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The Come Back

CAROLYN WELLS

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BY CAROLYN WELLS

THE COME BACK
IN THE ONYX LOBBY
THE MAN WHO FELL THROUGH THE EARTH
THE ROOM WITH THE TASSELS
FAULKNER'S FOLLY
THE BRIDE OF A MOMENT
DORIS OF DOBBS' FERRY
THE BOOK OF HUMOROUS VERSE
SUCH NONSENSE! *An Anthology*

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE COME BACK

BY

CAROLYN WELLS

Author of "In the Onyx Lobby," "The Men Who Fell Through the Earth," Etc.

NEW YORK

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THE COME BACK

CHAPTER I

The Prophecy

EVEN when Peter Crane was a baby boy, with eyes the color of the chicory flowers that grow by the wayside along New England roads, and hair that rivaled the Blessed Damosel's in being "yellow like ripe corn," he was of an adventurous disposition.

His innocent face was never so devoid of guile, his winning smile never so cherubic as when he remarked that he would "jes' run froo the front gate a minyit," and the next instant he was out of sight. Far afield his roving spirit led him, and much scurrying was needed on the part of nurse or mother to bring him back.

At four he achieved a pair of most wonderful russet-topped boots,—aye, even with straps to lift himself over a fence, if a fence came his way. And these so accentuated and emphasized his world-faring inclinations that he came to be known as Peter Boots.

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The name stuck, for Peter was always ready to boot it, and all through his school and college days he led his willing mates wherever he listed. He stalked forth and they followed; and, as he stopped not for brake and stayed not for stone, the boys who eagerly trailed Peter Boots became sturdy fellows.

And now, at twenty-seven, Peter Boots was more than sturdy. He was tall and big and strong, and the love of adventure, the dare-devil spirit of exploration still shone in his chicory blue eyes, and his indomitable will power was evident in his straight fine mouth and firm jaw.

He had traveled some, even before the war, and now, comfortably settled in his chosen niche and civilly engineering his way through the world, he grasped at vacation seasons because they offered him a chance to don his boots and be off.

This year he had a grand plan,—its objective point being nothing short of Labrador.

He had read many books of the North lands, but a delightful chance meeting with a doctor who lived up there gave him a sudden impetus to go and explore a little for himself. His decision to start was instantaneous, and there remained but to make the necessary arrangements.

For Peter Boots these arrangements consisted merely in getting two congenial companions, and to them he left all minor details of paraphernalia and equipment. Not that Peter was lazy or inclined to

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shift his burdens to others' shoulders, but he was so engrossed with the itinerary and calculations of distance, climate and season that he had no time to engage guides or buy camp outfits.

But the two men he picked,—and who jumped at the chance,—were more than willing and perfectly capable of all this, and so all details of the expedition were carefully looked after.

There had been opposition, of course. Peter's parents were emphatically unwilling to let their only son run dangers, all the more fearsome because only vaguely apprehended.

But their big boy smiled genially at them and went on with his calculations.

His sister, too, pretty Julie, besought him not to go. "You'll get lost in the ice," she wailed, "and never come back to me—and Carly."

Now Carly,—otherwise Miss Carlotta Harper,—was a disturbing element in the even tenor of Peter's life, and of late her disturbance had attained such importance that tucked away in a corner of his big, happy heart was a cozy, cuddly little notion that when he came back from Labrador he would take her to embark with him on a certain Great Adventure.

Perhaps her womanly intuition sensed danger, for Carly joined with Peter's sister in her entreaties that he spend his vacation nearer home.

"But I don't want to," stated Peter, with the air of one giving a full explanation.

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"That settles it," sighed Julie; "what Peter Boots wants is law in this house."

"Autocrat! Tyrant! Oppressor!" and Carlotta wrinkled her little nose in an effort to express scornful disdain.

"Yes," Peter agreed, with his benignant smile, "despot, demagogue, dictator, oligarch, lord of the roost and cock of the walk! It's a great thing to be monarch of all one surveys!"

"To the surveyor," flouted Carlotta, "but if you knew what the surveyed think of you!"

"I'd be all puffed up with pride and vanity, I suppose," Peter nodded his still golden head, though Time's caressing fingers had burnished the yellow to a deeper bronze.

