

Goldfrap John Henry

The Bungalow Boys North of Fifty-Three



John Goldfrap

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Dexter J. Forrester

The Bungalow Boys North of Fifty-Three

CHAPTER I – IN THE WHITE SILENCES

The air in the valley was still as death. Not a wandering puff of wind swept the white, snow-covered slopes that shot up steeply from either side of its wide, flat floor; nor had any stirred for several days. The land was chained and fettered in icy bonds, and would be for many long weeks.

The river – the Porcupine – that, when the Bungalow Boys had first come to this valley in the Frying Pan Range, had dashed and sometimes raged along its shoaly course, was ice-fast. Occasionally from an overburdened birch or hemlock branch the accumulated snow would fall with a dull crash.

These miniature avalanches alone broke the white silence. In the dead stillness they sounded quite loud and startling when they occurred. There was no twittering of birds nor were there traces of any larger animals than field mice and small rodents. In the snow, as if it had been a white drawing-board, these tiny animals had etched their tracks everywhere as they drove their tunnels or skittered over the surface.

But from round a bend in the river's course a column of blue smoke could be seen sagging and wavering almost straight up in the windless air toward the leaden sky.

The smoke came from an odd-looking craft tied up to the bank of the river. The boat in question was a small steamer with a single black smokestack. At her stern was a big cylindrical paddle-wheel to drive her over the shallows and shoals. For the rest she was homely in the extreme. In fact, she might not inaptly have been compared to a big floating dry goods box pierced with windows, and with a pilot house, like a smaller box, say a pill box, perched on top.

The *Yukon Rover*, which was the name she bore painted on her sides in big black letters, was of a type common enough along the navigable waters of Alaska, although she was smaller than most such steamers. Red curtains hung in the windows of this queer-looking specimen of the shipbuilder's art, and the smoke, already mentioned, curled from a fat stovepipe, suggesting warmth and comfort within.

At the bow, lashed fast to a small flagstaff, was a strange-looking figure. This was Sandy MacTavish's Mascot of the White North, the famous totem pole that the Scotch youth had purchased as a good-luck bringer when the lads, as described in the "Bungalow Boys Along the Yukon," were on their way northward from Seattle.

A door in the forward part of the box-like superstructure suddenly opened, and out into the frozen, keen air there burst three laughing, jolly lads. All were bundled up and carried skates. However depressing the Alaskan winter might have been to many of our readers, it was plain that these healthy, happy lads were enjoying themselves to the full. They slipped and slid across the frozen decks, and then made their way down a steeply inclined sort of gangway leading to the frozen surface of the river.

Their passage down this runway was not without incident. Sandy MacTavish was behind his two chums, Tom and Jack Dacre. All were laughing and talking at a great rate, their spirits bubbling over under the stimulus of the keen air and the thought of the fun they were going to have, when a sudden yell from Sandy came as the forerunner to calamity.

"Whoop! Ow-wow! Hoot, mon!" shrilly cried the Scotch youth, as he felt his feet slide from under him on the slippery, inclined plane leading to the ice.

"What in the world – !" began Jack Dacre, the younger of the Dacre brothers, when he felt himself cannonaded from behind by the yelling Sandy.

His exclamation was echoed an instant later by Tom Dacre, who was in advance. He had half turned at the almost simultaneous outcries of his brother and Sandy.

“Gracious!” he had just time to exclaim, when it was his turn to give a shout.

As Jack had been bumped into by Sandy, so he in turn shot helplessly against his brother.

In a flash all three Bungalow Boys were shooting down the slippery gangway. They fetched up in a snow pile at the bottom, a fact which saved them a hard bump on the frozen surface of the river.

“Whoopee! Talk about shooting the chutes!” puffed Tom, scrambling to his feet and shaking the powdery snow from his garments.

“Beats the time Sandy went sky-hooting down that old glacier on the Yukon!” chimed in Jack, half angrily. “What’s the matter with you, anyhow, you red-headed son of Scotland?”

“I’m thinking I’m loocky to be alive,” muttered Sandy, feeling himself all over as if to ascertain if he had sustained any mortal injuries.

“I guess we’re the lucky ones,” laughed Tom.

“Yes, we formed a human cushion for your freckled countenance to land on,” pursued Jack, as Sandy rubbed his nose affectionately. The organ in question was of the snub variety and decorated with freckles like spots on the sun.

“Aweel, mon, dinna ye ken that you saved my beauty?” chuckled Sandy gleefully. “You ought to be glad of that.”

“I’ll fix your fatal beauty, all right!” cried Jack, and he rushed at Sandy with a whoop.

But the Scotch lad was too swift for him. He dashed off, and at a safe distance proceeded to adjust his skates.

“I’ll get you yet!” cried Jack, shaking his fist, and then he and Tom Dacre sat down at the foot of the disastrous gangway and put on their ice-skimmers.

Jack looked up from his task to perceive Sandy making derisive gestures at him.

“Hoot, mon, gie me a bit chase!” yelled Sandy, hopping about nimbly and executing some gliding figures with a taunting air.

“If it’s a chase you’re looking for, that is my middle name!” exclaimed Jack, and with a shout and a whoop he was off after the other lad. The steel rang merrily on the smooth ice as Tom swung off after the other two.

The blood of all three boys tingled pleasantly in the sharp air. Their faces glowed and their eyes shone.

“You look out when I get hold of you!” exclaimed Jack, as Sandy, for the 'steenth time, eluded his grasp and swung dashingly off, skimming the ice as gracefully as the swallows soared above the river in the summer months.

“Yah-h-h-h-h-h!” called Sandy tauntingly, “want a tow-line?”

Sandy gave a loud laugh as, elated at his easy escape from his irritated chum, he gave a fancy exhibition of figure-making, and at its conclusion skimmed off again just as Jack’s fingers seemed about to close on his tormentor’s shoulder.

“I’ll wash your face in the snow when I catch you! Just you see if I don’t!” shrilly threatened Jack.

A laugh from Sandy was the only answer as he shot off under full steam. He turned his head to show his perfect command of the fine points of skating. A broad grin was on his freckled countenance.

