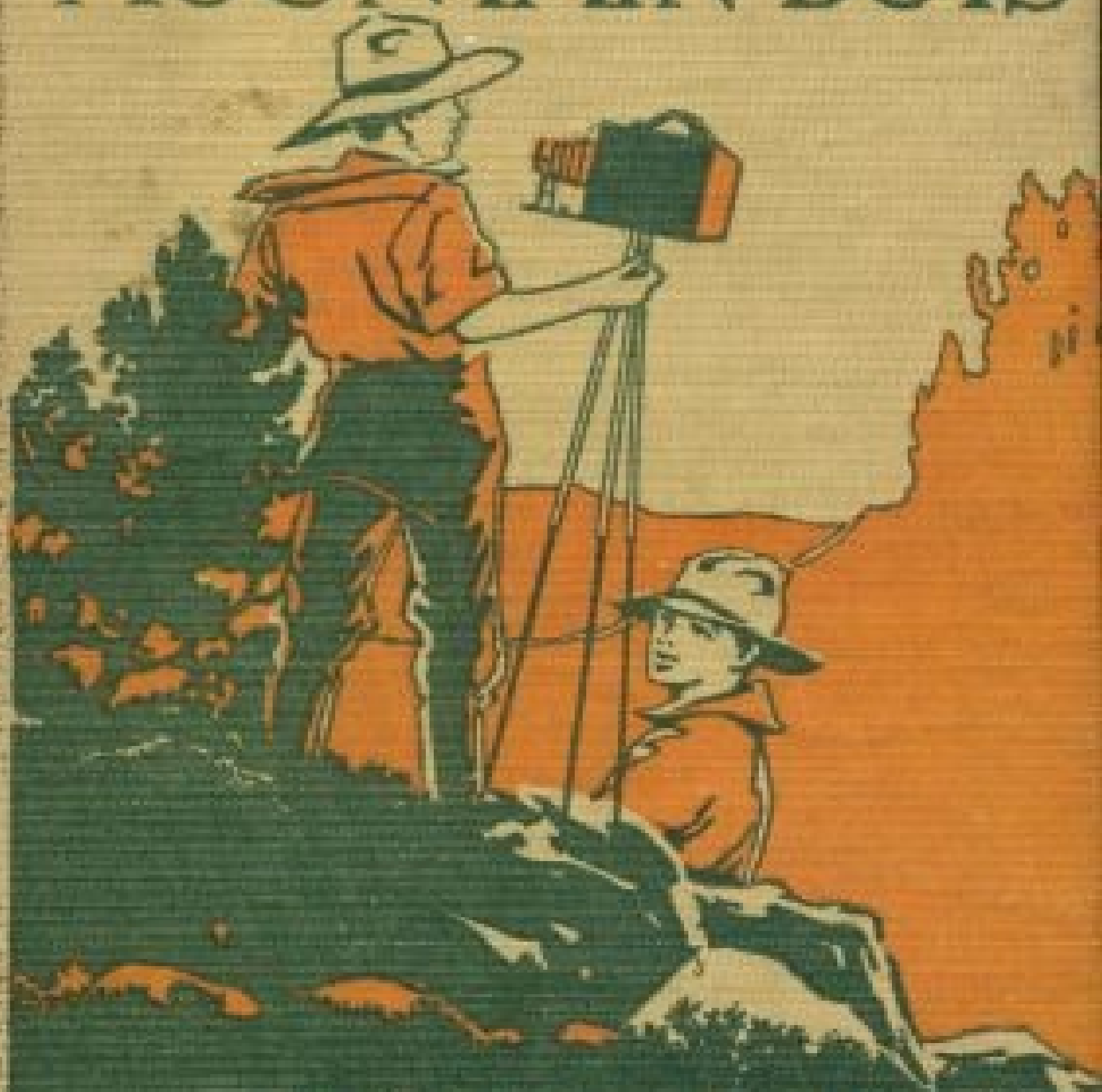


PHIL BRADLEY'S MOUNTAIN BOYS



SILAS K. BOONE

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HAVING SECURED A GOOD SUPPLY OF BAIT, THEY STARTED FOR
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THE MOUNTAIN BOYS SERIES

PHIL BRADLEY'S
MOUNTAIN BOYS

OR

THE BIRCH BARK LODGE

BY
SILAS K. BOONE

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PHIL BRADLEY'S MOUNTAIN BOYS

CHAPTER I

BOUND FOR LAKE SURPRISE

"Phil, *please* tell me we're nearly there!"

"I'd like to, Lub, for your sake; but the fact of the matter is we've got about another hour of climbing before us, as near as I can reckon."

"Oh! dear, that means sixty long minutes of this everlasting scrambling over logs, and crashing through tangled underbrush. Why, I reckon I'll have the map of Ireland in red streaks on my face before I'm done with it."

At that the other three boys laughed. They were not at all unfeeling, and could appreciate the misery of their fat companion; but then Lub had such a comical way of expressing himself, and made so many ludicrous faces, that they could never take him seriously.

They were making their way through one of the loneliest parts of the great Adirondack regions. There might not be a living soul within miles of them, unless possibly some guide were wandering in search of new fields.

The regular fishermen and tourists never came this way for many reasons; and the only thing that had brought these four well-grown boys in the region of Surprise Lake was the fact that one of them, Phil Bradley, owned a large mountain estate of wild land that abutted on the western shore of the lake.

All of the lads carried regular packs on their backs, secured with bands that passed across their foreheads, thus giving them additional advantages. In their hands they seemed to be gripping fishing rods in their cases, as well as some other things in the way of tackle boxes and bait pails.

Apparently Phil and his chums were bent on having the time of their lives upon

this outing. Laden in this fashion, it was no easy task they had taken upon themselves to "tote" such burdens from the little jumping-off station up the side of the mountain, and then across the wooded plateau. There was no other way of getting to Lake Surprise, as yet, no wagon road at all; which accounted for its being visited only by an occasional fisherman or hunter.

Each year such places become fewer and fewer in the Adirondacks; and in time to come doubtless a modern hotel would be erected where just then only primitive solitude reigned.

Of course Lub (who at home in school rejoiced in the more aristocratic name of Osmond Fenwick) being heavily built, suffered more than any of his comrades in this long and arduous tramp. He puffed, and groaned, but stuck everlastingly at it, for Lub was not the one to give in easily, no matter how he complained.

Besides these two there was Raymond Tyson, a tall, thin chap, who was so quick to see through nearly everything on the instant that his friends had long ago dubbed him "X-Ray," and as such he was generally known.

The last of the quartette was Ethan Allan. He claimed to be a lineal descendant of the famous Revolutionary hero who captured Ticonderoga from the British by an early morning surprise. Ethan was very fond of boasting of his illustrious ancestor, and on that account found himself frequently "joshed" by his chums.

It happened that Ethan's folks were not as well off in this world's goods as those of his chums; and he was exceedingly sensitive about this fact. Charity was his bugbear; and he would never listen to any of the others standing for his share of the expense, when they undertook an expedition like the present.

Ethan was a smart chap. He knew considerable about the woods, and all sorts of things that could be found there. And he had hit upon an ingenious method for laying up a nice little store of money whereby he could keep his savings bank well filled with ready cash, and thus proudly meet his share of expenses.

In the winter he used to spend all his spare time out at a farm owned by an uncle, where he had traps, and managed to catch quite a few little fur-bearing denizens of the woods. Then in the summer and fall he knew just where the choicest mushrooms could be picked day after day in the early morning. He also had several deposits of wild ginseng and golden seal marked down, and many pounds of the dried roots did he ship to a distant city to be sold.

His success was enough to turn any boy's head, since he seemed to receive a price far above the top-notch quotations for such things. The head of the firm

even took occasion to write, congratulating him on having sent a fox skin (really a dark red), which he claimed was as fine a *black* fox as he had ever seen, and worth a large sum of money. On another occasion it was to say that the dried ginseng Ethan had shipped was simply "magnificent," and that they took pleasure in remitting a price that they hoped would inspire him to renewed efforts.

Alas! how poor Ethan's pride would have taken a sad tumble had he ever so much as guessed that this very accommodating fur and root dealer was in reality an uncle of Phil Bradley, and that the whole thing was only a nice little plot on the part of the other three boys to assist Ethan without his knowing it.

That proved how much they thought of their chum; but should he ever discover the humiliating truth there was likely to be some trouble, on account of that pride of Ethan's.

It happened that Phil was an orphan, and had been left a very large property, the income from which he could never begin to spend in any sensible fashion. That accounted for his desire to assist Ethan; and while he felt that it was too bad to play such a trick, there seemed to be no other way in which the end they sought might be attained.

Raymond's folks, too, were wealthy, and he had really been sent up into the clear atmosphere of the Adirondacks to improve his health. Although the doctors did not really say he was threatened with signs of lung trouble, they advised that the boy, who had grown so fast at the expense of his strength, should live out of doors all he could for a year or two. He would then be able to catch up in school duties with little trouble.

The other three had by degrees come to look upon Phil as their leader; and indeed, he had all the qualities that go to make a successful pilot. They delighted to call themselves the "Mountain Boys." Really it had been Ethan Allan who originated that name, and no doubt at the time he had in mind those daring heroes of Revolutionary days who made themselves such a terror to the British under the title of "Green Mountain Boys."

Among other properties of which the Bradley estate consisted there was a tract of several thousand acres of wild land bordering on this mysterious Lake Surprise. Phil had heard a number of things about it that excited his curiosity. He had so far never set eyes on the place; when one of the other chums happened to suggest that it might make a splendid little outing, if they started to look in on the lonely estate.

One thing led to another, with the result that here they were heading toward the lake, and following a dim trail which had been described by an old guide who could not accompany them on account of other pressing engagements.

The boys were pretty good woodsmen, all but Lub, and they had not doubted their ability to find the lake.

"I think we're in luck about one thing," X-Ray was saying, as he toiled along sturdily, and wishing that he had as much stamina as Phil or Ethan; for somehow his legs seemed a bit shaky after so long and difficult a tramp, with all that burden piled on his back.

"As what?" asked Ethan, giving Phil a nudge, and thus calling attention to the fact that by degrees the puffing Lub had actually gone ahead, fastening his eyes on the winding trail, and evidently feeling that he was becoming quite a woodsman.

"Why, about that cabin the old guide Jerry Kane told us was on the shore of the lake. It'll save us building one, you know, if it's in any kind of a decent condition," the tall boy went on to say.

"Yes, that's a fact," Phil himself remarked; "I've been thinking so right along. I only hope we won't find some fishermen camped in it. Kane said that once in a long while some guide took a party over to Surprise; but that the tramp was so hard few gentlemen cared to try for it. There are lakes all around that offer just about as good fishing."

"I should think there'd be some pretty fine hunting around up here," remarked Ethan. "I've noticed quite a few signs of deer, and that was certainly the track of a big moose we saw. I'd like to run across one of that stripe. Never saw a wild moose in all my life."

"I wouldn't be surprised if some of us do meet one while we roam the woods around the little lake," Phil told him. "If I'm that lucky I want to take a picture of the beast, to add to my collection."

"And I reckon, now," suggested X-Ray, "that nearly every night you'll be setting traps, not to catch wild animals, but to make them take their own pictures. That's the main reason why you've come up here, isn't it, Phil?"

"Well, you know it's a sort of hobby of mine, and I've got all the apparatus for taking flashlight pictures along with me. I started in to the business just to kill time; but let me tell you it grows on a fellow like everything. I'm something of a hunter myself, but this shooting with a camera beats anything else all hollow.

Besides, you get your game, and yet don't injure it, which is the best of all."

Ethan laughed, and shook his head.

"But your pelts don't bring you in the hard cash, Phil, like mine do," he went on to say, with a touch of genuine pride in his voice. "S'pose now I'd just snapped off that black fox's picture instead of getting his paw in my steel Newhouse trap—it might have been all very well, but I'd be several hundred dollars shy right now."

X-Ray Tyson chuckled; but the other frowned and shook his head. It would never do to get Ethan's suspicions aroused. He was terribly persistent, and once on the scent would never give up until he had unearthed their clever little plot. Then good-bye to peace among the Mountain Boys, for Ethan would never be apt to forgive them the deception.

"That's the main thing, after all, Ethan," Phil added. "One man's food is another man's poison. You enjoy your way of doing things, and I understand how that is, for I'm something of a hunter of small game myself; but I find more real delight in surprising a keen-nosed fox, or a night-roaming raccoon, and getting his photo than in blowing them over with a charge of shot."

"Think there could be any bear up around here, Phil?" asked Lub, over his shoulder.

"I wouldn't be surprised, and if we run across tracks I'll add to my collection."

"Mebbe we ought to have fetched a gun along," suggested X-Ray, who was not much of a hunter himself, though fond of any kind of game when it was cooked at a camp-fire.

"Well, that would have brought us into trouble with the game wardens," Phil replied.

At this point they were interrupted by a cry from Lub, who was on his hands and knees in the midst of the scrub, where he had evidently caught his foot in a vine, and gone sprawling down on account of his clumsiness.

High above the exclamation from the lips of their fat companion they could hear a fierce growling sound, and about ten feet beyond Lub they saw the crouching body of a very large and angry bobcat, with blazing yellow eyes, and every hair on its back standing up on edge, as it got ready to spring.



CHAPTER II

LUB, AND THE MOTHER BOBCAT

"Keep still, everybody!" said Phil, grasping the perilous situation instantly.

"Gee whiz! look at its eyes staring, will you?" gasped X-Ray, appalled by the ferocious aspect of the crouching beast, which was squatted on a log just a few paces beyond poor kneeling and terrorized Lub.

"Phil, oh! Phil, tell me what I ought to do!" they heard the fat chum saying in rather a faint voice; all the while doubtless keeping his strained eyes glued on that dreadful apparition.

"It's a mother wildcat, and she's got kits somewhere near by," Phil was saying steadily. "That's what makes her so fierce in the daytime. Lub, can you hear me plainly?"

He did not elevate his voice in the least, not wishing to do anything out of the ordinary so as to excite the angry beast further, and cause it to jump.

"Yes, sure I can; go on and tell me, Phil," whined the other, appealingly, and remaining on his hands and knees as though absolutely incapable of moving.

"Don't be alarmed," Phil went on to say. "I've got my revolver in my hand, and if it comes to the worst I'll shoot. The other boys will yell like everything, too, and that might make her sheer off. But first try and back up, just as you are. Careful now, and do it as easy as you can, Lub."

They saw the fat boy begin to cautiously extend one foot backwards. When there came a warning snarl he instantly stiffened out as though he had been turned into stone.

"Try it some more," Phil told him, "go carefully, but never mind the growls.

When she sees you're retreating she'll be satisfied, let's hope."

So Lub did as he was told, for his nature was rather docile. It could be seen that he was holding himself in readiness to flatten out on his stomach in case of hostile demonstrations on the part of the wildcat. No doubt he expected that he could in this way manage to protect his face from her claws; while the pack on his back would serve him in good stead there.

Phil, however, had rightly gauged the intention of the mother beast. She was only standing up for her whelps, and so long as they were not placed in peril she did not mean to attack that crowd of two-legged enemies.

The further Lub got away from the danger zone the more rapidly he began to move his plump legs. Presently he felt Ethan lay hold of his foot, at which he gave a gasping cry, under the impression that it must be the mate of the enraged bobcat which had attacked him from the rear.

"It's all right, Lub," Ethan hastened to say, reassuringly, for he had not intended to frighten the other; "you're among friends now; and see there how the old cat slinks away, still growling and looking daggers at us with those yellow eyes of hers. Wow! she would have given us a warm time of it, I'm telling you!"

"Did you get her photo, Phil?" demanded X-Ray; "because I heard the click, after you'd swung your little camera around."

"Yes, when I saw that she didn't mean to tackle us," replied the other, "I remembered that I ought to have something to show for Lub's adventure. Guess you'll be glad to have a print of your friend, Lub; it'll be a nice thing to look at on a hot summer day; because you'll always have a chill chase up and down your spinal column, when you think what would have happened if you'd come to close quarters with that cat."

"And talk about the map of Ireland on your face," added Ethan; "more'n likely you'd call it one of Europe, with every river plainly marked."

Lub was mopping his face with his red bandanna. All the color had fled, leaving him as white as a ghost; but under the manipulation of his handkerchief that was being speedily rectified.

"I think I'll drop back a bit, and let some of the rest of you fellows take the lead from now on," Lub told them, contritely, "I ought to have known better than to try and show off when I'm such a greeny about following a trail."

"You were doing all right," Phil told him, "and making a good job of it up to that

time. Who'd ever expect that we'd run across a bobcat in the middle of the afternoon; and one that had kits at that? I'd have had just as bad a shock as you got, Lub, if it was me in the lead. No need of feeling ashamed; the sight of that thing was enough to give any hunter a bad scare, especially if he had no gun along."

This sort of consolation served to make poor Lub better satisfied; though doubtless he would continue to feel unusually nervous for some little time. If a chipmunk stirred in the trash under a dead tree Lub was apt to draw a long breath, and involuntarily shrink back behind one of his companions.

"Guess we'd better make a detour around that bunch of scrub, eh, Phil?" remarked Ethan, sagely.

"Well, it would be a wise thing to do," chuckled the other; "because just now we haven't lost any bobcat that we know about. The trail seems to be heading pretty straight right here; and chances are we'll have little trouble running across the same some little ways on."

Both he and Ethan took a good survey of their surroundings, but evidently the wildcat was still hiding amidst that scrub, for they saw nothing of her again while making the half circuit.

"Now keep your eyes peeled for the trail again, Ethan," advised Phil, when they were well around on the other side of the danger spot.

Lub managed to push along until he could find himself in the midst of the bunch. He cast numerous side glances in the direction of that disputed ground, as though half anticipating seeing a whole army of ferocious bobcats come leaping forth, all with blazing yellow eyes and stubby tails.

Nothing of the kind happened, however, and presently Ethan was heard calling:

"Here's your old trail, Phil, as plain as print. And d'ye know, there's only one thing I'm sorry about, which is that you didn't think to snap off a picture with our chum on his hands and knees backing off, and the cat on the log."

"Well, I'm glad myself there wasn't any chance to keep that accidental tumble of mine as a perpetual joke," said Lub, indignantly.

"Nothing to be ashamed about at all, Lub," remarked X-Ray; "and I reckon now if it had been Ethan himself who stumbled when he caught his foot in a vine, and then found himself face to face with a mad cat he'd have been near paralyzed too."

This seemed to mollify Lub somewhat, though he hardly liked that reference to his having been paralyzed very much.

They pushed on resolutely and the minutes passed. Phil on hearing Lub puffing and seeing that X-Ray lagged a little, cheered both of them up by declaring that the time was now short.

"It wouldn't surprise me a whit," he said, cheerily, "to get a glimpse of the lake any time now, through the trees. Unless all my calculations are faulty we must be on my land right now."

"That sounds good to me, Phil," asserted X-Ray, joyously, as he took a fresh spurt, and no longer limped as though he had a stone bruise on his heel.

Even Lub grinned until his red face looked like a newly risen sun.

"We'll all be mighty glad to get there, believe me!" he declared; "and think of the jolly time we'll have preparing our first supper in the woods. This big aluminum frying pan of Phil's has kept digging me in the ribs right along, until I'm afraid there's a black and blue spot there; but I mean to take my revenge good and plenty when we fill it full of onions and potatoes and such fine things. Take another squint ahead, Phil, and see if you can't give us real good news."

"Well, just as sure as anything I see what looks like water!" called out Phil, with an eager tremor in his voice.

"Whereabouts, Phil? Oh! I hope now, you're not joshing us?" Lub demanded.

"Stop just where you are, everybody," the pilot of the expedition told them, "and watch where I'm pointing. If you follow my finger you can see if I've made a mistake or not. How about it, X-Ray? You've got the best eyes of the crowd, I guess."

"It's water, all right, Phil," replied the other, glad that he could be accounted as best in something.

"And that means Lake Surprise, doesn't it?" questioned Ethan Allan.

"Yes, because it's the only body of water for miles around here," Phil continued. "That's one reason they let it alone so much. Other lakes lie in bunches, and a canoe can be taken over a carry from one to another in the chain; but Surprise is an awful lonely sheet of water."

"And that's how it must have got its name," added Ethan. "All the while nobody dreamed there was any such lake up here; and then all at once a wandering guide

must have run headlong on the same, to his surprise."

"Wish we were there on the bank right now," grunted Lub.

"Another mile, perhaps half of that, ought to take us to the water," he was assured by Phil; "and you see we are coming in from the west, which is all right, too, because my land lies on the western shore; and that cabin must be somewhere just ahead of us."

"Hurrah!" shouted Ethan, unable to keep from giving expression to his delight any longer.

The others felt pretty much the same way, and joined in a series of joyous whoops.

"Now, everybody put his best foot forward, and we'll soon be there," urged Phil; "the worst is behind us, you know."

"That's a heap better than having it yet to come!" declared X-Ray, feeling that with the goal in sight he should be able to hold out.

They plodded along for some eight minutes or more, frequently catching glimpses of the lake beyond, and knowing that they were rapidly approaching its border. All at once X-Ray gave a cry.

"Tell me, what is that I can see over there, Phil; looks for all the world like a shack made of silver birches! See how the sun shines on its side, will you? Is that your cabin, do you think, Phil?"

"Just what it must be, X-Ray," the other told him; "they've nailed birch bark all over the sides of the log hut, you see, just to make it look rustic."

"Then we'll have to call it Birch Bark Lodge!" burst out Lub, who had a little vein of the romantic in his disposition.

"That sounds good to me!" declared Ethan.

"It goes, then, does it?" asked the delighted Lub, beginning to believe he must be waking up, to have any suggestion of his so quickly and favorably seized upon.

"Sure thing," said X-Ray Tyson. "Hurrah for Birch Bark Lodge, the home in the wilderness of the Mountain Boys."