"You'll break mother's heart," suggested Julie, but in a hopelessly resigned tone.

"Only the same old break, sister, and it's been cracked and mended so many times, I'm sure it'll stand another smash."

"Oh, he's going, and that's all there is about it" said Carlotta with the air of a fatalist.

"I'm going," Peter assented, "but that isn't all there is about it. I'm coming back!" and he looked at the girl with unmistakable intent.

"Maybe and maybe not," she returned, with crushing carelessness, whether real or assumed.

"Yes, indeed, maybe and maybe not!" put in Julie. "You don't know about the prophecy, Carly! Shall I tell her, Peter?"

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"Tell me, of course," and Miss Harper looked eagerly interested. "Who prophesied what? and when?"

"Oh, it was years ago," Julie began, "we met a lot of gypsies, and mother would have them tell the family fortunes. And one of them said that Peter would go off on a long journey and that he would die a terrible death and never come home."

"Oh," Carly shuddered, "don't tell me any more!"

"But the more is the best part of it," said Peter, smiling; "you see, mother was so upset by this direful news, that another gypsy took pity on her and amended my cruel fate. The second seeress declared that I must meet the destiny number one had dealt me, but that to mitigate the family grief, I would return afterwards."

"As a spook?" cried Carlotta, "how interesting!"

"Perhaps; but it doesn't interest me at present. You see, this trip is not the fatal one——"

"How do you know?" from Julie.

"Oh, it's too soon. That old prophecy isn't fairly ripe yet. Moreover, I'm not ready for it. I'm going to Labrador,—and I'm coming back,—and then, if all goes well, perhaps I'll never want to go away again. And if not,——" he looked at Carly, "I may be glad to take the last and final trip! But if I go on with the program and return as my own ghost, I'll lead you girls a dance! I'll haunt you in season and out of season!"

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"Pooh, I'm not afraid," Carly tossed her head; "I've no faith in any of this spiritist foolery."

"Don't call it foolery, my child," said a serious voice, as Peter's father came into the room.

Benjamin Crane gave the impression of power and gentleness, a fine combination and rarely seen in its perfection. A man of sixty, he looked older, for his thick hair was white and his smoothly shaven face was lined with deep furrows.

He joined the group of young people, and it was indicative of his nature that there was no pause in the conversation or appearance of constraint of any sort.

"But it is foolery, Mr. Crane," Carlotta defended, "I've tried the Ouija Board myself, and it's a silly business."

"Not so silly as to condemn something you know little or nothing about," Mr. Crane said, in his serious, kindly way. "My dear Carlotta, even though you don't 'believe in' the supernatural, do try to realize that your lack of belief doesn't bar the rest of us from having faith in revelation."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Crane," Carly wasn't a bit offended, "don't mind me! Believe all you want to. But, do you believe in this 'Gypsy's Warning' about Peter? That's different, you know, from the usual claptrap."

"It's not exactly a question of belief," Mr. Crane said, slowly. "You will, I am sure, agree that Peter may be killed on some of these wild and dangerous

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adventures in which his soul delights. Let us hope." the day is far off, if it must come at all. And as to his spirit's return,—that is, of course, possible,—to my mind, at least."

"If possible, then extremely probable," declared Peter, laughing; "I've just told the girls, Dad, that I'll haunt them like a continuous performance, if conditions allow. Want me to appear to you, too?"

"Don't be so flippant, Son. If you die while away from us, and if your spirit can return and communicate with me, I shall, indeed, be glad to receive such messages, no matter through what medium."

"Oh, goodness, gracious!" exclaimed Carlotta; "not through a medium, I beg of you, Peter! I don't want spook messages that way! I don't mind a nice little Ouija or Planchette, but a common, blowsy, untidy medium person,—and they're all like that,—I can't stand for!"

"Why, you little rascal, what do *you* know about mediums?" Peter Boots frowned at her.

"I went to a *séance* once,—but, wow! never again!"

"I should hope not! You stay away from such places, or I won't come home to you at all,—dead or alive! How would you like that?"

"Not at all, oh, despot, oligarch, Grand Panjandrum,—or whatever you call yourself. Please come back, and all will be forgiven."

