Bindloss Harold

The Boy Ranchers of Puget Sound

Harold Bindloss

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Bindloss H.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
FRANK GOES WEST

It was the middle of an afternoon in May. An old side-wheeler was steaming south toward Puget Sound across the land-locked waters that lie between Vancouver Island and the state of Washington. A little astern on one hand Mount Baker lifted its heights of eternal snow. On the other, and a little ahead, the Olympians rose white and majestic; and between, vast, dim forests rolled down to the ruffled, blue water. It seemed to Frank Whitney, sitting on the steamer's upper deck in the lee of her smokestack, that it was a wild and wonderfully beautiful country he had reached at last; for since leaving Vancouver, British Columbia, they had steamed past endless rocks and woods, while island after island faded into the smoke trail down the seething wake and great white mountains opened out, changed their shapes, and closed in on one another as the steamer went by. He had, however, not come there to admire the scenery, and as he watched the wonderful panorama unroll itself he looked back upon the troubles that had befallen him since he set out from Boston a little less than a year ago.

When he left that city he was but sixteen, and was, as he had cause to realize during the following twelve months, merely an average American boy, with a certain amount of alertness, self-reliance and common sense; though he might, perhaps, have had more of these desirable qualities, had he not been a trifle spoiled by his widowed mother before he went to Gorton school. He had, quite apart from his lessons, learned a few useful things there which probably he would never have learned at home, but he had been suddenly recalled, and his mother had informed him that it was now impossible for him to enter the profession for which he had been intended. Frank did not understand all the reasons for this, but he knew that they were connected with the fall in value of some railroad stock and the failure of a manufacturing company in which his mother held shares. She had, as she pointed out, his two younger sisters to provide for, and he must earn his living at once.

Frank found this much harder than he had expected. The subjects in which he excelled did not seem to be of the least use to business men, and the fact that he could play several games moderately well did not seem to count at all. There were people who were ready to give him a trial, but they seemed singularly unwilling to pay him enough to live in a way that he considered fitting; and this somewhat astonished as well as troubled him. In the end, a relative, who said that a young man with any grit and snap had better chances in the West, found him a position with a big milling company in Minneapolis. Frank accepted the position, but soon found it not much to his liking. The people he met were not like his Boston friends. They were mostly Germans and Scandinavians, and their ways were not those to which he had been accustomed. What was worse, they hustled him in the milling company's offices, and instead of teaching him the business kept him busy licking stamps, copying letters and answering telephones, which did not seem to him a fitting occupation for an intellectual lad.

He bore it, nevertheless, because he had to, until one day there came a climax, when a clerk who had bullied him all along assigned to him a particularly disagreeable task which was really outside his duties. In return, in a fit of very foolish anger, Frank screwed the clerk's new hat down tight in a copying-press, and it happened that the secretary came upon the scene during the trouble that followed. The secretary had an unpleasant temper, and when he walked out of the general office Frank sat down at his desk boiling with indignation and almost stupefied. There was, however, not the least doubt that he was fired.

He spent a very dismal evening afterward, for one thing, at least, was clear – he could not go home to Boston and become a burden on his mother. But the flour trade was bad in Minneapolis just then, and business in St. Paul did not seem much better, so eventually he found employment in the offices of a milling company in Winnipeg. He suffered from the extreme cold during the winter there. The cold of Massachusetts, as he discovered, is very different from the iron frost which shuts down on the Canadian prairie and never slackens its grip for months together. The clothing he had brought from Boston was not warm enough, and his small earnings would only provide him with shelter in the cheapest quarters. Still, he held on until trade grew slack in the early spring and he was turned adrift again. This time he felt that he had had enough of business. He had heard and read of men who burrowed for treasure in the snow-clad ranges, broke wild horses, and cleared the forests, out in the farthest West. There was a romance in that life surpassing anything that seemed likely to be got out of the addition of flour invoices or the licking of stamps, and he wrote a letter to an old friend of his dead father, who lived on a ranch near Puget Sound. It was some time before he got an answer telling him rather tersely to come along.

Frank started the day after he received it, and was now, he supposed, within a short distance of his journey's end. He had never seen his father's friend, and knew nothing of what he would be required to do at the ranch, though he fancied that all that was necessary could readily be learned by an intelligent lad. In this, however, he was wrong.

Suddenly the steamer's whistle hurled a great blast out across the waters, and, looking around, Frank saw, not far ahead, a long point strewn with rocks and streaked with wisps of pines. There was, however, no sign of life on it, and he turned to a deck-hand who strode by.

"Can that be Bannington's?" he asked.

"Yes," the man informed him. "I guess that's just what it is."

"But there's nobody about," objected Frank.

The deck-hand grinned.

"Did you expect it was like Seattle or Port Townsend? There's a store to the place, and they've got a post-office back among the rocks. We lay off and whistle, and if there's no sign of a shore boat she goes on again."

He went forward with a jump as a man came out of the pilot house with a pair of glasses in his hand.

"Run up slow," he ordered. "There's nothing coming yet."

The big side-wheels beat more slowly and the whistle called again, but there was still only the ruffled blue water with white flecks on it and the rapidly rising pines. Frank watched them anxiously, for he had only about two dollars in his pocket, and it seemed quite possible that he might be carried on to Seattle, in which case he had not the faintest notion as to how he was to get back. It was quite certain that he could not pay any more steamboat fares.

A minute or two later the man with the glasses raised his hand as a sail crept out around the point, and the big wheels stopped. The strip of canvas grew into a gaff mainsail and a jib; the hull beneath it emerged at intervals from the little tumbling seas; and it became apparent to Frank for the first time that it was blowing rather hard. The sail seemed to be dripping and he could see the spray flying about the shapeless figure at the helm. Then the steamboat officer motioned to him.

"Are you getting off here?" he asked.

Frank answered rather dubiously that this was his intention.

"Then you'd better get down on to the wheel-case bracings with your grip. I don't know how they're going to take you off, but I guess they'll shoot her up head to wind and you'll have to jump."

Frank got out on the guard-framing on the after side of the wheel and watched the boat drive by, swung up on a little sea some distance away. Half of her hull seemed to be under water, though the fore part of it was hove up streaming into the air. She rolled wildly with her big mainsail squared right out and the jib, which hung slack, dripping water. Then she came round and headed for the

steamer, lying down all slanted to one side, while the water sluiced along her lee deck, and Frank made out a boy crouching under the sail with a rope in his hand. It seemed to him that the boat must inevitably ram the steamer and smash in her bows. Then a hail reached him.

"Hello, pilot house! Shove her astern soon as we're clear of you!"

Somebody shouted an answer, and the steamer swung out, lifting a row of wet plates out of the water and burying them again with a gurgling splash. A glance around showed Frank a deck-hand standing behind him with a long, spiked pole and a crowd of passengers leaning over the rails of the deck above. How he was to get into the boat he did not know, for the thing was beginning to look difficult. Then there was another shout from the figure at her helm:

"That you, Whitney?"

Frank waved his hand in answer, hastily grabbing up the small bag which contained his few possessions. The wheel-casing sank again into a ridge of frothing brine which swirled about his feet, and he felt that it would be a good deal wiser to climb back to the deck above and go on to Seattle. This, however, was out of the question, even if there had not been so many passengers looking on, and it was comforting to remember that he could swim a little. The next moment the deck-hand touched his arm.

"I'll sling your grip aboard her as she shoots," he said. "Then jump, and stick to anything you get your hands on."

The boat was now only seven or eight yards away, nearer the steamer's stern, but as Frank gazed at her she suddenly swayed upright with a frantic thrashing of canvas, and shot forward head to wind beneath the vessel's side. The next moment his bag went hurtling through the air, and he heard the deck-hand shout something in his ear. Then he set his lips and jumped.

He struck something hard with his knees, and was conscious of a sudden chill as the brine washed over one leg, but he had his hands clenched tight on a strip of wet wood, and somebody seized him by the shoulder. Making a determined effort he dragged himself up on the narrow side deck, and fell in a heap into the bottom of the boat. When he scrambled to his feet again the big side-wheel was splashing amidst a welter of churned-up foam as the steamer pushed away from them, and, in the boat, the boy he had already noticed was tugging desperately at a rope.

"Get hold and heave!" he cried.

Frank did as the boy directed. Then the helmsman waved his hand.

"Not too flat! Belay at that! Get down here aft, both of you!"

Frank staggered aft a pace or two, and sitting down breathless and dripping gazed about him. The boat looked a good deal bigger than she had appeared from the steamer, and, as a matter of fact, she was a half-decked sloop of about twenty-four feet in length. Just then she was slanted well down on one side, with the water foaming along her depressed deck and showers of spray beating into her over her weather bow, while the jib above her bowsprit every now and then plunged into the short, white-topped seas. There seemed to be some water inside her, for it washed up above the floorings at every heave. In a few moments Frank had recovered his breath sufficiently to look around at his companions. One was a boy of about his own age who smiled at him. He had a bronzed skin and a kindly expression, and looked lean and wiry.

"You're Frank Whitney?" asked the boy.

Frank acknowledged that this was his name, and the other proceeded to introduce himself and his companion.

"I'm Harry Oliver, and, as you're going to stay with us, we've got to hit it off together."

Then he turned and indicated the ruddy-faced, red-haired man who held the helm.

"This is Jake, one of the smartest choppers and trailers on the Pacific Slope. There aren't many of the boys who could have picked you off that steamboat in a breeze of wind as he did."

"Oh, pshaw!" said the helmsman with a grin.

Neither of them had said anything striking in the way of welcome, but Frank felt quickly at ease with them. As a rule, the new acquaintances he had made in business farther east seemed to expect him to recognize their superiority, or, at least, to understand that it was a privilege to be admitted into their society. His present companions, however, somehow made it plain that as long as he was willing to be commonly civil there was no reason why they should not get on well together, for which he was thankful, though he felt that any attempt to put on airs with them would probably lead to trouble.

"How far is it to your father's ranch?" he asked presently.

"Twelve miles," responded Harry. "With a head wind like this one, it means from eighteen to twenty-four miles' sailing. It depends, for one thing, on Jake's steering."

"Thirty, sure," broke in the helmsman, "if you had the tiller."

"How's that?" asked Frank.

"Know anything about sailing?"

Frank confessed his ignorance, and Jake nodded to Harry.

"Show him," he said. "He has got to learn and you can teach the fellow who'll allow he doesn't know anything. The kind we've no use for is the one that knows too much."

Harry laid a wet finger on the hove-up weather deck.

"Now," he began, "a boat or a ship under sail can go straight to the place she's bound for as long as she has the wind anywhere from right behind her to a little forward on her side. In fact, as she'll lie up within a few points of the wind, there's only a small segment of the circle you can't sail her straight into."

He traced a circle on the deck and then placed his finger over about a quarter of the circumference of it.

"She won't go there."

"But supposing you want to?"

"Then, if the wind's ahead, you have to beat." He drew two lines across the circle at right angles to each other and laid his finger at the end of one. "Say we're here at north and the cove we're going to lies about south. Well, you get your sheets in flat – same as we have them now – and you sail up this way, at this angle to the wind." He ran a slanting line across the circle until it touched the rim. "That brings you here; then you come round, and go off at the same angle on the opposite tack, which brings you right up to the cove. You can do it in two long tacks, or – and it's the same thing – in a lot of little ones, each at the same angle to the wind; but how many degrees there are in that angle and when you get there depends on how your sails are cut and how smart you are at steering her."

Frank understood the gist of it, but there were one or two difficulties, and he was not ashamed to ask a question:

"What makes her go slantways against the wind? Why doesn't it blow her back, or sideways?"

"It does," Jake broke in dryly, "if you don't sail her right, or it blows hard enough."

"What makes a kite go up slantways against, or on, the wind, which is the same thing in sailing?" continued Harry. "Because with the wind and the string both pulling her, that's the line of least resistance." He paused, and added deprecatingly, "I was at school at Tacoma and as I'd a notion I might take up surveying, they pounded some facts into me that made this kind of thing easier to get hold of. A boat goes ahead on the wind because, considering the shape of her, it's the easiest way; and this is what stops her going off sideways to lee." He kicked a high narrow box which ran along the middle of the boat. "It holds the centerboard – a big plate that's down deep in the water now. Before the wind could shove her off sideways – and it does a little – it would have to press that flat plate sideways through the water."

Frank made a sign of comprehension.

"That's about the size of it," said Jake. "Now I guess it would be more useful if you got some of the water out of her."

Harry, who explained that there was something wrong with the pump, pulled up one of the flooring boards and invited Frank to dip a bucket into the cavity and hand it up to him when it was full. Frank endeavored to do so, but found it difficult, for the water which surged to and fro as the sloop plunged left the bottom of the hole almost dry one moment and the next came splashing back so rapidly that before he could get a fair scoop with the bucket it had generally gone again. Besides, the motion every now and then flung him off his knees; but he toiled on with his head down for nearly half an hour, when a horrible nausea mastered him and he staggered to the foam-swept lee coaming. For the next ten minutes he felt desperately unhappy, and when he turned around again there was a grin on the faces of his companions.

"She'll do," said Harry. "You want to look to weather and get the wind on your face. That's the best way to keep a hold on your dinner."

