

Fur Pirates

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CHAPTER I. THE LAND OF ROMANCE.

IF it were not for Peggy I should not write this story at all. Peggy is my niece, and I am very fond of her and she knows it. So when she got the idea in her glossy young head we both knew very well what would happen, although I objected that there was no woman in the story except that other Peggy who, being my sister, did not count, and the klotchman Lucille, who was most certainly not a heroine. But Peggy overrode me grandly by saying she was tired of wilderness heroines who crop up where no white man would think of taking a woman. There was something in that.

But I protested further that though I had told the yarn often enough it was quite a different matter to write it.

"Bosh!" said Peggy. "Write it just the way you tell it."

So I was up against the iron there, too. I do not know just how to make a proper literary start; but, as with most other work, perhaps the main thing is to get started somehow.

My name is Robert Cory. I do not remember my mother. My father, who

taught history in a college which is not necessary to name, died when I was a little shaver, and when his friends came to dig into his affairs they found that he had very little money and no insurance and only one relative on earth so far as they could ascertain, a brother who lived in the wilderness that fringed the Carcajou. And so my sister Peggy and I, two forlorn little waifs, were packed off to him, and no doubt everybody was glad to be rid of us.

Now our Uncle Fred, though college bred like my father, had been a rolling stone. But finally he had taken up land on the Carcajou, in the belief that it would some day be valuable, and of course, as everybody knows now, he was right. But at that time he was land poor. He had several thousand acres of farm and timber lands on which he was hard pressed to make even the small payments required by the government, but often he had not enough money to buy flour.

He worked a scant thirty acres with the help of one man, a slow-moving, lanky, one-eyed Scandinavian named Gus Swanson. This gave him subsistence. And for more he waited till the march of settlement west and north should strike him; and the slow years never shook his faith, which has since been amply justified.

Peggy was his favorite, and from the first she could twist him around her finger, just as the other Peggy now twists me. and to me he was more like an elder brother than an uncle.

And so, you see, as a boy my life was bounded by the Carcajou. I had only faint recollections of anything different. Its waters and bordering forests made up my world, with which I was very well content. In summer, when old enough, I helped in the garden and fields, and fished and gathered wild berries in season for Peggy to do down against the winter. And in winter I fished through the ice, and set my small line of snares and traps for rabbit and muskrat and mink and fox; and even for the great, silver-gray, soft-footed, tuft-eared lynx.

And yet it must not be supposed that Peggy and I grew up like young savages. We had our schoolbooks and our regular hours for study, and our uncle taught us, having been no doubt at much pains to brush up his rudiments.

Close neighbors, in those early days, were few. Here and there a hopeful pioneer had settled and built himself a habitation, but in the main the land lay as in the beginning. We had our supplies from Neepaw, a struggling border outpost three days up the Carcajou by canoe, and twice that by a bad pack trail. And a hundred miles to the north was Carcajou House, a post of the fur company, to me in the Land of Romance.

Of Indians we saw plenty, Crees and Ojibways and Chippewyans mostly, who used the river by canoe in summer and by dog and snowshoe in winter. They were dirty, but friendly, and most of them were honest; at any rate, they never stole from us.

After a while, as settlement spread

upward from the south, there were more people passing on the river. Winter and summer they drifted up and down—hard, gaunt men for the most part, with seldom a woman or child—prospectors, trappers, lumberjacks, surveyors—the light foam of humanity that ever tips and heralds the advancing wave of settlement in the new lands.

Many of them, seeing a house and clearing where nothing but brush and beaver meadow should have been—and hearing the brave challenge of a rooster and the busy cackle of hens—halted and broke their journey upon us. Always they were ravenous for eggs, which Peggy sold at wonderful prices. In the main they were quiet and civil, and in the presence of Peggy, when she was almost a woman, abashed and tongue-tied, a thing which is so of most men whose companionship is principally masculine. To that rule, however, one day there was a notable exception.

On this day my uncle and Gus were absent. About noon two men landed from a canoe and came up to the house, and though they were hard-looking customers, I asked them to eat with us, following my uncle's custom. One of them, the younger of the two, was a big, black-haired fellow, not bad looking in a rakish sort of way, and as Peggy passed close beside him setting the table he threw his arm around her, drew her to him, and kissed her.

She struck him in the face, and as I jumped for my rifle, which stood in the corner, the other man caught me by the collar. I do not know what would have happened, except that if I had got my gun I would certainly have shot the fellow who had kissed Peg. Rut at the moment when I was kicking my man's

shins, and, I am afraid, calling him names which I had no business to know, and while Peg was thrusting the other fellow back and striking at him with all her strength, there came an unexpected interruption.

"What's up here?" said a voice from the door.

