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E-text prepared by Al Haines

BOY SCOUTS IN NORTHERN WILDS

Or, The Signal from the Hills

By

MAJOR ARCHIBALD LEE FLETCHER

Author of

"Boy Scout Rivals; or, A Leader of the Tenderfoot Patrol,"
"Boy Scouts on Old Superior; or, The Tale of The Pictured
Rocks," "Boy Scouts' Signal Sender; or When Wigwag Knowledge
Paid," "Boy Scout Pathfinders; or, The Strange Hunt for the
Beaver Patrol" etc., etc.

Chicago, 1913

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CHAPTER I

A CAMP ON MOOSE RIVER

Four Boy Scouts, of the Beaver Patrol, Chicago, were in camp on Moose river. They were all athletic young fellows, not far from seventeen years of age, and were dressed in the khaki uniform adopted by the Boy Scouts of America.

If you take a map of the British Northwest Territories and look up Moose river, you will discover that it runs through nearly three hundred miles of wilderness, from Lake Missinable to Moose Bay. The reader will well understand, then, how far "Sandy" Green, Will Smith, George Benton and Tommy Gregory had traveled from civilization.

The camp of the Boy Scouts was situated some fifty miles up the river from Moose Factory, a trading point famous in old Indian days for its adventurous spirits and its profits to the factors. Those who have read the preceding books of this series will doubtless remember the four Boy Scouts named above. Together they had visited the Pictured Rocks of Old Superior, the Everglades of Florida, and the great Continental Divide.

During all their journeys the boys had shown courage and resourcefulness beyond their years, and because of these qualities they had been chosen, by Mr. Horton, a noted criminal lawyer of Chicago, to undertake a difficult and dangerous mission to the Hudson Bay country.

They had traveled by way of the Canadian Pacific to Missinable, from which point they had proceeded to Lake Missinable. Here they had purchased a "Mackinaw," a great flat-bottomed craft, in which to transport their tents and supplies down Moose river to the bay of the same name.

They had made most of the journey in native canoes, which they had learned to handle with considerable skill, but now and then they had taken refuge on the big boat, "just to stretch their limbs," as they expressed it. They left Chicago late in September and it was now almost the last of October.

Those who live in the Hudson Bay country declare that they have three seasons in four months, Spring comes in June, summer in July and August, and autumn in September. At the southern extremity of James Bay, October may scarcely be called a winter month, although during the latter part of the month ice and snow are not infrequent.

The sun was setting on the lads' first day in camp as the boys rested from their labor of dragging in great quantities of both dry and green wood. Their tents were of double canvas, specially prepared for cold weather, and their bedding and suits had constituted an important part of their baggage.

Almost the entire fronts of the tents were composed of fine, strong silk mesh-cloth. The faces of the boys were well anointed with grease, and masks of mesh-cloth hung about the tents ready for use.

Mosquitos and an insect known as the "bull-dog" had driven many a trapper and hunter out of the swampy regions around Hudson Bay. During the summer it is almost impossible to live in the swamps of that country at all. By protecting their tents and faces, and keeping great "smudges" going, the boys hoped to be able to live in comparative comfort during their stay in that section.

"Look here, Will," Tommy said, as he laid down a great armful of dry wood, "some one ought to invent some kind of a contraption to kill these flying pests off by the billion. Here it is almost cold enough to snow, and we're being eaten alive by mosquitos."

"I reckon it wouldn't do much good to invent a way of killing the brutes," Will suggested, "as long as the swamps and pools of the Northwest Territories are turning them out at the rate of a billion a

minute."

"I read a story about how to get rid of mosquitos the other day," Sandy said. "It might be a good idea to try it."

"You can always read how to do things, in the newspapers," Tommy argued. "The only trouble is that the ideas don't work."

"This one will work," declared Sandy. "The way to kill mosquitos," he continued, "is to throw a great long rope up in the air. You let it stay up in the air; that is, one end of it, and grease it carefully with cold cream and tie a piece of raw beefsteak at the upper end. That will attract the mosquitos. Then when you get several millions up the rope, you cut it in two about twenty feet from the ground and pull the lower end down."

"It'll be the foolish house for yours!" Tommy laughed. "How are you going to throw one end of a rope up in the air and make it stay there?"

"I didn't say how to make it stay up in the air," grinned Sandy. "I just said you had to make it stay up in the air. Then when the mosquitos get tired of staying up in the ambient atmosphere, they'll come crawling down the rope and fall off where you cut it."

"I guess your dome needs repacking all right!" laughed Tommy.

"And then, when they come to the place where the rope has been cut off, they'll take a tumble for themselves, and you stand under the line and beat their heads off with an axe."

"Poor child!" laughed Tommy.

"If you leave it to me," George declared with a grin, "that story about how to kill mosquitos came out of Noah's ark on crutches."

The sun was setting over the great wilderness to the west, and the boys hastened to pile more wood on the fire. The forest was alive with the cries of birds, and the undergrowth showed curious eyes peering out at the intruders.

"This beats little old Chicago," cried George, bringing out a great skillet of ham. "When we live in the city, we've got to eat in the house and smell dishwater. When you live out doors, you've got a dining room about a thousand miles square."

"And when you live in Chicago," Tommy continued, "you can't get fresh fish right out of the brooks. When you want a fish here, all you've got to do is to run out to the river, grab one in your arms, and bring him in!"

"Then run out and get one now!" advised Will.

"Perhaps you think I can't!" shouted Tommy.

Seizing a head-net the boy dashed away to the margin of Moose river. His chums saw him walking about in quest of a minnow for a moment and then heard the swish of a line. In ten minutes he was back at the camp with a whitefish weighing at least five pounds.

There is incessant fishing in the wilderness north of Lake Superior throughout every month of the year. All through the long winter the ice is cut away in order that the fish may be reached, and there is every sort of fishing between that which engages the labors of sailing vessels and men, down through all the methods of fish-taking, by nets, by spearing, still-fishing and fly-fishing.

Though the region has been famous, and therefore much visited, for many years, the field is so extensive, so well stocked, and so difficult of access, that even today almost the very largest known specimens of each class of fish are to be had there.

"These are the kind of fish the Indians live on during the winter," Tommy explained as he scraped the scales from his prize. "Only," he continued, "the Indians don't clean them at all. They simply make a hole in the tail end of each fish and string them up like beads on sticks which they set up in racks."

"I never did like cold-storage fish," Sandy declared, in a tone of disgust. "They taste like dry corn meal!"

While the fish cooked and the boys sat in the protecting smudge of the campfire, the sound of paddles was heard up the river. The swish and splash came on steadily for a moment and then suddenly ceased.

"I thought we were going to have company," suggested Will.

The boys listened for a time but no further sounds were heard.

"Now what would any one be doing in this wilderness?" Sandy asked.
"What would any one be sneaking around us for?"

"Perhaps they don't even know we're here!" argued George.

"With that great campfire going?" scoffed Tommy. "Why, they can see the light of that fire for ten miles or more!"

"That's right," replied George. "I guess that fire wouldn't help to hide our presence here any."

"Suppose I go and see what's doing?" asked Tommy.

"You know your failings, young man!" Will cut in. "If you go out in the wilderness to see who's running that canoe, you're likely to get lost, or come back here after a couple of days with a broken leg or a busted coco! You'd better stay in camp."

"But I want to know who's sneaking around our tents!" insisted Tommy. "You come along with me, Will, if you think I'm not competent to go alone," the boy added with a grin.

Will hesitated for a moment and then providing himself with an automatic revolver and an electric searchlight, the two boys left the camp and soon disappeared in the darkness. They had been gone scarcely five minutes when a shot came from the thicket.

CHAPTER II

THE LITTLE BRASS GOD

After a time George and Sandy heard some one running through the undergrowth, and the next instant Will and Tommy burst into view. It was evident that they had been running, for they were panting and their clothing was disarranged and torn in places.

The two boys hastened out to meet their chums with question marks in their eyes. Will and Tommy offered no explanation until the tents had been reached, then Tommy burst into a low chuckle.

"Can you beat it?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?" demanded George.

"What did you see out there?" asked Sandy.

"We didn't see a thing!" declared Tommy.

"You're wrong there!" Will cut in. "We saw the flash of a gun!"

"Some one shoot at you?" questioned George.

"Perhaps not," Will replied, "but I heard a bullet whizzing past my ear! That's not a very warm welcome to this blooming country, I take it."

"What's it all about?" asked Sandy impatiently.

"That's the answer!" Tommy declared. "That's all we know about it ourselves. We hear a paddle splash in the water; we go out to see what's doing, and we get a chunk of lead plugged at us. That's the answer so far as I know. Now, how about this fish?"

"Right as a book!" cried Sandy. "I've been taking care of this fish while you've been out there facing some boy with an air gun."

"Yes," laughed Tommy, "if you want to find boys with air guns, come out here about three hundred miles north of nowhere!"