It was tea time in the Crane home, and though the home was only a summer cottage, up West-

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hester way, yet the big living room, with its hospitable easy chairs and occasional tables, its willow and chintz, gave an impression of an English household. It was late in July and, though warm, it was not sultry, and the breeze coming in at the big windows was crisp and fresh.

Mrs. Crane drifted into the room almost at the same moment two men appeared from outdoors.

A happy complacency was the chief attribute of Peter's mother, and this spoke from every smile of her amiable face and every movement of her plump but still graceful form.

As Peter adjusted the cushions she took a low willow chair and smiled a greeting at all, including the newcomers.

These were Kit Shelby and Gilbert Blair, the two companions of the Labrador trip.

They were good-looking, well set-up chaps, quite evidently unable to talk of anything save the plans for the momentous journey.

"Got a wonder for a guide," began Shelby, as soon as decent greetings had been made. "He's just been let loose by Sir Somebody of Somewhere, and I nailed him. Name o' Joshua,—but we can stand that. He really knows it all,—without continually proclaiming the fact."

"I'm thankful that you've a fine guide," murmured Mrs. Crane, in her satisfied way. "It means so much to me to know that."

"You're right, Lady Crane," assented young

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Blair. "And old Peter will have to obey him, too."

"Of course I shall," put in Peter. "I always bow to authority, when it's greater than my own. Oh, won't it all be great! I'm crazy to start. Think of it, Dad,—we three fellows sitting around a camp fire, smoking our pipes and spinning yarns of an evening, after a long day's hike over the ice and snow!"

"Thought you were going in a canoe," said his sister.

"Part of the way,—but, later, we abandon the craft and hoof it."

"Maybe and maybe not," said Shelby. "It all depends on the weather conditions. But the season is just right, and we'll have good going, one way or another, I'm sure."

"You're the surest thing I know, Kit," Gilbert Blair said; "now with no hint of pessimism, I own up I look for pretty hard lines a good bit of the time."

"Calamity Howler!" returned Shelby; "why damp our enthusiasm like that?"

"Can't damp mine," and Peter beamed with glad anticipation. "Let the hard lines come if they like. I'm expecting them and expecting to enjoy them along with the rest."

"Pollyanna Peter!" chaffed Carlotta; "shan't you mind it if the blizzard blows down your tent and the dogs run away with your dinner and your feets give out?"

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"Nixy! I'll set up the tent again, get some more dinner from the larder and rest my feet for a spell."

"That's right, boy," said his father, "that's the spirit. But do take enough provisions and, if they run low, make a dash for home."

"Just my idea, Dad, exactly. And as Shelby's looking after the commissariat, and Blair attending to the tents and cooking outfit, something tells me they'll be top hole. Maybe not such traps as these——" and Peter nodded toward the elaborate tea service being brought in and arranged before Mrs. Crane, who was in her element as hostess.

"No, you poor boys," she said, "I suppose you'll drink out of horrible thick china——"

"Not china at all, ma'am," corrected Blair; "lovely white enamel, though, with blue edges——"

"I know!" cried Carlotta, "like our motor lunch-box."

"Yes, that sort, and not bad, either. Oh, we'll rough it more or less, but it won't be absolutely primitive,—not by a long shot!"

"It'll be absolutely perfect," said Peter, dreamily gazing off into space, and seeing in his mind great white stretches of snowy landscape, or black, gurgling holes in ice-bound rivers.

"You are so ridiculous!" declared his sister. "You're a regular Sybarite at home. You love easy chairs and pillows and fresh flowers all about, and all that,—then you want to go off where you'll have nothing nice at all,—not even a laundry!"

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"Right you are, Sis. The Human warious is hard to understand. Come along, Carly, take me for a walk."

Rather slowly the girl rose, and the two sauntered forth, across the wide veranda, across the lawn and down a garden path. Neither spoke until, coming to a marble bench, they sat down and turned to look into each other's eyes.

"Going to say yes before I go, Carly, or after I come back?"

"After you come back," was the prompt response.

"Oh, good! You promise to say it *then?*"

"Well, I don't say how *soon* after."

"I'll decide on the soonness. Then I take it we're engaged?"

"You take it nothing of the sort! You know, Peter Crane, you can't boss me as you do your own family!"

"Heaven forbid! Why, dear, I want you to boss me! Our life together will be one grand boss,—and you can be it!"

