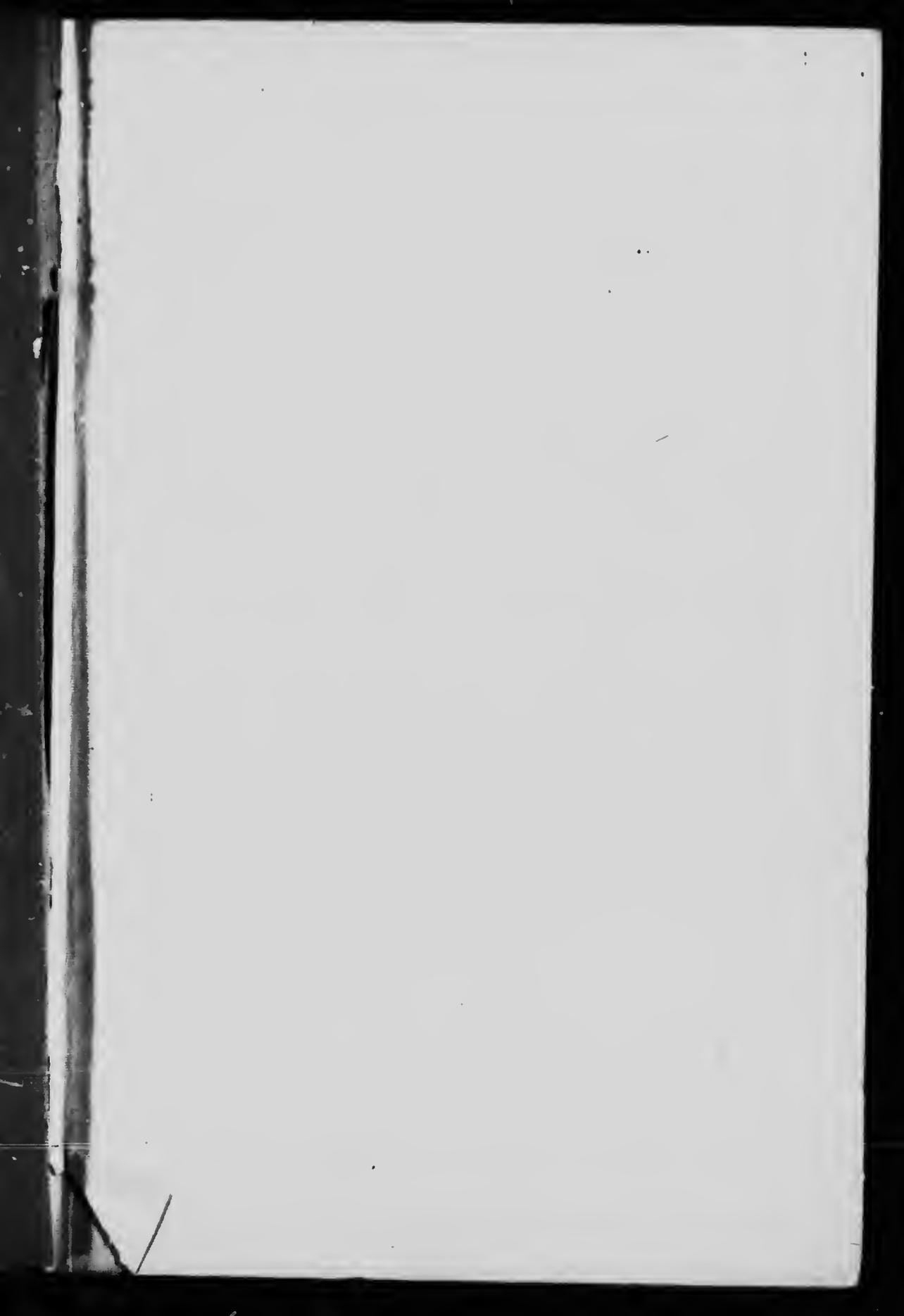
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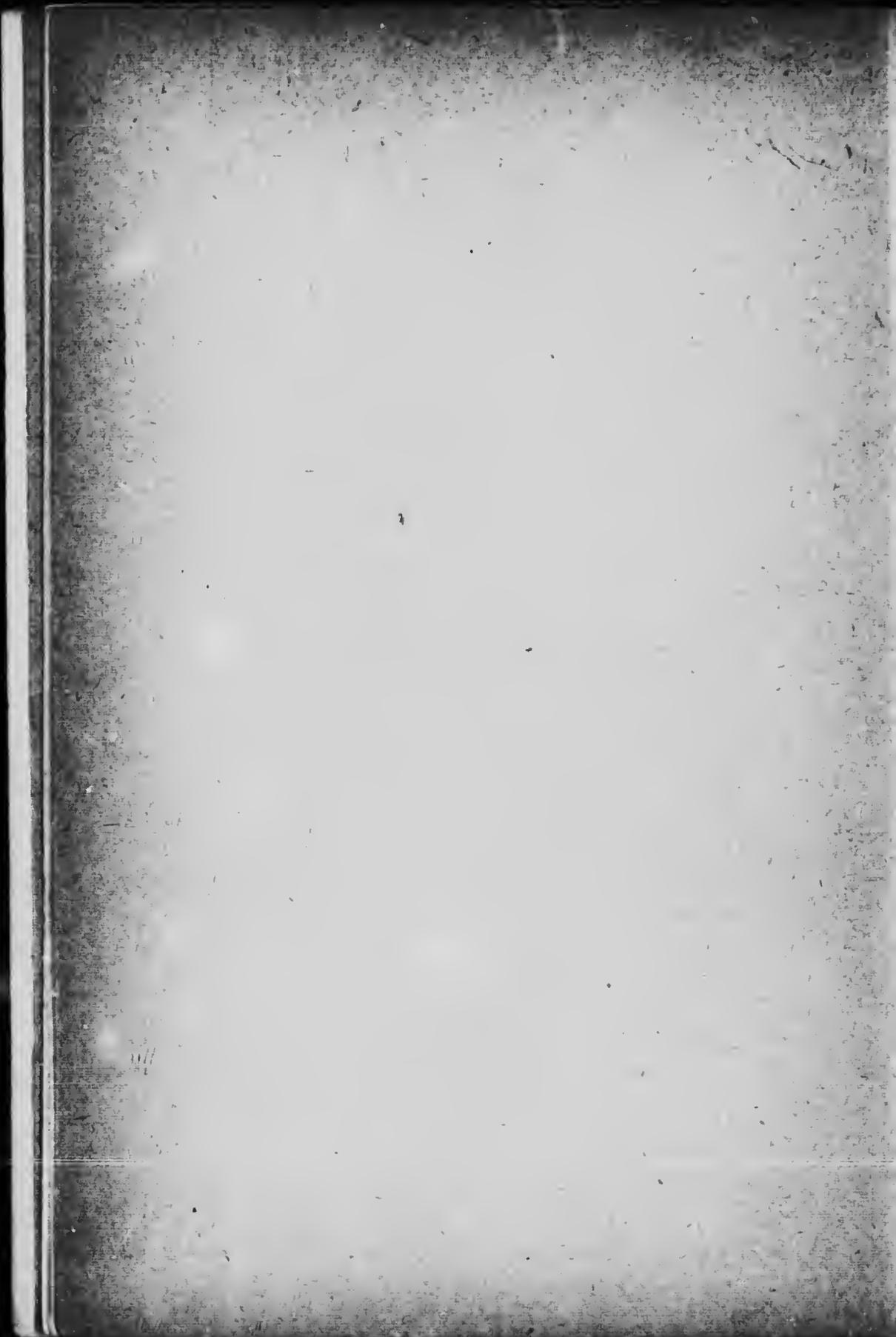
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NEVER BEATEN!

CHAPTER I.

THE VOICE THAT CALLED HIM AWAY.

FINISHED at last. The night-sorting work of the Meadhill Post Office was done, and Jack Stanhope wearily wended his way homeward. For two years he had been engaged day and night alternately in uncongenial labour, but he had never complained, or had entertained a thought of doing so, but he had long resolved that it should not be the work of his life, for the "voice of Canada" was calling him away. It had resounded in his ears by day and he had heard it in his dreams by night.

He was seventeen years of age, and for some time past had been a dreamer with a purpose, not a dreamer of idle dreams of wealth suddenly acquired and a subsequent life of ease. He aimed at prosperity, and he was willing to toil to earn it.

It was a cheerless March morning with heavy clouds hiding the stars and prolonging the darkness of the night. A moon just entering its second quarter had gone down hours earlier, and as Jack strode along, a clock of a church close by struck four. No other sound but that of the moaning wind broke the stillness.

The deserted streets were wrapped in a deep gloom, for at Meadhill the professed need of "keeping down the rates," which are never kept down, though corporations may be

never more parsimonious, led to the lamplighter going round at midnight and dextrously, with the hook at the end of a stick, reducing the burning gas to a bye-pass glimmer of which no self-respecting glowworm would be proud.

The keen wind was careering through the town, raising clouds of dust, welcome to the agriculturist, we are told, but trying to the urban resident. Jack paid no heed to it, nor to the depressing gloom, or aught else he was surrounded by, for his mind was busy conjuring up visions of a life in the Far West.

"Charlie Henning's gone," he suddenly exclaimed aloud, "and I'll go too."

A policeman, standing at the corner of Brookland Street, wherein Jack lived, heard his voice, and flashed the light of his lantern upon him. Jack was known to him, and a "Good morning" was exchanged, with the added remark from the officer that it was "a bit chilly."

This truthful comment on the state of the atmosphere Jack agreed with, and quickening his pace he soon reached his home. Provided with a latchkey, he let himself in, and making as little noise as possible, so that he might not disturb the sleeping crept up the stairs to his bedroom.

It was shared by two of his younger brothers, who slept together. Jack lighted the candle, left for him on a chair by his bedside, and as he hastily removed his clothing his eyes were fixed on the two boys, wrapped in the deep sleep of healthful, tender years. His heart was stirred with a feeling akin to sorrow as he thought of leaving them, perhaps never to see them again in this world, but no thought of swerving from his purpose entered his mind.

"There are so many of us," he murmured, "and I must go. At the office it will be years before I can keep myself, and I have no real heart in the work."

Jack was not of a demonstrative nature. He made no professions of any sort, but he had been ever thoughtful of others, and he had a faith that aid to further him in his

daily life would be given him, if he prayed for Divine assistance, and kneeling down he asked humbly that he might prosper in the distant land he was going to. Then he got into bed, laid his head on the pillow and was almost instantly asleep.

Mr. Stanhope was not a very prosperous man, but by strenuous effort with his pen he had so far managed to keep a fairly good home for his numerous family. He was not a genius, nor had he won a reputation for any presumably notable book. He wrote for boys, men, girls and women as the opportunity arose; and ranked as what is known in the profession as a literary hack, one of a class whose yoke is so hard to bear.

He was busy, towards noon on the following day, when Jack quietly entered the small back-room, dignified by the name of study. It was an unusual thing for him to do when his father was known to be busy.

"Well, Jack, what is it? Anything the matter at the Post Office?"

"Nothing, Dad. I've interrupted you to say that I am going to Canada."

If he had announced his intention of attempting to swim the Channel he could have more astonished his father.

"Canada, Jack!"

"I've been thinking of it a long time, two years at least, and I've saved up enough to pay my passage out. You would never accept any of my pay——"

"Because I knew you would take care of it," said Mr. Stanhope helplessly, "and you have been finding your own clothes and—but Canada! What do you know of Colonial life?"

"Oh, I've all sorts of papers on Canada I got from the shipping people," rejoined Jack, "and have read books about the life there which I had from the Institute library, and—and I've made up my mind to go. Charlie Henning has gone there and Sam Luton says he will be off soon."

"Charlie's father has plenty of money," said Mr. Stanhope gravely, "and is able to start his boy well. I have very little to spare."

"I am going out to work my own way," said Jack decisively. "Post Office work does not suit me."

His father looked at him critically. He was a fairly well grown youth for his years, but scarcely more than of the average in height. His figure was closely knit, and his shoulders were square and broad. Never a great talker, he had not previously intimated what he thought of his life at the Post Office. But there was no mistaking the set look of his face and the resolute gleam in his eyes.

"Have you quite made up your mind, Jack?"

"Yes, I am going; and remember, Dad, that whatever comes of it, you are not responsible. It will be all my own doing. I feel as if I'd just *got* to go to Canada. You understand, perhaps, what I mean."

"I do," replied Mr. Stanhope with quiet resignation.

"Well, as you are bent on leaving home, we must make up our minds to part with you. I suppose you will be going soon?"

"I shall give notice to the postmaster to-day to leave the end of next week," said Jack.

That Mrs. Stanhope should be tearful in her objecting to Jack's leaving home was inevitable. The feelings of a mother towards her offspring cannot be perfectly gauged by man. Its height and breadth and depth cannot be fathomed or measured by anyone but herself and others of her sex who have children. Jack reasoned with her, pointing out how distasteful post office work was to him, how slow promotion was, and gave her some facts that illustrated the lives of the employés, pointing out that some of them were approaching their thirtieth year and were still unable to marry and keep a home.

"Much less assist their younger brothers and sisters," he added parenthetically.

He was not to be turned from his purpose, having fixed honest ideals and the requisite courage to venture much in attempting to fulfil them. There you have his character in a nutshell. He loved his home and all in it, but he was not indifferent to the possibilities of the future, when it could be a home to him no more.

Nor would it be a home to the other boys and girls, for those who kept it together must, in the course of Nature, eventually pass away, though happily they might live for many years. So he was going to Canada to be helpful to himself and those dear to him.

The preparations for his departure need not be largely dwelt on. The attendant bustle and consequent excited interest of the family and friends, did something towards softening down the parental pain for the time being. Jack left the post office in due course, and spent a week in making his final arrangements. His brother employés clubbed together to buy him a parting gift. Other friends did not forget him, and those at home did what little they could to add to the store of things that would be useful to him in his life in the far West.

He proposed to go to Assiniboia, a part of Saskatchewan and work in an outlying district, where he could early take up the one hundred and sixty acres of land the Canadian Government gives to each emigrant who chooses to adopt farming as his pursuit, and one morning he was at Euston Station with his father and mother, outwardly calm and avowedly hopeful of the future.

The shipping people were very kind to him. He was going intermediate and ought to have departed at midnight of the previous day, but on the score of his youth, they gave him a pass to travel with the first-class passenger train to Liverpool.

It was ready to depart. At the last, but hasty adieus, in words, were taken. Held by his mother in a final embrace to the final moment, he had to jump into the train

as it was moving out of the station. As he settled into a seat his father saw that there was a moisture in his eyes, which his resolute nature would not allow to develop into falling tears.

"My own fault, if I go wrong out there," were his parting words.

The train left the station, apparently, to the eye, shutting up like a closing telescope, and for a moment it seemed to the father that his boy was being shut away from him for ever. It was the thought of a man who had earned bread for himself and others by the creations of his imaginative powers, such as they were. He kept the thought to himself.

"Jack will get on, he would do well anywhere," he said to his wife.

"It breaks my heart to part with him," said the mother, and the journey across the great City and by train to Meadhill was accomplished without either uttering more than a few occasional words, and they always were of Jack.

"He has only fifty dollars over and above his fare," said his mother, "suppose he should lose or be robbed of his money."

"He will never lose his head," remarked the father.

CHAPTER II.

SAM LUTON, SUNDOWNER.

"HURRY up, boys, the moon will soon be down."

Jim Brown, the prosperous settler, had a rough but cheery voice, and none whom he addressed had ever heard it raised in anger. It was good policy perhaps for him to avoid a display of temper, even when much provoked, but that with the man who was simply Jim to everybody, even to his men, was a minor consideration.

"If 'taint possible to get the best out of a man with reasonable words, you wuldn't do it in a year by howlin' at him," he would say.

The helpers he addressed were five in number, three men and two youths, and they were harvesting by moonlight, for the autumn days are precious in the Canadian West. A great deal had to be done in a short time, and it was work, work, on the farms from early morn till dewy eve, and half through the night when the moon was shining.

One of the youths was Jack, and the other bore the name of Pete. He must have had another name, but it had not been used for years. It is doubtful if anyone there could have recalled it, as at no time in the past had it been often made use of. Pete was a tall, lean young fellow, with a lank face, uncommonly plain, and made plainer by his visible condition of chronic discontent with his lot. When quite a little fellow he had been brought from England by his father, who was a widower. Inborn idleness and drink had killed the father when he was one of Jim Brown's labourers, and the boy was left on the farmer's hands. As idle as his deceased parent, he was

almost worthless, but Jim Brown was loth to turn him adrift, as he would then indubitably fall away into evil courses.

"He'd be up to somethin'," remarked the farmer to one of his acquaintances, who had been urging him to get rid of a worthless hand, "and maybe get rough justice done to him. I'd not like to hear as he had been caught horse-stealing and been shot or hanged."

It was inevitable that Jack and Pete could not be very great friends. In the spring when Jack arrived at the farm, after a walk of eleven miles from the nearest railway station—a poor place, where he left his luggage for a time, it was the tail of new, branch of the main line—Peter resented the ready way he was engaged by the farmer. When Jack showed that he was bent on working hard and saving all the money he possibly could, Pete took upon himself the task of correcting him.

"Play light," he said, "or I'll clout ye. I don't want no ojus comparitives made agin me."

Jack was engaged in cleaning out a stock shed and doing his best to get the task finished in record time. He ignored Pete's suggestion, but kept a wary eye on the sullen monitor, and when he sought to carry out his threat Jack was ready for him.

Now, it so happened at home, for simple amusement, Jack had occasionally indulged in a little friendly boxing. Pete's knowledge of fisticuffs was of the most primitive nature. Lowering his head and swinging his arms like the moving sails of a windmill, he went for Jack, who met his attack on scientific principles and speedily disposed of him as an adversary.

"Ye beant a fair fighter," Pete snivelled as he lay in a heap against the wooden wall of the shed.

"I can't fight any other way," answered Jack. "Get up and get out of the shed—sharp."

Pete did as he was told, and from that time he did not

interfere with Jack any more, but he nursed his hatred of one who worked too hard for his liking, and lived in the hope of one day being able to gratify it.

One of the men was known as Bossy, a cognomen derived from his disposition to direct everything and everybody, on all matters, whether he knew anything about them or not. Apart from that weakness, he was not a bad sort of fellow, and he was no shirker of work.

The corn lay as it had fallen before the advance of the horse-reaper, and the task in hand was forking it into a waggon to be carried to the homestead where it was being crudely stacked to await the threshing-day. Pete was languishing at his task, and showed a tendency to fall asleep, standing. The command to "hurry up," from Jim Brown roused him to further temporary activity.

"I du believe," he said, "that this yere wurk will be the death o' me."

"We'll gi' you a r'yal funeral if yer dies," said one of the men, "with music. I can perform wonderful on a comb, wropped in a bit o' thin paper."

"People can't wurk and jaw at the same time," said Bossy; "keep a goin', Jerry."

"And you keep a goin' alser," retorted Jerry, "and don't you jaw, neither."

"Less talkin', boys," said Jim Brown.

The moon was approaching the full, and sinking behind a distant range of hills that backed up a lake of water, resembling molten silver in the flood of moonlight. Away in the other direction, about a mile distant, was an extensive forest, locally known as "The Wood," with a predominance of pines, but there was a vast number of enormous beech, oak trees, with a sprinkling of the valuable black walnut and hickory.

Half the moon had disappeared behind the distant hill when Pete, who was taking another momentary rest, growled, "A chap comin' along, on a hoss."

It was time to abandon the work of loading the waggons, and Jim Brown gave the word to "ease off." Every eye turned in the direction to which Pete was lazily pointing, and a rider on a sorry horse was seen approaching.

"In Australy," said Jerry, "we should call that chap a sundowner."

"Then you'd be wrong," corrected Bossy. "If anything, he's a moonowner."

"The sun's down, ain't it, you idiot," said the exasperated Jerry. "I niver come across a man so given to puttin' people right, when all he knows could be put in a thimble and then leave room for a woman's finger."

"Ease off, tongue and hand," said Jim Brown. "Now then, my lad, what can we do for you?"

He was addressing the rider on horseback, a youth who sat in the saddle making a visible effort to keep upright. He was in a sorry plight, with his clothing almost in tatters, and a naked toe showing through one of his boots. Jack was staring at him with wide-open eyes, for in the newcomer he recognised an old acquaintance, Sam Luton, who had often talked at Meadhill of settling in Canada, but up to that moment Jack had no idea that he had left his home.

"I want you to put me up for the rest of the night," answered Sam, in a low tone of voice, "I've only had a crust of bread to-day. I can do a bit of work for you to-morrow."

"I know him," said Jack in an undertone, to Jim Brown. "He can have a shake down with me."

"Very good, my lad," replied the farmer. "He's welcome to a bit of food and a sleep under my roof. As for work, he don't look like doin' much of it."

Jack went up to Sam with an extended hand. It pained him to see the state he was in, for at home he had known him as a bright, but somewhat careless boy, who was not exactly vicious, but not free from the weakening vice of

smoking cigarettes and the folly of associating with some of the idlest youngsters in Meadhill. Sam stared at him for an instant and then ejaculated, "Jack Stanhope!"

"That's me," said Jack, "come along. I'll see you right for the night."

The waggon had moved on, with the men perched on the wheat piled up in it. Pete had managed to scramble upon the tailboard and was lying at full length with his eyes half closed. He was too tired to feel more than feebly resentful of the coming of "another loafer from over the sea," as he mentally stigmatised Sam as being, but he felt sure that Jack had expected an old friend whom he had brought thither to deprive him, Pete, of his post on the farm.

Mrs. Brown had gone to bed, as she had to be up early to milk two cows, all the stock then on the farm. She had left the table in the living room well covered with plain but wholesome food for the harvesters' late supper. A kettle of water on a "Beatrice" oil stove was ready to make coffee for all who cared to partake of it.

The tired toilers fell to as soon as the horses had been stabled and Sam Luton ate like a youth who had been starving for days. The appetite of most youths requires a considerable quantity of solids under normal conditions, but his feats of gastronomy were something phenomenal.

It was not until he had eaten his fill that Jack asked him how long he had been in Canada. He said that he started a fortnight after Jack left home.

"And what have you been doing?" inquired Jack.

"Nothing much," said Sam. "My people started me with fifty pounds and promised to let me have some more money when I took up my land, but I haven't done so yet. I came over with some fellows who had work offered them in Winnipeg, and I stayed there with them for a bit. I had half a mind to stay altogether, but I haven't been brought up to any trade, and clerks are not wanted there. I put my name down for a job at a farm, near Lumsden,

and I stopped there a month, but the people were so rough."

"This isn't a gentleman's country, just yet," remarked Jack quietly, "but the people are mostly honest. So you left the farm. Where did you go next?"

"I've been moving on ever since," replied Sam, "putting up at a farm in the evening, doing a bit of work for my bed and food in the morning, and then going on again."

"You bought your horse for that sort of life, I suppose?" said Jack, glancing keenly at Sam's face. It suddenly flushed deeply to the roots of his hair.

"I didn't exactly buy it," he whispered; "the fact is, the man I worked for one morning in August, had a lot of horses, more than he wanted, and I—I borrowed one——"

"Oh, be quiet. Not another word!" said Jack hastily. He had heard enough. Sam had no need to make a fuller confession. He had stolen the horse, committed a crime that with settlers in the Far West is never forgiven. It was terribly, bewilderingly painful to Jack.

The men had lit their pipes for a final smoke, and Pete had already stolen away to bed. Bossy was discussing the unwritten laws of their primitive lives and enunciating what he would do if he were ruler of the country.

"I would deal mercifully with any rascal but a thief. He's wuss than a murderer a'most. I dessay, Jim, as you remember the case of Wilkins, the poor settler, over by the Lone Lands. He'd but one hoss, and a sundowner come along one evening——"

Sam rose from his seat, with his wild eyes fixed on Bossy. None of the men, fortunately, were looking towards the terrified youth. Jack rose also, and taking him by the arm, hurried him unceremoniously out of the room.

Jack slept in a small chamber at the back of the homestead. It had little in it beyond a bed and a chair. He bade Sam sit down on the latter and closed the door.

"Oh, how could you do it, Sam?" he said softly. "If you wish to say anything to me, let it be in a whisper."

Sam sat with his head bowed down upon his breast and his hands hanging limply by his side. Without looking up, he huskily implored Jack not to betray him.

"I couldn't go so far as that," said Jack, "but that horse must somehow be got back to its owner. Is he far away?"

"About sixty miles," answered Sam, with a stifled groan. "I can't think how I could be so mad as to take it. But I hated the work I was set to do, cleaning out pigsties and grooming horses, some of them the most vicious beasts you ever set eyes on. The horse I have brought here was the only really quiet one of the lot."

"What is the name of the owner?" asked Jack.

"Stevens," replied Sam; "his farm lies about twenty miles west of Regina. I didn't come direct from there but have been tacking and dodging about, picking out farms to stop at for their loneliness."

"Then you've felt sorry for what you did?" said Jack.

"It's haunted me," said Sam, "day and night. I've had thoughts of it worrying me. I've done it over and over again, in my dreams, and been hunted by awful looking men, shouting, 'Horse-thief!' and threatening to shoot me. Do you know about the Lone Lands affair the man was speaking of?"

"I have heard the story," replied Jack; "never mind about that."

"Did they—they catch the thief?"

"They did."

"And wha—at did they do to him?"

"It's time we lay down and slept," said Jack. "Jim will be rousing the house in a few hours—at four o'clock at the latest."

"But I want to know what was done," urged Sam, "I can't sleep as I feel now. I shall be easier when I know the worst I have to fear."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"If you insist upon it, I must tell you," said Jack, as he kicked off his boots and removed his coat; "they hanged him half-an-hour after he was caught."

"He was lynched," said Sam, with a strange quietude upon him.

"Just so!" rejoined Jack. "Of course, it was an unlawful thing to do, and there was some talk of bringing the lynchers to trial. But nothing was done, as in the Lone Lands there are seldom any of the police about, and probably it was feared that the men would take refuge in the woods and turn what Australians call bushrangers."

"I deserve anything that may be done to me," said Sam resignedly. "Now I will try to get to sleep."

"To-morrow I will decide what ought to be done," said Jack. "We had better not talk now any more about it."

Jack was perturbed by thoughts of Sam's perilous position, but he was not awake long, for the fatigue of the day was bound to have its due effect upon him. Sam presently lay down beside him, and ere long he was sleeping also. In a state of unbroken repose these two types of those whom the vast Colony call away from home and friends, remained until Jim Brown thumped the bedroom floor with his fist in the morning and cheerily bade them rise and get to work.

CHAPTER III.

TRACKED BY THE POLICE.

ONE of Jack's duties was to feed the horses in the morning. During the short time of harvesting the grooming was, to some extent, neglected, but he never omitted giving the animals a good rub down.

The day had not returned when Jim Brown roused his household. Jack lighted the candle and indulged in a hasty wash in a bucket of water, standing on a deal box which Mrs. Brown, in a womanly way, had draped with a piece of fancy muslin. In silence Sam followed Jack's example, and having donned their clothes the light was blown out and they left the room.

Mrs. Brown, a tall woman, with a face that matched her husband's in its aspect of cheerfulness, was tidying up the living-room, prior to attending to the milking. The "Beatrice" stove was alight, and the kettle humming its promise that the water would soon be boiling. Mrs. Brown had a sympathetic feeling for boys. She had two sons, not yet old enough to help in the farmwork. They were at a boarding-school at Lumsden, to acquire some knowledge of reading and writing, and other elementary learning, the best education to be obtained there.