The incident did not seem to affect the appetites of the boys, for they attacked the fish industriously.

When the meal was finished and the dishes cleared away; Will turned to his chums with a sober look on his face. When he spoke it was with suppressed excitement. "Do you boys know exactly why we are in the Hudson Bay country?" he asked, "How much did Mr. Horton tell you?"

"Nothing at all!" Tommy replied.

"He just told us to come with you!" George cut in.

"When I tried to cross-examine him," laughed Sandy, "he said he was afraid we wouldn't go if he told us what sort of a game we were mixing in."

"Well," Will went on in a moment, "he told me to tell you after we got into camp on Moose river."

"Go on and tell us, then," chuckled Tommy.

"I don't believe it's any great mystery!" Sandy interrupted.

"We came here," Will said, speaking seriously, "to find the Little Brass God. Odd sort of a quest, that, eh?"

"What's the Little Brass God?" demanded Sandy.

"Did you think it was a load of hay?" asked Tommy. "The Little Brass God is the Little Brass God. Didn't you know that?"

"What does any one want of a Little Brass God?" asked George.

"The Little Brass God," Will explained, "is believed to be valuable, chiefly for what is contained in his belly."

"So this is a stuffed god?" cried Tommy.

"Has he eaten something he can't digest?" cut in Sandy.

"That just explains it!" Will exclaimed. "He has eaten something he can't assimilate, and we've been sent up here to relieve him of it!"

"How did the Little Brass God ever get into the Hudson Bay country?" asked Tommy. "I should think he'd know better."

"I reckon the Little Brass God had nothing to say regarding his journey," replied Will. "Two months ago the house of Mr. Frederick Tupper, on Drexel Boulevard, Chicago, was burglarized. Besides taking considerable money and silver plate, the thief also carried away the Little Brass God."

"I don't think any thief in his right mind would do that!" declared Sandy. "What could he do with a Little Brass God? He couldn't pawn it, or sell it, or trade it, without its being traced back to him!"

"Well, he took it just the same!" Will replied.

"How much is he worth?" asked George.

"Not more than five dollars."

"Then he isn't one of those East India Little Brass Gods with his legs crossed, and his arms folded, and a grin on his face?"

"His legs are crossed, his arms are folded, and there is a grin on his face!" replied Will with a smile. "But he's certainly not one of the population of a Hindu temple."

"He's just a common Little Brass God, probably made in Newark, New Jersey," suggested George. "What do they want him for?"

"They want to search him!" replied Will.

"Aw, come on, tell us all about it!" urged Tommy.

"Well," Will explained with a smile, "the tummy of the Little Brass God IS supposed to contain the last will and testament of Simon Tupper, father of Frederick Tupper."

"Gee!" exclaimed Tommy. "Can't he get the property until he gets the will? Then we'll have to find it, I guess!"

"No, he can't get the property unless the will is found."

"Who stole the Little Brass God, and also the will?" asked George.

"Did he know he was stealing the will when he stole the Little Brass God?" asked Sandy without giving Will an opportunity to reply to the previous question. "How'd he know the will was there?"

"We don't know whether he knew about the will or not," answered the boy. "In fact, we don't know whether the document is still in the tummy of the Little Brass God. That's what we've got to find out."

"You didn't tell me who stole the Little Brass God and the will," insisted George.

"I said it was a burglar!"

"But was it a burglar—a real, genuine burglar?"

"Yes, loosen up!" shouted Tommy. "Did he go there just to burgle, or did he go there to get that will?"

"That's another thing we've got to find out!" Will answered. "It's just this way," the boy continued. "We've been sent up here to find this Little Brass God. When we find it, we'll know whether the man who stole it was a common thief, or whether he was sent by interested parties to do the job. No living person can open the Little Brass God without first learning the way to do it. In fact, the only way the toy can be opened by one unfamiliar with the secret is to break it open with an axe! And that would hardly be done, as the little fellow is rather a cute plaything."

"And so, if the will is there, a burglar stole it. And if the will is not there, some one interested in the disposition of the property walked away with it! Is that it?"

"That's the way we figure it out!" Will answered. "And in the meantime," he continued, "an older will is being offered for probate. If the Little Brass God fails to disclose the last will, the property will go to a young man who was intensely hated and despised by the man who built up the fortune. Simon Tupper will turn over in his grave if Howard Sigsbee, his nephew, has the handling of that money."

"I can't see how that's going to get Simon anything!" grinned Tommy.

"Now," George asked, "why do they think the Little Brass God was brought into the Hudson Bay country?"

"We have traced it to an antique shop on lower State street," Will answered. "From there to the shabby parlor of a fourth rate boarding house on Dearborn avenue, from there into the possession of a French Canadian who hunts and fishes in the Moose river district."

"That's pretty straight!" George agreed.

"How do they know this French Canadian got this Little Brass God out of town?" asked Sandy. "You take a French Canadian of the trapper sort, and get him well tanked, and he'll sell the ears off his head for another drink of brandy. Perhaps he hocked the Little Brass God."

"If he did," Will answered, "the search must begin all over again!"

"Who put this will in the tummy of this Little Brass God?" asked Tommy.

"The man who made it—Simon Tupper," answered Will.

"Did he tell anyone where it was?"

"On his deathbed, he told Frederick Tupper, his nephew, where to find it. It's a pity the young man didn't remove the document and file it in probate court. It would have saved a lot of bother."

"But he didn't," George suggested, "and that gives us a fine trip to the Hudson Bay country."

"When was the house of this Frederick Tupper burglarized?" asked Sandy.

"On the night following the death of the old gentleman."

"Had the villain of the drama, this Howard Sigsbee, any knowledge concerning the hiding place of the will?"

"He was not believed to have."

"Do they think he went there and got the will himself?"

"Huh!" objected Tommy. "If he'd gone after the will himself, he'd have taken it out of the Little Brass God and carried it away with him. And he'd have made a pile of ashes of it in about one minute, at that!"

"Perhaps he couldn't open up the merry little chap," Sandy suggested.

"We don't know whether he understood the secret or not," Will answered. "All we know is that the Little Brass God was still intact a week after it had been stolen."

"Then he knew the combination, or he didn't get the will!" argued George.

"Anyhow!" Tommy laughed, "we've got only about a million or more miles of country to search over for a little brass god about ——"

"Say, just how big is this Little Brass God?" asked Sandy.

"He's about six inches in height, and three inches across his dirty shoulders, and he certainly is about the ugliest specimen of a heathen beast that ever came down the pike."

"What would that French Canadian buy him for?" asked George.

"That's another thing we've got to find out," replied Will.

Tommy was about to ask another question when Will held up a hand for silence. The leaping flames were sending long streamers of light into the thicket on either side and over the glistening waters of Moose river. The circle of illumination extended for some distance on every side, except at the back of the tents, where the level ground lay in shadows.

As the boys listened, the soft sound of a moccasined foot came to their ears. It seemed only a yard away, and yet it was not in sight. George dashed to the back of the tents, followed by a sharp cry of alarm.

CHAPTER III

THE CABIN IN THE SWAMP

When George reached the rear of the tent he saw a crouching figure there. A hole had been cut in the cloth, and the fellow was gazing into the tent. He was dressed in woodsman's attire, leather jacket and leggings and fur cap. The gold rings in his ears quivered and glistened as the light of the fire struck them.

As George rounded the tent the spy turned and ran for the forest. Without a thought as to the ultimate result, George followed along behind. For some distance the lad kept pace with the mysterious visitor, but, of course, it was impossible for him to do so for any great length of time, as the fugitive was well versed in woodcraft, while George was not.

After a time George lost sight of the fellow entirely, but could still keep track of him by the noise he made in passing through the thicket. It was quite evident that the intruder now believed that pursuit, had entirely ceased, for he made his way more leisurely through the swampy growth, and seemed to pay no attention whatever to the sounds of his passage.

Using great caution, the boy finally gained the hummock and stood looking at the dark bulk of a log cabin which stood in the center. He listened for a long time but all was silent inside. Presently he circled the place and came to a small opening which was more like a loop-hole than a window. There was a glass pane here, and through it he saw that there was a fire on the inside.

By this time the lad was shivering with cold, not having taken the time to provide himself with heavy clothing before leaving the camp in pursuit of the spy. As he glanced through the glazed opening he saw a great fire of logs blazing in a rudely made fireplace at one end of the room. He moved on until he found a door.

"Perhaps the owner of this log mansion will think I'm pretty prompt in returning his call," the lad mused as he knocked softly at the door. "But, all the same, I'm going to give him the pleasure of my company until I can get warm."

There was no response to the knock, and so George opened the door and entered. There was no one in front of the fire; no one in any of the rude chairs. The boy stood looking about the room for a moment and then walked back to three bunks fastened against the wall, one above the other.