“Catch me first, Jack! I’ll bet you – ”

“Hi! Look out!” roared Tom.

But his warning came just about the same instant that Sandy, skimming at full speed over the ice near the *Yukon Rover’s* hull, gave a howl of dismay as he felt the ice give way under him.

The next instant he vanished from view as the thin ice – merely a skimming over the hole chopped early that day to get drinking water out of the river – broke under his weight.

Jack, close on his heels, had just enough warning to swing aside. The last they saw of Sandy MacTavish was two hands upheld above the water as he vanished from view.

Then he disappeared totally.

“Tom! Quick! Help! He’ll be drowned,” yelled Jack at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER II – THE RESCUE OF SANDY

On the edge of the thin ice that had formed over the top of the water hole was a bucket. It was used to draw the supply of drinking water, and to its handle was attached a long rope. Jack, half beside himself with fright at the sight of Sandy's plunge and his own narrow escape, stood as if in a trance as he watched Tom swoop down on the pail.

He had hardly done this when Sandy's face, blue with cold, appeared above the water at the edge of the hole.

"Ouch! Ow-w-w-w-w! Fellows, canna ye get me oot of this before I freeze to death?"

"All right, Sandy old man. Hold on! We'll get you out!" cried Tom encouragingly.

"It's cuc-cuc-cold!" stuttered the Scotch youth, his teeth clicking like a running fish reel as he clung desperately to the solid ice at the edge of the hole.

Tom's answer was a reassuring shout, and, aided by Jack, who had quickly recovered from his temporary paralysis, he came swiftly toward Sandy with the rope from the bucket in his hands. As he skated toward the unfortunate Caledonian youth his hands nimbly made a loop in the rope. He flung this over Sandy's head and then, with a mighty heave and yank, the two Dacre boys succeeded in rescuing their chum from his unfortunate position.

"Now you get back to the boat as fast as you can," ordered Tom, half angry and half amused at Sandy's plight.

"It was Jer-Jer-Jack's fault!" chattered the unfortunate one.

"Why didn't you look where you were going?" demanded Jack. "You gave us the scare of our lives!"

Sandy appeared to be about to make an indignant reply, but Tom checked him.

"You two fellows fight this out another time," he ordered sharply. "Sandy, get into the cabin right away. There's some hot tea on the stove. While you're getting into dry things I'll fix something up for you. Get a move on now."

Sandy, without a backward glance, took his way up the gangway, followed by the others. Both Mr. Chisholm Dacre, uncle of Tom and Jack, and his partner in the enterprise that had brought the party north, were away back over the snowy mountains on a trip to a distant post for provisions. The boys were not sorry for this, under the circumstances.

And now let us leave them for a time while Sandy is being half scalded to death with hot tea and vigorously rubbed with rough, scratchy towels, and explain in some detail, to those who do not already know them, who the Bungalow Boys are, and what they are doing in the frozen north in the dead of winter not long before Christmas time.

We first met the lads in the "Bungalow Boys," a volume devoted to their doings and adventures, grave and gay, in the Sawmill Valley in Maine, where, by a series of strange events, they fell "heirs" to a cozy bungalow, which fact resulted in their being known as the Bungalow Boys. It was a name bestowed upon them after they had routed a band of counterfeiterers who made their haunt in the valley and caused all sorts of trouble for the boys, whom the gang viewed as interlopers.

Adventures came thick and fast to the boys and their companion, a certain wise and lovable, though eccentric, professor. The latter, by accident, stumbled on the counterfeiterers' den, an odd, cavern-like place cunningly concealed on a cliff summit above a small lake opposite to the bungalow. The boys, too, had many thrilling experiences, the memory of one of which lingers particularly. Our readers will have no trouble in recalling Tom's adventure in the flooded cave following his battle with the enraged moose, and his subsequent adventures with the Trulliber gang. In this volume, also, Mr. Chisholm Dacre, the Bungalow Boys' uncle, appeared after a mysterious absence, the cause of which was fully explained in the unraveling of events.

We next encountered our fun and adventure-loving heroes down in equatorial seas. In the “Bungalow Boys Marooned in the Tropics” their experiences in search of sunken treasure were set forth in full. In an exciting narrative, warm with the color and life of the tropics, the tale of their adventures and perils below, as well as above, the ocean was told. How Tom saved Mr. Dacre’s life from a huge devilfish far under the surface of the sea was but one of the experiences that occurred on that expedition. Jack and Sandy, too, came in for stirring times, not the least of which was the incident of the haunted cabin on the desert island and their “laying of the ghost.”

The “Bungalow Boys in the Great North West” dealt with very different scenes. In this book we made the acquaintance of Mr. Colton Chillingworth, the sturdy, sterling-hearted ranchman and friend of Mr. Dacre. How the boys incurred the enmity of a band of Chinese smugglers and how they acquitted themselves in several trying situations may all be read there, together with much information about that wonderful section of our country.

The great bodies of fresh water lying on our northern boundary line provided the setting for yet another volume which was called “The Bungalow Boys on the Great Lakes.” In a Lake Huron “hummer” the boys began a series of remarkable experiences. Setting out for a pleasure cruise, they found that they were once more called upon to face difficulties and dangers. Doubtless the hardened muscles and self-reliance developed in them by their other adventures helped them to meet these with fortitude and success. The secret of Castle Rock Island was one well worth finding out, as those who have read the book in question know.

Then came a succeeding volume, “The Bungalow Boys on the Yukon.” The “Golden River” of Alaska, that vast territory “North of Fifty-three,” was traveled by the lads and their elders in the stout little craft, the *Yukon Rover*, which we have already encountered in “winter quarters” in the present volume. Sandy, as usual, got into many scrapes, and Tom and Jack met with an extraordinary experience at the hands of two demented gold miners, who imagined that they had discovered a new El Dorado. From these two victims of the mad lust for gold they finally made their escape with the aid of a good-hearted, though comical, negro.

Their object in navigating the Yukon was to establish winter quarters for an unique industry, namely, the trapping and breeding of the rare and expensive silver fox and black fox. The animals were to be taken alive in specially designed box-traps, and when enough had been captured they were to be shipped to Mr. Chillingworth’s ranch in the state of Washington and set at liberty to breed in a climate believed to be excellently suited to them.