"Don't be silly, I'm in earnest. I couldn't be happy with a dominating, domineering man."

"Of course you couldn't. But I assure you I'm not one. You see, I only dictate in my own family because they like to have me to do so. Mother would be awfully upset if I didn't tell her what to do. Dad the same,—although I'm not sure the old dear knows it himself. And as for Julie,—why she just depends on me. So I naturally gravitate to the

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place of Grand Mogul, because I can't help it. But with you, it's different. You're a whole heap wiser, better and more fit to rule than I. And if you'll rule me, I'll be greatly obliged,—honest, I will."

"Oh, you're so absurd, Peter! I don't want to rule, either. I want us to be equally interested in everything, and have equal say in any matter."

"All right,—equality goes. I'll race you to see which can be the equalest. Now, are we engaged?"

"No, Peter, not till you come back."

"But I want to kiss you, and I can't, I suppose, until we are engaged. Oh, can I?"

"Of course not! Take your hand off my hand."

"Lordy, can't I even touch your hand?"

"Not with that ownership grasp! I am afraid of your possessive qualities, Peter."

"Meaning just what?"

"Oh, that if I do give myself to you, you'll own me so—so emphatically."

"I sure shall! And then some. Don't imagine, my child, that I'll accept you with any reservations. You'll be 'mine to the core of your heart, my beauty'! Bank on that!"

"I do,—and if I'm yours at all,—it *will* be that way. But wait till you come back. There's time enough. I suppose there's no chance for letters?"

"No; not after the first few days. We'll be out of reach of mail very soon."

"And you're returning?"

"I want to be home for Christmas. Kit thinks

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we'll make it, but Blair is some doubtful. So, look for me when you see me."

"Alive or dead?"

"Carly! What made you say that?"

"I don't know." The girl shuddered and her eyes stared into Peter's. "I seemed to say it without any volition,—the words just came——"

"Well, don't let them come again. I don't like it a little bit. I'm coming home alive, very much alive,—and I'm coming home to claim you,—remember that."

"Unless either of us falls in love with some one else. Those girls of the far North are beautiful, I hear."

"An Eskimo with a nose ring? No, thank you! My heart is true to Poll! But don't you go and set your somewhat fickle heart on another man, 'cause if you do, I shall have to kill him, much as I'd regret such a necessity."

"My heart isn't fickle! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I think it is. I think my little black-eyed, rosy-cheeked Carly is quite capable of being on with a new love whether she's off with the old or not."

"Oh, Peter," and the black eyes showed moisture, "how cruel you are!"

"Isn't it so, Carly? Tell me it isn't,—I'll be so glad!"

But the coquettish glance that answered him was not entirely reassuring.

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"Anyway," Peter pleaded on, "tell me you like me better than Kit or Gilbert. Tell me that if I'm a prey to green-eyed jealousy up there in the camp, at least, I needn't envy either of those chaps."

"Of course not!"

"Oh, you torment! Your words are all right,—but your emphasis is a little too strong. Carly, look me straight in the eyes and tell me you don't care for either of them!"

"Either of your eyes?"

"Silly! Well, yes, then, tell me that!"

The chicory flower eyes looked into the great, dark ones, and for a moment there was silence. The blue eyes were sweet and ···le, and they burned with a strong, deep lovelight. The eyes that gazed into them fell a little and seemed unable to meet them squarely.

"What is it, Carly? What is it, dear?" he begged.

"Nothing," she said, lightly. "I do l-like you, Peter,—better than any man I know——"

"Better than Kit Shelby?"

"Yes."

"Better than Gil Blair?"

"Yes."

"They're the ones I most feared. And mostly because I didn't want to go on a trip with a man I'm jealous of! That would be a fine kettle of fish!"

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"Well, you won't do that. Don't worry about them,—or any one else."

"Oh, you blessed little girl! Carly, dearest, why can't you say yes, now? Won't you, Carly,—please."

The caressing voice was low and gentle, the pleading blue eyes were very earnest, but Carlotta still shook her head.

"When you come back," she repeated.

"All right, then," and Peter's face showed one of its masterful looks. "I'll accept your decree,—as I can't very well help myself, but just as sure as you're sitting there, Carly Harper, I'm going to kiss you!"

And he did; gathering her into his arms with a gentle insistence and kissing her squarely on her surprised red lips.