At that Peg's assailant let her go very suddenly, and I twisted loose from the grip that held me. Two strangers stood in the doorway. One was a short, small, oldish man with a short, gray beard and very blue, childlike eyes. The other was a man of about thirty, I should think, with a lean, hard face and red hair. His eyes, too, were blue, but there was nothing childlike in their expression. They put me in mind of fresh-cut ice, and his red brows were drawn down over them and his chin thrust out.

"He kissed Peg!" I cried.

"So that's it," said the red-haired man. "Nootka Charlie and Siwash George! Squaw men! Pah!" He made a face of disgust. "That stuff may go with the klotchmen, Nootka, but not with white girls—not while I'm around. Don't make no move for a gun now. What'll we do with'm, Ike?"

"Well," said he of the childlike eyes, "you know I've allus said it'd come to a show-down one of these days." "Let her come, then," said the black-haired man. "I dunno what you're talkin' about. Me and George never lifted that winter cache of yours, if that's what's stickin' in your crop." "Never mind about the cache, Nootka," the red-haired man returned. "We can settle that—and some other things—later. But just now I'm goin' to give you a father of a lickin'—or you'll give me one. Come outside!" They fought down by the landing, and in the end

Nootka Charlie took a bad trimming. His partner helped him into their canoe, and paddled off, while the red-haired man grinned after them from the bank. He himself was badly battered, but very cheerful. He washed himself in the river, and afterward came up to the house and eat the meal Peggy had prepared. His name, he told us, was Dinny Pack, and his partner's was Ike Toft. Peg made a fuss over his bruises, and I think that stampeded him, for as soon as the meal was over he said they must be going, and hurried away from her thanks.

Shortly after this episode, which I lived over and over, having conceived a vast admiration for red-haired Dinny Pack, we had two new neighbors who built a cabin on the river some four miles away. These were partners, named Tom Ballou and Louis Beef. Of course the latter's name was really "Leboeuf," but nobody called him that. He was a tremendously thickset man, but not fat. His chest arched out like the belly of a wind-hardened sail, and it was covered with a veritable undergrowth of black hair, plainly visible, for he wore his shirt open save in the coldest weather. He had a big head covered with curling black hair like the front of a bull, and big, fierce, terrifying, black eyes. He must have been nearly fifty years old, but in spite of that and his fierce eyes he was as playful and mischievous as a bear cub. Also he was very strong and active.

Tom Ballou was some years older than Louis Beef—a tall man with a great, hooky nose and a gray beard which reached nearly to his waist. He reminded me of the pictures of the old prophets in our big Bible; only he chewed tobacco, which rather spoiled the likeness.

The land they took up was very

good, but they made scarcely any attempt to cultivate it, and were often absent for months at a time, prospecting or trapping, or guiding some outfit. We got to be very good friends. Sometimes I stayed at their shack overnight, listening to Louis Beef spin yarns in his queer patois—tales of the great wastes of the Arctic Sea, of the barrens where the musk ox ranged, of mountain ranges and unknown streams where the gold lay thick in the sands, and of the hard men who invaded these fastnesses.

One fall there came to Ballou and Louis an Eastern sportsman named Fothergill, who brought with him a vast outfit of weapons and complicated and burdensome camping devices. He was a tall, stout, red-faced man with prominent blue eyes and a loud voice. Of all things he desired to be considered—as he considered himself—a great hunter and an expert woodsman, and Tom and Louis indulged him in this belief.

“But dat Foddergeel,” said Louis to me, “he's more troub' in de woods dan leetle baby. For why? For because baby can't walk, an' so you jus' pack heem on your back an' you know where he be. But dat Foddergeel, he's turn round once an' he's lost!”

But Mr. Fothergill came for two seasons, and enjoyed himself hugely, never suspecting that he was considered a joke. He had plenty of money, and paid them liberally. And I thought him very generous, for, having a rifle of the same caliber as mine, he gave me his entire stock of ammunition for it, a most precious gift to a boy accustomed to pay for his cartridges with skins of small value.

Such, then, were our early friends and surroundings, which you may

perhaps think very commonplace and circumscribed ; and you may think I have dwelt upon them unduly. But if I have done so, it is because if I am to tell this story at all clearly I must throw off the burden of the intervening years and see men and things as I saw them then; so that, perhaps, I may make others see them clearly, too.

CHAPTER II. BALLOU'S TILLIKUM.

On a certain spring morning, when I was rising eighteen years of age and grown into a strong, dour, silent lad given to solitary rambles and daydreams which I kept entirely to myself, I rose before the light and went out to get a deer. For at that time we observed no close season, killing as we needed meat; but we killed only bucks at that season, and of them no more than sufficed.

