

Stratemeyer Edward

**To Alaska for Gold: or, The
Fortune Hunters of the Yukon**



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«Public Domain»

Stratemeyer E.

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PREFACE

"To Alaska for Gold" forms the third volume of the "Bound to Succeed" Series. Like the preceding tales, this story is complete in itself.

The rush to the far-away territory of Alaska, when gold in large quantities was discovered upon Klondike Creek, was somewhat similar to the rush to California in years gone by. The gold fever spread to even the remotest of our hamlets, and men, young and old, poured forth, ready to endure every hardship if only the much-coveted prize might be secured. That many succeeded and that many more failed is now a matter of history, although of recent date.

In this story are related the adventures of two Maine boys who leave their home among the lumbermen, travel to California, there to join their uncle, an experienced miner, and several other men, and start on the long trip to the Klondike by way of Dyea, Chilkoot Pass, and the lakes and streams forming the headwaters of the mighty Yukon River. After many perils the gold district is reached, and here a summer and winter are passed, the former in hunting for the precious metal and the latter in a never ending struggle to sustain life until the advent of spring.

In writing the description of this new El Dorado the author has endeavored to be as accurate as possible, and has consulted, for this purpose, the leading authorities on Alaska and its resources, as well as digested the sometimes tedious, but, nevertheless, always interesting, government reports covering this subject. Regarding the personal experiences of his heroes he would add that nearly every incident cited has been taken from life, as narrated by those who joined in the frenzied rush to the new gold fields.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

Newark, N. J.,
April 1, 1899.

CHAPTER I. A LETTER FROM THE WEST

"It is not a question of what we should like to do, Randy; it is a question of what we must do."

"I know it, Earl. One thing is certain: the way matters stand we can't pay the quarter's rent for this timber land to-morrow unless we borrow the money, and where we are going for it I haven't the least idea."

"Nor I. It's a pity the Jackson Lumber Company had to go to pieces. I wonder where Jackson is."

"In Canada most likely. They would put him in jail if they could catch him, and he knows it."

"He ought to be put in jail!" burst out Earl, who was the elder of the two Portney brothers. "That two hundred dollars he cheated us out of would just put us on our feet. But without it we can't even pay bills now owing; and Caleb Norcross is just aching to sell this land to Dan Roland."

"If we have to get out, what are we to do?" questioned Randy, soberly. "I don't believe we can get work, unless we go into the woods as mere choppers."

"We shall have to do something," was Earl's unsatisfactory response.

The Portney brothers lived upon a small timber claim in the state of Maine. Their parents had died three years before, from injuries received in a terrible forest fire, which had at that time swept the locality. The family had never been rich, and after the sad affair the boys were left to shift for themselves. The father had owned an interest in a timber claim, and this had been sold for three hundred dollars, and with the proceeds the two brothers had rented another claim and gone to work to get out lumber for a new company which had begun operations in the vicinity.

Earl was now eighteen years of age, and Randolph, or Randy, as he was always called, was nearly seventeen. Both lads were so tall, well-built, and muscular, that they appeared older. Neither had had a real sickness in his life, and the pair were admirably calculated, physically, to cope with the hardships which came to them later.

The collapse of the new lumber combination, and the running away of its head man, Aaron Jackson, had proved a serious blow to their prospects. As has been intimated, the company owed them two hundred dollars for timber, and, as not a cent was forthcoming, they found themselves in debt, not only for the quarter's rent for the land they were working, but also at the general supply store at the village of Basco, three miles away. The boys had worked hard, early and late, to make both ends meet, and it certainly looked as if they did not deserve the hard luck which had befallen them.

It was supper time, and the pair had just finished a scanty meal of beans, bread, and the remains of a brook trout Randy had been lucky enough to catch before breakfast. Randy threw himself down on the doorstep, while Earl washed and dried the few dishes.

"I wonder if we can't get something out of the lumber company," mused the younger brother, as he gazed meditatively at his boots, which were sadly in need of soling and heeling. "They've lots of timber on hand."

"All covered by a mortgage to some Boston concern," replied Earl. "I asked Squire Dobson about it. He said we shouldn't get a penny."

"Humph!" Randy drew a deep breath. "By the way, has Squire Dobson learned anything about Fred, yet?"

"He's pretty sure Fred ran away to New York."

"I can't understand why he should run away from such a good home, can you? You wouldn't catch me doing it."

"He ran away because he didn't want to finish studying. Fred always was a wild Dick. I shouldn't wonder if he ended up by going out West to hunt Indians." Earl gave a short laugh. "He'll have his eye-teeth cut one of these days. Hullo, here comes Caleb Norcross now!"

Earl was looking up the winding road through the woods, and, gazing in the direction, Randy saw a tall, lean individual, astride a bony horse, riding swiftly toward the cabin.

"Well, boys, what's the best word?" was the sharp greeting given by Caleb Norcross, as he came to a halt at the cabin door.

"I don't know as there is any best word, Mr. Norcross," replied Earl, quietly.

"I was over to Bill Stiger's place and thought if I could see you to-night about the rent money, it would save you a three miles' trip to-morrow."

"You know we can't pay you just at present, Mr. Norcross," went on Earl. "The suspension of the lumber company has left us in the lurch."

The face of the tall, lean man darkened. "How much did they stick you for?" he asked abruptly.

"Two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred dollars! You were fools to trust 'em that much. I wouldn't have trusted 'em a cent – not a penny."

"They were well recommended," put in Randy. "Even Squire Dobson trusted them."

"That don't make no difference. I don't trust folks unless I know what I'm doing. Although I did trust you boys," added Caleb Norcross, hastily. "Your father was always a straight man."

"And we are straight, too," burst out Randy, stung by the insinuation. "You shall have your money, if only you will give us a little time."

"How are you going to get it?"

"We'll earn it," said Earl. "I am sure we can get out enough timber by fall to square accounts."

"That won't do for me – not at all. If you can't pay up to-morrow, you can consider your claim on the land at an end."

"You won't give us any time?"

"No. I can sell this whole section to Dan Roland, and I'm going to do it."

"You are very hard-hearted, Mr. Norcross," began Randy, when a look from his elder brother silenced him.

"I ain't hard-hearted – I'm only looking after my own," growled Caleb Norcross. "If I let things run, I'd do as the lumber company did – bust up. So you can't pay, nohow?"

"No, we can't pay," answered Earl.

"Then I'll expect you to quit by to-morrow noon."

Without waiting for another word, Caleb Norcross turned around his bony steed and urged him forward. In less than a minute he had disappeared in the direction whence he had come. With sinking hearts the boys watched him out of sight.

The blow they had dreaded had fallen, and for several seconds neither spoke. Then Randy, who had pulled off one boot, flung it across the kitchen floor.

"I don't care, he can have his old place," he cried angrily. "We'll never get rich here, if we stay a hundred years. I'm sick and tired of cutting timber just for one's meals!"

"It's all well enough to talk so, Randy," was the elder brother's cautious response. "But where are we to go if we leave here?"

"Oh, anywhere! We might try our luck down in Bangor, or maybe Boston."

Earl smiled faintly. "We'd cut pretty figures in a city, I'm thinking, after a life in the backwoods."

"A backwoods boy became President."

"Do you wish to try for the presidency?"

"No; but it shows what can be done; and I'm tired of drudging in the woods, without any excitement or anything new from one year's end to another. Father and mother gave us pretty good educations, and we ought to make the most of that."

"I knew he wanted to sell this land to Dan Roland," went on Earl, after a pause. "I fancy he is going to get a good price, too."

"If Roland pays over five hundred dollars he will get cheated. The timber at the south end is good for nothing."