She gave Jack and Sam a cheerful good morning, and there was a special smile for Jack. Her keen grey eyes took swift stock of Sam, and the pursing of her lips showed that she did not entirely approve of him.

"You are too young to take to sundowning, lad," she said. "Get regular work somewhere and stick to it."

"I will, if I can," replied Sam miserably.

When our hearts are heavy with sorrow, or we have a dread of coming evil weighing upon us, the feeling harassing us is always harder to bear in the early part of the day. Sam was utterly wretched, and it would have taken very little more to completely break him down.

"Sam," said Jack, "will help me in the stable."

"Jim told me he was a friend of yours," said Mrs. Brown. "Let him reckon that it's a bit of wonderful good luck, his finding you. Chance meetings of old friends out here are uncommon scarce."

Jack led the way out doors, followed by Sam who walked in a weary, helpless way. In the east there was a faint grey strip of light, the herald of the coming sun. Jim Brown and the men were already at work, emptying the last waggon brought in on leaving off work some hours before.

There were eight horses in the stable, two teams, and a stout cob which the farmer used to ride about on. Adjoining, was the harness room where the cornbin and several sacks of chaff were also stored early for use. Jack took up a big sieve and showed Sam how much of each would serve for a horse's feed and bade him hurry along with the needed supplies, then himself went to work with the wisp of straw, rubbing the horses down, with the accompanying hissing, without which, at home or in the colonies, no grooming can seemingly be properly performed.

Sam soon had the cribs supplied with corn, and asked Jack what next he should do. Without pausing in his labour, Jack said that he could do nothing more but answer another question or two.

"What sort of man is Stevens?" he asked. "Is he good tempered, or bad? Is he the man to forgive—well, anything wrong done to him?"

"He's a passionate fellow, and used to go raging about," said Sam, "but his men took very little notice of him."

Jack nodded and was silent for a few moments, during which he finished with one horse and turned his attention to another.

"There is an important thing I want to know," he resumed. "Have you any reason to suppose that you are being looked for?"

"I have not seen anyone who appeared to be after me," replied Sam, in a hesitating way, "but——" he paused and passed a hand across his forehead as he stifled a tendency to groan aloud.

"But what?" said Jack. "Don't conceal anything from me."

"At the place I stopped at the night before I turned up here," said Sam, "I was lying awake in the room they gave me, and I heard the farmer and his wife talking. They must have been raising their voices. The man, anyway, seemed to be angry. 'I tell you, Polly,' he said, 'that I ought to do it. If it's known that I let him slide, I should be burnt out, or something else as bad.' 'He's only a boy, and we've boys of our own,' said the woman. Then they spoke lower and I couldn't clearly hear anything else they talked about."

"What did the farmer say to you in the morning?" asked Jack.

"He came to me, as early as we were called up this morning," said Sam, "and gave me a piece of bread, which he said was all I would get from him. 'As for working here, I don't want you. Go away, and don't come to my homestead again.' He was fearfully rough in his manner, and I got the horse and rode away at once. It was a full hour before I saw a gleam of daylight."

"Sam," said Jack, "it is certain that he knew of, or had heard something against you. Now, look here, old fellow, I've made up my mind to do the best I can for you, so that you may have time to live down the crime you have been guilty of. I am not going to preach to you, because

I should probably bungle the business. Your future depends on yourself, unless——"

Jack stopped short, not caring to say what he feared would come to pass. Sam readily interpreted what was in his mind.

"You think the police are on my track?" he said.

"I do," answered Jack, "it would be stupid of me to deny it. I hope you won't be tracked here. Our post goes out to-day, and as you have helped me with my work I can snatch a minute to write a line to Stevens, telling him his horse is here, and any expenses he may think ought to be paid for fetching it, I will meet. I may say a little more to him, but that will be between him and me."

"Oh, Jack, what a good fellow you are!" cried Sam, brushing a hand across his eyes.

"If you get out of this affair and behave yourself," said Jack, "you will find that there are a lot of good people about, in this country, much better than I can hope to be. Don't rub your eyes, or Mrs. Brown will wonder what is the matter with you. She's a sharp woman. Even Bossy says that he 'gives her in best in some things,' which is a proof that she is no common woman. Bossy, I believe, has never before been known to admit that he is inferior to anyone. Now for breakfast. I'm ready for it."

Jack assumed a lightness of heart which helped Sam to compose himself materially. Hope had come to his aid, and the change wrought in him was very marked, so much so that Mrs. Brown mentally blamed herself for having hastily misjudged him.

There was no order in partaking of breakfast. Jack got through with his in double-quick time, voluntarily explaining to Mrs. Brown that he had a short letter to write and post or give to the man who brought the mail and who, during harvest time, obliged the settlers by taking back their letters to the shanty that served for a post-office, about two miles distant from Jim Brown's homestead.

The farmer and his men came in as Jack was writing the letter in his room. Brown gave Sam a nod, and Bossy informed him that he would show him the work he would be called on to perform and how to do it.

"Jest as ye would freely show the Emperor of Rooshia how to keep his refractorus people in order," remarked Jerry. "It gives me all sorts of innard pains when I think of sich a wallyble man as you are, Bossy, bein' kind o' buried away 'ere."

"The place would be the better fer the buryin' of some people with serkustic tongues," retorted Bossy, "and I'd be their undertaker—cheerful."

When Jack emerged from his room with his letter ready for post, Jim Brown said, "Somebody has mislaid the spanner, Jack, and we're bound to want one afore the day is out. Danby, over at White Lees has got several. Take the cob and ride over for one. He'll lend it free."

Jack dearly loved a ride on horseback, but just then he would rather somebody else had been sent for the spanner. He was loth to leave Sam, until he felt more easy about the outcome of his serious, reckless act. But it would have been a mistake to raise any objection to going, as suspicion of something being wrong in Sam, might arise. So he went off, after giving Sam a warning look not to betray himself, to the stables.

In a minute or two he was riding towards White Lees, a farm about half-an-hour's smart canter from Kellson's, Brown's homestead. A short distance on the way he espied the letter carrier, and riding up to him handed over the letter. The cob needed no urging to perform the rest of the journey speedily, having been idle in the stable for two days, and covered the intervening ground in about twenty-five minutes. Danby was not at home and his wife informed Jack that he had gone down to the wheat "patch." She was an American woman, near the lake.

"I guess he's just got to keep the tools locked up, or

they'd never be found," she said, "and he's cute enough to hold the key."

Jack rode away to the lake, a ride of nearly a quarter-of-an-hour, and came upon Danby at work with his hands, cutting corn. He had only one spanner with him. In respect to the key, he was loth to part with it, and he extracted from Jack a promise to bring it back to him, when he had obtained a spanner from the tool-box.

Thus, more time than Jack had anticipated was occupied in the execution of his errand, and the better part of two hours had elapsed ere he came into sight of Brown's homestead. When still some distance from it, he observed two horses standing by the door, and drawing nearer he saw they were saddled. The riders had evidently gone inside. "Police come for Sam!" was the terrible thought that flashed upon him.

The police were there, two tall officers in plain, dark blue uniform, lean of body, and with eyes that showed the spirit of fearlessness without which they would have been useless in their calling. They were men who spent their lives mostly in the saddle, riding about lonely parts of the country, sheltering at night in some outlying station at one time, at other times compelled to camp and sleep in the open air. There was no visible excitement in the occupants of the room, Mrs. Brown was calmly tending to the gastronomical requirements of the officers, who had been riding through half the night without food, and had need of the homely viands she placed at their service.

As Jack, after restoring the cob to its stall, put in an appearance, they were talking quietly, and he caught his name, spoken in a casual way. The man who had uttered it, looked up and said, "Well, young 'un, you've got back. You've kept us waiting a bit."

Jack quietly explained what had detained him, and no comment was made to convey to him whether he was doubted or believed to have told the truth. One of the men

scanned him up and down, then went on with his breakfast.

"You can rely on anything Jack tells you," remarked Mrs. Brown.

"No doubt, mother," said the man. "All we want to know is if he has heard anything from his pal about Steven's horse."

"It's in the stable," replied Jack.

"We know that much," grunted the other man. "That information wasn't wanted. Do you know about its having been stolen? That's the point we're aiming at."

"Sam confessed to me that he had stolen it," said Jack.

"And you kept it to yourself," said the man, "which isn't according to Cocker, and may get you into trouble."

"I've written to Stevens," rejoined Jack, "and sent the letter on by Martin to the post, telling Stevens everything and offering to pay for the use of his horse, or any moderate damages he might ask for."

"Why did you not tell Brown that he had a horse-thief in his homestead?" demanded the man.

"Well, I reckon," said Jack, "that I didn't want to worry anyone here about Sam's mad doing. Do you imagine we could have knocked off harvesting to hunt about for you?"

"Smart boy, this," said the other man, addressing Mrs. Brown.

"He's honest," she answered, "and that's better than being smart. He's acted straightforwardly and for the best. I reckon you don't want to take him."

"Not yet," was the composed rejoinder, "but we should like to see the bold nipper who levanted with the horse."

"He's with Jim," said Mrs. Brown; "the corn's being reaped in the Hollow. Jack will show where it is."

The Hollow was a depression in the farm-lands, partly fringed with trees and bushes. It lay off towards the forest, and men working there were invisible from the level ground any great distance away. It was decided by the

police that they would go on foot, as their horses were weary, and, as one remarked, they "would stand quiet for hours."

Jack walked on a little ahead of the officers, asking no questions, as they could be productive of no good result. His heart ached for the misguided Sam, and the only grain of comfort he could extract from the position of things was obtained from a hope that the constituted authorities would not deal very harshly with a criminal so young. At all events, Sam would not be hanged.

Matters were bad enough, in any case, and Jack could hardly have felt more miserable if he had been the culprit. It was true that he and Sam had not been very close friends at home, but they had been often casually brought together, and had ever been on good terms with each other. Now, strange to say, Jack felt drawn closer to Sam, and grieved over his downfall as if he had been a boon companion in the past.

The rattle of the reaper fell upon his ears as he made his way through the fringe of bushes and trees, and slowly he came into view of the toilers in the Hollow. Jim Brown, with his men and Pete were there, but Sam was nowhere around, unless, as Jack suspected, he were hiding in the standing corn, having possibly espied the approach of the police.

The officers hailed Jim Brown, and all work was temporarily brought to a standstill. Judging by the demeanour of the farmer and his men, it seemed to Jack as he drew near them, that they were considerably surprised to see him accompanied by two members of the police force.

"Why, what's goin' now?" inquired the farmer.

"Where is Sam?" asked Jack.

"He's quit," answered Brown. "He got fidgettin' about, and kep' on sayin' as he was anxious about you. I asked him why he shud be so, but ther was no sense to be got out of him. I let him go as he liked, and he went a

prowlin' up the slope; the wood side, and that's the last I saw of him. I reckoned that he and wurk wasn't iver fitted together."

"He's nicked into the wood—must have spied us," said one of the officers. "We've been tracking him for days, and a nice run he's given us."

"Wut's he done?" curtly inquired Brown.

"Been riding about on a horse he borrowed without asking for the loan of it," was the mildly facetious answer.

The men were standing by, with wide open eyes and gaping mouths. Pete, who was seated on the reaper, a short distance from the group, took off his cap and waved it in the air.

"I reckoned he was a bad 'un," he shouted. "Jack's pal too. Hooroar!"

"I'll clout ye if ye ain't quiet," said Brown angrily. "Well, gentlemen," he added, turning towards the officers; "the youngster must ha' spotted your comin' and hev made for the wood."

"If I was you orficials," said Bossy, "I wouldn't lose a moment in tracking him. He can't be fur away, and I'll tell you how to circumwent him."

"Oh!" gasped Jerry, "at it agen. I shouldn't be s'prised if you wasn't made head of the perlice afore another month's out."

"The notion that only two men could track down anyone in yonder wood," said one of the officers tartly, "is the notion of an ass."

"And I recommend the ass to try it on alone, which would be just as much use," growled the other officer.

Jerry was convulsed with laughter, and Tanner, the third farm-hand, chuckled audibly.

"Now, all I have got to say to fule Jerry——" began Bossy, but was stopped by a sharp movement of Jim Brown's hand. Thereupon he subsided into a silence that was the outcome of a tremendous effort to control his tongue. It

inflamed his sunburnt face to the red glow of a railway danger signal.

"You had better take the hoss," said Brown, "I can't say no more."

"This youngster," said one of the officers, pointing at Jack, "knew what his chum had done."

"I've explained everything to you," said Jack quietly.

"It's sartain that you won't take Jack frum me, without a bit of a fight," said Brown with gleaming eyes, "fer I'm dead sure *he* ain't done nuthin' wrong."

The officers said no more, and wheeling round, stalked away without a word of adieu. Jack briefly told the farmer what he had done to put matters right for Sam, as far as he could, and was bidden to say nothing more about it.

"The poor fulish lad's gone," said Brown, "and in yon wood there's sartain death waitin' fer him, onless he comes out and gives hissself up. If he shows up at the homestead, I shall be bound to hand him over to the perlice."

"It would be no use looking for him, I suppose?" suggested Jack.

"If he's a mind to come back, he'll show up without our huntin' fer him," replied Brown. "If he ain't a mind to, we couldn't find him alive in a week. Besides, Jack, the corn must be got in. I wonder why sich onsuitable lads are 'lowed to come over 'ere. Sooner or later the breed is boun' to go wrong. Come, let's get to work. Pete, ye've got to keep that reaper movin' or I'll move ye in a way ye ain't reckoned on."

Jim Brown was evidently in a mood strange to him. He was angry with somebody, and Jack was not sure that Sam was the object of his wrath. To him, it appeared that the farmer's anger was directed towards the young culprit's friends for having allowed him to venture across the sea, to share in a life he seemed to be entirely unfitted for.

CHAPTER IV.

CHARLIE HENNING.

“DEAR JACK,—I wrote home for your address, and having got it, am writing to you, hoping you are rubbing along all right. I came over with a large party, got up by a man named Peter Wrystone. His very name ought to have made me shy of him. He is a rank fraud.’

‘He professed to have especial privileges given him by the Canadian Government, so that we could take up land near a railway station. The land he brought us to, and left us there, may be near a railway station when they make a line that way and put up a station for us. I don’t think it will be done for years and years, for the land is too far North and it isn’t now worth a shilling an acre.’

‘There were seven hundred of us when we landed and went on to Winnipeg—fifty youngsters about the same as myself, some a few years older, and so on, up to men of sixty, like a flight of stairs. Some of the men had wives and families, and I was sorry for them, because not a few were about as fit to come over here and take to farming as they would be to navigate a liner across the Atlantic.’

‘When we came to go into matters, or rather when the grown men did so—I didn’t bother about it—we found that we had to take train to a place called Obada—sounds like Obadiah doesn’t it?—and travel from there in waggons, which we could hire or buy. Well, it ended in only two hundred of us coming along, and when it came to waggoning—it was more properly speaking carting, for decent waggons were scarce—Peter Wrystone suddenly vanished, and when we looked for the rascal to let him

know what we thought of him, if we did not do anything more, we found that he had gone back to Winnipeg. Went off in a train that arrived the previous midnight.'

'Only a hundred of us had the pluck to go on. The rest either went back, as far as they could, or looked for work at Obada. Most of the men, I am glad to say, got something to do. I chummed up, in a cart, with two fellows, named Smirk and Newstone, both big and much older than myself. They seemed all right, but they were scabs. The first night we stopped to sleep, they cut my belt in two as I slept, and vamoosed. When I woke up and found what they had done, I drove back to Obada, but could hear nothing of them, and there I was, penniless.'

'How have I lived since? Well, that would make a long story, but here I am, back in Winnipeg, just living somehow, and I think of coming along to see if you can do anything for me. Expect me any moment. Your old friend,—CHARLIE HENNING.'

Jack read the letter through twice before he could fully realize what it portended. Charlie Henning was apparently in temporary trouble, but as Jack remembered him, he was not the sort of fellow to take things lying down. He was about a year the elder of the two and he was the taller, when they were last together at Meadhill, by three inches. Jack, however, had developed a tendency to grow fast soon after he arrived in Canada, and in that respect was still "going strong."

The harvest was at an end and heralding night frosts proclaimed the coming of winter. Jim Brown and his wife had gone away to another farm he owned, about twenty miles away. Largely, it was a ranch, where he ran a goodly number of cattle, under the care of a manager and several cowboys, whom it had been his practice to look up occasionally, generally without notice.

Jerry was left as ruler of the homestead for a time, to the unmitigated wrath of Bossy, who could only account for Jim Brown's mistake in not appointing him to the post as evidence of a suddenly developed insanity.

But he had to endure it, as the busy time of the year had come to an end and no work would have been obtainable on any of the adjacent farms. That was a fact that troubled Jack as he thought of the threatened coming of Charlie Henning.

Of Sam Luton, nothing had been seen or heard during the fortnight that had elapsed since he fled to the forest. The general assumption was that he had in his hasty flight penetrated too far into it, got lost, and died from starvation. Jack had done his best to find him by giving his spare hours—they were few—to seeking him here and there, as far as he could go; all in vain. There was no trace of him.

It was a pitiable end for him or any human being to come to. Sam had sinned, and that he should suffer seemed to be only just. But to perish in the lone depths of the wood, inch by inch, as it were, from starvation, was regarded as being more than paying the price his unreasoning act of horse-stealing demanded.

Jack had read Charlie's letter in the living-room, having lingered there after breakfast for that purpose. The stabled horses had been attended to, and there was no immediate work for him to do. Jerry had taken a gun and gone to see if he could shoot a prairie partridge or two to make an agreeable addition to the larder, and Bossy, who had the reputation of being the worst marksman in the district, accompanied him. Where Pete and Tanner were, Jack did not know.

As Jack sat meditating on the contents of Charlie Henning's letter, the door was opened and a tall lean man walked in and sat down. He had the high cheek bones, slanting forehead and deep set eyes of the North American

Indian, but his clothing was that of a settler, jacket, flannel shirt, breeches and big boots, all in a dilapidated condition. On his head was the remnant of a bowler hat, the brim being missing.

"Moke," he said, touching his breast, "got a pistol for you."

Jack sprang up to defend himself, but Moke gravely motioned for him not to be alarmed. From the inside pocket of his jacket he drew out a folded piece of paper and held it towards Jack, with the air of an ambassador delivering an important paper to an inferior.

"Pistol," he said again,

Realising that the ominous word was a substitute for epistle, Jack took the paper and read a few words written by Jim Brown, evidently in haste, for they were scarcely decipherable. When at his ease, with leisure and proper appliances, Jim Brown was the antipodes of a master of caligraphy. A pencilled note, written under adverse condition by him was a notable specimen of tortuous forms, suggestive of a child's attempt to sketch serpents writhing about, with their backs broken.

"Keep Moke at the homestead till I cum bac," was the communication, as Jack interpreted the hieroglyphics.

Jack had never heard of Moke, but it was clear that Brown knew him and had some reason for sending him to the homestead. Exactly what ought to be done with him, Jack did not know. That would be for Jerry to decide. Meanwhile it would be only kind to ask him if he would like to have some food.

Moke bowed, and Jack pointing at the breakfast table, whereon there still remain a good supply of wholesome food, sauntered out. Glancing across the stubble-covered lands he beheld Bossy striding homeward.

Jack went to meet him to ask if he knew anything of Moke, but ere he could say a word, Bossy burst out reviling Jerry.



JACK SPRANG UP TO DEFEND HIMSELF.

"You don't ketch me goin' out agin with a murderous warmint like Jerry," he said violently. "He's been a threatenin' to put a charge of shot inter my abduman, simply 'cos I now and then p'inted out to him how a man ought to hold a gun when he means to hit anything. And 'tain't perlite to tell a chap that he's got a woice as makes hoies in people's heads, takes the skin orf their ears, and wud scare a bird two miles orf."

"Here, I want you to read this," said Jack, handing him Jim Brown's crudely written letter.

"Well, now," said Bossy, slowly, as he stared at the writing, turning the paper this way and that, looking at it with both eyes and then with one closed, "this is a bit o' fancy wurk purpletraced by some little kid. I ken make out something like a pig's tail, and the 'orns of a steer, and a camel's hump, and a——"

"It's a note from Jim," interposed Jack, "asking for a fellow he's sent to the homestead to be kept there till he returns. He's an Indian and says his name is Moke."

"Jiminy!" exclaimed Bossy, "you don't say so. I knows that party. He's a Blackfeet as the Injuns wouldn't hev in the Ottawa reserwation. He giv hissself airs among his people 'cos he'd been to schule at Montcalm, sent there by somebody who camped with the Blackfeet for a bit. He was born with a swelled hed and thinks ne knows a lot, when he don't know no more than—than other fules, sech as Jerry. Moke got his name given him at schule, I've been told, and he's proud of it, 'cos he thinks it helps to make him a white man. If ye want to rile him and run the risk of his goin fer yer scalp, not as he's showed a leanin' that way, jest tell him he's a Injun and then see how he'll ramp."

"Why should Jim want him to stay at the homestead?" asked Jack.

"He come along larst winter and he amoosed Jim," returned Bossy. "As fer work, he don't fancy it. It give

him the 'orrors, so to speak. That's why Pete alser took kindly to him. I du wonder at Jim fisting Moke on us. Most Injuns have no jaw to mention, but he's all jaw."

"I think I can spot Jerry over yonder," said Jack, "I will go to him. You had better get on to the homestead and talk to Moke."

"Not me," said Bossy. "I can't stand a man as ignorant as a howl, but must keep on puttin' tothers right. Wait till you hears him talk about grammar, jography and the werbs and the 'mologies. He's read poetry too, though he don't cote it right, I'm ready to take a davy on. He's a—but, there, wait till you hev had a fair dose of him."

Jack laughed as Bossy stalked away, shaking his head and swinging his arms up and down. In the winter there was so little to do that amusement was a necessity, and Jack thought that Moke would, at least, do something to relieve the monotony of life in the homestead. For the time, he had altogether forgotten Charlie's letter.

CHAPTER V.

LUMBERERS OR WHAT?

JERRY was quite a mile away from the spot where Jack had met Bossy, and the crack of his sporting-gun was heard several times ere he and Jack came together. By that time he had about a score of prairie partridges tied by the feet in a bunch with a piece of string.

"You have had good sport," said Jack.

"I shouldn't have had, if I hadn't giv Bossy notice to quit," replied Jerry. "He's enough to drive a man wild. Fust he let out at the top of his voice when he thought he see a bird, and when I put the gun to my shoulder, there was his paw on it, instant, tellin' me how to shoot straight. Lots of birds winged orf, cluckin' with larfter, when I'd fired. Some of the shots went nigh up to the clouds, I reckon. Say, now, hev ye seen Danby?"

"I met him over yonder with a dorg and gun," said Jerry, "he's got news for us. There's a party, with a waggon, campin' jest inside the wood, over there, nigh that giant-pine, as some makes a landmark on. Danby had a word with one o' them, and he ses they might be lumberers, but he doubted it."

"Lumberers, I've heard, are not bad fellows, though rough," remarked Jack.

"If they are lumberers they wouldn't have come secret, skulking-like," rejoined Jerry significantly, "and wuts the good of lumberin' about these parts? We don't want no timber, and if it's cut down 'tain't wuth cartin' orf. They ain't lumberers, my lad, and we must look out fer trouble. Danby says he glimpsed the waggon and he wouldn't give

a dollar for it. It's been brought along as a blind. Some of us will hev to sleep in the stable with the hosses, and hev something of this sort with us."

Jerry touched his gun significantly and picking up the birds, which he had dropped to the ground, set out for the homestead with Jack, who told him about Moke's arrival and showed him Charlie's letter.

"I should like him to stay at the homestead for a bit," Jack said, "but it seems to me that it would be imposing on Jim's kindness."

"He can stay till Jim comes back, anyway," said Jerry, "and like as not he will be useful, if he's a smart chap."

"Charlie's got pluck, if that's what you mean," returned Jack, "and he will be sure to bring a gun with him. He used to do a little shooting at home, with his father, and I remember hearing that he started for the Colony with a shot-gun and a rifle."

Jerry nodded his head in approval and lapsed into silence. He was in a thoughtful mood all the way to the homestead, and did not say another word until they were within hearing distance of the voice of Bossy, lifted up in anger.

"I don't want no constructions from you," he was saying; "a werb may be a word, as you tells me, to be 'em or to do 'em or to stuff 'em, but I take no count o' that. Werbs won't cut corn, or cart it, or stack it, or feed hosses, and they ain't wanted 'ere."

Jerry opened the door and walked in, followed by Jack. Moke was seated in the only easy chair in the room, generally occupied by Mrs. Brown, when she was at home, sitting very upright, with his portion of a bowler tilted over to the left. In his hand he held a short stick, resting it on his knee, like a pedagogue's cane, held in abeyance for the moment while a refractory pupil is undergoing an examination. Bossy was pacing up and down the room, in a heated condition of mind and body.

"He's at it already," he cried, addressing Jerry, "a correctin' my grammer and I don't want no more of it."

"Don't want *any* more of it," corrected Moke gravely, "no more make two nega—nega—tors of it and that make a confirmative."

"I don't care wut it make," roared Bossy wildly. "I was brut up to speak English frum hinfancy and I aint goin' to be tripped up in my own langwidge by a——."

"Quit it, Bossy," interrupted Jerry. "There's sumthin' wuss than grammar to talk about. We've got a gang of hoss-stealers in the nebbhood."

Moke took no part in the discussion that ensued about the precautions to be taken to protect the horses from the presumed thieves. Tanner had come in, but he had little to say. He was a very quiet man, undemonstrative to a degree, and when it was arranged that he and Bossy would take the first night watch in the stables he merely nodded his head in assent.

"You and me tomorrer," said Jerry, addressing Moke.

The Indian sat impassive, making no reply.

Jack asked, "Where do I come in?"

"You and Pete will be better in the homestead," said Jerry. "The horse thieves won't attack it."

"I think, arter all," said Bossy, "that we ought to make sure they are hoss-thieves afore we spile our night's rest. Now, if I had my way——"

"Which you won't," said Jerry sharply. "Hoss-thieves they are. Danby's a cute man, and he don't make mistakes about rascals when he sees 'em."

Moke, who claimed little interest in the conversation, had lived a passive, quietly-disposed life among the whites for many years. He had been given a ridiculous name, but so far from being conscious of it, he regarded it as a speciality, an honour bestowed upon him because no other man he had ever met, white, black or red, had borne it.

What was his opinion of smiles and laughter? No

man knew. They were subjects he never discussed, if he had a view of them in his mind. Possibly he regarded them as signs of weakness, blemishes in the character of the whites, contemptible on the score that mirth did not find a place in himself, or among his people. If that were his view, he was human after all, as much so in that respect as the rest of mankind. We are all so apt to be proud of what is in ourselves and to despise the quality we do not possess and fail to understand.

At school he had not acquired much learning. There was something in grammar that pleased him, and in a parrot fashion he had assimilated the more obvious laws of it. His correcting Bossy was the outcome of imitation, and it was founded on the ways of the schoolmaster who had taught him.

With the arrangements made by Jerry he appeared to be very little concerned and nobody took any notice of him, insomuch that when he presently rose and quickly left the room, only Jack observed—was aware of his departure. He marvelled a little about it, but said nothing.

CHAPTER VI.