I slid, silent-footed, through the dawn fogs which rolled along the river bottoms, and the night dews on the brush soaked me to the hide. That I did not mind at all, being used to it; but the sun rose and gathered up the mists, and I saw no deer. Indeed, it was past noon when I killed a small buck. And when I came to look around, I found myself about seven miles from home and but a couple from Ballou's. Therefore I decided that instead of packing part of the meat home I would take the whole carcass to Ballou's, and get him or Louis to paddle me back, in return for which I would, of course, give them a hind quarter if they could use it.

But when I arrived at their cabin, very hot from the weight of the buck and the roughness of the going, and being

pestered by flies as well, brought by the scent of the blood, to my disgust I found no one at home.

I dumped my load on the bank beside their landing and lay down and drank from the river, and then I peeled off and dived in. Afterward I sat on the bank, kicking my heels, uncertain whether to wait or to quarter up the buck and pack what I could overland. Finally I got out my knife, and, as I did so, a canoe came down the river, but its occupant was neither Louis nor Tom.

I did not know him. He was an old man, lean and sinewy, bald save for a fringe of hair back of his ears, with a weather-beaten face, a long neck wrinkled like a turkey's, and small gray eyes very cold and steady. His canoe held a scanty outfit, but I saw a gold pan, and judged him a prospector. He drew in to the landing and caught a stake of it, while he glanced from me to the buck.

"How's chances to git some meat?" he asked, in a high, nasal voice. "Give ye a dollar for a ham."

"All right," I said. "I'll skin it out for you,"

He put his weather-beaten craft ashore and rose stiffly, a hand on the small of his back, and he swore as if it gave him pain. I observed that he wore a gun belt, and the butt of a heavy revolver stuck out from a worn holster, and this rather surprised me, for with us belt guns were not common, though, of course, most men traveled with rifles as a means of getting meat. He stretched himself on the grass and filled an ancient, charred pipe.

"I'd give a whole lot if I was as soople in the back as you he, young feller," he said, as he watched me.

"What's the matter with your

back?" I asked.

"Pretty close to seventy years," he answered, with a wry grin. "Them, mostly, and a few kidneys and rheumatiz and things. Sho! What's the use of tellin' a kid like you? Your folks live here?"

"No; you passed my uncle's place about five miles back."

"Pretty gal there?"

"My sister."

"Well, she's good people," he declared. "Staked me to a mess of early greens and some spuds. Wouldn't take nothin' for it. Don't run in the family, though."

"I'd have given you a chunk of meat," I retorted, "but you asked for a ham. A ham's worth a dollar. If you think it isn't, you don't need to take it."

He chuckled. "If it wasn't I wouldn't give it. Who lives here, anyway?"

I told him, and he straightened up with a smothered oath as his stiff hack caught him. "Tom Ballou!" he cried, staring. "Is he a big, skookum, brown-haired cuss with a hooked nose and a square chin?" I told him that Ballou's hair was gray, and I didn't know what his chin looked like because he wore a beard. But he had a big nose and a trick of narrowing his eyes when he was in earnest about anything.

"It's him," he exclaimed, "sure as a gun sight! Course he'd be gray—I'd forgot that. And this here Louis Beef—is he gray, too?"

"Not a bit. His hair is black and curly."

"Head like a bull and chest like a bar'l?"

"That's Louis," I agreed.

"Them Frenchmen don't git gray 'count of so much grease in their wool,"

he said. "Nor bald. I never see a bald peajammer yet. Gosh! And to think of runnin' up on Tom and French Louis here! Where be they?"

But I could not tell him that.

"I'll wait," he announced, "if it takes a week." And he threw his outfit ashore, drew up his canoe, and turned it over. "Now," he said, "we'll go up to the shack and cook us some meat.

Tom an' Louis here! Well, blight me standing! Who'd have thought it?"

"You know them?" I said.

"Well, some! We're old tillikums. Why, we was spreadin' our blankets together before you was born." And when we went to the cabin, he looked around. "Nice shack they got. Nice and comfortable. Not so durn much, maybe, but more'n most of us old-timers can show. Most of us ain't got nothin'. What we got we blowed. How's Tom fixed for money? Pretty strong?"

I didn't know anything about that, and said so. And then he asked me how long they had been living there and where they came from before that, and my own name.

"My name's Hayes," he informed me — "Jack Hayes. S'posin' you rustle some kindlin's, Bob. You're several years younger'n I be."