"Don't be too quick to settle that sort of thing," advised the more cautious Phil. "For all we know there may be somebody ahead of us in the shack; and you know we couldn't well chase 'em out."

"But see here, Phil, if the cabin stands on your ground of course it's your property by right of law, no matter whoever built the shack in the start. He was only a squatter at the best," and Lub looked wise when he laid down this principle in common law which is often so exceedingly difficult to practice in the backwoods, where right of possession is nine points of the law.

"Yes," Phil told him, "but there's always a rule in the woods that governs cases like this, no matter who owns the land. First come, first served. If we find that shack occupied by some sportsmen and their guides, why, we'll have to chase along and put up one for ourselves somewhere else."

"Huh! I don't like to hear you say that," remarked Lub, who would possibly have liked to enter into a discussion along the line of right of property, only none of the others cared to bother with such a question, particularly after what Phil had said.

They pushed on and approached the cabin. One and all were looking eagerly to discover any signs of occupancy, and greatly to their satisfaction no dog came barking toward them, nor was there even a smudge of smoke oozing out of the mud-and-slab chimney that had been built up alongside the back of the shack.

"I guess it's all hunk," admitted Ethan, with a sigh of relief, as they drew near the partly open door. "See that gray squirrel running along the roof, would you? He wouldn't be doing that same if folks were around."

"Oh! that depends on what kind of folks," remarked Phil. "For my part I never yet would shoot little animals around camp. I like to see them frisking about too much to want to eat them up. But as you say, it looks as if we had the cabin to ourselves, after all, for which I'm glad."

"Tell me about that, will you?" muttered Lub, also showing positive signs of satisfaction.

All of them pushed into the cabin.

"Why, this is *just* the thing!" cried Ethan Allan; "see the bunks along one side of the wall, boys,—two, three, four of them, if you please."

"Just one apiece for us, and I choose this because it looks more roomy, and better fitted for a fellow of my heft than any of the rest!" Lub was heard to say.

They immediately began to unfasten the straps that held their packs in place.

"Hey! what're you doing, starting a fire already, Phil?" called out Ethan, noticing that the other was bending over the hearth.

For answer Phil beckoned to the others to approach closer.

"There's something queer happened," he told them, with a frown on his face; "just bend down here, Ethan, and put your hand in these ashes, will you?"

"Why!" exclaimed Ethan, immediately, "they're warm right now, would you believe it?"



CHAPTER III

A MYSTERY, TO START WITH

While Ethan, Phil and X-Ray Tyson seemed to grasp the true significance of this astonishing discovery, Lub as yet had not managed to get it through his head. He was a little dense about some things, although a clever enough scholar when at school.

"The ashes warm, you say, Ethan?" he burst out with. "Now, that's a funny thing. What would make them hold heat that way, when there's not a sign of anybody around?"

"There *has* been somebody here, and only a short time ago, don't you see?" explained Phil.

"And like as not they heard us cheering when we glimpsed the lake, and cleared out in a big hurry," Ethan went on to say.

"Cleared out?" echoed Lub'. "Well, why should they run from us, tell me? We don't look dangerous, as far as I can see. We wouldn't bother hurting anybody; and didn't Phil say a while back that if we found some fishermen in his shack we'd just shy off, and build one for ourselves?"

"Yes, but these people didn't hear Phil say that; we were half a mile and more away from here at the time," explained X-Ray.

"And they couldn't begin to tell just who was coming," added Phil.

"It might be!" exclaimed Ethan, "that they took us for game wardens. Mebbe now they've been shooting deer out of season, and got cold feet when they knew some people were coming in to the lake."

Phil nodded his head in the affirmative, when he saw that Ethan was looking to

find out just how that suggestion struck him.

"I rather think you've struck the right nail on the head there, Ethan," he told the other. "It seems the most reasonable explanation for their clearing out in such a big hurry."

"They tried to put the fire out too, didn't they, Phil?"

It was X-Ray Tyson who asked this. Those keen eyes of his had made another discovery, and he was even then pointing the same out to his chums.

"Yes, I had noticed that some one had certainly thrown water on the fire," said Phil. "You can see where it washed the ashes off this charred piece of wood; and besides, it made little furrows in the ashes."

"That's an old trick in the woods," remarked Ethan, with a superior air; "fact is, no true woodsman would think of breaking camp without first making sure every spark of his fire was put out. Lots of forest fires have come from carelessness in guides leaving red cinders behind them."

"Yes," Phil added, "because often the wind rises, and whirls those same cinders to leeward, where they fall in a bunch of dry leaves, and begin to get their work in. But when people live in cabins they seldom bother wetting the ashes, unless they've got a mighty good reason for wanting to hide the facts."

"And these people did," added Ethan, conclusively.

"Let's look around some," suggested X-Ray.

Two of the others thought this a good idea, for they immediately started a search of the interior of the cabin, their idea being to find some clue that might tell just who the late mysterious inmates were, and why they had fled so hurriedly.

Lub may have been just as curious as his mates; but he was very tired after the long and arduous walk, so that apparently he believed three could cover the field just as thoroughly as four. At any rate he showed no sign of meaning to quit his seat upon the rude stool he had found; but leaning forward, watched operations, at the same time rubbing his shins sympathetically.

"What's this on the peg up here?" exclaimed X-Ray, the very first thing.

"Looks like some sort of a hat to me," remarked Ethan.

"Just what it is; but say, take notice of the size, will you? It's a *child's* hat, as sure as you live! Why, there must have been a child along with the lot!"

"That's queer!" Lub observed, not wanting to be wholly ignored.

"Game poachers they may have been," muttered Ethan, "but if there was a little chap along, there must have been a family of 'em. See if you could pick up such a thing now as a hair-pin, or any other woman business."

They went to scrutinizing the cracks of the floor more closely than ever. That suggestion on the part of Ethan was worth trying out. Of course the presence of any little article like a hair-pin would show that a woman had been there.

"I don't hear anybody sing out!" remarked X-Ray Tyson, presently; "and on that account it looks like we hadn't discovered anything worth mentioning. What gets me is, however could they have cleaned the old shack out so quick, and never left anything worth mentioning behind 'em?"

"From the time we sighted the cabin, back to when we first whooped, couldn't have been more'n eight minutes, I should think," Lub gravely announced.

"Lots could be done in that time," asserted Phil; "but all the same I am bothered to know why they'd be in such a rattling big hurry. It might be they knew about us being on the way longer than eight minutes."

"Who would have called 'em up on the phone, and mentioned the fact?" asked X-Ray, meaning to be humorous.

"Well, one of the lot may have seen us miles back, and put for the cabin by some short-cut we don't know anything about," Phil told him.

"That could be, of course," admitted Ethan, after considering the matter seriously.

"Mebbe we'll never know the truth, which would be too bad," Lub continued; for a mystery was a source of constant anxiety to him; he was so frank and straightforward himself that double dealing seemed foreign to his nature.

"Well, as we didn't come all the way up here just to worry our heads over guessing hard problems, I guess we won't lose any sleep," Ethan went on to say, in his easy-going way.

"I'm wondering what made all these burns on the floor," Phil told them; "and on this table, too. In these days people don't mold bullets like they used to years ago, when the pioneers were settling the wilderness; and yet that's what it looks like to me."

"The place isn't as clean as it might be," Ethan now remarked, "and the first thing we'll have to do in the morning will be to tidy up. I'll make a broom out of twigs, like I've seen poor emigrants do. It answers the purpose pretty well, too."

He was prying around in one of the bunks while saying this, as though he had suspicions; which Lub, who was anxiously watching him, hoped in his heart might turn out to be groundless.

Phil had turned to other things, and was proceeding to undo his pack. This caught Lub's eye, and caused the worried expression on his face to give way to one of pleasure. He knew that such a move meant it was getting time for them to think of supper; and Lub was always ready to do his part toward providing a meal; oh, yes, and in disposing of the same, too.

"Wow! you quit too soon!" suddenly yelped X-Ray, who had continued prowling on hands and knees after Phil and Ethan had stopped searching the floor.

"Found something, have you?" asked the former, without looking up from his job of opening the contents of his pack.

"Is it worth a hair-pin, X-Ray?" chirped Ethan, who had been gathering a handful of timber in a corner where a lot of wood lay in a pile, ready for burning.

"You could buy a thousand with it, I reckon!" was the astonishing declaration of the finder, which remark caused every one to immediately take notice.

The boy with the sharp eyes was holding something up between thumb and forefinger. It shone in the last rays of the setting sun, as they came into the cabin through a small window in the western side.

"Why, what's this mean?" ejaculated Ethan; "looks like you've gone and struck a silver mine, X-Ray! That's a half dollar, ain't it? D'ye mean to say you found it on this same floor?"

"Just what I did, and deep down in a crack, where it must have slid, so nobody noticed it!" exclaimed the other, exultantly. "Now, needn't all get busy looking, because I reckon it's the only coin there is. That's my reward for keeping everlastingly at it. You fellows are ready to give up too easy. Say, did you ever see a brighter half dollar than that? Looks like she just came from the mint, hey?"

"Perhaps it did!" said Phil, solemnly.

When he said that the others all focussed their eyes on Phil's face. They knew he would not have spoken in such a strain unless he had some good reason for saying what he did.

"Explain what you mean, please, Phil; that's a good fellow," urged Lub.

X-Ray was not so dense, for he instantly exclaimed.

"Why, don't you see, Phil reckons that this half-dollar may have been coined right here in this birch bark cabin!"

"Whew! counterfeit, is it?" gasped Ethan, whose breath had almost been taken away with the momentous discovery. "Then I guess I ain't going to bother getting down on my knees, and doing any hunting for bogus money."

The finder apparently did not much fancy having his prize counted so meanly. He immediately proceeded to bite the coin, and then started to ringing it on the hard surface of the oak table that had all the scorched spots on it, mentioned by Phil.

"It *tastes* good; and listen to the sweet ring, would you, fellows?" X-Ray hastened to say. "If it's a punk fifty-center, then it's the greatest imitation ever was. I'd just like to have a cartload of the same; I think I'd call myself rich."

"If there's any suspicion fixed on the coin," Lub observed, ponderously, just as he had heard his father, the judge, deliver an opinion in court, "I'd rather be excused from carrying it around on *my* person. The law, you know, does not look upon ignorance as innocence. Better toss that thing as far away as you can in the morning, X-Ray. I'd hate to think of you doing time for having it in your possession."

"Hanged if I do," muttered the other. "I'm all worked up now over it, and mean to get the opinion of Mr. Budge, the cashier of our bank. He can smell a counterfeit as soon as he sets eyes on one. He'll fix all that up, believe me."

"But, Phil," Ethan remarked, just then, "what was that you were saying about all the scorched places on the table? If these people were not molding bullets they may have been using melted metal for another purpose, and one not quite so lawful, eh?"

"It looks a little that way, I must say," Phil admitted.

"Give us something to do prying around while we're up here," suggested X-Ray; "seeing if we can run across their *cache* where they've gone and hid away their molds, and other stuff."

"Oh! now you're only guessing," Lub told him. "It may be they were game poachers after all, no matter if the coin is a bad one. I'm sorry this had to crop up the first thing, when we aimed to have such a jolly time of it here."

"We'll have that, all right, whether or no," said Phil; "and first of all let's get busy

with our duffle. If we're going to live in this shack it's our duty to make it look like home to us. Ethan, suppose you attend to the fire, and the rest of us will take care of the cooking."

"That's the ticket!" Lub ventured; "if I can do anything to help just let me sit here, and peel potatoes, or make the coffee. I'm pretty tired, you know; and besides it seems to me I get in everybody's way when I move around."

"Because you occupy so much room, Lub," X-Ray told him, cheerfully; "but it's all right, and we'll find some use for your hands. How about water; shall I take our collapsible pail and fetch some from the lake?"

Upon being told that some one must go, the spry lad darted out of the door, and reappeared a few minutes later with a brimming pail.

"I want to tell you all that it's going to be a dandy night," he chortled as he set the pail carefully down so that Lub, who was holding the aluminum coffee pot in his hands, could easily reach it; "moon's just coming up over across the lake, and about as full as could be."

"Well, some of the rest of us are hoping to be in the same condition before a great while," Ethan ventured, as he stepped over to the door, and looked out, to immediately add: "I should say it is a glorious sight, with that yellow streak shining across the water, and the little wavelets dancing like silver. Phil, this is the greatest place ever. If you hunted a whole year you couldn't beat it. And we ought to have the time of our lives while we're up at Birch Bark Lodge."

All of them were filled with delight. Being only boys, and with no particular cares weighing heavily on their minds, they refused to see any cloud on the horizon. Everything was as clear and lovely as the sky into which that full moon was climbing so sturdily.

Soon the delightful odors of supper began to pervade the atmosphere. That made it seem more than ever like a real camp. Lub was doing his share of the work like a hero. They had found a place where he could sit at one side of the fire, and here he attended to the coffee, as well as looked after the big saucepan of potatoes and onions that had been placed on the red coals. Lub's round face was about as fiery as the blaze that crackled and danced at the back of the hearth; and he often had to mop his streaming brow; but he stuck heroically at his task to the bitter end.

Then came his reward when they sat around, and every fellow had a heaping pannikin between his knees, or on the small table, flanked by a cup, also of light

aluminum, filled with coffee.

Seeing that they were all helped Phil knocked on the table, and held up his cup.

"Before we take our first bite, fellows," he went on to say, solemnly; "I think we ought to drink to the success of our camping trip up here in the Adirondacks proper. Coffee is the only proper liquid to drink that toast in, so up with your cups, every one. Here's to the Mountain Boys, and may they enjoy every minute of their stay at Birch Bark Cabin!"

"Drink it down!" cried X-Ray Tyson, noisily.

With that they took the first swallow of the nectar that Lub had brewed. Never had its like been tasted at home, amidst prosaic surroundings; there was something in the atmosphere of the mountains that made ordinary things assume a different aspect; their hard tramp had aroused their appetites amazingly, and just then those four boys were ready to admit that this was the life worth while.

For the next half-hour they sat there on such stools as they could find, and proceeded to "lick the platter clean;" inasmuch as there was not a particle left when they had finished supper. But even Lub confessed that he had had quite enough.



CHAPTER IV

THE FIGURE IN THE MOONLIGHT

"You couldn't beat this much, I'd say, if you want to know my opinion," Ethan was remarking, after they had finished the meal and were taking things easy.

"Of course we all feel pretty much the same way," admitted X-Ray Tyson; "but I'd be a whole lot better satisfied if I knew about that bright new half-dollar. Is it a good one, or a bunker?"

"Chances are we'll hear no end to that squall all the time we're up here," Ethan went on to say, with a pretended look of disgust on his thin Yankee face. "Whenever you do get a thing on your mind, X-Ray, you sure beat all creation to keep yawping about it. Forget that you ever picked up the fifty, and let's be thinking only of the royal good times we're meaning to have."

"What can that sound be?" suddenly remarked Lub, who had been listening more or less apprehensively for some little time now; "seems like some one might be sawing a hole through the wall. Course, though, I don't believe that for a minute; but all the same it's a queer noise. There, don't you hear it?"

There did come a distinct little "rat-tat-tat," several times repeated. No one who was not deaf could have helped hearing such a distinct sound; but Lub could not see that any of his mates seemed bothered.

"May be that old gray squirrel gnawing somewhere," suggested X-Ray; "they've got long teeth like a rat, and can chew a hole through any sort of board."

"Now, I'd rather believe it was the wind," said Ethan, who had a pretty good knowledge of woodcraft in all its branches, and was therefore well fitted to give an opinion.

"Why, how could the night wind make that sort of scratching sound?" asked Lub, doubtless wondering whether the other were simply guying him because of his being a greenhorn.

"Oh! the broken end of a branch might be rubbing against the roof of the cabin," Ethan told him. "I've known that to happen lots of times. There she hits up the tune again, you notice, Lub."

"Yes," added Phil, nodding his head approvingly, "and if you listen, every time that scratching sound comes you can hear the wind soughing through the tree-tops. That ought to prove it."

Still Lub seemed hard to convince, seeing which Ethan jumped up.

"Just stir your stumps, Lub, and come outside with me," he said, positively. "I want to prove what I said, and you've got to be shown."

Lub saw there was no getting around it, and much as he disliked making a move when he was settled so comfortably, he managed to scramble to his feet.

Once out in the bright moonlight and practical Ethan was quick to discover the source of the peculiar and often recurring noise.

"You see, Lub," he went on to say, "there's your saw at work right now. Just as I told you it's a branch that's been worn off to a stub by this scraping. Every time there's a fresh gust of wind it waves back and forth, and scraping against the roof makes that funny sound. Now, I hope your mind's easy, Lub, and that you'll sleep decent to-night."

"I hope I will," replied Lub, earnestly, at the same time remembering about the bunks, and what one of the others had said with regard to house-cleaning in the morning; "but say, it is a fine night, ain't it, Ethan. Listen to the frogs singing their chorus in some little bay of the lake."

"Yes," remarked Ethan, quickly, "I was listening to their serenade. Some busters in that lot, too, because you can hear 'em calling more-rum, more-rum' in the deepest bass. That always stands for the big bullfrogs. I ought to know, because I'm an experienced frog-raiser. Cleared sixty-seven dollars from my little pond this very summer; but I've never seen frogs'-legs quoted *quite* so high as that Mr. Brandon the restaurant man down in New York pays me. I guess he favors me a mite just because he happens to know some friends of Phil's."

Lub knew all about it, but he never let even a chuckle escape from his lips.

"Well, in that letter you had from him which you showed me," he observed, "he

said he'd never had such fine frogs'-legs before, and wanted to make sure to keep getting all you had to sell. A dollar a pound is a cracking high sum, sure it is, but then good things always bring fancy prices."

That frog pond of Ethan's went with his many other ways for making spending money. It required almost no time at all to run it. When he found an opportunity he caught frogs wherever he could find them, and put them into his preserve. Then, on feeling that he had the right kind of goods for a gilt-edge market he would make a shipment of a box of "saddles" neatly arranged, so that they were attractive to the eye of the proprietor of the fashionable restaurant in far-off New York.

Phil had recommended Ethan to try that place, and had even given him permission to use his name as a recommendation. Ethan never knew that the same mail had carried a letter from Phil to Mr. Brandon, who was an old friend of his, making arrangements to stand for the difference between the market price of frogs'-legs and the fancy sum he was to send Ethan every time he shipped him a box.

While Lub was standing there, and apparently enjoying the sight of the moonlight dancing on the water of the lake near by, he was at the same time casting occasional apprehensive glances around him.

The woods looked mysterious enough and gloomy too, for the moon had not risen far in the heavens, and the shadows were long and abundant.

Several times he fancied he saw something moving there on the border of the dense growth. Finally he appealed to Ethan, because he had considerable respect for the opinions of his chum, who had studied woods lore so long.

"You don't think now, that any of that crowd we scared away from the cabin would come sneaking back to spy on us, or try to steal any of our things?" he asked, trying to appear as though such an idea was furthest from his own thoughts.

"Well, I hadn't bothered with such a thing as that, Lub, but now that you mention the same I can't see why they should. We haven't got anything along worth stealing; and if they are afraid of the officers of the law, as counterfeiters, or game poachers, why, they'd want to get as far away as they could. So I wouldn't let that keep me from sleeping a wink."

"Oh! I don't mean to," Lub hastened to exclaim, stoutly; but all the same as he followed Ethan back through the cabin doorway the very last thing he did was to

take a parting survey of the forest fringe, and shrug his fat shoulders.

"Seems like it was getting right noisy out there, Ethan," remarked X-Ray, when Lub had carefully pushed the door shut, and both of those who had just entered found places again in the half circle before the red embers of the fire.

The interior was only dimly lighted, because they only had a single lantern to do duty. But then it served them amply, because no one meant to try and read; and whenever a fresh lot of wood was thrown on the coals it flashed up brilliantly.

That firelight was a part of the charm of the whole thing. They could have lamps, gas, or even electric light at home any time they wanted; but only under such conditions as these was it possible to enjoy the mystic firelight.

"Why, yes," Ethan replied, "I guess the woods folks are waking up. You can hear crickets a fiddling away for dear life, and other sorts of insects besides. Then there's a pair of screech owls calling to each other; a whip-poor-will whooping things up; and most of all the frogs have started in to get busy with their chorus. And say, I'm going to promise you a feast to-morrow night."

"Frogs'-legs, you mean, I take it, Ethan." Phil quickly exclaimed, looking pleased at the prospect.

"Yes, because there's some corkers out there; and leave it to me to get 'em. I'm an authority on frogs'-legs, you know. And when they fetch a dollar a pound every time, you c'n see that they ought to be reckoned a treat."

"A dollar a pound, did you say?" demanded X-Ray, as if he fancied he had not heard aright; whereat he had his shins kicked by Lub, who happened to sit next to him, as a warning that he was treading on perilous ground.

"Why, yes, that's the price I always get!" declared Ethan, loftily. "You see, it pays to do things up in style. My shipments look so attractive to Mr. Brandon that he says it is a pleasure to just open my box. Of course all of you fellows like frogs'-legs?"

Phil and X-Ray Tyson immediately declared they believed they could never get enough of the dainty.

"To tell you the honest truth," said Lub, contritely, "I never tasted any that I know of. My folks don't seem to care for queer things."

"Queer things!" almost shouted Ethan; "well, I like that now! Why, don't you know that frogs'-legs are as delicate as squab. You'd think you had a spring chicken, only when you come to think, it has just a *little* taste of fish about it."

"Oh! my, I don't know as I'd fancy that very much," complained Lub.

"Huh! I know you better than to believe that, Lub," he was told by the other; "and I'll just have to make sure to lay in a plenty, because I c'n see you passing in your platter seven times, to say: 'Please see if there isn't just one more helping for me, won't you, Ethan; they're the finest things I ever set my teeth in, and that's no lie!'"

