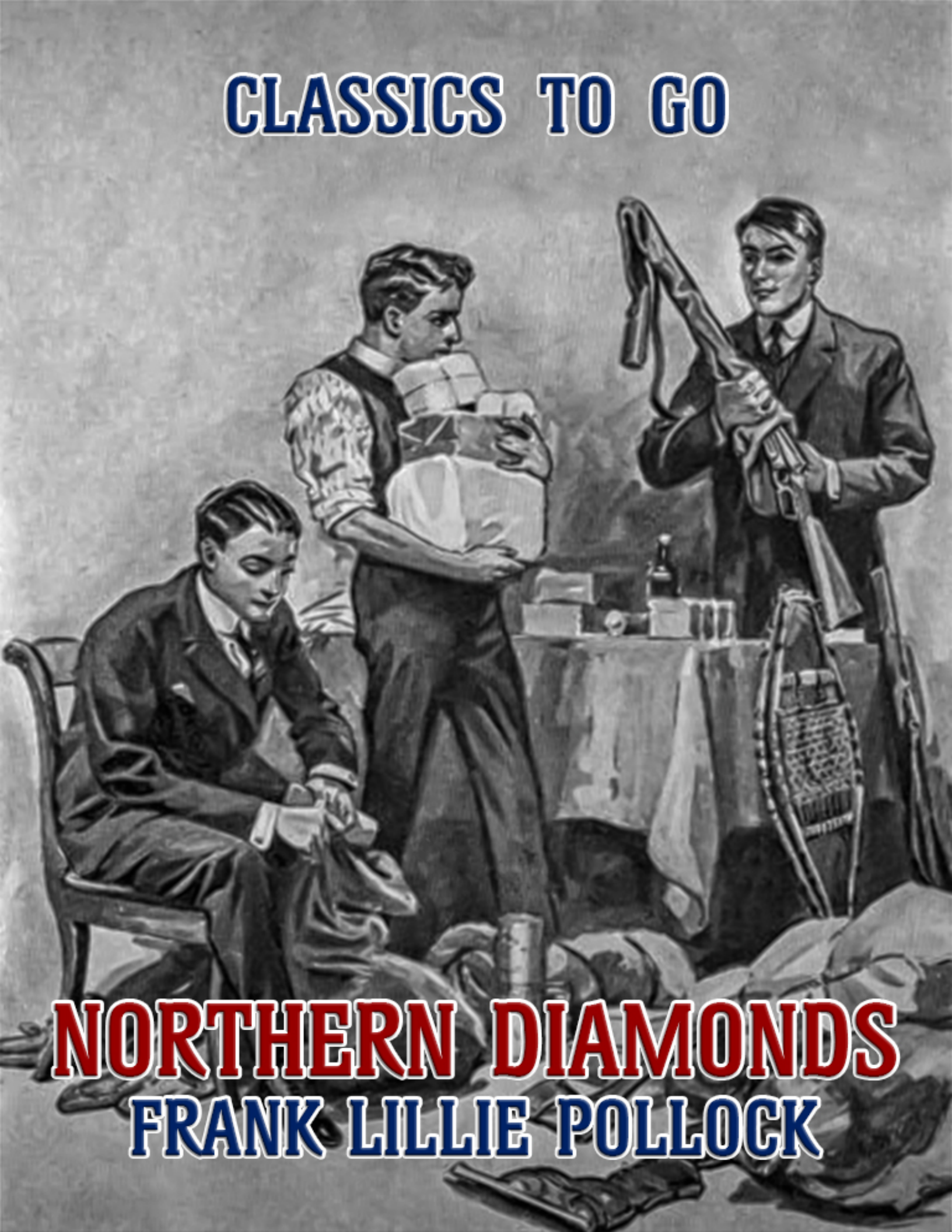
CLASSICS TO GO



NORTHERN DIAMONDS

FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

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ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

It was nearly eleven o'clock at night when some one knocked at the door of Fred Osborne's room. He was not in the least expecting any caller at that hour, and had paid no attention when he had heard the doorbell of the boarding-house ring downstairs, and the sound of feet ascending the steps. He hastened to open the door, however, and in the dim hallway he recognized the dark, handsome face of Maurice Stark, and behind it the tall, raw-boned form of Peter Macgregor.