The boys entered the cabin, lit the lamp, and sat down to discuss the situation. It was far from promising, and, an hour later, each retired to bed in a very uneasy frame of mind. They were up before daybreak, and at breakfast Earl announced his intention to go to Basco and see what could be done.

"You might as well stay at home," he continued. "It may be Norcross will come back and reconsider matters."

"Not he!" exclaimed Randy; nevertheless, he promised to remain and look over some clothing which needed mending, for these sturdy lads were in the habit of doing everything for themselves, even to sewing up rents and darning socks. Such are the necessities of real life in the backwoods.

It was a bright sunny morning, well calculated to cheer any one's spirits, yet Randy felt far from light-hearted when left alone. He could not help but wonder what would happen next.

"We've got just twenty-eight dollars and a half in cash left," he mused, as he set to work to replace some buttons on one of Earl's working shirts. "And we owe about six dollars at the general store, three dollars and a quarter for those new axes and the coffee mill, and twenty to Norcross. Heigh-ho! but it's hard lines to be poor, with one's nose continually to the grindstone. I wonder if we shouldn't have done better if we had struck out, as Uncle Foster did six years ago? He has seen a lot of the world and made money besides."

Earl had expected to be gone the best part of the forenoon, and Randy was surprised, at half-past nine, to see his elder brother returning from the village. Earl was walking along the road at the top of his speed, and as he drew closer, he held up a letter.

"It's a letter from Uncle Foster!" he cried, as soon as he was within speaking distance. "It's got such wonderful news in it that I thought I ought to come home with it at once."

"Wonderful news?" repeated Randy. "What does he say?"

"He says he is going back to Alaska, – to some new gold field that has just been discovered there, – and he wants to know if we will go with him."

CHAPTER II. THE BOYS REACH A DECISION

"Uncle Foster is going back to Alaska?" said Randy, slowly.

"Yes; he is going to start almost immediately, too," added his elder brother. "He says the new gold diggings are something immense, and he wants to stake a claim at the earliest possible date."

Randy drew a long breath. To Alaska! What a tremendous trip that would be – five thousand miles at least! And going to such an almost unknown region would be very much like starting for the north pole.

He remembered well that his Uncle Foster had paid a visit to Alaska three years previous, sailing from San Francisco to St. Michael's Island and then taking a Yukon River steamboat to a trading camp known as Fort Cudahy. They had received several letters from him while he was up there, working for the Alaskan Transportation Company part of the time and hunting for gold whenever the opportunity offered. The letters had told of the intense cold and the suffering, and of numerous unsuccessful attempts to strike a paying claim around Fort Cudahy and at another camp, known as Circle City. His uncle had taken up several claims, but they had not panned out very well, and Mr. Portney had finally returned to the United States, to interest himself in a Colorado silver mine.

"Let me see the letter," said Randy, and Earl handed it over. "I don't see how we are to pay our way to Alaska or anywhere else," added the younger boy, ruefully, as he opened the epistle.

"You will see presently," rejoined Earl. "Read it aloud. Uncle writes such a twisted hand, I want to make sure I read aright." And Randy started at once: —

Creede, Col., April 5.

"My dear Nephews: – I suppose you have been looking for a letter from me all winter, but the fact is I have been away from this vicinity since last December. A man from British Columbia wanted me to buy an interest in a gold mine at a settlement called Dunbar's, and I went with him. The mine proved to be worthless, and I left Dunbar's, and went to Victoria, and stayed there until three weeks ago.

"While I was in Victoria, I ran across two miners whom I had met while at Fort Cudahy in Alaska. They reported that a new gold field had been discovered farther up the Yukon River, at a place known as Klondike Creek. There had been an exodus from Circle City and Fort Cudahy to this new region, and a camp known as Dawson City had been started. They said that there were about a dozen small creeks flowing into the Klondike and into the Yukon at this point, and that it was reported and proved that the entire district was rich with gold.

"I was chary of believing the men at first, for I know only too well how many wild-cat reports start up in every mining camp. But a couple of days later I heard another report from Juneau, Alaska, to the effect that several miners had come down from this same territory by way of the lakes and Chilkoot Pass, and had brought with them over thirty-five thousand dollars in nuggets and gold dust, taken out of a place called Hunker's Creek, which runs into the Klondike.

"From these reports, and from others which are floating around, I am convinced that they have at last struck the rich vein of yellow metal which I always believed would be located there, and I am now making preparations to try my luck again in that territory, and if you two boys want to go along and think you can stand the climate, which is something awful for nine months in the year, I'll see you through. I do not know how you are fixed for cash, but I have been lucky in Colorado, and I will pay all expenses, providing you will agree to remain with me for two years, working as I work, for a one-half interest in all our discoveries – that is, a one-quarter interest to each of you and a one-half interest to myself. The expense of a year's trip to Alaska by the route we shall take, over the

mountain pass, will be between six and eight hundred dollars each, for we shall have to take nearly all our outfits – clothing, tools, and provisions – along.

"I am now on the point of starting for San Francisco, and shall arrive there probably before this letter reaches you. My address will be the Palace Hotel, and I wish you to telegraph me immediately, at my expense, if you will go or not. Do not attempt to accept my offer unless both of you are perfectly well and strong and willing to stand great hardships, for the sake of what we may have the good luck to find. And if you do go, don't blame me if we are all disappointed, and come home poorer than we went.

"If you accept the offer, I will telegraph you sufficient money to Messrs. Bartwell & Stone, Boston, to pay your fare to San Francisco, and I shall expect to see you at the latter city before the 20th of the month, for I am going to start for the new gold fields, even if I have to go with strangers, as soon as possible. With love to you both, I remain,

*"Your affectionate uncle,
"Foster C. Portney."*

"Oh, Earl, let's go!" burst from Randy's lips as he finished the long letter. "This is just what I've been waiting for. Let's go to Alaska and make our fortunes!"

"Go to Alaska and be frozen to death, you mean," replied Earl; yet he smiled even as he spoke. "Do you know that the thermometer goes down to forty degrees below zero out there in winter?"

"Well, we're used to roughing it out here in these woods."

"These woods can't hold a candle to Alaska for barrenness, Randy. Think of a winter nine months long and ice all the year round! Uncle said in one of his other letters, that the ground never thawed out more than a few feet, excepting in favored localities."

"Do you mean to say you'll let such a splendid chance slip by?" demanded the younger lad, straightening up and looking his brother full in the face. "And let it slip, too, when we're in such trouble here?"

"No, I didn't say that, Randy. But we ought to consider the matter carefully before we make up our minds. According to the letter we'll have to spend at least two years in the gold fields."

"I'll spend ten if I can make money."

"Uncle said in that other letter that no one seemed to care to stay in the upper portion of Alaska more than two or three years at a time."

"Well, I'm in for the trip, heart and soul. Hurrah for the – what's the name of that creek? – Klondike! Hurrah for the Klondike! I wonder if it's on the map."

Randy rushed over to the little shelf which contained all the school-books the family had ever possessed, and brought forth a large geography, much the worse for wear. There was no separate map of Alaska, but there was one of North America, and this he scanned with interest.

"Here's the Yukon and here's the Porcupine and the Pelly rivers, but I don't see any Klondike," he said seriously. "I wonder where it can be."

"You can't expect to find a little creek on a map that shows up the Yukon River as less than two inches long," said Earl. "Why, the Yukon is between two and three thousand miles long. Circle City must be up there," he continued, pointing to where the Yukon touched the 144° of longitude, "and if that's so, this new gold field can't be so very far off, although in such a great territory a few hundred miles this way or that are hardly counted."