Perhaps some of our young readers may think this a very queer form of enterprise. To these it must be explained that the project in which Mr. Dacre, the Bungalow Boys’ uncle, and Colton Chillingworth, the rancher, were partners was by no means a chimerical one. Good silver fox pelts bring in the open market from fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred dollars each, and black fox pelts even more than that. If it was possible, therefore, to raise them in numbers, there would be almost literally a “gold mine” in the business. At any rate, both the partners thought well enough of the idea to sink considerable capital in perfecting their plans.

An important part of their scheme was to preserve its secrecy, for rivals might prove troublesome. With this object a steamer had been chartered and the *Yukon Rover*, in sections, transported to the northland. She was put together at St. Michaels, near the mouth of the Yukon River, and loaded with “duffle,” traps and material for constructing a well-equipped “trapping-line,” had climbed the swift, shallow river to its junction with the Porcupine.

In the “Bungalow Boys Along the Yukon” we saw them in the earlier stages of the enterprise, which was now in active operation. The trapping season had opened, and already in several specially constructed cages close by the *Yukon Rover* were some choice specimens of silver and black foxes. But many more would be needed before the spring came, and the adventurers with their valuable living cargo could “go out,” as returning to civilization is called in Alaska. The enterprise had succeeded so far in a manner very gratifying to both the partners. As for the boys, they were enjoying themselves to

the full. But it was not all play. They had been brought along to “make themselves useful,” as well as to have fun. Already they had become hardy snow travelers and experienced trappers, and so, when this story of their doings opens, we find them well content with their situation and delighted at the successful way in which the trapping had so far gone forward.

But already there were signs that what Mr. Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth had feared, namely, the enmity of the professional trappers of the country had been aroused. As small clouds precede a mighty storm, so slight signs may indicate coming trouble. Mr. Chillingworth had himself been a trapper when younger and he knew the wild, half-savage traits of most of this class of men well.

Jealous of intrusion on what they deem their rights to the wild lands, distrustful as wild animals and vengeful, and experienced in the ways of the silent places, they make enemies not to be despised. This fact the boys were closer than they thought to discovering, and that before many hours had elapsed.

CHAPTER III – THE THIEF IN THE NIGHT

“Say, Tom!”

The elder of the Dacre boys awakened with a start from a sound sleep to find his brother Jack bending over him. That is, he knew it was Jack from the lad’s voice, but, as for seeing him, that was impossible, for the cabin of the *Yukon Rover* was pitchy dark.

“What’s up, Jack? What’s the trouble?” “It’s something over by the fox cages.” Jack’s voice was vibrant with anxiety. As for Tom, he was up in a jiffy. In the cages, as has been mentioned, were some half dozen silver foxes and one black one. In all, about seventy-five hundred dollars’ worth of pelts “on the hoof,” as it were, were confined in the big wooden cribs.

That night before they had turned in, Tom and Jack, leaving Sandy in his bunk recuperating from his ducking of the afternoon, had visited the cages and fed their valuable charges with the fish which formed their main article of diet.

“It is really like being left as watchmen in a bank,” Tom had laughingly remarked as they saw to it that all was secure for the night.

“Well, I don’t think it is likely that anyone would care to tackle valuables like these foxes,” Jack had rejoined, as the animals sprang snapping and snarling viciously at the fish, “that is, unless they were like the Spartan boy in the old reader come to life again.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” had been Tom’s grave reply. “Before Uncle Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth left, they warned me to be constantly on the lookout for trouble, and to spare no pains in watching the foxes at every possible opportunity.”

“But who in the world can they be afraid of up here in this desolate, uninhabited part of the world?” Jack had asked, gazing about at the solitary, snow-covered slopes, the drooping balsams and the long stretch of empty, frozen valley.

“As for its being uninhabited, I’m not so sure of that,” Tom had replied. “You remember those two miners ‘way back in the hills where we thought no human being had penetrated; and at this time of year, Mr. Chillingworth said the trappers are ranging all through this part of the country.”

“You mean that you imagine they thought there would be danger of somebody bothering our foxes?” Jack had inquired anxiously.

“That is just what I mean,” Tom had said. “Of course they didn’t say so in so many words, but I’ll bet that was what was on their minds. To lots of trappers there’s a fortune right here in these cages.”

This was food for reflection, and Jack had been in a wakeful mood all that night. What the hour was he could not imagine, but a short time before he aroused Tom, he had heard a soft crunching on the snow outside in the direction of the fox cages, followed by a sound as if the pens themselves were being tampered with.

He had leaped from his bunk with a bound and made for his brother’s, Tom being the accepted leader of the Bungalow Boys.

“Close the shutters!” were the first orders Tom gave.

“What for?” Jack could not refrain from asking.

“So that no light can get outside” was Tom’s reply, “while we jump into some clothes and see what’s up.”

The shutters he referred to were used when an unusually heavy wind came up. They were felt lined and excluded every bitter draft. At such times ventilation was obtained from a device in the roof of the cabin. Jack soon had the solid blinds closed and fastened, and then he struck a match and lit the hanging lamp. The next task was to arouse Sandy while they hastily dressed. The Scotch lad was hard to awaken, but at length he sat up blinking and drowsy, and Tom rapidly informed him of what Jack had heard.

“Huh! I’ll bet it was nothing but just a wolverine,” spoke Sandy scornfully.

Wolverines, the gluttons of the northland, had assailed the fox pens quite frequently, being attracted by the odor of fish. In one instance the black fox's pen had been almost demolished by the steel-clawed, truculent robber of the northern woods.

"Maybe that's what it was," said Jack anxiously, inwardly much relieved. As a matter of fact he had not much relished the notion of creeping out into the night upon possible human intruders.

"Well, if it is wolverines, we'll have a chance to nail them red-handed," said Tom, "so get a move on and jump into your 'parkee'."

Sandy saw from Tom's face that there was no use delaying any longer and he lost no time in obeying. Then, armed with rifles, having carefully extinguished the light, the boys crept softly out into the night.

It was bitterly cold, but to the north the famous "Lights" flashed and burned against the sky, shedding a softly luminous radiance on the white covering of the earth.