When I came in with the kindlings, he was nosing about in Ballou's belongings. I suppose my face expressed surprise and disapproval. But Hayes explained that he was looking for a needle to take a sliver from under his nail. I found one for him, and he went to the door for better light and picked the sliver out while I was busy with the stove. While I cooked and while we ate he asked continual questions about Tom and Louis. And afterward he filled his

pipe again and lay on the bunk while I washed up, which I did with great care, putting each thing back where I had found it, as was the custom.

Meanwhile, a stiff wind had sprung up, and the sky had clouded heavily. Looking out, I saw Ballou and Louis fighting their way up to the landing against wind and current. Evidently it was hard work, for both bent to it with snapping, driving strokes; but nevertheless the canoe would not keep way, checking the moment the paddles left the water. I called Hayes, and he peered out at the rhythmically swaying figures.

"Sure, that's them," he said. "I wonder if they'll know me. They ain't seen me for years. I won't tell 'em who I ant for a while."

Ballou and Louis made the landing, took a look at Hayes' canoe, and came up to the house.

"Hello, Bob!" said Ballou, and nodded to Hayes.

"I've been sorter makin' myself to home," said the latter. "Been usin' your layout to cook me some muckamuck."

"Sure, that's right," said Ballou heartily, and yet with a puzzled note in his voice. He eyed Hayes for a moment, and the perplexity crept into his face. "Old-timer," he said, "do I know you?"

"Well, now you mention it, your face seems sort of familiar to me," Hayes returned. "We might have met some place." He chuckled to himself. "Now whereabouts do you s'pose it might be?"

Ballou's eyes narrowed as he studied the other intently, but he shook his head. Hayes picked up his hat and put it on.

"Does that help any?" he said.

"Jackstraws!" cried Ballou.

"Well, by gar!" exclaimed Louis Beef.

"Surest thing you know, boys!" chuckled old Hayes. "Jackstraws! Lordy, I ain't heard that name for so long I'd almost forgot it. Well, ain't you hyas yutl tumtum to see me again?"

If they were glad of heart they did not say so.

"Mo' gee!" cried Louis, "I'll t'ink for sure you'll be dead. How you'll stand off le diable so long, hey?"

Hayes grinned. "I'm a hard old bird, Louis."

Louis cooked more venison, and he and Tom ate, keeping up a running fire of conversation with Hayes, chiefly concerning men and happenings quite strange to me.

Meanwhile the wind had increased to a gale, and waves crisped the river.

It began to rain, in driven sheets which beat and slatted on the widow. To get home by canoe was out of the question, and to go by the bush was decidedly unpleasant.

"You'd better stay the night," said Ballou. "Your folks will know where you are."

And so I remained. Darkness came, and we gathered around the stove, for the night was raw and chill. The men's talk continued, winnowing the years since they had met.

"Got any whisky?" Hayes asked presently.

To my surprise—for I had never seen him drink—Ballou, after a moment's hesitation, produced a demijohn from a cupboard. Hayes sniffed the neck with approval.

"Rum!" he decided. "Good hooch. It lays over rye an' Scotch an' such soft

stuff. 'S a ho, Tom! The old boys and the old days!"

They had a drink, and another. The smoke of their pipes filled the room. I grew sleepy and nodded by the fire.

"Better turn in," said Ballou. "Needn't wait for us. Take the new bunk in there."

He nodded toward the other room of the cabin, and, very glad to accept his suggestion, I kicked off my moccasins, rolled up in a blanket, and was asleep as quickly as a tired puppy. How long I slept I do not know, but when I woke, some time in the night, they were still talking, and their voices were loud. There was no door between us, and I could hear plainly.

I suppose the liquor Hayes had drunk made him quarrelsome. At any rate, at some remark of Louis', he seemed to lose his temper. And he cursed the Frenchman bitterly in a voice which heightened and shook in a sudden gust of rage. Out of the sudden silence that followed came Louis' voice, quite stripped of its jeering tone:

"Go easy, Jackstraws! I don't let no man call me dose t'ing! You say somet'ing more, now, an' for sure I wring your ol' neck!"

"I guess not," Hayes returned grimly. "You won't wring nobody's neck, you " And he added a phrase quite unprintable.

Came a bellow from Louis, the crash of an overturned chair, and the report of a pistol shot, shattering in that confined little space. I leaped from my bunk to the doorway.

Louis had Hayes by the throat with his right hand, while with his left he held Hayes' right, which held a smoking six-shooter, toward the roof. For a

moment they seemed to stand motionless, statuesque, in the white drift of the powder smoke which eddied in the lamplight, for this was in the days before smokeless powder had much favor. I knew that Louis, with his tremendous strength, could break Hayes in pieces. But, as I looked, Ballou sprang in, twisted away the gun, and cursed them both for a couple of old fools. He saw me standing in the door, and scowled blackly, but only for a moment.