"But you'll go, won't you, Earl?" pleaded Randy, as he restored the geography to the shelf. "We'll never make more than our pork and beans out here in the woods."

Earl picked up a small stick from the fireplace and brought out his pocket-knife. He always had to go to whittling when he wanted to do some hard thinking. "If we accepted Uncle Foster's invitation to come to San Francisco, there would be no turning back," he remarked, after a moment of silence.

"We shouldn't want to turn back as soon as that."

"And we couldn't turn back after we once got into Alaska. There is no such thing as travelling back and forth between the months of October and May. The rivers freeze up, and everything is snow and ice."

"Well, we'd have plenty of provisions – Uncle would be sure to see to that. We've got to vacate here, you must remember, in a day or two."

Again Earl was silent. He had sharpened up one end of the stick, and now he turned to the other. "I wonder where we could telegraph from best," he said at last.

Randy's eyes lit up instantly, and he caught his big brother by the shoulder. "Good for you, Earl; I knew you would say yes!" he cried. "Why, we can telegraph from Spruceville, can't we?"

"We can if they'll trust us for the telegram."

"If they won't, I'll pay for it. I'm not going to let such a chance slide by. The thing of it is," Randy added, sobering down suddenly, "how are we to get to Boston to get the money Uncle intends to send on?"

"We'll have to sell off our things here. They'll bring in something, although not much."

"Good! I never thought of that."

For two hours the boys talked matters over, and in the excitement dinner was entirely forgotten. Then a telegram was prepared which ran as follows: —

"Will sell out and come on as soon as possible."

It was agreed that Earl should send the message from Spruceville, a town four miles beyond Basco. This was a seven miles' tramp, but he did not mind it, having walked the distance many times previously. He procured a bite to eat, and with the letter from his uncle in his pocket he started off. He intended to show the letter to the telegraph operator in case the man should hesitate to send the message with charges to be paid at the other end.

At Basco, Earl met a number of workmen of the district, among whom was Tom Roland, the brother of the lumberman who intended to buy the timber land from Caleb Norcross. Roland was a man whom nobody liked, and Earl passed him without a word, although it was evident from Roland's manner that the latter desired to stop for a talk. With Tom Roland was a fellow named Guardley, a ne'er-do-well, who had been up before the squire on more than one occasion for drinking and stealing. The reader will do well to remember both Tom Roland and Guardley, for they are destined to play a most important part in the chapters which follow.

The middle of the afternoon had passed before Earl struck the outskirts of Spruceville and made his way to the little railroad station where was located the telegraph office. His errand was soon explained to the young man in charge, and he felt in his pocket to bring forth the slip of paper Randy had written out, and his uncle's letter.

To his consternation both were missing. He remembered well where he had placed them, yet to make sure he searched his clothing thoroughly. His search was useless. The message and the letter were gone.

CHAPTER III. A FALSE IDENTIFICATION

"Gone!"

That was the single word which dropped from Earl's lips as he stood at the window of the telegraph office at Spruceville and hunted for the missing letter from his Uncle Foster. He cared nothing for the message, – that could easily be rewritten, – but the letter was highly important.

Not finding it about his person, he commenced to retrace his steps with his eyes on the ground. An hour was spent in this manner, and then he returned slowly to the office.

"I want to send a message to San Francisco, and I had a letter with me to show that it was all right," he explained. "Will you send the message anyhow and collect at the other end? The man who is to receive the message wanted it sent that way."

The telegraph operator mused for a moment. Then he asked Earl who he was and where he lived, and finally said he guessed it would be all right. The message was again written out, and ten minutes later it was on its long journey westward, by way of Boston. The business finished, Earl thanked the operator and started on his return home.

He was very much out of sorts with himself, and wondered what his younger brother would think of him. "I needn't find fault with Randy for being careless after this," he sighed, almost bitterly. "I'm as bad as he is, and worse. One thing is a comfort, though: I remember the name of that Boston firm that is to provide us with our money – Bartwell & Stone. I had better make a note of that." And he did.

The evening shadows were beginning to fall when Basco was again reached. On the main street of the little town Earl halted to think matters over. Why wouldn't it be a good thing to let folks know that they wanted to sell out their household goods and their tools and other things? He made his way to the general store.

"Well, Portney, I heard you had been put off your place," was the greeting received from the general storekeeper.

"We have not been put off – we are going to leave it, Mr. Andrews."

"Oh! Where are you going?"

"To Alaska."

"Alaska? You must be joking."

"No, sir. My uncle, Foster Portney, has sent for Randy and me to come to San Francisco, and the three of us are going to some new gold fields."

"Well, what about my bill?" asked the storekeeper, anxiously. He was interested in but little outside of his business. "Of course that has got to be settled before you leave."

"We will pay up, never fear. But we want to sell off all our stuff first. Will you let me write out a notice to that effect and post it outside?"

"Yes, you can do that. Going to sell off, eh? What have you got?"

Earl enumerated the various articles he and Randy had listed to sell. They were not of great value, and the storekeeper smiled grimly.

"They won't bring much."

"They ought to bring thirty or forty dollars."

"You'll be lucky to get ten."

"Ten dollars won't see us through. We have got to get enough to pay our bills and secure our passage down to Boston."

"And how much will that be?" questioned Peleg Andrews, cautiously. Earl made a rapid calculation. With the money already on hand and that owing for tools and groceries, twenty-five dollars ought to see them through.

"We must have thirty dollars for the stuff."

Peleg Andrews said no more, but turned away to wait on a customer that had just come in. Procuring sheets of paper, Earl set to work and penned two notices, both alike, stating that the goods and chattels of the Portney brothers would be sold within the next three days, to the highest bidders, and a list of the articles followed. One of the notices was tacked up in front of the store and the other in front of the hotel, and then Earl returned home.

As the big brother had expected, Randy was much put out about the loss of the letter, but he was glad that Earl had gone ahead, nevertheless, and before he retired that night, he brought forth some of the articles to be sold, and mended and cleaned them up.

The two were eating breakfast when the first prospective buyer rode up in a farm wagon. It was a lumberman from over the ridge behind Basco, who was thinking of settling down to cabin life by himself. He made an offer of fifteen dollars for everything in sight, but Earl held out for forty dollars.

The man was about to drive away, when a second lumberman drove up, followed by Peleg Andrews in his store wagon. Both of the newcomers were eager to buy, although they affected indifference. Bidding became rather lively, and at last the goods were split up between the first comer and the storekeeper, the former paying thirty dollars and the latter twenty dollars for what they got. This made fifty dollars in all, and out of this amount Earl settled with Peleg Andrews on the spot.

It was while the men were loading the goods preparatory to taking them away, that Caleb Norcross appeared. He had expected to make a cheap purchase, and was keenly disappointed to find he was too late.

"Getting out, eh?" he ventured.

"Yes," answered Earl, briefly. "You can have your keys in a couple of hours. Here is your money."

"I ain't in any hurry," grumbled the landlord.

"Isn't Dan Roland going to take the property?" asked Randy, curiously.

"No, he backed out last night," answered Caleb Norcross, and to avoid being questioned further he moved away.

Fortunately for the two boys, there was an old trunk in the cabin, and also a small wooden box which could be made to hold clothing, and these they packed with such effects as they intended to take along. A bargain was struck with the man who had failed to purchase any of the other goods, and the two boxes were placed in his wagon, and then the lads were ready to leave the spot which had been their home for many years.

"Well, I'm sure I wish you success," said Peleg Andrews, as he shook each by the hand. "But it looks foolhardy to me – going away off to Alaska."