"There!" he said, "I guess you'll remember now that you belong to me,—whether you call yourself engaged or not! Mad?"

"Yes," she responded, but the one swift glance she gave him belied her words.

"You'll get over it," he said, cheerfully. "I'd like to kiss you again, though. May I?"

"When you come back," she said, and Peter waited.

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CHAPTER II

The Labrador Wild

IT was late in July before Peter Boots marshaled his merry men and let himself be marshaled by the guide, Joshua, on the trip of exploration and recreation.

A liner took them as far as Newfoundland, and at St. John's, a smaller steamer, the *Victoria Lake,* received them for their journey farther North. This ship belonged to a sealing fleet and also carried mails. It was not especially comfortable, and neither staterooms nor food were of the best.

But Peter was discomfort-proof, and his negligence of bothersome details and happy acceptance of existing conditions set a standard for the manners and customs of their party. Joshua, who had come to New York City to meet them, was not, by nature, possessed of the sort of heart that doeth good like medicine. But under the sunny smile of Peter's blue eyes, his customary scowl softened to a look of mild wonder at the effervescent gayety of the man who was yet so efficient and even hard-working when occasion required it.

Shelby was a close second in the matter of effi-

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ciency. He was a big chap, not handsome, but good-looking, in a dark, dignified way, and of a lithe, sinewy strength that enabled him to endure as well as to meet hardship bravely.

Not that they looked especially for hardships. Discomfort, even unpleasantness, they did anticipate, but nothing of more importance than inclement weather or possible colds or coughs. And against the latter ills Mrs. Crane had provided both remedies and preventions to such an extent that some were discarded as excess weight.

For the necessities of their trip, including as they did, canoe, tent, blankets, tarpaulins, duffel bags, shooting irons and cooking utensils,—besides food, were of no small bulk and weight even divided among four porters.

And Blair, though possessed of will and energy quite equaling the others', was less physically fit to stand the hard going.

It was already August when they were treated to a first sight of the Labrador.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Shelby, "and Shackelton, and Peary,—yes and old Doc Cook! What an outlook! If those breaking waves were looking for a stern and rockbound coast to dash on, they missed it when they chose the New England shore instead of this! I've seen crags and cliffs, I've climbed the dark brow of the mighty Helvellyn, but this puts it over all the earth! How do we get in, anyway?"

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"Great, isn't it?" and Peter lay back in his inadequate little deck chair and beamed at the desolation he saw.

For the coast of Labrador is nearly a thousand miles of barren bleakness and forbidding and foreboding rock wall. After buffeting untold ages of icy gales and biting storms the bare rocks seem to discourage human approach and crave only their own black solitude.

The one softening element was the fog that rode the sea, and now and then swooped down, hiding the dangerous reefs until the danger was increased tenfold by the obscurity.

"Oh, great!" mocked Shelby. "You can have mine. I'm going to stay on the boat and go back."

"Yes, you are!" grinned Peter, knowing full well how little importance to attach to that speech; "inside of a week, you'll be crazy about it."

"I am now," said Blair, slowly. "Most weird sight I ever saw. The rocks seem like sentient giants ready to eat each other. Termagant Nature, unleashed and rampant."

"Idea all right," said Crane, lazily, "but your verbiage isn't hand-picked, seems to me."

"You can put it more poetically, if you like, but it's the thing itself that gets me, not the sand-papered description of it."

"Nobody wants you to sand-paper it, but you ought to hew to the line a little more nearly——"

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"Lines be bothered! Free verse is the thing for this place!"

"I want free verse and I want fresh air," bantered Peter, "and Lasca, down by the Brandywine,—or wherever it was that Friend Lasca hung out."

"You're harking back to your school days and Friday afternoon declamation," put in Shelby, "and Lasca was down by the Rio Grande."

"Only Alaska isn't down there at all," Blair informed them, quite seriously, and the others roared.

After delays, changes and transfers made necessary by the uncertainties of Labrador travel, they came at last to Hamilton Inlet, and the little steamer approached the trading post at Rigolet.

"Reminds me of Hamilton Harbor, Bermuda," observed Shelby, shivering as he drew his furs round him.

"Oh, how can you!" exclaimed Blair; "that heavenly Paradise of a place,—and this!"