"Woke you up, did they, Bob? Well, there'll be no more of it. We're all going to bed."

His eyes challenged contradiction. To my surprise, the two combatants made no objection. They grinned sardonically at each other.

"Well, I guess I was too fast with my tongue and too slow with my gun," said Hayes. "In the old days you wouldn't have got your hands on me."

"Mebbe I'm leetle faster myself when I'm yo'nger," Louis returned. "I guess we have 'noder leetle drink, an' hit dose blanket."

Ballou followed me to my bunk, and, sitting down, began to unlace his moccasins.

"I'm sorry this happened when you were here. Bob," said he. "They got a jolt or so too much. However, they're good friends now. Still I wouldn't want any one else to know about it."

"I won't say anything," I promised. "I don't talk much."

"I know you don't. That's one thing I like about you. You've got better judgment than a lot of men. I s'pose it was the shot woke you up?"

"Yes. I guess so," I answered, which was not quite true, but eminently discreet; and, anyway, I had no idea what

they had been talking about. He nodded.

"Well, don't say nothing about it. If it got around, your uncle might not like your comin' here, and I wouldn't blame him, though nothin' like this is goin' to happen again. And then I was thinkin' that this fall you might come along with us on a hunt, and if he knew of this racket he might put his foot down on that."

Which made my silence absolutely sure, for a hunting trip in the hills had been my dream for years, and I would not imperil its realization. And as for telling Peggy, though she was as a rule my confidante, naturally there must be many things in a man's life of which he does not speak to his womenkind.

CHAPTER III. WHAT THE RIVER BROUGHT.

That spring I was very busy. For, as it happened, Uncle Fred had sprained his ankle, and Gus Swanson's rheumatism laid him up for a week at a stretch, and so the bulk of the work fell on me.

There was the garden to be planted and the grain to be sown and a patch of winter clearing to be broken and fenced, and a score of odd jobs done. And so I was hard at it from dawn to dusk; and, though I was strong beyond my years, I would nod over my supper and fall into a dead sleep immediately afterward.

Though I worked cheerfully enough, in my heart I loathed the labor. And while I worked my thoughts were not of the tasks in hand, but of the fall and camp fires in the hills and mysterious, lonely waterways and still,

dark-fringed lakes where moose and caribou and deer drank in the dawn fogs and the cold dusks.

At last there came a time when the new fence stood, and the raw soil of the fresh clearing lay uppermost, and the wheat and oats sprouted green in the drills; and in our garden the peas shot out delicate tendrils, and the potatoes pushed upward sturdy stalks of dark green, and all flourished.

Then I had breathing space to employ as I saw fit, and my inclinations led me to the water front, where I drove fresh stakes and made a new log landing and painted our two canoes, and sometimes sat for half an hour idle, my eyes on the ospreys wheeling against the blue and the vivid, darting, chattering kingfishers, or watching the slow, brown current slip by.

Here Peggy joined me one quiet afternoon, and we sat talking of the future and wondering what it might hold for us.

Suddenly Peggy exclaimed:

"Look, Bob, there's a canoe!"

I looked up. A canoe had rounded the bend and was coining toward us. It held two men. The one in the stern was an Indian, a particularly worthless Cree whom we knew as Joe Fishbelly. The other man was white, and a stranger. He was not paddling, though a paddle rested athwart the canoe in front of him. He lay with his back against a roll of dunnage, and seemed satisfied to let the Indian do the work, which was, of course, quite proper, for no doubt he was paying for it, but looked lazy. As he saw us, he turned and spoke to the Cree, who swung the nose of the canoe in on our landing.

When they were close, I could see that the white man was young, and,

though big of frame, very pale and thin, which was the more noticeable because he was naturally of a dark complexion. His head was bare, and his black hair clipped close to the scalp. His cheek bones seemed ready to start through the skin, and his cheeks were fiat against his teeth, without any kindly padding. The angles of his jaw stood out prominently. Indeed his face, owing to his exceeding leanness, seemed all knobs and angles, and there were sad-colored hollows beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves put me in mind of some one's whom I knew, being full of a strange, whimsical, quizzical, quenchless deviltry, and yet steady and cool. And suddenly it came to me that in expression they were like Dinny Pack's, though his were blue and these were almost black.

The canoe slid alongside the landing, and its passenger straightened up from his recumbent position and bowed to Peggy.

"Good afternoon!" he said, smiling at us. The words were common enough, and yet there was something in his voice and manner which made us aware that he was not a man of the woods and rivers. "Can you tell me," he asked, "how far it is to Toni Ballou's? Man afraid of a paddle back there"—and he nodded back over his shoulder at Fishbelly—"says it's about twenty miles, as nearly as I can understand him, and that we can't make it to-day."