"You'll be glad enough to come back home, see if you don't," put in Caleb Norcross. He did not offer to shake hands, at which the boys were just as well satisfied. In a minute more the brothers were up beside the lumberman on the wagon seat, the whip cracked, and the horse started; and the long trip to Alaska could be said to have fairly begun.

A stop was made at Basco, where Earl settled up such bills as still remained unpaid, and then the horse set off on a trot for Spruceville, which was reached less than three-quarters of an hour later. At the latter place a way train for Bangor was due, and they had barely time to procure tickets and get their baggage checked before it came along and took them on board.

"We've made a flying start and no mistake," was Randy's comment, as he leaned back in the cushioned seat. "Two days ago we never dreamed of going to Alaska or anywhere else."

"I hope we haven't any cause to regret our hasty action," answered Earl, gravely. Then he immediately brightened up. "But we've started now, so let us make the most of it."

The ride over the rough roads had made them hungry, but they had to wait until Bangor was reached before they could obtain anything to eat. It was late in the evening when the train rolled into the station and they alighted. Both boys had been in Bangor several times, so they did not feel quite like strangers. Having obtained supper at a restaurant, they made their way to the river docks and asked concerning the boat for Boston, having decided to make that trip by water. The boat was in, and having procured their passage, they were privileged to go on board and sleep there over-night.

The trip to Boston was an uneventful one, although full of novelty to Earl and Randy, who had never taken such a voyage before. They might have enjoyed it still more had they not been so anxious concerning what was before them. Alas! little did they dream of all the grave perils the future held in store.

"We don't want to look too green," said Earl, when the steamboat was tying up at her wharf and the passengers were preparing to go ashore.

"Oh, I guess we'll pass in a crowd," said Randy, laughing. "All we want to look out for is that we are not robbed, or something like that."

Leaving their baggage on check, the two boys started from Foster's wharf up into the city. They had no idea where the firm of Bartwell & Stone were located, but Earl was certain they could easily be found by consulting a directory.

The elder brother was on the point of entering a large store in quest of the book mentioned when Randy pulled his arm and pointed down the street. "There goes a fire engine, Earl!" he cried. "Let's follow it. I should like to see how they manage a fire in a city."

Earl was willing, and away they went, easily keeping up with the engine, which had to proceed slowly through the crowded thoroughfare. The fire was in a paint and oil works, and burnt fiercely for over an hour before it was gotten under control. The boys lingered around, watching the movements of the firemen with keen interest, and it was two hours later before Earl caught Randy by the shoulder and hauled him out of the mob of people.

"Remember, we're bound for Alaska," he said. "We can't afford to stop at every sight on the way."

A few blocks further on a directory was found in a drug store and the address of Bartwell & Stone jotted down. They lost no further time in hunting up the firm of bankers and brokers, who occupied the ground floor of a substantial business structure.

"I am Earl Portney," explained Earl, to the clerk who asked them what they wanted. "This is my brother Randolph. Our uncle, Foster Portney, said he would send on some money for us from San Francisco. Has it arrived yet?"

"I'll see. Was it a telegraph order?"

"I suppose so."

The clerk disappeared into an inner apartment, to be gone several minutes. When he came out he was accompanied by a tall, sharp-eyed man in rusty black.

"These are not the young men who called for the money," said the man in rusty black. "There must be some mistake here."

"Were the other men identified, Mr. Stone?" questioned the clerk, while both Randy and Earl pricked up their ears.

"Oh, yes; a clerk from Johnston's restaurant identified them as Earl and Randolph Portney. Besides, they held the original letter which had been sent by their uncle, Foster Portney, from San Francisco."

CHAPTER IV. A SERIOUS SET-BACK

Earl and Randy could scarcely believe their ears. What was this gentleman in rusty black saying, that two men had been identified as themselves and had called for the money sent on by their Uncle Foster?

"There is a mistake somewhere," said the clerk, turning to the brothers. "You say you are Earl and Randolph Portney?"

"We are," both replied, in a breath.

"Two men were here not two hours ago and were identified as the ones to receive the money. They had a letter from their uncle, in which he wanted them to come to San Francisco and join him in a trip to Alaska."

"That letter was ours!" burst out Earl. "I lost it a couple of days ago."

The clerk turned to the elderly gentleman, who looked more serious than ever.

"Have you any idea who those men were?" asked the gentleman.

"They were a couple of thieves, that's certain," said Randy, bluntly. "The money was to come to us and nobody else."

"Where did you lose that letter?"

"I lost it on the road between Naddy Brook and Spruceville," replied Earl, and gave some of the particulars. The full story of his uncle's offer to Randy and himself followed, to which Mr. Stone listened closely. He was a fair judge of human nature, and saw at once that the two boys were no sharpers and that their story was most likely true.

"Well, if you are the real Portney brothers, we are out exactly three hundred dollars," he said, after considerable talking. "I paid over that money in good faith, too, on the strength of the letter and the identification."

"We had nothing to do with that," answered Earl, stoutly, feeling he must stand up for his rights.

"Of course not, but – Just wait here a few minutes, and I'll try to find that clerk from the restaurant who identified the rascals."

Mr. Stone put on a silk hat and went out, to be gone nearly or quite half an hour. He returned accompanied by another man – a police official – to whom the particulars of the occurrence had been given.

"That identification was also part of the swindle," the broker explained. "I could not find the clerk at the restaurant, and I am convinced now that he was not the man he made me believe he was."

"But what about our money?" said Earl, coldly, thinking the broker might try to shift the responsibility of the affair.

"If you can find some reliable party known to us to identify you, I will pay the sum to you," was the answer. "But I've got to be sure of the identification this time – and you can't blame me for that," added the broker, with a short laugh.

"No, we can't blame you for that," repeated Earl, yet at the same time wondering who there was in that strange city who knew them.

"I don't know of any one here who knows us," put in Randy, reading his elder brother's thought. "I wish Uncle had sent the money in some other way."

"See here," put in the police official. "Since those swindlers had the letter that was lost up near where you come from, perhaps you know the men. Mr. Stone, can't you describe them?"

As well as he was able the broker did so. But the description was so indefinite that both Earl and Randy shook their heads.

"I know a dozen men who look a good deal like that description," said the older brother. "It's possible they were lumbermen like ourselves."

"Yes, they did look like lumbermen," replied Mr. Stone. "That is why I was not so particular about their identification."

For another half hour the matter was talked over, and then as it was getting time to close up the office for the day, Earl and Randy left, to find some one to identify them, were such a thing possible. At the corner of the block both halted.

"I'm blessed if I know what to do," were Randy's words. "I can't think of a soul who knows us here."

"There used to be a man named Curtis Gordon who once lived at Basco – he owned the feed mill there. He came to Boston and started a flour business. But whether he would remember me is a question. He hasn't seen me in about eight years."

"We might try him – it would be better than nothing!" cried Randy, eagerly. "Let us hunt him up in the directory."

This was done, and they found Mr. Curtis Gordon's place of business after a search lasting over an hour. Several clerks were in attendance who supplied the information that Mr. Gordon had gone to New York, and would not be back for two days.

"Stumped again," murmured Randy, dismally. "Did you ever see such luck!"

"Never give up," answered Earl, as cheerfully as he could. "I wonder if Mrs. Gordon lives in town."

"What if she does?"

"I'd call on her, and perhaps she can help us out. She used to know me."

From the clerks in the store they received the Gordons' home address. It was a fine place on the Back Bay, and it was nightfall by the time the boys reached it. They were ushered into the waiting-hall by a servant, who immediately went off to notify her mistress, who was at dinner.