Frank suddenly remembered that he had had no dinner. He had had only a dollar or two left in his possession, and after considering the steamboat tariff he had decided to dispense with the meal. In spite of this fact and the unpleasant sensations he felt, he was conscious of a certain satisfaction with his new surroundings. The seasickness would pass, and grappling with the winds of heaven and the charging seas seemed a finer thing than adding up the price of flour or sticking stamps on letters. Here man's skill, nerve and quickness were pitted against the variable elements, and Frank had a suspicion – which, as it happened, was quite justified – that if Jake made a blunder the next white-topped comber would come foaming across the bows of the craft. It was only his cool judgment and ready hand on the tiller that swung her safely over them.

Raising himself a little he glanced ahead. The steamer and her smoke trail had vanished some time ago, and the white Olympians had faded, too. Evening was drawing on. The sky was now a dismal, dingy gray, and the leaden-blue water was streaked with flecks and curls of foam. It seemed to him that the sea was steadily getting higher, and there was not the least doubt that the sloop was slanting more sharply and throwing the spray all over her.

"It looks bad up yonder, doesn't it?" he queried in anxious tones.

"I allow we might have more wind by and by," Jake answered laconically. "Seems to me she has about all the sail she can stand up to on her now."

He had scarcely finished speaking when a comber curled over at its top rose up close ahead, and the boat went into it to the mast. Part of it poured over the forward head ledge into the open well, and the rest sluiced foaming down the slanted deck to lee, through which she lurched clear, with the water splashing and gurgling inside her.

"We'll heave another reef down right away," said Jake. "Get forward, Harry, and claw that headsail off her."

The boy seized a wet sail that lay in the well, and as he crawled forward with it the sloop rose almost upright, with her mainsail banging and thrashing furiously. When he loosed a rope the jib ran partly down its stay, and then jammed, filling out and emptying with sudden shocks that shook the stout spar beneath it and the reeling mast. Harry, however, crawled out on the bowsprit with his feet braced against a wire – a lean, dripping figure that dipped in the tumbling seas – and Frank, seeing that he was struggling vainly with the sail, scrambled forward to help him, sick as he was. Water flowed about his knees on the plunging deck, flying ropes whipped him, and the spray was hurled into his face, but he could think of no reason why the Western boy should do more than he could. He crouched down, hauling savagely on a rope at which Harry pointed, and by and by the sail fell upon both of them. They dragged it in, made it fast, and set a smaller one in place of it, after which they floundered aft to where Jake was struggling with the mainsail.

He had hauled down what Frank afterward learned was the leach of it, and was now standing with his toes on the coaming and his chest upon the boom, pulling down the hard, drenched canvas and tying the little bits of rope that hung in a row from it around the boom.

"Hustle!" he shouted. "Get those reef-points in!"

Frank took his place with his companion, and tried not to look at the frothing water close beneath him as he leaned out on the jerking boom. For the most part, the big spar lay fairly quiet, but now and then the canvas above it shook itself with a bang. It cost him a strenuous effort to drag each handful of it down in turn, and he discovered afterward that he had broken two of his nails. He lost his breath, the perspiration started from every pore in his skin, and he was sick and dizzy, but he managed to hold on. At last it was finished, and soon afterward Jake, driving the sloop on her course again, turned to Harry.

"She'll make nothing of it against this breeze," he said. "We'll up-helm and look for shelter under Tourmalin."

Harry, bracing himself against the strain, let a rope run through the clattering blocks, the bow swung around, and the motion became a little easier.

"We'll be snug beneath the pines in an hour," said Jake, nodding reassuringly.

Frank found the time quite long enough. He was wet and dizzy, and the way the big frothing ridges came tumbling up out of the growing darkness was rather terrifying. They heaved themselves up above the boat, and every time that one foamed about her she slanted alarmingly over to leeward. At last, when it had grown quite dark, a shadowy blur that grew into a wisp of tall pines rose up ahead, and a minute or two later there was an almost bewildering change from the rolling and plunging as the sloop ran into smooth water. Her sails dropped, the anchor chain rattled out, and by and by they were all sitting in the little cabin, which was scarcely three feet high, and Jake was cramming bark and kerosene rags into the stove.

Half an hour later Frank forced himself to eat a little canned beef and drink some coffee, and then Harry told him he could lie down on what seemed to be a moderately dry sail. He had scarcely done so when he fell asleep. Jake, who had been watching him, turned the lantern so that the light fell on his face.

"He was mighty sick," he observed, a kindly smile lighting up his rugged features, "but he stayed with it through the reefin'. Your father should make something of him. I guess he'll do."

CHAPTER II
THE BUSH

Frank awoke a little before daylight, feeling considerably better. The nausea and dizziness had gone, and the sloop seemed to be lying almost still, which was a relief to him. Then he noticed by the light of a lamp that his companions' places were empty, and presently he heard them talking in the well. Crawling out through the narrow doorway, he stood up shivering in the coldness of the dawn.

There were dim black trees and shadowy rocks close in front of him, with a white wash about the latter, for a smooth swell worked in around a point from open water. He could hear the rumble of the surf upon the reefs, and though he could scarcely feel a breath of wind upon his face the wailing of the black pines suggested that it was blowing still. He could smell the clean resinous scent of them and it seemed to him that they were singing wild, barbaric songs. Afterward, when he knew them better, he learned that the pines and their kin, the cedars and balsams and redwoods, are never silent altogether. Even when their fragrance steals out heavy and sweet as honey under the fierce sunshine of a windless day, one can hear faint elfin whisperings high up among their somber spires. Then he saw that Jake was standing on the side deck, apparently gazing at the white surf about the end of the point.

"No," he mused, "she wouldn't face it. The breeze hasn't fallen any, and the sea'll be steeper. Guess you'd better leave me here, and take the Indian trail."

Harry agreed with this.

"We'll get off as soon as we've had breakfast; and, as I did the cooking yesterday, it's your turn this morning. There's still a little fire in the stove."

Jake disappeared into the cabin, and presently came out again and was filling his pipe when Harry sprang up suddenly on the deck.

"Hello!" he cried. "There's a schooner yonder!"

It was growing a little clearer and Frank, turning around, saw a tall black spire of canvas cutting against the sky. He made out a frothy whiteness beneath it where the swell broke on the vessel's bows, and the sight of her singularly stirred his imagination. She had appeared so suddenly, probably from behind the point, and she looked ghostly in the uncertain light. She ran in under her headsails and boom-foresail with her mainmast bare, rising higher and growing clearer all the while. By and by there was a splash, and a voice broke through the wailing of the trees.

"Three fathom," it said. "You can luff her in a little."

Harry seemed about to hail her, but Jake gripped his arm, and they all stood silent while the schooner crept up abreast of them. The little sloop, lying with the shadowy land close behind her, had evidently not been seen. Then the vessel commenced to fade again, and in a few minutes she had vanished altogether.

"It looks as if there might have been some truth in old Sandberg's tale," Harry remarked thoughtfully. "It's kind of curious that halibut fisherman from Bannington's said he saw her too."

"He said she'd a white stripe round her. Sandberg allowed it was green," objected Jake.

"That wouldn't prove anything. They could soon paint the stripe another color."

"What would they want to do it for?"

"What does a schooner want running in here? There's no freight to be picked up nearer than Port Townsend."

"That," said Jake dryly, "is just what I don't know. What's more, I don't want to. She might have run in for bark for cooking, or maybe for water."

Harry laughed. "If she has come down from Seattle they'd get plenty cordwood or, if they wanted it, stove coal there, and I guess a skipper wouldn't waste a fair wind like this one to save two or

three dollars. The thing's mighty curious. That vessel's been seen twice, anyway, and nobody seems to know where she comes from or where she goes."

"Well," Jake observed stolidly, "she doesn't belong to you or me, and if you want your breakfast it should be ready."

They crawled into the cabin, and when they had made a meal Jake sculled the sloop in near enough to the steep beach for them to jump. Then he flung a small packet after them.

"It's the most I can spare you, as I mayn't get a slant round the reefs until to-morrow," he said. "Anyway, it will do you two meals, and you ought to fetch the ranch by sundown. You want to head right up the valley until you strike a big log that lies across the river. When you get over, cross the neck of the ridge where it's lowest. You'll see the clearing from the top of it."

Harry said this was plain enough and moved away across the shingle, Frank following him cautiously when they reached the fringe of driftwood which divided beach from bush. Whitened logs and barked branches were scattered about in tangled confusion where the water had left them, and it was with difficulty that the lads scrambled over the barrier. Then Frank stopped breathless, with one leg wet to the knee and a rent in his trousers.

"It's pretty rough going, if this is an average sample," he panted.

"You'll find it a good deal worse before we reach the ranch," Harry answered with a laugh.

He strode forward, and Frank looked around with wonder when they plunged into the bush, for he had never seen a wood of that kind except in pictures of the giant Californian Sequoia. There are, of course, pines in the eastern states, but they seemed pigmies by comparison with these tremendous conifers which were already tall and stately when Columbus sailed from Spain. They ran up far above the boy in huge cylindrical columns before they flung out their first great branches, which met and crossed like the ribs of high-vaulted arches, holding up a roof of dusky greenery. Beneath, there was a dim shadow, and a tangle of such luxuriant vegetation as is seen, excepting in the tropics, probably only upon the warm, damp Pacific Slope.

There was another difference which struck Frank. The eastern woods that he had seen were clear of wreckage, for lumber and fuel are valuable there, and the ax had kept them clean, but this forest was strewn with huge logs and branches, some of which evidently had fallen years ago. Thickets of all kinds had sprung up between, and these were filled with tufts of unrolling fern which Harry told him would grow six or eight feet high. Through the midst of it all there twisted a narrow path which Frank remembered Jake had mentioned as the Indian trail.

"Have you Indians here?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Harry, "we have a few Siwashes, though there are more of them up in Canada. They seem fond of Indians there."

"Are they quiet?"

Harry chuckled. "You don't want to get them mixed with the redskins of the plains, though I suppose where they're not wiped out they're pretty quiet too. These fellows are a different breed. Most of them are sailors and fishermen, and they dress much the same as you and I do. They come up these rivers now and then after the salmon, and they made this trail. You can tell that by the looks of it."

"How?"

"It goes in and out, and where there's an obstacle it winds around. That's the difference between a white man's and an Indian's nature. The Siwash strikes a big fir log, and he walks around it, if he has to keep on doing it for months. It doesn't seem to worry him that he's wasting a minute or two every time. Then the white man comes along and gets to work with his ax. He goes right straight through. It's born in him."

Frank had made a sign of understanding. He knew something of the history of the old great nations as well as that of his own country, and he remembered another dominant race that ages ago blazed its trails from Rome across all Europe and far into Asia. It was characteristic of those men that, turning aside for no obstacle, they went straight, and long after their power had perished their

roads remained, running, as the crow flies, through morasses and over mountains and rivers. His own people had done much the same, whittling west with the axes through the eastern woods, and then pushing on with their wagons across the lonely plains, until they drove the steel track through the snow-clad Rockies and over the Sierras. They died in shoals on the journey, but it was the march of a nation, and always more came on, the lumberman after the trapper, the track-grader on the cowboy's heels, with ranches and farms and factories growing up along the line. Now they had reached the Pacific, and Frank wondered vaguely whether that would be the limit, or where they were going then. It was, however, a question that seemed too big for him.

"This country's rough on one's clothes," he said ruefully, looking down at a second tear in his trousers.

Harry laughed. He was dressed in old duck overalls, long boots, and a battered gray hat.

"That's a fact. What you want to wear is leather. There were two sports from back East came out to hunt last fall, and they had their things made of some patent cloth warranted to turn water and resist any thorns. Jake went along to cook for them." He paused with a chuckle and added, "They were wearing their blankets because they hadn't any clothes left when he brought them back."

They went on for an hour or so until they came out upon the bank of a frothing river which roared among the rocks in a shallow cañon. There was no way of reaching the water, had they desired it, and, as Harry had predicted, the trail they followed grew rapidly worse. In places it wound perilously along narrow ledges beneath a dripping wall of rock, in others it led over banks of stones which had slipped down from the heights above. The boys made very slow progress until noon, when they stopped for a meal from the package Jake had thrown them. While they ate it Frank looked down again at his boots, which were already badly ripped.

"They were new just before I left Winnipeg," he said. "In some ways the people in Europe are ahead of us. There are one or two countries where they make their shoes of wood."

Harry was too busy to make an answer, and when he had finished eating he carefully tied up the packet, which was now considerably smaller, before he turned to his companion.

"We'd better be hitting the trail," he said. "Unless we can make the ranch by sundown, we'll get mighty little supper."

They pushed on for a couple of hours, still floundering and stumbling among the rocks. Harry stopped for a moment where the bush was thinner and pointed to a big gap in a ridge of hillside three or four miles away.

"That's the neck," he said. "The log we cross the river on is somewhere abreast of it. We surely can't have passed the thing."

They went on a little farther, but there was no sign of the log. Presently Harry stopped again with an exclamation, catching a glimpse of a great branchless fir which rose out of a welter of foam in the bottom of the cañon.

"There she is," he exclaimed, "jammed in where we certainly can't get down to her. It will be difficult to go straight this time, but we'll have to try."

Frank drew a pace or two nearer the edge of the cañon, and felt a creepy shiver run through him as he looked down. The rock he stood upon arched out a little over the shadowy hollow, through the bottom of which the wild waters seethed and clamored. He supposed that he stood at least sixty feet above them. The rock on the opposite side also projected, so that the rift was wider at the bottom than at the top. In one place, however, the crest of it had broken away and plunged into the gulf, leaving a short slope down which stones and soil had slid. Its lower edge lay about twelve feet beneath him, though the distance would have been rather less if it could have been measured horizontally.