HORSE-STEALERS ALL

THE gang who had stolen into the forest under the cover of darkness, masquerading as lumberers, consisted of ten men and a youth, whom they had found half starved in the forest when they arrived. It was Sam Luton, who had never gone far away from the cultivated lands but had hung about the verge of them, longing to go back to Jim Brown's and give himself up, but not daring to do so.

What he suffered from hunger, he alone would have been able to describe. Thirst he was relieved from, by sundry small springs of water he found bubbling up where the undergrowth grew luxuriantly. But he would have died, and was on the verge of death, when the gang discovered him lying, white and thin, as helpless as a baby, at the foot of a tall beech tree.

Jake Blunt, the leader, a huge fellow, bearded like a Turk, was the first to see him as he stopped the two horses that were attached to the ricketty waggon.

"Great Cæsar!" he cried. "Here's a tenderfoot in trouble."

Springing down to the ground he went to Sam and after a hasty glance at him, drew a flask from his pocket and dropped a little of the liquid it contained into his half-open mouth. It had a reviving effect and Sam feebly implored Jake Blunt "to let him alone."

"Well, I don't know as I'm eager to nuss you through a long sickness," said Blunt; "wut's brought you here?"

"I stole a horse," feebly groaned Sam, "and I've been hiding from the police. You've come for me, I suppose."

Jack Blunt burst into a roar of laughter, and his gang, who had left the waggon and gathered up behind him, joined in his mirth. In the gang of ten there were nine white men and a negro of gigantic proportions, an ill-favoured lot, roughly clad, rough in their looks, rough in their bearing.

"He's a tenderfoot as we may make a man on," said Jake Blunt. "Gimme a bit o' food fer him. He must eat light for a bit."

Sam was given a little food, which he ate with difficulty, for his jaws were stiff and he was horribly weak, but he was able to partake of enough to make him feel better, and he lay quietly watching the gang as they prepared their camp for occupation, cutting away some of the brushwood and clearing a space for lighting a fire.

They had brought some tools with them, which were taken out of the waggon and ostentatiously displayed around to deceive anyone who might discover them and be at all curious. While thus engaged they talked freely of their chosen evil pursuit, and Sam gained a clear idea of the sort of men they were. He instantly resolved to get away from them as soon as he had an opportunity.

But following the resolve came the appalling thought of what would become of him if he ventured to run away. One course of starvation had sufficed to make a repetition of it inexpressibly terrifying to him, and there was the belief that if he were taken by the police that he would either be imprisoned for life or even hanged that bade him pause. No, he dare not attempt to go away, and he must remain with these men, who, in their rough, boorish way, were mostly kind to him.

It so happened that they had been several days in the wood ere Danby, the farmer, became aware of their coming. During that interval, some of the men had been out at night, spying round the farms to ascertain the details of the places where the horses were kept. Their final

purpose was to make a haul of the animals and ride away, early enough to put many miles between themselves and the scene of their depredations, ere the farmers discovered their losses.

All this Sam learnt during his time of convalescence. He picked up his health in a marvellous way, being allowed to eat and drink when he pleased and sleep as much as he cared to, in the waggon, night or day. He was almost fully restored to his normal condition, on the afternoon when Moke started on his vicarious errand to the "good Jim Brown," as Moke generally termed the farmer.

When the afternoon was waning, Sam observed that some of the men were in an excited condition. Silva de Gama, a Portuguese, who ranked as a white man, being a European, though he was as swarthy as an Indian, could not keep still for a moment, but wandered a little into the wood, came back again and dodged about the waggon like some restless wild animal. He was a monkeyish sort of man, thin, weazen-faced, and walked with his head thrust forward so that, being round-shouldered, he had the appearance of a hunchback.

Prior to coming to Canada, he had been in one of the Belgian settlements on the Congo. Why he had left there, he did not say, but judging by what they had seen of him, the gang gave him credit for having been guilty of some extra villainous atrocity, far beyond the ordinary cruelties perpetrated there.

The negro, who bore the name of Pompey, showed his restlessness most in his eyes, which he rolled about in such an alarming way that Sam thought he would have a fit. Pompey had been a "lion tamer," attached to an American circus, where the "kings of the forest" were drugged prior to his entering the cage in which they were kept. The negro did not lack courage, of a brute nature, and would freely have risked his life among lions

in their ordinary state, but the proprietor of the circus was unwilling to chance losing a valuable servant. Pompey's physique made him a prominent feature in the show.

He, too, had come to Canada for the good of the country he left behind him, and had at once taken to evil courses. A Yankee member of the gang, named Aker Ripp, had introduced him to Jake Blunt as the right sort of man to make himself useful.

"Barring his colour, he's perfect," said Akar Ripp, meaning that he was capable of any crime he might be called on to perpetrate.

Ezra Cattlemount, also an American, was another member of the gang, and in close company the two killed the time by whittling pieces of wood with their big bowie knives. In build and general appearance they were typical Yankees of the lowest class. The rest of the gang, for the moment, do not call for any description, beyond that one was an Italian, another a Canadian Frenchman, and the rest the scum of Canadian towns.

The night came down and the camp fire was allowed to sink down to a heap of glowing ashes. When Sam endeavoured to replenish it, Jake Blunt bade him let it be.

"We are going orf soon," he said, "and then you had better git inter the waggon, young 'un, and go to sleep."

Sam got into the waggon at once, for the night air was chilly. The trees were fast shedding their foliage and a strong wind was blowing through the swaying branches that moaned and whined like a herd of animals in pain.

Shortly afterwards the gang departed, and a sense of horrible loneliness fell upon Sam. He was not afraid of the dark, but knowing, from words that he had heard uttered by Blunt and others during the day, the nature of the errand they had gone upon, he feared what would come of it. The night and the hour had arrived for them to rob the settlers of their horses and take them away.

Would they return for him? He was troubled with a double desire, one that he would never see any of the gang again, and the other that he would not be left alone to go through once more his bitter starving experience, which he felt he must do, unless he gave himself up to Justice.

From harassing meditation he was aroused by a hasty footstep and creeping to the end of the waggon, he peered out. One of the gang, the Italian, had returned and was in the act of raking the ashes of the fire together and thrusting a few sticks into the glowing remnant of the fire.

"I can make it up, if you wish me to," said Sam.

"You shall just quit talking," said the man; "all I want is light enough to look for ze iron bar. Zat fool, Pompey, left it behind."

The sticks caught alight and by the flare the man was assisted in his search for the iron bar, obviously intended to break open stable-doors. He was unable to find it for some time, but at last discovered it lying among some leaves under the waggon. With his heavy boots he scattered the renewed fire and bade Sam "get to bed again."

Bed there might be, but sleep was impossible, and Sam lay down on the heap of coarse rugs that covered the bottom of the waggon, with a sigh of despair.

"They are going to leave me!" he groaned.

What was that? A human cry surely, coming from a short distance away. Sam sprang up and tumbling out of the waggon, stood listening with bated breath. He had never before heard such a sound uttered by man or woman, but he was certain it had not come from any beast of the forest. It was compound of rage and terror, the cry of a man who suddenly finds himself in mortal peril, and hears the flutterings of the wings of the Angel of Death.

Sam knew that it was not a signal, or a warning shout. It was largely incomprehensible to him, though he had vague

ideas of what it portended, and trembling, he clutched hold of the waggon to save himself from falling. For a moment he felt as if his heart had ceased to beat and life was departing from him.

There was no repetition of the cry, and gathering a little of his lost nerve, he climbed back into the waggon and drew some of the rugs over him, covering his head and face as scared children in bed make use of the blankets and sheets when alarmed by some noise in the night.

How long he lay there he did not know. The flight of Time was not reckoned by him, because he could not do so, in his mental state of chaotic thoughts. Anon, it was evident that the gang had returned to the camp, for he could hear Jake Blunt raging about, uttering horrible blasphemies. Sam lay shivering, but the reality of the presence of the gang with their foul-mouthed leader restored his faculties to their recent normal condition.

"Wut's come of Italiano?" yelled Blunt; "here, young 'un, hev yer seen him?"

The fire was again being renewed, this time by Pompey, and Sam as he got up slowly answered, "He was here, not long ago. He came for an iron bar."

"Did he find it?" asked Jake Blunt.

"Yes," said Sam, "it was under the waggon. He carried it away." Sam was outside by this time and was immediately collared by Blunt, who gave him a shake, as he growled, "How long's he bin gone?"

"I can't say for sure," answered Sam. "Soon after he left I heard a cry, or a scream, as if somebody was hurt."

Jake Blunt let go of Sam and stared blankly round at his men, who were staring stupidly at each other. Sam stole back to the cabin awe stricken, and not knowing what to think of matters. The rest of the talking he did not hear.

"We've waited two hours for him," said Blunt, "and Italiano was allus nimble on his feet. He hadn't fur to go and couldn't miss his way. What come of him?"

"I suggest grizzly," said Silva de Gama.

"Grizzly 'ere?" snapped Jake Blunt. "That's a thick-headed idea. Might be it's a moose as come across him, but then, the best on 'em would scoot comin' suddint-like on a man."

"I ask of the boy, vas the cry from far?" said Silva de Gama.

"No, not very far," replied Sam, "it seemed to me that whoever it came from, was very near, at the furthest fifty yards away."

"And only one cry?" said Jake Blunt.

"Only one," said Sam.

"Some of yer take a bit o' lighted pine, and look fer him," said Blunt. "I don't quite work out why any pusson should harm Italiano. We aint yet done nuthin' wrong, and settlers don't lynch afore a job's done."

The Portuguese was the first to have a pine-torch ready and depart. He was soon followed by two others, and the rest remained by the camp fire, staring, grimly silent, at its flickering flames, fanned by the wind.

Sam would fain have crept into the wagon again, but he was afraid to stir, lest he should bring down the wrath of Jake Blunt on his head. The brow of the ruffian was as black as night, and his eyes, reflecting the light of the fire, shone like those of a wild beast.

In a few minutes the Portuguese came back, walking swiftly, but with light footsteps. Jake Blunt was not aware he was near until he spoke.

"Italiano is found!" he said calmly.

"And where the tarnation hev he been?" demanded Jake Blunt.

"The dead do not travel far," said the Portuguese.

"Italiano has been shot."

"He's been murdered, du ye mean ter say?" shouted Jake Blunt.

"Somebody pounced on him and took his revolver from him—shot him with it—of that it must be so, for he haf no weapon left," said the Portuguese, gazing meditatively at the fire. "They are bringing him along, and you shall see for yourself that it has been done to him."

"Wut's the meanin' of it?" asked Blunt. He put the question wildly to men with blank faces, and none answered him.

CHAPTER VII.

INCOMPREHENSIBLE MOKE.

"I DON'T see no call for me to sit up fer him," said Pete. It was getting late. Bossy and Tanner, duly armed, had gone to the stable, and Jerry was with Jack and Pete, in the homestead. Moke's absence was generally known, and as he had not returned, and it was Jerry's opinion that he would not be back that night, if he returned at all.

"I think he will," returned Jack. "I shall sit up for him."

It was the utterance of this resolve that drew the recorded words from Pete, who immediately rose from the fireside and went away to his room. The threatened coming of the horse thieves had got on his nerves.

Jerry lingered behind, though he had risen to his feet. He stood with a hand resting on the back of his rough but strong home-made chair, in a listening attitude.

"Everything's quiet," he said; "like as not Moke's gone orf to Jim's other farm. Injuns is queer chaps. Not as I know much about 'em, but I've seen several moonin' about in my time, grave as judges, and with too much white of the eye for my fancy. Moke's the queerest as ever I knowed."

"Has he a bad temper?" asked Jack.

"Bless ye, no!" said Jerry. "I've never seen him no different to what he's been since he come here last harvest closin'. He's allus had the same clothes, not much better than they're now, and the same old notion of puttin' people's grammar right. That's his fust move. His next is poetry."

"Poetry!" ejaculated Jack.

"Well, I suppose it's poetry," rejoined Jerry, "it sounds like it to me becous 'tain't everyday talk. If he

turn up agen, you'll hear summat of it and judge fer yerself. I think you had better go to bed."

"I'll stay up another half-hour," said Jack.

Jerry bade him good-night and left him. Jack tossed a log on the fire, and, walking to the small window, drew aside the curtain and looked out. The moon was up but the light it gave was not its brightest, owing to its being on the wane. Its misshapen, sad face was just visible, peering above the distant wood.

As Jack stood there, watching for Moke, without much expectation of seeing anything of him, the Indian came swiftly out of the gloom, making straight for the homestead. Notwithstanding his quick movements he had no appearance of being in great haste. Jack unfastened the door, and as he pulled it back, Moke came quietly in.

"We have been wondering if you intended to come back to us," said Jack.

"I go, and am with you again, to-day, to-morrow, and other days perhaps," answered Moke. He walked to the fire and sat down. He seemed, outwardly, to be as quiet and harmless as usual, but Jack detected some subtle change in him, not easily estimated or defined. It was not in his look or his manner or in his words used in answering Jack's ensuing question about his wish to have some supper. There was nothing tangible, nothing to grasp, so far, but the change was there.

"I will eat," he said slowly, "but not yet. It is time for you to sleep."

"See anybody when you were out?" inquired Jack.

Moke did not answer him for a few moments. He warmed his hands at the fire in a mechanical way and kept his eyes fixed on Jack, with the lids half closed, as if he were disposed to sleep. There was a silence of a minute's duration.

"I see a man," said Moke at last, "and other men."

"What were they doing?"

"They walked from their camp—and went again to it," said Moke. "I leave them there, with a boy. I am tired. Talk no more."

Jack left him and went to his room, thinking over the events of the day. When he came to Moke's departure and his returning with a marked change in his bearing, indefinable but in Jack's opinion having the element of sadness in it, he puzzled his brain to discover what it portended, but could make nothing of it. He had been to the wood and seen the men, the horse-stealers. They had a boy with them. Jack's pulse beat a little faster as he for a moment conceived that it might be Sam, but he instantly dismissed the idea as incredible.

"Sam was dead before they came," he murmured. "The boy Moke spoke of may be the son of one of the gang."

Had he known the truth, or even guessed it, Jack would have at once gone to Sam's aid, but they were not to meet again, for awhile, anyway. The horse-stealers were shifting their camp deeper into the wood, taking Sam with them. For the time all predatory acts had been abandoned. Jake Blunt had determined to hide securely away and endeavour to get at the bottom of the mystery of the Italian's death.

Jack had no knowledge of there having been a tragic event to perturb the horse-thieves, and the only being at the homestead who might have enlightened him could keep a secret, which would not be revealed until after many days.

He had taken the life of Italiano, the only name the Italian had ever been known by to the gang, because he regarded him as a member of a dangerous gang of villains. He would not have taken the life of any man, save, as he believed, to save his good friend Brown from being robbed, and in all probability eventually murdered. The old slaying instinct, for the love of it, once so strong in his race, was dead within him.

Ere returning to the homestead he wandered a while about the wood, with a troubled mind. He was not sure he had done aright in acting as he had done. There was fever in his blood for a while, but it eventually subsided as he convinced himself that he was justified in what he had done, because the appointed agents of justice were so far away, and then went back, outwardly to ordinary eyes, the simple Moke, the poorly educated Indian, whose learning was akin to the parrot's recognition of the value of words it has been taught.

All in the homestead but Moke slept that night. Recurring doubt of how his killing the Italian might be regarded kept the Indian awake. In the stables Bossy and Tanner kept watch in turns, and their vigil was undisturbed by marauders. Nothing happened, and when the waning moon had run half her course, they ventured outside to look about them.

"It's all a bogey business," said Bossy; "there ain't sich a thing as horse-thieves around here. Them chaps over yonder are real lumberers."

"You ought to know, if any man do," said Tanner drily.

"D'ye mean ter say that I knows anything about 'em at all?" demanded Bossy.

"Ain't you supposed to know everything?" rejoined Tanner evasively, as he returned to the stables.

"Now, how am I to take that?" muttered Bossy; "but he can talk as he likes. It don't trouble me. It's precious cold and I'm fer havin' a warm at the fire."

He went to the homestead and knocked at the door, thinking that it was fast. Nobody responding to his summons he tried the latch and finding the door unsecured, went in. The lamp on the table was out, but there was still a heap of glowing ashes on the hearth, and Moke still sat there brooding.

"So ye've come back!" said Bossy.

The Indian did not stir and Bossy stole up so as to get

a view of his face. It was as still and expressionless as the face of the dead.

"Moke!" gasped Bossy. "Wut's the matter with ye?" Moke raised a hand, extending the fingers and touched the thumb with the forefinger of the other hand without speaking.

"Dashed if he aint lunatic!" gasped Bossy. "I say, Moke, this won't do. You ain't got no right to go orf yer head at Kellson's. We ain't got a licence fer keepin' daft people."

Moke turned his face towards him. There was no insanity in the light of his eyes.

"What is it my brother wants of me?" he asked.

"Nuthin' in particular," said Bossy, aghast at the words and bearing of the Blackfeet. "You seemed to be kind o' talkin' in yer sleep."

"Let sleeping dogs lie," said Moke, "approach not the redskin whose eyes are closed. He is watching you still."

"Been a-looking up the old langwidge in a book, I suppose," said Bossy feebly jocose; "keep it goin'. Practice it. It will amoose Jim when he comes back."

Moke rose to his feet and stalked to the door. There he turned his head and said, "When the good Jim Brown returns and finds I am not here, tell him that I am hunting."

Moke stalked away, leaving the door open, and Bossy went to it to watch him as he made his way swiftly across the open ground, a grotesque figure that inspired no mirth, but rather created a feeling of awe in Bossy's breast.

"Can't make him out," he muttered. "He ain't daft in the reglar way but he's daft somehow, and I hope Jim will see some fun in it. I can't. He's given me the creeps. I'll jest have a bite and a sup and then go back to Tanner, for I've a mind for company till it's sun-up."

Thus soliloquising, Bossy closed and temporarily secured the door, for there was a curious tingling of his nerves nearly allied to the sensation of fear.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DANGEROUS BELIEF.

JIM BROWN came back early in the morning, alone. He had left his wife at Happy Find, his other farm, as sundry things wanted looking to there. In addition to live stock there was a large number of poultry, which needed sorting, and killing off the more suitable birds that had been hatched in the Spring to serve as a change of food during the winter.

Moke had not returned, whereat Jim Brown was wroth, and as it transpired that Bossy had been last with him, he was told, mildly but incisively, that for anything beyond pitching wheat into a cart, he wasn't worth a cent. He ought to have stopped Moke's going. Jack put in a word for Bossy, saying that the Indian had been restless and spent part of the previous night in the wood. He was probably there now setting traps for small game, perhaps, and would soon return.

The story of the horse-thieves, as far as it could be told, changed the current of Brown's thoughts. That honest lumberers should come to the forest was rankly absurd. Lumberers in that country have their stations chosen for or granted to them by men of authority under Government, and they were never sent to places where their time and labour would be practically wasted.

Brown said that he would go and have a look at the gang to see what they were doing. Horse-thieves, like many other professional men, rascally and otherwise, bear the stamp of their calling and he would be able

to make sure of their character. Jim Brown was a bold man and insisted on going alone on his cob.

"I'll take a gun with me," he said, "at fer show. It's a kind of thing all rogues respect. I've got a nice broncho coming over for you, Jack, and if it was here, you should go with me."

"If I was you——" began Bossy, but was cut short.

"But you ain't me, or anybody but yerself, Bossy," interrupted Jim Brown, "and you won't never be anything else but an advice-giving chap to all and sundries, till you've taken up yer six feet of earth and get so fixed in it that your jaw will be stopped for good and all. There's some stock comin' along fer ye to look to, as feed's short at Happy Find, owin' to a prairie fire. Some of the steers may listen to yer advice. They wants persuadin' to mend their manners."

Jim Brown rode away and was back in a little over an hour. He was in a contemptuous humour, but jocular withal. He had found the camp deserted and it was his opinion that the lumberers, "*not* hoss-thieves," he said with emphasis, had gone away, having discovered that they had made a mistake about their appointed location.

He had not looked for their trail to see what direction they had taken, as he did not think it was necessary. Jack wished he had done so, but he said nothing, though he was uneasy. It was his view that the lumberers, if they were lumberers, would have at the outset discovered their mistake and not lingered about, idle for several days. Moreover they would, if they were honest men, have visited one or more of the homesteads.

The wind had brought up a mass of threatening cloud and there was a prospect of a fall of snow, the first of the season. Jim Brown hoped the stock would arrive before it came, but the beasts would not be there until the morrow.

Night came down and Moke was still away, to the great expressed regret of the farmer, who had been looking

forward to spending an evening with him. The Indian rarely failed to be amusing to Jim Brown, he being one of the class of men who do not require keen wit or super-excellent humour to excite them to laughter.

His report about the gang having gone put everybody at ease. It was not proposed to guard the horses that night, and after spending a quiet evening, the inmates of the homestead retired at an early hour.

Jack did not find sleep come to him so readily as usual. He lay thinking of various matters and people, the prospect of his having a bronco to ride, the absence of Moke, and the possible arrival of Charlie Henning on the morrow. From these reflections he was suddenly aroused by hearing a sound of movement outside. His room was at the back of the homestead and the window of it commanded a view of the stables.

To him it seemed to be stealthy footsteps, and he was instantly out of bed and by his window, which was covered with a very heavy curtain to keep out the cold. He pushed it aside and peered out, but it was too dark to see anything. The lingering moon had not yet risen.

Another sound of a different character broke the stillness. It was a sharp cracking of woodwork being split asunder. The import of it was clear. The horse-thieves were breaking into the stable.

Not a moment was to be lost. Jack slipped on a garment or two and thrusting his feet into thick list slippers, he hastened to Jim Brown's room and woke him up.

"Don't make a noise," whispered Jack; "dress and get your gun loaded. The horse-thieves are here. I'll wake up the men."

In about two minutes all had assembled in the living-room, ready to sally forth. They had three guns, Brown, Jack and Jerry carrying one apiece. Brown's was double-barrelled, the other two were single shot guns. Tanner and Bossy had a revolver each, and Pete who was armed

with a stick kept well in the rear, not meaning to risk his valuable life, if he could avoid doing so. The farmer cautiously opened the door and led the way out.

A few flakes of snow were driven into his face, but the fall, as yet, was light. It was the darkness that hindered swift and effective movement of the party.

The stable had been broken open and the thieves were presumably inside. A light seemed to be necessary to them and one of the gang struck a match. He was standing near the doorway and Jim Brown espied him.

"Hallo," he shouted, "who's there?"

The match was dropped and with scurrying feet the would-be thieves came hurrying out of the stable. The guns were fired in a haphazard way, with what effect Brown and his following could not immediately tell. The thieves returned the fire with revolvers, but the use of them had been anticipated. As soon as they had discharged their weapons, Brown and his companions darted on one side, and half a score of shots, fired by guesswork, and aimed at where they were supposed to be, failed to do any mischief.

Jack was in the act of slipping another cartridge into his weapon, but ere he had closed the breech, a bulky man blundered against him and by sheer weight threw him heavily down. The man kicked viciously at him and his foot caught Jack in the groin, but he had not let go of his gun, and the cartridge now being in, he smartly shut the breech and fired low.

It was a shot cartridge he had used and the charge peppered the fellow in his legs. The howl he uttered would have done credit to an angry wolf, but he managed to stagger away.

Meanwhile, Brown and his men had not been inactive. There had been some heavy blows exchanged, and a desultory revolver firing, but the raiders on the stable were indisposed to remain and risk the result of a blind

fight, and those who had not been seriously injured lost not a moment in beating a hasty retreat.

The snowfall was increasing and a sharp wind drove it along in big flakes into the faces of the men. Brown called for a light to see if any of the horse-thieves had come to grief, and Jerry bade Bossy fetch the stable lantern.

"I can't," groaned Bossy. "I've been fetched a whack atween the eyes with the butt of a revolver and I'm nigh as blind as a bat."

Jerry hurried off to get the lantern, and nothing more was said until he returned with it. It was then seen that one of the thieves, was lying passive on the ground, with his arms extended. Jack was rising painfully from the snow-covered ground.

"Hurt much, my lad?" inquired Brown anxiously.

"No," answered Jack; "one of the fellows pushed me down and kicked me. I shall be all right in a minute. I'll get indoors and sit down."

He was able to get along without assistance, and Brown turned his attention to the prostrate man. Jerry was kneeling down beside him, with Tanner holding the lantern near his face.

"Done for," said Jerry; "took the full charge of shot in his chest. He didn't know much about it."

Jim Brown looked very grave for a moment. He believed that he was responsible for the fellow's death, and killing men was not agreeable to him.

"I mostly meant to skeer the rascals," he said, "but the blame lies on himself, I reckon."

"That's so," said Jerry. Tanner, as usual, had nothing to say, but he sighed as he shifted the lantern aside. He, also, was averse to taking the life of a man.

"Wut's to be done with him?" asked Brown gloomily. "The ground's hardenin', and to-morrow it will be stiff wurk makin' a grave."

"Better leave him where he is till the mornin'," advised Jerry, and Brown assented with a nod.

The stable door was examined, and it was found that the lock had been forced off. As a simple expedient against further intrusion, Tanner was directed to get the box of tools and screw it up. There was little or no fear of the gang returning, and the door being made fast, Brown and his men returned to the homestead.

Pete, under directions from Jack, had made up the fire, and the door being secured, it was agreed that all should sit up for the rest of the night.

The wind was howling now, and Brown said it would be a blizzard ere long. By sunrise there would be deep snow on the ground. Jack, who was making the best of his aching side, thought of Charlie, who he feared might be out in the storm on his way to the homestead.

Moke was still absent, but no great anxiety was expressed about him. He was known to be a seasoned wanderer, gifted with much power of endurance. Bossy's condition was more ornamental than serious, and Jerry was inhuman enough to make humorous comment on his swollen nose and eyes, the latter having, according to him, got "nearly every shutter up."

"Yer will want a dorg and string for a few days, Bossy," he said.

"And you will be wantin' a bit o' rope afore your days is over," retorted Bossy.

"Now, that's real smart," rejoined Jerry.

"Be quiet, boys," said Brown; "this hev been a serious night and there may be more seriousness to foller. How many of them chaps was there?"

"About a score, I should say," answered Bossy.

"Seven or eight," said Jack. "I reckon by what I saw of them by the flashing of the first fire of the guns."

"Jack's about right," said Brown. "Well, if there was only seven they may be troublesome yet. They won't

come in and fight it out, but they may skulk about and try to get at us singly."

"You was wrong about them being lumberers, Jim," said Jerry.

"I was," assented Brown, "I'm apt to be too believin'."

Louder roared and shrieked the wind, and the logs piled upon the fire blazed merrily. Lone flakes of snow as big as a crown piece fluttered down the chimney, to instantly melt away with a resentful hiss. The talk was of blizzards that were records for severity in Canada, of horsemen losing their way in them, and dying as they sat in their saddle from the bitterness of the cold. One story related to a settler who was brought home by his horse frozen to death in the saddle, a mass of white from head to foot, and bereft of life.

Jack listened and silently prayed for the safety of Charlie Henning.

CHAPTER IX.

MOKE'S ARITHMETIC.

THE snow had ceased to fall by the morning, but it lay deep upon the land. By the homestead, sheds, and stables, the drifts were piled up to the eaves of the buildings. Jack overslept himself, and when he awoke, he heard the voice of Jim Brown talking to Pete.

"Git a broom, ye lazy young beggar, and sweep a path to the stable door, and be smart about it!"

"'Pears to me," grumbled Pete, "that I get most of the tough jobs to do. Why ain't Jack 'ere to help me?"