From the dining-room came a murmur of talking, and one of the voices sounded strangely familiar to Earl. "Hark, Randy," he whispered. "Isn't that Squire Dobson speaking?"

"It is!" ejaculated Randy. "We are saved at last!"

Mrs. Gordon came to them a minute later, having excused herself to her guest. The boys' mission was soon explained, Earl at the same time offering an excuse for calling at the meal hour. He mentioned Squire Dobson, and that individual was called from the table.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the squire of Basco, a short, stout, and rather jolly type of a country official. "I didn't expect to see you in Boston, although I heard yesterday that you were bound for Alaska or some such place. Mrs. Gordon, these are Daniel Portney's boys, – you must remember Daniel Portney, – the one who lost his life in that dreadful forest fire up our way some years ago."

Mrs. Gordon did remember, and she gave both lads a warm greeting. It was several minutes before Earl could get down to business, and then the matter of identification was left to Squire Dobson, who said he would see them through in the morning, as soon as the Bartwell & Stone offices were open.

"I don't know them," he said, "but I know some bankers on the same block, and we can introduce each other."

Mrs. Gordon was glad enough to see some folks from the district which had once been her home, and asked the brothers to partake of dinner with the squire and her family of boys and girls. After some hesitation, the invitation was accepted, and two hours were spent at the mansion.

During the course of this time it was learned by Earl and Randy that Squire Dobson had come down from Maine in search of his son, a happy-go-lucky lad, who had run away from home, as previously mentioned. The squire had heard from a friend that Fred had been seen near the docks in Boston, but he had been unable so far to locate the wayward youth.

"I'm afraid he has either gone to New York or on some long ocean trip," said the squire to Earl. "He's a foolish boy and is causing me no end of trouble. If you ever run across him, send him home at once."

"I will – if he'll go," answered Earl; but neither he nor Randy ever dreamed of meeting Fred Dobson where they did.

The visit over, the brothers left, to hunt up some cheap hotel at which to stop for the night. This was an easy matter, and at ten o'clock they retired. A sound sleep, however, was out of the question, for both were anxious concerning the outcome of their dealings with Bartwell & Stone.

Promptly at the hour appointed they met the squire at the office of the brokers and bankers. Another banker, well known to both Squire Dobson and to Mr. Stone, was introduced all around, and thus Randy and Earl's identification was established beyond a doubt. This accomplished, Earl received three hundred dollars in cash, for which he and Randy signed a receipt; and the transaction was over.

Just outside of the office, the boys separated from the squire of Basco, and the former lost no time in making their way to the depot of the New York & New England Railroad.

"I don't know what route is best to take to San Francisco," said Earl. "I guess we had better buy tickets as far as New York first." And this was done; and a few hours later saw them safe on board a train, with their baggage in the car ahead. At the depot Earl had obtained a number of folders of different routes to the west, and these he intended to study while on his way to the great metropolis.

"Oh, but railroad travelling is fine!" cried Randy, enthusiastically, as the long train sped on its way through hills and valleys, and past numerous pretty towns and villages, all alive with the hum of a thousand industries. "One feels as if he would like to ride forever!"

"I'm afraid you'll be tired of riding by the time we reach San Francisco," said Earl, who, nevertheless, also enjoyed the journey. "This is only a little trip of six or seven hours. The next will be one of many days and nights."

"I wonder how they sleep on a train," went on Randy, curiously.

"We'll learn soon enough, Randy. Only don't let every one see how green we are," added Earl, in a whisper.

At one of the stations in Connecticut, where a ten minutes' stop was made, the two lads alighted to stretch their legs and take a look around. They had been seated in the last car, and now they walked forward along the broad platform.

Suddenly Randy caught his brother's arm. "Earl! Earl! look!" he ejaculated, and pointed to a window of the smoking-car. "There are Tom Roland and Jasper Guardley! What can they be doing on this train?"

Earl glanced to where Randy pointed and saw that his brother was right. At the same instant Tom Roland saw them, and he drew back and motioned for his companion to do the same. Earl noted the movement and stood stock-still.

"Randy, I wonder – " he began, and stopped short.

"What, Earl? Isn't it queer they should be on this train from Boston?"

"Yes. Randy, do you think it is possible that Tom Roland would be so dishonest as to – to – "

"To get that money, Earl?" broke in the younger boy. "He might be – and yes, Mr. Stone's description of the two swindlers fits Roland and Guardley exactly!"

CHAPTER V. A NIGHT IN NEW YORK

"The description certainly does fit these two men," said Earl, with some hesitation. "And it is queer that Roland should be down here, when only a few days ago he was in Basco. Guardley, I know, is not above cheating – he's been up before Squire Dobson several times for it."

"Let us go and have a talk with them," said Randy, impulsively. "If they stole that money, I want to know it."

"It's not our business to hunt those swindlers up," answered Earl, hesitatingly; yet he followed Randy to the platform of the smoking-car, and they were soon inside, and making their way to where Roland and Guardley sat, pulling away at two black-looking cigars.

"How do you do, Earl?" said Tom Roland, familiarly, as soon as the boys appeared. "It's queer we should be on the same train, isn't it?"

"It is queer," answered Earl, stiffly, taken aback by the greeting. "Where are you bound?"

"Guardley and I are going to try our luck in the West. Say, I heard you boys were bound for Alaska. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"It costs a heap to go there – didn't know you had so much money," put in Guardley, with a smile that neither Earl nor Randy appreciated.

"And I didn't know you had any money for a Western trip," returned the older brother, rather sharply.

"Oh, Tom here is seeing me through," answered Guardley; but both Randy and Earl noted that he appeared somewhat confused for the moment.

"Guardley has done me several good turns, and it wouldn't be fair for me to turn my back on him," finished Tom Roland. "We are going right through to San Francisco. How about yourselves?"

"We stop off at New York," said Randy.

"It's a pity we can't travel together – " began Roland, when Earl cut him short.

"Roland, did you pick up a letter belonging to me?" asked the boy.

The man's eyes dropped, but only for the fraction of a second. "A letter belonging to you?" he repeated. "No. Where did you lose it?"

"Somewhere around Basco. Did you see it, Guardley?"

The second man shook his head. "Was it important?" he asked.

"Very," said Earl, laconically, and then, as the train began to move again he motioned to Randy, and the two started back for their seat in the last car.

"What do you think?" questioned Randy, when they were seated.

"I don't know what to think. It's mighty queer the pair should leave Basco in such a hurry."

"We left in a hurry. But we had a good reason."

"And they may have – a reason most folks don't look for."

"Do you think they left on account of some crooked work?" cried Randy.

"That would probably be Jasper Guardley's reason for getting away. But it's not our affair, and we have enough other matters to think of," concluded Earl, after a pause. "When we get to New York we'll be like stray cattle in a hundred-acre lot. We must look out not to get lost, and above all things not to lose our money."

"And engage the cheapest and quickest passage to San Francisco," said Randy. "Let us look over those folders before it gets too late. It's too dark to see much outside."

The lamps were lighted in the car, and they lost no further time in digesting the contents of the folders of the railroad companies and pouring over the maps of the various routes to the Golden Gate.

"One looks about as good as another on paper," remarked Earl, at last. "I think we had best take the New York Central Railroad to Chicago, then the Rock Island & Chicago to Rock Island, and then the Southern Pacific. We'll find out about that route when we reach New York."

It was exactly ten o'clock in the evening that the train rolled into the Grand Central Depot at Forty-second Street and Randy and Earl alighted. The crowd was very thick, and though both looked for Roland and Guardley, the two men could not be discovered. The coming and going of so many people confused them, and the many cries which greeted them as they emerged on the street did not tend to set them at ease.