When he reached the front of the sleeping places an exclamation of alarm came from a bundle of furs and blankets on the lower bunk and a boy's frightened face gazed up at him. The boy sat observing the other with evident suspicion for a moment, until his eyes caught sight of the Boy Scout medals which adorned the sleeve of the lad's coat.

Then he extended an arm in the full salute of the Boy Scouts of America, and sat back with a grin on his face to note the result.

"Beaver Patrol; Chicago," he said directly.

"I know you," George said with an exclamation of surprise. "You're Thede Carson, and you're about the toughest little wharf rat in Chicago!"

"That's a nice recommend for a patrol leader to give one of his scouts," grinned the boy. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"The last time I saw you," George said, smiling at the memory, "you were diving into the South Branch to keep out of sight of a police boat."

"I remember that," grinned Thede. "They said I'd been swiping bananas up in Gambler's alley, and that wasn't true."

"Well, how in the name of all the seven wonders of the world did you get into the Hudson Bay country?" demanded George.

"Old Finklebaum," answered Thede.

"Old Finklebaum?" repeated George. "Do you mean the old Shylock who does business under the three balls down on State street? You can't mean that he had anything to do with your appearance here?"

"You bet he did have something to do with my being here!" Thede insisted. "You see, it's just this way: Old Finklebaum says to me one day, 'I'll take the hair off Ikey's head for selling that Little Brass God!'"

George gave a quick start of surprise at the mention of the very article the Boy Scouts had come to the Hudson Bay country in quest of, but checked himself in a second.

"What did he have a—a—what did you say it was?—if he didn't want to sell it?" asked the boy in assumed surprise.

"He did want to sell it up to that very day," was the reply, "but no one wanted to buy it. Then a man came into the shop and said he'd give a thousand dollars for it on sight. So Finklebaum, having the Little Brass God within a foot of his hawkbill nose, takes the man's address and says he'll let him know if he hears anything about the thing in demand. Finklebaum thinks that if the man'll pay one thousand dollars for it, he'll pay five, and that's why he loses out."

George's interest was now so intense that the boy ceased speaking and sat regarding him steadily for a moment.

"What do you know about the Little Brass God?" he demanded.

"Nothing," replied George. "Never saw it!"

"Seems to me you're pretty much interested in it, though," commented the boy, rising from the bunk and taking a seat before the fire.

"I was thinking about Old Finklebaum cheating himself by getting too gay," answered George. "Go on, and tell me about it!"

"So when this man who offers the thousand dollars leaves the shop," Thede continued, "Finklebaum chases out to a dealer in antiques to make inquiries about the Little Brass God. I guess he thinks it's

some East India idol, or something of that kind, and that his fortune is made."

"Supposing it should be an East India idol!" exclaimed George,

"It may be, for all I know," Thede replied. "Anyhow, while old Finklebaum was out trying to find out how much his Little Brass God was worth, little Ikey sold it for a ten dollar note."

"Oh my, oh my, oh my!" laughed George. "I'll bet there was a merry old time when Finklebaum returned and found the ten dollar note in the drawer and the Little Brass God gone."

"Such a racket as never was!" declared Thede, laughing at the recollection of the scene. "I was in the shop," he went on, "getting out some articles Mother Murphy had been borrowing money on, and heard all that took place."

"Go on and tell me about it."

"Old Finklebaum said he was just plumb ruined. He said he'd snatch Ikey bald-headed, and do a lot of other things to him, if he didn't walk right out into State street and bring back that Little Brass God. Holy Moses! You ought to have seen how scared Little Ikey was!"

"Could he describe the man who bought the Little Brass God?" inquired George in a tone intended to be indifferent.

"Oh, yes!" replied Thede. "Ikey said the man wore a leather jacket with a red belt around the waist, a fur cap and rings in his ears. So Ikey was sent out to find the fellow, and I asked Old Finklebaum what he'd give me if I'd bring back the Little Brass God. He says he'll give me a hundred dollars the minute I put it in his hands, and I ducked down State street in search of this gink with the rings in his ears."

"And didn't find him?"

"If I had you wouldn't find me up here in this beastly country," replied Thede. "That is," the boy went on, "if I had found him with the Little Brass God in his possession."

"So you really did find him?" questioned George.

"Yes, I ran across him in a saloon down near Twelfth street, and stuck to him like a bulldog to a cat's back for two days and nights."

"Why didn't you go and tell Finklebaum where he was, and let him do the watching? That's what you should have done!"

"Not for mine!" answered the other. "Old Finklebaum would have taken the case out of my hands, and fooled me out of my hundred simoleons. I follows this gink around until he becomes sociable and sort of adopts me. I gets into his furnished room down on Eldridge court and searches it during his absence. There ain't no Little Brass God there!"

"Did you ever get your eyes on it?" asked George.

"Never!" was the reply. "But he acts funny all the time, and I think he's got it hidden. When he gets ready to come back to the Hudson Bay country he asks me how I'd like to come up north with him and learn to be a trapper, so I says that if there's anything on earth I want to be it's a trapper, and I come up here, making him think I'm after fur, when all the time I'm after the Little Brass God."

"Are you sure the man you followed is the man who brought the toy?" asked George, "You might have picked up the wrong man, you know."

"No I didn't!" replied Thede. "I've heard this man, Pierre, muttering and talking in his sleep, and I know he has the Little Brass God hidden. I'll go back to Chicago some day with it in my possession and Old Finklebaum will pay me a couple of thousand or he'll never get hold of it again! Won't it be a great story to tell the boys on State street about the times I'm having up here."

The door opened and Pierre entered, anger flashing from his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

LOST IN THE STORM

"What you do here?" demanded Pierre, standing with his back against the door and facing George with a snarl of hate and suspicion.

"I got lost!" was the quick reply.

"You go 'way!" shouted the trapper.

"Aw, what's the matter with letting him stay here all night?" asked Thede. "These boys are hunting and fishing, and the kid got lost in the swamp. He's all right!"

"He follow me!" insisted Pierre.

"Sure, I did!" George replied, trying to give the impression that the matter was rather a good joke on himself. "I heard you smashing through the bushes and I thought you were some kind of a wild animal, and so I followed you up. I got so far away from camp that I couldn't find my way back. Then I saw your light and came here."

"Where your gun?" demanded Pierre, pointing suspiciously to the boy's empty hands. "You no shoot without gun!"

George drew an automatic from his pocket and held it up in the firelight. Pierre eyed it enviously.

"We hunt with these things!" the boy said.

Pierre continued to regard the boy with suspicion, for a long time but he finally seated himself before the fire and began to grumble because Thede had not been more active in the preparations for supper.

"It's a wonder you wouldn't come home and get supper yourself once in a while!" exclaimed the boy, "You needn't think I came up here in the cold to wait on you, Old Hoss!" the lad added with a wink at George. "I didn't leave my happy home for any such menial service."

Pierre grumbled out a few sentences in mongrel French and proceeded to prepare a solitary meal. Thede winked at George and began cooking enough supper for both of them.

George was thinking fast while the boy was sweating before the scorching heat of the fire. He was wondering whether Thede had told him the exact truth concerning his connection with Pierre. He was wondering, too, whether the boy had told all he knew of the Little Brass God.

Here were two parties in the Northern wilderness in quest of the same thing! It occurred to the wondering boy that Pierre might have been sent into the Hudson Bay country in quest of the individual who had purchased the Little Brass God at the pawnbroker's shop.

This, he argued, would be just about what Finklebaum would be likely to do. On the discovery of his loss, he would naturally seek some one familiar with the northern country and dispatch them in quest of the lost prize. In case this should prove to be the fact, the boy Thede might not have been taken into the confidence of the two men.

He might be telling what he believed to be the truth concerning the matter. The advantages to the pawnbroker of this secret arrangement would be many. In the first place, anyone following Pierre would naturally suppose him to be the person having possession of the Little Brass God. This would naturally cause investigators to entirely lose sight of the real possessor in shadowing the man sent out to recover the article.

Another point which the boy considered was the possibility of the Little Brass God having been robbed of his treasure before being placed in the pawnshop. This idea, however, he soon rejected for the reason that no one would know better than the man who inspired the larceny whether the will was still retained in the cavity of the toy. Had he secured the document, he would be the last one to offer a high reward for the return of the odd casket in which it had been contained.

While the boy puzzled over the case, Pierre and Thede sat down to their evening meal. George was invited to join them in the repast, but declined on the ground that he had eaten supper not long before. After the meal was over, Pierre took up his rifle and left the cabin, scowling at George over his shoulder as he took his departure.

"He's pretty sore about your being here," grinned Thede.

"I don't know why he should be."

"Perhaps he thinks you've come up here to steal this little Brass God."

The boy was very anxious to get back to his chums in order that the situation might be thoroughly discussed. They were in the Hudson Bay country in quest of the Little Brass God, and here was Thede on the same mission. It seemed to him that if Pierre had really had the toy in his possession, Thede would have caught sight of it, at least,

The more he thought of this phase of the case, the more he was inclined to believe that Pierre was also in search of the Little Brass God.