"He's a liar," I said, for I held Fishbelly in contempt, and did not care whether I hurt his feelings or not. "It's not more than five."

"I suspected something like that," said he. "Thank you. You hear that, my oxidized friend! I believe in my soul Ananias was a Cree!"

"They're not all like him. But there's nobody at Ballou's. They're away somewhere—gone prospecting, I think—and they won't be back for two or three weeks, and perhaps longer."

"The deuce they are!" he ejaculated ruefully, and rubbed his clipped scalp in comical perplexity. "I beg your pardon. But that puts me in a nice fix. Here, I'll come ashore for a minute, if you don't mind." He did so rather slowly, as though his legs were weak beneath him, and bowed once more to Peggy. "Before I tell you my troubles," said he, "permit me to introduce myself. My name is Dunleath, first name James, usually shortened down to a nonapostolic 'Jim.' I am a friend of Mr. Wallace Dent Fothergill, whom I think you know. I presume I am addressing Miss Cory and her brother, am I not?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'm Bob Cory, and this is my sister Peggy."

He bowed again, smiling, and Peggy smiled and I laughed without knowing why; but just, I suppose, because of the big, radiant friendliness of his smile and his eyes.

"So now I'll unload my troubles," he went on. "I was going to spend a month or so with Ballou, just loafing and camping anywhere. The medical sharps thought that would set me up again. Of course you can see that I'm slightly pulled down. In fact I'm far from being a strong dog yet. Nothing infectious, I assure you. I'm no lunker—merely a pneumonia-typhoid convalescent. Fothergill told me about this country, and it looked good to me. But with Ballou away things are complicated. Is there any one else I can get? Man afraid of his paddle is barred for obvious reasons. I want a white man for guide,

philosopher, and friend."

"I'm afraid there isn't any one," I replied.

"Tough luck!" he said gloomily. "I guess I'll have to go back. I wouldn't spend a month with this Indian on a bet." Suddenly he brightened. "I wonder now! Couldn't you arrange to come with me yourself? I'd make it worth your while, and I think we'd get along together all right."

"Oh, but Bob couldn't go!" Peggy exclaimed, putting in her oar unasked, as girls will.

"Why not?" I demanded. "The crop is all in. I'll ask uncle about it." "Good—with due apologies to you, Miss Peggy," said Dunleath. "It's a case with me. If I can steal your brother I'll do it."

"Well, he's really worth stealing," she laughed. "But he's my chum, and I don't want to lose him. Here is uncle now. You'd better ask him."

Uncle Fred came limping down the trail, and I think he liked Mr. Dunleath as we did. However, he would give him no answer as to me, but invited him to stay with us for a few days; an invitation which Mr. Dunleath accepted frankly, but with the proviso that he should live in his own tent so as not to incommode us. And so I helped him pitch his tent, and he got rid of Fishbelly, though the rascal overcharged him. And while he was settling himself in his new quarters, Peggy and I went back to our house together.

CHAPTER IV. DEAD MEN'S BONES.

From the first there was no doubt that I should be allowed to go with Mr. Dunleath. But he was not strong, and

Uncle Fred thought he should wait for a week at least. In that time I worked hard, so that I might go with a clear conscience. And meanwhile Uncle Fred and Peggy saw far more of our guest than I did. Indeed he and Peggy became great friends, and spent hours together reading and talking by the river, though for my part I could not see what he found to talk about to a girl so often and so long, and I told Peggy so.

"It's funny, isn't it?" she admitted humbly, but with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "But then he isn't well,

Bob, and you must make allowance for that"

"I s'pose that's it," I conceded, and I wondered what she found to laugh at.

Mr. Dunleath's convalescence was most confoundedly slow, I thought. I imagine Peggy had as much to do with retarding it as anything or anybody. For the first time I was forced to the realization that an otherwise sane man may prefer mooning about with a girl to the attractions of the woods and the river. At any rate, a fortnight elapsed before we made our start.

But one morning I routed him out of his blankets in the gray dawn, had his bed rolled and roped while he dressed, and loaded the canoe so that she trimmed to my liking; that is, well down in the stern and up in the bow, which is best under most circumstances. And I remember still the importance I felt when I picked up the steering paddle and shoved off, waving it jauntily at Peggy and Uncle Fred on the bank; and yet with a certain preoccupied dignity, for was I not now a man and a guide?

I have no intention of describing the next three weeks in detail because they contain little of interest. We went

down the Carcajou by easy stages and into the Little Windy, with its chain of lakes—where I managed to lose myself completely for several days, though my companion did not know it—and from there into the Antler. Of course much of this was strange country to me, but on the whole I got along very well by aid of a good memory and a sharp eye, for at different times I had had very accurate descriptions of it.