"Well, wait and see, that's all," Lub concluded. "I'm willing to be convinced. I mightn't care for a thing like that at home, with a white tablecloth, silver, and cut glass all around me; but then it's a different case when you're up in the woods, with your camp appetite along, and going just half crazy because supper is so slow cooking, with all those odors stealing to your nose. Try it on me, Ethan; I'd be willing to taste even dog just once, if I was hungry, and met up with a bunch of Indians."

"I'm not afraid of the verdict," announced the boy who raised frogs, and thought he had a right to know considerable about them, since he topped the market with the gilt-edge prices he received.

So they talked, and joked, as the evening wore along. Several times they caught Lub in the act of yawning, and he was of course immediately poked in the ribs as they besought him to please not swallow the cabin while about it.

"But I tell you I am sleepy; and no matter what the rest of you say I'm going to get my bunk made up. I want to be in apple-pie shape for to-morrow, for I expect it's going to be a red-letter day with us."

Each of them had carried a warm blanket in their pack, which was one reason for the bulk of these burdens. They had not been quite as heavy as they looked; doubtless the greatest load consisted of canned goods, and food of various kinds, which they would not have to pack out of the woods again.

Lub was somewhat fastidious about how he wanted his bed made up. Three separate times did he pull it to pieces again, to start in afresh.

"Hey, stop bothering so much with that!" X-Ray Tyson called out, having been observing what the other was doing. "You certainly are the greatest old woman I ever ran across, Lub."

"And you'll never make a woodsman, as long as you're so finicky, either," Ethan warned him. "'The happy-go-lucky kind is best in the end. They give their blanket a fling, and just crawl under. And they sleep the soundest too."

"Oh! well, I'll learn some day, perhaps," said Lub, not at all disconcerted by all this raillery, for it fell from him as water does from a duck's back. "But I've got it fixed to suit me at last. This bunch of dead grass rolled in the pillow slip I fetched will make me a dandy pillow. I'm glad you gave me a hint to bring one along, Phil."

"Old woodsmen use then? boots for a pillow," chuckled Ethan, which remark caused the particular Lub to shudder, and shake his head, as though he began to despair of ever reaching that point where he could claim to be a seasoned veteran.

While the others were again indulging in some sort of discussion, Lub, thinking he was unobserved, sauntered over to one of the little windows which the builder of the birch cabin had arranged so that he might have light, and yet shut out the cold air of winter.

"Oh, come here, won't you, Phil; there's somebody walking along by the trees, and standing still to watch the cabin every once in a while!"

When Lub said this in a voice that trembled with excitement the other three boys of course hastened to scramble to their feet and reach his side.

"Whereabouts, Lub?" demanded X-Ray Tyson, eagerly, as he pressed his nose against the glass, and occupied so much space in doing so that he prevented the others from having a chance to see fairly; so that Phil and Ethan deliberately drew him to one side.

"There, over yonder where the moon shines between the little second-growth trees!" the discoverer went on to say, huskily, and pointing a trembling stubby finger as he spoke. "There, didn't you see then, boys?"

"There certainly is something, and it moved!" admitted Ethan.

"Oh! it's a man, I'm telling you!" hissed Lub; "didn't I see him plain as the nose on your face, X-Ray, and that's going some. He was moving along where the shadows die out. Now he's past that place. It's a man, believe me; and he's meaning to sneak in here to-night, to rob us. There, see him moving again, will you?"

"Yes, I do believe it is a man, bending over at that," agreed Phil.

"He's moving off, seems like," observed X-Ray, who had not altogether fancied Lub's allusion to his nose, because it *was* rather large.

"Mebbe he's seen us peeking out and thinks it's time he sheered off?" suggested

Ethan.

"Had we better collar him, Phil?" asked X-Ray, who was inclined to be very quick in his actions, and often without due thought making some move he was likely to regret later.

"No, that would be silly," decided Phil. "The only weapons we've got consist of one revolver, a couple of camp hatchets, and some hunting knives. How do we know what he might do, or how many of them there may be? Let him look at the cabin, and then go away. I don't think we'll be bothered by anybody."

"And I'm not going to lie awake thinking about it," said Ethan. "If he comes in here, and finds anything worth while, we could surround him and make him go shares, you know."

"There, he's moving off at last," said Lub; "but I don't like all this mystery. Who is he, and what does he want? We'd be happier if we moved on, and built a cabin somewhere else."

"What!" exclaimed the belligerent X-Ray, "clear out when Phil owns the whole shebang, and has invited us up? Well, I guess not!"



CHAPTER V

THE SUDDEN AWAKENING

"Thought you meant to go to bed, Lub?" said Ethan, some little time afterwards, as they were all sitting around again.

"Oh! somehow I seem to have gotten over my sleepy spell," admitted the other, frankly; "perhaps it was the excitement over seeing that prowler outside that did it. I'm as wide awake as a hawk right now."

"Well, it's just the other way with me," X-Ray remarked, yawning almost as furiously as Lub had been doing before; "I'm getting dopey, and mean to turn in pretty soon. If nothing else happens to bother, nobody's going to hear a word from me after I hit the hay."

Lub looked at him painfully, but he did not think it best to ask further questions lest he stir up a hornets' nest. There was something on Lub's mind. Phil understood this from various signs. He began to get an inkling as to what its nature might prove to be, when several times he saw the other lean forward and look long and earnestly up the chimney.

"What d'ye expect to see up there, Lub?" asked Ethan, who had also it seemed been watching the other. "This isn't the time for old Santa Claus to come down with his pack of toys. His reindeer need snow for their sledge, you know."

"Will you let the fire go out when we turn in, Phil?" asked Lub, ignoring all such little annoyances as this.

"Why, I suppose so," he was told. "If it was cold weather it might be a different thing; but to-night is pretty warm, and we'll get little air in here, with the door closed. Yes, the last wood has been thrown on the fire; and to tell the truth there's only a handful more in the house, which we'll save to start things with in the

morning."

"What did you ask that for, Lub?"

X-Ray made this inquiry. He realized that the other must have something on his mind, or he would not have spoken as he did. And X-Ray was curious to know what its character might turn out to be.

"Oh, nothing much; only it strikes me that's a whopping big chimney, that's all," replied the other, a little confused.

"I see what you mean," said Phil; "you're thinking that even if we do close the door as we intend, if a thief wanted to get in here he could creep down such a wide-throated chimney? Well, I shouldn't be at all surprised if he could, providing he took the notion."

"I hate to think of being sound asleep, and not know a single thing about it," pursued Lub, "You know how I caught that darky stealing our chickens last winter? I set a trap for him, and gave him such a scare that he just crouched in a corner of the coop with all the hens cackling like mad, till father went out and got him by the scruff of the neck."

"Mebbe you'd like to set one of your fine traps here then, Lub," suggested Ethan.

"I think I could do it, if the rest of you didn't object," Lub pursued.

"Please yourself," said Phil.

"I'm off to bed right now," added X-Ray Tyson, "so you c'n have the whole blooming field to yourself. Be sure you don't get nabbed in your own contraption, Lub. Now, you may smile at my saying that, but it wouldn't be the first time a bitter got bitten."

Both Phil and Ethan began to stretch, and exhibited other positive signs of being ready to turn in. It would appear that none of the rest of them gave much thought to the possibility of their having unwelcome visitors during the night. Lub envied them their calm indifference; but he felt that he would not be doing his whole duty unless he carried out that idea of the trap.

He saw Phil saunter over to the door, which, with something of an effort he managed to get to close tight enough so that the bar could be dropped into place. That avenue seemed quite safe; and as the windows had each one a couple of stout bars fastened across them, it looked as though there could be no ingress unless the intruder were a mere child, or else made use of that wide-throated slab-and-hard-mud chimney.

The other boys were more or less amused to see what the ingenious Lub was doing, in order to further his plot. First of all he arranged the stools and other bulky objects that he could gather about the room in such fashion that they formed a species of rude barricade on either side of the hearth, where the red embers still held forth.

"Looks like a regular wild animal trap, all right!" Ethan sang out, as though more or less surprised that Lub should know as much as he did about such things. "That forces the intruder to step out in the middle; and I guess now that's where you're going to fix things to give him a warm reception, eh, Lub?"

"You wait and see," was all the other would say.

They quickly understood what he had in mind. Everything they had along in the shape of cooking utensils, that would be apt to make a jangling noise if thrown down, was utilized. The big frying pan crowned the pyramid, and Lub was very particular just how he placed this, so that the least jar was apt to dislodge the aluminum skillet, which would be certain to arouse even the soundest sleeper when it rattled on the floor.

"Don't kick over our grub that we've got piled up close by you there, Lub," warned X-Ray, after chuckling to see how the other was making such elaborate arrangements; for he did not have the remotest idea they would amount to anything in the end.

"That ought to finish your trap, Lub, I should think," said Phil, who was almost ready to climb into his bunk, having removed most of his clothing, and arranged his sleeping quarters in a jiffy; he too had a small pillow-slip filled with some of the hay, upon which he expected to rest his head comfortably.

"Why, yes, I don't seem to think of anything else we've got that would help to make a big noise," the other replied, soberly; "what with four cups, as many platters, the coffeepot, and the frying pan ought to make plenty of racket. But say, you should have seen the heap of tin-pans I piled up the time I caught that chicken thief."

"If you had much more than this lot," Ethan announced, "I don't wonder the poor critter was scared nearly stiff, and could only crouch there till your dad came and arrested him."

"And on my part," said X-Ray Tyson, with another wide yawn, "I only hope there doesn't anything happen to start that pyramid tumbling, that's all. If I was dreaming of something lovely it'd sure be a shame to get waked up by such a

row, and to find that it was all brought about by a pannikin slipping out of place."

"No danger of that happening," Lub told him; "I've tested it all, and you can depend on things holding."

By slow degrees all of them managed to get settled down. Even slow moving Lub was finally snug in his bunk, though he had to shuffle around for some time while settling himself into the most comfortable position. Ethan threatened all sorts of dire things unless he stopped moving about, because it happened that the sleeping place chosen by the fat camper was just above his.

"I c'n hear it creakin' like anything," announced Ethan; "and if you keep up that squirming business much longer, Lub, I tell you she'll come down on me. Think I'm hankering about being smashed flatter'n a pancake, do you? I don't see why you had to go and pick out one of the upper berths, just because you imagined it was a mite bigger'n any other. 'Tain't fair, I tell you. Go easy now, and quit that moving about. If you've got the itch say so, and we'll rub you down with something. Stop it, right now!"

Perhaps being scolded in this fashion had some effect upon Lub. At any rate he concluded that what couldn't be cured would have to be endured. So he did his level best to forget all about possible night visitors of all types, and tried to lose himself in sleep.

Phil had put out the lantern the last thing. He kept it close by his hand, with matches where he could produce a light in a hurry, in case one was required.

The fire had burned low. Now and then a little flame would spring up and make a faint buzzing sound. Once or twice when this occurred Phil saw Lub raise his head and look earnestly toward the chimney; but he must have finally decided that it was an innocent noise, for with its second repetition he failed to move.

"He's off," Phil told himself, with a slight sigh of satisfaction, for from the way Lub was acting he had begun to fear they were in for a bad night of it.

Lying there Phil rested his head on his arm and looked out into the cabin. When the dying flame occasionally leaped up and burned fitfully for a dozen seconds or so he liked to watch it, and also glance around him as well as he was able.

Phil fairly loved everything that had to do with outdoor life. The dank odor of the woods filled him with a sense of delight that he could never find words to describe. He believed it must have come down to him from some long line of ancestors, this love for Nature, and a desire to commune with her.

Fortune had been kind to him in giving him the means to enjoy such outings; and it added much to his satisfaction to have these fine fellows along with him. They were very dear to Phil. Not one of them would he have willingly missed if such a disaster could be avoided.

Then as he lay there waiting until the drowsiness overtook him again, he allowed his fugitive thoughts to once more wrestle with the mystery connected with the late occupants of that birch bark cabin. Who could they be, and whither had they flown at the approach of himself and three chums?

It was hardly any accident, for all the signs pointed to a flight that bordered on panic. Whoever they were they must have some good and sufficient reason for fearing the advent of strangers. That could only mean they dreaded the strong arm of the law; that there was *some* reason why they wished to keep from contact with all whom they did not know.

Well, Phil concluded, there was no use of bothering about them. They had taken a hurried departure, and that was the end of it. He had reason to believe that a child had been there, and possibly a woman as well. While they had not found such tell-tale evidence as a hair-pin, still the little silver thimble which he himself had discovered on a shelf just before retiring, and which he had not mentioned to the others, because he hated to get Lub wide-awake again, seemed to be pretty strong evidence that way.

When he found himself yawning again Phil decided it was time he closed his eyes, and allowed his senses to steal away. The fire had ceased flaring up, and was dying out rapidly, though the ashes would likely retain some of their heat until well on toward dawn.

The last Phil remembered was listening to the weird call of that persistent whip-poor-will, perched in some neighboring tree, and sending forth its shrill discordant cries.

Twice after that he awoke, and found all well. He could hear the steady breathing of his comrades near by; and Lub, lying flat on his back perhaps, was making a grating noise not unlike a snore.

The second time Phil struck a match, one of the silent kind, and took a look at his watch, curious to know how the night was wearing away. He found it was two o'clock, and that the guess he had made was not far amiss.

It took him some little time to get asleep again after that, but in the end he managed to accomplish it. Daylight would be coming by four o'clock and as the

novelty of the outing was still upon them, it was to be expected that the boys would want to be up with the birds—that is, all but Lub, who loved sleeping better than plunging into the lake for an early morning swim.

It was fated, however, that they were not to be allowed to slumber calmly on until the approach of the sun hurried the round moon out of sight below the western horizon.

A most unearthly racket sounding awoke every one. If an earthquake had occurred it could hardly have created a greater noise. And the big frying pan proved that the supreme confidence which Lub had placed in its ability to jangle had not been in the least overdone; for it certainly played a fandango as it pitched over on the hard floor of the cabin, and danced some sort of jig, with other things adding their little mite to swell the chorus.

Four fellows came tumbling out of their bunks as one.

"Phil, oh! Phil, strike a light!" cried one.

"Where's my gun?" growled X-Ray Tyson, thinking that in this way he must give fresh alarm to the bold intruder, whoever he might prove to be.

"Phil, the thief has come down the chimney, just as I feared!" called Lub, who in the darkness hardly knew which way to look.

As he managed to get his bearings to some degree he was sure he could detect a man on his hands and knees crawling over the floor. At the same time he heard a whining sound, as well as what seemed to be scratching; and it struck terror to the heart of poor Lub. He fancied that others were without, waiting for the first thief to open the door, in order that they too might rush in, and help make prisoners of the four Mountain Boys.

Just then Lub to his great relief saw a tiny flame spring up close by. This he knew must be a match in the hand of Phil Bradley, who was meaning to light his lantern.

To Lub it seemed an age before the flame was communicated to the wick, and yet it could only have been a comparatively few seconds, no longer than Phil would have taken under ordinary conditions. His hand did not tremble appreciably; and while in an undoubted hurry he went about his self appointed task with a deliberation that promised a successful result.

Then came the snap as the globe was pressed into place. The room was no longer in darkness. It was possible to see; and with his heart feeling as though it were

trying to climb up in his throat Lub fixed his eyes on the spot where he had discovered that moving, creeping object.

What he saw thrilled him through and through, so that for the life of him Lub could not move, or even utter a sound above a whisper. Nor were the other boys much better off, to tell the truth, for they all stood there as though rooted firmly to the spot.



CHAPTER VI

GETTING RID OF AN INTRUDER

"Whoo! it's a bear!" yelled Lub, who looked as though his eyes were trying to pop out of his head.

"Tell me, am I seeing things? Is this a wild dream, or am I gazing on a real, live, woolly bear?" cried X-Ray Tyson.

Just then, as though suspecting that the clustered boys had evil designs on him, the small black bear actually growled, and showed its white teeth.

"Here, keep back, you!" exclaimed Ethan; "we haven't lost any bear that we know about. Where'd you come from anyhow, and what d'ye want here?"

"Ethan—don't you see, he came down the chimney!" gasped Lub.

"Just what he must have done," added Phil, who was gripping the only firearm they owned, and wondering what effect a peppering of its tiny missiles would have on the tough hide of a black bear.

"I bet you he was nosing around up there, and smelled our grub," suggested X-Ray, a sudden gleam of light dawning upon him.

"And leaning too far over while he sniffed, he just *fell in*; that's what you mean, don't you?" demanded Lub.

"Looks that way," assented the other; "but what under the sun are we going to do about it, I'd like to know? He don't mean to crawl up again like he came down. See how he acts; I bet you he got scorched, because there's still some red coals in the fireplace, you notice."

The four boys were huddled in a bunch. It seemed like a case of "in union there is strength" with them just then. And the bear stood where he had been at the

time of first discovery. He had his snout thrust out, and was "sniffing" at a great rate. Perhaps it was the human odor that interested him, though Lub got an idea in his head it may have been the food that was so close by.

"Phil, do you think he'll attack us?" Lub asked.

"I hardly think so," replied the other, steadily, after closely examining the appearance of the intruder; "that is, if we keep from making him more furious than he is now."

"Guess he's some surprised to find himself shut in with four husky boys?" suggested Ethan.

"And say, he looks kind of small to me," observed X-Ray.

"I was just going to tell you that," Phil went on to say; "I believe it's only a two-thirds grown cub after all."

"But even at that he's a dangerous customer, with those sharp claws, and his ugly white teeth," protested Lub.

"That's right," added Ethan. "If we tackled him, chances are we'd be sorry for it, unless we had something to knock him on the head with. That makes me think of my bully little camp hatchet. Watch me sneak it right now!"

He started to move softly toward the spot where he had discovered the article in question. The bear began to growl more fiercely than ever.

"Careful, Ethan," cautioned Phil; "take it slow, and duck back just as soon as you've hitched on to the hatchet. Stop and wait till he cools down. Now, only one more step; then you can lean over and reach it."

All of them fairly held their breath, for it was a toss-up as to whether the suspicious bear would conclude to attack Ethan or not. The growls and sniffing continued, but the boy managed to get his fingers fastened upon the handle of his tool.

"Now, back up!" Phil told him.

Step by step Ethan pushed away from the dangerous locality. The bear did not attempt to follow, but resumed his former way of pushing out his snout, and sniffing. Something evidently smelled mighty good to him, Lub thought.

"This is all very well," ventured X-Ray Tyson, who had also managed to arm himself with a billet of wood, "but somebody tell me what the end's going to be. Do we have to camp outside in the cold, cold world; or will we invite Mr. Bear

to skip? That's what I want to know. Phil, how about it?"

By now Phil had realized that unless they did something to provoke the bear to extremes they did not need to fear an encounter with his sharp claws. A bright idea had struck him, which he hastened to bring to the notice of his chums.

"If ever we go to tell this story, lots of fellows will give us the merry laugh, you understand, boys," he remarked; "and if you're all willing, I'd like to settle it so we'd have the best of proof that a bear *did* come down our chimney in the night time."

"Phil, do you mean that you want to snap off a flashlight picture of the beast backed up against our fireplace?" demanded X-Ray Tyson, as quick as anything.

"That's what I meant," he was immediately told. "See, here's the whole apparatus ready for business. All I'd want you to do would be to turn down the lantern when I gave the word."

"I'll look after that part of it," agreed X-Ray, instantly.

"And I'll hold my hatchet, ready to whack him square between the eyes if he tries any football rush on us," Ethan remarked, grimly.

"What can I do to help?" demanded Lub, weakly, yet evidently not relishing the idea of being utterly ignored in all these valorous preparations.

"If you want to have a place in the lime light, Lub," ventured X-Ray, sarcastically, "s'pose then you just step up and engage the bear in a catch-as-catch-can wrestling match. It'll be a splendid chance to prove to every fellow at home how you had more nerve than any of the rest of us!"

Of course Lub knew this was all spoken in satire.

"You'll have to excuse me this time, X-Ray; I wouldn't want to run a chance of spoiling Phil's picture for anything. Guess I'll crawl up in my bunk again, so as not to take up so much space. I'm afraid that if Ethan gets to swinging that wood chopper around recklessly he might gouge me."

Meanwhile Phil had arranged his little apparatus as he wanted, aiming directly at the bear. He knew that it was focussed just right for a short distance, because all that had been fixed previously, it being his intention to have small animals snap off their own pictures at about the same focussing point, by pulling at a baited trigger that was attached to the flashlight cartridge by a cord.

"All ready, X-Ray?" he asked, presently.

"Yep—let her go, Phil!"

As he spoke the holder of the lantern turned down the flame. Immediately the interior of the cabin became almost pitch dark. The bear could be heard sniffing as before, and evidently regaining some of his courage, which must have received a rude jolt following that plunge down the chimney.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash. It was all over in a second, but the boys could hear the bear scrambling on the hearth. Perhaps the coals burned his feet again, and forced him to abandon any idea of trying to escape by the same means he had employed in reaching the interior of the shack.

"Light up again!" ordered Phil; "it's all over!"

So X-Ray again turned up the wick of the lantern. The bear was standing there, growling, and looking more belligerent than before. Evidently he did not altogether like this sort of treatment. That dazzling flash had blinded him. It may have made him think of the lightning that went with a storm; and there was now no friendly hollow tree into which he could creep; only those strange, two-legged creatures whom instinct told him were enemies of his race.

"Looks almost ready to tackle us, don't he, Phil?" chirped Lub, from the security of the second-story bunk.

Ethan was swinging that shining hatchet wickedly back and forth.

"He'd better not, if he knows what's good for him," he was saying, with determination written upon his set jaws and flashing eyes; "I'd just like to get one good belt at him square between those wicked little eyes of his. We'd have bear steak for breakfast, let me tell you."