"How are we to get across?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Jump," said Harry curtly. "Can't you do it?"

"No," Frank answered with some reluctance.

"Scared?" asked Harry, looking at him curiously.

"I am, but it's not that altogether."

"You didn't seem to want sand when you jumped into the boat."

Frank stood silent a moment or two with a flush on his face. Had he been forced to make the choice a year earlier, he probably would have jumped and chanced it from shame of appearing afraid or of owning his inferiority to another, but he had learned a little sense since then.

"It was different then," he explained. "I was scared – badly scared – but I felt I could do the thing if I forced myself to it. Now I'm almost certain that I can't."

"Yes," owned Harry, thoughtfully, "that's quite right. One hasn't much use for the fellow whose great idea is to keep himself from getting hurt, but when a thing's too big for you it's best to own it." He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. "The question is how we're going to get across, and my notion is that we'd better head right up into the bush. The river will be getting smaller, and it forks somewhere. Each branch will probably be only half the size, and I guess the cañon can't go on very far."

It occurred to Frank that considering the nature of the country it would be singularly inconvenient if the cañon went on for another league or two, particularly as they had only a handful of provisions left, but he followed his companion, and they stumbled and floundered forward all the afternoon. There was now no trail to follow, and where they were not forced to scramble over slippery rock, fallen trees and thorny brakes barred their way. Still, there was nothing to indicate that the cañon was dying out, and where they could have reached the water it either foamed furiously between rocky ledges or spun round in horrible black eddies on the verge of a wild, yeasty turmoil. They looked at these spots and abandoned any thought of swimming.

Evening came at length, and they sat down beneath a big cedar where the roar of the river rang about them in deep pulsations. A chilly wind was wailing in the tops of the pines, and trails of white mist commenced to drift in and out among their trunks, which showed through it spectrally. Harry gazed about him with a rueful grin on his face.

"If I'd an ax, one or two matches, and a couple of blankets, I'd make you quite snug. Then with a few groceries, a kettle, and a spider, we'd have all any one could reasonably want."

"You haven't got them," Frank commented. "Wouldn't it save time if you wished for a furnished house?"

"I'd 'most as soon have an ax. Then I could make a shelter that would, anyway, keep us comfortable enough, and when I'd cut you a good layer of spruce twigs you wouldn't want a better bed. If I'd a rifle I might get a blue grouse for supper. Still" – and he laughed – "as you say, we haven't got them, and we couldn't do any cooking without matches. Curious, isn't it, what a lot of things you want, and that in most cases you have to get another fellow to make them?"

Frank agreed with this, but he had never realized the truth of it as he did just then. It was clear that the man who made all he wanted must live as the Indians or grosser savages did, and that it was only the division of employments that provided one with the comforts of civilization. Every man, it seemed, lived by the toil of another, for while on the Pacific Slope they turned the forests into dressed lumber and raised fruit and wheat, the clothes they wore, and their saws and plows and axes, came from the East. One could clear a ranch on Puget Sound only because a host of other men puddled liquid iron or pounded white-hot steel in the forges of, for instance, Pennsylvania. Frank would very much have liked to provide his companion with the fruit of somebody else's labor in the shape of a few matches, which would have made a cheerful fire possible.

In the meanwhile Harry had opened the packet and divided its contents equally.

"There's not enough to keep any over," he observed. "We have got to make the ranch to-morrow."

They ate the little that was left them, and then set to work to search for a young spruce from which they might obtain a few branches, but they failed to find one small enough even to climb. Coming back they lay down among the cedar sprays, which seemed rather wet, and it was some time

before Frank could go to sleep. He was still hungry, and the roar of the river and the strangeness of his surroundings had a peculiar effect on him. The mist, which was getting thicker, rested clammily on his face, and crawled in denser wreaths among the black trunks which stood out here and there from the encircling gloom. Drops of moisture began to fall upon him from the branches, and once or twice he cautiously moved an elbow until it touched his companion. It was consoling to feel that he was not alone.

At length, however, he fell asleep, and awaking in the gray light of dawn staggered to his feet when Harry called him, feeling very miserable. He was chilled to the bone. His shoulders ached, his knees ached, and one hip-joint ached worse than all, while his energy and courage seemed to have melted out of him. As a matter of fact, nobody unused to it feels very animated on getting up before sunrise from a bed on the damp ground.

"As we have to reach home to-night, we may as well get a move on," announced Harry. "It's about four o'clock now, and it won't be dark until after eight."

The prospect of a sixteen hours' march with nothing to eat all the while did not appeal to Frank. It was the first time in his life that he had felt downright hungry, and this fast had made him the more sensitive to an unpleasant pain in his left side.

"If you're not sure about the way, wouldn't it be better if we went back to Jake?" he suggested. "It seems a pity we didn't think of it earlier."

"I did," Harry answered smilingly. "The trouble is that Jake would clear out the minute the wind dropped a little or shifted enough to let him get round the head. Besides, he'd have mighty little to eat if he were still lying behind the point when we got there. When your letter reached us we'd hardly time to run down to Bannington's to meet the steamer, so I just grabbed what I could find, and we sailed in a few minutes."

Frank said nothing further, and they pushed on doggedly into the shadowy bush. It was wrapped in a thick white mist, and every brake they smashed through dripped with moisture. Except for the clamor of the river, everything was wonderfully still – so still, indeed, that the heavy silence was beginning to pall upon Frank, who suddenly turned to his companion.

"Isn't there anything alive besides ourselves in this bush?" he asked.

"That," replied Harry, "is more than I can tell you. We have bears, and a few timber wolves, besides two kinds of deer and several kinds of grouse, and some of them are quite often about, but there are belts of bush where for some reason you can't find one."

They went on again, following up the river for an hour or two. In the meanwhile the mist melted, and Frank could see the endless ranks of mighty trees stretch away before him until they merged into a blurred columnar mass. At last the cañon, which was growing shallower, forked off into two branches, and they followed one branch until a broken rocky slope led them down to the water. It was a dull greenish color and foamed furiously past them among great stones. There was no means of ascertaining how deep it was and the boys looked at each other dubiously for a moment or two. Then Harry made a little gesture.

"We have to get across," he said.

Frank, without waiting for his resolution to fail him, plunged in on the instant, and a couple of steps took him well above his knees. The water seemed icy cold. As a matter of fact, it was mostly melted snow, and the drainage from the glaciers had given it the curious green color. The gravel commenced to slide away beneath Frank's feet, and by the time the foam was swirling round his waist he was gasping and struggling savagely. There was a big, eddying pool not far away and, though he could swim a little, he had no desire to be swept into it. A moment or two later he was driven against a rock with a violence that shook all the breath out of him. He clung to it desperately until Harry came floundering by and held out his hand. They made a yard or two together and then Harry slipped suddenly, jerking Frank off his feet as he rolled over in the flood. Frank went down overhead and as he felt himself being swept along toward the eddy he exerted all his energy in a struggle to

regain his footing. He clutched at a rock, but the swirling waters only carried him past. Half dazed and breathless he was flung against another rock. This time, with a great effort, he managed to hold on, and when he stood up, gasping, he found that the water now reached only to his knees. In another minute he and Harry were safe on dry land.

Half an hour later they crossed the other creek, and soon afterward Frank sat down limply in the warm sunlight, which at last came filtering between the thinner trees.

"I must have a rest," he gasped.

"There's just this trouble," Harry pointed out. "If you rest any time you won't want to get up again."

"If I go on now I'll drop in another few hundred yards," declared Frank.

It was probably no more than the truth. He had been clever at athletics and open air games, but, as it happened, he had been able to learn them easily. Besides, he had been indulged by his mother and had been rather a favorite at school, and as one result of it he fell short of the hardihood usually acquired by the boy who has everything against him. After all, an hour's exercise in a gymnasium or an hour and a half spent over a game amidst applause and excitement is a very different thing from the strain of unrelaxing effort that must be made all day when there is nobody to cheer. He did not want to rest, but his worn-out body rebelled and mastered him.

"Aren't – you – played out?" he stammered weakly.

"Oh, yes," replied Harry with a grin. "Still, in this country you're quite often dead played out and have to go on again."

"But if you can't?"

"Then," said Harry dryly, "you have to keep on trying until you're able to."

It struck Frank that this might be painful and his heart sank. After a while he tried another question:

"Don't people get lost in the bush every now and then?"

"Why, yes," was the answer. "There was a man strayed off from a picnic just outside one of the cities not long ago and they didn't find him until a month or two afterward. He was lying dead not a mile from a graded road."

Frank shivered inwardly at this.

"Still, I suppose you generally have something to guide you – the moss on the north side of the trees? I've heard that people who don't know about it walk around in rings."

"I must have gone pretty straight the only time I was lost," laughed Harry; "and it's mighty hard to find moss in some parts of the bush. In others it's all around the trees. I'd rather have a big peak as a guide. You have heard about people walking round, but I wonder whether you have heard that when they're badly scared they'll walk right across a trail without seeing it?"

"Is that a fact?" Frank asked in astonishment.

"Sure!" said Harry. "A lost man will sometimes walk across a logging road without the slightest idea that he's doing it. Anyway, I know where the homestead lies. It's only a question of holding out until we reach it."

Frank was sincerely pleased to hear this, and by and by he rose with an effort and they went on again.

CHAPTER III
THE RANCH

Dusk was not far away when the boys, stumbling down a low hillside, came into sight of an oblong clearing in the forest with a wooden house standing on one side of it. That was all Frank noticed, for he found it difficult to keep himself on his feet, and his sight seemed hazy. Indeed, he fell down once or twice in the steeper places, and had some trouble in getting up; and after that he had only a confused recollection of crossing an open space and entering a dwelling. A man shook hands with him, and a woman in a print dress made him sit down in a low chair before she set out a bountiful meal. Soon after he had eaten a considerable share of it Harry led him into a very little room where a bed like a shelf with a side to it was fixed against one wall. Five minutes later he was blissfully unconscious of his recent painful experience.

The sun was streaming in through the window when he awoke, feeling wonderfully refreshed, and, dressing himself in some overalls which had been laid across the foot of his bed, he walked out into the larger general room. It had uncovered walls of logs and a very roughly boarded floor, and there seemed to be little in it besides a stove, a table and several chairs.

A brown-faced man with a little gray in his hair sat at one end of the table and at the other end sat a woman resembling him and of about the same age. Harry, sitting between them, was apparently engaged in narrating their adventures. Frank, who took the place laid out for him, found that his supper had not spoiled his breakfast, for he fell upon the pork, potatoes, dried apricots, hot cakes and syrup with an excellent appetite. When the meal was over, the man led Frank into another room and filling his pipe asked him to sit down.

"We'd better have a talk," he said. "You can take the chair yonder."

Frank looked at him more closely when he sat down. Mr. Oliver, who was dressed in duck overalls, was rather spare in figure, though he looked wiry. His manner was quiet, and his voice was that of an educated man, but he had somewhat piercing gray eyes.

"I had a sincere regard for your father," he began. "On that account alone I should be glad to have you here; but first of all we had better understand each other. You mentioned that you had been in business in Minneapolis and afterward in Winnipeg. Didn't you like it?"

"No, sir," replied Frank, who felt that it would be wiser to answer carefully any questions this man might ask. "Still, that wasn't exactly why I gave it up, though" – and he hesitated – "to say I gave it up isn't quite correct."

"If I remember, you called it being fired, in your letter," Mr. Oliver suggested with a twinkle in his eyes. "What led up to that?"

"Slack trade in the last case. I'd like to think it was only the grudge a bullying clerk had against me in the other."

"Then, if you had been allowed, you would have stayed with the milling business, though you didn't care for it?"

"Yes," responded Frank. "Anyway, I'd have stayed until I could have got hold of something I liked better."

Mr. Oliver nodded in a way which suggested that he was pleased with the answer.

"Well," he said, "that brings us to the question why you came out here. Was it because you had heard that it was a good country for hunting and fishing?"

Frank's face flushed. "No, sir," he replied, "I wanted to earn a living, and I understood that a" – he was going to say a live man, but thought better of it – "any one who wasn't too particular could generally come across something to do quickest in the West. In fact, I'd like to begin at once. After buying my ticket and getting odd meals I've only two or three dollars left."

"Two-fifty, to be precise. My sister took your clothes away to mend. Now, it's possible that I might manage to get you into the office of some lumber or general trading company in one of the cities. How would that do?"

"I'd rather go on to the land. I'd like to be a rancher."

"How much do you know about ranching?"

"Very little, but I could soon learn."

It was Frank's first blunder, and he realized it as he saw the gleam of amusement in Mr. Oliver's eyes.

"It's by no means certain," commented the latter. "There are men who can't learn to use the ax in a lifetime. We'll let it go at that, and say you're willing to learn. Have you any idea of making money by ranching?"

Frank thought a moment. "Well," he said finally, "I'd naturally wish to make some, but I don't think that counts for most with me. I'd rather have the kind of life I like."