Brown's answer was not verbal. It extracted from Pete a smothered howl, and Jack concluded that an open hand had been applied to his head. While Jack was dressing, the men entered the living room, and the clatter of earthenware as it was being unceremoniously placed upon the table, conveyed an intimation to Jack that breakfast was being prepared. He lost no time in joining them, and apologised to Brown for being late. A reassuring nod of the head indicated that it did not matter.

"I reckoned," said Brown, "that you was pretty dead asleep, or you wud have been about the fust up."

The fire was burning brightly and a big kettle thrust into it was beginning to hum. Jerry was cutting up some pork for frizzling in a frying pan with a conveniently long handle. Bossy was looking on, occasionally pointing out what he conceived was the best method of cutting up the meat, his advice being promptly responded to by Jerry doing his work in a directly opposite way.

"Moke come back?" inquired Jack.

"No," answered Brown. "I suppose he wasn't comfortable 'ere, with me away, and he's gone off somewheres else."

"It was disapp'intin' to him," remarked Jerry, "to find that he couldn't knock no grammar inter Bossy."

"Nor you neither," grunted Bossy, "as you are so chock full-up with 'igh eddication. There wasn't room for any more."

Having, as he considered, given Jerry a verbal knock-out, Bossy took the coffee-pot down from a shelf and proceeded to make himself useful in filling it with the aromatic, mildly stimulating decoction, the most popular drink among settlers.

Breakfast was soon ready, and as they were about to sit down at table, the door opened and Pete, followed by Moke, came in. Jim Brown sprang up and gave the Indian a hearty welcome.

"Where have yer been?" he inquired.

"In the wood," replied Moke.

He sat down, without offering any further explanation, and fell upon a plate of frizzled pork and beans with a hunter's appetite. The men talked, but Pete sullenly ate his food in silence, eyeing Jack malevolently, evidently regarding him as a shirker in the performance of his duties.

There was some talk about the affair of the previous night, but the dead man lying under the snow was not mentioned until the meal was disposed of. Then Brown said that the body couldn't be left lying there, and suggested its being removed to a distance, as far as the wood, if possible.

"We could rope a few shortish poles together," suggested Jerry, "and make up a kind o' ramberlance."

But first the horses had to be fed, and that was Jack's duty. As he left the homestead and walked to the stables he looked around for the snow-mound that would reveal

where the dead man was lying. The snow lay smoothly around. There was no mound visible, which set him wondering.

Anon, when he had nearly finished with the horses, he heard Jim Brown talking loudly and rapidly, evidently a victim of great excitement.

"Wut's come o' it?" he said. "This is about the spot where it ought to be, but there's nuthin' as big as a rabbit lyin' about 'ere."

Jack went out to see what caused Brown's excited exclamations. All the men of the homestead, with the exception of Moke, were there, gazing at the disordered snow, which had been shovelled about over a considerable space of ground, and raked over, without the body of the horse-thief being found.

"I suppose he *wus* dead!" said Brown staring about him.

"If he wasn't, he is by this time," returned Jerry. "No mortal man with a charge of shot in his chest, could have kep' abroad larst night and lived through it."

"Shots don't strike deep," said Bossy sagaciously; "like as not the charge only got inter the man's skin. I'd bet a trifle it wus so."

"Well, look 'ere," said Jerry, "I'll giv ye a chanst of makin' a bit of money. I'll load the gun with jest a few shots, not enuf to hurt a man, and if you stand twenty yards orf, twice the distance that chap was frum us larst night, I'll fire at ye, not choosin' a wital part, and I'll give you two dollars if most of the shots don't get through yer hide, tough as it is, and someway funder."

Bossy acrimoniously declined to support his theory at the cost of his personal inconvenience, and the vanishment of the body was left as a mystery none there could get at the root of. The men still lingered near the spot, and Jack went indoors to clear the breakfast table.

Moke was seated by the fire, absorbed in working out

some arithmetical problem with his fingers, holding the left hand up and using his right fore-finger for counting purposes. He was too absorbed to notice the incoming of Jack, who halted by the table to watch him.

"One — two — twice two — one more — six" — a pause, "no, all wrong." Moke begun again. "One—two—twice two—four—and one more—five." He extended the fingers of both hands, looking steadily at them. "Ten—ten—nine—eight—seven—six—five—run away—afraid of Indian cry—go into wood—die there—now only four." Moke knitted his brows and pondered a while. "Only one five in ten," he muttered, "six next—"

"What are you trying to get at, Moke?" enquired Jack. The Indian was roused¹ from his calculations, but he exhibited no startled surprise. Dropping his hands he said, "Add some—take away some," he said, "no right—that all."

"Can I help you?" asked Jack.

Moke did not answer him. From one of his pockets he brought out a leather pouch and a pipe. From the former he drew a little tobacco, filled the pipe, and lighted the tobacco with a burning stick. Jack saw that he did not desire to be troubled further and proceeded with the task of clearing the table. He wondered for a while what the Indian had been endeavouring to work out, but he soon forgot all about it. In after days he recalled the episode vividly, and it was branded on his mind from that time thenceforward.

CHAPTER X.

CHARLIE HENNING'S FLIGHT.

MOUNTED on a sturdy pony, a boy of about fourteen, a week later, rode up to Kellson's in the afternoon, and dismounting, unceremoniously opened the door and walked in. Jim Brown was talking of the non-arrival of his expected stock and expressing fears about its safety. In a blizzard, cattle usually huddled together come to no great harm, but if the men in charge had succumbed to it, the beasts might now be straying and most of them be lost.

"Hallo, Ralph," he cried, "wut's brought you here?"

"Two things," replied the boy, "your men with the beasts, and a stranger to us arrived at White Lees last evening."

Ralph was Danby's eldest boy. He had three others and a girl, the latter the eldest of the family. She was about eighteen years of age. The Darby family were considered to be, from a settler's point of view, a smart lot of young people. Ralph already was a fearless rider and a good shot. As a worker on the farm he was regarded as being "almost as good as a man."

"Wut about the beasties?" hastily inquired Brown.

"Two lost," replied Ralph, "one of your stockmen says that when the snow began to fall, they just cocked their tails and made for the wood. They scented the blizzard coming."

"Two gorn I might be wuss," said Brown philosophically.

"The young fellow we've got at our place," said Ralph, turning to Jack, "is a friend of yours. He said you would be anxious about him, and as there was the stock to tell off, I thought I would ride over."

"It is very kind of you," said Jack. "I have been expecting Charlie Henning. He lost his way in the blizzard, ¿ reckon?"

"He did, but his horse managed somehow to strike White Lees," rejoined Ralph, "and only just in time. Henning's in bed, but I think he will pull round. He was about as nigh frozen through as a fellow can be without his blood being solid ice. We had to lift him out of the saddle and carry him in, as stiff as the trunk of a full grown hickory tree."

"I ought to go over and see him," said Jack, looking at Brown, who nodded assent.

"Yer ken hev one of the hosses, Jack," he said.

"I can walk in my rubbers," said Jack, and went off to his room to get them.

"We've housed your beasts," said Ralph. "Dad's keeping no stock just now and the sheds were empty. They're welcome to stay there a while. We've lots of fodder for them."

"I take the offer kindly," said Brown. "If there's no more fall, I'll be over for 'em in a day or so."

Jack returned, ready for the journey to White Lees, and he departed with Ralph, who offered him the pony to ride, at least part of the way.

"But you have no rubbers on," said Jack.

"Well, I reckoned that you'd like to be at the Lees as smart as you can," said Ralph laconically. "Your friend is pretty weak."

Jack was alarmed on Charlie's account, but he would not take the pony. He said that he was fairly smart on his feet, and would get along as quickly as he could. Ralph sprang into the saddle and they started off, the pony ambling along and Jack trotting beside it, as fast as he could with the depth of snow hampering his movements.

Ere long he felt he was getting winded and stopped for a moment to rest.

"Ride on and tell Charlie I am coming," he said, "I shan't be long behind you."

Ralph urged his pony onwards and was soon lost to view in the gathering gloom. The day was gone and the shades of night were gathering fast. White Lees was little more than a mile away and there was no fear of Jack missing his way. If he diverged from it there would sure to be a light in the homestead window to put him right.

He was keenly anxious about Charlie, though Ralph had said so little. Evidently there was cause for anxiety, for the settlers were not wont to make too much of serious matters. They were not fussy, or given to verbally embellishing the troubles of themselves or others. Having recovered his breath, he forged ahead, ploughing his way through the snow with all the speed he could make.

The gloom deepened rapidly. The air was misty above, hiding the stars. More snow was threatened, possibly a steady fall for days. The long, dreary winter had set in and the land would now be hidden from the eye until the spring returned.

Suddenly, from a distance, in the direction of the wood, a shriek for help was heard. It came from a woman or a boy. Jack could not be sure which it was, and stopping short, he listened for a repetition of it. In its place resounded the deep voice of a man.

"No, you young warmint, you beant a goin' to be 'lowed to git away and blow on us. Come back, or I'll do fer yer."

"Kill me," was the faint response, "the life's too awful to bear."

"Not me," returned the man, contemptuously; "if yer was a eatable crittur I might. But I've a use fer yer, so come along."

Jack knew not what to make of it. Assuredly it was not Ralph who was in trouble, but there were other boys living on the outlying farms and it might be one of them who had run away, been pursued and captured and being

taken back again. Anyway, whoever he was, Jack could not assist him. Without a weapon Jack could not assume the aggressive towards a man.

And he must lose no time in getting to White Lees. If Charlie were dying when Ralph rode over, he might be dead now, from exhaustion, which sometimes follows severe exposure such as he had endured.

The light was burning in the window at White Lees, and Jack was soon in the room where Mrs. Danby, her daughter Mary, and the youngest children were sitting by the fire. Jack had no words of greeting ready and his face asked the question that lingered on his tongue. Mrs. Danby answered it.

"He's asleep, and better, if anything," she said, "but the poor boy has had a bitter time of it. There's a light in his room. Mary will show you where he is."

Mary laid aside some needlework she was engaged upon and quietly rose from her chair. She was not beautiful, or even pretty, in the orthodox way, but she had a nice, pleasant face and a graceful figure, that told of an active life within and without the house. She was very pleasing as a picture of budding womanhood.

Charlie Henning lay in a back room, with a wood fire burning on a small hearth. There were many blankets piled upon him, and over all was a rug made of the skins of grey wolves, stitched together. Only his head and face were visible. The lamp was a cheap oil one, hanging on the wall.

Mary walked up to the bedside, and stooping down listened to Charlie's breathing for a few moments. When she raised her head her eyes were dim with tears.

"He has suffered terribly," she said softly, "but he is better. His breathing is more regular than it was, and longer. He is a nice looking boy."

Jack could hardly define the feeling he experienced as he heard her eulogium on Charlie's good looks. Hitherto

he had only seen Mary occasionally and regarded her as simply a nice sort of girl, with unaffected manners. Nothing more than the ordinary civilities of their quiet lives had passed between them, and Jack had neither cause nor the right to be jealous. But he was a little so, and he put aside the emotion as something unworthy of him and unreasonable for him to entertain.

"His mother is very proud of him," Jack said; "she grieved when he left home."

"And yours?" quietly asked Mary.

"There's never a day when I don't picture her as she looked at me when I was leaving Easton Station," replied Jack, quietly, and Mary glanced at him keenly. The inspection of his face seemed to satisfy her.

"I am sure you don't forget," she said.

He did not ask her what it was he did not forget, but stood silent a while, and then said, "Fellows like myself, fresh from the old country, don't care to talk much about home. It wouldn't do. I came here because I felt I must. I hardly knew what to expect, but the longing grew upon me and I had to come. Being here, I mean to stick to my work and go on ahead."

"Canada can find room for millions like you, Jack," Mary said. "How long will you stay?"

"In Canada?"

"No. You are here, for good and all. If ever you return home on a visit, you will soon be wanting to come back again. Dad has told me all about the feeling. He went through it, and he threw up a good position to come over. No. I meant how long will you stay here, now?"

"Through the night, if I may," said Jack, "I will sit up with Charlie."

"Ralph shall bring you in some logs," Mary said, and left him.

So Jack sat by Charlie and watched him as he slept hour after hour, without one restless movement. Jack's

thoughts wandered in many directions, to his home, to Meadhill generally, and dwelt on certain events of his brief time in Canada; and last, but not least, he recalled the utterances of the unseen man and boy on the open lands that night.

He was now able, having nothing else to do, to recall and weigh every word he had heard, and he came to the conclusion that it was not a case of a runaway hand and an angry employer.

"No, yer young warmint, yer beant a goin' to be 'lowed to git away and blow on us," pointed in another direction. Then there was a threat, and Jack came to the conclusion that it was one of the horse-thieves who had uttered it.

But who was the boy? Was it possible that after all he could be the erring Sam Luton? Jack could not entertain a belief that it was his misguided friend, as the probabilities were so adverse to it, but the idea returned again and again, like some persistent note in a long-drawn-out melody, making itself persistently felt and dominating the music it discordantly intrudes itself into.

"No," said Jack finally, "poor Sam is dead. It is some other fellow, a waster who was in trouble."

He got up and replenished the fire, and as the logs caught alight a grateful glow added warmth to the room, Charlie awoke from his long sleep. Jack saw his eyes were open and bent over him.

"Better, are you?" he asked.

"Is that you, Jack?" murmured Charlie.

"Yes, they fetched me along. I have been here for hours."

"I shall soon be right again now," said Charlie, and with a sigh of satisfaction closed his eyes and went to sleep once more.

CHAPTER XI.

THE REMNANT OF THE GANG.

It was Sam Luton, whose voice, imploring for him to be killed and put out of his misery, that Jack had heard. He had been living and suffering with the remnant of the gang in a dense part of the wood. Of the ten rascals half were gone. Five only remained, Jake Blunt, Ezra Cattlemount, Silva de Gama, Pompey and Aker.

The remnant had managed to erect a shelter that served to keep them warm, with the aid of a fire at night. The waggon was broken up and the poor almost fleshless horses killed and eaten for lack of better food. When imminent starvation stared them in the face, they came upon Jim Brown's two straying head of cattle, prowling about the wood, and Pompey with an axe slew the beasts.

The negro was cooking a portion of the flesh over the fire in their crude hut when Jake Blunt came in, dragging Sam Luton, who had absconded, after him. The re-capture of the errant youth was hailed with a shout of exultation.

"Lie there a bit," said Blunt, as he pushed Sam down, "and listen to what I have ter say. Why did yer sheer orf?" demanded Blunt. "There's food and company and fire to warm yer. Ain't yer satisfied?"

"No," replied Sam, "it's an awful, filthy life with you fellows. I shall say what I think, and you may kill me if you like."

"He's a bold chap," said Blunt, addressing the other men, "and that's why I tuk to him. He's got the makin' of a free-livin' man in him. If he hadn't grit, he niver would

have boned that ere hoss of Stevens's. Not havin' a boy o' my own, I intends to bring him up accordin' to my notions."

"Ah, yees," said Silva de Gama, drily. "Haf you not a saying, proverb, zat you shall take ze horse to ze vater and he not drink."

"If I tuk a hoss to the water to drink," said Blunt, "it'd have to drink or I'd flay it. Now, Pompey, hand over a bit o' that meat. It smells good."

A low, mournful, wailing sound arose in the forest, rising and swelling, until it ended in a shriek. The men listened in silence, and when it ceased, Aker said, "they won't leave us. It's as well that we covered the meat with timber."

"They've packed for the winter," said Ezra Cattlemount, "and the man as goes out alone from here to-night wunt come back agen."

"In the open they knows they ain't safe," remarked Blunt; "a grey-wolf skin will fetch ten dollars, and the settlers, if they ketches a wolf out by day, shoot straight."

"It wasn't beast-meat that drawed 'em here," said Cattlemount, and angry eyes were fixed upon him.

Again the cry of the wolf was heard, and the weird note was answered from different parts of the forest, concluding with a chorus of wailing.

"We shall get that sort of thing all night," said Aker angrily, "unless they get something to eat. I think that Sam is in fair condition. Put him outside and let the brutes have a feed."

Aker was a tall, handsome man of thirty. In his early days he had taken to wearing an eyeglass, an affectation of a presumed English idiosyncrasy, and he had one dangling outside his rough shirt. Having fixed it in his eye while speaking, he examined Sam critically.

"Yes," he added, "there's a mouthful for each. Shall I fire him out?"

Sam had witnessed the awful sight of the wolves devouring their prey and Aker's suggestion made him shrink, but

he offered no remonstrance. Pompey grinned and Silva de Gama laughed in a cackling way. Aker had spoken in his usual drawling tone, familiar to his companions. As he never spoke in jest, apparently they had no reason to doubt his earnestness now. He was quite capable of suggesting anything, almost, and lending a hand in carrying it out.

"Are yer speakin' of a youngster as I've taken to," said Jake Blunt, fixing a pair of angry eyes on the indifferent Aker. "Mebbe, I'm to take yer serus."

"I meant exactly what I said," replied Aker; "of course you can do as you please, but if I had my way, out Sam would go."

He dropped his eyeglass, yawned and proceeded to fill his pipe, as if an ordinary conversation had just been brought to an end. Blunt growled like an angry dog and turned his attention to an additional supply of meat Pompey handed to him.

There was an ample supply for all, and Sam wisely did not refuse to partake of his share. He knew that he must eat to live, and he meant to live and sooner or later get free of his horrible associations.

Anything approaching mirth or gaiety was gone out of those left of the gang. They had to take their position seriously, and thoughts of half their number haunted them, despite their outward display of indifference. They entertained a suspicion that their lost companions had been attacked and devoured by the wolves, unless they were dead before the fierce creatures touched them. Anyway, it was certain that without provisions or shelter they would perish, sooner or later. They thought of the ending of Italiano, and wondered if the man who had killed him was still about the forest. It was the most harassing thought of the many fears that haunted them.

Sam sat apart, brooding over his lot. In sheer desperation he had that evening fled from the gang with the intention of going to Kellson's and giving himself up, but Jake Blunt, whose watchful eye was

ever on him during his waking hours, pursued him, and it was not until he was clear of the forest that Sam was overtaken, and then it was owing to having sunk above his waist in the snow lying in a hollow.

And now he was back again, compelled to endure the companionship of men whose society was repulsive to him, and, worse than all, he had to bear the newly-awakened affection of Jake Blunt for him, arising from his hope of Sam's being made amenable to his teaching and developing into a worthy member of the gang. That was the hardest thing of all Sam had to bear. He hated the sight of the coarse, burly ruffian, and shrank from the touch of his hand. Sam would just as soon have been favoured with the amiable attentions of a loathsome reptile.

It very seldom happens that matters are so bad with anyone as to be utterly dark and hopeless. Sam had a crushing burden of misery to bear, but he derived one ray of comfort from the knowledge that the gang had no whiskey left. With the prodigality of their class and similar classes, they had recklessly consumed every drop. The whiskey jars were empty, and Sam quietly chuckled as he listened to the men bemoaning the absence of anything but melted snow to drink.

They fussed and fumed and said bitter things about it, and one blamed the other about not having "been keeful of the liquor" in terms that led to blows, and it was only the strong hand of Jake Blunt that prevented bloodshed. Sam quietly revelled in these outbursts, created by the craving for strong drink. It pleased him to see that the longing embittered their existence and made it harder to bear than it would have otherwise been.

That night there was talk of going away, but the winter had set in earlier than they expected and the gang would have to travel far ere they reached a haven of safety. In the nearest towns they were too well known and would meet with scant welcome. In all probability

they would be moved on, or lodged in jail, pending a criminal charge being laid against them.

"'Tain't to be thought on," said Jake Blunt; "we've jest got to winter 'ere and rub along somehow."

"If ze Indian do I see, and ze grey-beasts and ze settlers will let us," said Silva de Gama.

"I'd like to sight that Injun," growled Jake Blunt, "but there ain't no trace of a moccasin around. I've looked fer it. Maybe it's only one of the settlers playin' Injun."

"They are all scared by the Indian," thought Sam, "cowards, every one," and he startled the gang by bursting into a fit of laughter. It was one of the strangest ebullitions of mirth that ever came from a boy's lips, and Jim Blunt looked at him, angrily surprised.

"Wut's the matter with ye?" he demanded. "Hev ye gone clean daft?"

"No," replied Sam, "I was thinking of something. Listen to the wolves!"

"Dey wranglin' now ober sumfin," said Pompey. "Me spect dat dey got at de meat, somehow."

The store of cattle-flesh was just outside the door, piled against the side of the crude hut, and covered with big branches cut down from the trees. No doubt the wolves were near it, and if Pompey were right, very little of the meat would be left in a few minutes.

"We must cl'ar 'em orf," said Blunt, "and there's nuthin like fire for the job."

He seized a burning brand and the other men followed his example. The door was opened by Silva de Gama and in a body the gang rushed out of the hut.

Pompey had rightly interpreted the wrangling noise the wolves were making. They had found a weak spot in the covering of the store and huge joints of beef were being dragged out to be fought over, torn to pieces and ravenously eaten. Already the better part of the store was gone.

The wolves were numerous. There were at the least two

score of them, and many for a time withstood the fiery onslaught made upon them. They snarled and snapped their teeth as they were struck and covered with a shower of sparks, and some of the boldest sprang at the men, ripping their clothing and inflicting ugly wounds upon their legs and arms.

Even the wolves who fled away a short distance turned upon their assailants, yelping defiance, their eyes glistening fiercely red in the light of the flaming brands. The fear of starvation made the men desperate, and they fought the brutes away until it seemed that all had fled.

"We've saved a bit of the meat!" panted Jake Blunt. "Kiver it up. We must drive some stakes in, round the pile. Git out the axes, Pompey."

The negro entered the hut and immediately there arose a horrible commotion of a yelling man and the fierce snarling of wolves. Some of the boldest brutes must have sneaked into or retreated blindly into the hut while their fellows were being dispersed. The men stared at each other aghast. They instinctively grasped the fact that it was one thing to attack the wolves in the open with fire, but having an encounter with them in the small area of the hut was quite another matter.

Pompey's cries increased in intensity, and for a time no man outside the hut stirred. Then it suddenly occurred to Jake Blunt that the interior of the hut was filled with a light too brilliant to be accounted for as alone coming from the fire on the hearth.

"Foller me, boys!" he shouted.

He made a dash at the door and was met by two wolves as they bounded out. He staggered back and struck wildly at the brutes, but they did not linger to fight. Pompey came staggering after them, with an axe in his clenched hand. His clothing was torn and stained with blood, and as he sank on one knee, he gasped out, "De hut's afire."

Smoke came pouring out and Jake Blunt loudly yelled for Sam, but there was no response. He made an effort to get

into the hut, but was driven back by the flame and smoke.

"The boy, the boy, he's bein' roasted alive!" he groaned.

"Ze volves vas zere before ze fire broke," suggested De Gama.

"He's done for," said Aker "and it's no use howling over him."

Jake Blunt made no reply. He stood staring at the rapidly increasing fire, until it compelled him and the others to back out of the full force of its intense heat. The wolves had vanished.

No assistance was offered to Pompey, but he succeeded in crawling away from the hut and joining his associates. He lay on the ground near them, making an effort to bind up his wounds. Ezra Cattle-mount was similarly occupied, and Blunt had wounds that needed attention, but he was heedless of them.

Dumfounded by the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen the gang, he leant against a tree and stared at the rising flames that lighted up the forest around. They rose straight into the quiet air, a column of fire, and swiftly their work of destruction was done. The crude roofing was alight, and flaring up awhile, fell in. Then nothing more than a heap of glowing ashes remained, to smoke and smoulder for hours, or perhaps, for days.

"It's a big kerlamity," said Jake Blunt wearily, "but I cud hev bore up agin it, if the boy hadn't been lorst."

"It comes to me a question," said Silva de Gama. "How shall ve do now?"

"We must foot it," said Aker.

"Me not able to walk," groaned Pompey.

"So much to carry," murmured de Gama, "it is a peety, but it shall be for you to be left."

Jake Blunt was now binding up his wounded arm with a handkerchief, Cattle-mount lending him a hand. Pompey rolled his dark eyes about, from one to the other, and there was light enough given by the ashes of the fire for

him to see their faces. He failed to find either pity or sympathy in any one of them. And he did not ask for either.

"I'm ready," said Jake Blunt, "and I propose we make for Halson's ranch. It's sixty miles south, and there's a lot of boys there as ain't squeamish about their company. It's our only chance."

The others assented with a nod, and as they were about to start, Pompey said, "Wish you all de luck you deserb, boys."

"You ain't a baby," returned Cattlemount, "or we'd carry you in turns. So long."

"It's your luck, you know," remarked Aker, "We shall all have to pass in our checks, some day."

Silva de Gama raised his hat as he was moving away. "I salute the dead," he said, as an apology to his companions for his peculiar act of courtesy.

Pompey let them go without another word. His injuries were terrible and he knew he had no hope of long surviving them. Already the weakness arising from the loss of blood and the biting cold was beginning to tell upon him. He was getting numbed and his mind was wandering. Though feeling chilled to the bone, there was fever in his blood.

Was it a dream? He could not tell and he did not live to speak about it. As he lay there, it seemed to him that the fire again feebly flared up and by its light he saw, or fancied he saw, a tall man, in poor attire, such as settlers wear, but with Indian face and mien, steal up and pause before him, with gleaming eyes fixed on his face.

The head of the figure slightly bent down, and two piercing eyes looked long and earnestly at him, then turned aside and vanished so swiftly that Pompey dimly concluded that he had seen a vision.

"He a sperrit come for me," thought the negro, and closing his eyes, fell back and lay still.

CHAPTER XII.

HEADED OFF.

PETE went over to Wild Lees early the following morning, an unwilling messenger from Jim Brown. He asked for Jack, who came out to see him, in the room where Mrs. Danby and Mary were at work.

"Jim wants to know how that chap is?" said Pete surlily, "and he says that if you're minded to stay 'ere a bit wi' him, yer can do so."

Jack turned to Mrs. Danby, who gave him a smile that meant he could stay as long as he pleased. Mary did not endorse the invitation, which disappointed Jack. He wanted her to be interested in him more than she appeared to be.

"You may say that Charlie is going on all right, and I shall be glad to stay here for the day."

"There's summat happened at the homestead," said Pete, after a pause, "but Jim said I was to say nowt to you about it, or he would pull my ear."

"Has anybody been hurt?" asked Jack.

"Nobody, as I knows on," said Pete.

"Anyone ill?"

"Didn't I say as I wasn't to tell you anything about it."

Pete was quite indignant at being cross-examined, and still more so when Jack told him that he did not believe anything had happened at Kellson's.

"Yer will see if there ain't when yer comes back," he said.

"A muzzle would suit you," remarked Mrs. Danby. "If you were told not to chatter why did you open your mouth at all about whatever's happened?"

"I've done," said Pete, and walked away grinning.

He had carried out his object to arouse Jack's curiosity without satisfying it. Jack puzzled his brain for a time, trying to conjecture what could have possibly transpired, and needed to be kept a secret until he returned to Kellson's. He was obliged to give it up.

"If there had been need of your hurrying back," said Mrs. Danby, "Jim Brown would have sent word to you."

Charlie had now so far recovered that all immediate fears about him were dispelled. He was able to eat moderately, but he could not shake off a desire to sleep. That was no marvel to Jack on hearing from him that he had practically been a day and a night in the saddle being eager to finish his journey, when the blizzard swept down upon him. He believed he was at the time close to Kellson's but the snow and the biting wind deprived him of all power to do anything but sit quiet and leave his horse to go where it willed.