"But remember that the law is on bears yet, and if we killed him we might run up against a game warden and be arrested!" Lub warned him; for Lub was always well posted on all matter that pertained to the law, as became the son and heir of a well-known judge.

"We don't want to fight except there's no other way," said Phil; who wished to restrain both Ethan and X-Ray; for he knew they were apt to be impulsive, and it would not take much to precipitate a battle royal with the four-legged visitor.

"But what's the answer, then?" demanded the latter chum, indignantly; "do we sit down and watch him gobble all our fine grub without lifting a hand to stop him? Say, I'd be ashamed to tell the story afterwards; and him only a half-grown bear in the bargain."

"He don't seem to like that smoke you made, Phil?" remarked Lub, who had an unusually fine place for observation, being elevated above the heads of his crouching chums. "Couldn't you keep that going, and just force him to climb up the chimney again?"

"My flashlight cartridges are too valuable to be wasted like that, Lub," he was informed by the other boy.

"Then isn't there some way he could be made to retreat?" asked X-Ray. "What if the whole four of us started to advance, shooing with our hands, and whooping things up, wouldn't he just understand that he *had* to climb, whether he got his toes scorched again or not?"

Phil shook his head.

"I've got another idea, and it's so simple I only wonder nobody thought of it before," he told them. "The rest of you stay here where you are."

"I object, if you're meaning to tackle the varmint alone and single-handed, Phil!" X-Ray burst out with.

"I'm not quite so simple as all that," Phil flashed back at him; "you can see I'm heading the other way."

"Oh! I know what he means," burst out Lub just then; "it's the door! Phil's going to take down that bar we pushed in place, and open up. Hurrah! that sounds good to me! Phil knows how to do the trick. You trust him every time, and you'll never get left."

Of course it was all simple enough now, and if Lub could see through it the other pair could also. To be sure, Phil meant to swing wide the door, and thus invite the departure of their unwelcome guest.

They saw him reach the front of the cabin. The bear was apparently suspicious of any sort of movement, and continued to growl threateningly. So long as he did not actually start to make an attack Ethan believed he could afford to remain idle, and hold his ground.

Phil appeared to be having some little trouble about getting the bar loose. The door did not shut closely, and it had taken the combined strength of two of them to fasten it securely.

"Give it a hunch, and then slip the bar up, quick, Phil!" called out Lub; for as he had helped close it he knew best how the thing could be done.

Phil made a third attempt, and this time succeeded, for they saw him open the door, and then back away, still gripping the stout bar in his hands, as though he considered it worth having in an emergency.

"There you are, Mister; now please get a move on you!" called Lub.

The animal must have already sniffed the outer air, to judge from his actions. He may have also suspected some sort of cunning trap, for he did not immediately start on a rush toward the gap in the wall.

"He guesses you're laying for him, Phil," Ethan remarked; "p'raps you'd better back up and join our squad here. There's another upper berth, if so be you think you'd like to join our brave chum Lub."

"Huh! think you're smart, don't you?" muttered the one referred to; but evidently the slur cut to the quick, for what did Lub do but bundle out of his bunk and actually take his place in line with the others, as though to show them that at least it was not *fear* that had caused him to climb up out of the way.

"I guess he's going to make the run for it!" exclaimed X-Ray Tyson. "Everybody start to waving their arms when he comes, and keep him going. Whoop! hurry up your stumps, old bear; this is a white man's cabin, and you're not wanted!"

All at once the beast concluded it would be wise for him to accept of the one lone chance for escape. That open door, and the sweet smell of the outside air appealed irresistibly to his nature.

"There he comes, boys!" snapped Ethan; and with that they all began to make extravagant gestures, at the same time using threatening language that must have appalled the poor bear, could he have understood its meaning.

Snapping and growling he scuttled past the line of excited boys, headed for the open door. He presented such a ferocious aspect that none of them cared to do the slightest thing to bar his forward progress; indeed, just the contrary seemed to be the case. Something must have influenced Lub, for that worthy actually stepped forward out of line; and as the beast shuffled hastily past he let drive with his right foot, just for all the world as though he were trying for a drop kick on the gridiron, with three thousand breathless spectators watching to see if he would make the goal.

Then the bear, thus urged on by every possible means, went hastily through the open door, and was seen no more. The cabin was once again in their undisputed possession.

"Three cheers!" shouted X-Ray Tyson, who after the manner of boys in general, was so completely filled with enthusiasm that he could only think of one way in which to get rid of the surplus "steam," which was by shouting.

The others joined in the noise, and if any one happened to be within a mile of that birch bark cabin just then, before the break of day, he must have been greatly mystified to understand what all the racket could be about.



CHAPTER VII

ON THE BORDER OF THE LAKE

"Did you all see me kick him out?" proudly demanded Lub, who evidently believed that by this action he had established his reputation for bravery beyond all dispute.

"Sure, we did," declared Ethan, "and he must have been some surprised bear when he felt your heft slam up against him. You'd better look out if ever you meet up with that chap again, Lub; they say bears have got wonderful memories, and he'll never forgive such an insult."

The door was fastened again, and the boys climbed into their blankets, for the night air coming in had given them something of a chill.

"No need of trying to go to sleep again," announced Phil; "because daylight'll be along in seven winks. Fact is, I thought it looked that way in the east when I shut the door, though the moon shining like it does fools you some. But it's after four, and dawn comes early these summer days."

Leaving the lantern burning, they lay there and talked matters over. All of them had been so worked up, what with that sudden awakening, and the row that followed, that they would have found it difficult to have resumed their interrupted sleep even though several more hours must elapse before morning.

Lub felt that he had been fully vindicated.

"You fellows thought it smart to laugh at me when I hinted we might have a thief come down the chimney, but see what happened!" he went on to say, desiring to rub it in a little.

"Well, of course none of us ever thought a yearling bear would drop on the roof

from a limb of a tree, and smelling our grub down the chimney lean so far over that he'd pitch headlong in," ventured Ethan, who had apparently figured it all out, and knew just about how the thing happened.

"If a bear can do it, any sort of animal, or even a bad man might follow suit," suggested X-Ray Tyson, wickedly.

Lub took up the dare instantly.

"Just what I was thinking," he hastened to say; "and you mark me that when morning comes I'm going to climb up on the roof and look around. Leave it to me to fix something across the vent of that old chimney, so even a 'coon couldn't squeeze through."

"Like as not you'll smother us with the smoke!" grumbled Ethan.

"Not much I will," he was promptly assured; "I know enough for that. If I had a piece of heavy wire-mesh like's on the windows of our stable at home, it'd be the ticket; but as it is I'll have to use something else. I mean to sleep nights without thinking that all sorts of ferocious wild beasts are aiming to drop in on us without invitations."

When they saw that the dawn had really come the boys began to move around. Phil led the way to the border of the lake near by and they took an early morning duck. The water was pretty chilly, but then growing lads can stand almost anything. No doubt some of them may even on a dare have braved a skim of new ice on a pond in the early spring.

After a bit, when they had finished their dressing, preparations for breakfast came next in order. Things began to look decidedly comfortable about that time. They forgot all unpleasant things, and the rattle of tongues would have made any one believe in the story of the Tower of Babel.

Every one had his plans laid out, and numerous pet schemes to work. Phil of course meant to roam around the neighborhood, and see what discoveries he could make in connection with the haunts of small animals, or places where they "used," to speak after the manner of a hunter or trapper.

If he could find such a favorite spot it was his plan to set his trap on the succeeding night, with the intention, not of harming the creature, but getting him to touch off the flashlight, and thus take his own picture.

Lub's enthusiasm seemed to have petered out, in that he manifested no immediate intention of climbing to the roof of the cabin. The truth of the matter

was, Lub always showed a disposition to put things off; procrastination was one of his greatest faults, even as too much haste had always been X-Ray Tyson's besetting sin. There was the whole day before him; so what need of undue speed. Taking things easy had become second nature with Lub. Besides, as a final argument, he had gorged himself with the fine breakfast, which of course he had helped to cook; and it would be too bad to risk indigestion while on this outing.

So Lub just lay around, and bothered some of the others by asking innumerable questions. Still, he was always willing to assist if called upon, and for that he was forgiven his lazy habits.

It was toward the middle of the morning when Phil came back again, after roaming around. His manner gave them to understand that he had met with some success.

"Find any place to make your lay-out to-night, Phil?" asked Lub.

"Yes, one splendid spot where a 'coon seems to travel down to the water's edge, to fish, or something or other," Phil replied. "You can see his tracks going and coming as plain as anything. I've marked a place where I can tie my camera, and fix the bait so he'll have to be in range when the flash comes. This afternoon I'm meaning to go further afoot, and see if I can run across bigger game."

"You certainly look as if you enjoyed this sort of thing," ventured Lub, a little enviously; for he often wished that he had it in him to love tramping, and all that pertained to woodland sports.

"Why, it seems to grow on you," admitted Phil, with considerable animation. "In the start I didn't care a great deal about it, and sometimes called myself silly to want to spend so much time trying to circumvent little animals, and get a flashlight picture of them. It's hard work, too, because they're not only shy but cunning as well. What little I've managed to do along that line has made me keen on the subject. And right now I believe I'd rather shoot a moose with a camera than with my Marlin rifle."

Ethan laughed a little, and shook his head.

"I confess that I don't understand it, Phil," he went on to say. "The real thrill must be lacking. You can only get it when you're bent on bagging your game. That's the thrill that comes down to us from our savage ancestors who had to live by hunting."

"I'm able to judge of that, Ethan, because I've tried both ways; and I give you my word I feel just as much pleasure when I'm trying to outwit a cunning fox as you

do when you trap one. I get his picture, and you have his pelt, that's all the difference."

"Well," replied Ethan with a grin, "when that same pelt brings you in more than a cool three hundred, it makes considerable difference in the end."

Lub began to make faces, and swallow very fast at hearing that, as though he had come near choking; but in fact it was to keep from chuckling, and thus arousing suspicion in the mind of the hoodwinked Ethan.

"I noticed you down on your hands and knees, Ethan, over where we thought we saw that moving figure of a man last night," Phil went on to say, changing the subject hastily, partly from the same reason that influenced Lub to cough and gasp; "did you find out anything?"

At that the other assumed a mysterious air.

"Well, first of all, we weren't mistaken, you want to know, boys," he remarked.

"Then it was a sure-enough man?" asked Lub, beginning to be deeply interested.

"That's what it was," Ethan assured him. "I found his trail as easy as turning over my hand. Even followed it some ways off, but lost the same among the rocks. When we saw him turn away he didn't come back again, but kept straight on."

"He must have been watching us through one of the windows?" suggested Lub.

"If he was, he made up his mind we were too many for him to tackle, and that he had better clear out for good," Ethan continued, as though he had been figuring it all out beforehand, and had his mind made up.

"Do you think he could have been the same party who was in our cabin before we came along, Phil?" asked Lub.

"It looks that way," the other told him. "If this man had just been a stranger, up here to try the fishing, or something like that, he would have knocked on the door, and tried to make our acquaintance. As it was, he watched us, and then cleared out."

"Let's hope he won't think to come back again," Lub pursued.

"Better hurry and get that strainer fixed on the top of our chimney, Lub," advised Ethan, a little maliciously; "first a bear, and the next thing to drop down on us might be a real man."

"Oh! leave that to me," the other assured him; "I haven't quite figured it out in my mind just how I'll fix it, but after lunch I'll get busy. And believe me, when

the Fenwick screen is applied, not even a 'possum or a squirrel can invade our cabin home. It'll be impervious to man or beast."

"Better get out a patent right away on the thing then, Lub," he was advised by the scoffing Ethan, "or some wise duck will be stealing the idea from you."

"Where's X-Ray?" asked Phil, suddenly noticing that the fourth member of the camping expedition was missing.

Ethan looked at Lub, inquiringly.

"You see I was so busy reading the signs of that trail I never once thought a thing about any one else. Lub, you must have seen where he went, didn't you?"

"Last I saw of him he was down on the lake shore," replied the other. "He had his fishing rod along, and I understood him to say he meant to look for some grasshoppers or crickets or something for bait, because he felt trout hungry."

"X-Ray has a weakness for fish, you know," Ethan declared. "He said he'd be the boss fisherman of the bunch while we were up here, and even dared me to take him up, the one to win who could show the greatest number, biggest variety, and the heaviest fish of all that were taken. I think I'll go him, if I can find time to bother."

"And I'll encourage you both to the limit," chuckled Lub; "because that means we're bound to have all the fine trout we can eat while we're here. May the best man win. I know how to cook 'em to beat the band, by rolling each trout in cracker crumbs, and then frying in hot grease from fat salt pork. Makes my mouth fairly water just to mention it."

"We won't forget that, Lub," Ethan told him; "and you can consider that you're hereby appointed the official fish frying man of the lot. For if there's anything I hate to cook it's fish. Eating's another story, and I always try to do my duty there."

"I thought I heard some one call out then," said Lub, looking around him.

"Must have been a crow cawing, or a gray squirrel barking," suggested Ethan.

They listened for a dozen seconds, but heard nothing.

"I reckon I was mistaken about it," admitted Lub, finally; "only I wondered if X-Ray could have tumbled into any sort of trouble. He's spry enough as a rule, and not built like me."

"No danger of him not letting off a whoop if he ran up against anything like a

rough deal," Ethan ventured.

"Still, no harm done if we stepped down to the edge of the water, and took a little look around," suggested Phil. "We've none of us paid any attention to the lake so far, only to take that early morning dip in the same. It seems to be about a quarter of a mile across to the further shore, and with lots of bays and nooks, as well as points of land jutting out like fingers. I'd think it was a splendid piece of water for trout; and I'm glad I own some land fronting on Lake Surprise."

As they turned in the direction of the edge of the water Lub's eyes were frequently cast upward toward the rude chimney that surmounted the back of the cabin wall. Evidently he was endeavoring to figure out just how he might accomplish the task he had taken upon his shoulders, and arrange things, so that while the smoke had free access to the open air, all manner of intruders would be kept out.

When Lub did undertake anything, no matter how simple, he was apt to throw his whole heart and soul into the accomplishment of the same. To him it meant that his reputation was at stake; unless he made good his chums would have the laugh on him for a long time to come.

Ethan happened to be in the lead as they advanced. That may have accounted for the fact that it was him who brought them to a sudden standstill by throwing up a warning hand, and exclaiming sharply:

"What's that I hear? Sounds mighty like the drip of a paddle to me!"

"And there's a line moving out from the shore!" added Phil, pointing; "there's *something* back of that point, and moving in the water. Perhaps it may only be an old mother duck with her little brood. No, there it goes again. Ethan, you're right about it; that's the dip of a paddle!"

"Whoever's got a canoe up here, they're heading this way, because you can see from the ripples," Ethan continued, eagerly; for versed in many of the secrets of woodcraft the boy was quick to notice which way the successive ripples were moving.

"Watch now, because he's going to push out from behind that tongue of wooded land!" said Phil, sharply.

All of them stood there as if rooted to the spot. Their eyes were glued on the point mentioned by Phil, and back of which must be the canoe that was sending all those ripples forth, away from the land.

"There it comes!" breathed Lub, who was holding his breath, and consequently getting, frightfully red in the face.

They could see the raised prow of what looked to be a genuine birch bark canoe poke in sight. In these modern days when even the Indians up in Maine manufacture up-to-date canvas canoes by the thousand, it is a rare event to run across one made of birch bark. The trees that are large enough for the purpose have about all been destroyed, so the Indians claim, which accounts for the revolution in canoes.

Further and further moved the boat. Now half of its length was seen, then two-thirds, and finally the stern had passed the end of the point. The three watchers could now see that it was being softly driven by a paddler who sat in the stern, and wielded a single blade.

All of them stared, and Lub, strange to say was the first to find utterance so as to voice his surprise.

"Why, Phil, Ethan, don't you see who it is?" he ejaculated; "who but our chum, X-Ray Tyson, sitting there as big as life, and heading straight toward us! Where under the sun d'ye reckon he found that canoe; and whose can it be?"



CHAPTER VIII

THE MOUNTAIN BOYS IN CAMP

"Whoopee! Hello, X-Ray, where'd you pick it up?"

When Ethan called this out the paddler waved at them, and laughed.

"Wait till I push her nose up on that fine sandy beach, and I'll tell you all about it, boys," he answered.

Two minutes later and the prow of the birch bark canoe glided softly up on the shore. Laying his paddle down in the boat X-Ray proceeded to pass along toward the bow, so that he could step out without getting his feet wet. Meanwhile Lub was looking the canoe over, noting that it seemed to be in very good condition, and not at all weather worn, as though it had been lying in the bushes for several winters and summers.

"I ran across her," the finder started in to explain, "while I was pushing along through the scrub, meaning to get to a certain point. I'd picked up some hoppers and crickets, and wanted to give the trout a try, to see if they were hungry. Whoever owned the boat had hid her away; and not so long ago, either, for there was a wet streak on her keel that no rain had made. She was lying bottom-up, of course."

"Have you been fishing in the canoe all this time?" asked Phil, sniffing the air, and then stepping forward to look for himself; upon which X-Ray bent over and lifted out a string of a dozen pretty fair-sized trout.

"How's that for a starter, eh, Ethan?" he demanded joyously. "Think you can beat that for a beginning? Right back of that point there's the boss bay; and say, you couldn't drop in a stone without hitting a trout, they're that thick. I stuck right in the same place all along; no need to move around."

"You got a fine mess, though I believe I could eat that many myself," ventured Lub, eyeing the string hungrily.

"Oh! we can get all we want," he was told; "it's only a question of finding the bait. They're just asking to be taken on. It's hit and come with them as soon as you drop your line in. The bait hardly sinks a foot before it's taken. I never saw anything like it in all my life. And fight, say, they bent my rod double lots of times. I lost more'n I saved."

"But about the canoe," Phil went on to say, "the chances are it must belong to whoever was in our cabin before we came."

"That stands to reason, seems to me," Ethan agreed.

"Well, he had the use of your shack, goodness knows how long, Phil," said Lub, with an imitation of his father's solemn manner when delivering an opinion from the bench; "and it's only fair you have the use of his boat. Tit for tat, you know. One balances the other. Besides, we are not supposed to know whose boat it is."

"There's something else I wanted to tell you about," remarked X-Ray.

He was thrusting a hand inside his coat as he spoke; and when it came out again the others saw that it held something like a buff colored envelope, torn open.

"Now, I found this same when I was nosing around," he explained. "It was caught tight away under this seat in the bow, and must have been blown there by the wind."

"Looks like one of those telegraph envelopes," remarked Lub.

"Which is exactly what it is," said X-Ray Tyson, as he offered the object in question to Phil. "There's an enclosure inside; read it, and see what you can make of the same. It got me balled up a whole lot, I'm telling you."

Phil quickly had the enclosure out. It was a printed form, and had a message written upon it.

"John Newton:

Winchester, N. Y. (hold until called for).

"Stay where you are. Search grows warmer daily. Too bad for both you can't compromise.

"RUTGERS."

Phil read it all out slowly, and Lub listened very seriously.

"First," Phil went on to say, "the man's name, or the one he goes by right now, is John Newton. It may be assumed, and I 'reckon the chances are all that way. He seems to be in hiding, just as we thought. This is a friend who's warning him not to think of leaving his nest yet awhile. The question is, what terrible thing has he done, and who's hunting for him?"

"If you asked me," ventured Lub, composedly, "I'd say it was all as plain as print. This man must be a counterfeit money-maker. The Secret Service people are looking for him everywhere, because, like as not he's big game. And you can see how this Rutgers, who is of course a chap of the same kind, is telling him how hot the hunt is getting to be."

"It does look a little that way," admitted Phil; "there's only one thing that bothers me."

"Go on and explain what you mean," urged Ethan.

"The last part of the message doesn't seem to go with that sort of an explanation," said Phil.

"As how? Read it again, and let us see, Phil," Lub requested.

"'Too bad for both you can't compromise.' Now, the Government never allows itself to enter into any bargain where a rascal can get off. He may turn State's evidence against his pals, and in that way get lighter punishment; but there can be no such a thing as compromising a felony against the United States Government!"

"Phil, you're right about that, and I know it!" declared Lub, ponderously.

"I'll keep this telegram, if you've no objection," Phil continued; "and try to hit on some other sort of explanation later on. If we only had the key, this mystery would all be simple enough, I'm thinking."

"Well, what matters most to us is that we've got the canoe, and can find lots of uses for the same while we're up here at Lake Surprise," commented X-Ray.

It was decided a little later on, after the trout had been prepared, that as the fish looked so inviting, they might as well start right in by having a feast at noon.

"Well, anyway, it'll get us fixed for better things later on," sighed Lub, as he contemplated the three that would fall to his portion, and noted how small a mess that was going to be.

However, he did prove that he knew how to cook them splendidly. When handed

around they were well browned, and as sweet as could be. Every one complimented Lub on his feat, and begged him to keep up the good work, which he readily agreed to do, never once appearing to realize that he was proving an "easy mark."

During the meal he was joked more or less about not having made a start with his screen on top of the chimney, and this must have spurred him on to showing his chums that he had conceived a clever scheme looking to that end.

First of all he managed to roll several logs against the lower part of the cabin. These upon being lifted in a pile formed a means for climbing up on to the roof. Without some such assistance Lub would have had no end of trouble in getting started on his self chosen job.

The others paid little or no attention to what he was doing, since they had various plans for passing the afternoon away. In fact, while Phil meant to take a wider detour of the neighborhood, to look for signs of game he could photograph, X-Ray had badgered Ethan into agreeing to accompany him out on the lake, to see which would catch the greater number of fish before evening came on.

They were now industriously searching for grubs, crickets, grasshoppers, or even angle worms, so as to tempt the fat trout to take hold.

It was while this was going on that a muffled cry came to their ears.