"Ugh!" shivered Jack under his breath, "isn't it cold, though!"

"Hoot!" grunted Sandy disgustedly, "if it hadna' been for you and your false alarms, we might ha' been in our beds the noo' instead of tramping around out here like a lot of gloom-croons."

"Hush!" breathed Tom impatiently; "what's the matter with you fellows? Can't you move quietly?"

"Oh, aye!" rejoined Sandy. "In my opeenion, yon noise was nought but a pack o' bogles."

"Then they're the first ghosts I ever heard of that carried hatchets," retorted Tom sharply, although in a low whisper. "Hark at that!"

They all paused just within the doorway of the *Yukon Rover's* deck-house, into which they had withdrawn, and listened intently.

Over against the hill there could be made out in the faint glow of the Northern Lights a number of dark blotches sharply outlined by their white background. These blotches they knew were the fox cages. In other words, the "safes" containing the four-footed wealth they had been set to guard.

"Can you see anything?" asked Jack under his breath.

"I'm not sure, – just a minute, – yes! Look there!"

"Where?" demanded Jack, his eyes burning and his heart giving a violent thump.

"Right by the last cage."

"The one that the black fox is in?"

"Yes."

"By hookey, I do! It's – it's –"

"A man!"

"Holy smoke! What'll we do now?"

"Get after him, of course. Come on!"

Clutching his rifle in his gloved hands Tom started forward, but before he could move another step he stopped short. From over by the black fox's cage there came a shot and a blinding flash.

"He's shooting!" cried Sandy in real alarm.

"Yes, but not at us," rejoined Tom excitedly, springing forward once more, "it's the black fox he is after. We've got to head him off in that little game."

CHAPTER IV – THE TRACKS IN THE SNOW

As they ran across the bridge of planks connecting the *Yukon Rover* with the shore, the boys saw something else. Standing by the cages in such a position that they had not seen it before was a dog-sled.

Even as they were still on the gangway the form of a man glided through the darkness toward the sled. In his arms he held a bundle of some sort.

“Stop where you are!” cried Tom, guessing with a catch at the heart what it was the man was carrying.

There was no reply. The man had reached the sled and bent swiftly over it an instant.

Crack!

Jack gave a jump. The man was not shooting. It was the sharp crack of his dog-whip, sounding like the report of a pistol on the frozen air, that had startled the boy.

The dogs started forward. The sled creaked on the hard, packed snow. It began to glide off through the night like a phantom.

“Stop or we’ll fire!” shouted Jack excitedly.

He raised his rifle but Tom sternly grasped his arm.

“None of that,” ordered the elder Dacre boy sternly.

“But – but he’s a robber, or at least attempted to be one,” sputtered Jack indignantly.

“That makes no difference. We don’t want any shooting.”

“Hoosh!” exclaimed Sandy disgustedly, “you’re going to let him get clear away.”

Before Tom could check him, the Scotch boy had leveled his rifle and fired in the direction of the sled, which could now only be made out as a dark object gliding swiftly off over the snow.

From that direction there floated back to them a laugh. It was a derisive sound that made Tom’s blood boil, but he kept his head.

“You do anything like that again, Sandy,” he said, turning on the Scotch lad, “and you’ll have me to settle with.”

“But we can’t let him get away like that without raising a finger, – hoosh!” exclaimed Sandy indignantly.

“Let’s first see if he has really done any harm,” said Tom, “he may have only intended it and we have frightened him off.”

But although he spoke hopefully, Tom’s inner senses told him that the daring marauder had done more than merely alarm them. In the first place, there was the shot coming from the direction of the black fox’s cage. To Tom that could mean only one thing and that was that the intruder had killed the occupant of the cage. In fact, that was the only way that he could have secured his prey, for the foxes were wild and savage to a degree, and it would have been impossible for anyone to abstract them alive.

All these thoughts and conclusions flitted through his mind while Jack and Sandy, at his orders, were getting a lantern. When it arrived, the three boys in any but enviable frames of mind made their way as quickly as possible to the fox cages.

The animals were excited and frightened, and through the darkness their anxious eyes glowed like jewels as the lantern light struck them. This showed Tom that at least six of the cages still held their occupants. But the seventh, the one that had been used to hold the black fox, was apparently empty.

When they reached the pen in question even Tom could not refrain from exclamations of anger, for the cage had been ripped open and the black fox was indeed gone.

On the snow were blood-stains in plenty, and enough mute evidence of the slaying and theft to enable them to reconstruct everything that had happened as well as if they had seen it all.

“Oh! wow! Fifteen hundred dollars gone ker-plunk!” wailed Jack.

“Hoots-toots,” clucked Sandy, clicking his tongue indignantly, “the bonny black fox killed and taken by that gloomerin’ thief!”

Tom alone was silent. The suddenness and completeness of the catastrophe had overwhelmed him. What could they say to Mr. Dacre and his partner when they returned from the settlement? What explanation could they make that would excuse their seeming carelessness?

As Tom stood there beside the empty cage with the blood-stained snow at his feet, he passed through some of the bitterest moments of his life. He was fairly at a standstill. In the dark it would be impossible to overtake the bold thief, and there was no means, of course, of sending out a warning as might have been done in a civilized region.

No; the thief had vanished and there appeared to be not the remotest chance of ever catching him. Any trader would be glad to buy the black fox skin, and with the proceeds the marauder could easily leave the country, leaving no trace behind him.

“What will Uncle Dacre say?”

It was Jack who voiced Tom’s gloomy thoughts. With his younger brother’s words a sudden resolution came into Tom’s mind. Undoubtedly he, as the one in charge of the camp, was responsible for the loss of the black fox. It would never be seen alive again, of that he was sure.

But its skin? That was valuable. If he could only recover that, it would at least be partial restoration for what he, perhaps unjustly, felt was a neglect of his duty.

He came out of his reverie. Swiftly he set about examining the remainder of the cages. They had not been tampered with. No doubt the thief knew that he was not likely to have time to rob more than one cage undisturbed after the noise of his gun had aroused those who were undoubtedly on watch. With this in mind he had taken the most valuable of the lot.