Both of them uttered an exclamation of satisfaction at seeing him. They were both in fur caps and overcoats, for it was a sharp Canadian December night, and at the first glance Fred observed that their faces wore an expression of excitement.

"Come in, boys!" he said. "I wasn't going to bed. Here, take your coats off. What's up? You look as if something was the matter."

"Is Horace in town?" demanded Peter.

Fred shook his head. Horace was his elder brother, a mining engineer mostly employed in the North Country.

"He's still somewhere in the North Woods. I haven't heard from him since October, but I'm expecting him to turn up almost any day now. Why, what's the matter?"

"The matter? Something pretty big," returned Maurice.

Maurice Stark was Fred's most intimate friend in Toronto University, from which he had himself graduated the summer before. He knew Macgregor less well, for the big

Scotch-Canadian was in the medical school. His home place was somewhere far up in the North Woods, but he had a great intercollegiate reputation as a long-distance runner. It was, in fact, chiefly in a sporting way that Fred had come to know him, for Fred held an amateur skating championship, and was even then training for the ice tournament to be held in Toronto in a few weeks.

"It's something big!" Maurice repeated. "I wish Horace were here, but—could you get a holiday from your office for a week or ten days?"

"I've got it already," said Fred. "I reserved my holidays last summer, and things aren't busy in a real estate office at this time of year. I guess I could get two weeks if I wanted it. I'm spending most of my time now training for the five and ten miles."

"Could you skate a hundred and fifty miles in two days?" demanded Macgregor.

"I might if I had to—if it was a case of life and death."

"That's just what it is—a case of life and death, and possibly a fortune into the bargain!" cried Maurice. "You see—but Mac has the whole story."

The Scottish medical student went to the window, raised the blind and peered out at the wintry sky.

"No sign of snow yet," he said in a tone of satisfaction.

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded Fred, who was burning with curiosity by this time. "What's going on, anyway? Hurry up."

"Spoil the skating," said Macgregor briefly. "Well," he went on after a moment, "this is how I had the story.

"I live away up north of North Bay, you know, at a little place called Muirhead. I went home for a little visit last week, and the second day I was there they brought in a sick Indian from Hickson, a little farther north—sick with smallpox. The Hickson authorities wouldn't have him at any price, and they had just passed him on to us. The people at Muirhead didn't want him either. It wasn't such a very bad case of smallpox, but the poor wretch had suffered a good deal of exposure, and he was pretty shaky. Everybody was in a panic about him; they wanted to ship him straight down to North Bay; but finally I got him fixed up in a sort of isolation camp and looked after him myself."

"Good for you, Mac!" Fred ejaculated.

"Oh, it was good hospital training, and I'd been recently vaccinated, so I didn't run any danger. It paid me, though, for when I'd pulled him around a bit he told me the story, and a queer tale it was."

Macgregor paused and went to look out of the window again with anxiety. Fred was listening breathlessly.

"It seems that last September this Indian, along with a couple of half-breeds, went up into the woods for the winter trapping, and built a cabin on one of the branches of the Abitibi River, away up northeast of Lake Timagami. I know about where it was. I suppose you've never been up in that country, Osborne?"

"Never quite as far as that. Last summer I was nearly up to Timagami with Horace."

Fred had made a good many canoeing trips into the Northern wilderness with his brother, and Horace himself, as mining engineer, surveyor, and free-lance prospector, had spent most of the last five years in that region. At irregular and generally unexpected times he would turn up in Toronto with a bale of furs, a sack of mineralogical specimens, and a book of geological notes, which would presently appear in the "University Science Quarterly," or even in more important publications. He was an Associate of the Canadian Geographical Society, and always expected to hit on a vein of mineral that would make his whole family millionaires.

"Well, I've been up and down the Abitibi in a canoe," Macgregor went on, "and I think I know almost the exact spot where they must have built the cabin. Anyhow, I'm certain I could find it, for the Indian described it as accurately as he could.

"It seems that the three men trapped there till the end of October, and then a white man came into their camp. He was all alone, and complained of feeling sick. They were kind enough to him; he stayed with them, but in a few days they found out what the matter was. He had smallpox.