"I felt as if my arms were stone and frozen to my side," he said, "It was impossible for me to see a yard ahead, and I lost all count of time, I could think of nothing clearly. I don't remember being brought in here and the first thing I saw when I came to, was Mary's nice face as she stood by the bedside with tears in her eyes. That girl is a brick."

"Yes," said Jack vaguely. "You had better not talk too much just yet. Rest and sleep are what you want."

"I am resting," returned Charlie smiling, "and feel as if I can sleep again for hours."

He was soon off again and Jack dozed off in a chair beside the bed. He was awakened by Ralph, who announced that Moke had just turned up, looking "as if he had not slept for a week."

"I guess he has been wandering about all night," said Ralph. "I wonder what brings him here."

Jack went to the sitting-room where he was surprised to find Moke seated by the fire, his eyes closed. He

could hardly have been asleep, for he opened them as Jack approached him.

"Have you come from Kellson's, Moke?" asked Jack.

"No," replied the Indian, "I have been about, heading off straying animals."

"Jim's stock got loose?"

"I head back my own stock."

Moke closed his eyes again and Jack questioned him no more. What sort of stock Moke owned and where he kept it, Jack did not know, and he left enquiry concerning it until he got back to Kellson's. If Charlie suffered no relapse he intended to return in the afternoon. Ralph came in and asked Jack if he would care to go out with him to try to get a shot at a wolf.

"They were howling in the wood last night," Ralph said, "I was lying awake for a bit and heard them."

"Can you lend me a gun?" asked Jack.

"Ther's your chum's rifle in the corner," said Ralph. "It was slung on his back when he arrived here and covered with snow and ice. Mary thawed and cleaned it. It's the same bore as Dad's rifle, and we've heaps of cartridges."

"It can't be easy to track wolves in the wood," suggested Jack.

"I shouldn't be such a fool as to try," rejoined Ralph. "What we have to do is to hang about the outside of the wood and watch for a wolf to show in the open. They will sometimes come sneaking out during the day to have a look round, with the hope of spotting a straying beast, or they may have reasons for making tracks to another part of the country and will scuttle across the open lands, taking their chances. They're mostly in packs by this time, and will be so through the winter. In the spring they break up and skedaddle to different parts of the country. That is really the best time to get at 'em."

Jack had donned his rubber-boots and with Charlie's



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rifle, a handy weapon of medium weight, and a pocket filled with cartridges, set out with Ralph in quest of a grey-wolf.

The sight of a wolf was no novelty to Jack. When he first arrived at Kellson's, he was set to work on the land with two horses and an automatic wheat-sower, with Bossy for an instructor, a position that rather self-opinionated man revelled in. His instructions were so copious and incessant that Jack was getting reduced to a state of mind bordering on idiotcy, when a wolf went hurrying by, a short distance away.

The lank, lithe animal, with its shifty eyes, startled Jack and restored his mental balance. Bossy picked up a clod of earth and threw it at the wolf, which snarled and raced away.

"It knowed we hadn't a gun with us," said Bossy, "or it wouldn't have come anigh us, within a mile or more."

Later on, Jack had a far-off glimpse of a pair of wolves, making tracks for land not yet settled upon, and during the summer he often heard the men talking of the value of wolf-skins and the proper method of tracking the wild animals. Bossy had several novel methods in his mind and propounded them to unbelievers, Jerry being the most pronounced dissentient to his views.

"Whensomever Bossy pots a wolf," he asserted, "there will be the biggest airthquake as was iver heerd on."

Jack had often longed to shoot a wolf, not only for the worth of its skin, but for that love of sport that has been the means of sending bold men into lone countries, unconscious pioneers of communities to come in after years. Jack had no wanton cruelty in his disposition. There are times when killing is a necessity, and when the opportunity comes a swift death is really a merciful ending to the wild inhabitants of the forest or prairie. The instinctive hunter has existed from time immemorial, and he will be

in existence until there are no creatures inimical to the welfare of man left to hunt.

No more snow had fallen, though the cloudy sky threatened a continuance of it. The wind had risen and was gathering strength, but it caused little inconvenience to Ralph or Jack. They made their way to the verge of the wood, where they halted. The only sound to be heard was the soft moaning of the branches of the trees.

"Sounds queer, doesn't it?" whispered Ralph. "It's like somebody in pain."

"Yes," replied Jack, "it's very different to the rustling of the trees in summer."

"Well, I reckon that everything and everybody sings then," said Ralph. "There is nothing like a wolf moving here. Let us walk along a little way."

Ere they had travelled far both suddenly came to a halt.

In the deep snow were the footmarks of men, who had emerged from the forest and gone away across the land, at an angle, as if they had deliberately avoided going towards White Lees.

"The marks ain't very fresh," said Ralph, "as they are partly filled in with light drift. It's easy to guess they were made by the horse-thieves who've been skulking in the wood. Shall we track them a little way? The fellows may have worked round and be hiding somewhere near the homestead."

Jack was agreeable to do anything suggested by Ralph, and they traced the footsteps to a short distance away from the forest. In the open ground the drift had done more towards wiping them out, but they were always clearly discernible. At the outset they were fairly close together, but something must have happened, as about a furlong on they assumed a scattered form and showed that the men, wide apart, had gone about and returned to the forest.

"They were scared by wolves, I guess," said Ralph.

"Wouldn't there be traces of the animals?" asked Jack.

"Naturally," answered Ralph.

No trace of wolves could be found, but they discovered a place where the snow had been cleared away a sufficient space for a man to lie down in a shallow hollow. Ralph regarded it attentively for a few moments.

"Looks as if some fellow had tried to make his bed here," he said, "but the snow isn't deep enough yet for that. By and by, after another fall or two, a fellow might do worse, when he is lost in the open, than making a wallow, lying down in it, and allowing the snow to drift over him. Sleigh dogs do that sort of thing when the drivers are camping at night."

"I have read that if travellers lie down to sleep in the snow that they never wake again," remarked Jack.

"Of course, if a fellow lies down without making a wallow," said Ralph, "he's pretty sure, if he has no blankets, to be frozen to death. But dying as you sleep under a fair covering of snow is all bunkum. Hist, there's a wolf!"

It was a lean, grey creature with one ear missing, which had probably been lost in a fight for its share of prey. It had emerged a few yards from the forest and was sniffing at the furthest return tracks of the men. Ralph and Jack slowly raised their rifles so as not to alarm the wolf by any sudden movement.

It advanced a step, sniffed at another footmark and then turned back, apparently satisfied that the man who made the trail had entered the forest. Lifting its head it uttered a piercing cry, the calling of the pack together for the hunt.

"Aim at the head," whispered Ralph, and both rifles sharply cracked, raising a succession of faint echoes in the forest. The wolf ceased its mournful cry and fell upon its side without a quiver of its body.

"Good shooting!" said Ralph exultingly.



"BOTH RIFLES SHARPLY CRACKED."

Both bullets had struck the wolf in the head, one piercing the eye. The other had broken the skull near the ear. Ralph knew that the former shot was his, but he laid no claim to it. He merely remarked to Jack, "A shot through the eye instantly kills, and doesn't damage the wolf in any way. A sound head, well-stuffed and fixed up generally, fetches money."

The wolf's signalling cry had been answered in the forest, but after the rifle fire, stillness reigned again. Each taking hold of a hind leg, the successful young sportsmen dragged the dead animal further into the open, and then Ralph said he would show Jack how to skin it.

He was no novice at the work, and he casually said that he had been taught how to skin a wolf properly when he was eight years old. A year later he shot his first one. Jack quite envied him his early days.

"Shall we cover up the carcass with snow?" he asked, as they were about to return homeward.

"If we leave it till to-morrow," answered Ralph, "it will be a light job."

"Will the other wolves eat it?" inquired Jack.

"Every ounce of it, including the bones," said Ralph.

As they sauntered back Jack's mind reverted to the missing body of the horse-thief, shot at Kellson's, and concluded that the wolves were responsible for its disappearance. It was sound reasoning and may be accepted as conclusive.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WONDERFUL ESCAPE.

MOKE was gone from White Lees when the wolf-hunters returned. He had asked for and been given some food to take away with him—a sure sign that he was not going back to Kellson's for a day or two, at least. Nobody seemed to be interested in whither he had gone and Jack was spared giving his view on the matter.

He was beginning to understand what Moke was doing, or attempting to do, but he was resolved to keep his suspicions to himself, until he had some direct evidence to go upon. He could not exactly disapprove to his taking the lives of the gang of horse-thieves, as it was Jack's opinion that the sooner they were put out of the way the better it would be for the honest people of the scattered community.

Jack had been told that the winter was the time for settler hospitality. Assemblages took place at the various homesteads, when there was a moon to give light to those who were invited. Some came on horseback, others rode in sleighs, and the younger and more active performed the journey on snow-shoes.

Well, with these entertainments going on, and the remnant of the rascally gang skulking in the forest, there was a distinct element of danger to those who would have to journey from and back to their homes, but it was not allowed to act as a check on the simple festivities.

Charlie could be safely left without anxiety. He was sitting up, eating a dinner especially prepared for him by Mary, when Jack returned to White Lees, and he was hopeful of being able to get up the next day.

"Mrs. Danby says I must stay here till I am quite well," he said, "and then, if I may, I will come on to your place."

"Jim is quite agreeable," rejoined Jack. "He is a good fellow, kindness itself, and you will have some work to do, as he intends to make an addition to his homestead. That will relieve you of the feeling of being dependent on him. Not that he would mind, but I know exactly how you would feel, if you were compelled to eat bread you have not earned."

"I'm fairly bursting to get to work," said Charlie. "I say, Jack, we ought to take up our land in the spring. You and I could rub along together."

"We will talk it over later on," said Jack.

He had his dinner with the Danbys. The conversation was mainly about the discovery of footmarks made that morning. Danby was sure they had been made by the horse-stealers, but he was puzzled to understand why they should leave the forest, walk in company for a distance, then scatter and make their way back again.

"Possibly they changed their minds about clearin' off," he said, "kind o' jibbin' at footin' it across country in winter, but goin' back to the wood means starvation for 'em."

"Well, they are there," said Jack, "and there's danger in it."

"The police ought to be sent for," said Danby, "a letter would bring 'em along. Mary shall write it."

Matters were left there, and after dinner Jack set out for home. On the way the mysterious hints Pete had given of something being wrong at Kellson's recurred to him, and he wondered what was in store for him.

Jim Brown and his men were busy cutting up logs with cross-cut saws, and Jack was approaching them when the farmer motioned to him to go into the homestead. He turned away and opening the door he saw a spare built

figure of a youth sitting by the fire, with his back to him. The logs were merely smouldering and the light in the room was dim. For a moment Jack failed to recognise who it was, but the noise he made as he walked down the room caused the other to look round.

It was Sam Luton.

He was changed, strangely so, considering the practically short time since he disappeared from Kellson's. There was no sign of recent starvation visible, but his face had aged. All the boyhood had departed from him. At first sight, he appeared to have developed into a man, grave and austere. His clothing had suffered, and he had sore need of another outfit.

"Sam!" was all Jack could say.

"I can see you have not been told I was here," said Sam. "I have come to give myself up. Brown says he won't have a hand in it. You are to do as you please with me."

"Nothing will be done to you," replied Jack, laying a hand on Sam's shoulder. "That I am certain of. Stevens has his horse again, and he hasn't written or come near us. Nothing more has been seen of the police."

Sam leant forward, and with his elbows on his knees, buried his face in his hands. The hot tears trickled between his fingers, and his whole frame was convulsed with emotion. Jack drew up a chair and sat down beside him.

"Pull yourself together," he said, "and tell me where you have been, and how you got here. We gave you up. I was certain you had died in the wood."

"Give me a little time," said Sam. "You have given me a shock that is hard to bear. It's the joy I feel that is too much for me. I had braced myself up to bear the worst. You are sure that Stevens forgives me?"

"Reckon it certain," said Jack.

Sam brushed his tears away and sat quiet while Jack

made up the fire. By that time he was more composed and able to tell his story.

The essential part of it has been set down here. There is only his escape from the horse-thieves to deal with. When the men rushed out to disperse the wolves, Sam followed them as far as the door. Then as man and beast fought, it flashed upon him that now, if ever, was the time to make his escape from the gang.

"I merely wanted to get away from them," he said. "If I had been forced to stay much longer in their company I must have grown to be as bad as they are. I could feel it and was horrified. I thought it would be better to die, so for the second time I ran for it, and not a wolf or brute-man saw me go. I came on here and hung about the homestead until the morning came. Brown was the first to show and I gave myself up to him."

"What did he say?"

"He stared hard at me for a few moments and then said, 'You look half-froze, my lad. Come in and warm yourself.'"

"Jim all over," said Jack.

CHAPTER XIV.

HUNTING HORSE-THIEVES DOWN.

SAM LUTON'S story had not been told to Jim Brown, and when it was related that evening by the fireside it was generally agreed that something must be promptly done to rid the neighbourhood of Jake Blunt and the remnant of his gang. Sam had little to say about them. He gave no details of their losses, the subject being loathesome to him. How much or little of their store of meat had been left to them by the wolves, could only be guessed at.

"I shan't be ready for my stock," said Jim Brown, "for two days and I don't like Danby havin' the 'sponsibility of keepin' the beasts. How many men is he a keepin' on for the winter?"

"Only two besides himself and Ralph," replied Jack.

"Not enough," rejoined Brown, "but like as not them fellows will lie low a bit. If Moke was here, he could keep an eye on the wood, and where he is seems oncertain."

"He was at Danby's this morning," said Jack, "but he only stayed long enough to eat some food and go away, taking a bag of bread and meat with him."

"Wut is his game?" exclaimed Brown.

Jack held his peace. He was unwilling to lay his assumptions before the men, as in case he should be wrong, something might be said by Bossy to annoy the Indian. Jack's bump of caution was abnormally developed. There was a bare possibility that Moke might be only playing at Indian warfare.

As regards Sam, who was not present during the foregoing conversation, but now came in, he was relieved from

all anxiety about his immediate future. Brown bade him make Kellson's his home and promised him work for the winter. Stock and horses require a lot of looking after, and the farmer proposed to make additions to his buildings, with the view of increasing his stock in the succeeding year.

"We've done with yer little mistake, my lad," he said, "it's buried, bury the past, and if a man o' mine casts it inter yer teeth, he will hev to reckon with me."

"When's the missus a-comin'?" inquired Jerry.

"I'll fetch her when I think she's wanted," replied Brown; "for a bit we shall hev to shift fer ourselves."

It was understood that he did not intend to fetch his wife until the danger of marauders visiting the homestead was regarded as a thing of the past. Nothing more was said on the subject that evening.

When Jack and Sam retired for the night in the former's room the snow had begun again to fall. There was but little wind, which Jack said he believed was a sign there would be a lot of snow down during the next day or two. In a measure the work of building would be impeded. Sam scarcely heeded what he was saying, for he was wrapped in deep thought.

"Have you told Charlie Henning what I did?" he asked, after a pause, during which Jack had been undressing.

"No," replied Jack, "but it will be better to let him know. Charlie is a good fellow and he won't trouble about it. He will understand your position and look at it in a kindly light."

"Are you sure of it?" said Sam wistfully. "If it were known at home that I have made such a fool and rascal of myself, it would embitter my whole life."

"Have done with it," said Jack. "When a fellow has done a wrong thing he can't call it back. If he repents and goes straight afterwards nobody has a right to speak of it. It would be a most cowardly thing to do."

That was Jack's last word upon the subject. The horse episode was buried deep as far as he was concerned. Before Sam got into bed Jack was sound asleep, but the joy of being under a good roof again, amongst honest people, kept Sam awake for an hour or more.

The snowfall was fortunately not very heavy as yet, and work was resumed in the morning without Jim Brown, who put on snow shoes and plodded over to White Lees. Jerry took up the position of boss and directed the labours of the day, which were lightened by several diverting wrangles he had with Bossy, who invariably suggested a way of his own on contrary lines to those chosen by Jerry.

"Now, look 'ere," said the goaded Jerry at last, "if you comes puttin' in yer spoke agin, I'll make a dumb man of you for iver."

"How?" demanded Bossy.

"By knockin' yer hed orf," said Jerry, "and you make a note o' that."

"I've heered that sort of thing afore," said Bossy contemptuously, "but tle men as threatened and tried to do it, ain't alive now to tell the story of their wentur'."

"Maybe you killed 'em when they was kids," said Jerry. "Now then, hev yer done?"

He made a movement as if about to take off his coat, but Bossy waved his hand to intimate that he had nothing more to say, and the work proceeded for another hour without interruption. The frame of the shed they were putting up was finished and the roofing half on ere the work was given up for the day.

Jim Brown did not return, and it was concluded that he was staying at White Lees for the night. The snow was still falling in the morning and strenuous efforts were made to finish the roofing of the shed in double-quick time. Sam worked, as Jerry approvingly remarked, "as if he was fully growed-up and on piece work."

The roofing was finished, and fixing the double boarding

of the sides was comparatively easy work. As the boards were put up, Jack and Sam thrust between them the packing of coarse dry grass and wheat straw and rammed it down. Then the night again returned without either Brown or Moke appearing.

"Jack," said Jerry "you had better go over in the morning to see what's come of Jim. There's summat oncommon movin' at White Lees, or he wud hev been back this arternoon."

"If it wasn't so dark," said Jack, who had risen and drawn aside the window curtain, "I would put on my shoes and go at once. I believe I could find my way. What do you think?"

He addressed Jerry, who bade him not think of it. Pete, who had been silent and sullen all day, his task having been to carry the timber to the men, which he thought was heavier work than that which Sam had been set to perform, grinned and said, "Jack don't mean to go. He's afeard."

"It seems to me that he's bluffin'," said Bossy.

"Would you go?" demanded Jerry.

"I wud, if I thowt there wos any 'casion for me to do so," answered Bossy.

"Well, my mind's oneasy about Jim," said Jerry, "and that's 'casion enough, so put on a pair of shoes and git away."

"Not me!" returned Bossy; "arter a day's wurk it's too much to expeck of a man."

"I'll go," said Jack.

He put on his snow-shoes, a heavy coat and muffler, Jerry making no sign. Sam stared at Jack apprehensively and Pete grinned more expansively than ever. Bossy muttered something about "more bluff," and drew hard at his pipe.

A whiff of cold air swept through the room and the door was banged to. Jack was gone and Bossy sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens!" he cried, "call him back!"

"Call him yourself," said Jerry, "and he won't listen to you. I like his grit and shall honour him for it, though he may git lorst. As fer you, Pete, if anything happens to Jack, I'll dig a hole, somehow, to-morrer, and bury yer in it."

Pete whimpered, and said it wasn't his fault if Jack "riled up at a bit of chaff," as Jerry went to the door, opened it and peered out. Nothing more than the falling snow, close to the doorway, could be seen. Some flakes were swept in by the wind.

"He's gorn, right enough," said Jerry, as he closed the door. "I, myself, hardly thowt he would make the ventur'."

"He ain't been much on the shoes and can't be mighty free in usin' 'em," Bossy murmured regretfully, and acting on an angry impulse he smote Pete on the side of his head and knocked him off his seat.

"Wut's that for?" shouted Pete.

"There ain't no call fer me to say wut it's for," replied Bossy.

It was an unjust blow, because Jack had not been induced to go by anything that Pete had said. Off and on, during the day Jack had wondered at the absence of Brown being of so long continuance. The uneasiness he had felt received an impetus from what Jerry said about his own feelings on the subject, and acting on impulse Jack went off to assure himself of Brown's safety.

Clear of the homestead, he faced in the direction of White Lees, with the intention of travelling in a bee line, which he believed would bring him to it, or near enough to see the usual light showing through the window-curtain. Ignoring all sensation of fatigue, he kept on his way at a good pace, intent on avoiding the danger of getting out of the right course.

A mile of ground was traversed by him in the grim silence of the night. The snow lightly drifted against his face or fell to the ground, making no sound. Overhead

the sky was an even spread of blackness. Only the white mantle on the earth was faintly visible a short distance ahead. He paused a moment to take breath and then the silence was broken by a distant cry.

It was not one of alarm or terror, but rather partook of the nature of a signal of one man's whereabouts for the benefit of another. It was a cry shrill and clear, oft used by settlers when hailing each other from afar.

Jack put his gloved hands to his mouth and repeated the cry, then waited. In a few moments there was a response. Then an exchange of signals was made, and the distant crier drew nearer and nearer.

At length Jack thought the unseen person or persons had come near enough to make known what he or they wanted. He shouted, "Who are you?" The answer came promptly, "Police."

For a moment Jack's heart seemed to cease to beat. He thought of Sam and feared that, after all, Stevens had determined to prosecute the offending youth and had sent the police for him. Jack remained silent.

"We want White Lees," shouted the police. "We have got off our track through our horse giving in."

"Sleighing?" queried Jack, with his mind intensely relieved.

"Yes, there are four of us. Who are you?"

"Jack Stanhope, of Kellson's. I am going to White Lees. Come on to me. I don't want to get out of my line."

Jack waited, and in a minute or two, four men, wrapped to their eyes in furs, appeared out of the intense gloom, like dim spectres, ill-defined and unrecognisable. One was leading the stiff, weary horse. The other three were laboriously dragging the sleigh.

"You are the youngster with the horse-prigging chum," said one.

"Yes," replied Jack. "Stevens has his horse, I presume?"

"Oh, that is all right," was the answer, "and he's satisfied. He's too easy going by half. Not that it matters. Your chum who sloped into the wood is a goner, I reckon."

"Let him rest," said Jack, declining to be too confiding. "Now, if you come with me, I will try to strike White Lees."

He moved on ahead and they kept in his track, with occasional halts, owing to the horse showing signs of collapsing. There was no talking, save now and then a word or two were exchanged by the police. Jack kept his attention fixed on the course to take. He now knew what had brought the police there, but he wondered how it was they had got Danby's message so soon. In the ordinary course, the police could not have been expected till the next day, or later on.

Presently he saw the faint glimmer of a light through the falling snow, and quietly announced that White Lees was near.

"Should you ever be minded to join the force," said one of the men, "you will be welcome. You've a good idea of how to get about in the dark."

"I had only to keep straight on," said Jack, "and it wasn't so far to travel."

"Far enough," replied the man, "for some of us to lose our way. 'Tain't easy to keep a straight line far in the dark. A man is almost bound to bear to the left a bit, and move in a circle."

The light brightened quickly, and in a very short time they were at White Lees. The door was fast, and in response to a knock the police were asked who they were. A satisfactory answer having been given, the door was opened by Danby and they were invited in.

"We've a dead beat horse here," said the man in charge of it, "where's your stable?"

"Wait a moment," said Danby, "and my son shall bring you a lantern."

Jack had gone in and was overjoyed to find Jim Brown by the fire, talking with Mrs. Danby and Mary. He stared at Jack's white figure with unmitigated astonishment.

"We were uneasy," said Jack, "and I came over to make sure nothing had happened to you."

"And thanks to him, we are not now wandering goodness knows where," said one of the police, who had followed Jack indoors; "we were off the track and the horse give in. He heard us shouting and brought us along. But for him you might have had to go thief-hunting without us."

"You've come along pretty smart," said Mrs. Danby.

"We were at the railway station when the mailman arrived. He said he had a letter for us and that it was from White Lees. We being officials, he took it out of the bag and handed it to us. Then we got a sleigh and started along, thinking we should be here before dark, but the horse couldn't get along easy through the snow, being an old 'un."

Mrs. Danby and Mary were already busy preparing the table for supper, and soon the whole party were gathered round the well-spread board. Before partaking of anything Jack went in to see Charlie, and found him sitting up in bed, reading a book.

"I won't ask you how you are," said Jack.

"I shall be about in the morning," replied Charlie with a broad smile. "What splendid people these Danby's are, especially Mary."

"Everybody likes her," rejoined Jack, with assumed indifference; "after supper I will come in and have a chat with you."

"You surely are not going back to-night," said Charlie.

"No, I want to have a hand in some work that will be done to-morrow," answered Jack, as he left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

IN PART DISPOSED OF.

HOW and where all the guests were stowed away in the homestead was a matter that concerned the host and hostess alone. It may be stated that the sleeping resources were strained to the utmost, and the living apartment presented the appearance of a guard-room. To hardy men, accustomed to privation, as the police were, sleeping on a floor hardly mattered. The fire was kept up and with the further aid of blankets they passed a more than endurable night. Before the daylight returned, everybody was up and stirring. Danby, who had been out to the stables, reported all well there, and the snow had ceased to fall.

No definite plan of action had been decided on, to capture Jake Blunt and his remaining followers. Sam had spoken of their diminished number at first, but he ceased to talk about them. The method of working in the forest had been discussed by the men the previous evening without anything feasible being brought forward. The difficulties were admittedly great, on account of the extent of the wood and, practically, the impossibility of locating the gang.

It was Jack who, in the morning, put forward a suggestion, of which the police highly approved.

"The snow in the wood doesn't blow about, as it does in the open," he said, "and footmarks can't be easily wiped out. We might look for some of the thieves tracks and follow them."

The head of the little force was Sergeant Marks, a fair-haired, keen-eyed, hardy man, six feet high. He

regarded Jack with twinkling eyes and said, "Your idea is good, youngster, but where does the we come in?"

"I reckon that I am part of the we," answered Jack.

The sergeant shook his head.

"It's man's work," he said, "and boys are better out of it."

"Jack's more than a boy," said Brown. "He can do the work of a man on the farm."

"I don't object, personally," said Sergeant Marks, "I only spoke on account of the youngster. He's got plenty of time ahead for him to take up horse-thief hunting."

"I am going," said Jack decisively.

Ralph said he would like to join the party, but that was emphatically vetoed by all. The boy grumbled, but brightened up when his father said he would be wanted at home to take care of those left in the homestead. He would be in command of the two labourers, who were neither asked, nor very keen on it, to take a part in the expedition.

Arms there were, in sufficiency for all. Jack again took possession of Charlie's rifle, and soon after sunrise a start was made for the forest.

The first thing was to find the return tracks of the horse-thieves, which Jack and Ralph had come across. In the open they had completely disappeared, and it was not until the party had penetrated into a dense part of the wood, where the top foliage of the trees was so dense as to make twilight there, that they found any trace of them.

A comparatively thin layer of snow was on the ground, between the trees fairly distinct footmarks were discovered. Obviously, they had been made by two men, walking side by side. One had huge feet and the other long but slender ones.

"I've seen those narrow marks before," said Sergeant Marks, "or some as like 'em as two peas. The lot were

made by a Portuguese, named Silva de Gama. He was wanted for murder and arson, but we never found him. Now, I wonder if these are his."

"Sam told me that there was a Portuguese of that name in the gang," said Jack, forgetting his over-night's reticence about Sam.

"Hello," cried the sergeant, "you've seen your chum lately! Where is he?"

"At Kellson's," replied Jack stoutly. "The gang found him in the wood and tried to make a horse-thief of him, but he ran away, bent on giving himself up, rather than take to such a life."

"Well," said the sergeant, pondering, "I must say that I meet all sorts of young chaps from England, but you and he beat me altogether. Before he gave himself up, did he know that Stevens would do nothing?"

"He had no idea of it," said Jack.

"That I can swear to," said Jim Brown.

The sergeant scraped his chin thoughtfully, with his eyes on the ground. He had been offered a problem too deep for the official mind to solve. His previous experience had been that when a young fellow took to evil courses, he never turned back.

"With you two for witnesses," he said, "no Regina jury would convict this lad. Let us follow the trail. No more talking, please."