Tom’s eyes fell on the tracks of the dog-sled on the hardly frozen snow. They lay there in the yellow lantern light as clean cut and conspicuous almost as parallel lines of a railroad.

The boy knew that the sled must be packed heavily, probably with all the paraphernalia of a traveling trapper. The question of how the man had come to find out about the valuable collection of foxes on the bank of the Porcupine River, Tom, of course, could not guess. But one thing he did know – that the thief had left behind him a valuable trail which it would be as easy to follow as the red line on a map indicating a transcontinental railroad.

And that track Tom meant to follow before it grew cold. They had no dog sleds, but they knew that the man with his heavy load could not make very fast time. Before daylight, long before the first glimmerings of the brief winter’s day of the north, the boys’ arrangements had been completed.

Snow-shoes were looked over and thongs inspected, tea and provisions packed into provision bags secured with “tump-lines,” and everything put into readiness for the long trail that Tom and Jack (for his younger brother was to be his companion) were to strike. As the boys had been in the habit of going thus equipped over the long trap-line, and had become adepts on snow-shoes, these preparations did not take long.

Sandy was almost in tears when it was decided that he was to be left behind. But it was necessary for someone to be there to feed and guard the foxes, and to be on hand to meet Mr. Dacre and his partner on their return from the settlements and explain matters to them. Tom was not certain just when their elders would get back, but he entertained a vague hope that it might be possible to overtake the thief and secure the black fox pelt before that time.

As the two lads glided off in the dim gray light, moving swiftly along the thief’s trail on their snow-shoes, Sandy stood and watched them till they were almost out of ear-shot.

“Good-luck!” he shouted and saw them turn and wave, and then, feeling very depressed and alone, he turned back to the *Yukon Rover* and to the foxes which were already barking and whining for their fish.

CHAPTER V – THE WILDERNESS TRAIL

It is a peculiarity of the wilderness, be it in the frozen north or under the blazing sun of the southwest, that it breeds in its dwellers and sojourners a stout and hardy independence and self-reliance that no other life can. In the midst of primitive solitudes, where man has to battle with nature for his means of life, every quality of hardiness and ingenuity that may have been dormant in civilization is called forth by that stern task-mistress, necessity.

Thus it was that, though only boys so far as years were concerned, their many adventures had made of Tom and Jack Dacre two woodsmen of unusual competence, considering that they had not been born and bred to the life. Brown as berries, with muscles like spring-steel, and in the pink of condition, the lads were as well equipped almost as veteran woodsmen to fight the battle of the wilds which lay before them.

As they glided along over the hard crust of the snow, always with the trail of the sled stretching before them, a sort of feeling that was almost exultation came over them. Both boys possessed a love of adventure, a delight in meeting with and conquering difficulties and asserting their manliness and grit, and surely if ever they had an opportunity before them for the exercise of these faculties they had it now.

Along with their heavy garments and thick hoods, the lads carried packs and their rifles, besides ammunition. In his belt each lad had a stout hunting knife and a serviceable hatchet. Stoutly laced leather boots encased their legs as far as the knees, and altogether, to anyone encountering them, they would have looked to the full the part of efficiency and capability demanded by the problems of the north woods.

As they ascended the valley and the tracks they were following began to leave the side of the river, they found themselves gliding through open woods of spruce and balsam. In these woods signs of animal life began to be plentiful. Everywhere the parallel lines of the thief's sled were criss-crossed with tracks of martens, and scored deep with the runways of the big hares.

Sometimes they came on a spot where a pitiful little pile of bedraggled fur and scattered splashes of scarlet showed that a weasel or an ermine had made a banquet on some small woods creature.

It was when within a short distance of one of these mute evidences of a woodland feast that Tom, who was in advance, came to a stop. Jack also made a quick halt. Running parallel to the trail of the sled was another track, – that of an animal.

Tom dropped his rifle butt on the ground and looked at Jack with quizzical eyes.

“One of our old friends!” he said with a short laugh.

The trail, which was somewhat like that of a small bear but much narrower in the feet, was a thoroughly familiar one to them. It was that of the most cunning creature to be found north of fifty-three, and one that is pretty well distributed throughout the wild regions of the north.

It was, in fact, the track of a wolverine, carcajou, or, to give him the trapper's and woodsman's expressive title, “the Glutton.” No animal is so detested by the trappers. The wolverine's hide is of little value, but one of his banquets, made invariably at some luckless trapper's lure, may destroy a skin worth a hundred dollars or more.

Among his other talents, the Glutton is possessed of a sense of smell and wariness keener than that of a fox. No bait has yet been devised that will lure him into a trap, no poisoned meat, no matter how skillfully set out, has, except on rare occasions, been known to tempt him. And so the wolverine, low, black and snakey-eyed, with ferocious teeth and claws, roams the northern woods seeking what, of other's capture, it may devour. Nor does it confine its depredations to the trap-lines.

Many a trapper on reaching one of his huts where he has carefully cached away his flour and bacon to serve in an emergency, has found that it has been raided in his absence by wolverines, who have spoiled what they could not destroy. The camp of our friends on the Porcupine River had been

visited on several occasions by wolverines, but they had merely contented themselves with prowling about the fox-kennels and on one occasion ripping open a fish-pound and devouring all the supply of fox food contained therein.

“I’ll bet that fellow has smelled the blood of the black fox on that rascal’s sled and is on his track,” exclaimed Tom, as the boys stood looking at the often anathemized footprints.

“In that case he may get to the carcass before we do,” remarked Jack.

“Not very probable,” said Tom; “you can be sure that a man carrying a valuable skin like that would guard it day and night, and – ”

He stopped short and his brown face grew confused. It had just occurred to him that to guard the black fox day and night was just what they ought to have done. Jack noticed his confusion.

“Cheer up, old fellow,” he struck in consolingly, “it couldn’t be helped, and – ”

“But don’t you see that that is just what we can’t explain to Uncle Dacre and Mr. Chillingworth?” demanded Tom. “How are we to get them to see that it couldn’t be helped?”

Jack looked rather helpless.

“But we’ll get it back, – at least we’ll get the skin, – if we ever catch up with this chap,” he insisted.