At first our stages were short, for my companion tired easily and was in no hurry. But after the first week his strength came back very fast—not having Peggy to warn him against the perils of overexertion, I suppose—and he delighted to test it. He was ignorant of many things which I supposed everybody knew, but he was quick to observe, and asked questions continually. Being a boy, I am afraid I was not above showing off a little. But if I could teach him things about a canoe and animals and fish and birds, and show him a lot of camping wrinkles, there were other things which he could teach me.

I had always considered myself a good swimmer until I saw him in the water, and then I knew myself for a mere flapper, and immediately set about acquiring the strokes he employed so smoothly. Then, too, I discovered that he was "scienced," as we called it, meaning that he could box and wrestle. I was eager to be taught, and I think he enjoyed teaching me; but of course, as we had no gloves, we were a little handicapped in the boxing lessons, though we made rough pillows out of a flour sack and moss. But when it came to wrestling, though I was a strong, active youngster, he handled me as if I had been a baby, and I knew that when he

had his full strength he would be a formidable opponent for any man, even my old hero, Dinny Pack. And, thinking of that one day, I told him of how Dinny had trimmed Nootka Charlie to a peak down by our landing.

"Good for Dinny!" he approved. "I'd like to shake hands with him."

"I wonder if you could lick him?" I speculated.

"Do you?" he said, with a grin. "Well, my son, you'll never know because you couldn't hire me to try."

We portaged over from the Antler into the Cuisse Lakes, and one day on the Upper Cuisse we landed to boil the tea pail and eat a lunch of cold venison and bannock. As we rested afterward my eye caught the glint of some white objects on the sand dunes a hundred yards or so away, and I walked over to examine them. They were bones, sticking out of the sand, but they were not scattered; they were in regular order, as if the animal to which they belonged lay below with its bony framework entire.

"What do you suppose it was?" I asked Jim Dunleath.

"By George," he said, "those are human ribs! It's a skeleton."

"Let's dig him up!" I suggested.

"I see plainly," he said, with a grin, "that you are destined for the medical profession. You have all the earmarks of a freshman med. All right, my resurrectionist friend, go to it."

And so I fetched a broken shovel that we carried to shift coals on the bake kettle, and dug away. In a few minutes I had the gruesome thing bare. It had disarticulated long ago, and fell to pieces when the supporting sands were removed. The skull was whole, and the teeth still in their sockets. Evidently it

was the skeleton of a big, able-bodied man. For some moments we stood in silence, looking down on all that was left of one who had dropped out from the long trail to tread a longer one.

"Alas! Poor Yorick! I knew him well," said Jim Dunleath.

"You did?" I cried in astonishment. "How can you tell just from the bones? Yorick? Was he a Swede?"

"A Dane, I think. No, this isn't Yorick. I was just repeating a line from a play."

Which was just like Jim Dunleath. Most men would have told me it was one of the best-known quotations, and made me feel ashamed of my ignorance, for at that time I had read no Shakespeare; but not Dunleath.

"Oh, a play," I said. "Well. I wonder who this fellow was."

"Some Indian, I suppose," he returned. "Poor devil! No way of --- Hello! What's this?"

He stooped and picked from the bottom of the excavation a small metal box, blackened and discolored. In shape it looked like a little curling stone, and it was about four inches across and perhaps two inches deep.

"Why," I said, "that's an old tobacco box. The old-timers used 'em. Most of 'em were silver, and they were just about water-tight. You don't see so many of 'em now."

"You talk like an old-timer yourself." He scratched the box with his knife point. The scratch was bright. "This *is* silver," he decided, "otherwise it would have rusted to nothing, I should think. Must have lain there a long time."

He tried to open it, but the lid,

which fitted very closely, refused to move. After repeated trials he discovered that instead of lifting it swung.

"I wonder what brand he smoked?" he said as it came back.

But there was no tobacco. The interior was filled with a paper, folded so that it fitted neatly. This he pried out carefully. Beneath it was an odd- looking scrap of dried, parchmentlike skin, about the size of a silver dollar, to which wisps of straight, black hair still clung.

"What in thunder is this?" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps the paper will tell," I suggested.

"Right, my son. I see I was mistaken. You will some day be a great detective." He unfolded the paper carefully. "Writing, sure enough!" he exclaimed. "Must have been a white man. Pencil writing, and pretty bad. Let's see if we can read it!"

He smoothed it out flat on the sand, and we lay down on our stomachs to decipher it. The paper had apparently been old and crumpled before being written on. In addition, the writing was clumsy, faint, and shaky. In parts it was quite illegible, but this is what we finally made out:

Dear Brother :

I am writing this on the divide north of Shagenaw, because I am too sick to travel any more, and I guess this is my finish, for the pain in my side and bowels hits me worse every time. . . .