They followed the footmarks a long way into the wood. In the more open spaces they could scarcely be discerned. Here and there they had been obliterated, but the trail was soon picked up again and on the party went, until they came to the spot where the crudely built hut had been burnt down.

There they paused and surveyed the ruins, a heap of ashes, now cold, and the extinguished brands that had been taken from the fire in the hut to disperse the wolves, scattered about. The meat store had been ransacked, and

near it were many close-set footmarks, similar to those they had traced through the wood.

"Meat's been stored here," said the sergeant.

"My meat," said Jim Brown sententiously.

"Two head of cattle strayed from his herd," explained Danby.

"Here's some rags here," cried one of the police, who had been prowling round the spot.

The rags were part of a man's clothing, and there were a few pieces of crushed bones that were as reading in a book to the police.

"Wolves got one of them here," said the sergeant, "and here's a tuft of nigger wool."

"There was a nigger in the gang," said Jack. "Sam told me all about him. He had been a lion-tamer in a circus."

"Pompey!" said one of the police. "Strong as a bull, he was. When he was copped for drunkenness and rioting in Regina some years ago, he gave six of us a tough job to get him to the station. I heard that he had joined Jake Blunt's gang. I reckon he's out of it now."

"Jake's the head of this lot," said the sergeant. "He'll put up a big fight before he's taken dead or alive."

From the hut there proved to be two trails, and each was made by two pair of feet. Those of Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama differed from the other pair, which were much alike, and had been made by men with big heavy boots, and they were straight to the degree of being almost pigeon-toed.

"I don't know these," said the sergeant, alluding to the latter footmarks. "They are not in my list. They seem to be freshly made."

He looked at his men who nodded in assent. One of them said "Quite fresh. The other lot are hours old."

"Longer, lays perhaps," said the sergeant, adding quickly, "some of 'em anyway. I'll track the newest."

They started at once and kept on the fresh trail for the next half-hour. Then they suddenly came upon Ezra Cattlemount and Aker Ripps, staggering along, faint, weary and half-frozen. They were armed with a revolver and bowie knife apiece, and drew them to defend themselves.

"Give yourselves up," cried the sergeant fiercely.

Cattlemount's revolver snapped uselessly but that of Ripp was fired and the sergeant reeled back and fell. His men took aim with their rifles and pulled the triggers.

The two Yankees lurched forward, and clawing the air for a few moments they fell heavily, side by side.

"It had to be done," said one of the police, "it was their lives or ours."

Jim Brown and Danby nodded in gloomy assent. From the motionless condition of the two fallen men, it was evident they were dead. The short distance between them and the police was a guarantee that the rifle aim had been true.

Jack was kneeling beside the sergeant, who was only wounded. He said he had been shot in one of his legs, and that was what had "dropped him."

"I can make my way back to White Lees," he said, "if somebody will give me a little help. The youngster will do. You men had better hark back and go on the other trail."

"And leave these two dead men here?" exclaimed Danby.

"The dead can't come to further harm," replied the sergeant, "the bodies must wait till they can be attended to. Make a clean sweep of the gang. With Jake Blunt and the Portuguese chap alive, you will never be safe in your homesteads."

With assistance the sergeant got upon his feet and tested his injured leg. He declared he could "just hop along," and implored the men not to lose time.

"The days are short and an old trail is often long," he urged.

The men started off on the back track and leaning on Jack's shoulder, the sergeant hobbled after them. They were soon lost sight of. As the two trails were at right angles from the hut, there did not seem to be any prospect of falling in with Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama. The way back to the homestead was presumably safe. But the sergeant never left anything to chance and he bade Jack avoid speaking and keep his eyes and ears open.

They had their rifles loaded, the sergeant carrying his in his disengaged hand. Jack held his poised so that it could be quickly raised to his shoulder. In silence they made their way back to the ruins of the hut and there paused to rest.

"My leg is getting numbed," said the sergeant, "and I can scarcely move it along. You had better hurry back, my lad, and fetch the homestead men to carry me."

"Will you be safe by yourself?" asked Jack.

"I've been in a worse fix than this," said the sergeant.

"Don't be afraid of leaving me alone for a bit."

"Let me bind up your wound," said Jack.

"No, that's all right," returned the sergeant testily.

"The blood ain't flowed very freely and it's already congealed, which is as good as a temporary plaster. Hurry along."

He had been suffering more keenly than he had cared to admit, and Jack, as he glanced at his livid face, guessed the truth. He seemed to be on the verge of a collapse as he sank down in a sitting position on the ground.

"Hurry up, my lad," he said faintly, "you are nimble-footed and won't be long."

CHAPTER XVI.

JACK'S BOLD EXPEDIENT.

FOR a moment Jack still lingered. It seemed to him that if the sergeant were left alone he would die. As he sat there, slightly bent forward, with his eyes fixed, and making strenuous exertions to avoid groaning, it was clear that he was enduring great agony, and fighting against the horrible weakness that had come over him.

But Jack could do nothing of any service by remaining, and turning away, he entered the forest, intent on hastening to the homestead for help.

Suddenly he paused to look about him. In his haste he had missed the back trail of the party, which in many places where there was little snow had not been too clearly defined. Little as he knew of wood-craft, he perfectly understood the necessity of recovering it, or he might lose much time and waste many precious moments in getting out of the forest by a new route.

He had to think how to go to work and he conceived that his best plan would be to tack about until he came across the trail. This he did and when after many useless tackings he was beginning to lose heart, he came upon—footmarks. Not of himself and his friends, but those of Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama. Excited by the discovery, he for a moment forgot his errand, and when he recalled it he had lost all idea of the way out of the forest.

"What shall I do?" he murmured miserably.

Relief came to him, however, when it flashed on him that his friends were on the track of the two ruffians and must soon arrive. Meanwhile, he resolved not to be idle.

It was risky following up the trail alone, but Jack did not lack courage and he proceeded slowly onward, keeping his wits at work, so that he might not inadvertently overtake the two horse-thieves and find himself at their mercy. One he could account for with his rifle, perhaps, but there was a possibility of his failing to make good use of it. And the trail was dim or lost in places, as it had been before.

The trees thinned suddenly and to his amazement he caught a glimpse of the ruins of the hut. Then he heard a rough voice, speaking in exultant tones.

"He ain't dead, only onsensible. Bear a hand to lift him on the timber."

Jack dashed forward and saw Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama in the act of lifting the sergeant, who was limp and insensible, from the ground, with the intention of placing him on the remnant of the timber that had served to cover their store of meat. Jack for a moment hardly knew what to do. He was afraid that if he fired his rifle he might hit the sergeant and that would be tantamount to sacrificing both. No, that would not do.

The second resource that entered his mind was to sham his being but one of a party, and making the most of his voice, he shouted, "Here they are. Now we have them!"

Jack Blunt and the Portuguese dropped their burden and bolted off in the opposite direction. Jack risked much by making use of his rifle, but the shot he hastily fired at the retreating ruffians was not entirely wasted. He saw Silva de Gama clap his hand to his head, and he uttered a wild shriek as he plunged into the forest, in the wake of Jake Blunt.

"Hit him, anyway," thought Jack.

He hurried over to the sergeant, who had partly recovered his senses and lay on the ground, with his eyes wide open, staring about him.

"I heard shooting," he said huskily.

"You were being hustled about by two of the thieves,"

said Jack, "and I let fly at them. One had his head damaged, but I've not killed him."

"You've brought the men with you, I suppose," said the sergeant.

"No," he answered, "I lost my way and came upon the trail of those rascals. Not knowing what else to do, I followed it, and found they had come back here, for some purpose."

"Doubling, my lad," said the sergeant. "I reckon you've saved my life. What curs they must be to bolt from a boy."

"I yelled, making believe the others were with me," returned Jack modestly, "and they wern't far away, for here they are."

The police and the two farmers came rushing into the clearing, lured thither at that pace by the report of Jack's rifle. They stared with amazement at the scene before them. Jack briefly explained matters and his heart was made to flutter by the encomiums bestowed on his prowess.

"Never mind me," he said, "the sergeant's bad. He can't walk and I reckon he's well nigh frozen."

Pursuing the two horse thieves, all that remained of the gang, was out of the question now. After recent events, the sergeant could not be left again, so he was taken up by his men and the whole party laboriously and slowly made their way to the homestead.

There the sergeant's wound was attended to. He had been hit just below the kneecap, which made the injury peculiarly painful, but beyond that, it was of comparative small moment. The galling part of the day's work was that the task taken in hand had not been completed.

Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama were still free and while they were alive and in that district, they would be dangerous to the peace and welfare of the settlers.

As to the dead men left in the forest, nothing could be done—they were too far away for anything less than a party of men to go and bury them, and finding them at all was problematical, for were there not wolves about.

CHAPTER XVII.

FALSE SECURITY.

DURING the ensuing week nothing was heard or seen of Moke. Jim Brown was too busy to think much about him during the day, but at night, when his household gathered round the fire, he was wont to express wonder at the continued absence of the Indian.

"There wus nuthin' to drive him away," he said, "nuthin' as I knows on."

Jerry had a theory that he had gone away heart-broken because he could not knock sense or grammar into Bossy, and it was naturally resented by that unappreciated adviser to all and sundry of his acquaintances.

"If Moke had stuck 'ere," he said, "ontil he got sense out of you, Jerry, he would be in the homestead now, and stick in it fur iver."

Mrs. Brown, unable to rest long away from her home, had returned to Kellson's. The stock had been brought home, and Charlie had arrived, so that there was plenty of life about the homestead, and a fair amount of work to do. By day the cattle were let out under the care of one of the men, and the beasts showed their appreciation of liberty by wallowing among the snow, and rooting it about to get at such fodder as still existed beneath.

They were not dainty beasts. Wheat straw that had been left on the ground at harvest time they ate with relish. Nothing in the way of animal food came amiss to them. Nor did they suffer from the keen frost, registering forty below zero, which had set in with a suddenness that astonished those inexperienced in Canadian wintry weather.

The police, after staying two days, had departed, taking the sergeant with them. He made shift to ride in the sleigh with his injured leg in a rest. His men had again visited the forest, seeking Jake Blunt and the Portuguese, but though they found their trail, it was soon lost. Wolf tracks were plentiful, but nothing was seen of the creatures, though occasionally they were heard howling in the distance.

"That the fellows can live long there, I don't believe," said the sergeant, as he parted with the Danby family. "If nothing is heard or seen of them for a week, sleep easy."

Nothing was seen or heard of either of the two men during the next few days and a feeling of security began to be felt. Doors were locked at night and the farmers slept with loaded rifles in their rooms, but no other precaution was taken against marauding attacks.

The day was drawing to a close and Jack, Sam and Jerry were rounding up the cattle to drive them under shelter for the night, when a familiar figure was seen to emerge from the forest and bear down upon Kellson's. It was Moke and he walked as one utterly weary.

"We shall be pretty full-up now," muttered Jerry as he fell in beside Jack and Sam. They were all mounted on hardy broncos that had hardly turned a hair during their recent exertions.

"I should like to know what he has been doing," said Jack to Charlie. "He walks like a man who hasn't had a square meal for days."

The cattle needed little guidance after being rounded up to make for their night-shelter and the entire herd was soon under cover. Jerry had counted them as they filed in, and announced that the number was right.

The horses were attended to and then there was an adjournment to the homestead to hear what Moke had to say for himself. Charlie was assisting Mrs. Brown to lay the table. Moke, Pete and Bossy sat by the fire.

"Hello, Moke," said Jerry; "back at last."

Moke paid no heed to his remark. It did not require very keen eyes to see that he was in a very exhausted state of body and his lack-lustre eyes indicated a mind vacant, for the time.

"Let him be," said Mrs. Brown, "he's nigh done for want of food."

She handed Moke some bread and meat and it seemed as if he accepted it mechanically. He stared at it as if he did not know what use to put it to.

"He wants a drink," suggested Jerry. "Here Moke, take a sip of corfee."

He put the cup to Moke's lips and he took a feeble sip. Then as Jerry urged him, he took another and another. Finally, he emptied the cup. After that he partook of the food given him, eating slowly at first, but afterwards ravenously.

Brown had been in his room looking for some cordial, which he thought he had a supply of, to give some to Moke. He had failed to find it and came in to announce the fact.

"Moke's all right," said Mrs. Brown. "He doesn't want your cordial, as he never touches strong liquor."

To all questions put to him, Moke had little to say in reply. He admitted having been in the forest, part of the time he had been away, but on the subject of what had taken him there, he was dumb.

"Tired—must sleep," Moke said.

There was no room for him in any of the ordinary sleeping places. Moke settled the matter by saying he would sleep in the stable. All he wanted was a rug or two. These were given him and he departed to his chosen quarters for the night.

"He looks like a party who's lorst somethin' or been kind o' disapp'inted," remarked Jerry as he took his seat at the table.

"It's my belief that he ain't altogether square," said Bossy; "there's a sort of hunted look in his eyes, at least

there was when he fust come in, just as you see in chaps that are ewadin' the perlice."

Sam winced a little and cast a hurried glance around. Nobody was looking at him, and even Bossy appeared to be quite unconscious of having said anything that might be regarded as personal. Pete alone seemed to have accepted his words in that light. Though not looking at Sam, he was grinning as he sat with his eyes fixed on his plate.

"He doesn't matter," thought Sam, but he felt resentful.

In the morning Charlie accompanied Jack to the stable to look to the horses. As they entered it, they espied Moke, sitting up among some straw, at the far end. He had his back to them and seemed to be working out some calculation on his fingers.

"Counting your money, Moke?" said Jack facetiously.

"Never have money," said Moke, as he slowly rose to his feet, "must work for it. Some sing, 'Work, boys, work, and be contented?' I not work."

He passed by them and left the stable. Jack went on to the heap of straw and examined the spot where Moke had been sleeping.

"Has he dropped any coins about?" inquired Charlie, as he picked up a sieve to fill it with corn and chaff.

"It isn't money I am looking for," replied Jack, "and he has left nothing at all behind him."

"What do you think he might have left, Jack?"

"Can't say for certain, Charlie. I was wondering if he had really been sleeping at all—his eyes are very heavy."

"He's a restless chap," said Charlie.

They got through their morning task with the horses and joined Jim Brown and the men, who were at work building a big strong sleigh. They were toiling in the open air, with their hands enveloped in fingerless gloves. Handling iron tools at the low temperature would be courting injuries on a par with those created by touching red-hot metal.

Charlie was not allowed to stay and take his share of out-door work. He was still a little weak from the illness that followed his exposure to the blizzard, and Jim Brown was insistent on his confining himself to doing light jobs about the house, for the present.

It was a fine morning, without any wind and not a cloud in the sky. The sun lay low in the horizon, a big red ball, which pointed to a continuance of clear frosty weather.

"We shall all be going to Danby's next Monday," said Jim Brown, "and this sleigh is for the wife to go in. The saddle ain't fit for a woman in the winter."

The invitation was for all, including the men and boys. At that time of year the homestead could be left, under ordinary circumstances, to look after itself during the latter part of the day. Strangers, moving about the country, were as scarce as blackberries at Christmas, and robberies were unknown. In the full belief that nothing more would be heard or seen of the horse-thieves, Jim Brown had no hesitation about leaving his place unprotected, but that was not to be entirely the case, as will presently appear.

Moke was included in the invitation, but he declared his intention of staying away. Jim Brown remonstrated with him when they happened to be alone, on the morning of the day.

"You'll be welcome, Moke," he said, "why not go with us?"

"Pain here," replied Moke, touching his breast. "I kill a man once."

"You don't mean that surely?" exclaimed Brown aghast.

"True," replied Moke. "You think it wrong?"

"Well, in course," said Jim Brown, "killin' people ain't right and nuttin' can make it so."

"I kill him for a friend."

"Then all I can say is that you'd better have left

your friend to do sich a thing hissself and git hanged fur it."

They were in one of the sheds, and Jim Brown walked out, worried by the information Moke had given him. It was a ghastly revelation to the simple-minded farmer, who had not the least inkling that he was the friend on whose behalf Moke had taken the Italian's life. The Indian's confession had totally changed Brown's regard for him, and his heated condition was apparent to his wife when he entered the homestead. She was talking with Charlie and Sam about the coming visit to Danby's.

"What's the matter now?" she inquired.

"Moke's been telling me that he's killed a man to obleege a friend," said Brown miserably.

"What friend?"

"I don't know."

"I think I do," said Sam. "Jack and I have often talked it over. It was an Italian fellow he killed, one of the gang."

He told the story of that night when the attack on the homestead was postponed by the tragedy of the Italian's death, and Jim Brown listened attentively. It impressed him deeply, as he slowly realised what Moke had done for his sake. The Indian had evidently purposed to strike terror into the hearts of the horse-thieves and scare them away, and apparently had succeeded in doing so.

"I'll ask him about it," said Brown, "and if you've guessed aright, Sam, 'tain't for me to blame him furdur."

He went out in search of Moke, but he was not to be found. Feeling that he had done something Jim Brown not only did not feel grateful for, but was disposed to censure, he had gone away and many days came and went ere they met again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PETE AS A MISTAKEN BENEFACTOR.

PETE had not gone to Danby's with the rest. He had stayed away voluntarily, being in one of his sulky moods.

"I don't want to see nobody there," he said, "and nobody wants to see me. It's a lot of fulery."

During his life he had never shown that there was anything boyish in his disposition. He played no games, indulged in no jests, unless they were vicious ones, and never laughed so heartily at anything as he did at the misfortunes of those whom he regarded as his enemies. As he did not consider that he had a real friend in the world, his presumed enemies were rather numerous.

It was a surprise to Jim Brown and the boys on their returning from Danby's to find him up alone, sound asleep by the fire. Jim Brown woke him up and asked why he had not gone to bed.

"Cos Jerry as come in with Bossy half-an-hour back, said as I wasn't to, till you come home," Pete answered.

"Thet was rough," said Brown, "of course he and Bossy are in bed."

"No, they ain't," answered Pete, "they're hangin' about somewheres with a gun."

"There's nuthin to shoot now," said Jim Brown, "unless it be a wolf, and I ain't heerd any of 'em howlin' as we druv along. Git to bed, boy."

"Jerry said as I wasn't to go till I'd told you sumthin'," muttered Pete. "Two chaps come along and I give 'em a bit o' grub. They wanted it. Most people round 'ere would hev done the same. I niver seed two sich starvelins

afore. They looked as if they hadn't had a meal for a week."

"'Tain't like Jerry to turn rough when a sundowner, whatsomever the season, has a bit of bread given him," said Brown. "Are the two men in the stable?"

"No, they ain't," said Pete, "they went right away, as soon as I'd fixed 'em up with a bit of pork and a loaf. That made Jerry suspicious."

"About what?" asked Brown.

Jerry came in at that moment, to answer for himself. He heard the question, and shook his fist at Pete.

"To let sich a chance go," he growled, "it makes me wild, it does."

Bossy was behind him, with the gun in his hand. He placed it in a corner, remarking that it was loaded.

"'Twas too dark to track the warmints," he said.

"Who?" roared Brown. He was tired and a trifle irritable.

"I reckon it was Jake Blunt and the Portergeese chap," said Jerry, "jedgin' by Pete's descriptor of 'em, and their not stoppin' for a doss. They must hev knowed summat about the ball, or they wouldn't hev ventured 'ere. Like as not, they spected to find the homestead deserted. Now, Pete, spin yer yarn and let's hev it correck."

"It was a short time afore Jerry and Bossy came home," said Pete, "when I hears a soft knock at the door. I opens it and there stood the two men, one a tall chap and tother shorter, and both of 'em so thin thet their rags of clothin' hung about 'em loose. 'Be ye alone?' said the biggest chap. 'Yes,' says I, 'but I'm spectin' all the chaps back any minnit.' 'Well,' says the big chap, 'all we wants is a bit o' wittles. Hand us out a pile and we'll be orf.' 'His woice was frightful rusty and a bit weak.' I thowt I'd better do as he bid me, and I fetched the wittles. I told Jerry and Bossy zackly what I'd done 'mediately they came in."

"The boy aint to blame, as I sees," said Jim Brown. "He couldn't keep the fellers here. Blame the two warmints. Iverbody thowt they was dead or gorn."

It was perturbing news. Pete, on being further questioned said that, as far as he saw, the men had no weapons, beyond a stick apiece. They might have knives in their pockets, he thought, and it was the general opinion that they did possess them.

"Be thankful, my lad," said Jim Brown, "that you wasn't murdered sulkin' at home alone. It oughter to be a lesson for yer niver to sulk no more, but when you gits the chance to go out and enj'y yerself among good company, do so."

Pete was altogether dissatisfied with himself and everybody. He professed to feel certain that Jake Blunt or the Portuguese would not have harmed him. In his heart he would not have been sorry if they had set fire to the homestead or done anything, so long as they let him alone. His cultivated embitterment was very strong upon him as he slouched off to bed.

Jerry volunteered to sit up and guard the place. With the gun, a double-barrelled one, he was not afraid of anything the two men might do to him. The probability of their returning was, however, very remote, and the rest retired with minds easy on that score.

Tired though he was, Jim Brown could not sleep for a while. He was a kind-hearted man and he regretted the loss of Moke, under circumstances he regarded as painful, on both sides. It was an unfortunate business and Jim Brown characteristically blamed himself as being responsible for it.

"If I ever comes across the poor chap," he murmured, "I'll hold out a hand to him and make it up. He took me aback with his yarn about killing somebody and I acted like an ongrateful fule."

Having in a slight degree eased his remorse, he sought

sleep, and it came readily to his wooing, as it was wont to do.

Jack also thought a while of the Moke affair and it was his belief that the Indian was not gone for ever. The wish may have been father to the thought, as it often is, and whether he was right or wrong, was a matter that must be left for a time.

One thing was too evident. Two dangerous men, who had been regarded by many as dead, or had made their final exit from the settlement, were still in hiding somewhere, around and until they were disposed of there was the element of danger to disturb the peace of the honest toilers on the surrounding homesteads.

CHAPTER XIX.

PETE'S BINDING OATH.

PETE had told his story, with a reservation. Jake Blunt had made him take an oath that he would at intervals bring some food, and place it in a hollow tree on the border of the forest. It was a giant among pine trees, well-known to all who lived within ten miles of it, and it was often used as a landmark.

The nature of the oath was a little out of the ordinary. Pete had been made to swear by all he hoped for, in this world and the next, that he would obey the injunction of Jake Blunt, his omission to do so to be followed by certain terrible pains and penalties.

"And wot's more," added Jake Blunt, as a parting warning, "when you lies down to sleep at night, we shan't be fur away, and the fust time we has to go a day without wittles, we'll find a way to take you away to suffer Injun tortures. You've read of 'em in books, I suppose."

Pete had at least heard of stories by Fenimore Cooper, regarded as popular narratives for telling at the fireside. He was also warned that he would be made to suffer if he said a word about the oath he had taken, Jake Blunt mysteriously hinting that he had a way of hearing of it "almost as soon as spoken."

Two hungry men cannot be fed on a crust a day. Sufficient for them, taken from the larder, would surely be missed. Pete had an abnormal appetite that required a lot of food to appease it, and what he might be able to smuggle from his plate into his pockets, would be but an infinitesimal supply to meet the requirements of the two ruffians.

It was essential that Pete should obtain supplies from a source where suspicion of his doings would not be easily aroused. Mrs. Brown kept a number of fowls—about a hundred—and Pete had never known her to count them. From the henroost he resolved to take his first instalments of food. A hen's neck is easily wrung and the body could be stowed away under an overcoat without much inconvenience.

There was no immediate hurry to begin. The pork and bread he had given Jake Blunt and his companion ought to suffice for two days. Pete need not begin to steal from the henroost until the following night, or early in the morning.

He would have liked to take a fowl, plucked, drawn and cooked, but that was impossible. The only place for cooking was in the kitchen, and when culinary work was proceeding there, an aroma from it penetrated every room in the place. Even plucking was dangerous, to a degree, owing to the feathers. The smaller ones, as light as down from a swan's breast, would fly about and betray him.

The day after the outing was a quiet one at the homestead. Only essential outdoor work was done. Those who had been to Danby's, all but Brown and his wife, on foot wearing snowshoes, wanted a rest, and they took it. In the afternoon, when all were indoors, Pete saw his opportunity. To Mrs. Brown's great surprise he volunteered to take one of her special duties on himself—closing up the hen-house for the night.

There was little to do beyond closing up the small entrance holes in the side of the fowl-house, but light as the task was, that Pete should volunteer to perform it made Jack suspicious. There was more in it than, as the saying goes, "met the eye." Jack's suspicions were enhanced by the length of time Pete was absent, and when he came in, there was a sheepish, guilty look upon his surly countenance.

"He has been up to something," Jack thought. "If the hens were laying, I should think he had been stealing eggs, but they are not. What on earth has he been up to?"

On the face of it, there was nothing in Pete's act to excite any interest, but Jack could not get it out of his mind. It was with him when he went to bed and again in the morning when he awoke.

It was early and nobody appeared to be stirring. Jim Brown invariably was the first up, and he roused the laggards as soon as he was about. Jack lay quietly thinking about Pete until he was attracted by the sound of a stealthy movement in the adjoining room.

Jim Brown was never stealthy in his way of going about the house. He wore thick, heavy boots, and he made good use of them. His "stump, stump," was familiar to all who dwelt in the homestead. It could not be him. Somebody else was up and about for some secret purpose.

It required very little time for Jack to hurry on his clothes. He was dressed in two minutes and stole out of his room. Nobody was in the living room, but somebody had been there, as some logs had been placed on the ashes of the previous night's fire, and were beginning to burn.

The flickering flames revealed that the door had been unfastened. Whoever had risen so early had gone out. Could it be Pete, and if it were, what had he gone out to do? Jack slipped on his overcoat and cap and went out to see.

In the east was a remnant of the moon, in its fourth quarter, and overhead the stars were shining brilliantly. Jack judged it was about five in the morning, an uncoruscable hour for anyone to be up at that season of the year. He softly closed the door and walked round the homestead, instinctively making for the fowl-house, and as he turned the corner, he collided with Pete, who was seemingly in a hurry.

He had something in his hand, which he dropped upon

the snow and spluttered out a few incoherent words. Taken by surprise he was staggered and bewildered.

"Where are you going," asked Jack, "and what is that you were carrying?"

"'Tain't no business of yours," replied Pete, "you ain't got no right to spy upon me."

Jack thrust him aside and stooping low, picked up a dead fowl. Pete in a frenzy rushed upon him and endeavoured to recover it. He struck Jack in the chest and made him reel, but he did not fall.

"If you want to fight," said Jack, "I'm with you."

He threw the fowl down and went for Pete, who called him hard names and threatened to kill him, if he did not "leave off interfering with people." Jack paid no heed to him, but hit out and in a few moments Pete was on his back, sobbing and whining.

"Get up and go indoors," said Jack, "or I'll rouse Jim and hear what he has to say about the fowl you've killed. What were you going to do with it?"

Jack again took possession of the fowl and as Pete did not rise he banged it about his head until he scrambled to his feet and hurried indoors. Jack was so sharp upon his track that he had no time to take refuge in his room.

"Stay here and tell me what your game is," said Jack, "Why did you kill the fowl?"

"How do you know I killed it?"

"Its neck has been wrung and the body is quite cold. You killed it last night when you went to close up the fowl-house. Tell me the truth. I won't stand any lying or shuffling. What were you going to do with the bird?"

"I dursn't tell you," whined Pete.

"I give you a minute to answer me," said Jack, "and then if you won't, I will call Jim up."