“Yes, and that ‘if’ looks as big as the Washington Monument to me right now,” responded Tom, “but come on. Hit up the trail again. I wonder how much ahead of us he is, anyhow?”

“Funny we haven’t struck any of his camps yet. He must have stopped to eat.”

“The very fact that he hasn’t shows what a hurry he is in, but if he keeps on at this rate his dogs will give out.”

“And that will give us our chance?”

“Exactly. He must guess that we are on his track and is going to drive ahead like fury.”

“But he can get fresh dogs.”

“Not without entering a settlement, and I guess he wouldn’t take a chance on doing that just yet.”

“If only we could get another dog team and a good guide, we could run him down without trouble.”

“I’m not so certain of that, but anyhow I’d rather have the dogs than the guide. A blind man could follow this trail.”

After this they pushed on in silence, watching as they went the stealthy tracks of the wolverine following, like themselves, the unknown marauder of the night.

CHAPTER VI – STOPPING TO REST

Large natures are apt to take heavy blows more calmly, at any rate so far as outward appearances are concerned, than smaller ones. The Dacre boys, broadened and deepened by their adventurous lives, were not as cast down over the disaster that had befallen them as might have been many lads less used to meeting hardships and difficulties and fighting them as American boys should.

Therefore it was that, keen as was their interest in the stake that lay ahead of them, they yet found time to notice the sights about them and to talk as they moved along over the snow much as they might have done under quite ordinary circumstances.

If anything, Jack had shown his anger and chagrin more perceptibly than Tom when the blow had first fallen. But now he was in as perfect command of his faculties as his elder brother. He was able even to crack a joke now and then with seeming indifference to the object of their journey and the perils that might lie in front of them, perhaps just around the next turn of the trail, for all that they knew.

As for Tom, following the calm, almost stoical way with which he had met the discovery of their loss, he had become possessed of an unconquerable desire to find the man who had robbed them and if possible hand him over to the authorities. Failing this, Tom found himself possessed of a grim, bulldog determination to make the man give up the spoils. As for the man himself, he felt no wish to punish him under those circumstances. That was for the law to do. The main thing was to get back the black fox's skin, for he was sure the creature had been killed.

At about noontime Tom called a halt. Jack was for pressing right on without stopping to eat, but Tom would not allow this.

"It's no use two fellows wearing themselves out," he said; "we shall work all the better for having stopped to 'fire up.'"

"Well, it looks to me like so much lost time," observed Jack, sitting down, however, at the foot of a tree and loosening his snowshoe thongs. This was in itself a sign of weariness, but Tom pretended not to notice it.

He set Jack to work hacking fragments from a dead hemlock which was still upstanding, for, although there were plenty of fallen trees about, timber that has been lying on the ground is never such good kindling as upstanding deadwood, because it is almost sure to be damp. While Jack was about this task, Tom cleared a space in the snow, and then he drew from his pack a blackened pot, which had boiled tea on many a trail.

When Jack had the kindling and some stouter bits of wood for the permanency of the fire, Tom filled the pot with snow and then set a match to the pile of shavings. They had been raked together lightly and the heavier wood set up in somewhat the form of an Indian's tepee.

The dry kindling caught as if it had been soaked in kerosene. Up shot the cheery red flames, and the blue smoke curled merrily away as the wood crackled joyously. There is magic in a fire in the woods. In a trice a match and dry timber can convert a cheerless camp into a place fit for human habitation and happiness.

The snow was melted by the time the kindling had died down and Tom could make a bed of red coals. In these he set the pot once more, this time with tea added to the boiling water. It was sweetened with some of a precious store of molasses, carried in a bottle and used as a special luxury. As for milk, even of the condensed variety, the Bungalow Boys on their trips along the trap line had long since learned to do without it.

With jerked deer meat, prepared the week before, and some soggy flapjacks baked in an aluminum oven, they made a satisfactory meal. By way of dessert, each boy stuffed some dried apricots into his mouth to chew as they moved along. Thus refreshed, thongs were tightened, duffle packed, and they were once more ready for the trail.

All that afternoon they followed along the man of mystery's track, but in no place could they find a spot where he had paused to camp. He must have eaten whatever refreshment he had while riding on his sled or while on foot, for no traces of a fire or a resting place could the boys' eyes discover.

One clue alone the thief had left behind him, and that was in the form of numerous stubs of cigarettes which had been rolled by hand out of coarse yellow paper. But outside of this sign there was nothing but the sled marks to guide them. One thing about the trail that has not yet been mentioned is that the man was back-trailing. That is to say that, on leaving the boys' camp, he had followed the same path by which he had come, and in places the two tracks could be seen where the sled had swung out a little.

After a time they found that a snow storm, which must have fallen in the vicinity during the night, had entirely wiped out the "coming" track, leaving only the fresh marks of the "going" trail.

From this fact the boys deduced that the man might have turned off somewhere on his journey to their camp, but they cared little for this. It was his fresh trail that they were following hot upon, like hounds upon the scent.

All the way, too, went the trail of the wolverine, and, judging from the tracks, the boys guessed that the animal had been traveling fast. This looked ominous, for the wolverine is not, as a rule, an energetic animal, and proved at least to Tom's mind that the robber must be traveling very quickly.

He pointed this out to Jack, who agreed with him. But neither of the boys said a word about turning back. They were far too nervy for that, and, having started out, such an idea as quitting did not once enter their heads. All that afternoon they kept grimly on.

At about three o'clock, or shortly thereafter, the sun grew dim and low. Half an hour later only a pale twilight lingered about them, for at that time of year in the northern wilds the evening sets in early.

Above their heads, from the darkening canopy of the sky, the stars, a million pin points of light, began to shine. The snow turned a dull, steely blue as the light shut in. A slight breeze stirred in the hemlocks and spruces. It began to grow noticeably colder, too.

But as the daylight died another light, a wonderful mystic glory of radiance, began to glow in the northern sky. Against its wavering, shimmering, unearthly splendor every twig on every tree stood out as though carved in blackest ebony. The brush was shrouded in deepest sable, and the shadows lay upon the snow as black as a crow's wing.