"The trouble with a good many men is that when they get it they find out they like something else. Quite sure that hunting and fishing aren't taking too prominent a place in your mind? If they are, I'd better tell you that the favorite amusement in this country is chopping down big trees. There's another fact that you must consider. It takes a good deal of money to buy a ranch and, unless it's already cleared, you have to wait a long while before you get any of the money back. This place cost me about nine thousand dollars, one way or another, and in all probability there's not a business on the Pacific Slope in which I wouldn't get twice as much as I'm getting here for the money, though I've been here a good many years. Now what do you expect to do with two dollars and a half?"

What he had heard had been somewhat of a shock to Frank, and the question was difficult to answer.

"I might earn a little more by degrees, sir," he said hopefully.

Mr. Oliver smiled at him encouragingly.

"It's possible; and there's cheaper land than mine, while a smart man used to the country can often get hold of a small contract of some kind. Now I'll tell you what we'll do. Wait a month, and then if you find that you like the life I'll hire you for what anybody else would give you."

With that he arose, signifying that the discussion was over, and Frank went out of doors and joined Harry in the clearing. The latter held a big handspike with an arched iron hook hinged to it, and he invited Frank to assist him in rolling logs.

"It will give you some idea how a ranch is cleared," he said. "To begin with, you had better take a look around."

Frank did so and first of all noticed the rather rambling house, part of which was built of logs notched into one another at the ends, though the rest, which had evidently been added to it later, was of sawed lumber. It was roofed with what he fancied were red cedar shingles. On the other side of it, carefully fenced off with tall split rails, stood orderly ranks of trees, some in delicate pink and white blossom. Harry told him they were apples and prunes and peaches. Nearer him were one or two fields of timothy grass and fresh green oats, and then more of the latter growing among fern-engirdled stumps sawed off some six feet above the ground. Beyond them, in turn, half-burned branches were strewn among another stretch of stumps, then there was a narrow belt where great trees lately chopped lay in tremendous ruin, and behind them again the forest rose in an unbroken wall.

"Now," explained Harry, "you have the whole thing in front of you, if you'll begin at the bush and work back toward the house. First you chop down the trees, then you burn them up and raise your first crop or two round the stumps. Afterward by degrees you grub up the stumps and get the clean, tilled land. When it's been worked a few years it will grow almost anything."

"But where's the stock?" Frank asked. "I had a notion that a ranch was a place where you raised no end of horses or cattle."

"That's on the plains," laughed Harry. "On this side of the Rockies it's any piece of cleared land with a house on it. At quite a few of the ranches they raise nothing but fruit. As you asked the question, though, our cattle are in the bush. They run there and live on what they can find until we round them up. Now we'll get to work."

He turned away after a pair of brawny oxen that were plodding leisurely across the clearing, and in a little while they halted on the edge of what Harry called the slashing. This was a belt of fallen timber which ran around most of the open space. As Frank gazed at the chaos of great trunks and mighty branches he felt inclined to wonder how Mr. Oliver had managed to get them down.

"What will you do with these?" he asked.

"Saw or chop off the bigger branches," Harry answered. "Then we'll wait until the trunks are good and dry in the fall and put a fire to them. It will burn up all the small stuff, and leave them like this."

He pointed to the rows of blackened and partly burned logs which lay between the slashing and the half-cleared soil, and Frank noticed that most of them had been sawed into several pieces.

"Couldn't you sell them for lumber?" he inquired.

"No," replied Harry. "For one thing, it's quite a long way to the nearest mill and we'd have to build a skidway for a mile or two down to the water. Besides, in a general way, it's only the redwood and red cedar that the mills have much use for."

Then he gave Frank a handspike that lay close by, and between them they prized up one end of a log so that he could slip a chain sling under it. The other end of the chain was attached to the yoke of the oxen, and when he called them the big white and red beasts hauled the log away until he stopped them and went back for another. Frank did not find much difficulty in this, but it was different when they had drawn six or seven of the logs together and laid them side by side. Harry said that the next lot must go on top of the others, and Frank was wondering how they were to get them there, when his companion laid two or three stout skids some distance apart against the first of the row. These, it was evident, would serve as short, slanting bridges, but Frank was still not clear as to how the next log could be propelled up them.

When Harry brought it up he slipped the chain along toward its middle, though it cost the boys an effort to prize the mass up with their handspikes, after which he made one end of the chain fast on the opposite side of the row, around which he led the oxen. The other end he hooked to their yoke, so that it now led doubled across the row and around the trunk they wished to raise. He said that when the chain was pulled the log would roll up it. He next shouted to the oxen, who plodded forward straining at the yoke, while he and Frank slipped their handspikes under opposite ends of the log.

"Heave!" he cried. "Send her up!"

Frank did his utmost, with the perspiration dripping from him and the veins on his forehead swelling, but the ponderous mass rolled very slowly up the skids, and several times he fancied it would drag the oxen backward and slide down on him. Indeed, for about half a minute it hung stationary, though Harry, who dared not draw out his handspike, shouted frantic encouragement to the straining beasts. Then it moved another inch or two, and one released skid shot up as though fired out of a gun when the log rolled upon the first of the preceding ones. They worked it well across them, and then freeing the chain went back for another, though Frank's arms felt as if they had been almost pulled out of their sockets.

"You want somebody to keep the oxen up to it as well as two to heave, when the logs are as big as these," said his companion. "Still, some of the small ranchers do the whole thing alone."

Frank could not help wondering what kind of men these were, but in the meanwhile he was obliged to bend all his thought on his difficult task, which grew heavier when, having ranged the logs in two layers, they commenced the third. The skids were now too short to reach the top of the second tier without making the slope rather steep and Harry said that they must cut some new ones.

A couple of axes lay close by, and handing one to Frank he strode into the bush and stopped in front of a young fir.

"The butt ought to make a skid," he said. "I'll leave you to get it down and I'll look for another. You do it like this."

Spreading his feet apart and balancing himself lightly, he swung the heavy, long-hafted ax above his head. The big blade, descending, buried itself in the trunk, and rose with a flash when he wrenched it clear. This time he struck horizontally and a neat wedge-shaped chip flew out.

"Now," he said, handing the ax to Frank, "you can go ahead."

He turned away and Frank swung the ax experimentally once or twice. The thing looked easy. Whirling up the blade, he struck with all his might. It came down into the notch Harry had made, but it was the flat of it that struck, and, while the haft jarred his hands, the blade glanced and just missed his leg. This appeared somewhat extraordinary, and he was a little more cautious when he tried again. He hit the tree fairly this time, but almost a foot above the cut, and he was commencing to feel indignant when he dragged the steel out again, which in itself was not particularly easy. He then struck horizontally, but the blade did not seem to go in at all, and at the next attempt the ax buried itself in the soil, just grazing his boot. This steadied him, for he had no desire to lame himself for life. Shortening his hold upon the haft, he used it after the manner of a domestic chopper, until at length, when his hands were blistered and he was very hot, the tree went down with a crash. Then turning around he saw Harry watching him with a look of amusement.

"Have you got yours down?" Frank asked.

"Oh, yes," Harry replied, "and another. I've chopped them through for skids." He pointed to the hacked and splintered log. "Looks as if something had been eating it, doesn't it?"

Frank's face grew rather red. "You couldn't expect me to drop into it all at once. Give me a week or two to pick up the swing and balance of it."

"A week or two!" Harry seemed to address the clustering firs. "They sure raise smart folks back East."

"How long were you learning?" retorted Frank.

"Well," said Harry thoughtfully, "you could call it most of twelve years. I used to go whittling with a toy tomahawk soon after I could walk. Of course, they confiscated the thing now and then. Once it was after I'd just brought down a one-leg round table."

"Did you ever cut yourself?"

Harry rolled up his trousers and pointed to a big white mark below his knee.

"I could show you two or three more of them," he commented dryly. "There are quite a few bush ranchers who haven't got all their toes on."

He cut a skid from the butt of the log, and when they went back to the pile the work which before had been hard now became more or less dangerous. They had to prize and sometimes shoulder up the ponderous masses of timber three-high, and Frank was far from feeling over the effects of the previous two-days' march. Still, if his companion could manage it, he was determined that he could, and he toiled on, soaked in perspiration, straining and gasping over one of the heaviest tasks connected with clearing land, until to his vast relief Miss Oliver appeared in the doorway, jingling a cowbell as a signal that dinner was ready.

They went back to work after the meal, and Frank somehow held out until the middle of the afternoon. It seemed very hot in the clearing and the scorching sunrays beat down upon the back of his neck and shoulders. One of his horribly blistered hands commenced to bleed, he was almost afraid to straighten his back, and his arms were sore all over. At last as they were heaving up a heavy log it stuck just on the edge of the tier and Frank, who felt his breath failing him and his heart beating as though it would burst, could hear the oxen scuffling furiously on the other side of the pile.

"Heave!" Harry shouted. "Another inch will land her!"

"I can't!" Frank panted, with his hands slipping upon the lever.

"Then look out!" warned Harry. "Let go of the thing and jump!"

Frank did not remember whether he let go or whether the handspike was torn from his grasp, but he jumped backward as far as he could and staggered a few paces farther when he saw the big log rolling down after him. Then he fell headlong, there was a crash and a great trampling of hoofs, and he wondered whether the log would crush the life out of him. When he scrambled to his feet, however, it had stopped not far away; and in a few moments Harry appeared from behind the pile.

"It pulled the oxen backward right up to the logs," he explained. Then he looked sharply at Frank. "We haven't done badly for one day, and Aunt Sophy wants me to haul in some stovewood. You sit there and rest yourself awhile."

He went away with the oxen, and Frank was thankful to do as he was told, for his heart was heavy and he was utterly worn out. His hands were torn and blistered and the logs that he had partly lifted with his body had bruised his breast and ribs. If this was ranching, it was horrible work, and he felt that he would break down altogether if he attempted much more of it. It was nothing like his dream of riding through the bush on spirited horses after half-wild cattle. Then the troublesome question as to what he should do if he gave it up had to be faced. He had found that he had no aptitude for business, and he had a suspicion that work would be quite as hard in a logging camp or in a sawmill. It was clear that he could not go home, even if he had the money for his fare, which was not the case, and he felt very forlorn and miserable.

In the meanwhile the twigs he lay upon were pleasantly soft, and it was cool and peaceful in the lengthening shadow of the firs. There was a curious rhythmic drumming sound which he found most soothing and which he afterward learned was made by a blue grouse not far away. The pungent smell of withering fir and cedar sprays in the slashing dulled his senses, until at last his troubles seemed to melt away and he fancied that he was back in Boston where nobody had ever required him to heave ponderous logs upon one another.

It was a couple of hours later when Mr. Oliver, walking back that way with Harry, stopped and looked at the pile.

"You have put all those up since this morning?" he asked.

Harry said that they had done so, and Mr. Oliver glanced down with a little smile at Frank, who lay fast asleep.

"It's rather more than I expected. The lad must have done his share, but it might have been better if you had started him at something easier."

"He stood it all right until a while ago, and I think he'd have seen me through if it hadn't been for the walk yesterday. Shall we crosscut some of those branches to-morrow instead?"

"No," replied Mr. Oliver after a moment's reflection. "It might be wiser to let him see the worst of it. If he stands a week's logging there's no doubt that he'll do." He paused a moment and looked down at Frank again. "I don't think he'll back down on it. He's very much like his father, as I remember him a good many years ago."

Then he laid his hand on Frank's shoulder.

"Get up, boy. Supper's ready."

CHAPTER IV
TARGET PRACTICE

The two boys spent most of the following week rolling logs and they were busy among them one hot afternoon when Mr. Oliver walked out of the bush nearby. As they did not immediately see him, he stopped and stood watching them in the shadow for a few minutes. Frank was feeling more cheerful by this time, though his hands were still very sore and, as a good many of the logs were burned on the outside, he was more or less blackened all over. He was getting used to the work, and Jake, who had arrived with the sloop in the meanwhile, relieved him and his companion of the heaviest part of it. Turning around presently at a sound, Frank saw Mr. Oliver smiling at him.

"If I were as grimy as you I think I'd go in for a swim," he said. "It's hot enough, and there's a nice beach not far away. I dare say Harry will go along with you while Jake and I put up these logs."

Harry lost no time in throwing down his handspike, and they set out together down a narrow trail through the woods, which led them out by and by upon a head above the cove in which the sloop lay moored. Standing on the edge of the crag, Frank looked down upon the clear, green water which lapped smooth as oil upon a belt of milk-white shingle and broke into little wisps of foam beneath the gray rocks at the mouth of the cove. Beyond this the sea flashed silver in the sunlight like a great mirror, except where a faint, fitful breeze traced dark blue streaks across it. Dim smudges of islands and headlands broke the gleaming surface here and there, and high above it all was a cold white gleam of eternal snow.

In a few minutes they had scrambled down a winding path, and Frank, stripping off his clothes, waded into the water abreast of the sloop which lay swinging gently about a dozen yards from the beach.

"Can you swim off to her?" shouted Harry.

Frank said that he thought he could, and set about it with a jerky breast stroke, for he was not very proficient in the art. The water was decidedly cold and he was glad when he reached the sloop. Clutching her rail where it was lowest amidships he endeavored to pull himself out. To his disgust he found that his feet would shoot forward under the bottom of her, with the result that he sank back to the neck after each effort. When he had made two or three attempts he heard a shout:

"Hold on! You'll never do it that way."

Harry shot toward him, his limbs gleaming curiously white through the shining green water, though his face and neck showed a coffee-brown, as did his lower arms, which he swung out above his head, rolling from side to side at every stroke. He grasped Frank's shoulder and pushed him toward the stern of the sloop.