Here several lines were quite undecipherable, and throughout there were parts which were entirely illegible.

... to stand us off, and six men were killed. . . . Black Donald myself, not knowing who he was, and lucky for him, for if I had got him alive he would have died slow . . . went back on the bargain and wanted equal shares all round, and I had to pretend to agree, because they were, too many to stand off alone. But it turned out . . . away fast enough, and we found there was a big bunch after us, and headed us into . . . traveling faster than we could the way we . . . cache everything, and scatter, and meet again when it was safe; and they agreed, because it was that, or get caught.

I took Joe Barbe with me, and left the rest, and we doubled back and watched the bunch go by. And then we raised the cache and made a new one. That is what I want to tell you about, because you know old Joe isn't all there at times since that time on the Slave, and, in case he forgets, here is how you will find it:

The cache is on the Burntwood Lakes, on the one the Indians call Ahtikamag, on a creek on the west side of it, near the upper end. It is in a rock cave. We blocked up the mouth with rocks, and loosened down a little slide to make a good job, and there was a bigger slide than we thought, so it is blocked good and plenty. You will have to dig your way in, and be careful not to shake down more. The cave is dry and cold, so everything will be O.K.

I was afraid to blaze a tree, or set up anything, because they will comb the country fine; but for landmarks there is a big hawks' nest right opposite the cache, on the far side of the creek, and downhill from the tree is a red rock with a fiat top; and on that I marked a line. Lay your rifle along the line, and she will sight for the mouth of the cache.

Now, these dogs went back on their bargain, and I have fooled them plenty. Don't tell them you know, or give them a share. Let them hunt for the cache till they give up. Then get about four big canoes, and men you can trust, and go after it yourself. . . . saw better nor anything like them in my life, and no one else. You would hardly believe . . . worth a hun . . .to see you again, but I guess I am out of luck. So good-by. Your loving brother,

ANGUS McNAB.

P. S.—I am putting in a lock of Black Donald's hair, because you hated him about like I did. I told him I would get him before I died, and I am glad I did. Use this box, and think of me once in a while. Use old Joe right, because he stayed with me.

When we had finished reading this remarkable message from the past—and it was not at all easy to read—Jim Dunleath looked at me with lifted brows.

"Well, my son," said he, "what have we struck? Who on earth is—or was—Angus McNab?"

"I never heard of him."

"He must have been a mighty hardbitten sport," he said, and lifted the scrap of skin and black hair gingerly. "By thunder! Bob, this belonged to some gentleman called 'Black Donald' and Angus McNab scalped him!"

I nodded, my eyes bulging at the grisly memento of bygone feud and hate.

"But what is the letter about, anyway?" he went on. "It's disjointed—written by a sick man—and he rambles. Now let's see: McNab and some tough bunch of which he seems to have been the leader fought for something valuable and won out. They quarreled over the

spoils. About then they had to make a get-away from some party that outnumbered them. So they cached whatever it was, and McNab lifted it and cached it again. It was bulky, or heavy, because they couldn't travel with it, and, anyway, that part about the canoes settles it. Then, having fooled his companions, McNab took sick. As he describes it, I'll bet it was appendicitis—and he wrote this note to his brother and gave it to Joe Barbe. If Barbe is this skeleton—or the skeleton Barbe—his brother never saw it. And that is likely from the way we found the letter in the box. So the chances are that whatever they cached is there still."

"But what was it?" I asked. "Gold?"

"Not likely. He tells his brother to bring about four canoes. He couldn't have four canoe loads of gold. He says it is worth 'a hun ' That must mean a hundred. A hundred what?"

"A hundred dollars!" I suggested foolishly.

"Pshaw! Nobody would bother caching a hundred dollars. A hundred wouldn't weigh anything. He must mean a hundred thousand at the least." "Gosh!" I breathed. "That's a whole bunch of money."

"Think so, Bob?" he said dryly. "Well, it is—when you haven't got it. Not so much when you have. I know a fellow who got rid of that much in a couple of years."

"He must have been a darn fool," I said candidly.

"So he was. And, as the Wise Man of the East remarked: 'A fool and his father's money are soon parted.' Well, where are these Burntwood Lakes the letter speaks of?"

"It's up North. Up the Brule River,

I think. I don't know just where. I guess Tom Ballou would know." "Well," he said, "when we get back we'll ask him about it. And now let's cover up the bones of old Joe Barbe, and put up a cairn or a cross or something just as a mark of respect from humans to an ex-human. And then let's get out of here. I don't think I want to camp on this lake to-night."