"Listen! wasn't that some one calling for help?" demanded Ethan, scrambling to his feet, with a can that had held Boston baked beans in his hand, into which he had been introducing crickets, and such things, it having only small holes punched in its sides, besides the larger one which he kept stopped with a handful of grass.

"There it goes again," said X-Ray, turning all around, as though so bewildered that he could not place the direction from which the call came.

"Look at Phil, will you, how he's putting for the cabin!" ejaculated Ethan.

"Do you think it can be a bear, or a panther, or anything like that; and is he meaning to shut himself in?" asked the other, his voice showing signs of trembling in spite of his well known bravery.

"Shucks! no, don't you see he's aiming to reach the back of the cabin, where Lub's heaped up that stuff? He's meaning to climb on the roof! It must be Lub's fallen part-way down the old chimney, and stuck there. Hurry and let's get along

to help pull him out!"

With that they started on a mad run. As the shack was close at hand they managed to arrive at almost the same time Phil clambered on the roof.

For such nimble fellows the task of mounting to the roof was not a difficult one. When they reached there they found that Phil was leaning over, and seemed to be giving directions.

"Is it Lub; and has he fallen down inside?" asked X-Ray, quickly, hardly knowing whether to burst out into a laugh, or look sorrowful.

"Yes, and it happens that he's stuck there in such a way he can't go down any further, and isn't able to climb up. You hold on to me, both of you, while I lean in and see if I can get hold of his hands."

"Tell us when to yo-heave-o, will you, Phil?"

"Something'll have to come; only I hope we don't pull his arms off!" chuckled Ethan, beginning to see the humor of the situation, now that it looked as though Lub was not hurt in any way, only "discommoded," as he afterwards called it.

So while Phil leaned over, and thrust himself part-way down into the gaping aperture, his two comrades, seizing hold of his lower extremities, prepared to pull with might and main.

"Now, get busy!" they heard a half-muffled voice say, and at that X-Ray and Ethan began to tug.

There was heard considerable groaning and puffing, but they were not to be denied. Slowly but surely Phil's body was coming upward, until finally the head of Lub appeared above the top of the slab-and-hard-mud chimney.

"I know it's a tough joke on me, boys," he said, humbly enough, after he had clambered on to the roof, and rubbed some of his scraped joints with more or less feeling; "but after all it was an accident."

"How was that, Lub?" asked X-Ray, examining a number of stout stakes which apparently had been cut to certain lengths, and were intended to be fastened crossways in the chimney, being pounded into position with the hatchet.

"Why, I had one of those prison bars in position, and unfortunately leaned too hard on the same," Lub explained.

"The pesky thing betrayed your confidence, did it?" demanded Ethan.

"Just about how it happened," the other continued, frankly. "I must have tried to

save myself, more through intuition than because I had time to think about it. Anyway I got doubled up somehow; and that's the reason I stuck in the flue. One thing I'm glad of, and that is you fellows were close by, and could hear me yelp. If you'd gone off I might have had to stay there all afternoon; and let me tell you it would have been no joke."

"Ready to give it up as a bad job, are you, Lub?" questioned X-Ray.

"What, me quit for a little thing like that?" burst out the other; "I should hope I was a better stayer than that, boys. It only makes me clinch my teeth, and resolve to conquer or die."

"Well, please don't die in our chimney flue," begged Ethan; "because you know we need it to keep our fire going, so we can cook three meals a day. I think you must have pounded that first bar down a little too far, that's all, Lub. Better luck next time!"

They left him industriously at work. Having found to his sorrow where his mistake was, Lub would be more careful in the near future. And when he finished his task no 'coon or squirrel would find it possible to have access to the cabin by means of the chimney, unless they first gnawed through the parallel bars.

Shortly afterwards, having succeeded in procuring a good supply of bait, the two ambitious fishermen pushed off in the bark canoe. Ethan held the paddle, for he was a master-hand at this sort of work, and could propel such a light running boat with the deftness of an Adirondack guide, hardly a ripple being stirred, with the paddle never once taken from the water.

Then Phil wandered off, after giving Lub directions for summoning them back should any necessity arise, which of course they had no reason to believe would be the case.

Engrossed in his work of hunting high and low for signs of his quarry Phil passed an hour or more. Then he returned to camp, and found Lub resting after his labors, having completed his task. From his manner it was easy to see that he felt quite well satisfied with what he had done.

Later on they heard loud calls, and saw the other boys coming in. X-Ray was wielding the spruce blade now; and in the bow Ethan held up two long strings of glistening and still squirming trout, as trophies to their united prowess with hook, rod and line.

"It's beginning to get pretty warm work between us," said X-Ray, as they stepped

ashore. "I got nineteen this afternoon while Ethan he reached twenty-six; so even with my twelve before that I'm only five ahead in the count. All trout, so variety isn't in the game yet. He hooked a sockdolager, but his line broke. Yet I'm willing to admit he's got one there that goes ahead of any I've taken. Get the scales and we'll measure up, Ethan."

Lub rubbed his hands together when he learned how much in earnest the rivals were becoming.

"I reckon now, Phil," he said aside to the other, "we're just going to feast on these here trout all the time we're stopping at your hotel. Encourage 'em to keep the game going. First we'll make out to think Ethan is bound to win; and then we can switch off on to X-Ray."

"You're getting to be a regular schemer, Lub," commented Phil, though he took occasion later on to follow out the advice given, and thus increase the seeds of rivalry between the fishermen.

They had a glorious mess of trout for supper, and even Lub owned up that it was utterly impossible for him to stow away another one, so that several had to be wasted. None of them had yet shown any signs of becoming tired of the deliciously browned trout, and Lub even declared that if they would get him up betimes in the morning he would fry another batch.

"The night favors my plan, because you see how it's clouded up," Phil was saying, as he prepared to go and set his trap.

"That is, you mean you need darkness, because your camera has to be set ready to take the picture," Lub remarked.

"Well," said Phil, "that's the way photographers do when taking an interior, but I've got an arrangement attached to my camera that works different. When the animal pulls the string that is connected with the flash light apparatus he does something more. He exposes the plate for just a quarter of a minute."

"A time exposure, you mean," remarked Ethan. "If you've no objections, Phil, I think I'd like to go along, and see how you set the thing."

Phil looked pleased.

"Only too glad to have you, Ethan," he told the other.

Ethan had been the one who only lately had scorned the idea that any hunter could find so much delight in "shooting" game with a camera as in other days he had done with a gun.

Phil began to feel encouraged. He knew only too well, from his own personal experience, that once the seed had taken root it was bound to sprout and grow rapidly.

Ethan's genuine love of all out-doors, together with a nature that could not be called cruel, would make it fallow ground that the seed had fallen upon. Results were sure to follow.

So Phil led the way to the place where he had discovered that one or more of a colony of 'coons had actually made a trail leading to the lake, going and coming so many times.

He had half jokingly declared that they went down when fish hungry to look for an unwary trout. Whether this could really be so or not Phil of course was in no position to prove.

"But they do eat fish," Ethan remarked, as they walked along together; "I've seen a big buck 'coon snatch one out of the water. Some people say they bob the end of their striped tail on the surface as they sit on a log, and in that way lure a fish close in. As I never saw such a thing you'll have to take the story with a grain of salt."

He was really very much interested in the way Phil set his trap, and asked a lot of questions, all of which the other obligingly answered.

And after everything had been arranged the two chums who had such a mutual love for the Great Outdoors walked back to the Birch Bark Lodge in company.



CHAPTER IX

THE 'COON PHOTOGRAPHER

"Lightning! Why, we're going to have a storm!" exclaimed X-Ray Tyson.

They were all beginning to feel somewhat tired, and Lub must have had as many as six or seven little "cat-naps." The fire was burning cheerily and the interior of the cabin pretty close, despite the fact that the door had been left wide open.

"Well, let her rain," muttered Lub. "We haven't anything to get wet, outside of our canoe, and it won't hurt that."

Phil had arisen to his feet. There was a peculiar smile on his face, Ethan saw. He looked satisfied about something.

"I hope you fellows can spare me the lantern for a little while," he said.

"Well, that's queer!" observed Lub, in bewilderment.

"What's doing, Phil?" demanded X-Ray Tyson.

"I think I'll go out and get my camera," the other returned.

Then Ethan chuckled.

"I thought that was what it must have been, Phil," he observed, dryly.

"Oh! I see," Lub went on to say; "afraid of the rain, of course. Well, I suppose it would ruin the thing to get it wet."

"Too bad you've had all that work for nothing, Phil," yawning as he said this X-Ray tried to look sympathetic; but was really too sleepy to be anything but ridiculous.

"Oh! I don't know about that," Phil told him, as he picked up the lantern; "I've

got a hunch that the thing's been played to the end of the string."

Ethan chuckled some more. Both Lub and X-Ray opened their eyes and began to realize that there was something more to this thing than they had grasped.

"Whatever can you mean by that?" asked Lub; while the fourth boy, quicker to catch things, cried out:

"Oh! then that wasn't a flash of lightning after all, Phil?"

"After a kind, it was," Phil went on to say. "In fact, I believe my trap has been sprung. Mr. 'Coon was early on the trail to-night. I'd better go and see. If the thing's happened, no need of leaving the camera out all night, and take chances of a shower. Coming along with me, Ethan?"

"Sure thing!" declared the other, who had only been waiting for an invitation, as Phil very well knew from the eager look in his eyes.

They soon arrived on the spot.

"It's all right," observed Phil, immediately.

"Trap's sprung, you mean?" asked his comrade.

"Yes, you can see where the bait has been carried away from the place where I fixed it," he was told, as Phil pointed out where the cord ran.

"I guess the flash gave the poor old 'coon the scare of his life," Ethan went on to say, considerably amused.

It was an object with Phil to encourage this interest on the part of his chum. Accordingly, after gathering up the camera and flashlight apparatus he had Ethan closely examine the marks that were plainly seen about the place where the bait had attracted the attention of the little animal.

As has been said before, Ethan was a practical woodsman, and knew a great deal about all things connected with outdoor life. Trailing had long been one of his particular hobbies; hence, he was able to tell just what must have happened there.

"Here's where the 'coon came along, just as he'd likely done on many another night when he felt fish hungry. And about here, Phil, he began to get a whiff of that green corn you fetched with you to use as bait."

"How do you make that out?" asked the other, partly for information, and also with the idea of keeping up Ethan's interest, which he could easily see was growing right along.

"Why, the marks have a different look," Ethan explained. "He stopped right here to sniff, and then went forward on the run, all caution thrown to the winds."

"That took him up to the bait?" suggested Phil.

"Yes, and you bet he didn't waste a single second laying hold of the same," Ethan ventured, positively, just as though he might be watching the entire performance with his own eyes, instead of figuring it out.

"Like as not it's been a long time since this particular 'coon had a chance at an ear of juicy green corn," observed Phil. "Perhaps he never even saw one before, but his instinct told him what a good thing was when he ran across it."

"As he began to pull at the cob, meaning to carry it off to his den, there came that dazzling white flash," Ethan continued.

"It petrified the 'coon for the instant," explained Phil, "that happens in nearly every case. If you look close you'll find that the animal always has a startled expression. I rather think any of us would if a flash like that blinded us just when we'd started to pick up the biggest watermelon in the patch."

"It frightened Mr. 'Coon away, of course," said Ethan.

"But he may sneak back here again before morning," laughed Phil. "You can see where his teeth cut into the green corn, and the memory of that one taste will make him ready to take chances again."

He dropped the half ear of corn on the ground as he spoke.

"You mean that the poor old chap isn't going to be cheated out of his fine treat, eh, Phil?"

"He deserves something," was the reply, "because I reckon he's given me a cracking good picture. I want him to know I appreciate his pull at my latch string."

This closed the incident, but on the way back Ethan continued to ask numerous questions. These the other always answered to the best of his ability, for it was his desire to interest Ethan more and more.

And Phil felt satisfied when, just before they arrived at the cabin Ethan gave expression to an admission:

"Well, I'm ready to own up, Phil, that if for any reason I couldn't have a gun, or use one because the law was on all game, I *might* take some stock in hunting by flashlight, and with a camera."

"And the knowledge you have, Ethan, of wild animals' ways would make you a master hand at the game, if ever you bothered taking it up."

"Think so?" remarked the other, naturally pleased at this sort of appreciation on Phil's part.

"I'm sure of it," he was told.

Nothing more was said at the time. Phil felt positive, however, that he could count on Ethan's coöperation so long as they remained at Birch Bark Lodge.

It was not long before they all sought their bunks.

The night passed without any alarm. Lub had assured his comrades they need have no fear of any unwelcome guest dropping down the chimney again. He had insured against such an event happening; and apparently felt the utmost confidence in his own invention, for he seemed to drop asleep almost as soon as he settled down in his blanket.

Again in the morning they enjoyed their plunge in the lake, although Lub had to be strongly urged before he consented to join them.

When he mentioned trout he was gently but firmly told that it was folly to whip a willing horse.

"Don't let's have fish every meal," urged X-Ray Tyson, "or we'll all be sprouting gills and dorsal fins and scales. Once a day after this ought to satisfy the trout hunger. Now it seems to me that's a bully good fire for camp flapjacks."

"Just what it is," agreed Ethan with enthusiasm.

"That suits me all right," Phil agreed, "and we all know the kind you can make, Lub. If you want any help, call on me."

"Oh! it's only a pleasure to me, so long as I know my efforts are appreciated," said Lub, just as they all knew he would.

The flapjacks must have been good, for not a piece of one was left after the four boys had finished breakfast. And they even had the audacity to bait Lub on top of it.

"Don't care how soon you repeat that mess, Lub," observed Phil.

"Never tasted their equal," confessed Ethan.

"And as for me," said the wicked X-Ray, "I'll sure dream of the treat to-night, see if I don't."

Whereupon, of course, Lub set about figuring out just how the little sack of self-raising flour would hold out, if he made flapjacks every single morning of their stay in camp.

Lub was a lovable camp mate, and so easily imposed upon. But then his chums were just as ready to do things for him in turn.

Later on in the morning, seeing that the rival fishermen had started out again to depopulate the lake, and Lub was busy cleaning up around the cabin, Phil took a notion to wander off.

He meant to cover quite some little territory this time, his object being to see if he could catch a glimpse of a deer. Of course he carried his camera along, because it was always possible that some good chance might arise where he could use it to advantage.

Phil believed in being ready. He was a hunter, and knew how exasperating it was to run across tempting game when one's gun had been left at home.

Half an hour later he found himself wandering through a section of woods that looked very promising. He fancied he caught a sound, and it was of such a peculiar nature that Phil stopped still to listen.

Yes, it was not the "whiff" of a startled deer or moose, but struck the astonished boy more like the wailing cry of a distressed child.



CHAPTER X

FINDING A SUNBEAM

At first Phil found it hard to believe he heard aright.

"I've known cats to make sounds like a baby crying, when they were facing each other, and ready to scrap," he told himself.

The more he listened the stronger grew his conviction.

"Even if it turns out to be a pair of spitting young bobcats," he concluded, "I'd like to snap 'em off. As to a child, what would one be doing away up here in this wilderness, unless—by George, now, that might be it."

He had suddenly remembered how they found the little cap, yes, and a baby silver thimble in the cabin.

It was no trouble at all to locate the source of the sounds. The sobs continued as he advanced. In a few minutes Phil was gazing with considerable surprise upon a figure outstretched on the ground.

He could see it was a little girl, possibly four years old. She had golden curls, and when she looked up suddenly at hearing his footsteps Phil discovered that she was as pretty as a fairy.

Just then she looked a little forlorn, since her face was soiled from the dirt, and tears had made furrows down her cheeks.

She scrambled to her feet, and seemed hardly to know whether to try and run away, or put her childish trust in this strange boy.

Now Phil was always a favorite with younger children. They all loved him because he had such a pleasant face, engaging laugh, and seemed to know just how to appeal to a child's heart.

Few boys care to bother with little tots; they only appear as a nuisance in their eyes. Phil, however, was different.

"Hello! here, little girl, what's all the trouble about?" he asked, cheerily; and somehow there must have been magic in his voice, for the look of fear left the child's face immediately.

She recognized a friend in need. As a rule children, just the same as most dogs do, have an instinct that tells them who to trust.

"I'se losted!" she said, simply, with a little sob in her voice.

Phil had now reached her side. She did not shrink from him as he bent down and put his hand gently on her curly head. Something that she saw in his kind eyes, perhaps the vein of sympathy so pronounced in his tones, told her this strange boy could be safely trusted.

"Now, that's too bad," Phil went on to say, just as if he himself had been "losted" and hence knew how it felt. "But who are you lost from?"

"Daddy," she said, simply, as though taking it for granted that every one must know who was implied by that term; because to her mind there was only one "daddy" on earth.

Phil believed he saw it all now. The man who had occupied the cabin, had this child with him. For some unknown reason he had taken alarm, perhaps because of their coming to the lonely lake, and made a hurried change of base.

Why he had prowled around on that first night it was of course impossible for the boy to say, unless he simply meant to satisfy himself with regard to their intentions.

And now the little girl had managed to lose herself in the woods. No doubt the father would be searching everywhere for her.

Phil thought it all over, even while he was soothing the child and telling her he would see to it that she found "daddy" again.

He could not leave her there in the open pine woods, that was sure, and since there could be no immediate way of learning the present abode of the mysterious man, the only thing left for Phil to do was to take the little girl to camp with him.

In due time no doubt the father was sure to turn up there to claim the child. They would try to convince him that it was none of their business what made him hide away from his fellows as he was doing.

So Phil made up his mind.

He had by this time managed to distract the child's thoughts from her troubles. Indeed, this was no difficult task for Phil Bradley. Already she had laughed at something he had said. When Phil heard what a sweet laugh that was he immediately told himself:

"I warrant that there's a man chasing wild through the woods right now, trying to find this little sunbeam. I know I'd be, if I missed a merry laugh like that at my fireside."

"My name is Phil," he told her, "and won't you tell me yours?"

"Why, it's Mazie," she quickly answered.

"Mazie what?" he continued.

"No, just only Mazie," the little girl told him positively.

Phil was baffled, for he had hoped to learn "daddy's" name. He did not attempt anything further along that line.

"Now, Mazie," he went on to say, "you'll come with me, won't you? You must be hungry, and want some lunch. We'll find daddy pretty soon, you know, and you wouldn't want to stay out here in the woods all by yourself?"

She looked alarmed at the mere suggestion of such a thing. It pleased the boy to notice how eagerly she seized his outstretched hand, to which she clung confidently.

"Oh! no, 'cause I'm afraid. I saw a bear, a big bear once. Daddy shoed it away from our house. And oh! it whiffed and whiffed just awful. Please take me with you—Phil."

"Just what I'll do, Mazie. You see I have three friends, all boys who will be glad to see you. And when daddy comes he can take you back home."

"Home!"

The child repeated the word after him. There was a bewildered look on her face. Phil judged from this that some memory was awakening.

"Home—daddy—muzzer!" he heard her say almost in a whisper.

"Oh! you didn't tell me that your mother was up here, too; is she with daddy, Mazie?" Phil asked her, as they walked slowly along.

She looked up. The wistful glow in her eyes gave the boy a strange feeling.

"Oh! no. Muzzer gone far away. She never come to her little girl now," he heard her say; and somehow the thought that she meant her mother was dead kept Phil from questioning her any further.

The little thing had evidently already recovered from her recent grief. She trusted in Phil, and believed that it would only be a matter of a short time before he would bring "daddy."

In her eyes Phil was a magician. Nothing could be beyond his power to accomplish. That is what the faith of a child means.

She prattled all the way along, and yet it was pretty much about the woods, the flowers she liked to pick, the noisy scolding squirrels, and how daddy had always watched over her so carefully since they came up here, ever and ever so long ago.

Not once did she refer to any former life. It seemed to be in the nature of a closed book with the child.

Phil was waiting to see how she acted when they came in sight of the cabin, for he felt sure she must recognize it. She pointed to several things, even telling him that the tree with the dead top was where "bushy-tail" lived and had a family, so daddy said, and daddy knew everything.

All at once the child gave a cry. She had discovered the cabin.

"Oh! I live here!" she burst out, and disengaging her hand from that of her champion she flew to the open door and burst in, shrilly crying:

"Daddy! Daddy!"

Imagine the astonishment of Lub. He happened to be sitting tailor fashion on the floor sewing a button on that he had burst off, Ethan told him when he gorged so much the evening before.

Hearing a flutter, and then that cry in a childish voice, Lub turned to see what he thought at first must be a specter.

The little girl was abashed to find only a stranger there. Her sudden hopes being so suddenly dissolved brought the tears again into her eyes.

But Phil quickly managed to brighten her up. And Lub was ready to do almost anything to please the little miss, even to trying to stand on his head had she demanded it.

Then along came the other fellows. Of course both of them were as much

astonished as Lub had been, but at the same time showed that they were not sorry to have such a little sunbeam around.

Among themselves, of course, they talked it all over, and knew that Mazie must be the child who had been the sole companion of the lonely occupant of the cabin.

"Too bad if it turns out he's a scoundrel, and a law breaker, with such a bully little girl belonging to him."

X-Ray Tyson said this, looking as he spoke at the suspiciously new coin he had picked out of a crack in the floor, and which he fully believed had been molded right there in that isolated cabin.

"Don't count too much on that," remarked Phil; "you can tell that she loves daddy above everything on earth. He can't be so very wicked, I guess."

As the day wore on all of them took turns in amusing the little girl. She proudly showed them a number of things that she had been in the habit of playing with when she "lived here."

Not once did she speak of a former life. Everything seemed to be associated with "daddy." And as the other boys had been told by Phil what he thought in connection with her mother being dead, of course they were careful not to mention the word, for fear it might cause her sudden grief.