"Pierre will be apt to raise a howl if I leave the cabin alone," the boy finally said. "He's fierce when he gets mad!"

"You don't seem to be afraid of him," replied, George.

"I'm afraid of him all right," the other replied, "but I don't intend to let him know it. I've got one of these billies inside my coat, all the time, and if he tries any funny business with me I'll knock his block off!"

"He could cut you into shoestrings while you are asleep!"

"Yes, I suppose so, but he won't do anything of the kind!"

"Well, come on over to camp," urged George. "It isn't so very much of a walk. I guess we can make it in half an hour."

Thede hesitated, but finally dressed himself for a cold journey, and fixed the fire so that no damage might be done by it during his absence.

"How long has Pierre lived in this cabin?" asked George, as the boys started out. "It looks like an old building."

"I guess he found it standing here deserted and just moved in," was the reply. "I don't think he knows much about this country."

"Do you think he has any idea that the Little Brass God is in such great demand?" asked George. "No, I don't think he has."

"Then, why should he keep it hidden away, even from you, three hundred miles away from civilization? I should think he'd want to have the thing out once in a while, just to take a look at it, anyway."

"I should think so," agreed Thede.

The boys made their way over the morass and entered the thick undergrowth. Now and then George flashed his electric, but he did not keep it burning steadily for the reason that he did not care to have Pierre trailing them back to the camp.

"Are you sure you passed this way when you came to the cabin?" asked Thede as they walked along. "I don't seem to find any trail here."

"It seems to me I came along here," was the reply. "If it wasn't so blasted dark, we could tell whether we were going in the right direction or not, all right!"

As the boy spoke, he lifted a hand to his face and raised the net which protected his features from the mosquitos, still flying about, although the night, apparently, was cold enough to freeze their wings stiff.

"They won't bother you much more," Thede commented.

"How do you know that?"

"Because there's a snow storm coming up!"

"Then we'd better be getting a move on!" advised George. "If we get caught up here in a snow storm, it'll be 'Good-night' for us!"

"We're going as fast as we can," replied Thede, "but I don't know whether we're going in the right direction or not. It seems like we've walked far enough to be at the camp."

In five minutes the searchlight revealed a drift of snow in the air, and ten minutes later the ground

was white. A cold wind blew out of the north, shifting at times to the west, and the boys shivered under the chill of it. Still no welcome light from the camp.

"Can you find your way back to the cabin?" asked George after they had walked at least an hour.

"We've got to find our way somewhere pretty soon!" the other replied. "If we don't, we'll freeze to death!"

The boys walked for what seemed to them two hours more, and then Thede, who was in advance, stumbled over a tree bole lying at the foot of a gentle slope. He rose rubbing his elbow and turned the flashlight toward the front.

"I know where we are now," he said. "We're about eight miles from the cabin. This place here is called Bear Ridge, and it's about the only collection of rocks and caverns that I know of in this district."

"Can't we find a cavern to crawl into?" asked George, his teeth chattering with the cold.

"If we find a cavern," advised Thede, "we're likely to find a couple of bears packed away in it!"

"I don't care if there are a hundred bears!" grumbled George. "I'll freeze to death if I stay out in this snow another minute!"

After a long and difficult climb the boys came to a ledge of rock and crawled into a small opening revealed by the searchlight.

"The beds are all full tonight, I guess," George said shivering. "I hear Bruin kicking about being disturbed."

CHAPTER V

A BOY SCOUT TRICK

"Where's that fool boy going now?" asked Tommy as George, in pursuit of the spy, dashed into the thicket.

"What did he see back here that caused him to let out a yell like that?" asked Sandy.

"I don't believe he saw anything!" Will declared. "He just thought he'd give us a good scare by pretending he'd bumped into a band of Indians, or something like that."

The boys looked over the ground in the rear of the tent, and finally Tommy came to the place where the spy had punctured the canvas.

"Who made this hole in the tent?" he asked.

The boys gathered around the opening through which the spy had inspected the interior of the tent, and looked at each other with wonder expressed on their faces. Tommy was first to speak.

"George must have caught a man here looking in," he said.

"That's why he disappeared so suddenly," Will argued.

"Yes, he was chasing the Peeping Tom," Sandy agreed.

"I wish we knew the direction they took," Will mused. "The boy may get into serious trouble, chasing off into the forest along in the night. He should have told us of his discovery so one of us could have gone with him! We may be able to find him yet."

"Aw, he'll come back before long!" Tommy argued. "He can't make any headway out there in the underbrush, and the fellow who was here will probably run away from him before he gets three rods from the tent."

"I hope so!" answered Will.

"But what was that gink prowling around the tent for?" asked Sandy. "That must have been the same

fellow we heard using the paddle a short time ago. If it is, he's mighty liberal with his bullets!"

"I'm anxious about that boy," Will broke in. "I wish he'd come back!"

"Yes, this isn't a very desirable country to be lost in in the night!" Tommy admitted. "He ought not to have gone away."

"What do you make of this gink prowling around our tent?" asked Sandy. "Do you think he's doing it out of curiosity, or because he has an inkling of what we're up here after?"

"Huh! How would any one away off up here know anything about the Little Brass God?" demanded Tommy.

"Look here," Will argued. "The Little Brass God is stolen from this house on Drexel Boulevard. Enclosed in a cavity in the toy is a will disposing of several million dollars worth of property. The Little Brass God is finally sold to a pawn-broker, who in turn disposes of it to a trapper known to belong in the Hudson Bay district."

"That's a fair statement," answered Tommy.

"Now, Mr. Horton, attorney for the man who is in quest of the lost will, and Sigsbee, the man interested in probating the previous will, both know of the final disposition of the Little Brass God. At least, Frederick Tupper knows that it was taken from the pawn shop by a Hudson Bay trapper, and it is believed that Sigsbee possesses the same information."

"Of course, they both know about it," agreed Sandy.

"Now, why shouldn't they both send people up here in quest of the Little Brass God?" Will continued.

"But suppose this man Sigsbee doesn't know anything about the will being in the belly of the Little Brass God?" suggested Tommy.

"We believe he does know all about it!" said Will.

"And do you believe, too, that he hired a burglar to go and steal the Little Brass God?" asked Sandy.

"As I said before," Will answered, "we don't know anything about that. The Little Brass God may have been taken by a burglar who was simply in quest of plunder. The whole thing resolves itself into this: If the really, truly burglar stole the toy and sold it to the pawn-broker, the will is in the ugly little chap's belly. If Sigsbee hired the burglar he took the will out before the trinket was sold at the pawn-shop. In that case, he would be the last one to send an expedition up here to retrieve the toy. And so you see," Will continued, "that we don't know anything about it."

"Well it's funny that gink should come prowling around our tents on the first night of our arrival!" Tommy exclaimed. "According to all accounts, he should have come sneaking into camp looking for a drink of brandy. The fact that he ran away when discovered shows that he wasn't here for any honest purpose."

"Well, what are we going to do?" demanded Sandy. "Let's give the Little Brass God a rest long enough to make up our minds about George."

"We can't do anything until morning," Will interposed.

"How do you know we can't?" demanded Tommy.

"Because it's dark, and because we know nothing about the country," replied Will.

The boys sat before the fire until midnight listening for the return of their chum. When it began to snow they reluctantly decided that George had crawled into some temporary shelter for the night and would not think of trying to make his way home through the storm.

"You boys go to bed now," Will advised, "and I'll sit up and keep watch. If you hear me firing now and then, don't think the camp's been attacked. George may be lost in the woods, and I'll be doing that to give him the right direction."

"We should have done that before," Tommy suggested.

"Well, get to bed," Will urged, "and I'll run the camp till morning."

Tommy and Sandy crawled into the tent which stood nearest to the great campfire and cuddled up in the warm blankets.

"Do you believe Will will stay in camp until morning?" asked Tommy.

"Of course I don't," was the reply. "He'll wait until we're asleep, and then he'll go prowling around the camp in search of George."

"That's just about what he'll do."

"What's your idea, then?" asked Sandy.

"Well," Tommy whispered, "George may be out in the snow somewhere, and it won't take us very long to circle about the camp just to make sure."

"I got you!" replied Sandy. "We'll get out under the back wall, and take a little trip with our searchlights."

Half an hour later, when Will, heavily wrapped, glanced in at the tent preparatory to going out on his quiet search for the missing chum, he saw that the blankets were empty.

"The little scamps?" he chuckled. "They've beaten me to it!"

In the meantime, Tommy and Sandy were making their way through the wilderness traveling in the narrow light provided by the electric lights. By this time the snow was quite deep, and the wind appeared to be rising every minute.