"Cab, sir? Coupé? This way for the Broadway Central Hotel! Evening papers, *Post* or *Telegram!* *Mail and Express!*"

Several came up to the two boys, offering them cab rides and the like, but both Randy and Earl shook their heads. Then Earl remembered that the ticket office was close at hand, and he and his brother went inside again. A long talk with the ticket clerk followed, and they concluded to take the New York Central road to Chicago, and from there as previously intended. The train would start at ten in the morning, and Earl bought two tickets, paying an amount which brought their cash balance down quite low once more.

"Never mind; that pays for about all we'll need," said Randy. "Let us leave the tickets to be called for, and then they'll be safe."

"No indeed!" said Earl. "Some one may call for them just as the money was called for. I'll carry my ticket in an inside pocket, and you had best do the same."

This settled, the brothers strolled out once more. It was rather late, but they could not resist the temptation to a walk down Broadway, of which they had heard so often. They trudged as far as the Post-office, took a look at Park Row and the numerous newspaper buildings, and the Brooklyn Bridge all lit up in a blaze of electric lights, and then Earl happened to glance at the clock on St. Paul's Church.

"Half-past twelve, Randy!" he ejaculated. "Gracious! we'll never find a hotel open as late as this! Let us get back to the vicinity of the depot again!"

"I guess the hotels are open all night here," answered the younger brother. "Let us ride up Broadway on that street car." And they boarded a cable car, which speedily took them back to Forty-second Street. A convenient hotel was found close to the railroad station, and they lost no time in retiring. The constant rumble and roar of the elevated trains disturbed them not a little, and it was well into the morning hours before both dropped off into dreamland, not to awaken until a bell boy aroused them at seven o'clock.

After a hasty breakfast another look was taken around the city. Finding they had the time, they took an elevated train to the Battery and back, staying long enough at the lower end of the city to catch a glimpse of Castle Garden with its aquarium, and the statue of Liberty out in the bay.

"One could spend a month in sight-seeing here," sighed Randy. "I wish we had had the time to do Boston and New York thoroughly."

Ten o'clock found them on the train which was to take them through to Chicago without change of cars. The cars were comfortably filled, but there was no crowding. Again they looked for Roland and Guardley, but without success.

"I guess they remained in New York," said Earl; but for once the young fellow was mistaken.

Leaving the vicinity of the metropolis, the train began its long journey up the beautiful Hudson. But the journey northward did not last long. Soon the train branched to the westward and plunged into the hills and rolling lands of the Mohawk Valley. City after city were left behind with a whirl and a rush that almost took Randy's breath from him. At noon a stop was made for lunch, then on they went again. Supper was served in a dining-car, and both boys voted it about the best meal they had ever tasted.

After the lamps were lit it was not long before the passengers began to think of going to bed. Both Randy and Earl watched the porter closely as he drew out the beds from the narrow closets in the sloping roof of the car, set up the little wooden partitions, and otherwise arranged the sleeping-apartments. The boys had a section to themselves and concluded to sleep together in the lower berth, so the upper berth was left out.

"A sleeping-car is a great institution," said Earl, as they turned in. "Why, a train like this is just a moving house and nothing else!"

Shortly after noon of the day following Chicago was reached. Here they had a three hours' stop and spent the time in a ride on State Street, and a trip to the roof of the great Masonic Temple, where a grand bird's-eye view of the entire city was to be seen, spread out far below them.

And so the long trip westward continued. To tell of all the places stopped at would be impossible. All day long for nearly a week they sat at their car window taking in the sights of cities, towns, prairies, and mountains. There were wonderful bridges to cross and perilous turns to make, at which both held their breath, expecting each moment to be dashed to pieces. In the mountains a severe storm was encountered, and the rolling of the thunder was awe-inspiring, so long was it kept up.

But all journeys, long and short, must come to an end, and one fine morning the boys found themselves safe and sound in San Francisco, and on their way to the Palace Hotel. The trip overland had brightened them a good bit, and they no longer looked as green as when they had started.

They had just stepped from a Market Street car in front of the hotel when they saw a youth coming down the hotel steps who looked strangely familiar, in spite of the somewhat ragged clothing he wore.

"Randy, who is that fellow?" questioned Earl, quickly, as he caught his brother by the elbow.

"Why, if it isn't Fred Dobson!" burst from Randy's lips. "How in the world did he get away out here? Fred Dobson! Fred Dobson! Stop, we want to talk to you!" he called out, as the youth in question was on the point of hurrying off.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE

"Randy Portney!" came from the lips of the boy addressed, as he turned to stare at the person who had called out his name. "And Earl, too! Where – where did you come from?"

"From Basco, of course," returned Randy. "How did you get away out here?"

"I – I came out on a train from Chicago," stammered Fred Dobson, but he did not add that the train had been a freight, and that the stolen ride had been both uncomfortable and full of peril.

"We met your father in Boston," put in Earl. "He said if we should ever run across you to tell you to come home."

"I'm not going back," was the reply of the squire's son. "I came out here to make my fortune."

"I'm afraid you'll find it rather hard work," ventured Randy, and he glanced at Fred's shabby suit. Around Basco the youth had dressed better than any one else.

"I've been playing in hard luck lately," was the slangy reply. "But say, what are you two fellows doing out here?"

"We came on to join our uncle," said Randy. "He is going to take us to Alaska with him."

"Alaska! To those new gold fields a fellow reads about in the daily papers?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to go there myself," said the runaway, readily.

"It costs a good deal of money to go, Fred," remarked Earl. He rather liked the squire's son, in spite of his wild ways. "A fellow must take along a year's provisions."

"So I've heard. I wonder if I couldn't work my way up on one of the boats."

"I wouldn't advise you to go," said Randy. "Why, you are not used to hard work, and they say work up there is of the hardest kind."

"Oh, I can work if I have to. Where is your uncle?"

"He's stopping at this hotel." Randy turned to Earl. "Let us see if Uncle Foster is in, and we can talk to Fred some time later."

This was decided upon, and the squire's son walked off, promising to be back in a few hours.

"He puts on a pretty good face, but I fancy he is homesick, nevertheless," remarked Earl, as he and Randy made their way to the hotel office. They were just about to ask for their uncle when a hand was laid on Earl's shoulder.

"Earl! Randy! How are you, my boys! Just as fresh and hearty as when I saw you last. And how both of you are growing! Why, Earl, you are almost a man! I'm glad to see you, yes, I am!" And Foster Portney beamed at both from a pair of brown eyes set in a round, ruddy face, which was half covered with a long beard. He was a large and rugged man, and his open manner had made him many friends.

"What a beard you've got, Uncle Foster!" were Randy's first words, as he winced at the close grip Foster Portney gave his hand. "You look like all the rest of the Westerners around here!"

"I'm glad we had no trouble in finding you," put in Earl, whose hand also tingled from the grip given it. He remembered now that his uncle had always been considered an unusually strong man. "I know he'll stand the Alaskan climate well enough, even if we don't," he thought.

"Didn't have any trouble getting here, did you?" questioned Foster Portney. "Your message came on time?"

"We had a little set-back in Boston," answered Earl, and told of the trouble about the money. His uncle listened with a sober look on his broad face.

"That was too bad, truly, lads. But it's the loss of that firm of bankers and brokers. They ought to have been sure of the identification. And you think the thieves were two men named Roland and Guardley? They must be thorough rascals."

"We are not sure," broke in Randy, hastily. "It only looks that way."