"But you'd rather be here?" and Crane shook a warning fist at him.

"Yes,—oh, yes! This is the life!" and if Blair wasn't quite sincere he gave a fair imitation of telling the truth.

"Will you look at the dogs!" cried Crane. "I didn't know there were so many in the world!"

The big Eskimo dogs were prowling about, growling a little, and appearing anything but friendly. Not even to sunny-faced and kindly-

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voiced Peter Boots did they respond, but snarled and pawed the ground until Joshua advised Crane to let them alone.

"They're mighty good things to keep away from," the guide informed, and his advice was taken.

"I'm glad we have a trusty canoe instead of those villainous looking creatures," Blair admitted, and when, later on, they heard tales of the brutality and treachery of the pack dogs, the others agreed.

At Rigolet final arrangements were decided on and last purchases made for the dash into the wilds.

Peter Boots, in his element, was as excited and pleased as a child with a new toy.

"Here I am, where I've longed to be!" he exulted; "at least, I'm on my way. Buck up, you fellows, and enjoy yourselves, or you'll answer to me why not!"

"I'm for it," Kit Shelby cried; "I hated that dinky little old steamer, but now we're ashore in this live wire of a place, I'm as excited and glad as anybody. I say, the mail from England comes every year! Think of that!"

"Once a year!" wondered Blair.

"Yep; the good ship *Pelican* brought it yesterday, and it's due again next summer! Up and coming, this place, I tell you!"

"It nothing means to us," said Crane, calmly; "I'm expecting no valentines from England myself, and we'll be back home before mails from the States get around again."

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"And, moreover," said Shelby, who had been acquiring information by various means, "old Captain Whiskers, forninst, says that we're bound to get lost, strayed and stolen if we go the route we've planned."

"That's our route, then!" Peter said, satisfiedly; "they always prophesy all sorts of dismal fates, and, like dreams, they go by contraries. 'Fraid, boys!"

He extricated himself from the onslaught this speech brought and then all set about getting the outfit into shape for the start.

Pounds and pounds of flour, bacon, lard, pea meal, tea, coffee, rice, tobacco and other necessaries were packed and stowed and maneuvered by the capable Joshua, before whose superior judgment Peter Boots had to bow.

Some natives were hired to help carry things that were to be cached against the return trip, and three tired but happy men went to rest for their last night beneath a real roof for many weeks.

Next morning their happiness was even greater and their spirits higher, for the day was clear and perfect, the air full of exhilarating ozone and the golden sunlight and deep blue sky seemed to promise a fair trip and a safe return.

Gayly they started off, and gayly they continued, save when the rain poured unpleasantly, or the swarms of Labrador flies attacked them or steep banks or swift rapids made portage difficult.

However as no threats or persuasions could in-

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duce Joshua to travel in the rain, there were enforced rests that helped in the long run.

Another trial was the midday heat. Though the temperature might be at the freezing point at night, by noon it would buoyantly rise to ninety degrees, and the sudden changes made for colds and coughs, that were not easily cured by Mrs. Crane's nostrums.

"Fortunes of war," said Peter, serenely, and Shelby responded, "If that's what they are, I'm a regular profiteer!"

Days went by, the hours filled with alternate joy and woe, but accepted philosophically by willing hearts who had already learned to love the vicissitudes of the wild.

One morning a portage route was of necessity winding and rough. Not as much as usual could be carried by any of them and two or three trips of two miles must be made by each.

Joshua arranged the loads to weigh about seventy pounds each, but these became tiresome after a time. The work took all day, and when toward sunset camp was made and the tired pleasure seekers sought rest, each was far more exhausted than he was willing to admit.

"Had enough?" asked Peter, smiling. "Turn back any time you fellows say. Want to quit?"

"Quit! Never!" declared Shelby. "Go home when you like, or stay as long as you please, but no quitting!"

"It's goin' be nice now," put in Joshua, who was

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always sensitive to any discontent with his beloved North land. "Nice fishin', nice sleepin',—oh, yes!"

And there was. Rest that night on couches of spruce branches, that rocked like a cradle, and smelled like Araby the Blest, more than knit up the raveled sleave of the hard day before.