"We never can get home in this storm if we once lose sight of the campfire," Tommy said as the two huddled together in the lee of a big tree.

"That's a fact!" Sandy admitted. "So I guess we'd better be poking along. Which way is the fire?"

"Why, it ought to be right over there!" replied Tommy doubtfully.

"Over where?" demanded Sandy, with a note of alarm in his voice.

"Blessed if I know!" declared Tommy, sitting flat down in the snow.

The boys walked round and round the tree and made little excursions in every direction without getting a single trace of the campfire.

"I guess we've gone and done it now!" Tommy grunted.

"Aw, we can find our way back all right enough!" Sandy declared.

"We came north when we left the camp, didn't we?"

"Guess we did," replied Tommy, his teeth rattling with the cold.

"Then all we've got to do is to follow the wind and we'll strike the tents. That's some Boy Scout forestry sense, isn't it?"

"We'll wait until we see whether it brings us back to camp or not," replied Tommy. "If it does, it's all right; if it doesn't, it's all wrong."

Had the boys proceeded straight north on leaving the camp, they would have doubtless returned to the lighted zone by keeping with the wind, if the wind had not shifted to the west soon after their departure from the camp.

They walked for what seemed to them to be hours. In fact, more than once they glanced about hoping to get their direction from a showing of daylight in the sky.

"I don't believe it ever will be daylight again," grumbled Sandy, "and I move we stop right here and build a big fire."

"Can we build a fire in all this ruck?" asked Tommy.

"You bet we can!" was the answer. "What are we Boy Scouts good for if we can't build a fire in a storm?"

They cleared a little space in the snow and Tommy brought a handful of dry bark. Shielding the flickering blaze as much as possible, the boy applied the match he had struck to the bark. The fire

which resulted could have been started in a teacup.

About this he built a skeleton tent of bits of dry soft wood from six to nine inches in length. His fire was now as large as an ordinary kettle. Next, the boys threw larger boughs on the blaze, and finally succeeded in surrounding it by large logs.

"There's one thing about it," Tommy declared as they warmed their hands over the blaze, "there won't any wild animals take a bite out of us as long as we keep near this fire!"

"I wish George would come poking along in," Sandy commented. "I believe I'll go out in the thicket after I get warm and see if he isn't somewhere in this vicinity. I thought I heard a call over there just a moment ago."

"Listen, then," Tommy advised. "If some one called, we're likely to hear a repetition of the sound."

Sure enough, the call came again as the boys huddled over the fire. It came down with the wind and seemed to be rapidly drawing nearer.

"That sounds to me like a boy's voice," Sandy suggested.

"Sounds more like a half-breed to me!" Tommy answered.

"He's stopped coming on, anyway." Sandy exclaimed in a moment.

"Perhaps he's tumbled down in the snow!" Tommy argued.

"In that case, we'd better be getting out where he is," said Sandy.

The boys both left the fire and darted out into the darkness, listening for the call but hearing only the roaring of the wind.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAVE OF THE TWO BEARS

"Bears?" exclaimed George, as the lads listened in front of the cave, "do you think there are polar bears up here? I think it's cold enough for the big white variety."

"Put your head inside the cave," Thede suggested, "and you won't be wondering whether there are any bears here."

George did as requested, and soon the warm animal odor noticeable in the various zoos of the country attacked his nostrils.

"What kind of bears are they?" he asked.

"I've heard Pierre say there were black and brown bears," replied Thede. "You know I haven't been in here only a few days."

"I wonder if they'll bite."

"Stick your arm in there and find out," Thede answered.

"I don't believe they'll jump on us if we keep our light going," George argued. "Anyway," he went on, "we've got to get somewhere out of this wind and snow. If we don't, we'll freeze to death!"

Very slowly and cautiously the boys made their way into the cavern. It was a small place, not more than six feet in width and twice that in depth, and the electric revealed about all there was inside.

Two black huddles of fur showed under the finger of light, and as the boys crept on, George with his automatic ready for use, two pair of surly, pig-like eyes became visible.

The animals stirred restlessly as the boys advanced and finally began edging toward one side of the cave, as if seeking a way out.

"Get out of the entrance," advised George as soon as both animals were on their feet, "and we'll give

them a chance to escape."

This plan was followed, and, much to the delight of the youngsters, the animals sprang outside and for a moment disappeared in the darkness.

"It's a shame to turn the poor creatures out in this storm!" George declared. "Perhaps they were just entering upon their long winter's sleep."

"We didn't order them out!" grinned Thede. "It amounts to the same thing," George responded. "They've gone away, and are likely to freeze to death."

"If you think they've gone away," Thede replied, "just turn your light toward the entrance. They're not going to give up their warm nest without a scrap, and I can't say that I blame them for it."

It was considerably warmer in the cave and, out of the tempest, the boys were quite comfortable in their thick clothing. They huddled together at the far end of the cavern, and George kept the light turned, on the two bears, who were now growling savagely.

"Why don't you shoot?" asked Thede.

"What's the use of shooting until I have to?" demanded George. "They can come in here if they want to, if they'll only behave themselves."

"If they try to come in here," declared Thede, "I'll go up in the air about nine hundred feet."

Although they did not attempt to re-enter the cavern, the bears kept close to the entrance. It was clear that only the light of the electric kept them from attacking the boys.

"They'll stay right there till morning," exclaimed Thede, "and we'll have to shoot them anyway before we can get out. They are kicking themselves now," he continued with a grin, "because they let us in here without a battle. I wish we understood bear talk so that we could learn what they're saying to each other."

"Nothing very complimentary to us," George declared.

As the night advanced it grew colder and the boys moved about in quest of a more sheltered corner. They could still hear the bears moving about outside, but paid no attention to them.

"Look here," George said presently, as the search-light rested for a moment on a break in the rock. "I wouldn't wonder at all if we could get further under the hill. There's an opening here which looks wide enough for us to crawl through."

"It's a wonder the bears didn't find it then," commented Thede.

"I'm going to see whether I can get through it or not," George insisted. "It may be a warmer corner. Anyway, it'll give us exercise, and that's what we need about this time."

Throwing the spear of light into the crevice, the boy glanced keenly about. The walls of the opening seemed to be smooth, and to extend only a short distance. Just below where the walls broke he could see the brown floor of another cavern.

"I guess it's all right," he said to Thede. "You take the light and hold it down and I'll scramble in. May as well break my neck as to freeze to death."

"Let me take your hand, then," advised Thede, "so you can be pulled back if you don't like the looks of the new furnished room."

"I'd like to be in a furnished room on Washington boulevard just this minute," George broke in.

"I wouldn't mind a good box in Gamblers' alley," said Thede.

When all was ready Thede gave one hand to George and lowered him down to the full length of both arms.

"All right!" George cried in a moment, "I can feel my toes touching the rock. Let go! You drop down now, and I'll steady you when you light."

Both boys were soon in the lower cavern and a moment following their arrival there, they heard the claws of the bears rattling on the rocks above.

"I've heard Pierre tell about caves in this range of hills," Thede said, "but I never knew that they had

caves two stories high."

As the boy ceased speaking, George suddenly shut off his flash light and laid a hand on the other's arm.

"What's that for ——"

"Keep still!" whispered George. "Do you see anything?"

"Looks to me like a light," the other replied.

"Looks like a fire, doesn't it?" asked George.

"It certainly is a fire and there's a man sitting in front of it."

The fire showed at the end of a narrow passage, perhaps ten or twelve yards away. It was blazing vigorously, and the cavern in which it stood was well clouded with smoke. It was evident that the watcher by the fire was as yet unconscious of the approach of the two boys.

"I wish we could get to that fire!" George said with a shiver.

"And why not?"

"I don't think he'd be hiding here if he was keeping open house," replied George. "He may be an outlaw hiding from the police. And in that case he wouldn't relish the idea of his underground retreat being discovered, even by two boys who want to get warm."

"Anyway," Thede insisted, "I'm going to crawl up close and see what I can find out. That fire looks good to me."

The boys advanced cautiously, with George a little in advance. The man at the fire sat with his chin on his breast as if in sound sleep.

"I don't believe he'd say anything if we walked right in on him," Thede declared. "If he does, we can hold a gun on him and invite him to a more friendly mood."

The man did not move as the boys came on, and George was about to call out to him when Thede caught him by the shoulder.

"Don't you dare make a motion!" the boy whispered. "Stand still where you are and look to the little shelf of rock on the other side of the fire."

George looked, and his automatic and his searchlight almost clattered to the floor as his eyes rested on something which glittered like gold in the red light of the fire. He turned to Thede, and there was a tremor in his voice as he whispered in his ear.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked.

"I think I know what it is!" was the whispered reply.

"It's the Little Brass God!" whispered George excitedly. "And I'm going to sneak over there and lay my hands on it before that fellow wakes up!"

"You never can do it!" advised Thede.

"I've just got to do it!"