During the afternoon her merry laugh was heard frequently. Childish troubles soon fade away. And surely a little girl could not wish for a better lot of "big brothers" than these four boys seemed to be. They anticipated her every wish, and after a while Mazie even seemed to look upon them in the light of old and tried friends.

Phil had arranged it that while their little guest honored them with her company she was to have his bunk. He could make himself fairly comfortable on the floor, somehow. A bunch of hemlock browse would do for a mattress, and if the fire was kept up a blanket was hardly necessary.

Phil felt a little fearful that at night she might miss a familiar figure, and cry herself to sleep wanting "daddy." He was agreeably disappointed, however. Mazie ate supper with her protectors, and cuddled down in the arms of Lub, to whom she had taken a great fancy. Perhaps it was because he had so much to do with the getting of meals, although it was hardly a fair thing to say that, because Lub was kindness itself.

There she was finally discovered fast asleep. Lub insisted on them leaving her with her head on his shoulder for a long time.

Finally, Ethan and Phil having come back, after setting the flashlight arrangement in a new place, they managed to carry the sleeping child to the bunk provided, without arousing her.

The night passed quietly.

Phil would not have been surprised had a heavy summons on the door brought them all to their feet, and upon opening up to find an almost distracted man anxiously inquiring as to whether they had seen anything of a lost child.

Nothing of the kind occurred.

Wherever "daddy" could be searching for the missing one as yet he failed to turn his attention to the cabin where until recently he had lived in retirement, a hermit, as X-Ray Tyson called him.

Another dawn came.

Breakfast was prepared in almost abject silence. The little girl was still sleeping. All of the boys had tiptoed up and taken a peep at her lying there, as though hardly able to believe it could be so.

Phil had washed her face and hands the first thing, and with her rosy cheeks and lips, with the masses of golden, natural curls she certainly looked, as Lub expressed it, "pretty enough to eat."

So breakfast was prepared almost in silence. When any of them found occasion to speak it was laughable to see how they got their heads together and whispered.

Just before Lub had breakfast ready to serve, Mazie called out to Phil, and was soon ready to sit down at the table with two of her newfound friends, there not being room for all.

X-Ray, thinking to pick up some information, called the child's attention to the scorched places on the heavy board, apparently done with molten metal.

"See what daddy did!" he went on to say; and immediately the others, guessing his game, waited to see the result.

The little girl looked from X-Ray down to the scarred surface of the table. She shook her head vigorously in the negative, and looked indignant.

"Daddy didn't!" she exclaimed, with a vigor that settled that question.

"These marks were here when you came, were they, Mazie?" asked Phil.

This time she nodded her little curly head in the affirmative.

No more was said. X-Ray took out his new fifty cent piece and looked hard at it—but if he half intended asking the child whether she had ever seen any like it he changed his mind. Perhaps he did not fancy looking into those clear blue eyes, and coaxing the child to unconsciously betray her "daddy."

After breakfast the boys started to do various things. Ethan and X-Ray Tyson were more than ever bent upon fishing. They counted exactly even now, and the excitement was running high.

"But after this," said Ethan, who had the soul of a true sportsman, "we mean to put back all the ordinary trout that are uninjured. We're no fish hogs, you must know. We'll carry the little scales, and the foot rule along, so as to measure what we take."

"That's a sensible arrangement," Phil told them; "but then it's only what I would have expected of you, Ethan."

They were still gathering bait close by the cabin when there broke out a terrible din.

"It must be Lub!" exclaimed Ethan.

"Yes, I saw him wandering off in that direction a bit ago," added X-Ray.

"What can have happened to him?" exclaimed Phil, his mind running to panthers, ferocious bobcats, hungry bears, and even an excited father, wild with searching for his lost child.

"There he comes now!" cried Ethan.

"How funny he acts," X-Ray went on to say.

Indeed, Lub was carrying on as though he had gone suddenly crazy, leaping up into the air, threshing with his arms, and prancing madly to and fro. All the while they could hear him letting out hoarse yells.



CHAPTER XI

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE PINE WOODS

"Help! Chase 'em off, somebody! Help a fellow, won't you? Ouch! they're murdering me by inches. Oh! my stars, what can I do?"

"It's hornets!" shrieked X-Ray, always as quick as a flash.

"Mebbe a swarm of yellow jackets!" suggested Ethan. "I can see something whirling around over his head. Gee! what if he runs here and gives us a dose? The cabin for mine."

"Hold on," called out Phil, taking in the situation, and then raising his voice he shouted to the terrified Lub: "Throw off your hat as you run. There, that'll attract some. Now your coat. Never mind a sting or two, but do as I say."

Lub, accustomed in matters of this kind to letting some one else do his thinking for him, hastened to obey.

Immediately afterward he was heard calling piteously:

"There's some after me yet, Phil, and oh! how they do hit you! I'm beginning to swell up right now. How'll I get away from the swarm, Phil? You tell me what to do, and quick!"

"Run for the lake and jump in!" called out Phil. "Duck under, and keep there as long as you can stand it."

Without thinking twice, and only too willing to blindly obey, Lub galloped straight to the shore of the lake. He happened to strike a little bank, where the water was quite deep.

"Here I go!" they heard him shout, and then came a tremendous splash.

"Oh! my!" gasped X-Ray, "that settles our fishing for this morning! He'll scare every trout in the lake with his threshing around!"

Ethan was bubbling over with laughter, and even Phil had hard work to keep from giving a shout when upon reaching the shore they saw what was going on.

Lub stood in water up to his chin. He kept bobbing his head in an anxious effort to locate any determined insect that still hovered near by. Occasionally he would duck entirely out of sight, and move along a dozen feet, as though in hopes of eluding the enemy in this way.

Taking pity on the poor fellow Phil assured him the coast was clear, and that he was safe in coming out.

Such a woe begone figure he presented.

It seemed like a shame to laugh, but the boys could not have helped it had their lives depended on keeping sober faces.

Besides looking like a drowned rat, poor Lub found that his face was already swelling up. His jaws looked as they may have done when he had the mumps. One eye threatened to be lost altogether, on account of the puffiness all around it. His nose had received due attention, and even his hands had failed to come through the scorching fire unscathed.

Despite all this Lub tried to grin, although the effort was, as X-Ray said pretty much of a "ghastly failure."

"I know I'm a sight to behold, fellows," whimpered Lub. "I guess I deserve all I got, too, for being such a fool. But how was I to know that old hornets' nest almost lying on the ground under the bush was *loaded!*"

"What did you take it for?" asked Phil.

"Why," replied Lub, "I supposed it was a regular giant puff-ball, one of the toad-stool kind that go off with a crack and a puff of smoke when you kick 'em."

"Then you actually kicked it?" cried Phil.

"Just what I did—oh! murder!" gasped Lub, feeling of his enlarged head in dismay.

"And it went off, all right, I bet you?" asserted Ethan, uproariously.

"A million of 'em came hustling out and started to eating me up," Lub went on to explain, plaintively. "I killed 'em in droves, but there was always a fresh lot. Then I ran—you saw how I had to carry on. Guess it wasn't any laughing matter

to *me*! And it isn't right now. If I keep on swelling like I am I'll bust. Talk to me about having the big head—bein' President of the United States wouldn't make my cranium swell any more. Phil, ain't you going to do something for a chum that's had trouble?"

"Sure, I am," announced Phil, readily. "Ethan, find some mud, and let it be clay if you can. Hurry and get it here. While you're doing it I'll take the sting out with ammonia. It's lucky I thought to fetch some along."

Lub only too willingly put himself wholly in the hands of his friends. The ammonia smarted at first, but by degrees the pain began to disappear, as the poison was neutralized by the remedy.

"I have to be careful not to let a drop of it get in your eyes, because it would smart terribly," Phil told the patient.

"Yes, I know even now how a dog feels when you squirt some of this stuff in his eyes with those little ammonia pistols," Lub remarked.

The process was continued until Ethan arrived with the clay.

This was fastened on the best way possible by the use of Lub's big red bandanna handkerchief.

Phil had insisted on taking a snap shot of the victim of the hornets before he had his face bound up. He also got another view after this operation had been completed.

"I'm doing this partly for your own good, Lub," he explained. "Perhaps it'll make you feel bad to see how pride always swells before a fall. But then it's going to be a valuable lesson to you."

"And you'll never kick again before you're dead certain what kind of a puff-ball it is, because some happen to be inhabited," X-Ray told him.

As Lub would very likely not be fit for anything during the rest of that day, Phil took charge, while the rival fishermen were out in the canoe.

All the while he enjoyed having the little girl around. She seemed like a real ray of sunshine.

"Whatever will we do without her, Phil, if her father blows in here any time and carries her off?"

Lub said this in a muffled tone, for he was tied up good and fast, but he meant every word of it.

"Perhaps we might get him to let her stay with us," said Phil, showing that he, too, had been thinking along those lines; "if one of you fellows agreed to give up your bunk to 'daddy' and sleep on the floor with me."

"I'd do that, and more, for the sake of keeping her here," declared Lub.

The fishermen reported at noon.

X-Ray seemed in high spirits, and Ethan correspondingly depressed. It was easy to see which way luck had gone that morning.

"Well, there's another day coming," said Phil, hopefully.

"Yes, and I mean to start in and show him a few wrinkles from now on," Ethan declared; at which the other laughed scoffingly as he remarked:

"Oh! so you've just been playing off all this time, have you? Seemed to me you put in your best licks right along. I'll have to think up a few dodges myself, if that's the game."

"Everything square and above board, boys," warned Phil.

"As fair as can be, Phil. Neither of us would want to play a mean trick," said Ethan, and his rival echoed his words.

After lunch Phil told them it was their turn to look after the camp while he took a stroll.

"Be careful about letting Mazie stray off," was what he told them the last thing, ere starting away, camera in hand.

He had managed to develop his two flashlight pictures, and so far as he could tell from the films they appeared to be clean-cut good ones. Ethan after inspecting the negatives had expressed the opinion that they looked "fine."

From various indications Phil began to believe he had the other interested in the work, and that it would not be long before Ethan might be counted as one of those who call it fascinating.

Phil was thinking of all this as he walked along. Numerous other things came into his mind also. He even wondered whether some accident might not cause him to come upon Mazie's father, and what "daddy" would prove to be.

Somehow the boy had come to believe the man could not be bad, or he would never have held the affection of that dear little heart; and he knew from many signs that Mazie certainly fairly worshiped her father.

Altogether the trip up to Lake Surprise was turning out delightfully all around.

There might be a few things associated with it that would not always be a happy memory with some of his chums. For instance, there was the episode of the hornets' nest which poor Lub had kicked on the impulse of the moment, thinking it only a harmless "puff-ball." He would shiver every time some buzzing sound reminded him of his wild flight; but even then Lub had learned a lesson he could never forget.

Phil kept his camera ready for instantaneous use. He knew that if by any great good luck he "jumped" a deer that had been lying down, and sleeping in the heat of the day, it would require considerable presence of mind and a quick action in order to snapshot the animal at close quarters.

Being somewhat of an experienced hunter, Phil had been careful when starting out to head into the wind. This was done so that a deer would not discover his presence through any sense of smell, until he was close up.

Once given a fair chance, and he believed he was capable of handling the situation.

As luck would have it his course took him through the very same neck of the woods where on the previous day he had found Mazie, only now he had gone half a mile and more beyond that spot.

All at once as Phil carefully pushed through a screen of bushes he heard a scrambling sound. Some animal jumped to its feet, and Phil, as he took note of the dun color, the immense size, the mule-like ears, the square muzzle and the two-thirds grown horns knew that he was face to face with the king of the Adirondack woods—a bull moose!



CHAPTER XII

WHEN TWO PLAYED THE GAME

The moose looked at Phil, and Phil stared at the moose. Both of them seemed to be equally surprised at the unexpected meeting.

Apparently Phil was the first to recover, for the sharp little "click" of his camera shutter acting, after he had quickly drawn a head on the bulky animal, told that he was true to his instinct as a Nature photographer.

It may be that even that little snapping sound angered the moose; or possibly he was just in a mood for trouble. The rutting season was well over by this time of year, and his horns had grown fairly stout, so that they could be trusted to do good service in battle.

Phil never knew. In fact he had no opportunity to make inquiries, or conduct any sort of an investigation. All he became aware of suddenly was that the bull moose had lowered his head, and started toward him at a full gallop.

Now Phil may at times have been called a bold sort of a boy, but he also had a pretty well defined streak of caution in his make-up. Those towering horns had an ugly look to him. He could easily imagine how inconvenient it would seem to feel them brought into personal contact with some part of his body, with all that muscular power of the big animal butting them on.

There was only one thing left for Phil to do, and that was to make himself scarce around that neighborhood as quickly as possible.

Although the boy had never in all his life witnessed such a thing as a genuine bull fight, he understood that the first thing to be done was to dodge. The moose was so close to him that he knew he had very little chance of outstripping those long legs in fair flight.

With this partly formed plan in his head Phil ducked to the left, and started to run. He could have no real motive in choosing this side, because there was no time to take even a quick observation, and form a plan of action.

As it turned out luck favored him in making this hasty choice on the spur of the moment. Had he turned to the right he would have been compelled to cover such an extensive strip of open ground that his fleet-footed enemy must have easily overtaken him. That would have forced Phil to make another side movement, or else be caught up in those branching horns.

He knew what this latter must mean, and that once he found himself knocked down and rendered helpless, he would be rolled along, prodded wickedly, and even jumped upon in the endeavor to disable him.

On the left, though, there were trees close to him that offered some sort of refuge. Phil, hearing the moose putting after him at full speed, hastened to swing his body around the first of the trunks he came to. It would offer a barrier against the attacks of the animal until he could get his wits about him, and figure out some plan.

A minute later and the moose was chasing him around the tree in a merry way. All the games Phil had ever played with his schoolmates in days gone by were not a circumstance to the one he found himself engaged in with that determined animal. The more he was disappointed at reaching his supposed enemy the greater became the fury of the moose. He stamped, and whistled, and butted his head against the tree; after which he would start on another fast trot around it, the performance consisting of perhaps a dozen or a score of circles.

Phil had the inner ring, and could of course move much faster around than the enemy. Still, it was not long before he became heartily tired of that continual and useless work. It began to make him dizzy, too. He found himself wondering whether the moose meant to keep going in these spirals until he had exhausted the boy; and how long it was possible to keep this sort of thing up before he fell over.

It was in vain that he shouted in the face of the animal; the sound of a human voice did not seem to have any effect, unless it was to make the beast show fresh animation, as though spurred on to renewed vigor.

"However am I to get the better of the old fool?" Phil asked himself between his puffs; for this happened after he had been chased another dozen times around the well-worn path.

There was a breathing spell, as the moose halted for a brief time. Phil did not cherish any hope or expectation that the beast meant to retire, and leave him to himself. In fact he began to believe the big animal was having the time of his life, and enjoying it immensely.

"Which is more than I can say I'm doing," Phil grumbled; "this ring-around-the-rosy business is played out, and I've just got to find some way to stop it."

Taking advantage of the breathing spell he cast a hurried look back of him. Of course he did not dream that such a thing as help could come; on the contrary his only expectation was that he might find some way by means of which he could extricate himself from his dilemma.

"Bully! if I can only make that clump of small trees I ought to manage it!" was what Phil exclaimed.

There was no time for more just then. Mr. Bull Moose was ready for another frolic, having freshened up. So again they chased madly around that tree, the hoofs of the animal tearing up the ground until it looked as though he had made a regular race-track there.

When finally the new inning came to a close Phil was fairly panting for breath, and more dizzy than ever.

"A few more turns like that would do me up!" he gasped; and then gritted his teeth with a determination to make the break he had figured on.

Fortunately the moose always seemed to come to a stand at about the same spot. This brought the little clump of trees exactly behind Phil, which fact would give him a chance to get fairly started before the moose became aware of his intention.

Taking in a long breath the boy suddenly darted away.

He instantly heard the moose rushing after him. The distance was short, and so Phil managed to swing around his new shelter, with those ugly horns not more than five feet behind him.

Well, that was all the margin he needed for safety. The new barrier would cause him to cover much more ground with every revolution; but then it was not his purpose to keep this up any longer than was absolutely necessary.

A great wave of relief swept over the boy when he managed to slip in between two of the small trees, and found that he was well protected on all sides from the enraged animal's horns.

In vain did the moose attempt to insert his head between the trees. Phil kicked at him, and continued his shouts. By now he was beginning to feel that the advantage was swinging over to his side. He had done nothing to incur this hostility on the part of the animal, and was surely entitled to the privilege of defending himself as best he could, even to the extent of inflicting injury on his four-footed enemy.

Perhaps at some time in the past a monster tree had been cut down on this spot, and these second-growth saplings had sprung up in a circle that was wide enough to afford a nimble boy shelter. The towering horns of the moose, more than anything else, rendered it difficult for him to reach Phil.

This second stage of the affair was a decided improvement on the first, Phil assured himself. At the same time he was not satisfied. He failed to see the fun of being kept a prisoner, cooped up in that limited space for perhaps hours. It was no fault of his that the moose chanced to be in an ugly humor; and just then, if Phil Bradley had had any sort of firearm along he would have felt justified in dispatching that furious animal. Game laws are good things, but even they must be broken when one's life is placed in jeopardy.

Besides his pocket knife Phil had nothing on his person that could be called a weapon. For once he had even left his hunting knife at the cabin, and bitterly he repented of his unusual thoughtlessness. It would never happen again he told himself, when he realized how helpless he was.

When the moose again started trying to get at him Phil conceived a new hope. It was in the shape of an inspiration, and he watched eagerly in the expectation that such a thing might come to pass.

What if the moose did find a way to crowd his head between two of the trees, by slanting it sideways; what if in his stupidity he was unable to extricate it again, and could only tug frantically backwards becoming excited and helpless?

That would be turning the tables in great shape. Phil had seen cows confined in stall yokes somewhat after that fashion. He also knew how green turtles are captured in large mesh nets down along the Florida coast streams like Indian River; for the stupid creature, having passed its flippers through the net, and being unable to continue the forward movement on account of the bulging shell, simply keeps trying to urge itself on, and never dreaming that it could back out by reversing its flippers.

There was one particular place where Phil thought the chances seemed fairly good that the horns of the moose might pass through, provided he turned his

head the proper way.

In order to try out his scheme he did all in his power to coax the animal to begin operations in that section. For a while it seemed as though the moose persistently avoided the larger opening. Everywhere else he struggled the best he knew how to reach the prisoner of the saplings, even pawing viciously at him with his hoofs.

"I must make a big bluff of meaning to slip out through that hole," Phil told himself; "and when he gets around there perhaps he'll fall into the trap."

This he immediately started to carry out. It worked like a charm, too, for he had barely time to dodge back into his asylum when his captor came up against the tree next the wider opening with a bang.

After that Phil easily led him into making a fresh effort to insert his horned head through that opening. Eagerly the boy watched every move on the part of the determined animal. Twice it looked as though success was about to crown the effort of the moose.

"Keep going!" Phil told him, encouragingly, as he tapped the animal's nose with the toe of his shoe, just to keep his temper up, so he might not get weary of his task; "one good turn deserves another. The third time takes the cake. Just manage to get your old horns through first, and then you can push that big head after, as easy as pie. That's the way. Whoop! he's really done it!"

Of course the moose could not understand the explicit directions which Phil was only too willingly handing him; but by some chance he did manage to get his obstructive horns through, and then follow with his head; though his shoulders would prevent him from going only so far. Phil thought he had been neatly trapped, and his next move was of course to slip out of the circle by another exit.

"Wonder now if I dare skip out, and leave him there?"

Phil asked himself this as he saw that the moose had already taken the alarm over his condition, and was acting wildly, twisting his head in every direction, and straining to drag it out.

"What if his horns gave way, or broke off? Oh! that time he came within an ace of getting free! He may be smarter than a turtle, and remember how he pushed in. I'd be in a bad box if he did get free, and chased after me again lickety-split!"

Phil believed it was his best policy to stay there, and watch a while longer, just to see what the animal would do. If some time passed, and the moose did not seem

able to extricate himself from his sad dilemma, then Phil believed he could take his hurried departure; though he meant to snap off a picture of the animal first.

"Might as well do that same now, while I have the chance," he went on to say; and stepping well back to where he could get a fine view of the imprisoned moose, he again made use of his camera to advantage.

Hardly had he done so than he saw the animal twisting his head again in a way that threatened to bring about the catastrophe which Phil dreaded. In fact the boy had only time to once more hurriedly gain the shelter of the clump of trees when he saw the moose withdraw his head from its yoke.

"Well, it looks like you might be a smart one," muttered Phil, as he found himself once more fast in the trap, with the enraged animal striking at him with his hoofs, and making all sorts of queer noises that might be taken for threats.

When this had gone on for nearly half an hour, and there was no sign of a cessation, Phil started to exercise his wits again. First he began an investigation of his pockets to see if there might not be some means for bringing this ridiculous and uncomfortable situation to an end.

"What's this?" he exclaimed, as he drew forth a small package and stared at it, as if unable on the spur of the moment to understand what it was or how it came to be there; then it flashed upon him, and he gave a wild shout of joy.

"Why, would you believe it, this must be the little paper of black pepper I had in my pack. Lub was asking for some this morning, while cooking breakfast; and when he handed it back to me I must have dropped it in my pocket without thinking what I was doing, meaning to put it on the shelf when I stood up. Hurrah! if ever a pinch of pepper was worth its weight in gold that time is now. It seems mighty cruel to do such a thing, but what else is left to me?"

Of course it was an easy thing to get close enough to the moose to scatter some of the pepper over his head. It did seem a cruel thing to do, and Phil would never tell the story without a feeling of shame; but he considered that his life was at stake, and hence he was justified in going to such extreme measures.

The actions of the bull moose immediately told that the siege was going to be called off without delay. He shook his head, snorted furiously, and then turning galloped away. Phil saw him collide with a tree before he passed from view, and the sight caused him to utter an exclamation of pity.