"Now, you know how the Indians and half-breeds dread smallpox. They fear it like death itself, but these fellows seem to have behaved pretty well at first. They did what they could for the sick man, but pretty soon one of the trappers came down with the disease. It took a violent form, and he was dead in a few days.

"That was too much for the nerve of the Indian, and he slipped away and started for the settlements south. But he had waited too long. He had the germs in him. He sickened in the woods, but had strength enough to keep going till he

came to the first clearings. Somebody rushed him in to Hickson, and so he was passed on to my hands."

"And what became of the white man and the other trapper?" demanded Fred.

"Ah, that's what nobody knows. The Indian said that the remaining half-breed was falling sick when he left. The white man may be dead by this time, or perhaps still living but deserted, or he may be well on the road to recovery. But I left out the sensational feature of the whole thing. My Indian said that the white man had a buckskin sack on him full of little stones that shone like fire. He seemed to set great store by them, and threatened to blow the head off anybody who touched the bag."

"Shining stones? Perhaps they were diamonds!" ejaculated Fred.

"It looks almost as if he might have found the diamond fields, for a fact," said Peter, with sparkling eyes.

Canada was full of rumors of diamond discoveries just then. Every Canadian must remember the intense excitement created by the report that diamonds had been found in the mining regions of northern Ontario. Several stones had actually been brought down to Toronto and Montreal, where tests showed them to be real diamonds, though they were mostly small, flawed, and valueless. One, however, was said to have brought nine hundred dollars, and the news set many parties outfitting to prospect for the blue-clay beds. But they met with no success. In every case the stones had either been picked up in river drift or obtained from Indians who could give no definite account of where they had been found.

Could it be that this strange white man had actually stumbled on the diamond fields—only to fall sick and perhaps to die with the secret of his discoveries untold? Fred gazed from Peter to Maurice, almost speechless.

"Naturally, my first idea was to get up a rescue party to bring out the sick prospector," Maurice went on. "But the woods are in the worst kind of shape for traveling. The streams are all frozen hard, but there has been remarkably little snow yet—not near enough for snowshoes or sledges. It would be impossible to tramp that distance and pack the supplies. Besides, when I came to think it over it struck me that the thing was too valuable to share with a lot of guides and backwoodsmen. If we find that fellow alive, and he has really discovered anything, it would be strange if he wouldn't give us a chance to stake out a few claims that might be worth thousands—maybe millions. And it struck me that there was a quicker way to get to him than by snowshoes or dogs. The streams are frozen, the ice is clear, and the skating was fine at Muirhead."

"An expedition on skates?" cried Fred.

"Why not? There's a clear canoe way, barring a few portages, and that means a clear ice road till it snows. But it might do that at any moment."

"A hundred and fifty miles in two days?" said Fred. "Sure, we can do it. I'll set the pace, if you fellows can keep up."

"Anyhow, I came straight down to the city and saw Maurice about it. He said you'd be the best third man we could get. But I had hoped we could get Horace, so as to have his expert opinion on what that man may have found."

"The last time I heard from Horace he was at Red Lake," said Fred, "but I wouldn't have any idea where to find him now. He always comes back to Toronto for the winter, and he can't be much later than this."

"Well, we can't wait for him," said Maurice regretfully. "I'm sorry, but maybe next spring will do as well, when we go to prospect our diamond claims."

"Yes, but we've got to get them first," said Peter, "and there's a man's life to be saved—and it might snow to-night and block the whole expedition."

"Then we'd get dogs and snowshoes," Maurice remarked, "but it would be far slower traveling than on skates."

"We must rush things. Could we get away to-morrow?" Fred cried.

"We must—by the evening train. Maurice and I have been making out a list of the things we need to buy. Have you a gun? Well, we have two rifles anyway, and that'll be more than enough, for we want to go as light as possible. You'll need a sleeping-bag, of course, and your roughest, warmest woolen clothes, and a couple of heavy sweaters. We'll carry snowshoes and moccasins with us, in case of a snowfall. I'll bring a medicine case and disinfectants."

"Will we have to pack all that outfit on our shoulders?" Fred asked.