"If that is the real Little Brass God, how did it ever get here?" whispered Thede. "Strangest thing I ever heard of."

"Gee whiz!" whispered George. "We mustn't stand around wondering how it got here. The thing for us to do right now is to get possession of it. I believe I can get over there without waking that fellow up."

"Let me take your gun, then," Thede advised, "and if he moves or makes any funny breaks, I'll keep him under cover!"

George handed his gun over to the boy without a word and moved on toward the fire. It was clear that the man was asleep, his chin resting on his breast, his shoulders supported by a wall of rock.

The thing which glittered on the ledge, now almost within reaching distance, was unquestionably the

Little Brass God, the quest of which had brought the boys into the Hudson Bay country.

George had never set eyes on the toy, but there was no mistaking the crossed legs, the folded arms, the paunchy stomach, and the misshapen, leering face. The boy heard a soft warning whispered from the opposite side of the room and turned his eyes from a greedy contemplation of the Little Brass God to the figure of the man crouching before the blaze.

The fellow had lifted his head, and now sat staring at the boy with a dumb wonder in his eyes. While the boy looked the expression changed from wonder to alarm, from alarm to anger, and then the doubled-up figure straightened and sprang forward.

The boy heard a pistol shot, sensed the acrid smell of powder smoke, felt a muscular hand grasp the wrist which was extended toward the shelf of rock, and then a million stars seemed to be falling from the heavens. There was a roar as of an ocean beating against breakers, and then a lull during which he heard another pistol shot.

When the boy regained consciousness, daylight was creeping into the cavern through an opening much lower down than the one by which the boys had entered the upper cavern.

The earth outside was covered with a thick mat of snow, and the trees and shrubs of the forest were bending beneath burdens of pure white.

The fire had burned to ashes and it was miserably cold.

The Little Brass God was gone!

CHAPTER VII

AN EMPTY CAVERN

Perhaps a dozen yards from the fire, Tommy stumbled at a figure over which the falling snow was fast drifting. He called out to Sandy, who was only a short distance away, and the two lifted the unconscious form in their arms and staggered toward the fire.

"Why, it's nothing but a kid!" Sandy exclaimed.

"Don't you know who it is?" demanded Tommy.

"Never saw him before!" was the reply.

"It's Thede Carson!"

"Not that little monkey of a Thede Carson who's always getting the Beaver Patrol into trouble?" demanded Sandy. "What would he be doing up here? I guess you're losing the sense of sight."

"Sure, it's Thede Carson," insisted Tommy.

"Well, I guess he's about all in," Sandy volunteered.

"Get busy then, with your first aid," Tommy ordered. "Get some of his clothes off and get to work with snow, or his fingers and toes will drop off as soon as they thaw out."

"I don't believe it's the cold so much as it is exhaustion," Sandy ventured. "He seems to have been running a whole lot, for he's still panting, I reckon he just dropped down when he couldn't run any further."

"I guess that's about right," Tommy admitted. "He doesn't seem to be very cold. It may be that wound on his head," the lad added, pointing to a long gash in the scalp which, judging from the state of the lad's clothing, had bled very freely.

"What do you think of coming away up here in the Hudson Bay country and picking a member of the Beaver Patrol right out of the woods?" demanded Sandy. "We seem to find Boy Scouts wherever we go."

The boys worked over the exhausted lad some moments, and then he opened his eyes.

"Now for the love of Mike!" exclaimed Tommy, "don't look around and say 'Where am I?' The correct thing to say in these modern days is 'Vot iss?' Do you get me, Thede?"

"Why, it's Tommy!" said the boy.

"Betcher life!" returned Tommy. "Did you run all the way up here from Clark street? Or did you come up in an aeroplane?"

Thede sat up and looked about for the tents and the boats.

"Why, this isn't the camp!" he said.

"We haven't got any more camp than a rabbit!" declared Sandy. "We're lost! We've got to wait till morning to find our way back."

"It's a good thing you're lost!" exclaimed Thede. "I don't think I could have held out until I reached the camp. You see," he went on with a slight shudder at the recollection of his experiences, "I left George a long distance off."

"Left George?" repeated Tommy.

"I couldn't bring him with me," answered Thede, with a slow smile,

"Where did you leave him?" demanded Tommy.

"Why didn't he come with you?" asked Sandy.

"Because," replied Thede, "just as he was reaching up to the wall of the cavern to take hold of the Little Brass God, he got a tunk on the coco that put him out for the count."

"What do you know about the Little Brass God?" asked Tommy.

"I've seen it!" answered Thede. "It sat up on a shelf on the face of the wall, with its legs crossed, and its arms folded, and its wicked face telling me where I could go whether I wanted to or not."

"I guess something's gone to your head!" declared Sandy.

"But I'll tell you we found the Little Brass God!" declared Thede. "George came to the cabin, and we started out to find the camp, and got lost in the storm, and brought up in a cave inhabited by two bears."

Sandy regarded Tommy significantly.

"And we found a basement floor to the cavern, and went down the elevator and found a man asleep in front of a fire with the Little Brass God winking at him. Funny fellow, that Little Brass God!"

"You for the foolish house!" cried Tommy.

"Honest, boys!" Thede declared. "George came to the cabin and I started home with him after Pierre left us alone together. The storm chased us into a cave, just as I told you, and we kept on going until we came to the place where the Little Brass God sat up on the wall making faces at a man asleep at the fire."

"Go on!" exclaimed Tommy, at last understanding that the boy was in his right mind. "Tell us about it!"

"And George said he would get the Little Brass God without waking the man up. So he gave me his gun, and I was to shoot in case the man made any trouble. Then, just as George was reaching for the little Brass God, the man woke up and shot at him, Then the man shot at me, and I shot at him, and then he got my gun away from me and I ran out to find you."

"And you left George there in the cavern?" asked Sandy.

"I just had to!" was the reply. "I couldn't do anything with that giant of a half-breed, and I didn't have a gun and so I ducked."

"Can you take us back to that cavern now?" asked Tommy.

"Sure I can," was the reply.

"Oughtn't we to let Will know where we are?" asked Sandy.

Tommy looked at Thede questioningly.

"Can you tell us how to find the cavern?" he asked in a moment.

"What for?" demanded the boy. "I'm going to take you where it is."

"You're about all in," declared Sandy, "and you ought to go to camp and rest up and tell Will where we've gone."

"You couldn't find this cave in a thousand years," declared Thede.

While the boys talked the wind died down, and the snow ceased falling.

Presently a mist of daylight crept into the forest and then the boys crept out on their journey toward into ridge of hills.

"Wasn't that a dream about your seeing the Little Brass God?" asked Tommy as they walked along.

"Sure not," was the reply, "we both saw it, didn't we?"

"Well, whoever told you anything about the Little Brass God?" demanded Sandy. "How did you know there was a Brass God?"

"Old Finklebaum told me. He said he'd give me a hundred dollars if I found it, so I started in to earn that mazuma."

In as few words as possible the boy repeated the story he had told George on the previous evening.

"I guess you boys came up here looking for the Little Brass God, too, didn't you?" the boy asked, shrewdly, after a moment's hesitation.

"We came up to hunt and fish!" laughed Tommy.

"To hunt for the Little Brass God and fish for the man who bought it of the pawnbroker, I guess," laughed Thede. "You boys never came clear up here just to chase through the snow after game when there's plenty of shooting three hundred miles to the south."

"You say you think that Pierre is the man who bought the Little Brass God of the pawnbroker?" asked Sandy, as the boys stopped for a moment to rest. "Is that the reason you followed him here?"

"That's the reason!" was the reply.

"He seemed perfectly willing to have you come?"

"He welcomed me like a long lost brother!"

"Then it's a hundred to one shot Pierre never got his hands on the Little Brass God! Don't you see how suspicious he would have been if he had had the little brute in his possession?"

"I didn't think of that!" replied Thede. "Look here," the boy continued, "I'd like to know what all this fuss is about, anyway. Why should any one in his right mind give old Finklebaum a thousand dollars or five thousand dollars, for that piece of brass? That's what gets me!"

Tommy and Sandy looked at each other significantly but made no immediate reply. In a moment Thede went on.

"'Spouse this should be a Little Brass God stolen from some temple away out in the wilds of India. Suppose a delegation of East Indians should be sent here to get it. Wouldn't they murder a score of men if they had to in order to get possession of it?"

"They probably would," was the reply.

After an hour's hard walking, the boys came to the foot of the ridge of hills and looked upward. Thede pointed to the cavern where the two bears had been discovered.

"There's where we went in," he explained, "but the cavern where the fire and the Little Brass God were is right under that one."

"How're we going to get to it?"

"If you want to take your chance on meeting the bears, you can drop down through the opening from the floor above."

"But isn't there an opening to this lower cavern?"

"Sure there is! That's the one I ran out of! Say," he continued, "that's the one we saw the man by the fire run out of, too. You can see the tracks of his moccasins in the snow. He must have left after the storm ceased. My tracks were filled."