"But he'll pull through it in time," the boy was saying, as he came out of his place of refuge; "by to-morrow it'll be pretty nearly over. I wonder if he's learned

a lesson, and will give two-legged strangers a wide berth after this. Well, it was all his own fault. He had no need to get into such a tearing rage because I took his picture. But let me tell you I'm as tired as if I'd been running a ten mile race. Every muscle in my body aches from the sudden jumps I had to give."

Phil felt that on the whole he had come out of the scrape with honors. And whenever he looked at that picture of the moose with his head fast among the saplings, it would be apt to remind him forcibly of the adventure.

"No more tramping for me to-day," he continued, shaking his head; "I've had good and plenty of it. The rest can wait for another time. Even if I didn't snap off another view all the time I was up here I'd feel it paid me to come; but I've got a few more cards up my sleeve to play. That flashlight business is going to pan out just great, I can see. Now to head for home. I can imagine how the boys' eyes will stare when I tell them what I've been up against, and prove it with that picture."



CHAPTER XIII

HOW "DADDY" CAME BACK

In order to see more of the country Phil took a notion to change his course while heading for the home camp. This turned out to be another of those little things that occasionally happen by accident, but which afterwards seem to have been inspired.

He had not been walking along more than ten or twelve minutes before he came to a sudden pause.

"What under the sun could that have been," he asked himself, listening intently; "sounded as near like a regular groan as anything could be."

Ridiculous as it might seem, Phil even thought of the suffering moose, and wondered whether the distressed animal could have taken shelter in that thick copse, to moan with pain. Then again he heard the strange sound.

"It must be some one's lying there, and in pain!" Phil observed, though the idea gave him a thrill of apprehension.

He stepped closer, and when for the third time the same type of noise welled out of the bushes he made bold to call:

"Who's there? Do you need any help?"

There was a rustling sound. Then the bushes parted, and he saw a man's face peering at him. Phil could not remember ever having seen that face before, and yet it struck him that he ought to be able to give a good guess who the other was going to turn out to be. He had Mazie in his mind just then; her "daddy" was the only man known to be around that neighborhood.

The other beckoned to him, and as Phil approached he went on to say, in a voice

that was half muffled, both with pain and anxiety:

"Oh! I'm glad that you've come, boy. My leg is broken, and I've got to the point where I can't seem to drag myself another yard. I'm hungry too, and crazy for a drink of water. But I was just making up my mind I might as well give up, and be done with it; because if she's dead there's no use of my living!"

That settled one thing in Phil's mind. The man was Mazie's father. Already the boy could see that he did not have the look of a villain. Pain and want had made deep lines on his face, but somehow Phil believed the other was all right.

He could easily imagine what the father must have suffered both in body and mind, with his little daughter lost in that big wilderness, and a broken leg preventing him from searching for her, as he would have wanted to.

Evidently he must be relieved in his mind as speedily as possible.

"Do you mean Mazie?" Phil asked.

The man stared hard at him. Then, as hope struggled into his almost broken heart he burst out with:

"Why do you ask me that? How do you know her name? Oh! boy, boy, tell me she is safe—that you or some of your friends have found my darling child!"

At that Phil nodded quickly in the affirmative, and the man fell backwards as though about to faint from sheer joy. But it was not so, for he struggled up once more to his former sitting posture, as Phil bent over him.

"Safe, Mazie safe after all! Oh! it seems that I must be dreaming, it is too good to be true! Tell me in plain words, I beg of you, boy!"

"She is at the cabin with us, and perfectly well," Phil went on to say, plainly. "I found her crying in the woods. Are you her 'daddy'?"

"Yes, and I have been trying to crawl all the way to the cabin, dragging this wretched leg after me," the man told him; "it seemed as if it would kill me with the pain, but as long as I was able I kept it up, for something seemed to tell me my only hope was there. I meant to beg you to scour the woods, and call her name everywhere. Oh! it is a wonder my hair hasn't turned white with what I have suffered, mostly in mind, for I could stand the rest without whimpering. Mazie is safe! Oh! I see now what a fearful wrong I have done. I vow to repair it as soon as I can travel."

"Will you let me take a look at your leg?" asked the boy.

"Only too gladly, if you think you can do me any good," he was instantly told. "My one longing now is to get to where the child is. To have her in my arms I would endure any torture there could be."

"I happen to know a little about such things, and perhaps could do you some good," Phil went on to tell him. "Then there happens to be a little spring back a short distance for I had a drink there, and the water's icy cold. I'll fetch you some before I hurry to the cabin to get help."

"You are kind, boy; what shall I call you?" asked the man; and evidently from his looks, speech, and manners he was a gentleman, Phil realized.

"My name is Phil Bradley," he said, as he bent down to see what he could do for the injured limb; "there are four of us up here for a little outing. I happen to own a patch of ground bordering on Lake Surprise, and that birch bark lodge is on it."

The man muttered something to himself, and Phil thought he caught the one word "fool." Perhaps he was taking himself to task for acting so on impulse when first discovering the coming of the strangers, whom he must have believed were persons whom he had reason to distrust.

All that could be left until later for discussion among himself and his three chums; Phil felt that his present business was to succor the wounded man.

He found that there was a compound fracture of the bones of the lower limb, not far from the ankle. The man must have caught his foot somehow, and pitched forward heavily.

"Once we get you to the cabin, sir, and I'm sure I can set the bones, and ease your pain greatly," he told the other, presently.

"That satisfies me," the man remarked, closing his lips as though he felt that he could stand anything, now that Mazie was safe. "Please make all the haste you possibly can. Minutes will seem like hours to me until I feel her dear little arms around my neck."

"First I must get you a drink," Phil told him; and without waiting to see or hear anything more he darted off, all his own weariness utterly forgotten in this one desire to render first aid to the wounded.

He had no trouble doubling on his own trail, and thus finding the spring. Since there was no other means for carrying water Phil dipped his hat in, and was soon back alongside the injured man, who drank greedily of the cold fluid, and seemed greatly refreshed in consequence.

"Now I'll run in the direction of the cabin," Phil observed, after he had in this fashion relieved the pressing needs of the other.

"Are you sure you can find me again?" asked the man, anxiously. "If you are in doubt call out, and I'll try to answer. I heard shouts a little while back, but my throat was too dry for me to make a sound above a groan."

"You heard me having a little circus with an angry bull moose that had me backed up behind a tree," Phil told him; "but never fear about my being able to come straight here. I'm woodsman enough for that, and take my bearings as I go. Look for us to come inside of an hour, sir."

With that he was off on a run. Just as he had said with such assurance, he had his bearings, and knew just which way to go in order to reach home. Before twenty minutes had elapsed Phil burst upon those comrades who were clustered in front of the cabin, watching the little girl do some cunning dance steps which she could hardly have learned up there in that wilderness.

Judging from his excited condition that Phil had met with an adventure of some sort, the boys began to ask numerous questions.

"Never mind what it's all about, fellows," he told them. "I want Ethan and X-Ray to come with me right away. Lub, you look after the cabin, and Mazie. Ethan, fetch your camp hatchet; and we will need some ends of rope. Hurry, both of you! I'll explain after we're on the run!"

The blank expression on poor Lub's face told better than words what he thought of being left out in the cold that way. Still, he was so accustomed to doing what he was told that such a thing as rebellion never once entered his head. Besides, he must have realized that some one had to stay with the child. And when it came to sprinting, as Phil seemed to think was going to be necessary, Lub was not built for quick action or long continued running.

Phil had hardly time to draw a dozen long breaths before the other boys announced that they were ready to accompany him.

Wonder was written in big letters all over their faces. The little Phil had said must certainly have aroused their curiosity until it reached fever heat.

"Now, for goodness' sake open up, and tell what all this is about, please, Phil!" begged X-Ray Tyson, as they ran along in company.

It was no time to even mention anything concerning the stirring adventure with that stubborn and combative moose bull. Later on he could relate the story, and

perhaps show them the pictures he had taken, to prove his marvelous tale.

"Man up in the woods here a ways, with a broken leg!" he started to say.

"Whee! is that so?" exclaimed Ethan.

"Mazie's 'daddy' for a cookey!" cried X-Ray, always the first to alight on a solution to a puzzling question.

"Yes, that's who he is," Phil went on, jerking out his words somewhat, because he was using up his wind in running. "He broke it while hunting for the child; and has been nigh crazy ever since. Struck him he might get help from us. Started to actually drag himself all the way there. Petered out in the end. Bad shape, too, but think I can pull him through all right!"

"You want us to help get him home; is that it, Phil?" demanded Ethan.

"Yes, we've just got to do it. Poor fellow needs lots of attention. He'd likely die if left much longer. I think gangrene would set in, and finish him. Glad I fetched along my little medicine case, with bandages and such things. Thought one of us might get into trouble, and need it. Handy thing to have around in the woods."

"It sure is," agreed X-Ray Tyson; "but how can we carry a man all the way to the cabin, Phil? If he's that bad hurt it's going to be a hard job."

"Huh! see this hatchet?" demanded Ethan, flourishing the article in question before the eyes of the other. "Well, with that sharp edge it won't be a hard thing to tinker up some kind of stretcher. That's what Phil had in mind when he told you to fetch some rope ends along."

"Just what I did," Phil assured them; "but hold on now, and save your breath for running; you'll need it all. We'll get there in ten minutes more, I think."

About that time had elapsed when Phil sighted the spot where he had left the wounded man. He knew it from the land marks he had impressed on his mind. And both going and coming the boy had maintained a constant watch, so as to make sure that he continued in the direct line he had laid out.

"There he is!" he suddenly exclaimed, as he saw a hand feebly waving from the covert of bushes.

"Oh! I'm glad you've gotten back again!" the wounded man told Phil. "It has seemed ages since you left; but I watched the sun, and knew that the hour had not passed that you said it might take. These are your friends, are they?"

"Yes, Ethan Allan and Raymond Tyson. We mean to get busy, and make some

sort of a litter that will do to carry you on. Let's see, you begin and cut some poles, Ethan."

As the boy with the camp hatchet knew just what sort to select, he was soon busily engaged in chopping down small saplings. As these were trimmed of branches, and cut in proper lengths the other boys began to splice them together.

After all it was not a hard task. Although possibly none of them had ever built such a thing as a stretcher, they knew in a general way how it must be done in order to accommodate a wounded man. There were four handles by means of which it could be gripped and carried. These two main braces of course were extra strong, and made of hickory. Then the others were shorter and not so thick, so that the body of the stretcher might bend somewhat.

When the thing was completed the boys found some hemlock browse, with which they made as soft a bed as possible.

"Now, if you can stand for it to let us lift you, we'll soon be on our way," Phil went on to say to the injured man.

"I can stand anything but continued suspense," the other declared, bravely.

They could see that he had to shut his teeth tightly together in order to keep back his groans while they were lifting him as gently as they could. But despite his white face the man tried to smile at Phil when he saw the look of pity on the boy's face.

"Don't mind me—I'm all right—you're doing famously—I'll never, never forget it, either!" he said, between breaths.

Phil took one end, that nearer the patient's feet, while the other boys managed the second pair of handles between them. The stretcher had been made purposely narrow at the foot, so that one bearer could handle it.

"If you get tired, sing out, Phil, and we'll change all around," X-Ray remarked.

It was not hard work after all. The man happened to be of medium weight, and not unusually tall, so with only two short resting spells they carried their burden all the way to the shore of the lake.

How eagerly he leaned over one side of the stretcher, and strove to catch a first glimpse of his child, over whose fate he had been almost losing his mind while lying there, wounded so grievously in the pine woods.

Lub heard them coming. He stared almost stupidly at first, hardly understanding

what it was they were carrying. Perhaps Lub even thought it might be that pugnacious half-grown bear cub, which had attacked Phil in the forest and suffered in consequence.

He quickly understood differently, however. There was a flutter near him, a swift patter of childish feet flying over the ground, a gasping cry, and then little Mazie was clasped in the eager arms of the man on the litter. Regardless of the pain his exertions were causing him the father pressed his darling to his heart, while a look of supreme joy came upon his white face.

Then Phil had to bend over and unwind the arms of Mazie from the neck of "daddy," for he suddenly discovered that what with his emotions and the agony of his broken limb the man had fainted dead away.



CHAPTER XIV

THE PUZZLE OF IT ALL

"What d'ye make out of it all, Phil?"

When Ethan asked this question two days had elapsed since they brought the wounded man to the cabin. Much had happened during this time. In the first place Phil had proven himself a splendid amateur surgeon, for he had set the broken bones, and attended to securing splices so that they would be kept in proper position while the mending process continued.

Of course this was somewhat old-fashioned, because a doctor would have set the limb in a plaster cast; but Phil's way promised to answer for all practical purposes.

The man had improved remarkably. He was even cheerful, though at times Phil had seen him shake his head, and could hear him sigh. This was always while he was watching Mazie; and it did not require much to tell the boy that whatever was upon the man's troubled conscience concerned his child.

"It's pretty hard to say, Ethan," he told the other; "I can't make up my mind that's he's any sort of a scamp. His actions tell us that, you know."

"And it's hard for me to believe that any man who loves a child as he does that one of his, can be a bad man," Ethan declared, emphatically.

"Yet you saw how he turned red in the face when I handed him the telegram, and explained how we found it caught under the bow seat of his birch-bark canoe," continued Phil, looking troubled.

"What was it he mumbled at the time; I didn't quite get it?" Ethan asked.

"He admitted," the other explained, "that the message had come to him. He also

said that was not his real name, but one assumed for a purpose, of which he was now heartily ashamed."

"That sounds queer, don't you think, Phil?"

"Why, no, I can't say that I do," Ethan was told. "Any of us might do something on the spur of the moment that we found reason to feel sorry for afterwards. Only the other day I bitterly repented of insulting that noble old bull moose by daring to snap my camera at him point-blank, didn't I? He made it pretty warm for me, I tell you."

"But this mysterious man must have done something dreadful, to have him say he was so repentant!" persisted Ethan.

"You're only jumping at conclusions," he was told, bluntly. "I heard him say at the time he was lying there in the pine woods and suffering, that he realized he had done somebody a great wrong, and that if he lived he meant to right it. Now, according to my notion, that was a fine thing for him to say."

"Mebbe so," remarked Ethan. "I've heard my father say that the best men are those who've been through the fire, done some wrong, and repented, so that they think they must spend the rest of their lives making good. And between us I kind of fancy Mazie's daddy. He seems to be a pretty nice man."

"Mazie evidently thinks there isn't another like him in the whole world," Phil told him; "look at her now as she sits there holding his hand. Why, Ethan, believe me, I can see what looks mighty like a tear running down his cheek. Yes, there, he wiped it away, and shook his head. That man's made up his mind to some big sacrifice, you mark my words."

"Then it must be in connection with Mazie," added Ethan, quickly; "because the sun rises and sets with her, in his opinion."

"I wonder now," began Phil, with lines on his forehead, as though a sudden idea had flashed into his mind that he hardly knew how to handle.

"What are you thinking about?" inquired Ethan, who knew the signs.

"But then there's no doubt he's her father, so that could hardly be," Phil went on to say, as though crushing the suspicion that had arisen.

"Well, what about it, Phil?"

"Oh! I just happened to wonder if he could have stolen the child from some one, and had now made up his mind that it was wicked, and she must be returned. But

then, how could a father be tempted to steal his own child? I reckon that must have been a silly notion. Let's forget it."

"Like as not we'll never know," Ethan observed, a little provoked, it seemed, on account of not being able to solve the mystery that surrounded Mazie and her "daddy;" for Ethan above all things hated to give a puzzle up as beyond his power.

"Wait and see," the other advised him. "As it is now, he feels under some obligations to the lot of us, and may think we deserve to hear his story before we get him down to civilization again."

"Some obligation?" repeated Ethan. "Well, it's my honest opinion he owes you his life! If you hadn't found him when you did, he'd be dead right now. And then about that job of setting the bones in his leg, you did yourself proud there. It'd be a queer thing, and ungrateful in the bargain, if he said good-by, and never once opened up to explain things."

"It isn't going to bother me a bit," Phil told him.

"Now, is that a hint that I'm foolish to keep it on my mind?" asked Ethan.

"If the shoe fits, put it on," his chum told him. "But one thing sure, he'll never be able to walk on that leg by the time we expect to start home."

"Which I take it means we'll either have to carry him all the way down to the village on that stretcher, if it takes two days; or else one of us go after a team."

"Without any road up here," Phil explained, "it would be a hard job to get horses to the lake. And then the going would be so tough he'd suffer terribly. So as near as I can see it looks as if we'd have to work that stretcher again."

"Huh! I like that!" grunted Ethan, though he must have meant it in sarcasm, for his tone showed anything but enthusiasm. "We all congratulated ourselves on the way up here on the fact that we'd have it easy going out of the woods, because all that canned stuff and other grub would be devoured. And now by jinks! if we don't have to lug a *man* out. Whee!"

"But there's no other way, Ethan; and you'd be the last fellow to vote to leave him behind, if I know you," ventured Phil.

"Sure, I would, and don't you mind how I grumble every little while, Phil. My grandfather on my mother's side was a whaler, and I guess now I must have inherited his sailor way of growling. I try to cure myself of the habit, but she will break out once in a while. It's harmless, you know; it comes from the mouth but

not from the heart."

Phil laughed softly.

"I haven't chummed with you as long as this not to know you like a book, old fellow," he said, affectionately, as he laid a hand on the other's shoulder. "We've had some pretty good times, together with X-Ray Tyson and jolly old Lub; and we hope to enjoy a lot more. Wait till we get down there on Currituck Sound this fall, when the ducks are arriving in flocks. You know I've got the finest little shooting-box located there you ever heard tell of. And, say, perhaps we won't have the grandest time going."

"I hope nothing will keep us from going along with you, that's all," said Ethan, drawing a long breath; for gunning was his one particular hobby, and the prospect of a week or two on those famous ducking-grounds appealed irresistibly to his hunter's heart.

"This has been the hottest day we've struck since we came up here," said X-Ray Tyson just then, as he came sauntering up, wiping his forehead with his big red bandanna.

"Yes, and unless I'm a poor weather prophet," added Phil, taking a look aloft as he spoke, "we're just about due for a whacker of a storm. No leaving my camera out-of-doors this night, I tell you."

"We'll all be glad of a decent roof over our heads, if she comes on to blow and rain great guns," Ethan remarked.

"How about the pictures you were printing a while ago, Phil; turn out well?" asked the last comer.

"See for yourself," he was told, as Phil drew a little book out of his pocket, among the leaves of which he had a number of fresh prints.

"Well, that one of the moose poking his head between the little trees is a jim-dandy, let me tell you!" declared X-Ray Tyson. "Every wrinkle of his hide shows as plain as it could. And say, here's one showing Ethan and me carrying the litter, with Mazie's daddy on the same. I didn't know you snapped that off."

"You've had great luck so far in all your pictures, haven't you, Phil?" Ethan went on to say.

"No complaints from me," he was told; "and I do feel I've been in great luck, as you say. I've got on the track of a fox, and pretty soon I hope to have his smart phiz along with the rest."

"It'll be a prize collection yet, take that from me," X-Ray announced.

"The funny part of it," continued Ethan, "is the fact that while you'll have all these pictures, most of the originals you've never seen. That comes of fixing it so they press the button, and do the flashlight act themselves."

"Saves a heap of trouble," commented X-Ray, sensibly.

"Of course the main thing is," Phil went on to say, "that you couldn't get that class of Animated Nature picture in any other way. I'd hate to stick it out all night, waiting for Mr. 'Possum or Br'er Rabbit to breeze along, so I could flash him. Besides, the most wary of all, Br'er Fox, wouldn't come within a hundred feet of a human scent. They've got too keen noses for that. And yet I expect to show a fox picture soon."

"I wish I had one of that dandy black fox I trapped last winter, and the pelt of which brought me over a cool three hundred," remarked Ethan; and X-Ray was heard to take a quick breath as though given a little shock; at the same time winking aside toward Phil, who frowned, and shook his head threateningly.

They did not share that enthusiasm with the proud trapper, over that particular foxskin; simply because they knew it was a very poor specimen of its kind, and by rights not worth one-tenth the amount of the check which Ethan had received from the dealer in the distant city—Phil's uncle, though Ethan never dreamed of such a dreadful thing.

"Well, it strikes me you're a pretty clever weather man after all, Phil, because I certainly heard far-away thunder right then," and X-Ray as he said this pointed up at the heavens, which were heavily overcast with dark clouds.

"Let's get busy then, and see that everything is snug," Phil suggested.

"First of all we must get Mazie and her daddy housed," Ethan remarked. "By using the pair of rough crutches I made him, and with some help, he manages to get about after a fashion, though he'd be better keeping still some days yet. But he's such an active man it's hard to tie him down."

"He told me," Phil informed them, "he had that boat carried away up here on the back of a guide; and that another man brought his grub, blankets and outfit. You know we went and got all the duffle from the place he'd hidden it when he left here, a regular cave in the rocks; and everything looks like the party who bought the same had money to burn."

"Yes, he admitted that much to me," said Phil. "He also said those marks were on

the table when they came. One of the guides told him a story about some men who were up two years ago, and arrested by government agents. He thinks they may have been bogus money-makers. When I showed him the fifty-cent piece X-Ray found he tried it every which way, and said it was probably counterfeit, though as clever an imitation as he had ever seen. But there's another grumble of thunder, boys, so let's get to work."

With the four of them hustling, things were speedily arranged. After the lame man and Mazie had been assisted under cover, the boys started to lay in plenty of fire-wood to last them a couple of days. There could be no telling how long the storm might linger—perhaps there would be only an hour of furious bombardment; and then again it was likely to rain heavily for days. Adirondack storms have a pretty bad name, as all will agree who have ever experienced their vigor and fury.

X-Ray even climbed up on the roof, and proceeded to patch one corner that he imagined needed repairs.