"No, of course not. I have a six-foot toboggan, which I'll have fitted with detachable steel runners to-morrow, good for either ice or snow. We'll haul it by a rope. But here's the main thing—the grub list."

Fred glanced over the scribbled rows of the carefully considered items,—bacon, condensed milk, powdered eggs, beans, dehydrated vegetables, meal, tea, bread,—and he was astonished.

"Surely we won't need all this for a week or ten days?"

"That's a man-killing country in the winter," responded the Scotchman grimly. "I know it. You have to go well prepared, and you never can depend on getting game after snow falls. Besides, we'll have no time for hunting. Yes, we'll need every ounce of that, and it'll all have to be bought to-morrow. And now I suppose we'd better improve the last chance of sleeping in a bed that we'll have for some time."

He went to the window and again observed the sky, which remained clear and starry, snapping with frost.

"No sign of snow, certainly. We can count on you, then, Osborne? Of course it's understood that we share expenses equally—they won't be heavy—and share anything that we may get out of it."

"Count on me? I should rather think so!" cried Fred fervently. "Why, I'd never have forgiven you if you hadn't let me in on this. But we'll have to do a lot of quick shopping to-morrow, won't we? Where do we meet?"

"At my rooms, as soon after breakfast as possible," replied Mac. "And breakfast early, and make all the preparations you can before that."

At this they went away, leaving Fred alone, but far too full of excitement to sleep. He sorted out his warmest clothing, carefully examined and oiled his hockey skates and boots, wrote a necessary letter or two, and did such

other things as occurred to him. It was long past one o'clock when he did go to bed, and even then he could not sleep. His mind was full of the dangerous expedition that he had plunged into within the last hours. His imagination saw vividly the picture of the long ice road through the wilderness, a hundred and fifty miles to the lonely trappers' shack, where a white man lay sick with a bag of diamonds on his breast—or perhaps by this time lay dead with the secret of immense riches lost with him. And the ice road might close to-morrow. Fred tossed and turned in bed, and more than once got up to look out the window for signs of a snowstorm.

But he went to sleep at last, and slept soundly till awakened by the rattle of his alarm-clock, set for half-past six. He had an early breakfast and packed his clothes. At nine o'clock he telephoned the real estate office where he was employed, and had no difficulty in getting his holidays extended another week. Business was dull just then.

At half-past nine he met Maurice and Peter, who were waiting for him with impatience. Macgregor had already left his toboggan at a sporting-goods store to be equipped with runners for use on ice. But there remained an immense amount of shopping to do, and all the things had to be purchased at half a dozen different places. Together they went the rounds of the shops with a list from which they checked off article after article,—ammunition, sleeping-bags, moccasins, food, camp outfit,—and they ordered them all sent to Macgregor's rooms by special delivery.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the boys went back, and found the room littered with innumerable parcels of every shape and size. Only the toboggan had not arrived, though it had been promised for the middle of the afternoon.

"Gracious! It looks like a lot!" exclaimed Maurice, gazing about at the packages.

"It won't look like so much when they're stowed away," replied Peter. "Let's get them unwrapped, and, Fred, you'd better go down and hurry up that toboggan. Stand over them till it's done, for we must have it before six o'clock."

Fred hurried downtown again. The toboggan was not finished, but the work was under way. By dint of furious entreaties and representations of the emergency Fred induced them to hurry it up. It was not a long job, and by a quarter after five Fred was back at Mac's room, accompanied by a messenger with the remodeled toboggan.

The toboggan was of the usual pattern and shape, but the cushions had been removed, and a thirty-foot moose-hide thong attached for hauling. It was fitted with four short steel runners, only four inches high, which could be removed in a few minutes by unscrewing the nuts, so that it could be used as a sledge on ice or as a toboggan on deep snow.

During Fred's absence the other boys had been busy. All the kit was out of the wrappers, and the room was a wilderness of brown paper. Everything had been packed into four canvas dunnage sacks, and now these were firmly strapped on the toboggan. The rifles and the snowshoes were similarly attached, so that the whole outfit was in one secure package. They hauled this down to the railway station themselves to make sure that there would be no delay, and dispatched it by express to Waverley, where they intended to leave the train. It was then a few minutes after six.