"Now," he said when he clutched it, "there are just two ways of getting out of the water into a boat. If she has a flat stern you make for there and get your hands on the top of it spread a little apart. Then you heave yourself up by a handspring – though that isn't very easy."

Frank smiled at these instructions, but said nothing. It was easy for him, because he had learned the trick in a gymnasium. Suddenly jerking down his elbows, which ever since he had grasped the stern were as high as his head, he shot his body up until his hands were down at his hips. Then, as his waist was level with the sloop's transom, he quietly crawled on board. Harry, however, had to make two or three attempts before he succeeded, and then he looked at his companion with undisguised astonishment.

"I've never done it right away yet," he said admiringly. "Say, do you know how to dive?"

"No," replied Frank; "that is, I've scarcely tried."

Harry led him forward where the boat's sheer was higher and he could stand a couple of feet or so above the water.

"You only get half the fun out of swimming unless you can dive," he said. "Let's see what kind of a show you make."

Frank stiffened himself and jumped. At least, that was what he meant to do, but as it happened, he merely threw himself flat upon the water, and the result was rather disconcerting. He felt as though all the breath had been knocked out of him, and in addition to this all the front of his body was smarting. He was about to swim toward the stern again when Harry stopped him.

"Hold on!" he called. "You may as well learn the other way of getting out, and if she's a sailing craft with a bowsprit it's much the easiest one. Swim forward to the bow."

Frank did so and saw that a wire ran from the end of the bowsprit, dipping a little below the water where it was attached to the boat. He had no difficulty in getting his foot upon it, and after that it was a simple matter to crawl on board. His chest and limbs were still smarting and were very red when he joined Harry. The latter regarded him with a look of amusement.

"You'll get hurt every time, if you dive like that," he said. "Look here," and he stood up on the boat's deck. "You want to get your weight on the fore part of your feet all ready to shove off before you go. Then you must shoot as far forward as you can – falling on it won't do – and hollow your back and stiffen yourself once you're under. That is, when you want to skim along just below the surface. Watch me."

Leaning forward a little he sprang out from the boat, a lithe, tense figure, with hands flung straight forward over his head. They struck the water first, and he went in with an impetus which swept him along scarcely a foot beneath the top. Then his speed slowly slackened and he had stopped altogether about a length of the boat away when he raised his head and swam back to her.

"You don't want to try that in less than four feet until you're sure you can do it right," he said when he had climbed on board. "The other kind of diving's different." Then, taking up a galvanized pin, he threw it in. "See whether you can fetch it. There's about eight or nine feet of water here. You can open your eyes as soon as your head's in, and you won't have any trouble in coming up again. Jump, and throw your legs straight up as you go."

Frank managed this time not to drop in a heap as he had done before. He also opened his eyes under water for the first time and found it perfectly easy to see. It was like looking through green glass. He could make out the pin lying a long way down beneath him. It was, however, impossible to reach it. The water seemed determined on forcing him back to the top, and when he abandoned the struggle to get down he seemed to reach the surface with a bound.

"How far did I go?" he gasped.

"About six feet. It's quite as far as I expected."

Harry plunged, and Frank, who had climbed out in the meanwhile, saw him striking upward with his feet until he turned and came up with a rush, holding the pin in one hand. Flinging it on board he headed for the beach and was standing on the shingle rubbing himself with his hands when Frank joined him.

"I guess you had two towels when you went swimming back East?" he laughed.

Frank looked up inquiringly, acknowledging that he usually had taken one.

"Well," said Harry, "we have them at the homestead, but there are ranches in this country where you wouldn't get even one."

"No towels!" exclaimed Frank in some astonishment. "What do they use instead?"

"Some of them cut a very little bit off of a cotton flour bag. Those bags are valuable because they keep them to mend their shirts with. I've a notion that the other fellows sit in the sun."

Frank laughed and scrambled into his clothes after rubbing himself with his hands. He was commencing to realize that whether Harry was joking with him or not it was unavoidable that they should have different ways in different parts of so big a country. Indeed, now that he was some four thousand miles from Boston, he felt that instead of its being curious that the people were slightly different it was wonderful that they were so much the same. If one measured four thousand miles

across Europe and Asia one would get Frenchmen at the one end and wild Cossacks or nomad Tartars at the other, with perhaps a score of wholly different nations, speaking different languages, between.

They had an excellent appetite for supper when they went back to the ranch, and after the meal was over, Mr. Oliver took down a rifle from the wall.

"You can bring yours along, Harry," he said, and then turned to Frank. "In a general way, a rancher doesn't get much time for hunting, and he seldom goes out for the fun of the thing, but an odd deer or grouse comes in handy now and then. Anyway, before you can hunt at all you must learn to shoot and you may as well begin."

"Dad's a pot-hunter," chuckled Harry. "At least, that's what the two smart sports we had round here last fall said he was."

A gleam of amusement crept into his aunt's eyes, but Mr. Oliver's face contracted into a slight frown.

"Harry knows my views, but you had better hear them, too," he said to Frank. "I'm certainly what those fellows called a pot-hunter, though they very foolishly seemed to think that one ought to be ashamed of it. Most of the ranchers in this district take down the rifle only when they want something to eat, and that's the best excuse there is for shooting. Is it a desirable thing to destroy a dozen harmless beasts for the mere pleasure of killing, and leave them in the bush for the wolves and eagles?"

"Don't the game laws prevent that, sir?" Frank asked.

"They limit a man to so many head of this and that, and in a general way he brings no more out with him, but it doesn't by any means follow that he hasn't killed a bear or a deer that he doesn't mention in some lonely ravine. The sport who hasn't a conscience is as big a pest in a game country as the horn and hide hunter used to be, and we have to thank him for practically exterminating several of the finest beasts in North America."

"Wouldn't the clearing of virgin country and the way the farms and ranches spring up account for it?"

"Only to some extent. It's my opinion that there are more deer and bears about the smaller ranches than you could find anywhere else. All this is no reason why you shouldn't learn to shoot; that is, to hit your game just where you want to and kill it there and then."

He walked out with his rifle and the boys followed him across the clearing. Here Harry fixed a piece of white paper about two feet square with a black dab in the middle of it on the trunk of a big fir, after which he came back to where the others were standing.

"How far do you make it?" his father asked.

"About a hundred yards."

Mr. Oliver now turned to Frank.

"As I think you told me you couldn't shoot, I'll give you a short lecture on the principles of the thing. When they're after birds most men use a scatter gun. It will spread an ounce of shot – several hundred pellets – over a six-foot circle at a distance of about forty yards; but the rifle is the great weapon of western America. Take this one and open the breach – now look up the barrel."

"I can see little grooves twisting round it like a screw," said Frank.

"That's the rifling. It serves two purposes. The bullet – you use only one – has to screw round and round to get out, and that gives the explosion time to act upon it. It increases the muzzle velocity. Then it gives the bullet a rotary motion, and anything spinning on its axis travels very much straighter than it would do otherwise. It's the twisting motion that keeps a top from falling over."

Frank could readily understand this, and he remembered what he had read about the gyroscope.

"Now," continued Mr. Oliver, "we have to consider the pull of the earth upon the bullet, which would bring it down, and to counteract this you have to direct it rather upward. The slight curve it makes before it reaches its mark is called the trajectory, and it naturally varies with the distance. You arrange it by the sights. There are two of them, one on the muzzle and one near the breach. The last one slides up and down like this. The farther off the mark is the higher it must go. As you

have to get them both in line, it's evident that pushing the back one up will raise the muzzle. You can understand that?"

Frank said that he could, and Mr. Oliver pushed the rearsight down and snapped a lever.

"It's cocked, though it hasn't a shell in it. At a hundred yards or less the sight goes down about the limit." He handed Frank the rifle. "Stand straight, left foot a little to the left and forward – that will do. Now bring the rifle to your shoulder – left hand under the barrel near the rearsight, elbow well down, right hand round the small of the butt, thumb on the top. Try to hold it steady."

Frank found it difficult. The rifle was heavy and the muzzle seemed to want to drop, but Mr. Oliver stopped him when he let his left elbow fall in toward his side.

"Bring it down and wait a moment before you throw it up again," he advised.

Frank did so once or twice, and at length his instructor seemed satisfied.

"Now we'll aim," he said. "Drop your left cheek on the stock – you'd better shut your left eye. Try to see the target through the hollow of the rearsight, with the front one right in the middle of it."

It seemed singularly difficult. The square of paper now looked exceedingly small and the sights would wobble across it. After several attempts, however, Frank got them comparatively steady.

"Put your forefinger on the trigger," Mr. Oliver directed. "Don't pull, but squeeze it slowly and steadily, holding your breath in the meanwhile."

This was worst of all, for Frank found that he pulled the sight off the target when he tightened his forefinger. After he had made an attempt or two, Mr. Oliver told him to put the rifle down.

"See what you can do, Harry," he said.

"Standing?"

"Yes," said Mr. Oliver, turning to Frank again. "Standing's hardest, kneeling easier, and lying down easiest of all, but when you're hunting in thick bush you generally have to stand."

Harry slipped a shell into his rifle, and pitched it to his shoulder. It wobbled for a moment and then grew still. After that there was a spitting of red sparks from the muzzle, which suddenly jerked, followed by a sharp detonation. A second or two later there was a thud, and Harry laughed as he stood gazing at the mark while a little blue smoke curled out of the muzzle and the opened breach.

"It's well up on the left top corner," he said.

Frank was blankly astonished. He could certainly see the square of paper, but it seemed impossible that anybody could tell whether there was a mark on it. As a matter of fact, very few people who had not been taught how to use their eyes could have done so.

Then Mr. Oliver took up his rifle, and Frank noticed that his whole body and limbs seemed to fall into the best position for holding it steady without any visible effort on the man's part. The blue barrel did not seem to move at all until at length it jerked, and Harry grinned exultantly at Frank when a thin streak of smoke drifted past them.

"That's the pot-hunter's way. He's about two inches off the center."

Mr. Oliver gave Frank the rifle, and this time he slipped in a shell.

"If you can't get the sights right bring it down," he directed. "Don't dwell too long on your aim."

Frank held his breath and stiffened his muscles, but the foresight would wobble and the target seemed to dance up and down in a most exasperating manner. At length he pressed the trigger. He felt a sharp jar upon his shoulder, but to his astonishment he heard no report. After what seemed quite a long time there was a faint thud in the forest.

"You've got something, but I guess it's the wrong tree," laughed Harry.

After that Frank tried several shots, finally succeeding in hitting the tree a couple of feet above the mark. Mr. Oliver, who had taken out his pipe in the meanwhile, nodded at him encouragingly.

"You only need to practice steadily," he said. "For the rest, anything that tends toward a healthy life will make you shoot well. Whisky and tobacco most certainly won't."

Harry's eyes twinkled as he glanced at his father's pipe.

"One of them hasn't much effect on him. I don't know whether I told you about the bag the two sports who were round here last fall nearly made. I got the tale from Webster on the next ranch."

Frank said that he would like to hear it, and Harry laughed.

"Well," he began, "Webster was sitting on a log in the bush just outside his slashing, looking around kind of sorrowful at the trees. It seemed to him they looked so big and nice it would be a pity to spoil them. When I've been chopping until my hands are sore I sometimes feel like that."

"It doesn't lead to riches," interrupted his father dryly.

"By and by," Harry continued, "Webster heard a smashing in the underbrush. It kept coming nearer, but it wasn't in the least like the sound a bear makes or a jumping deer. You don't know they're around unless they're badly scared. Anyway, Webster sat still wondering what it could be, until he saw a man crawling on the ground. He was coming along very cautiously, but you couldn't have heard him more than half a mile away. By and by he disappeared behind a big tree, and as there hadn't been a deer about for a week Webster wondered if the man was mad, until there was a blaze of repeater firing in the bush. Then Fremont, his logging ox, came out of it like a locomotive and headed for the range so fast that Webster couldn't see how he went. He grabbed his logging handspike, and found a sport abusing another for missing in the bush.

"'What in the name of wonder are you after?' he asked.

"'We've been trailing a deer two hours,' one of them declared. 'A mighty big deer. Must have been an elk.'

"'An elk, sure. I saw it,' added the other.

"'There isn't a blamed elk in the country,' said Webster.

"'You'll see,' persisted the other. 'I tell you I pumped the cylinder full into him.'

"'Quite sure of that?' Webster asked.

"The other man said that he was, and Webster waved his handspike.

"'Then it's going to cost you sixty dollars, and I'll take a deposit now,' he said. 'It's my ox Fremont you've been after.'"

"Did they give it to him?" Frank broke in.

"Five dollars," Harry answered. "Webster looked big and savage, and they compromised on that."

"But had they hit the ox?"

Harry chuckled. "Give a man who isn't a hunter a repeater and he'll never hit anything – unless it's what he isn't shooting at."

"Anyway, it's better to stick to the single shot at first," Mr. Oliver remarked. "Then you take time and care, and it's more likely that when you shoot you kill. No humane person has any use for the man who leaves badly wounded beasts wandering about the woods."

He rose, and shook out his pipe.

"We'll be getting back," he added. "There's only one way of making it easy to rise at sun-up."