"In we go, then!" cried Tommy, advancing up the slight slope to the top of the cavern.

"Watch out for bears!" cried Thede.

CHAPTER VIII

A TRAPPER'S TREACHERY

When Will, watching at the camp, found that Tommy and Sandy had disappeared, he had no idea that they would remain more than an hour or so.

The long night passed, however, and the boys did not return. When daylight came, Will built up a roaring fire and began preparing breakfast.

It was his idea at that time that the boys had come together in the forest about the time the snow began falling, and had sought in some deserted shack temporary protection from the storm.

"They'll be back here in a short time, hungry as bears!" he thought.

Presently he heard some one advancing through the snow-covered thicket, and turned in that direction with an expectant smile.

Instead of his chums he saw a half-breed in leather jacket and leggings and a fur cap approaching. When the fellow reached the camp he made a quick and rather impertinent inspection of the tents before approaching the spot where the boy stood awaiting him.

"Good morning!" Will said, not without a challenge in his voice.

"Where are the boys?" asked the visitor.

"Who are you?" demanded Will.

"Pierre!" was the short reply.

"Why do you ask about the boys?"

Pierre explained in broken English that one of the boys who evidently belonged to the camp had coaxed his companion away.

"Who is your companion?" asked Will, "and why do you come here looking for him? Who was it that visited your cabin?"

Pierre laboriously explained what had taken place on the previous evening, and Will listened with an anxious face.

"And you left them there together, and when you returned they had disappeared? Is that what you mean to say?"

Pierre nodded.

"He coaxed my boy away," he said sullenly.

"Is this boy you speak of your son?" asked Will.

"Chicago boy!" was the reply.

"Why don't you go on and tell me all about the boy and about yourself?" inquired Will. "What's the use

of standing there grunting and trying to make me understand nods and scowls?"

Pierre explained that he had been in Chicago to see the sights, had fallen in with Thede, and agreed to bring him into the forest with him. His explanation was not very clear as he talked more mongrel French than English, so Will was not very well informed at the end of the recital. Pierre looked suspicious as well as disappointed.

"Well," Will explained to the half-breed after a moment's deliberation, "I suppose you'll turn in now and help me find the boys!"

Pierre nodded and pointed toward the campfire.

"Build him big!" he said. "Boys come cold."

Accepting the hint, Will piled great logs on the fire while the half-breed looked sullenly on. The boy then dressed himself in his warmest clothing and the two set out together.

"Have you any idea which way to go?" asked the boy.

Pierre pointed away to the south.

"Wind blow that way," he said. "They follow the wind."

Numerous times, as the two tramped through the snow together, Will caught the half-breed looking in his direction with eyes of hate.

After proceeding some distance, he fell in behind Pierre, and so the two traveled through the wilderness, each suspicious and watchful of the other. After walking an hour or more they came to a place where Tommy and Sandy had built their fire on the previous night.

There the half-breed read the story written upon the snow like a book. Pointing here and there, he explained to Will that two boys had been caught in the storm and had built a fire. He showed, too, that a third boy had come plunging through the snow, nearly circled the camp, and came back toward the fire from the north. Then he showed the tracks of three heading off to the south.

"Do you think one of those boys was your companion?" asked Will.

The half-breed answered that he was sure of it.

"Then that leaves one of the boys still unaccounted for," Will mused. "It looks to me," he went on, "as if your friend and George started away together and got lost. Then your boy came back and found Tommy and Sandy and started away with them toward the place where he had left George. Is that the way you look at it?"

The half-breed grunted some sullen reply, and the two walked on together following the trail which led toward the range of hills.

Instead of directly following the trail left by the boys, however, Pierre turned frequently to left and right, explaining that if enemies were about it was a trail which would be watched.

They came to the cavern at last, and stood by the dying embers of the fire. There was no one in sight. Will examined the sloping surface of snow in front and found no tracks leading outward.

"They must be in here somewhere!" he exclaimed.

Pierre nodded his fur cap vigorously, and the two began a careful examination of the underground place.

They found many little caves opening from the larger one, but no trace of the boys. After a time a shout from Pierre drew Will to his side. The fellow was peering into a crevice, in the rocky wall which seemed to lead for some distance under the hill.

"Do you think they are hidden in there?" asked the boy.

Pierre explained in his barely understandable dialect that he thought the boys might have escaped into the inner cavern and started to make their way out in another direction.

"Then I'll go in after them," Will decided.

Before entering he called shrilly into the cavern, but only the echoes came back to him. By considerable squeezing, he managed to make his way through the opening. He then found himself in a

passage-like place, sloping upward. As he threw his light about the interior, he heard a chuckle in the outer chamber where he had left Pierre.

He turned in time to see the half-breed rolling great stones against the mouth of the narrow opening by means of which he had entered.

"Hah!" sneered Pierre. "You bring me trouble!"

"What are you doing that for?" demanded Will.

The half-breed peered into the opening with eyes that resembled those of a snake, so full of malice and hatred were they.

"You steal my boy!" he said.

"So this is a trap, is it?" Will demanded.

The half-breed answered by a chuckle of laughter."

"If you don't take those stones away," Will threatened, "I'll fill you full of lead when I do get out!"

The half-breed patted his gun stock significantly, but made no reply.

The boy heard him rolling rocks along the cavern floor and against the opening, and turned away hoping to find some other means of egress.

It was clear to him that the half-breed thoroughly understood the situation in the hills. He had no doubt that he had planned to bring him there for the purpose which had developed. He understood, too, that if there were other openings to the cavern, Pierre knew where they were, and would block them as soon as he had effectually blocked the one by which entrance had been effected.

It was cold and damp in that underground place, but the perspiration actually broke out on the boy's brow as he considered the fate which might await him in that dreary place of detention.

He had, of course, no means of knowing the whereabouts of any of his chums. In fact, it seemed to him possible that they, too, had been inveigled into a trap similar to the one which had been set for himself.

The motive for this brutal action on the part of the half-breed was, of course, entirely unknown to the boy. It will be remembered that he knew nothing whatever of Thede's suspicions that Pierre actually had the Little Brass God in his possession.

It was black as ink in the passage, but the boy's flashlight had recently been supplied with a new battery, and he knew that it would not fail for many hours, so he walked along with confidence.

In perhaps a quarter of an hour the boy came to a blank wall. There appeared to be no way in which the journey could be extended under the hills. The nearest lateral passage was some distance back.

Realizing that no time should be lost, the lad hastened thither and advanced to the south end of the cross passage. Here, too, he came upon a blank wall. While he stood listening a heavy, rumbling voice came to his ears. There were either crevices in that rocky bulkhead or the wall was very thin.

Presently the heavy voice ceased speaking, and then a lighter tone was heard. At first Will could not distinguish the words used, but directly his heart almost bounded into his throat as he listened to Tommy's voice saying:

"I'll break your crust, you old stiff, if you come near me!"

So the boys were still in a position to defend themselves! Will beat frantically on the wall and threw his light hither and yon in search of some opening through which his voice might be heard.

Directly there came an answering sound from the other side.

CHAPTER IX

TWO HUNGRY BEARS

The Little Brass God was gone!

George, still lying upon the floor of the cavern, stretched his legs and arms, to see if he was all there, as he mentally commented.

After a time he arose to his feet, clinging desperately to the wall because of his weakness, and called to Thede, who, as the reader knows, had left hours before, in search of the injured lad's chums. There came only echoes in reply to his shouts.

There was a pile of wood near at hand and, gathering numerous dry fagots, the boy staggered dizzily toward the heap of ashes in the center of the cave. It seemed to him that the first thing to do was to get warm.

He was hungry, too, but warmth was the important thing just then. A few red coals still remained, and a blaze soon grew under the boy's careful hands. In a short time there was a roaring fire.

After thawing the chill out of his bones, the boy began looking around for his friend of the night before. He looked at his watch and noted that it was eight o'clock. His revolver was gone but his search-light was still in his pocket.

He remembered in a moment that he had handed his revolver to Thede before starting to cross the light zone in the center of the cavern. Whatever had taken place during his hours of unconsciousness, it was evident that he had not been robbed.

It seemed to the boy, as he stood looking through the opening which gave a view of the forest to the north, that he had lain on the hard floor of the cavern for countless aeons. He did not remember what had caused the wound on his head. He only knew that he had been seized with a sudden dizziness and had fallen, after hearing pistol shots.

Standing before the fire with the cheerful light of the blaze on one side and the dazzling light of the sun on the snow on the other side, the uncanny incidents of the night before seemed like a dream to the boy.

He even found himself wondering whether he had actually caught sight of the Little Brass God, leering down upon the watcher from the wall.

Then he recollected that Thede had first called his attention to the ugly image whose evil eyes seemed to take on malevolent expressions in the light of the dancing flames.