Pete implored him not to take any more notice of the dead fowl. He asserted that he had killed it by accident, the previous night, and was only going to take it away

from the homestead and throw it down for some straying wolf that might come that way. Jack refused to believe him.

"You could have thrown it away last night," he said, "anywhere would have done. The wolves, if any are about, would have scented it."

Pete caved in, and little by little Jack screwed the truth out of him. He went down on his knees and begged of Jack not to say a word about it. Jack contemptuously bade him get up and stop snivelling.

"You ass!" he said. "All you had to do was to speak to Jim about those rascals having played on your funky nature. As for the oath they made you take, nobody would value that. An oath dragged from a fellow like you in a fright, wouldn't count anywhere."

Pete slowly rose from his knees, with his eyes fixed on Jack's face. In his slow, dull way, he was endeavouring to find out if Jack really meant all he said. That he spoke cuttingly hardly affected Pete. He was used to rough words and occasional somewhat rough treatment from Bossy or Jerry, when he exasperated them by his disobedience or neglectful work. The main thing he was concerned with was his oath, and if he, justifiably or not, broke it, what would be the outcome of it.

"He made me swear, did that Blunt chap, that I would take food to 'em," he said miserably, "and I said the words after him because I was afeard of him."

"Just so," rejoined Jack quietly, "the oath wasn't of your own making, and you will have to break it because you won't be allowed to keep it."

"Them chaps will settle me, if I don't," muttered Pete.

"Do you want to keep it?" asked Jack.

"No, I don't," answered Pete. "If they had let me alone, I wouldn't hev done a thing for 'em."

"Then all you have to do is to say nothing and leave me to settle with Blunt and the Portuguese," said Jack.

"Don't go away from the homestead further than you are

obliged to, and you are not to say a word to Jim Brown or anyone. A fowl, more or less, won't matter to Mrs. Brown. I'll do something with it. Now go back to your room and wait there until you hear Jim stirring."

"Will you never tell on me, Jack?" asked Pete dubiously.

"I will never say a word, so long as you behave yourself," said Jack. "Keep a civil tongue in your head and go about your work as if you did it willingly and took pleasure in doing it. See if you can't make a more decent fellow of yourself."

Jack opened the door and went out, taking the fowl with him, and Pete stole softly back to the room where he slept. For companions he had the three farm-hands, and he was glad to find they were all still sound asleep. He kicked off his boots, and, having removed his coat, rolled himself up in the top blanket to await the summoning voice of Jim Brown.

CHAPTER XX.

JACK'S BOLD RESOLVE.

THE burning desire of most boys and young men is to do something that will elevate them in the eyes of their friends, and, if possible, in the eyes of mankind generally. In short, the craving to distinguish ourselves may be reckoned among the ambitions of our early years, say from fifteen onward to manhood.

Allied to the longing is a somewhat reckless disregard of the peril attached to a great effort to accomplish something that will rank among the notable deeds of mankind. It is the gift of youth to believe that one will always get the better of an enemy in a fair hand-to-hand encounter. In other words, to use a somewhat slangish phrase, the boy or youth, if he is of a plucky disposition, is pretty sure that he will "come out on the top."

Jack was largely imbued with this characteristic faith. If he had not been, he would not have conceived the idea of capturing Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama, without the aid of full grown men. It was in his head when he was talking with Pete, and when he went forth to dispose of the dead fowl, he dwelt upon it, and the more he reviewed it, the better he liked it, as being feasible and full of promise of success.

"Pete said he saw no weapons about them," Jack mused, as he scraped a hole in the snow with his feet. "They may have their revolvers but can't have any cartridges. What they had a while ago, they must have used to shoot birds or animals to eat. An empty revolver is a poor thing compared with a charged rifle. I'll have a talk with

Charlie and Sam, and if they will join me, we'll nobble those scoundrels as sure as fate."

He deposited the dead fowl in the hole he had made, kicked the snow over and returned to the homestead. Instead of going back to bed he sat up until Jim Brown was stirring about an hour later on.

He was surprised to find Jack in the living room, and asked what had induced him to get up so early. Jack said he had been out to see that everything was right. He hinted at having heard somebody moving about outside and admitted that he had found "nothing to be alarmed about."

"It was a wolf perhaps, hoverin' about the fowlhouse," suggested Brown.

"There isn't much work doing in the day," said Jack quickly, "so there wouldn't be any objection to my being out early to-morrow looking for wolves."

"Resky," said Brown; "there's them two warmints still about."

"I am sure Charlie and Sam will join me," said Jack eagerly. "We shall have a rifle apiece, and Pete said that neither Blunt nor the Portuguese had any firearms. We can take care of ourselves. Don't forget that we are a little more than boys. I can shoot fairly straight, and Charlie is a splendid shot. He wouldn't often miss a man at two hundred yards. Wolf skins are worth money, and I shall want all I can get, as I intend to take up my land next year."

"If youngsters will wentur nuthin', they are wuth nuthin'," said Jim Brown sagaciously. "Fer my part, I don't think them chaps will come 'ere agen. They wentured to the homestead knowin' we was at the Danbys. I shall never forget it. Poor Moke! If he had come and brought a sackful of scalps along I would forgive him, purwided they was scalps of hoss-thievin' warmints or the likes of 'em."

Jack had gained his object. He and his chums could now leave the homestead during the night, without exciting any surprise. He shrewdly guessed that Blunt and Silva de Gama would come seeking food in the appointed hiding place during the hours of darkness, and not finding it, would hover about, in expectation of Pete's arriving. With himself and Charlie and Sam in ambush, the ruffians could be either shot or compelled to surrender.

Though no dreamer in the accepted sense, Jack often pictured to himself things that he hoped would become realities anon, and he indulged in a vision of the two rascals sneaking up to the hollow hickory tree, and kneeling down to grope about inside for the food they hungered for. Then a sharp cry of "Hands up!" would ring out and startled the men would leap to their feet to find three rifles levelled at them. They would cave in—men of their class always yielded under such circumstances—and then they would be commanded to walk on ahead, the triumphant three bringing up the rear, with rifles ready to shoot if either attempted to escape.

Jack was as proud of his conception as a mother is of her child. In a different way, perhaps, but the emotions were akin. It was such a simple plan and so easy to carry out. Failure seemed to be impossible, if the two men were alive still, and trusting in Pete would come to the hickory tree to obtain their supplies.

They might not come the next night, as it was known that Pete had given them two days rations, but the chances were that they would do so to make sure of being provided with food and so avoid running out and suffering from hunger.

By what means Blunt and Silva de Gama had managed to survive, was a puzzle. Shelter, of some sort, they must have, and good enough to prevent their being frozen to death. It was hardly likely that they had been able to build another substantial hut. Where were they in

hiding? Jack speculated much on the subject but had to give it up.

He was sure that Charlie and Sam would readily join him in his proposed venture, and, having confided in them the whole story of Pete and the horse thieves and what he intended to do, he was gratified by their ready assent to act with him, and all three were confident of being successful in their venture.

"And won't Jim and Bossy and everybody stare when we march the vagabonds in," said Jack gleefully.

"My share in it will be some small return to Brown for his kindness to me," said Sam thoughtfully. "It will give him a mind at ease to have Blunt and the Portuguese laid by the heels. How long will they be kept in prison?"

"About the usual interval between trying and hanging such fellows," said Jack. "I believe enough will be brought home to them to end their career."

"They will have to be taken to the nearest police station," said Charlie.

"By the police, who will be sent for," replied Jack. "Jim will keep them in one of the sheds, bound, of course, and I will suggest to him that they be watched, night and day, till the police arrive."

This conversation took place in the harness room attached to the stables, early after breakfast. The men were feeding the cattle, and Pete was assisting Mrs. Brown, who was busy with the housework, and, what was more, astounding her by his willingness and abnormal activity.

With the house-broom he performed prodigies of sweeping and, marvellous to relate, did not shirk the corners. He made the men's beds and his own, and brought in a supply of logs for the fire, without its being so much as suggested to him. Then, most amazing thing of all, he asked if there was anything more that he could do?

"Have you gone wrong in your head?" asked Mrs. Brown. "What's come to you?"

"I don't know whether my head is any wuss than it used to be," replied Pete, "I've took to work a bit more kindly, that's all."

"Quick changes don't allus please me," remarked Mrs. Brown, shaking her head, "they mean that something's wrong in mind or body. Do you feel a bit feverish?"

Pete said he was not aware of such a feeling.

"Let me see your tongue," said Mrs. Brown.

Pete thrust out a tongue that would have served a half-grown calf, and there was nothing in its appearance to suggest indisposition. Mrs. Brown knitted her brow as she looked steadily at Pete's eyes for a few moments.

"Something's turned you inside out," she said. "I suppose there is some work for you to do outside."

"I'll find a job," replied Pete and bustled out in search of something to do.

As he had staggered Mrs. Brown, so he staggered Jim Brown and his men, when he got out the wooden horse and a saw and proceeded to cut up logs with an hitherto unrevealed energy. They were engaged in repairing some cribs for the cattle to feed from, and paused in their labours to look at Pete. Jack and his chums emerged from the stable and stopped to survey the willing toiler, too. They understood what Pete's reformation meant, but as it followed that Brown and his men did not, the latter had all the surprise to themselves.

Pete cast a glance at Jack, out of the corners of his eyes, and plied the saw at a rate that drew an expostulation from Bossy.

"Steady on," he said, "or you'll break the implemink."

"Mind your own business!" grunted Pete. "I shall work as hard as I like."

"Harder than ye've ever liked afore," said Bossy. "You'll hev that saw in two. There, now you've done it!"

The steel part of the saw was all right but Pete had

broken the wooden handle off, and he paused of necessity in his work, and stood panting for breath. Jim Brown came over and looked him up and down.

"Don't worry about the handle, Pete," he said. "You've done a full day's work, for you, in arf-an-hour. Ease orf and take a rest."

"He's been a savin' hisself up fer this fer years," said Jerry, "and now I suppose he's done till he's close on forty."

"I mean to work now with the best of yer," said Pete. "All I axes fer is to be let alone and not jawed at."

"He's drefull in airnest," said Bossy, "he's been revoluted."

"Been wut?" demanded Jerry.

"Revoluted," answered Bossy defiantly.

"There ain't no sich wurd," said Jerry; "you made it up out of yer own head, which in your excited state would be better fer bein' shaved."

"Ease orf," said Jim Brown, "you two chaps ain't the pussons to talk of langwidges, one bein' about as good as tother, with long words, and maybe wuss. Pete, my boy, when did yer make up yer mind to work in airnest?"

"This mornin'" replied Pete. "Jack jawed me about it, and I promised him I'd mend a bit."

"He sets a good example, does Jack," said Brown approvingly, "its inkspririn'. Keep the 'dustrial feelin' goin'. Don't allow it to chill orf. Gimme that saw and I'll mend the handle. There's another in the stock shed. Fetch it along and resoom cuttin' logs."

Pete did as he was told, and having been rested, he resumed cutting up logs, not with such fiery energy as before, perhaps, but still performing, for him, prodigies of labour.

He was changed, and that day he learnt a lesson which has come home to many men. Earnest labour, with unflagging devotion to it, is not so wearing as dawdling through the work that falls to our lot to perform.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLAN THAT "GANGED AGLEY."

IT wanted but half-an-hour to the first indiction of the coming of the sun. The night had been fine, with a piercing wind that luckily blew off the forest, or three watchers ensconced behind different trees adjacent to the hollow hickory would have been impelled to give in and hurry back to the warm homestead.

The fine, loose snow was taken up and whirled about like the sand of the desert before the advancing simoon. The trees swayed their topmost branches, and creaked and groaned as if a multitude of beasts were in pain. The result was awe-inspiring, thrilling, and calculated to cool a man of ordinary courage.

Jack was crouching behind the trunk of a mahogany tree, about ten yards away from the spot where Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama were expected to appear. His part of the programme was, at the psychological moment, when the two men knelt down, to step out and give the command, "Hands up!" Then Charlie and Sam were to emerge from their hiding-places, a little in the rear and repeat the cry. Taken in the front and rear, what else than submit could the horse-thieves do?

Cunning they were known to be, but that their cunning should have been cultivated by the semi-wild-beast life they had been living, did not dawn upon the youthful would-be captors. They had no knowledge of the enforced cultivation of the senses, sight and hearing, which attends the life of the hunted man or beast. Constant peril breeds unceasing watchfulness, and Jake Blunt and Silva

de Gama, knowing that foes might possibly spring upon them at any moment, had acquired the stealthiness and the ultra caution in their movements that marks the wild animals of the forest.

Pete had been made to take a terrible oath, and his fears they hoped would induce him to keep it, but neither Jake Blunt nor his companion placed full reliance in him. This was natural to men who would have unhesitatingly broken a dozen oaths or more if their purpose would be served, whatever that purpose might be.

They were at hand, within fifty yards of the hidden youths. Each step they took was succeeded by a halt, and listening for sounds that would reveal the near presence of an enemy. They were experienced in woodcraft, and the moaning of the night wind they did not heed. The trees might rock, and groan, and creak, without inspiring in them a moment's interest or feeling of fear. A slight, irrepressible cough or the soft sound of shifting feet, would suffice to alarm them.

They had their knives and empty revolvers in their hands, all the weapons they possessed, one to use if necessary, and the other to inspire fear. A presented revolver, loaded or not, is not entirely impotent. It will make men pause, check a rush of eager assailants, and thus enable the possessor of it to attempt to make good his retreat, by backing while he could do so with impunity, and turning to run for his life when he must.

Their sight had improved and strengthened. That of Silva de Gama had always been good. Now it had developed in keenness, and almost matched that of the feline animals that seek their prey at night.

Silva de Gama walked two steps ahead of his companion, with his body bent and his head thrust forward, his eyes endeavouring to pierce the gloom of the forest. Suddenly he stopped short and Jake Blunt had to make a great effort to avoid coming into collision with him. The

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Portuguese wheeled half round and grasping his arm softly hissed a warning for him to be silent.

They had come to close upon the verge of the forest and the outside tree trunks were limned against the starry sky. At first Jake Blunt could see nothing to alarm him, but observing the outstretched arm of Silva de Gama and following the direction it pointed, he saw a silhouetted human figure, leaning against a tree.

It was Jack, but he was not recognised, and his height justified the assumption of the Portuguese that it was Pete. The extreme caution that had been engendered in him, alone prevented him from addressing the figure in a familiar, friendly manner.

With another pressure of his hand he conveyed to Blunt that he wished him to remain where he was, and step by step the Portuguese advanced until only a few feet were between him and Jack. Then he saw it was not Pete, but somebody a little taller and sturdier built.

It flashed upon the Portuguese that Pete had betrayed him, and somebody he did not know had come to kill or capture him and Jake Blunt. The barrel of a rifle, now that he was so near, was visible.

A glance around showed no other being was in sight. Charlie and Sam were entirely hidden from his view. Only one to deal with. It was not much, especially as he could be taken unawares. Fury possessed the soul of Silva de Gama, and with a fierce yell he leapt upon Jack and bore him to the ground.

Jack had a finger on the trigger of his rifle and involuntarily pulled it. The shot sped away across the snow, doing no harm to living thing. It would then have been all up with Jack if Silva de Gama in falling had not dropped his knife. Failing it, he struck Jack in the face with the butt of the revolver and then grasped him by the throat.

It was all the work of a moment. Jack was bewildered

by the suddenness of the attack made upon him, but he knew he was in deadly peril and struggled to free himself from the deadly grip of the Portuguese. He might just as well have endeavoured to free his throat from a vice.

Fires danced before his eyes, he heard an exultant shout from some hoarse-voiced man, and then felt his reason going. He was choking, his life was departing from him, and then he heard a muffled sound as if something soft had been struck, and his throat was free.

He failed to understand why the hold upon it had been released and with his thoughts as turbid as a sea in a storm, could not decide what he ought to do. Two rifle reports roused him to a clearer view of things and he made an effort to scramble to his feet.

"They have got away," somebody said. Jack thought it was Charlie speaking but was not sure.

He reeled against the tree, as if he had been drinking, and endeavoured to discern what was going on near him. All he could see was the blackness of the forest and his two chums engaged in re-loading their weapons.

"Yes, we missed them and they've scooted." It was Sam speaking now. He angrily jerked his shoulders and turned to Jack. "How do you feel, old chap?" he said.

"I am coming round," Jack answered; "that fellow nearly choked me."

"He might have done so completely but for Charlie," said Sam. "I believe he fetched the fellow—it must have been the Portuguese—a whack on the side of the head that sent him over on his back. He was up as quickly as if he had been an indiarubber ball, just as if he had fallen and bounced up again, and was sheering off when he ran against a big fellow, and they cursed each other, as they bolted into the wood. He fired after them, but had no time to take aim. I confess to having been a bit staggered."

"They were too cunning for us," said Jack ruefully. "I suppose they can see in the dark, for we were as quiet as mice. Charlie, I owe my life to you, and I shall not forget it. I can feel that rascal's fingers on my throat still."

"I heard him rush upon you, then your gun went off," said Charlie, "and it wasn't a blow I gave him. It was a kick and it was almost a blind one, but it bowled him over. It's nothing to brag about, so say no more."

They set out for the homestead as a faint light appeared in the sky, diminishing the brilliancy of the stars. Almost immediately the wind softened and ere they had reached home the air was scarcely disturbed by it. The calm of a typical Canadian winter day there was at hand.

Jim Brown was standing at the door and he looked at them critically, with a faint smile on his lips.

"Three shots," he said "and nary a wolf."

"You heard us fire!" said Jack.

"No," replied Brown, "but I see the flashes. One of you ought to have hit somethin'."

"It was two-legged wolves we shot at," said Charlie.

"You don't mean ter say——" began Brown. Jack interrupted him.

"Yes," he said, "it was Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama we were after. I hoped to have brought them back with us, but they were too slim."

"And you went out a-puppose to get at 'em?" said Brown.

"We did," replied Jack airily. "Why not?"

"There ain't no why not—considering your venturesome natur'," said Brown, "but it was resky, uncommon resky. You had better make a bigger party of it the next time you goes on that errand. What amazes me, is the life the warmint have in 'em. Decent men would have died long ago from exposure."

"I am sure they have found some sort of shelter," said Jack, "and when it is discovered they can be taken, easy."

Jim Brown backed into the room and they followed him. He sat down and meditated for a while without being interrupted. Jack had a shrewd idea of what was in his mind, and he was very near the mark.

"The sooner we finds where they are skulkin' the better," said Brown, "I'll go over to White Lees in the sleigh and make arrangements for a day's searching of the wood."

"You will take us with you?" suggested Jack.

"Well, my lad," said Brown, "if we didn't take you, I reckon you would foller 'us, fer ther's no holdin' yer back when its in yer hearts to wentur your lives. So let it be so. What's the matter with yer neck, Jack, that you keep a wrigglin' yer head about?"

"I think I've the mumps coming," said Jack laughing.

He put his rifle in a corner, and his chums having done likewise, they went to their room, leaving Jim Brown by the fire pondering on the subject.

"Mumps," he murmured, "don't make roundish black marks on the throat. There's been some hand-to-hand work goin' on. If anything happens to that young chap, I shall feel the loss of him as if he was my own son. And Canada will lose one of its best settlers. Hang them thievish beggars! I wish they was caught and done fer."

CHAPTER XXII.

A LETTER FROM MOKE.

JIM Brown went off to White Lees and did not return until late in the afternoon. He brought back the information that in two days' time the settlers would be ready to make a thorough search of the forest, within a reasonable distance from the open country. With the Kellson's contingent there would be at least twenty of the party.

"Two days more won't be helpful to the beggars," he said. "They will be nigh starved out by that time, unless somebody is feedin' of 'em. But I can't conceive anybody bein' wicked enough for to do that."

Pete was one of the listeners to this remark, and he squirmed in his chair as he sat partaking of tea. The imploring look he cast at Jack was seen by Mrs. Brown, who regarded him keenly, but said nothing. Women are often very shrewd at interpreting signs of discomfiture, and she was inclined to suspect that Pete had been guilty of doing something wrong. Mentally, she reviewed the contents of the larder, but as nothing was missing, she was silent. Ever since Pete had developed his abnormal industry, she had felt convinced that there was some moving cause for it. What it was she was unable to clearly divine.

About noon on the following day a settler named Rogers, rode over from a farm that lay three miles away from White Lees. He brought with him a small paper parcel which he said he was asked to give Jim Brown as early as possible. The bearer was a young man who had not long taken up his land. He was the younger son of an

English farmer who was poor and had come out to Canada to find a better living than he could get at home.

He was a thickset young fellow, with a rubicund face, brightened by the smile that comes with contentment. Jim Brown stared at the letter, which he held unopened in his hand, and asked "who sent it."

"Open it and see," replied Rogers; "that ere letter were left at my house late, on the night of the party, with the man in charge of my homestead. I would have been over before now, but was kept back by some fencing round the pigsties that wanted patching up and I had to attend to that job first."

Jim Brown opened the letter, glanced at the signature first, and saw the name of Moke; the letter was written in a fair round hand. It gave him quite a shock. Never before had he seen Moke's handwriting, and it had never occurred to him to think that the Indian was able to write at all. Now he recalled the well known fact that Moke had been at school where he had been taught the use of the pen as well as grammar, and he tossed the envelope aside and proceeded to read the unexpected communication.

"Good jim brown. i left yu to go to my people but i shall not do so. The feelin to kill is gone, and i have Borrowd some cloathes of the man i find in Rogers homestead. He gave them to me because they are old, but i wil work and get cloathes of my own and return his one day. O my dear friend i feel i shal mis you bad but i did wrong in killing your enemy as i did without yure leve. I must be a Bit of a savvage still—it wood hav bene difrent in a fite. I am goin' to a plase to work. Some people say that indians wil not work but i shal give a lie to them for i go to help on the raleway and they shal see the indian can work as wel as whites. so no more from your sorryfell MOKE."

It was in diction and spelling the letter of a small schoolboy, but Jim Brown gave no thought to that. He

was not the man to criticise its faults, which might have been his own, had he attempted to write so long an epistle to anyone, which he never had done. His relief was great. He felt as if Moke had been restored to him, as he used to be, and he was more than satisfied.

"It was, in my way, my fault," he said, "that the poor chap ever took on the savage twist, but he's straightened hisself out agen and if iver he come this way in the futur, he shall sit by my fire and be free of the homestead as he used to be, and the man who so much as whispers a word agin him in my hearin', will have to take a lickin', or give me one."

Rogers stayed about an hour, talking over the search-work that was to be done on the morrow and partaking of the inevitable hospitality of Kellson's, offered to all comers. Then he rode away and Jim Brown read and re-read Moke's letter, pondering on its contents with unflagging regret.

"I feels," he remarked to his wife, "as I'd been nasty with a healthy man for havin' had a lone fit."

"The man who has had one fit, is likely to have another," she replied sententiously. "Moke won't be any the worse for a stretch of work."

When the letter was read aloud in the evening, Bossy led a discussion upon it. Unwisely he criticised the spelling of certain words, but when invited by Jerry to spell them the right way, he was unable to do so, which laid him open to censure.

"I blushes fer your rawdacity," said Jerry, "to say a word agen anybody's spellin'. I should like to see a letter of yours, a love letter for ch'ice. It would choke orf any gal from takin' yer."

"Moke put up fer bein' eddicated," growled Bossy, "I don't wentur to do so."

"It would be a wentur," rejoined Jerry significantly, "beginnin' and endin' at that. Can yer spell yer own name?"

"I'd hev a try, if put to it," answered Bossy, "but I don't see thet I'm called on to tackle it."

"Wut is yer name?" inquired Jim Brown. "I've known you for three year and all the time ye've been Bossy, and nuthin' more."

"In the old country I was known as Ebenezy Melterman," said Bossy reluctantly.

"Spell the fust name, Bossy," said Jerry.

An air of expectation manifested itself in the assemblage as Bossy screwed himself up to make a great effort, but it was evident that he was somewhat at sea. He got as far as the first two letters and then came to a halt.

"I ain't sure about the b's," he said. "You see, it's so long since I was called on to tackle it. 'Tain't a common name, anyway, and it didn't ought to hev been givin to a boy as was set crow-scaring 'most as soon as he could toddle. It's a name as a ornary chap wants help with. Let them as enj'ys spellin' it, do so."

He drew hard at his pipe, like a man who was indignant at having an unpleasant past raked up, and when Charlie spelt his name, he said it was not right. There were more e's in it than Charlie gave, and at least two b's and there were several z's. That he could swear to. He did not profess to put them together correctly. His father's name was Habukkuk, and he couldn't spell it, in fact he wouldn't have spelt it if he could. His family generally were "awerse to spellin'."

Verbally "ragging" Bossy was Jerry's favourite amusement, and he gave no rest to the unhappy owner of the name of Ebenezer Melterman, until Jim Brown stopped it and turned the subject to supper and bed.

"We've a stiff day afore us to-morrer," he said, "and the sooner we turn in the better we shall be able to get through it."

Ere they retired, the rifles were carefully examined to see if they were loaded, and there was a hopeful feeling in all that the ensuing day would see the last of the horse thieves who had proved so troublesome and dangerous.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JAKE BLUNT'S RETREAT.

OVER a score of settlers assembled in the morning at Kellson's, and the cattle were allowed to run to make room for the horses. Only men on foot would be of good service in the forest. Turner, Jim Brown's third man, was appointed to keep the cattle rounded up.

Jack, Sam and Charlie were the youngest members of the party, and some of the men were of opinion that they had better stay at home. Jim Brown said that talking of keeping people at home was all very well, but keeping with some meant staying with them, and he for one would not do it. "Don't be afraid on their account," he said in an undertone, "I'll be sorry for Jake Blunt or the Portergeese chap if they comes within gunshot of 'em."

The party walked to the wood, and there Brown took the command. The method of advance was to be in line, keeping an eye open for tracks of the hiding men.

It was a calm day and the interior of the forest was still. There was no sound of moving animal, no sight of one as the long line moved on. The course Jim Brown took led them to the ruins of the hut, destroyed by fire. The first thing observed there was innumerable footmarks on the sparse snow, the next that not a piece of charred timber of the hut remained.

"Taken away to start fires," remarked Brown.

Jack and his chums, while the men stood staring at the spot where the hut had been, looked for tracks leading into the forest and found them. There were the indentations of the big broad feet and the long and slender ones,

showing that more than once the horse-thieves had gone to and fro. The word was passed that the trail had been found, and the three chums went on ahead, the men following.

"They are going on too quickly," remarked Rogers, "call 'em back, Brown."

"The less callin' the sooner we shall find them warmints we are arter," replied Brown. "Peg along!"

Striking the trail so soon was a piece of good fortune, and there was no break in it, save when the searchers came to a fallen tree or a cluster of undergrowth. Then it would be lost for a moment and speedily recovered. As the party advanced, now in a body and no longer in line, the forest grew denser, the trees stood thicker, and the daylight softened down.

Not a word was spoken. In grim silence they proceeded, in the wake of the pioneer youngsters. A small, unsuspected stream was come upon. The water in it seemed to have been frozen solid, and the ice had a coating of snow with the guiding footmarks crossing it.

On and on, two miles perhaps were traversed, though it seemed to be much more, and then the hitherto level surface of the forest began to slope upward. None of the gathering had ever penetrated so far in the forest before. The trees near the cultivated land were mostly fine, here many were gigantic.

There was little lower foliage. Tall and straight, like huge columns, the trunk rose in the air, and high overhead topped with crowns of foliage that was largely there winter and summer, almost cutting off the light of day. Here and there some had shed their leaves, and grateful patches of brighter light rested on the ground below. But for the most part it was a journey through gloom.