They walked toward the house together, and it seemed to Frank that there was a good deal to be said for this rancher's views. He did not tell tall stories and boast of what he had shot, but Frank had seen enough to realize that it was most unlikely that he left any sorely wounded animal to die in misery. It was not often that Mr. Oliver molested the beautiful wild creatures of the woods, but when he fixed the sights on one of them he killed it clean.

CHAPTER V
THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOONER

Three or four weeks slipped by uneventfully, and Frank was commencing to like the simple, laborious life at the ranch. He and Harry were standing together one evening on the shingle down in the cove. It was close upon high water and a long swell worked in, breaking noisily upon the pebbles, while they could see the blue undulations burst into snowy froth about the dark rocks at the entrance. The sun had just dipped; it was wonderfully fresh and cool, and a sweet resinous smell drifted out of the forest behind them.

Harry glanced at a canoe which lay close by. It was about fourteen feet long and just wide enough to sit in, and had been hollowed out of a cedar log by a Siwash Indian. The bow, which swept sharply upward, had been rudely cut into the likeness of a bird's head. The craft was kept there so that anybody who wished to reach the sloop could go off in her.

"I don't think it's quite high water yet, and the breeze is dropping," Harry was saying. "There's just enough to take us a mile or two down the beach over the tide with the spritsail set. Then we could lower the mast and paddle home."

"Wouldn't she sail back?" Ray asked.

"No," was the answer, "only with a fair wind. You can't beat a thing like that to windward. There's not enough of her in the water."

Frank said that he would like to go, and after running the canoe down they lifted the short mast into place and set the little sail. It filled when a few strokes of the paddle had driven them out of the cove, and they slid away, rising and falling smoothly, with the swell running after them. Harry took hold of the rope that held the foot of the sail fast to a peg.

"You want to keep the sheet handy in a very small craft," he instructed. "Then if a hard puff of wind strikes her you can slack it up, or let it go altogether, when the sail will blow out loose. There's more weight in this breeze than I expected."

It seemed to Frank from the gurgle at the bows and the way the foam slipped by them that they were sailing very fast, but for a while he watched the rocky heads that dipped to the water open out one after another and then close in again behind them. The woods that crept between them down to the strips of shingle were rapidly growing shadowy, and the ridges of water that followed them seemed to be getting darker, though here and there one of them was flecked with bright wisps of froth. At length Harry let the sheet go and brought the canoe around.

"We'll have the mast down and get back," he said.

They had no trouble in rolling up the sail and laying the mast in the bottom of the craft, but when they dipped the paddles, Harry kneeling in the stern and Frank toward the bow, the latter realized that their next task would not be quite so easy. A chilly wind which seemed considerably stronger than before they turned struck his face, the bows splashed noisily, throwing up little spurts of spray, and now and then the narrow craft lurched rather wildly over the top of a swell. He worked hard for about twenty minutes, and then glancing astern was a little astonished to see that a rock which had been opposite them was now a remarkably small distance behind. Harry, who had evidently followed his glance, scowled disapprovingly.

"We'll have to paddle, that's a cold fact," he declared. "The tide seems to have turned quite a while before it ought to have, and the breeze is getting up again. We might find slacker water right inshore."

They edged close in to the rocks, the sight of which did not add to Frank's comfort, though the boat crept on a little faster. The swell broke in long white swirls about their feet, and it was evident that any attempt to land there was out of the question. Besides, even if they managed to reach the

bush, there was no trail to the ranch, and he had no desire to struggle through the tangle of fallen branches and dense thickets in the darkness. His knees and hands were getting sore, but he toiled on patiently with the single-ended paddle, while the canoe lurched more viciously and little showers of spray flew in over her bow. It was becoming exceedingly hard work to drive the craft into the rising head sea. The foam-girt rocks were, however, slowly crawling by, and at length, after laboring, panting and breathless, around a somewhat larger head, Harry suddenly stopped paddling.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "Just keep her from swinging, and look yonder!"

Frank, glad of a brief rest, gazed astern. It was neither light nor dark, for a pale moon hung low in the sky, casting a faint silvery track upon the water, which was now flecked with white froth a little off shore. Across the sweep of radiance there moved a tall black spire of slanting canvas, with the foam leaping up about the shadowy strip of hull beneath.

"The schooner!" said Harry significantly. "She's beating up over the tide and she'll probably stand close in, but I don't think they could see us against the land."

He spoke as if he did not wish to be seen, and for no very clear reason Frank felt glad that they lay in the shadow of a big black head. The schooner was coming on very fast, rising, it seemed to him, bodily, until he could make out the curl of piled-up water that flowed away beneath her depressed side. The mass of straining sailcloth hid most of her slanted deck, and he could see nobody on board her, but it seemed curious that she carried no lights. Then it occurred to him that she was heading straight for them, and he was about to dip his paddle when Harry stopped him.

"Keep still!" he commanded. "They'll have to come round before they reach us."

Frank could now hear the roar of water about the bow of the vessel, and in a minute or two she swayed suddenly upright and there was a great thrashing of canvas as, shooting forward, she came round. She was very near them and as her boom-foresail and mainsail swung across, leaving clear the side of the deck they had shrouded, he saw two or three shadowy figures busy forward. They became more distinct as she drove back into the moonlight, which fell upon the form of her helmsman. Frank could see him clearly, and there was, he fancied, something peculiar about the man.

The splashing top of a sea slopped into the canoe as they got way on her, and they taxed their strength to the utmost during the next hour. The craft bucked and jumped as they laboriously drove her over the confused swell, which was rapidly getting higher, and there was already a good deal of water washing about inside her. Once or twice Frank held his breath as a threatening mass of water heaved up ahead, but in each case she lurched across it safely, and presently they found smoother water under another crag. He gave a sigh of relief when at length they reached the cove and beached her upon the shingle. They turned her over to empty before they ran her up, and then Harry sat down upon a boulder. Frank already had discovered that he seldom talked of anything they had done as though it were an exploit.

"I'm quite puzzled about that schooner," he said presently.

"Why?"

Harry paused and thought a moment. "Well, it's a sure thing she's the vessel that crept past us the morning we were lying beneath the point, and though she's been seen three or four times now there's no notice in the papers of any arrival that seems to fit her. She has the look of being built for the Canadian sealing trade, and most of the craft in that business are mighty smart vessels."

"Doesn't a ship have to carry papers saying where she's from and where she's going?"

"Oh, yes," assented Harry. "Still, she might clear from somewhere in Canada, say for the halibut fishing – I've heard they're trying to start it there – or something that would keep her out a month or so. Then, as there is no end of quiet inlets in British Columbia and a good many here, she could run up and down from one to another and go back with a few fish, and there'd be nothing to show what she had been doing in the meanwhile."

"You think it's something illegal?"

"If it is anything honest I don't see why she was beating up without her lights in the strength of the tide, when she'd have slacker water over toward the other side, only there'd be a chance of her being seen from the Seattle boat if she ran across yonder. Now it's a general idea that there's a good deal of dope – that's opium – smuggled into this country, and now and then Chinamen, too. Our people won't have any more of them, but though they have no trouble in getting into Canada, they seem to like the States better. I guess wages are higher."

"Have you talked to your father about it?"

"I told him what we'd seen the other time and he looked kind of amused, or as if he didn't want to be bothered about the thing; though that may not have been it, either. Unless he tells you right out, you can never figure on what he's thinking. Anyway, I'll say nothing more to him unless there's some particular reason."

Harry was afterward sorry that he had arrived at this decision, and, for that matter, so was his father, but it was the next morning before this came about. In the meanwhile the boys went back to the ranch, and soon afterward retired to rest in the room they now shared. Frank went to sleep at once, and it was some time later when, awaking suddenly, he fancied that Harry had left his bed, which was fixed against the opposite wall. A faint light from outside crept into the room, and Frank made out a black figure standing by the open window. Slipping softly to the floor he moved toward it and Harry raised his hand warningly when he joined him.

"What are you doing here?" Frank inquired.

"Well," answered Harry, "since you ask me, I don't quite know, but I fancied I heard somebody about the ranch. Keep still and listen."

He spoke in a low and rather strained voice, and Frank, who was uneasily impressed by it, leaned out of the window. There was a moon somewhere in the sky, but it was obscured by clouds, and only a dim, uncertain light filtered down. It showed the great black firs which rose, a rampart of impenetrable darkness, beyond the rather less shadowy clearing, across part of which the fruit trees stretched. Then ran back, in regular rows, little clumps of deeper obscurity which presently grew blurred and faded into one another. The wind had apparently dropped again, for it was impressively still.

"I can't hear anything," whispered Frank.

"I'm not sure that I did," rejoined Harry. "It may be that seeing that schooner put the thing into my head, but we'll wait a little now that we're up."

For a couple of minutes they waited in silence. Then Harry suddenly gripped his companion's arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "Across the clearing – yonder!"

Frank fancied that he could make out a shadowy object in the open space between the fruit trees and the forest. It was very dim and indistinct, and he realized that he would not have noticed it only that it moved. Shortly afterward it disappeared and a faint rattle like that made by two pieces of wood jarring together came out of the deep gloom beneath the firs.

"The fence," suggested Harry. "It sounded like the top rails going down."

The fence was made of split rails interlocked together in the usual manner without the use of nails, and it seemed to Frank very probable that anybody climbing over it in the darkness would be apt to knock one or two of them down. The question was who would be likely to climb over it, since there was no one living within some miles of the ranch. Then he caught another sound which seemed farther off. It suggested the crackle of rotten branches or torn-down undergrowth, but it ceased almost immediately.

"Slip on your things," whispered Harry. "I'm going down."

In a few moments they crept softly down the stairway barefooted, and Harry opened the outer door very cautiously. He picked up an ax outside, and they moved silently around the house, stopping now and then to listen. There was only a deep stillness. Nothing seemed to move; though Frank

wished that he had at least a good thick stick in his hand. He had an uncomfortable feeling that they might come upon a man hiding in some strip of deeper gloom as they slowly crept along the wall. When at length they had satisfied themselves that there was nobody about, Harry sat down.

"I can't figure out this thing," he mused. "It seems to me that whoever those strangers were they haven't been near the house, and it's a quiet country, anyway." He glanced down at his bare feet. "I'd go along and look around the barn and stables only that I'd certainly stub my toes, and it wouldn't be any use. Nobody steals horses around here. They couldn't get rid of them if they did."

The outbuildings stood at some little distance from the house, and Frank, who remembered that they had strewn the trail to them with broken twigs in dragging some branches from the slashing, agreed with his companion that it would not be wise to traverse it in the darkness with unprotected feet.

"Couldn't you slip into the kitchen and get our boots?" he suggested.

"Not without waking dad," answered Harry. "He's in the next room, and he sleeps lightly. I'm not anxious to bring him out if no harm's been done."

"He'd get angry?"

"No, he'd only smile; and somehow that makes you feel quite cheap and small. Besides" – and he hesitated – "there was another time, when I roused them for nothing; and I don't want to do it again. You wouldn't either, if you had stood as much about it from Jake as I've had to ever since."

They decided to say nothing about the matter unless some reason for doing so appeared in the morning, and creeping back through the house as silently as possible they went to bed. They awoke a little later than usual, and going down found Mr. Oliver standing at one side of the kitchen table rather grave of face, with Jake, who also looked thoughtful, opposite him. A strip of paper with some writing on it lay between them. Mr. Oliver looked around as the boys came in.

"Did either of you hear anything suspicious last night?" he asked.

"Yes," said Harry hesitatingly. "In fact, we came down."

He briefly related why they had done so, and Jake broke in:

"Then why in the name of wonder didn't you call somebody?"

"It's a reasonable question," said Mr. Oliver.

Harry explained with some diffidence that they were afraid of being laughed at, and Frank felt a little uncomfortable under the rancher's steady gaze.

"Well," said the latter dryly, "I suppose your idea was natural, and we'll let it go at that. It's perhaps scarcely worth while to point out that most people get laughed at now and then, and there's no reason for believing that it hurts them. I wonder if you will be surprised to hear that my team has gone?"

They were certainly somewhat startled.

"I found this stuck up on the stable door," said Jake, pushing the strip of paper across toward them.

The boys read the straggling writing: "*If you want your team back keep your mouth shut.*"

For a moment they looked at each other in silence, and then Mr. Oliver turned to them.

"It's all we know in the meanwhile. Have you anything more to tell us?"

Harry diffidently mentioned the schooner, and his father drew down his brows.

"Whether her appearance has any connection with the matter is more than I can say, but I'll sail up to the settlement this morning. You and Frank can go on with the drain cutting while I am away."

Just then Miss Oliver came in to get breakfast ready, and when the meal was finished the two boys made for the clearing where they were cutting a trench. When they reached their destination Harry sat down and pushed back his hat.

"This thing isn't very clear to me, but I'm beginning to get the drift of it," he announced. "It's quite likely that dad knows a good deal more about it than I do, but until he has it all worked out

he won't tell. First of all, we'll allow that they're smugglers on that schooner. They borrowed two of our horses and that fixes it."

"You couldn't smuggle a great deal on two horses," Frank pointed out.

"Sure," admitted Harry. "Still, they might have picked up another team somewhere else, and you want to remember that it only pays to smuggle things that are valuable and can be easily moved. Now one packhorse load of dope would be worth a good many dollars, and you can't move anything much easier than a man. He's got feet."

This was incontestable, but Frank considered the matter.