And when they fished in a small, rocky stream, for heaven sent trout, contentment could go no further. Unless it might have been when later they ate the same trout, cooked to a turn by the resourceful Joshua, and then, lounging at ease before a camp-fire that met all traditions, they smoked and talked or were silent as the spirit moved.

The black firs showed gaunt against the sky; the stars came out in twinkling myriads and the dash and roar of the river was an accompaniment to their desultory chat.

"If I were a poet," Blair said, "I'd quote poetry about now."

"Your own, for choice?" asked Shelby, casually.

"You *are* a poet, Gil," said Peter. "I've noticed it all the way along. You don't have to lisp in numbers to be a poet. You just have to——"

"Well, to what?" asked Blair, as Peter paused.

"Why, you just have to want to recite poetry."

"Yes, that's it," put in Shelby, quickly; "understand, Gilbert, dear, you don't have to recite it, you know, only want to recite it. If you obey your impulse,—you're no poet at all."

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"I'll restrain the impulse then,—but it's hard—hard!"

"Oh, go ahead," laughed Kit, "if it's as hard as all that! I'll bet it's highbrow stuff you want to get out of your system!"

"Yes, it is. In fact it's Browning."

"Oh, I don't mind him. Fire away."

"Only this bit:

"You're my friend;
What a thing friendship is, world without end.
How it gives the heart and the senses a stir-up,
As if somebody broached you a glorious runlet——"

"That'll do," laughed Peter. "That's far enough. And you didn't say it quite right, any way."

"No matter," said Blair, earnestly; "I mean the thing. Without any palaver, we three fellows are friends,—and I'm glad of it. That's all."

"Thank you very much," said Shelby, "for my share. And old Pete is fairly overflowing with appreciation,—I see it in his baby-blue eyes——"

"I'll baby you!" said Peter, with a ferocious smile. "Yes, old Gilbert, we're friends, or I shouldn't have picked us as the fittest for this trip."

"Good you did, for the fittest have the reputation of surviving."

"Let up on the croaks," Peter spoke abruptly. "Have you noticed any fearful dangers, that you apprehend non-survival of them?"

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"No; but——"

"But nothing! Now, Blairsy, if you're in thoughtful mood, let's go on with that plot we started yesterday."

"What plot?" asked Shelby.

"Oh, a great motive for a story or play. Setting up here in the Labrador wilds and——"

Shelby yawned. "Mind if I doze off?" he said; "this fire is soporific——"

"Don't mind a bit," returned Peter gayly; "rather you would, then Gil and I can maudle on as we like."

And they did. Both were of a literary turn, and though they had achieved nothing of importance as yet, both hoped to write sooner or later.

"A story," Peter said, "maybe a book, but more likely a short story, with a real O. Henry punch."

"H'mph!" came in a disdainful grunt from the dozing Shelby.

"You keep still, old lowbrow," advised Peter. "Don't sniff at your betters. There's a great little old plot here, and we're going to make a good thing of it and push it along."

"Push away," and Shelby rolled himself over and dozed again.

"Where's Joshua?" asked Crane, later, as, the talk over, they prepared to bunk on their evergreen boughs.

"Haven't seen him since supper," said Shelby, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Queer, isn't it?"

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Queer it surely was, and more so, as time went by and they could find no trace of their guide.

"He can't be lost," said Kit; "he's too good a scout for that."

"He can't have deserted us," declared Peter. "He's too good a friend for that! He'll no more desert us than we'd desert one another."

"Well, he's missing anyway," Blair said, undeniably; "then something must have happened. Could he be caught in a trap?"

"Not he! he's used to them about. No, he's had an accident, I think." Peter's eyes were anxious and his voice told of a fear of some real disaster.

The dusk fell early and though only about nine o'clock, it was as dark as midnight. Clouds had obscured the stars, and only the firelight relieved the black darkness.

But after an hour's worriment and distress on the part of the three men the guide returned. He looked a little shame-faced, and was disinclined to reply to their questions.

"Come, now, Joshua, own up," directed Peter; "I see by your eyes you've been up to mischief. Out with it!"

"I—I got lost!" was the astonishing reply, and they all burst into laughter. More at the rueful countenance, however, than at the news, for it was a serious matter.

"You, a guide, lost!" exclaimed Shelby. "How did it happen?"

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"Dunno. Jest somehow couldn't find the way."