Up and up sloped the way. Presently the trees began to thin and huge stones were met with, resembling the boulders we find near a rocky seashore. But no sea was

within a thousand miles, and if ever the salt water had stained the rounded rocks it must have been ages and ages ago, long before man is reputed to have dwelt on the earth.

The trees became scanty and then entirely ceased. Ahead lay a wide stretch of rugged ground, fringed on the far side with another forest. A halt was made and the men looked round.

Snow lay between the rocks and the trail had vanished. It seemed as if the men they sought had come thus far and then turned back. So said one, and there were nods of assent. Jim Brown looked glum.

"We've been a pesterin' along an old trail," he said, "and now we must hark back."

Nobody had been paying much heed since the halt was made to the movements of Jack, Sam and Charlie. They had climbed to the top of a huge rock, which the wind had made barren of snow, and were surveying the uninviting landscape. Jack was pointing down below, and as Brown parted his lips to call them back, they suddenly disappeared.

"What's come of 'em?" said Jim Brown with a bewildered look.

"They slipped down out of sight in a moment," said Rogers, "jest as if they had fallen over a precipice."

There was a rush for the rock and the men scrambled up its uneven surface. It was a mode of progression that winded most of them, and, the summit gained, there was another halt to regain their breath. Then they went on to where the trio had been seen standing, and their minds were relieved.

There was no precipice, nothing more than a sharp slope down which Jack and the two other youngsters had slid as if they had been tobogganing. Knee deep they were, well on ahead, ploughing their way on, between the masses of rock with the eagerness of hounds in pursuit of a fox.

"I reckon," said Brown, "that they've struck the trail again."

It was so. Jake Blunt and Silva de Gama had made their way over the big rock and thus broken the trail, a cunning move that failed to serve them. It had been found again, and oblivious of the risk they ran, Jack, Sam, and Charlie were following it.

"We ought to have the honour and glory of nabbing them," said Charlie. "In the daylight they can't take us by surprise. 'Hands up' ought to be enough for them, and if it isn't—well, they're too dangerous to let go!"

"My blood boils when I think of the brutes," said Sam rather viciously. "To understand what they are you must live with them for a bit, as I have done."

The trail was clear enough now. It showed that Blunt and the Portuguese had floundered quite recently through the deep snow that lay in the hollow of the narrow ravine that marked the road the trio were taking. The rocks on either side assumed fantastic shapes and were largely inaccessible to man. Only an expert mountaineer could have gained the summit of the easiest of them.

A longer ravine than the one hitherto met with was gained and cautiously traversed, and at the end the termination of the journey was seen.

The ravine was blocked by a wall of rock and at the base of it was the mouth of a cave.

The hiding place of the horse-thieves had been found.

Confirmatory evidence of it was given by a thin wreath of grey smoke that was seen curling out of the cave. It was scarcely perceptible. Charlie was the first to notice it and point it out.

The smoke proclaimed the existence of a fire inside the cave, but naught could be seen of that. The mouth yawned black, as if opened to receive and devour anyone who might venture in. It was a fancy that took

possession of Sam, and when Jack moved forward, he softly asked him what he intended to do.

"Have them out," replied Jack resolutely, "they must give themselves up."

He went on ahead and his companions followed him.

When within ten yards of the cave, he called out, "Jake Blunt. Come out or we will shoot."

"Give us time," was the answer, in a faint, hollow voice, "we air comin' as fast as we can."

Dragging footsteps were heard, and one of the men coughed. Jack held his rifle at the present to awe the horse-thieves into complete submission when they appeared. His purpose was to compel them to walk in front of himself and his chums until they came to the men in the rear, who would take charge of them. It promised to be a notable capture.

Jake Blunt appeared at the mouth of the cave, walking feebly and staggering along, like a man in the last extremity of feebleness and distress. His head was bent down so as to be partly hidden, but enough of it was visible to reveal that his cheeks were pinched and his mouth drawn.

He advanced a few steps, and suddenly reeling, fell at full length, face downwards. Jack moved up to him and stood between Jake Blunt's outstretched arms, looking down at him. Then two hands darted forward and grasped Jack by the ankles, and with a jerk he was thrown.

Out from the cave darted Silva de Gama, armed with a heavy stick. The fall of Jack and the appearance of the Portuguese was so momentary and unexpected that Charlie and Sam were taken by surprise. Sam was felled by a blow from the stick, and Silva de Gama closed with Charlie.

The two rascals had suffered and lost much of their old strength, but they were strong men still. Jake Blunt half rose, moved his body quickly forward and pinned Jack

down by the shoulders. Silva de Gama threw Charlie heavily, but owing to the depth of snow, his fall was comparatively light. As things were, he was seriously shaken and half dazed.

Sam also had had his mental faculties temporarily disturbed, but he soon recovered his wits and went to the rescue of his chums. He fired at the Portuguese, sending a bullet through his shoulder, extracting from him a wild shriek of rage and pain. Then reversing his weapon dealt Jake Blunt a heavy blow on the head, just as he had fixed his huge hands on Jack's throat.

Though not reduced to a senseless condition, the burly ruffian was compelled to let go his hold, and Jack thrust him over upon his side. Then he sprang up, picked up his rifle, which he had dropped, and presented it at his head.

"Give in, or I shoot!" he cried.

"I've done, don't kill me!" gasped Blunt; "we made a bid fer liberty and hev failed. Stop that howlin', de Gama."

The Portuguese was making an awful row as he lay upon the ground, the blood from his wound staining the white snow. Sam, with re-loaded rifle, was standing guard over him. Charlie was endeavouring to pull himself together.

A shout from the rear proclaimed the arrival of the rest of the party. They came up as swiftly as they could, staring with amazement and delight at the scene before them, only half comprehending what had happened.

"You seem to have gone on ahead fer sumthin'," said Jim Brown to Jack. "It's a pretty bit of work you boys hev done, and I'm proud of yer."

Jack said nothing. He really felt proud of having had a share in securing the last of the thieving gang, but he was not disposed to boast about it. At present he had only a faint idea of the details of what had happened after Jake Blunt threw him. He owed either Sam or

Charlie his life, but he could not be certain which it was, so rapidly had the encounter and rescue been.

The two rascals were helpless. They were prisoners, without any hope of escape. Half-a-dozen men carried Jake Blunt, and Silva de Gama's wound was looked to. The bullet had gone clean through his shoulder, and it was small comfort to him when Danby informed him that "it wasn't dangerous."

Improvised bandages were put on either side of his shoulder, and he was requested to walk, with the intimation that any disposition he exhibited to lag would be met with "instant justice" being meted out to him. The Portuguese perfectly understood what that meant and fell in for the march back to the open country.

That the arrival of the men of the party had been a complete surprise to the captives was voiced by Jake Blunt. "We thowt the boys had come along by theirselves in a wentursome sperrit," he said, "and we laid ourselves out to do fer 'em and get their guns. But it warn't to be, I suppose. I ain't much down-hearted about getting fixed, fer I'd had enough of the life we've been leadin'. As fer that cave, it goes right inter the bowels of the earth, I reckon. It's full of whisperins and groanins and strange shrieks and cries. Mebbe, it was nuffin but the wind——"

"It was demons," interposed Silva de Gama, "there are legions of dem."

"We got a bit o' shelter there, but no peace," said Jake Blunt. "I suppose hangin' is ahead of me and it will be better than livin' on yonder, better than starvin' and the bitin' frost. Whatsomever we may have done, we've already paid a good price for it."

"Too much," said Silva de Gama, with a groan. His wounded shoulder was very painful, and he being an exceptionally cruel man, naturally bore his sufferings badly. The cruel man is always, in his inmost heart, a coward.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MATTER OF SYMPATHY.

AS a precaution against further attempts at violence, Jake Blunt's arms were bound behind his back. Silva de Gama did not need any such precaution, in the opinion of the settlers. He had both his arms free.

It had been a long quest, and the better part of the daylight had gone as the triumphant party of men and youths emerged from the wood and moved across the open land towards Kellson's. It was there, in the harness room, the prisoners would be kept, pending the arrival of the police.

Sam walked just in front of Jake Blunt, and whenever he looked back he was sure to see the eyes of the horse-thief fixed upon him, not with any vengeful light in them, but with a curicus, yearning expression that at first caused Sam surprise and eventually irritation.

He understood what it meant. The ruffian had taken a liking to him when he was with the gang, and it had ever been objectionable to Sam. Now it was repulsive to him. And yet, he could not deny in his heart that but for the horse-thief and his men, he must have died in the wood. He was on the verge of starvation when they came upon him, and from their hands he had received the food and drink that gave him back life and strength. It was a humiliating indebtedness, but to have such a man entertain affection for him was almost unendurable. It was part of the penalty of the huge folly he had been guilty of.

Only the most hardened criminals fail to dwell on and

mourn over their sins. Jake Blunt was not sorry for his evil doings, and Sam, under the influence of his misplaced affection might have been trained up to be as bad as he was. Jake Blunt aimed at that outcome of his favour. He had but one idea of greatness, and that was to be great in villainy, to be successful in a war against honest men.

Probably, if Sam had yielded himself up to his teaching, he would have been fond and proud of him, as a father is when he has a son who walks in his shoes with credit. But that was outside the point to Sam, who would have died rather than have joined him in his unlawful pursuits. Physically and morally, the man was loathsome in his sight, but withal Sam had a grateful disposition, and he would gladly have made Jake Blunt some return for the one good thing he had done for him.

That was a combatant feeling against repulsion in Sam, as he observed the glances of the horse-thief. Jake Blunt was making no demand upon him. Seemingly he was asking for no return for having fed a starving boy. What he wanted was, possibly, a word or a glance of sympathy from Sam, who could give him neither.

When the two prisoners were put into the harness room, Mrs. Brown came and looked to the wound of Silva de Gama. Accidents often happen among distant settlers and their women-folk act as doctors or surgeons in minor cases. The Portuguese uttered no thanks for her kindly care, and she asked for none. He sat on a heap of straw, sullenly looking away from her, wincing if he were hurt by some accidental touch of her hand, but otherwise showing no sign that he was at all affected.

When she had finished her task, it was deemed necessary to bind the Portuguese with his able arm to his side, and his legs together. Jake Blunt was also secured in such a way that he could not move without assistance. Finally Jerry and Turner were appointed to keep guard over them.

Jack brought in some food and the prisoners were fed. They ate ravenously, and when they had had their fill, Jake Blunt asked if he could see Sam for a few moments. Jack said he would take a message to him and departed.

Sam presently appeared, halting in the doorway. It had cost him an effort to respond to Jake Blunt's wish and he intended the interview to be brief.

"What do you want with me?" he inquired.

"Not much," replied Jake Blunt, "only a word or two, if them men will leave us together a bit."

"You can go outside," said Sam to Jerry and Turner. "I have no fear of either of them."

"We'll be within call," said Jerry as he went out.

Sam closed the door and stood with his back to it, ignoring Jake Blunt's whisper for him "to come a bit nearer."

"The door is thick," he said, "nobody outside can hear what you say. Say what you have to say and get it over."

"I jest wanted to let you know wut I thinks of ingratitood," said Jake Blunt; "it's a thing as brings misfortin' on them as practises it. I saved yer life and yer jines a party to take mine. It would hev been kinder if ye'd kep' out of it. One day you will hev to pay fer it."

"I would gladly do anything short of helping you to get away," said Sam. "If you had left your wicked life and taken me away from the gang, I would have worked for you, in an honest way, and there is plenty of work to do in this land. Believe me, I was grateful to you. If I cannot be anything more to you than I am, it was your own fault."

"If you had wrung his neck when it shall be we first see him, you may not be here," said Silva de Gama; "it vas for him to betray us."

"It is not true," said Sam. "While I was with you, you had an enemy who killed the Italian. It was known

what you were, and preparations were being made to bring you all to justice. Jake Blunt, tell me what I can do for you, and if it is right I will do it."

"Give me a life for a life," said Blunt quickly, "cut these derved ropes and let me hev a chance of gettin' away."

Sam shook his head.

"Not for worlds," he said.

"Curse him and let him go," said Silva de Gama.

"He's right," said Jake Blunt after a pause, "though I didn't see it till now. If he wasn't sound, and did anything to get us off, he would be a wrong 'un. Don't linger, lad. I got it inter my hed all of a suddint that you might help me, for I knowed you had feelin', but it can't be. You're welcome to all I did fer yer. It wasn't much, and I don't know that goodness was at the bottom of it. Be easy. Don't worry about ingratitude. You owe more to others than you do to me."

"It shall be for you to turn soft," said Silva de Gama derisively. "Poor Jake Blunt, vunce so bold. It shall be for you to veep. Sam, you have handkerchiefs. Vipe his eyes."

Sam wished to cut the interview short. No good would come of it that he could see.

"Good night and good-bye," he said, as he opened the door and went out. The Portuguese burst into shrill laughter.

"Oh, ze good Jake Blunt," he cried. "It shall be for him to re-e-form. To re-e-epair his vays. To preach. Ha, ha! I am amuse."

There had been no tears in Blunt's eyes. He now looked up and fixed them on the jeering Portuguese.

"If my hand was loose," he said, "I'd stop yer grinnin', yer monkey-man."

Silva de Gama spat at him and hurled epithets at Jake Blunt's head, to the dire exasperation of the big fellow.

He was roused to anger to such a pitch that he was suddenly endowed with the strength of a madman, and with a tremendous effort he burst his bonds.

A terrific scream, so wild and piercing to the ear that it haunted them for days afterwards, startled Jerry and Turner, who were leisurely returning to the post by the prisoners. They rushed to the door and opened it to behold a sight they were never likely to forget.

Jake Blunt was holding the Portuguese aloft, as if about to hurl him to the floor, but changing his mind he cast the screaming wretch at the men, both of whom were knocked down. Silva de Gama lay on the threshold of the harness room, gasping for breath. Jake Blunt bestowed on him a violent kick, and, dashing through the stable, passed out and fled away.

Jerry was the first to rise and go in pursuit of him, but the night was so dark that he could see nothing a few yards away from the stable door, and he was obliged to be content with firing his rifle haphazard, with the very remote chance of shooting the fugitive. That brought out the men and youths from the homestead, eager to learn what had happened.

"He's gorn!" yelled Jerry frantically; "the wust of the gang, Jake Blunt."

"How wus it yer let him go?" inquired Jim Brown tartly.

"I'll tell yer presently," replied Jerry. "There's the Portuguese. Let's make sure of him."

Very little care would do that. Silva de Gama, still bound, was groaning and rolling his eyes about in a most fearful manner. He had no speech left in him, and when they lifted him up to move him back to the harness room, he screamed so wildly that they were glad to lay him down again.

"He's bad, uncommon bad," said Jim Brown; "seems to me that he's got more broken bones—ribs, most likely."

"He's dyin'," said Jerry. "I wunst saw a man who'd been squeezed between a engine and a thresher, and his face took the colour you see there."

Silva de Gama's face had assumed a leaden hue, and his piercing cries soon subsided down to faint moans. His eyes were turned upward and fixed. Jerry was right. His last moments had come.

Nothing could be done for him. When spoken to, he did not seem to hear what was said to him. Jack was sent back to the homestead to fetch brandy, kept for cases of sickness, and when he returned with a little of it in a tumbler, all was over.

"I don't like to say hard things of the livin', much less of the dead," said Jim Brown, "but I feel called on to say that he died as he lived, by vi'lence."

Leaving his men to lay out the dead decently, until the morrow, the worthy farmer, with the youths, returned to the homestead to spend the rest of the evening quietly, with the one disturbing thought, that Jake Blunt, the leader and most dangerous member of the gang, was still abroad.

CHAPTER XXV.

MOKE'S RESTORATION.

ALL that could be done with the lifeless body of Silva de Gama was to convey it to an unfrequented spot near the wood, bury it beneath the snow, and take such steps as would secure it from the attack of prowling wolves. Limbs were cut off the trees and piled above it with a careful arrangement that promised to defy the efforts of wild creatures to remove or disorder them. When that was done, the men who had done the work, went back, silently communing with themselves.

No harsh comment on the dead man, or his departed associates, was spoken that day. He had paid the penalty of his criminal living with his life, and all the rigour of the law could have obtained no more from him.

But Jake Blunt was still free. That was a sore point with them, and with the other settlers who were enlightened on the subject. The police, when they arrived at Kellson's to take the prisoners away, were bitterly disappointed. Naturally they regarded matters in a professional light.

"While Blunt is at liberty," they said, "we shall never be free of a gang of scoundrels. He's a sort of magnet to wasters and thieves of every description. They are drawn to him like so many needles. Shoot him on sight, for goodness' sake, the next time you come across him."

"But surely he will get fixed up now and die in the wood," said Jim Brown.

The police were doubtful, one of them remarking that Blunt was a strong man, who could endure more than any

two men they knew of. He was cunning and resourceful too, and more would be heard of him.

Of Moke the police brought some news. He was at Lumsden, doing such work as he was able to do, when he could get it, and living quietly and peaceably alone, in a small wooden hut, on the outskirts of the town.

"Tell him," said Jim Brown, "that whenever he likes to come to Kellson's I shall be glad to see him."

"No use," replied one of the officers, "he won't come, I am sure, yet awhile, anyway. He does his work, saying no more than he is compelled to do by way of question or answer to living creature. He goes nowhere, talks to nobody, and looks like a man who is always brooding over something."

"Poor chap!" said Jim Brown, and changed the subject.

Once more the days went by and nothing happened to disturb the evenness of the settlers' lives. Jake Blunt soon ceased to be talked about, or much thought of. In the spring, Jack intended to take up his land, and Charlie and Sam were going to be his helpers for a time. One of the outlying young settlers was returning to the old country, he being one of the few who are not steadfast in their ambitions or sufficiently persevering to make good settlers. He wanted to be relieved of his land without any fuss with the authorities, and he asked no more than a few pounds for his homestead.

"He's unfort'net to have well-to-do relations," said Jim Brown, "and he's not ashamed to go back to 'em. He'll be well out of the country. We don't want his breed here."

Business matters were opened and Jack met the dissatisfied farmer at Danby's homestead, where everything was settled but the formal proceedings of transfer, neither of the parties having any difficulties to advance.

Guy Westerton was the disposer's name. He was about twenty-five years of age, good looking and educated,

naturally built for work, but unfavourably possessed of what Danby termed "a constitutional objection to doing more than he could help."

He was affable and agreeable, and the only objection taken to him was his contemptuous manner of speaking of a settler's life.

"It's drudgery," he said, "there is nothing in it."

"Empires are built up by drudgery," remarked Danby, and Jack cordially agreed with him.

The affair was practically concluded, and Guy Westerton drove away in an expensive sleigh, which was not the product of his earnings. Jack returned to Kellson's on snowshoes, elated and happy at the prospect of his being a landowner. He felt as if he had really entered on the life he had aimed at, and wrote a long letter home that night, describing much that has been here set down and largely dwelling on the prospects of his future.

A month went by and then there came news of the capture of Jake Blunt at Lumsden, where he had been taken red-handed in an attempt to rob and possibly to murder, one of the inhabitants, who was going home late at night. The story of his capture was printed in a local paper and a copy was sent on to Kellson's. It arrived in the morning when all hands were busy, and it was laid aside for full enjoyment in the evening, when Jack could read the interesting items aloud.

We, who get our paper every morning and are kept well-posted up with the more important doings of the world, can only imagine what joy a paper, filled with news, is to those who live on the lone farms of the West. Leisure time is devoted to reading every word, including the advertisements. Ordinary news is of surpassing interest.

Tea disposed of, the somewhat numerous household gathered round the fire, and Jack, occupying a middle seat, unfolded the paper, and immediately the column containing the story of Jake Blunt's capture, caught his eye.

The reporter and editor had made the most of it. There was a long account of the horse-thief's career, largely confined to facts, but some "items of interest" undoubtedly were evolved out of the writer's inner consciousness. Jack left that part of the report for final reading, and began at the point describing the capture.

"Last evening when the Indian, Moke, was returning home from work, he caught sight of a big man slouching into the town. The form of the man was familiar to him, and knowing he was a bad character, he went on the fellow's trail, with the craft and stealthiness of his forefathers, instinctive, because he had not dwelt among his people since his childhood."

As Jack paused for a moment amazement was depicted on the faces of most of the listeners, on that of Jim Brown especially. Bossy assumed a critical air, as if he were about to listen to a story that would have to be closely scanned, weighed, and if found wrong in the balance, to be promptly relegated to the region of untruthful things. Jerry gruffly asked him if he felt unwell, and was told to mind his own business.

"Moke's bein' ther is suspicious," said Bossy. "Sich cove-incidences don't happen out of story books. You may depend that he and Blunt had chummed up, and Moke thought it better for himself to give the tother away."

A look from Jim Brown put an end to his premature comments, and Jack was permitted to read the report to the end without further interruption. It seemed that, in the town, Jake Blunt temporarily eluded Moke, but he was still near enough to him when he attempted to commit the crime he was charged with, to hear the assailed man cry for help. Moke rushed to the rescue, and with a blow dealt with a stick, stretched Jake Blunt senseless. The police were soon on the spot and Blunt was taken to prison.

"Bravo, Moke!" cried Jim Brown. "You did that job well."

"I don't see why he used a stick," said Bossy. "It ought to ha' been a different weppin, onless he didn't want to kill Blunt. He's got credit for doin' a mighty smart thing, but you mark my words, Blunt will escape from limbo."

"What makes you think that?" asked Jim Brown.

"Well, I reckon that Moke will get the reward offered for Blunt, and that will satisfy him," said Bossy. "He'll be off from Lumsden with the money, and the lorse of sich a witness——"

"Why, you chucklehead," interposed Jerry, "Blunt's got fifty charges agin him and Moke's affair one of the least. I can't see wut yer drivin' at."

"I'm a drivin' at common sinse," replied Bossy.

"And driven agin it and upsettin' it," said Jerry. "I can see wut you aim at. It's at the 'ole thing bein' a put-up job. You're a lunatic."

"Well, I niver thowt much of Moke," said Bossy. "Wut are you boys a-laughin' at?"

"You've no case, Bossy," said Jack, "better be quiet."

"It's usin' a bit o' stick that shows up the job," insisted Bossy. "There's want of genuineness about it, a hypocrisy that don't please me. I admit that Moke did for one of that hoss lot, but why did he, all through, let Jake Blunt alone, and how comes it both was in Lumsden, and why should he——"

The door opened and the current of cold air that rushed in caused every eye to be turned in that direction. The door closed and Moke stood before them.

Not the Moke of old, in ragged attire, but Moke decently dressed in the strong, serviceable clothing of a workman. But for his Indian face, nobody would have known him, and Bossy was doubtful of his identity.

"Friend, brother," said Moke as he held out his hand to Jim Brown.

It was fervently grasped and Moke was drawn to the fire and took a seat in the farmer's own chair.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEN THE SPRING CAME.

FROST was gone and the snow had melted away. Jack was on his farm with his two chums working at the plough, laying up the softened soil in ridges. It was hard work, and two of the toilers were complete novices at it. Jim Brown had spared Jerry for a few days to assist Jack in teaching them, and no severe critics were about to point out uneven furrows, here and there. Moreover, only half the land was to be tilled that year. The rest was to be used as grazing ground for a few cattle the settlers had contributed to give Jack a start in life.

The gift was, in part, a recognition of his worth as a promising young settler, and in part as a reward for his plucky assistance in dealing with the horse-stealing gang.

It was a thing of the past, for Jake Blunt had been tried and hanged at Regina for crimes he had committed before he appeared in the final scene of his nefarious proceedings.

Jake Blunt died as he lived, a hard unrepentant man. No word of regret for his misdeeds passed his lips, and the only thing he regretted was his mistake in going to such an unprofitable place as the forest in the character of a lumberer.

"It was sneaking and playing the game low down," he said, "but it was de Gama's idea and I fell in with it. He was a man who allus preferred doing a thing by cunning, instead of bein' open and manly. He wasn't zackly a coward, but he shirked fightin' when he could, bein' so precious careful of his skin."

The Danbys think a lot of Jack, and when there is time for visiting, Ralph and his father frequently ride over to see him. One day Ralph asked him if he had named his farm, which the previous owner had been too indifferent to do. Jack did not answer for a moment.

"I was thinking of calling it Maryland," he said quietly.

Mr. Danby turned aside with a smile on his lips, but Ralph suspected nothing, and merely said that he thought it was a pretty name. On returning home he told Mary about it, and was surprised to see the deep flush that suffused her pleasant face.

"Hello!" he said, "I suppose you think Jack has named his homestead after you?"

"Perhaps he has," replied Mary, "but how should I know? He never said anything about it to me."

"Jack is very young," remarked Mrs. Danby; "there's time enough for him to hold off for a year or two before he says why he gave that name to his place."

"Charlie sent his kind regards to you, Mary," said Ralph. "He's a nice young fellow."

"I like him," said Mary, "and hope I shall always do so."

"But you like Jack better," persisted Ralph.

"I wish you would not bother me with stupid suggestions," said Mary, flushing deeper than before, as she hastened out of the room.

"What have I said to make Mary angry?" inquired Ralph amazed.

"The hens have been cackling all day," said Mrs. Danby. "Go and collect the eggs, Ralph. One of the early layers is already getting broody."

Ralph went off to collect the eggs, and Mrs. Danby sat thinking a while of something that evidently pleased her.

"Nothing would delight me more," she murmured, as she resumed her household duties; "he will make her one of the best of husbands—by-and-by."

Jack, in his quiet way, kept his own counsel until the winter came again, and the usual evening visiting was resumed. Big parties gathered together at White Lees and Kellson's, and it was at one of them that Jack spoke to Mary of what had been in his heart for some time.

"I may seem to be in a hurry," he said, "but I don't want anyone else to come along and take you."

"I would have waited for you, Jack," whispered Mary, "as long as you pleased."

Mrs. Danby and her husband, when spoken to, approved, and so did Ralph when he had got over his first feeling of astonishment. There had never been any love-making going on, as far as he had seen, and he could not understand it. Charlie, when he was enlightened, said he was glad. He admitted he had thought a little bit of Mary himself, and had endeavoured to show it—without satisfactory results.

"I told her one day," he said with comic lugubriousness, "that I was fond of her, and she said I was not to be foolish, and that settled me. I have quite got over the shock she gave me. Well, Sam and I will take up our land in the autumn and my farm will keep my mind occupied. There are other girls about, and if none around here will have me I must import a wife from England. The old country has lots of girls to spare, and a sensible one would prefer life out here. We haven't any theatres or ordinary places of amusement, but we have a bracing air that makes us feel as if life is indeed worth living. The work we do is a joy to us, and our quiet amusement gives us all the relaxation we need. Our life isn't mere existence."

"How the women and girls used to chatter about dress and other idle nonsense in Meadhill," said Sam, "and men, too, possibly. Think of the pale-faced boys, earning poor pay, smoking cigarettes and lounging idly about, if doing nothing worse, and most of them living at home, at the expense of their parents. I can't boast of having

been better than they were and are, nor of what I have done here and must have continued doing, till the end, but for you, Jack——”

“Enough of that,” said Jack good-humouredly as he rose from his chair. “It is a fine day and a few partridges will be acceptable as a change of food. I have a letter to write home—it won’t take me long, and then we will go out and look for them.”

A letter to friends at home! He has written many, and when he is fairly settled in his home one of his brothers is coming out to him. In this way the Old Country helps to people the New, and form another nation—the offspring of our sea-girt isle.

THE END.