"If you turned a number of Chinamen loose in the bush wouldn't they be recognized as strangers at any settlement they reached and have to give an account of themselves to somebody?"

"The trouble is that, although I believe they have to carry papers of some kind, it's mighty hard to tell one Chinaman from another and they all work into each other's hands."

"Your idea is that the smugglers have confederates?"

"They have them, sure," said Harry. "There's some diking being done on a salt marsh not far away, and the last time I was there it struck me there were some hard-looking white toughs on the workings. Then there's a small Chinese colony behind the settlement, and it's thick bush with only a few ranches for some leagues beyond. Just the kind of country for running dope through."

"Are the ranchers likely to stand in?"

"No, not in a general way, but it's possible that a man here and there living by himself in the bush would say nothing if they borrowed a horse or two. It's not nice to have a gang of toughs up against you."

"Your father doesn't seem inclined to look at it that way."

Harry laughed. "I'll allow that there's a good deal of sense in dad. It would be clear to him that he couldn't well give them away afterward if he did nothing this time. They'd certainly have got him; and dad's not the man to let a gang of dope runners order him round." He paused a moment, and added significantly: "If they try any bluffing in this case there'll be trouble."

Frank asked no further questions and they set about the trenching.

CHAPTER VI
AT THE HELM

Mr. Oliver did not come back until nightfall. He said nothing about his visit to the settlement and several days passed before the boys heard anything further of the matter. In the meanwhile they went on with the drain they were cutting across a swampy strip of clearing, and one afternoon they stood in the bottom of the four-foot trench. Harry was then busy with a grubhoe, cutting through the roots and breaking up the wet soil, which his companion flung out with a long-handled shovel. It was unpleasantly hot, and the flies were troublesome. Frank's hands were too muddy to brush them away and they crawled about his face and into his ears. He had already decided that draining was about the last occupation he would have chosen for a scorching afternoon, had the choice been open to him.

He stood, stripped to shirt and trousers, in about a foot of water, and because he had not learned the trick of pitching out the soil, part of every shovelful fell back upon him. His shirt was spattered all over, and patches of sticky mire glued it to his skin. There was no doubt that ranching was considerably less romantic than he had supposed it to be, and logging and ditching struck him as particularly uninteresting and somewhat barbarous work, but he was beginning to realize that all the agricultural prosperity of his country was founded on toil of a very similar kind. The wheat and the fruit trees would not grow until man with patient labor had prepared the soil for them, and, what was more significant, Mr. Oliver had made it plain that their yield varied in direct proportion with the work bestowed on them. Nature's alchemy, it seemed, could transmute the effort of straining muscle into golden sheaves, glowing-tinted apples, and velvet-skinned peaches and prunes.

It was clear to Frank that if he meant to become a rancher he must make up his mind to face a good many unpleasant tasks, and he swung up the mire shovelful by shovelful, though his back and limbs were aching and he had to work in a horribly cramped position. He was young, and though there were times when the work seemed almost too much for him, it was consoling to feel when he laid down his tools at night that he was growing harder and tougher with every day's toil, for his muscles were now beginning to obey instead of mastering him. He could go on for several hours after they commenced to ache, without its costing him any great effort.

By and by, however, there was an interruption, and Frank was by no means sorry when Mr. Oliver came up with a stranger and called them out of the trench.

"This is Mr. Barclay whose business is connected with the collection of the United States revenue," he said. "I believe he would like a little talk with you."

He walked away and left them with the stranger, who sat down on a log and took out a cigar. He was a little man and rather stout, dressed carelessly in store clothes, with a big soft hat and a white shirt which bulged up above the opening in his half-buttoned vest. It occurred to Frank that he looked like a country doctor. From out rather bushy eyebrows shone a pair of whimsical, twinkling eyes. When he had lighted his cigar he indicated the trench with a large, plump hand.

"Been making all that hole yourselves?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Harry.

"Interesting work?"

"That depends on how you look at it," said Harry flippantly. "Would you like to try?"

Mr. Barclay waved his hand. "It isn't necessary. Did something of the same kind years ago – only, if I remember, it was rather wetter."

"Where was that?" Harry inquired with an air of languid politeness, at which Frank felt inclined to chuckle.

"Place called Forks Butte Creek. It was a twenty-foot trench."

Harry seemed astonished and his manner suddenly changed.

"You were with the boys at Forks Butte when they swung the creek?"

"Sure," assented Mr. Barclay with a laugh. "I didn't expect you'd have heard of it. You certainly weren't ranching then."

"I've heard of it lots of times," declared Harry, turning excitedly to Frank. "It was one of the biggest things ever done by a few men this side of the Cascades. The old-timers talk about it yet. A mining row – there were about a dozen of them working some alluvial claims on a disputed location. I don't know the whole of it, but the thing turned upon the frontage, and they stood off a swarm of jumpers while they shifted the creek."

"Something like that," said Mr. Barclay. "In those days they interpreted the mining laws with a certain amount of sentiment, which – and in some respects it's a pity – they don't do now." He paused and flicked the ash from his cigar. "I understand you have been seeing a mysterious schooner."

His tone was sufficiently ironical to put Harry on his mettle, and he furnished a full and particular account of the vessel. When he had finished Mr. Barclay glanced at him with amusement in his eyes.

"You have an idea there might be smugglers on board of her?" he suggested.

"It's more than an idea. I'm sure."

"I wonder if you could tell me why?"

It was rather difficult to answer, but Harry made the attempt, furnishing his questioner with half a dozen reasons which did not seem to have much effect on him.

"Well," he persisted, "you're convinced she had opium and Chinamen on board her?"

"Aren't you?"

Mr. Barclay looked up with a smile. "At the present moment I can't form an opinion. After all, it's possible."

He rose, and as he was strolling away toward the house Harry's face contracted into an indignant frown.

"That man must have been cooking, or something of the kind, at Forks Butte," he broke out contemptuously. "Anyway, it was the last time he ever did anything worth talking about. Did you ever run up against such a stuffed image?"

Frank was far from certain that this description was altogether applicable to the stranger, but Harry seemed so much annoyed that he did not express his opinion, and they got down into the trench again. When they went back to the ranch an hour later they heard that Mr. Oliver and Mr. Barclay had gone to a neighboring ranch and intended to make a journey into the bush if they could borrow horses. When the boys were eating breakfast the next morning Miss Oliver turned to Harry.

"We have run out of pork, and the flour is almost gone," she said. "I meant to ask your father to bring some when he went up to the settlement, but I forgot it, and Jake must bring in those steers to-day."

"We'll go," broke in Harry quickly. "There's a nice sailing breeze."

His aunt looked doubtful. "You have never been so far with the sloop unless Jake was with you; and isn't there a nasty tide-rip somewhere? Still, I don't know what I shall do unless I get the flour."

She yielded when Harry insisted; and shortly afterward the boys paddled off to the sloop and made the canoe fast astern. They set the big gaff mainsail and Harry sculled her out of the cove before he hoisted the jib. Then he made Frank take the helm.

"It's a head wind until we're round the point yonder, but you'll have to learn to sail her sometime," he said. "The first thing to remember is that she'll only lie up at an angle to the wind and if you make it too small she won't go through the water. You want to feel a slight strain on the tiller."

He hauled the sheets in until the boom hung just over the boat's quarter, and while Frank grasped the tiller she slid out into open water. Bright sunshine smote the little tumbling green ridges that had here and there crests of snowy foam, and she bounded over them with a spray cloud flying at her bows. She seemed to be making an excellent pace, but Harry shook his head.

"No," he objected, "you're letting her fall off. That is, the angle you're sailing her at is too big. She'll go faster that way, but she won't go so far to windward. Don't pull so much on your tiller and she'll come up closer."

Frank tried it, but the boat sailed more slowly, and presently her mainsail flapped.

"Now you're too close," warned Harry. "You're trying to head her right into the wind. Pull your helm up again."

Frank did so, and when the boat gathered speed he ventured a question.

"If you keep her too close to the wind she won't sail, and if you let her fall off she's not going where you want. How do you find out the exact angle she ought to make?"

Harry laughed. "It depends on the boat, the cut of her sails, and how smart you are at the helm. One man would shove her to windward a point closer than another could and keep her sailing faster, too. It's a thing that takes time to learn, and there are men you couldn't teach to sail a boat at all."

Frank found that it became easier by degrees, though his companion did not appear altogether satisfied. The sloop had dipped her lee rail just level with the water now, and she rushed along, bounding with a lurch and splash over the small froth-tipped seas. He began to understand how one arrived at the proper angle by the slant at which the wind struck his face as well as by watching the direction of the seas which came charging down to meet her in regular formation. Then Harry said that as they had stretched out far enough to clear the point they would go about upon the other tack.

"Shove your helm down – that's to lee – not too hard!" he ordered, and as Frank obeyed him there was a sharp banging of sail cloth and the boat, swinging around, swayed upright.

In another moment the wind was on her opposite side, and she was heading off at an angle to her previous course, while Harry with one foot braced against the lee coaming struggled to flatten in the sheet on the jib. The big mainboom had swung over of its own accord amidst a great clatter of blocks. By and by when the point slid away to lee of them Harry told Frank to pull his helm up, and then he pointed to a confused mass of gray rocks and trees rising above the glistening water several miles away.

"Now," he said, "she'll go there straight, and all you have to do is to keep her bowsprit on yonder head. It's a fair wind, and when you've got that you want to slack out the sheets until the sails are as far outboard as they'll go and still keep full. If your sheets are too tight, you'll know it by the weight on the tiller."

He let a couple of ropes run out through the clattering blocks, and the sloop, slanting over a little farther, seemed to leap forward. The sparkling green ridges which came tumbling up on one side of her swung her aloft with the foam boiling along the edge of her lee deck, and then surged away in turn and let her drop while another came rolling up. Instead of being a mere thing of wood and canvas she seemed to become animate, charged with vitality. The springy way she rushed along was strangely exhilarating. Frank became fascinated watching her bows go up and the snowy, straining sail sweep across the dazzling blue at every lurch, while he became conscious of a sense of control and mastery as he gripped the tiller. He felt that he could do what he wanted with this wonderful rushing thing.

For she was certainly wonderful. There was no doubt of that, because among all of man's works and inventions there is none that more nearly approaches the simplicity of perfection and adaptability to its purpose than the modern sailboat. It has taken centuries to evolve her, each builder adding a little to the work of those who went before, and balancing in her making, often without knowing it, the great natural forces one against another, until at last science justified what man did, so that with this frail creation one may brave the untrammeled winds of heaven and the onslaught of the seas.

By and by the headland they had been nearing thrust them off their course, and outside it lay a nest of islets, with a strong stream running up between. As it ran to windward it broke up the regular, breeze-driven waves into short, foaming combers with hollowed breasts and tumbling tops which flung up wisps of spray. Frank glanced at this tumult with some anxiety, and it was a relief to him when his companion offered to take the tiller.

"You had better let me have her," Harry said. "She wants handling in a jump like that. I'd heave a reef down to reduce the sail, only that it would take us some time to tie it in and there'll be smoother water once we're past the islands. As we'll have to beat through, you can get the sheets in."

Frank found this no easy task, for he had no idea that the sails could pull so hard, and Harry had to help him with one hand. Then the latter's face became intent as they plunged into the turmoil. The seas looked big and angry now. In fact, as usually happens, they looked a good deal bigger than they really were, but they were breaking in a threatening manner and came on to meet the sloop in white-topped phalanxes. She went over some with a disconcerting plunge and swoop, but she rammed a few of the rest, driving her jib and bows in and flinging the brine all over her when she swung them up. Her deck was sluicing, and every now and then a green and white cascade came frothing over the coaming into the well. Frank, however, noticed that, instead of letting the boat meet the combers, his companion occasionally pulled his tiller up, so that, swinging round a little, she brought the ridge of frothing water farther on her side as she plunged over it.

"I thought you had to face a nasty sea head-on," he said.

"Did you?" Harry responded. "Then watch that smaller one."

A slope of water came tumbling on some yards ahead, and as the boy eased his helm down an inch or two the bows came up to meet the sea. They struck it full in its hollowed breast, and the next moment there was a shock and half the deck was lost in a rush of foam.

"Like me to plug another?" laughed Harry.

Frank begged him not to do it. The result of the experiment was rather alarming, and Harry let her fall off a little to dodge the onslaught of the succeeding combers, until at last they grew smaller as the stream spread itself out in open water. Then he gave Frank some further instruction.

"If you were pulling or paddling a small craft it would be safer to bring her head-on, because you have to remember that she'd be going mighty slow, but when you're sailing a boat that's carrying her speed it's evident that you don't want to ram her right at a comber. If you do, she's bound to go bang into it. When you see one that looks threatening you let her fall off slightly and she goes over slanting." He broke off for a moment with a laugh. "Seems to me I'm always on the 'teach.' You come here and take the tiller while I get some of the water out of her. You can head for that point to starboard."

He busied himself with the bucket while Frank steered the boat, and an hour or so later they ran into a little sheltered inlet where they brought her head to wind and pitched the anchor over. After that they bailed out the half-swamped canoe, and, dropping into her, paddled ashore.