Everywhere was a deep, breathless hush, except where the light wind caused a huddled mass of snow on an interlaced branch to slip ground-ward. The great solitudes appeared to be composing themselves for sleep. On the hard, frozen surface the boys' snowshoes creaked almost metallically as they pressed on, following in the dimming light the two parallel lines that had begun to burn themselves into their brains.

They knew when they set out that it was going to prove a stern chase; now they saw that unquestionably it was likewise to be a long one. How long they could not guess. They passed a small stream. In the silence they could hear the ice "crack-cracking!" with that startling sound that is one of the most mystic of the voices of the woods. It grew bitterly cold. Tom began to look anxiously about him. They must find a lodging for the night. The question of sleeping in the open did not bother him. Timber was plenty, and they could make an evergreen shelter and soon have a roaring fire to warm their blood. He was merely prospecting for a place that looked a likely one.

And then, suddenly, something happened that sent an involuntary chill running up and down the spines of both boys.

From the westward, through the long, melancholy aisles of straight-trunked trees, the sound had come. Out of the silence it was borne with a chilling forboding to them. It was a long-flung, indescribably forlorn sound, and seemed to fill the silences, coming from no definite spot after an instant's listening.

It deepened and swelled, died away and rose like the sound of distant church bells. Then, while they stood listening, involuntarily brought to a swift, startled halt, it died out uncannily, sinkingly, and the silence shut down again.

“It’s the wolves!” said Tom in a low, rather awestruck voice.

The boy was right. The gray rangers of the big timbers were abroad seeking their meat from God.

CHAPTER VII – IN THE TRAPPER’S HUT

Now, to a reader who has never been a woodsman, who has never penetrated the silences that lie north of Fifty-three, the word “wolves” conveys a distinct impression of uneasiness.

The cold fact is that the northern woodsman stands rather in contempt of wolves. He has no use for them, but he does not fear them; and the wolves for their part – except in some startling exceptions – leave mankind alone.

The boys had been long enough in the Northland to share this feeling, and it was not fear that brought them to a halt at the long, melancholy ululation that told them of the “gray brothers” wishing each other “good hunting.” It was quite another feeling: the sense of their isolation, that the moaning cry had brought sharply home to them, the loneliness of the solitudes about them, the possibly dangerous nature of their quest.

“Wow! but that sound always makes me shiver,” said Jack, glancing about him, as if he expected to see a gray head pop out from behind the trees at any moment.

“Yes, it never sounded very good to me, even when we were lying snugly in our bunks on the good old *Yukon Rover*,” agreed Tom. “I wish we could find some trapper’s shack or hut hereabouts. I wouldn’t mind making a good camp with some company around, for to-night anyhow.”

“Why, you talk as if we might be a long time in the woods,” said Jack, in rather dismayed tones.

“And so we may be, for it is up to us now to keep on that trail till we find the man that made it, or else run it out.”

Jack did not make any reply to this. His spirits had been good all day, and he had looked upon the chase rather in the light of an enjoyable adventure than anything else.

But now the twilight desolation, the fading line of light in the west and the long howl of hunting wolves, which ever and anon swelled and died out in the distance as they stood there, combined to give him a sense of forboding and creepiness.

Tom’s cheery voice aroused him.

“We can push on a way yet, anyhow,” his elder brother was saying; “even half a mile farther will be better than nothing, and who knows that we may not come on some Indian camp or trapper’s shack, where we can get a hot supper and find, maybe, some news of our visitor.”

Jack, thus admonished, roused himself. By an effort he put aside his gloomy thoughts. Side by side through the trees the two young adventurers forged ahead. But Jack soon began to sag behind. It was plain that he was beginning to get fagged. It was small wonder. They had come thirty-five miles that day, as Tom’s speedometer showed, which is a fair journey for a grown man, let alone boys. A seasoned woodsman can make fifty miles a day on snowshoes and pull up with no feeling but a huge appetite. But, although the boys were well muscled and used to following the trail, they could not hope to compete with the lifelong rangers of the forest in endurance.

Tom was just thinking of making camp right where they then were, in a grove of hemlocks and stunted spruces, when he gave a sudden cry of joy.

“Hurray! Jack, old boy! Talk about luck!”

“What’s up?”

“Don’t you know yet?”

“I do not.”

“Then you are a worse woodsman than I thought you.”

“You might explain. Have you gone crazy?”

“Not just yet. Don’t you smell anything?”

“Um – a-h-h-h! Yes, I do. Smoke.”

“Wood smoke, Jack, and wood smoke means a fire, and fire means a human being.”

“Yes, and a human being may – mean – may mean – ”

“Well?”

“A human being that may make us a lot of trouble; for instance, the man who stole that skin!”

“Cracky! It may be he! Wait right here till I creep ahead a little.”

Dodging here and there behind tree trunks, Tom stole cautiously forward. He made not a sound as he went except when now and again the snow creaked under his feet. As he moved, he was doing some rapid thinking.

All day long they had been striving with all their strength to get near the man of the long trail who had stolen their black fox skin. Yet now that he might be at hand, almost within earshot of them, Tom found his heart pounding in a most uncomfortable way. What kind of a man might he be? Perhaps some desperado who could easily overpower them. Perhaps there were even a gang of them.

All these discomfoting thoughts kept popping into Tom’s mind as he made his way onward as cautiously as a scout. But suddenly, as he bent forward, his rifle that he carried slung by a bandolier over his shoulders bumped his back. It was like a dose of magic elixir and brought his courage back in a flash.

“Well,” he thought, “if that rascal wants trouble, he can – ”

He came to a quick halt.

“Here’s the end of the trail!” he gasped.

Before him, not ten rods away and just over a slight rise, which had prevented his seeing it before, was a small log hut.

It stood on the brink of a little lake, the latter, of course, frozen many inches thick. About it was a clearing where the logs to build it had been felled. But what brought Tom up with a round turn was the sight of sleigh tracks leading up to the door.

From the chimney a thin wisp of bluish smoke was curling, undoubtedly the subtle aroma they had sensed at a distance. Tom stood as still as a graven image for a minute, listening intently. Over everything about him hung the hush of the wilderness at nightfall.