"I see." Foster Portney mused for a moment. "Well, we can't lose time in trying to investigate. I was hoping you two boys would turn up to-day or to-morrow. Day after to-morrow a boat sails for Juneau, and if I rustle around I think I can secure passage for ourselves and our traps. If we don't catch this boat, we'll have to wait two weeks, or else take a train for Portland and wait ten days."

"But we haven't a thing, Uncle Foster," cried Randy. "That is, outside of our clothing, which is in our trunks, on check at the railroad station."

"And that clothing, for the most part, will have to be left behind, Randy. For a country like Alaska one must be differently dressed than here. Each of you will have to have a suit of furs and plenty of flannels and all that sort of thing."

"And where shall we get them?"

"There is a regular outfitting store not far from here. But the first thing to be done, now you have turned up, is to secure those passage tickets to Juneau. The Alaskan fever is setting in strong here, and we'll not be alone on our trip over Chilkoot Pass and along the headwaters of the Yukon."

"I'm in the dark about this trip, I must confess," said Earl. "Where is this pass you mention, and where is the Klondike Creek, or River?"

"I'll show you the route to-night, boys, on a map just issued by our government, the best map out so far. But come along to that steamboat office, or we'll get left."

Five minutes later saw the boys and their uncle on a street car which ran close to the dock at which the steamboat lay, taking in her cargo, which consisted mainly of the outfits of miners and prospectors. The boat, which was named the *Golden Hope*, had been chartered especially for this trip, and a temporary shipping office had been established close at hand. Around this office was congregated a motley collection of men, all eager to obtain passage to Juneau as cheaply as it could be had.

Through this crowd Foster Portney shoved his way, with Randy and Earl close behind him. It was some minutes before they could get to the ticket office.

"I want three tickets," said Mr. Portney. "How much freight will you carry on them?"

"Six hundred pounds, and not a pound more for anybody," was the quick reply.

"And when do you sail?"

"Wednesday, at twelve o'clock sharp. What are the names? We don't want any mix-up in this rush."

The names were put down, and the money for the passage paid over, and with their tickets in their pockets the three struggled to get out of the crowd, which was growing more dense every minute. Close at hand was a big bill-board on which was posted a large circular headed in big black letters: —

THE GOLD FIELDS OF ALASKA!

Direct Route via Juneau and Over Chilkoot Pass!

Now is the Time to Go and Stake Your Claim!

"That circular is enough to set almost any one crazy," said Earl, as he read it over. "Well, I hope we strike a bonanza."

"The reports are very encouraging," replied Foster Portney, who, in spite of his usual cool headedness had the gold fever nearly as badly as any one in San Francisco. "You see," he went on,

"the sooner we get there the better: for we won't have much time left after arriving before the long and terribly cold winter sets in."

Earl had imagined that the six hundred pounds of freight must be divided between the three, but soon learned that six hundred pounds was the limit for each person.

"We'll never carry that much, will we?" he queried. "Why, how are we going to get all that stuff over the pass you mentioned?"

"We'll get Indians to pack it over. They'll charge twenty or thirty cents a pound, but it's the best that can be done. Some hire pack mules and dog teams, but my experience has been that Indians are the most reliable."

Dinner was now had, and then the three proceeded to the outfitting store Foster Portney had previously mentioned. On the way their uncle asked the boys what they had in their trunks, that nothing not needed might be purchased.

Two hours were spent in buying clothing, and both Earl and Randy thought their uncle would never get done adding to the pile. First came a dozen suits of flannel underwear, and with them a dozen pairs of heavy socks and half a dozen of light ones. Then came two suits of woollen clothing, strongly made and with large pockets, two pairs of strong shoes and a pair of arctics, and two pairs of walrus-hide boots – heavy, it is true, but strong as iron. Finally came a suit of furs and two caps, each with a guard which could be pulled down to the neck, leaving only two holes for the eyes.

"I reckon you've got handkerchiefs and such extras," said Mr. Portney. "So now all you want, so far as wearing is concerned, is a few pairs of smoked glasses, to prevent snow-blindness."

The general outfitter was also able to supply these, and he suggested they take along about ten yards of mosquito netting.

"Mosquito netting!" cried Randy. "What for?"

"During the short summer mosquitoes are exceedingly thick in Alaska," said his uncle; and made the purchase suggested.

It was now getting late, and Foster Portney said they had best wait until the following morning before buying the camping-out things, bedding, and other necessities. "I'll make a careful list to-night," he added.

They returned to the Palace Hotel, where Randy and Earl found Fred Dobson awaiting them.

"Say!" was the greeting of the squire's son. "Is half of Basco moving out to San Francisco?"

"What do you mean?" questioned Earl, with a puzzled look.

"Why, I was down at the railroad station about an hour ago, and I saw a train come in from Chicago with Tom Roland and Jasper Guardley on board."

CHAPTER VII. BUYING THE OUTFITS

"You saw Tom Roland and Jasper Guardley?" burst from the lips of the Portney brothers simultaneously.

"Yes," replied Fred Dobson. "I couldn't believe my eyes at first, but when I felt sure I was right I ran up to speak to Roland."

"And what did he say?" queried Earl.

"He didn't give me a chance to speak to him. He and Guardley disappeared in the crowd like a flash. I rather think they saw me and avoided me."

Earl and Randy exchanged glances. Tom Roland and Jasper Guardley had followed them to San Francisco. What could it mean?

"I shouldn't wonder if they are bound for Alaska, too!" burst out Randy. "Oh, Earl, supposing they got that letter – "

"It's more than likely they did," said the elder youth, quickly. "I'll wager both of them are going to try their fortunes in the new gold fields. Well, they had a cheap trip West," he concluded bitterly.

"If we could prove they got the money, we could have them locked up."

"But we can't prove it, Randy; we haven't time, so we'll just have to let matters stand where they are. For my part I never want to see either of them again," said Earl, decidedly.

Fred Dobson had listened to the latter part of the conversation with interest, and now he wished to know what it all meant.

"They must be guilty," he said, after Randy had recited the facts. "Guardley is a bad egg. You know he was up before my father several times. But say, Randy," he went on, as Earl turned away with Foster Portney to secure extra accommodations at the hotel for the two following nights, "can't you fix it up with your uncle so that I can go to Alaska with him? I'll work like a slave for the chance to go."

Randy had expected something of this sort and had talked the matter over with Earl, and now he shook his head.

"I don't believe I can, Fred. My uncle is only taking us along because we are related and because he knows we are both strong and used to hard work. I really don't believe you could stand it in the new gold fields. He has warned us that the exposure is something awful."

"Oh, I know, but I can stand more than you think," pleaded Fred.

"Besides that, it wouldn't be right," added Randy. "You ran away from home, and it's your duty to go back."

"Oh, don't preach. My father doesn't care where I am."

"Yes, he does, Fred; he cares a good deal. And then your mother must be worried, too."

At the mention of his mother, Fred Dobson's face changed color for a moment, and when next he spoke there seemed to be a suspicious lump in his throat.

"I – I'm going to send mother a letter; I'll write it to-night."

"You should have written long ago, Fred."

"Oh, don't preach. Then you won't speak to your uncle?" And the squire's son looked into Randy's face wistfully.

"Yes, I'll speak to him; but it won't do any good, Fred."

It was not long after this that Foster Portney and Earl came back, having hired an extra room for the time desired. The uncle had been introduced to Fred, and now he invited the runaway to take supper with them.

It was not until the meal was nearly over that Fred urged Randy to broach the subject next his heart. Foster Portney listened patiently to all Randy had to say and also gave ear to Fred's pleadings. But his face did not brighten up into anything like an encouraging look.