CHAPTER VII
A WARNING

Frank looked about him with some curiosity when they reached the settlement, which struck him as a singularly unattractive place. In a hole chopped out of the forest that crept close to the edge of the water stood a few small log houses and several roughly boarded shacks. Tall fir stumps surrounded them, and here and there provision cans and old boots lay among the fern, in which a few lean hogs were rooting. Farther on, however, there was an opening in the bush, for the boy could catch the gleam of water between the trees, and in one place the great columnar trunks cut against the soft green of a meadow. The grass was bright with sunshine, but dim shadow hung over the forest-shrouded settlement.

"A forlorn spot," said Harry. "I don't know why the folks first pitched here, but they raise a little fruit, and now and then a Seattle boat comes along. It's thin gravel soil on this strip, and that's probably the reason they haven't done any more chopping – there are salt meadows farther along – but if they'd any hustlers among them they'd have got out their axes and let a little daylight in." He waved his hand contemptuously. "They're a mean crowd, anyway, except the storekeeper, and I've wondered how he makes a living out of them. Now we'll go along and get that flour."

They moved on down the trail, which was torn up by the passage of jumper sledges, until they reached a frame building which Frank had not noticed at first. It stood back a little and was larger and neater than any of the rest. A veranda ran along the front of it and in one window small flour bags and more provision cans were displayed. A couple of men in blue shirts and overalls lounged smoking on the veranda in a manner which suggested that they had never hurried themselves in their lives, and they seemed to be the only inhabitants of the place. As the boys walked up the stairway Harry pointed to a notice pasted up in the window. Frank stopped and read it aloud.

"*Twenty dollars will be paid to any one identifying the man who recently drove a pair of horses off the Oliver ranch.*"

With a laugh Harry looked up defiantly at the lounging men. "That's Oliver's answer," he said. "They told him to keep his mouth shut."

One of the men grinned. "Seems to me it was good advice. Do you figure any one round here is going to earn those twenty dollars?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't," he answered. "Still, my only reason for believing it is that the money isn't big enough. Anyway, that notice will serve its purpose. It makes it clear that we mean to fight."

The lounger grinned again and Harry, marching past him with his head up, entered the store. A man who was sitting behind the counter rose when the boys came in and raised his hand in a manner which seemed to indicate that caution was desirable.

"You're wanting some groceries?" he asked.

"Flour," Harry answered. "A seventy-pound bag, if you've got it. Some pork, too – you know the piece we take. You might send them down to the beach, if there's anybody in the place who's not afraid of carrying a flour bag."

The storekeeper smiled and strolled casually toward the window. Coming back he leaned upon the counter.

"Your aunt's mighty particular about her pork," he said, raising his voice a little. "Better come along into the back store and see what I've got."

They followed him into a smaller room, where he first of all threw several big slabs of pork down upon a board, making, it seemed to Frank, as much noise as possible.

"Twelve pounds in this lot," he said loudly, then lowering his voice: "Those fellows outside haven't gone and I don't want them to hear. You haven't found your horses yet?"

Harry admitted that they had not done so, and the man nodded gravely.

"Well," he said, "I guess they'll turn up presently. I couldn't tell your father that because there were other folks in the store when he handed me the notice. What I want to say is that he's not wise in bluffing the boys. You had better tell him that's my opinion."

"How much do you know about the thing?" Harry asked directly.

"Very little, but I can guess a good deal. Quite enough, anyway, to convince me that you folks had better lie quiet, and let the boys alone."

Harry glanced scornfully toward the veranda.

"Pshaw!" he growled. "We don't want to meddle, but it's another matter to let those slouches drive off our team. That's my view, though I don't know what my father means to do about it. He hasn't told me."

"He never does tell folks," the storekeeper answered with a trace of dryness. "I guess he'll wait, and kick when he's ready, but you tell him from me that he's up against quite a big thing." He raised his voice: "Well, I'll send that pork and flour along."

The boys went out and met one of the loungers strolling casually across the store, though Frank had a suspicion that he had come in softly some time earlier. As they were walking down to the beach Harry glanced up the strip of sheltered water.

"There's a Chinese camp a little way up the creek," he said. "Nothing much to see there, but we may as well take a look at it."

They paddled across a strip of shadow where the reflections of spreading cedar and towering fir floated inverted in the still, green water until the ripple from the bows broke across and banished them. After that they slid out into the sunlight where a narrow belt of cultivated land ran back on either hand. On one side it was partly hidden by a bank of soil, at the end of which three or four men were leisurely working. They merely looked down as the canoe slid past.

"Hard cases!" said Harry presently. "If I was sheriff I'd clean this hole right out. There are decent folks here, but the curious thing is that when you let two or three toughs into a place they seem to get on top."

Frank made no comment, and soon they were once more paddling into the shadow of the forest. The creek was growing smaller, and at length they ran the canoe ashore and struck into a narrow trail through the bush.

It was now getting on into the afternoon and Frank felt sorry that they had not eaten the lunch Miss Oliver had prepared for them before they left the sloop. It was very hot, and very still, except when now and then the drumming of a blue grouse came sharply out of the shadows. By and by, however, the wood became a little thinner, and Harry pointed toward an opening between the trees.

"That's the place," he said. "Not much to look at, but it's good land. You can see the maples yonder – that's always a favorable sign – and somebody with money has lately bought quite a piece of it to start a fruit ranch on. The Chows have taken the contract for clearing it, and if any dope has been landed in the neighborhood they're probably mixed up with the thing."

Frank glanced toward the opening, and sitting, as he was, in dim shadow, the open space he looked out upon seemed flooded with dazzling brightness. In the background, and some distance away, little, blue-clad figures were toiling with axes that flashed as they swung amidst a confusion of branches and fallen logs, the staccato chunk of the blades ripping through the heavy stillness. Nothing else, however, seemed to move, and the air was filled with a languorous, resinous smell. Rows of stumps stretched out from the spot on which the Chinamen were working, breaking off before a cluster of bark and split-board shacks that stood beneath the edge of the forest. A man dressed in loose, blue garments was seated motionless outside one of the shacks, before two logs, from between

which a little smoke curled straight up into the air. Presently the man stood up, and just then Harry seized Frank's shoulder.

"Look round a little – to the left," he whispered.

Frank did so and was astonished to see another man slip quietly out of the forest and approach the shack. His face was not discernible, but there was something peculiar in the way he walked, and his dress made it evident that he was a white man.

"Have you seen him before?" Harry asked softly.

"I can't locate him, but I've an idea that he's not quite a stranger," said Frank.

"Well," said Harry, "I'm open to make a guess at him. Just as the schooner went about that night I had a look at her helmsman. He had his back to me, but it was moonlight, and I could see that one shoulder hunched up in a kind of curious manner."

Frank looked again and it seemed to him that there was something unusual in the way the man held his shoulder. It was somewhat higher than the other, though it hardly amounted to a deformity.

"Slip in behind that tree," whispered Harry, pointing toward the bush. "We'll creep up through the shadow if he goes into the shack."

They spent some minutes moving forward in and out among the trees, and in the meanwhile Frank saw the stranger enter the shack and the Chinaman follow him. Then he and Harry walked out of the bush scarcely a score of yards from the rude building, and headed straight for it. As they approached, the Chinaman became visible in the doorway, where he stood waiting for them. He appeared to be an old man, for his face was lined and seamed, but it was absolutely expressionless, an impassive yellow mask, and Frank felt baffled and repelled by it. As soon as it was evident that the boys intended to enter his dwelling, he moved aside, and when they stood in the little, shadowy room Frank was astonished to see that there was nobody else in it. This seemed incomprehensible, for there was only one door in the place. In the meanwhile the Chinaman was looking at them quietly.

"It's quite hot," observed Harry.

"Velly hot," assented the other, who did not seem in any way disturbed by the fact that they had so unceremoniously marched in.

Harry appeared embarrassed after this, as though he did not know what to say next, until he was evidently seized by an inspiration.

"Got any chow, John?" he asked.

"Velly good chow," answered the Chinaman. "Lice, blue glouse, smokee fishee."

"Blue grouse!" said Harry disgustedly aside to Frank. "It's the nesting season, but I guess that wouldn't count for much with them." He turned to his host. "I'm not a heathen. Savvy cook American? Got any flour you can make biscuits or flapjacks of?"

"You leavee chow to me," said the other. "Cookee all same big hotel Seattle, Tacoma, San F'lisco."

"It's quite likely," said Harry, looking round at Frank. "You can trust a Chinaman to turn out a decent meal. I'll walk round a bit in the meanwhile; you can sit here and rest."

Frank did not particularly wish to rest, but he fancied that his companion had given him a hint, and while the Chinaman busied himself with his pots and pans he sat down outside the shack. He had been up early that morning, and after the steady, arduous work at the ranch it was pleasant to sit still in the strip of shadow and let his eyes wander idly about the clearing. Among other things, he noticed that a little trickle of water flowed across it, and that the soil was quaggy in the neighborhood. He concluded that the stranger, who had so mysteriously disappeared, must have crossed the wet place.

It was some little time before Harry came back and the Chinaman then set out their dinner. Frank had no idea what some of it consisted of and his companion was unable to enlighten him, but it was excellent. When they had finished, the man turned to Harry.

"One dolla," he said gravely.

Harry handed it over readily and smiled at Frank when they strolled back into the bush.

"It wasn't what I'd figured on when I first walked in, but I had to make some excuse," he said. "Just now I'd very much like to know how far it went with him." He paused and looked thoughtful. "I guess it wasn't a very long way. The image is ahead of us by a dollar."

Frank laughed. "You had some reason for going for that walk?"

"Oh, yes," replied Harry. "I wanted to make sure of things, and the ground was soft. There were some footprints in it – going from the shack – and they'd been made quite lately by a white man's boot. John sticks to his slipper things in a general way. Anyhow, it was the man we saw who left those tracks."

"How do you know that?"

"There were a lot of others about, but they'd been made earlier. The water had got into them, but there was very little in those I was interested in."

Frank was conscious that this was a point which would probably have escaped his notice, but he had not lived in the bush and learned to use his eyes.

"It's very curious how the fellow got out of the shack without our seeing him," he said.

"It looks curious until you begin to think. Now, though I tried to keep my eye on it all the while, the trees kept getting between me and the shack as we made for it, and what I couldn't see you couldn't see either. You were close behind me, which, in one way, was where we were wrong. If we had crept in well apart, the same tree wouldn't have bothered both of us, though if we'd done that it would have doubled the chances of our being seen."

"A tree isn't such a very big thing," Frank objected.

"No," said Harry. "The point is that it will shut an object a good deal bigger than itself out of your sight." He stopped a moment and pointed toward a neighboring cedar. "We'll say that one's three feet in diameter, but, as you're standing, it will shut off a good deal more than a track three feet wide through the bush. You want to run a line from your eye to both edges of the trunk and then carry them out behind it. The farther you run them, the farther they get apart, and as you can't see round a corner, everything in the wedge they enclose is shut out from view. Got that into you? It will come in useful when you're trailing a deer."

It was quite clear to Frank now that it had been explained, but his companion went on.

"Well," he added, "it wouldn't have taken that fellow more than a few seconds to slip out of the shack and in behind it. Then if he kept it between him and us he'd be hidden until he reached the bush."

"Yes," said Frank. "It must mean that he saw us, and didn't want us to see him."

"You're getting quite smart," said Harry with a grin. "I don't know if you noticed it, but you trod on a rotten branch that smashed. He didn't want us to know him again, but I'd pick that fellow anywhere by his back and walk. Now why was he so anxious that we shouldn't see him talking to the Chinaman?"

It was a suggestive question, but Frank could not answer it, and Harry said nothing further. Reaching the canoe they paddled down the creek until they came abreast of the sloop and saw the provisions lying upon the shingle some little distance from the water, for the tide had ebbed since their arrival. When they had run the canoe in Frank assisted Harry in getting the flour bag on his back, but gave a sudden cry of dismay as a white cloud flew all over him.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Put it down. It's running out!"

Harry dropped the bag and drew down his brows as he gazed at the little pile of flour which lay at his feet. Then he suddenly stooped down.

"The bag seemed a sound one," Frank suggested.

"Oh, yes," said Harry shortly. "There's only one thing the matter with it. See here," and he laid his finger on a long slit. "Somebody has stuck a knife into it."

"A mean trick!" Frank broke out wrathfully.

Harry stood up with a flash in his eyes. "It's rather more than that. It's a hint. Anyway, if you'll get hold of the other end we'll pack the bag down with the cut uppermost."

In spite of this precaution they spilled a good deal of the flour before they got it on board the sloop, but Harry said no more about the matter, and hoisting sail they slid out of the inlet with a faint breeze abeam of them. They found it fair and the breeze only a little stronger when they had left the woods behind, and Frank sat at the tiller while the sloop glided rapidly through the smooth blue water with no more than a drowsy gurgle beneath her bows. The tide was running down with them now and it was only when he glanced toward the beach that he realized how fast they were going.

A pleasant salt odor of drying weed was mingled with the scent of the firs. In front of them a wonderful vista of white snow mountains emerged from fleecy cloud, and far beneath the silvery vapor appeared the faint and shadowy blurs of distant hillsides clothed with mighty forest. Overhead the big white sail swayed languidly to and fro, cutting sharply into the blue, and Frank felt that he would like to sail on like this for hours, lounging at the helm, and listening to the water as it slipped along the sides. With a light fair wind he could guide the boat wherever he wished by the slightest touch of the tiller, and it was pleasant to see how steadily he could keep her bowsprit pointing to a low rocky head that rose, a patch of soft blue shadow, against the evening light.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.