"Hadn't you a compass?"

"No, sir; I got sort of turned around like,—and I went a long hike the wrong way."

Simple enough, to be sure, but apparently it was only good fortune that had made him find at last the road home to camp.

Light-hearted Peter dismissed the whole affair with a "Look out after this; and always carry a compass or take one of us boys along," and then he sought his fragrant, if not altogether downy couch.

Blair, too, gave the episode little thought, but to Shelby it seemed more important. If a hardened guide could get lost as easily as that, it might happen to any of them. And a compass was not a sure safeguard. A man could wander round and round without finding a fairly nearby camp. Shelby was a few years older than the other two, and of a far more prudent nature. He had no daredevil instincts, and not an overweening love of adventure. He was enjoying his trip because of the outdoor life and wildwood sports, but as for real adventure, he was content to omit it. Not from fear—Kit Shelby was as brave as any,—but he saw no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

While risks were as the breath of life to Peter Boots. Indeed, he was sighing because the conditions of modern camping ways and the efficiency of

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the guide left little or no chance for risk of life or limb.

He didn't by any means want to lose life or limb, but he was not at all unwilling to risk them pretty desperately. And he found no opportunity. The days were pleasantly taken up with fishing, shooting, moving on, setting up and taking down camp, and all the expected routine of a mountain expedition; but, so far, there had been nothing unusual or even uncomfortable to any great degree.

The next day brought a fearful storm, with gales and sleet and driving rain and the temperature dropped many degrees.

The party experienced their first really cold weather, and though it depressed the others Peter seemed to revel in it.

The tent was practically a prison, and an uncomfortable one, for the wind was terrific and the squalls became hourly more menacing.

Shelby was quiet, by reason of a sore throat, and Blair was quiet with a silence that was almost sulky.

Not quite though, for irrepressible Peter kept the crowd good-natured, by the simple process of making jokes and laughing at them himself, so contagiously, that all were forced to join in.

But at last he tired of that, and announced that he was going to write letters.

"Do," said Shelby, "and hurry up with them. The postman will be along any minute now."

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Peter grinned, and really set himself to work with paper and pencil.

"I know what you're doing," said Blair; "you're beginning our story."

"I'm not, but that isn't half a bad idea. Let's start in, Gil. We can plan it and make up names and things——"

"Why can't you really write it?" asked Shelby. "I should think it would be the psychological moment. Isn't it to be all about the storms and other indigenous delights of Labrador?"

"You take that tone and I'll pitch you out into the indigenous delights," threatened Peter. "Come on, Gilbert, let's block out the backbone of the yarn right now."

They set to work, and by dint of much discussing, disagreeing, ballyragging and bulldozing each other, they did make a fair start.

"What's the heroine like?" asked Shelby, beginning to be interested.

"Like Carly Harper," said Blair promptly.

"Not the leastest, littlest mite like Carly Harper," said Peter, his blue eyes hardening with determination.

"Why not?" demanded Blair, who cared little what the heroine was like, but who objected to contradiction without reason.

"Because I say not," returned Peter, impatiently. "The heroine is a little rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired doll. She has blue eyes,—something like mine,—

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and a saucy, turn-up nose, and a dimple in her left cheek."

"A peach," said Shelby, "but no sort of a heroine for that yarn you two fellows are spinning. I'm no author, but I'm an architect, and I can see the incongruity."

"If you know so much, write it yourself," said Peter, but not pettishly. "If I'm doing it, I create my own heroine or I quit."

"Oh, don't quit," begged Blair. "We're just getting a good start. Have the treacle and taffy heroine if you like, only keep on."

His point won, Peter did keep on, and a fair bit of work was accomplished. For the first time it began to seem as if the two authors would really produce something worth while.

"Not likely," Peter said, as they talked this over. "I'm no sort of a collaborator,—I'm too set in my ways. If I can't have it the way I want it, I can't do it at all."

"But you can have your own way in details," said Blair, musingly. "They don't matter much. Give me the swing of the plot and let me plan the climaxes, and I care not who makes the laws for the heroine's complexion."

"Well, I'm for a run in the rain," said Peter. "I've worked my brain into a tangled snarl, and I must go out and clear it out."

He shook himself into his storm togs, and as no one cared to go with him, he started off alone.

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