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"Well, we're as good as off now," remarked Maurice, with a long breath. "Our train goes at eight. We've got two hours, and now I guess I'll go home and have supper with my folks and say good-bye. We'll all meet at the depot."

Neither Fred nor Macgregor had any relatives in the city and no necessary farewells to make. They had supper together at a downtown restaurant, and afterwards met Maurice at the Union Depot, where they took the north-bound express.

Next morning they awoke from uneasy slumbers to find the train rushing through a desolate landscape of snowy spruces. Through the frosted double glass of the windows the morning looked clear and cold, but they were relieved to see that there was only a little snow on the ground, and glimpses of rivers and lakes showed clear, shining ice. Evidently the road was still open.

It was half-past ten that forenoon when they reached Waverley, and they found that it was indeed cold. The thermometer stood at five above zero; the snow was dry as powder underfoot, and the little backwoods village looked frozen up. But it was sunny, and the biting air was full of the freshness of the woods, and the spirits of all the boys rose jubilantly.

The laden toboggan had come up on the same train with them, and they saw it taken out of the express car. Leaving it at the station, they went to the village hotel, where they ate an early dinner, and changed from their civilized clothes to the caps, sweaters, and Hudson Bay "duffel" trousers that they had brought in their suit-cases.

They had been the only passengers to leave the train, and their arrival produced quite a stir in Waverley. It was not the season for camping parties, nor for hunting, and no one went into the woods for pleasure in the winter. The toboggan with its steel runners drew a curious group at the station.

"Goin' in after moose?" inquired an old woodsman while they were at dinner.

"No," replied Peter.

"Goin' up to the pulpwood camps, mebbe?"

"No."

"What might ye be goin' into the woods fer?" he persisted, after some moments.

"We might be going in after gold," answered Maurice gravely.

He did not mean it to be taken seriously, but he forgot that gold is mined in several parts of northern Ontario. Before many hours the word spread that a big winter gold strike had been made up north, and a party from the city was already going to the spot, so that for several weeks the village was in a state of excitement.

The boys suspected nothing of this, but the public curiosity began to be annoying.

"Can't we start at once?" Fred suggested.

"Yes; there's no use in stopping here another hour," Peter agreed. "We ought to catch the fine weather while it lasts, and we can make a good many miles in the rest of this day."

So they left their baggage at the hotel, with instructions to have it kept till their return, secured their toboggan at the depot, and went down to the river. The stream was a belt of clear, bluish ice, free from snow except for a little drift here and there.

Half a dozen curious idlers had followed them. Paying no attention, the boys took off their moccasins and put on the hockey boots with skates attached. They slid out upon the ice and dragged the toboggan after them.

The spectators raised a cheer, which the three boys answered with a yell as they struck out. The ice was good;

the toboggan ran smoothly after them, so that they scarcely noticed its weight. In a moment the snowy roofs of the little village had passed out of sight around a bend of the river, and black spruce and hemlock woods were on either side. The great adventure had begun.

CHAPTER II

"Don't force the pace at first, boys," Fred warned his companions. "Remember, we've a long way to go."

As the expert skater, he had taken the leading end of the drag-rope. His advice was hard to follow. The ice was in perfect condition; the toboggan ran almost without friction on its steel shoes, and in that sparkling air it seemed that it would be easy to skate a hundred miles without ever once resting.

For a little way the river was bordered with stumpy clearings; then the dark hemlock and jack-pine woods closed down on the shores. The skaters had reached the frontier; it might well be that there were not a dozen cultivated fields between them and the North Pole.

Here the river was about a hundred feet wide, the long ice road that Fred had imagined. Comparatively little snow had yet fallen, and that little seemed to have come with high winds, which had swept the ice clear. More, however, might be looked for any day.

But for that day they were safe. They rushed ahead, forcing the pace a little, after all, in a swinging single file, with the toboggan gliding behind. In great curves the river wound through the woods and frozen swamps, and only twice that day had they to go ashore to get round roaring, unfrozen rapids. Each of those obstructions cost the boys half an hour of labor before they could get the toboggan through the dense underbrush that choked the portage. But they had counted on such delays.