"I'm not like the backwoodsman who never seemed to get his leaky roof mended," X-Ray announced, from his elevated position; "and when they came to ask him the reason he says, says he: 'When it rains I can't mend it; and when the weather's dry, what's the use?' The time to do it is when you hear the thunder warning you there's something great coming."

"It's getting closer all the while," commented Phil, as a louder burst came to their ears.

"And listen, what's that other sound we hear?" asked X-Ray Tyson, about ready to descend from his perch.

"Why, that's wind!" announced Ethan.

"Whew! it must be a hurricane then, for I thought that was a freight train. I'm glad we haven't any big tree hanging over us that'd be in danger of falling. And I'm also pleased to know our Lodge is so well protected by evergreens and birches. They'll serve as a wind-break."

"There's the rain; and as the wind is pretty fierce, we'd better adjourn to the cabin," and Phil led the way, with the others at his heels.

Hardly had they entered than there was a vivid flash without, followed by a crash that shook the humble cabin. Then with a shriek the wind swooped down, the rain began to fall in sheets and the storm was on.

They had seen ordinary storms many times, but one and all were decidedly of the opinion that this was something beyond the common. When X-Ray called it a hurricane he was not far out of the way.

Every little while they could hear a crash somewhere near by that sounded like a big tree falling; and in fact they understood that this was what was taking place; all of which made them doubly glad they had so good a shelter.



CHAPTER XV

AFTER THE STORM

"Such a night I've passed; never slept a wink!" groaned Lub, as he dangled his feet over the side of an upper bunk, and held a heavy head between his hands.

"Well, all I can say is that you made so much noise snoring I couldn't hear the wind blow at times; so explain that away if you can. Jump down there, and stop shutting off what little light there is from me."

That was X-Ray Tyson talking. As Ethan had insisted on making himself a sleeping place on the floor alongside Phil, X-Ray had pre-empted his bunk, giving his own to the wounded man, while little Mazie had the second upper one.

It had indeed been a terrible night.

With little cessation the storm had held forth. At times Phil, lying awake because it was impossible to get the clamor out of his mind, wondered if there would be any decent-sized trees left in the North Woods by the time things settled down quiet again.

He and Ethan were up and busily engaged getting some breakfast ready. It was as much as they could do to see, so dim was the light; and they did not dare use the lantern, because their supply of kerosene was limited.

"How'd you like to have been caught out in that whooper, eh, Lub?" asked Ethan, as the other continued to yawn, and rub his reddened eyes, though still occupying his position there on the edge of his berth, X-Ray having crawled out below.

"Please excuse me from answering that question," the other replied. "I never'd

have survived it, I reckon. Bad enough to be in a dinky little twelve by twelve cabin, let alone a hollow tree, or a make-shift under a shelving rock."

"Now, none of your making fun of Birch Bark Lodge," warned X-Ray; "it's been a hunky-dory refuge, all right, don't forget it. And say, not a drop leaked in on us through that bad part in the roof. Shows what a little common-sense can do for things, don't it?"

"All I can say," remarked Phil, from over the fire, "is that I'm sorry for any one who might be unlucky enough as to get caught in that howler. If they missed being struck by lightning, they ran a big chance of getting crushed under a falling tree."

"Yes," added Ethan, "and at the best they'd be soaked through and through. It's no fun to feel that way all night. You start to shivering, and then like as not your teeth rattle together like you've heard the minstrel end-man shake his bones when he sings. I've had a little experience, and I know what I'm talking about."

The man in the lower bunk had been listening to all this conversation. Phil noticed he seemed to have an additional line across his forehead. Perhaps the storm had also kept him awake. Possibly he had often thought of how uncomfortable it would be for any one he happened to know, who might have been caught in the open woods by the howling gale.

They were eating breakfast some time later, when the man from his bunk, since he preferred to lie there while so many were around the small cabin, called out to Phil. He had long since recognized the patent fact that the Bradley boy was a leader of his set; and that the other three only too gladly looked up to Phil, not on account of his being independent with regard to means, but because he had the attributes of leadership in his person.

"Do you think the storm has slackened for good, Phil, or will it come back again for another siege? It seems to me the wind has changed, and is blowing much more evenly."

"When I took that look out just a bit ago," Phil told him, "I noticed several pretty good signs that seemed to tell we had got to the wind-up. It wouldn't surprise me, because these hard storms are not the ones that last for days. We could go out now, if we didn't mind getting wet from the dripping of the trees."

The man had something on his mind, Phil saw. During the night he must have been thinking deeply. Perhaps conscience was gripping him more than ever, and the coming of that fearful storm had been the "last straw on the camel's back."

"I hate to ask any further favors of you, Phil," he finally said, with an effort, "but a great fear has taken hold of me during the night. With every fresh howl of the wind I seemed to hear a cry for help! It almost set me wild. If I had not been such a cripple I believe I must have dashed out of the cabin, and spent the remainder of the night wandering around, searching the woods."

The rest of the boys stared at him. Perhaps it may have occurred to one or more of them that Mazie's father was losing his mind. But Phil knew there was something back of it all. He had been trying to study the man, figure out what ailed him, and why he had been hiding himself and the child away up in this solitude.

"Were you expecting *some one* to come up here looking for you, sir?" he asked, boldly, remembering what the contents of that telegraph message had been.

"Yes, that's what has been worrying me," admitted the man, acting as though he knew the time had come when he must explain away at least a part of the mystery that surrounded him, if he expected these friendly lads to assist him further.

"An enemy, most likely?" continued Phil, seeing the other hesitate.

At that there was a heavy intaking of the breath, and then the man went on to say:

"No, hardly that. I would not like to give it so harsh a term. Say a friend from whom I have been estranged, and who I believed had wronged me; though of late my eyes have been opened to my own faults, and I have repented of many things done in the heat of temper."

"And you believe then that this friend may have engaged a guide—that it is at least possible they were not far away from here when the storm broke. You fear they may have been caught and made to suffer; is that it, sir?"

Phil was handling the affair wonderfully well, his chums thought, as they listened to all that was being said.

"That is what I have cause to fear," the other went on to say, quickly. "Through the livelong night of tempest I have fancied I heard their cries for help, and oh! how they crucified me! It would be a terrible punishment on my head if some tragedy had taken place in the pine woods last night; and Mazie—" his voice failed him in his emotion, and he did not finish his sentence.

"Do you want us to go out and see if there are any signs of strangers on the trail

leading up here, the one we followed all the way from the village many miles off?" Phil asked; and his manner was so reassuring that the wounded man immediately nodded his head in the affirmative.

"It would be a fitting climax to all you and your fine chums have done for me and mine," he told them, with tears in his eyes.

"Shucks! that wouldn't be such a great job," Lub hastened to say, before any one else could talk; "and I volunteer to be one of the party right now."

"But you'd get all wet, Lub, you know," expostulated Ethan.

"What of that?" came the indignant response; "am I made of salt, or sugar? Haven't I been soaked before? If I could stand jumping into the lake with my clothes on, when the hornets tackled me, I ought to be able to take a little sprinkling, hadn't I?"

"We'll all go, so as to spread out considerable," suggested X-Ray Tyson, who, truth to tell, was a little afraid of being left to look after things at the lodge. "I'm needed because I've got the sharpest eyes; Ethan might have a chance to bring some of his woodcraft into play; Phil is the one to run things; and Lub, well, he spoke first, and ought to have a show."

"Knowing what we'll be up against," said Phil, "we can arrange accordingly, so when we get back we'll have something dry to put on. Before we start we'll get Mr.—Mr. Newton out, and fixed before the fire, so he can feed it as often as he pleases."

The man had flushed when Phil purposely hesitated about calling the name that had been given in that message.

"Call me Alwyn Merriwell from now on," he hastily told them. "That is my real name. The time has passed for all deceit and assumed names. I have made up my mind to do what is right for—for the other party, no matter what pain and suffering it brings to me."

A short time later the boys began to prepare to start out. Phil saw that their injured guest was really working himself up into a fever over the anxiety he was enduring. His thoughts during the night had had a strong effect upon him. He may even have dreamed something dreadful had really happened, and it haunted him.

Acting on Phil's advice the others dressed lightly. This would allow of leaving certain parts of their clothing behind, to be resumed on their return.

"We will be moving all the time, and can keep warm enough, even while wet to the skin," he told them, as they started forth, after saying good-by to Mazie, who was content to sit alongside her "daddy," holding his hand, and prattling constantly as was her pretty way.

Phil had managed to cover his little camera, so that he could take it along.

"Like as not we'll run across some effects of the hurricane that we'd like to remember," he explained, when X-Ray looked questioningly at the camera. "There must be places where trees have been thrown down in all sorts of twisted shapes; and those sort of things always make the boss pictures, you know."

They followed the trail. It was very faint in many places; but then Ethan could be depended on to find it whenever a cry arose that it was lost. Phil, too, had his bearings pretty well in hand, though as a rule he allowed Ethan to swing things, for he saw that it was giving him no end of pleasure to thus exercise his knowledge of woodcraft.

For a full hour they pushed on. The sun peeped out every little while, showing that Phil had guessed rightly when he said the storm was a thing of the past. The leaves still dripped, though not so copiously as at first. Lub even boasted that he seemed to be drying off faster than he got wet. That fact apparently occupied more of his attention than other matters.

"How far ought we go, do you think, Phil?" inquired X-Ray Tyson; "not that I'm getting tired at all; but I just asked for information."

"Another half-hour, and then we'll call it off," he was told. "By that time we'll have covered a number of miles. If this—er—friend of Mr. Merriwell's is anywhere around, and able to make us hear, we'll come on the party."

"Beats me to understand what it all means," grumbled Lub. "And d'ye know, I've got a good suspicion that you've tumbled to the game, Phil."

"I've been told no more than the rest of you," the other replied; "and my guess may be wide of the mark; so just now I'm not going to say anything more. But you can see from the way he keeps looking at Mazie she's got something to do with it all. When he talks about having to make a terrible sacrifice it means giving her up."

"Gee whiz! I never once thought of that!" burst out Lub; "now I bet you the little tot's got a grandfather who's been left the child by her mother when she died. Is that the answer, Phil?"

"I refuse to say, Lub. Ethan and I have been talking it over, and we've come to a certain conclusion; but wait a little, and we'll explain. We may find the person he seems to be expecting. Perhaps he received a later message, and which warned him his presence up here was known."

Lub relapsed into silence. It could be seen, however, that he was pondering over matters, for that serious look on his usually placid face betrayed the fact.

They continued to push forward, and kept up a constant watch for any sign that would indicate the presence of strangers. This might be the smoke of a fire, or the sound of an ax.

"How would it do to let out a whoop every little while, Phil?" suggested X-Ray Tyson; "for all we know they might have lost the trail in the storm, and be somewhere to one side. It'd be a mean thing if we passed 'em by without knowing it."

"That isn't a bad idea," Phil told him; "so start in right away with a yodel."

This was all the other was waiting for, and he accordingly lifted up his voice in a loud shout. Any camper hearing it would understand that the call was meant for a friendly one, and must hasten to reply.

"There, wasn't that an answer; or do they have echoes as wonderful as that up here in the North Woods?" demanded X-Ray, excitedly.

"It was a shout, all right," Ethan told him, positively.

"And came from over on our right," added Phil, pleased at least that all their labor had not been for nothing.

"Let's mark the trail so we can be sure to find her again," Ethan continued; always cautious about letting a good thing slip him.

This being done by means of a certain tree that all of them felt sure they must easily recognize, even at some distance, the four Mountain Boys turned toward the spot where that faint "hallo" had come from.

Presently keen-eyed X-Ray Tyson told them he saw smoke.

"That's right," admitted Ethan, when he had followed the extended finger of the other chum; "and of course it means they've got a camp fire burning; though after all that rain it'd take a good woodsman to know where to find dry wood, except in the heart of some stump. Let's hurry up and get there."

He kept watching as he went on. It would grieve Ethan sorely should he find at

any time they were actually lost, and after he had taken so many precautions in the bargain.

"I can see somebody moving around there," announced X-Ray, soon afterwards; "and it's a man, too. Seems to be a guide, if his looks count for anything."

They kept heading straight toward the small cheerless camp in the drenched woods. All the while Phil was expecting to hear his chums, saving possibly Ethan, give utterance to low cries of surprise.

"There's somebody lying down on the other side of the fire, boys," continued the one with the hawk eyes. "That smoke keeps shifting around so much I don't seem to be able to glimpse as well as—say, what d'ye think, fellows, I declare if it ain't a *woman!*"



CHAPTER XVI

PEACE AFTER STRIFE—CONCLUSION

Lub uttered a gurgle to indicate his consternation. Ethan and Phil exchanged knowing looks, as though to say it was coming out just as they had figured.

The guide was a dark-faced native. He had evidently been having a hard time of it during that terrible storm, with possibly an hysterical woman on his hands, and no proper shelter. He waved his hand at the boys, and looked pleased to see them coming to their relief.

As they entered the camp they saw that the woman was sitting up. She looked as though she could not have stood much more. In spite of all the Adirondack guide may have done in trying to shield her from the torrents of rain, she had been wet through and through. Even sitting close to the fire for a long time had not caused her to stop shivering.

"We've come down here to see if we could help you any," Phil said the first thing, when he and his chums reached the fire.

"How'd ye know we was around these diggin's?" asked the guide, as though puzzled.

"We've got a gentleman in camp with a badly broken leg, and he asked us to come," Phil went on to say, narrowly watching the eager face of the woman, who he could see was by breeding a lady, and a very handsome one too no doubt, though just at that time she looked woe-begone, with her long hair hanging down her back to dry, and her khaki outing skirts bedraggled. "He's been worrying all the night, and nearly crazy because he was afraid some one would be caught in the storm, some one he expected was coming to find him."

Waves of color passed over her face as she heard how the gentleman had been so

deeply concerned.

"Would you mind telling me his name?" she asked Phil; and somehow the boy was reminded of Mazie when he looked more closely at her.

"He has been calling himself John Newton all along," he remarked; "but just this morning he admitted that his real name was Merriwell—Alwyn Merriwell."

She drew a long breath. Her eyes were as bright as stars as she hurriedly went on to ask another question; and both Phil and Ethan knew exactly what this would be before she had uttered a single word.

"Is there a little girl with—Mr. Merriwell? Oh! please tell me instantly, for I am crazy to hear!"

"Yes, and her name is Mazie!" Phil immediately replied. "We found her lost in the woods, and took her to our camp. Then later on we ran across him. He had broken his leg while searching for her, and tried to crawl miles, thinking to get help from us so as to find her. He came near dying, too."

She dropped her head in her hands, and they could see that she was crying very hard. Whether it was through sheer thankfulness because of what she had heard concerning the presence of the child, or from some other reason, Phil could not quite understand. But he believed it was all going to turn out splendidly.

Presently she looked up, and smiled bravely through her tears. Phil could see that a new happiness had come upon her; and he guessed the cause.

"I am Mazie's own mother," she said, to the astonishment of Lub, who up to then had not been able to figure things out correctly; "there was a terrible misunderstanding between my husband and myself. The court gave me charge of our child. His love for Mazie was an absorbing passion, even greater than my own. One day she disappeared, and we had reason to suspect that he had taken her away, so that she could be with him. Ever since I have sought far and wide to find them, but until lately without avail."

She stopped speaking, and seemed to be thinking for a minute; then went on, for of course none of the boys had ventured to say a single word:

"Of late I have learned through the death of a wicked person that I had wronged my husband dreadfully. I am only waiting to see him to ask his forgiveness; and unless he has lost all his love for me we may undo the wretched past, and start all over again, with Mazie the bond between us."

She had said quite enough for them to understand. Phil was wondering whether

they might not have to construct another litter in order to carry the lady all the way to the distant camp.

"Oh! have no fears for me," she hastened to tell him, when he started to speak of such a thing. "I feel as though I could walk from now to sunset, and not grow weary, knowing that Mazie, and Alwyn, are at the end of the trail. We cannot start too soon to satisfy my yearning heart. I could almost fly as though I had wings."

And, indeed, there was no difficulty in her keeping up with them. The new hope of happiness, after all these dreary months of wretchedness, buoyed her heart up as possibly nothing else could have done.

Before noon had arrived they drew near the cabin under the hemlocks and birches. The sky had cleared, and the sun shone warmly. All nature looked bright again after the storm.

"Listen!" cried the lady, suddenly.

It was the sweet childish voice of Mazie they heard, singing one of her little songs, which the boys had never tired of hearing. Imagine how it affected the mother, separated from her darling so long.

She could not be longer restrained, but rushing ahead passed inside the cabin. The boys purposely loitered. When finally they ventured to enter it was to find the lady on her knees, with the arms of the child tightly clasped about her neck. She had one of the wounded man's hands in hers; and apparently the breach between them had been healed, for he was looking upon mother and child with a love light in his eyes.

This influx of guests was getting serious, X-Ray and Lub had a regular argument as to which one should surrender his bunk to Mazie's mother. She would not hear of any such thing, however, and insisted that there was plenty of room for both Mazie and herself in the one bunk.

And after she had recovered from her exposure Mrs. Merriwell insisted on making herself useful, both in the way of a nurse, and in helping with the cooking. As for Mazie's "daddy," he no longer looked the unhappy man the boys had considered him; since he was not going to be called upon to make that terrible sacrifice which he had considered was his duty.

This new arrangement left the boys more opportunity to prosecute their various pleasures. Lub had begun to show a decided interest in certain things connected with woodcraft, so that Ethan only too gladly accepted every chance to explain

how to follow a trail, what certain signs stood for, what was the best way to make a fire in a storm, and dozens of other things equally as interesting.

Of course Phil was more than ever engaged with his flashlight photography. He had secured a startling picture of the red fox whose tracks he had discovered; and this spurred him on to greater things. Often Ethan kept him company, and showed that he had really started to take a deep interest in this newer method of hunting without a gun.

Mr. Merriwell steadily grew better. He hopped around by the aid of his crutches, and hoped to be able to walk some by the time the Mountain Boys thought of leaving the North Woods for their home town, which was further south, though still in the uplands.

Josh Maxfield, the guide, stayed with them. He made himself useful, and Ethan managed to pick up quite a fund of information from the experienced native, who had been born and bred in the pine woods.

Many were the cheery evenings they all spent, in front of the cabin if it happened to be warm, or before the fire if the night air was chilly, as often turned out to be the case. Josh had plenty of interesting stories to tell. Mazie in particular was keenly interested in his accounts of how the black bear outwitted the honey bees that had made their hive in an old hollow tree; so that he usually secured a sweet treat as long as he could reach in with his paw, and tear the heavily laden combs out.

All too soon did the days pass, until finally it was decided that they must be starting back over the old trail.

Every one would be sorry indeed to say farewell to Birch Bark Lodge. The Merriwells made Phil promise to send them a set of all his pictures, and in particular the one that showed the dear old cabin.

"It stands for our new life," said the gentleman, as he sat there one arm around his wife, and the other about Mazie; "and every time we look at it our vows will be renewed. Besides, all the happy things that have happened here must rush over our memories. Yes, it will be our standard cure for the blues."

Although the lame man was getting around pretty well, Phil knew he would never be able to stand such a long and arduous journey as the one they had ahead of them. Accordingly they made over the stretcher, with the help of Josh, and meant to carry it along. Of course once they managed to reach the village, where there would be a road leading out of the wilderness, and possibly some sort of

vehicle to hire, things would be much easier.

"One thing sure," said Phil, as they got ready to clear out one bright morning, "I've had glorious good luck in taking all the pictures I did. Why, I've beaten my highest expectations three times over. The collection will fill a new album; and right in front I'll have stamped in letters of gold: 'Memories of Birch Bark Lodge.'"

"Yes, we'll never forget what a grand good time we've all had up here," affirmed Lub, who seemed to feel the breaking away even more than any of his chums; "and often when I'm snuggled down between common every-day sheets at home I'll dream of my fine bunk, and the way my blanket kept me warm."

"And what came down the chimney one night," added X-Ray Tyson; "not to mention what *tried* to come down the next day. Oh! we'll all enjoy remembering things. And I don't believe we could ever have such a magnificent time together again."

"Don't be too sure of that," Phil told him. "I can see some other outings ahead that may even turn out to be jollier than this one, though it seems hard to think it now. Let's give the old cabin a last salute, boys. Three cheers and a tiger for Birch Bark Lodge!"

They were given with a will. Even little Mazie added her childish treble to the volume of sound that went up.

So they pulled out, and left the old cabin tenantless. The gray squirrels could run over the roof with impunity now; Br'er 'Coon might wander along his trail down to the water's edge to do a little fishing, without having a sudden blinding flash startle him out of his seven senses; while Br'er Fox need not skulk in the dense covert for fear of meeting roving boys.

But the bear that had fallen down the chimney, and the lordly moose had better make themselves scarce in that particular neighborhood; because ere many moons had waxed and waned Josh intended coming back again to look them up; and the law would no longer protect the shy inmates of the North Woods against the "sticks that spat out fire and stinging missiles" whenever they were pointed straight.

The man with the broken leg soon gave out, and had to take to the stretcher. The sturdy woods guide carried one end and the boys took turns helping out, so they got along very well.

Mazie and her mother walked alongside, though from time to time the little

sprite would insist on taking Phil's hand; or it might be that of stout Lub. She had made him promise he would send her his picture when he got home; and Lub always grinned when X-Ray Tyson or Ethan tried to joke him about his "new girl."

They arrived at the mountain village, and a vehicle was obtained by means of which all of them could get out of the region, and in touch with civilization. When it came to saying good-by to the Merriwells the boys found it very hard. The gentleman declared they would see them all again as soon as he found himself perfectly well; for he wanted to know their families; and doubtless meant to inform these good people as to the extent of the debt of gratitude he owed Phil Bradley and his Mountain Boys.

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