For a space he stood thus, and then, giving his rifle a quick hitch so that it would be in readiness to his hand, he strode forward on his snowshoes with long, certain strides.

CHAPTER VIII – THE GHOSTLY CRY

There was a big wood pile at one side of the hut, from which the owner evidently drew for his fuel supply. Tom used this as a sort of screen to conceal his advance, and, slipping behind it, gained a place where, through a chink in the logs, he could gaze into the interior. It was deserted. Of that he was sure immediately after his first glance, for the shack consisted only of the one room.

Having made sure of this, he continued his way around to the front of the place, and then discovered to his astonishment that the sled tracks went straight onward through the snow. It was easy for him to guess that the man they were pursuing had camped for a short time in the hut, cooked himself a meal and left the fire in the stove burning. When he saw several brown-paper cigarette butts lying scattered on the snow in front of the place, the identity of the visitor to the lonely hut became a certainty.

The problem of a place to pass the night was thus solved, for it is the rule of the waste places that the benighted traveler may make himself at home whenever he happens to come across a shelter. Tom gave a loud “Hullo!” and there came back an answering hail from Jack. In a few minutes the younger of the Bungalow Boys was at Tom’s side.

“Well, here’s our hotel, all ready and fixed up for us, even the fire lighted in readiness for us,” laughed Tom as Jack came up.

“But what does the owner say about it?”

“Not being at home just at present, he hasn’t anything to say; however, our friend of the black fox skin stopped here, rested his bones, fed his dogs, to judge from all the litter around, and then passed on.”

“But isn’t there a chance that he may come back?”

Jack spoke rather timidly. He was tired and a little nervous, and the thought that the fellow who had robbed them might be prowling about somewhere rather scared him.

“No danger of that. I wish he would. Then we could end this thing up right here.”

“Been inside yet?” asked Jack, by way of changing the subject.

“No; I waited for you. Come on, let’s go in and see what sort of a place it is and who lives in it. I guess it belongs to a trapper, all right, from the looks of it.”

An inspection of the big room inside proved the correctness of Tom’s surmise. Traps of all sorts and sizes were littered about the room or hanging on nails. A rough table, chairs formed out of boxes, the stove, whose smoke had first caught their attention, and some pots, pans and other equipment completed the furnishings. In one corner was a rough bunk containing dirty bedding.

One thing caught Tom’s eye immediately, and that was a barrel in one corner of the place. All about it several small skins such as beaver, marten and weasel were scattered on the floor. Closer inspection showed that the barrel contained some more of the same kind of pelts. It looked as if somebody had hastily rummaged through the barrel of skins and selected what he wanted.

“I’ll bet that rascal who stole the black fox has been on a raiding expedition here, too,” cried Tom indignantly. “What a shame!”

“Yes, looks as if he’d helped himself,” agreed Jack, unstrapping his pack and taking off his snowshoes.

They spread their provisions out on the table, got in plenty of wood and water, and lighted a coal-oil lamp which they found on a shelf. When the door was shut and secured by a big wooden bar which was adjusted from within, they set about getting supper. In the yellow lamplight, with the kettle singing on the stove and some jerked meat bubbling in a sort of stew Tom had fixed up, the place looked quite cosy and homelike.

“Wonder how poor old Sandy is getting along?” said Jack, as they sat down to eat.

“Oh, he’ll be all right,” replied Tom. “Of course, he’ll be lonesome and all that, but he’s quite safe unless some other fellow takes it into his head to come a-raiding.”

“Well, lightning never strikes twice in the same place,” responded Jack, “and it is hardly likely that a second thief would come along so soon.”

“Just what I think,” agreed Tom.

Having finished their supper, they washed up the dishes and set about preparing to make everything snug for the night. From time to time they could hear the distant howling of the wolves, but that only made the hut seem more snug and secure.

“I wonder what the owner would say if he found us making ourselves so very much at home?” said Jack, as he inspected the none too clean bedding.

“Oh, he would be glad to see us, I guess,” replied Tom. “Visitors are welcome in this wilderness, and as for making ourselves at home that is the right of every traveler in the woods when he needs hospitality and the host happens to be out.”

“Still, I don’t imagine the hospitality includes helping yourself to skins, like that rascal we’re trailing did.”

“I hardly should think so,” rejoined Tom dryly. “Fellows like that don’t have a bed of roses when they are caught. It is as bad as horse stealing in the West.”

“I know I can think of a good many punishments fitting for the rascal who stole our black fox.”

“So can I, without straining my imaginative powers, either.”

Both lads were thoroughly exhausted by their labors of the day, and after a little more talk they made up a good roaring fire to keep the hut warm through the night, and turned into the bunk. For some little time they lay awake, listening to the crackling of the blaze and the sighing of the wind which was stirring outside.

From time to time, too, they could still hear the howling of the wolf pack, and occasionally the night air would ring with the sharp cry of some small animal pounced upon by a great snow owl or a weasel. But both lads were well used to these sounds of the northern night, and it was not long before their senses began to swim and they dropped off into sound and refreshing sleep.

Just what time it was when they both awakened together they did not know, but the cause of their sudden arousing was a startling one. Borne to their ears there had come a strange sound, a long, low, howling sort of moan.

“Wow-ow! Ow-hoo-ha-hoo-wow-w-w-w-w-w!”

That is about as nearly as the sound can be indicated in print.

Both boys sat bolt upright, wide-eyed with alarm. Jack felt the skin on the back of his scalp tighten as he listened. The lamp had been left alight, although it was turned low, and in the dim light each lad could read fear and perplexity in the other’s countenance.

“Wh-wh-what is it?” gasped out Jack.

“I der-der-don’t know,” stuttered Tom, equally at a loss and almost as badly disturbed by the weird nature of the wailing cry.

CHAPTER IX – TOM CALMS JACK’S FEARS

“Wow-yow-wyow-ow-oo-oo-oo!”

Again came the cry, punctuating the night in the same ghastly, unaccountable manner.

“Is it wer-wer-wer-wolves?” stammered Jack.

Tom shook his head.

“Nothing like them. It beats me what it can be. I never heard such a sound.”

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