"No, Dobson, I can't take you," was his reply. "In the first place, Earl and Randy are all the companions I wish to take along, that is, and grub stake, as we term it in mining slang – pay their way, that means; and in the second place, it wouldn't be right. You are a minor and have run away from home, and, if anything, it is my duty to see that you go back. Besides this, you do not look strong, and, I believe, you have never done any real hard work, and that won't do for Alaska. Only those who know how to rough it stand any show whatever of getting along there. My advice to you is, to go back where you belong."

As may be surmised, this plain speech did not suit Fred Dobson at all, and he felt more than ill at ease for the remainder of the repast. As soon as he could do so gracefully he arose to go.

"I don't suppose I'll see you again for a long while," he said, as he held out his hand to Earl and to Randy. "Well, good luck to you, anyway."

Randy caught Earl by the arm and gave it a little pinch. "How are you off for cash, Fred?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Oh, I've got a little money with me," answered Fred, quietly, but did not add that the sum-total of his fortune amounted to exactly sixty-five cents.

"Perhaps we can help you a little," put in Earl, who understood the pinch Randy had given him. "We haven't much, but if a few dollars will do any good –"

"Will you let me have two dollars?" asked the squire's son, eagerly.

"Yes."

"And I'll let you have two more," added Randy, and the amounts were passed over on the spot, and Fred thanked them very profusely. A few minutes later he had thanked Foster Portney for the supper, bade all good-by, and was gone.

"Not a half bad boy," was the comment of Mr. Portney. "His one fault is, I reckon, that he has been allowed to have his own way too long. Roughing it out here will most likely make a man of him, unless he gets into bad company and goes to the dogs."

"I am going to write to his folks and let them know where he is," said Earl; and the letter was penned and mailed before he went to bed.

The three were on their way early on the following morning to complete the purchase of their outfits, for all must be packed up and on the steamboat deck by seven o'clock the next morning, to insure being stored on board of the *Golden Hope*.

The first purchases made were those of a good tent, bedding, woollen blankets, rubber sleeping-bags, a large piece of oiled canvas, and several lynx-skin robes.

"Now for our tools with which to cut down trees, build boats, and the like," said Foster Portney. "Remember, we are almost like pioneers in a new land."

For boat-building purposes they purchased a good whip-saw, a cross-cut saw, a jack plane, and a draw knife, a large and a small axe, a hammer, brace and bits, six pounds of assorted nails, several pounds of oakum for calking, and some pitch. To this outfit was added fifty yards of three-quarter-inch rope.

"Don't we want some canvas for sail?" asked Randy, who was intensely interested, and who felt somewhat as if he was going out to play at Robinson Crusoe.

"No, the other bits of canvas will do for that," responded Foster Portney. "Now for the camping-out things," he went on, and had soon procured a good-sized water kettle, a frying-pan, broiler, bean pot, tin measure, extra baking and cooking tins, three tin plates and cups, three sets of knives and forks, coffee pot and strainer, salt and pepper shakers, and a strong paper-fibre water pail.

"That about ends that," he said, when each article bought had been carefully scrutinized to see that it was perfect. "Now for food and medicines, and then we'll be about done."

The food list made Randy smile grimly. "No luxuries there," he whispered to Earl. "We are going to live as plain as we did up in Maine, or plainer."

The list consisted of the following: A hundred pounds of flour, with baking-powder, twenty pounds of smoked ham and bacon, two dozen cans of tomatoes, a dozen cans of other vegetables, a small sack of potatoes, a dozen cans of condensed milk, twenty pounds of sugar, ten pounds of salt, twenty pounds of coffee, a sack of beans, pepper and other spices, and mustard. To these were added a few cans of fruit by way of delicacies.

The food packed, they made their way to a drug store and procured a small family chest of various medicines, and added to this several bottles of liquor, which, however, were to be used only for medicinal purposes, for none of the party were drinkers.

Foster Portney already had a serviceable pistol, and he now procured for this weapon a sufficient supply of cartridges. He also bought a pistol for Randy and a shot-gun for Earl. "The gun will be the most useful weapon," he said, "for it will help put lots of game into our eating-pot, and that is what we shall want."

"Won't we want a fishing-line or two?" asked Earl. "I have one in my trunk, but it is not of much account."

"Yes, we'll buy several first-class ones, and a book of flies. Fish to a hungry man are as acceptable as any other game," answered his uncle, and the articles mentioned were purchased without delay.

The list was now filled, yet Foster Portney spent nearly an hour more in picking up such odds and ends as pins, needles, spools of thread, three good pocket compasses, and burning-glasses, a pocket notebook for each, with pencils and some writing-paper and envelopes. Finally he took them to a little shop on a side street, where each procured a monstrous knapsack of oiled canvas, having straps to be placed over the shoulders and an extra strap to come up over the front part of the head.

"What an affair!" said Randy, with a laugh. "I never saw a knapsack with a head-piece before."

"You'll find it an easy thing to carry," said his uncle. "Try it," and Randy did so, and was astonished to learn how much the head-strap improved the carrying powers.

The best part of the evening was spent in packing the things they had purchased, and it was not until after ten o'clock that the last of the bundles were ready and duly tagged.

"Now we have only a few more things to get," said Foster Portney, "the most important of the whole outfit;" and as Randy and Earl looked at him blankly, he smiled in an odd way. "What could three gold hunters do without picks, shovels, and pans?"

"To be sure!" shouted Randy, and Earl reddened over the idea that he had not thought of the things before.

"We'll get them in the morning, for they won't have to be packed," said the uncle. "We have done enough for to-day."

And Randy, who was tired out, agreed with him that it had been a busy day, indeed. He went to bed with his head in a whirl about Alaska and how they were to get there, and of the wonderful finds of gold which awaited all hands. He was full of the brightest of hopes, and the hardships so soon to be encountered did not bother him.

CHAPTER VIII. ON THE WAY TO JUNEAU

"Get up, Randy! Don't you know we are to start for Alaska to-day?" cried Earl, at six o'clock on the following morning. "Come now, turn out."

"Oh my, but I'm tired still!" grumbled Randy, as he stretched himself. Nevertheless, he hopped out of bed a moment later and was dressed almost as soon as his brother. They had barely finished when their uncle came to summon them to breakfast.

"We'll hunt up those tools and then I have a little private business to attend to," announced Foster Portney. "So we must move lively."

Breakfast, the last meal to be eaten in San Francisco, was quickly disposed of, and then followed a half-hour's inspection of various picks, shovels, and gold-washing pans at a hardware store that made a specialty of miners' tools. The boys were greatly interested, and, as Earl said, it made them feel more like prospectors to own a pick and a shovel each. The final bundle was made and shipped to the steamboat dock, and Foster Portney left them.

"Meet me at the dock at eleven o'clock," he said, as he hurried away.

The boys had still several private matters to be settled. Their trunks were to be sold, also some old clothing. At the hotel they obtained the addresses of several dealers in second-hand goods, and they had one of the dealers call and look at the stuff. He offered ten dollars for the lot; and, as they did not see their way to doing better, they accepted his terms, and the goods were removed without delay.

"Let us take a walk around while we have the chance," said Earl. "It is only ten o'clock."

Randy was willing, and off they started up Market Street to the City Hall, and then back and into Montgomery and Kearney streets, taking in all the sights as they went. Almost before they knew it, it was time to go to the wharf.

"We don't want to keep Uncle Foster waiting," said Earl; but when they reached the wharf their uncle was nowhere in sight.

The crowd which had collected to see the gold seekers off was a large one, and more people kept coming every moment. The almost magic name, Klondike, was on every tongue, and there were hundreds who expressed the wish that they were going along.

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