"It must be all true, then," he concluded. "The man by the fire, the Little Brass God on the shelf, the pistol shots, and then a blank."

He wondered where Thede had gone, and why he had deserted him.

"That's the strangest part of it all," the lad mused. "I had an idea that the boy would stand by me if I got into trouble, and here he runs away, leaving me lying unconscious in the freezing atmosphere of this desolate old cavern. I didn't think it of him!"

It occurred to George as he studied over the puzzle that Thede might not have been as innocent and loyal as he had pretended to be. He might have been merely an instrument in the hands of a cunning man.

"At any rate," the boy pondered, "we have found the Little Brass God!"

He had not, of course, secured possession of it, but he had learned definitely that it was in that part of the country. He wondered as to the identity of the man who sat watching the fire. The light had been dim, and it might have been Pierre for all he knew. Or it might have been an accomplice of the tricky trapper.

"Now, I wonder how I'm going to get back to camp," the boy mused as he piled on more wood and spread his hands to the cheerful warmth of the fire. "Judging from the time it took us to get here, it must be ten or twelve miles back to the camp."

"The boys will think I've deserted them, I guess," he added. "If they knew how hungry I am just at this minute, they'd send out a relief expedition!"

While the boy warmed himself before the fire a series of growls came from the entrance to the

cavern, and two black bears looked in upon him.

"Now I wonder if you're the same disreputable citizens that tried to make a free lunch counter of me last night?" George mused. "I presume you're hungry, all right, but I'd rather not be the person to do the feeding this morning. You look too fierce for me, both of you."

The smell of blood evidently excited the bears to unusual feats of courage, for they entered the mouth of the cavern and stood growling and showing their teeth within a short distance of where George stood.

Only for the great blaze which now leaped almost to the roof of the cavern, the boy would have been attacked at once. He glanced at the rapidly decreasing pile of wood, and wondered what would take place as soon as the fire had died down. He had no weapon with which to defend himself.

For at least a quarter of an hour the bears and the lad gazed at each other through the red light of the fire. The bears were gradually moving forward, and every time the lad laid a stick of wood on the blaze they seemed to understand more fully that his defense was weakening.

George thought he had never seen wood burn away so fast. The blaze seemed to melt it as boiling water melts ice.

Already the blaze was dropping lower, and the pile of wood was almost gone. The bears sniffed at the blood stains where the boy had lain on the floor, and turned fierce eyes on the figure by the fire.

George estimated that his wood might last ten minutes longer. Then there would be a rush, a crunching of bones and all would be over.

A rifle shot sounded from the outside, and one of the bears dropped to the rocky floor, struggled spasmodically for a moment, and then straightened out and lay still. The next instant another shot, equally accurate, came and the second bear was dead in a moment.

The boy waited eagerly for the appearance of the man who had done the shooting. He had no idea who the man might be, and was not quite certain that the fellow had not taken from him one danger only to place him in another. Still, he looked eagerly forward to his appearance.

When the man appeared, a smoking double-barreled rifle in his hand, George saw a tall, ungainly figure with long legs, a long, slim body, very high cheek bones, and rather stern and uncompromising blue eyes.

The newcomer was dressed in the leather jacket usually worn by trappers in that district, leather leggings, moccasins, and fur cap. A belt of red leather, probably colored and tanned by some Indian process, was drawn tightly about his waist. There were gold rings in his ears which swung an inch down on his brown cheeks.

"Hello, sonny!" the man said, advancing into the cavern, standing the butt of his rifle on the rock, and leaning on the barrel.

"Say," the boy almost shouted, springing forward and extending his hand, "that's about the best shooting I've seen in a year!"

"The place to hit a bear," the new-comer replied, "is in the neck, right about where the spinal cord starts to crawl under the skull."

"It's a good thing you came along just as you did," George stated. "I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am, and so you'll have to take that for granted. You saved my life!"

"I'm Antoine," the other said, in a moment, after a casual survey of the boy. "I'm a hunter and trapper. I saw the bears looking in, and knew from the smoke coining out that there was a human being in here, too. Knowing that bears and humans don't mix remarkably well, I came in, too. That's all there is to it!"

"I guess they would have mixed with me all right in about a minute," George said with a smile. "I had about abandoned hope!"

"How'd you get here?" asked Antoine.

George related the story of the adventures of the previous night, omitting, however, any mention of the Little Brass God. While he talked, there came to his mind an indistinct impression that the face of the man he had seen sitting by the fire was the face of the man who now stood before him.

He put the thought away instantly, for he did not believe that the person who had left him on the floor of the cavern to die of cold and exposure, or to be devoured by wild beasts, could be the same who had so opportunely rescued him from death.

"You must be hungry, I take it," Antoine said, after the boy had concluded his recital. "Boys usually are hungry."

"You bet I'm hungry!" George replied.

Antoine glanced smilingly about at the two bears lying on the floor.

"Can you cook bear steak?" he asked.

"Can I?" repeated George.

Antoine pointed to the Boy Scout medals on the lad's coat sleeve.

"You have the Stalker and Pioneer medals," he said. "You ought to know something about forestry."

"How do you know what they are?" smiled George.

"Oh," was the hesitating reply, "I know quite a lot about Boy Scout work and training. Fine lot of fellows, those Boy Scouts!"

"Right you are!" declared George.

Antoine now drew forth a hunting knife which seemed to be as keen as a razor and began removing the skins from the dead animals. He worked swiftly and skillfully, and in a short time the making of two fine black bear rugs were laying in the sun outside.

"Now," the man said, "you get busy with that steak over the coals, and I'll tote in more wood. You don't seem quite up to carrying heavy loads yet. That must be a bad wound."

"I think I must have lost considerable blood," George answered.

After the steak was nicely broiled, Antoine brought water from a nearby stream, and the boy's head was carefully and rather skillfully attended to.

"And now," said Antoine, "we'll go to my own home, which isn't far away."

Without a word the boy followed the hunter through the deep snow which lay on the slope until they came to an opening in the rock. Entering, the boy found a very comfortable cavern, almost completely lined with fur. There was a chimney-like crevice in the ceiling which permitted the escape of smoke and foul air. Both inside and outside the entrance were great stones by which the place might be sealed up from either side.

"Quite a cozy nest!" George ventured, and Antoine nodded.

"We'll celebrate your arrival with a cup of good strong tea," he said.

The tea was brewed and drunk. Then the trapper's face began to assume grotesque forms. The boy's head swam dizzily. He caught a cynical smile in Antoine's eyes and dropped back into a drugged and dreamless sleep!

CHAPTER X

BOYS IN A TIGHT PLACE

"Who's there?" asked Tommy's voice, as Will beat frantically against the rocky bulkhead against which he stood.

"How do I get in there?" asked Will.

"Go around to the entrance and shoot up this half-breed!" advised Sandy. "He's got us cornered!"

"He's got me cornered, too!" shouted Will.

"Then I guess he's got the high hand," Tommy answered back.

"Say," Thede's voice exclaimed, "the rock at the end of that passage isn't more than a foot thick and it's full of cracks, at that. If you had a couple of big whinnicks, you could smash it down."

"I can find the whinnicks all right!" answered Will.

"Say!" cried Sandy, "you want to hurry with those whinnicks, for Pierre is almost standing on his head, threatening to shoot if you try to break through."

Will collected a number of heavy stones which had fallen from the walls and threw them with all his strength against the partition.

The cracks widened, and slivers of brittle rock fell away. His efforts were greeted with cheers from the other side, and he redoubled them, with the result that in a short time, a passage between the two sections of the underground chambers had been made.

When Will stepped through the opening he saw Pierre's fur cap sticking up above a barrier which reached almost to the ceiling. The long barrel of his rifle protruded threateningly into the room.

"I guess," Will proposed, "that we'd better get out of range of that gun. It doesn't look good to me."

The boys crowded back into the chamber which Will had recently left and looked at each other with inquiring eyes.

Pierre's harsh laugh came from the outer room. "You thieves!" he cried. "You die like bear in a trap."

"What does the old idiot mean by that?" asked Will.

"Search me!" replied Tommy.

"How did he ever get you in here?"

"That's a pretty question to ask of us!" declared Tommy. "How did he ever get you in here?"

"He came to camp and volunteered to help find you run-away boys," replied Will. "He brought me to the hills and tumbled boulders into the entrance to the cavern."

"Well, he came to our assistance almost as soon as we reached the hills in search of George," Tommy grinned. "He was so mighty careful to get us into safe quarters that he led us into this rotten hole and fixed it so we couldn't get out!"

"What's he doing it all for?" Will asked, turning to Tommy.

"Perhaps Thede Carson can tell you better than I can," replied Tommy. "You remember Thede Carson, don't you, Will?"

"I seem to see a faint, resemblance in this lad to a boy I used to know as Thede Carson," Will laughed. "He looks now, though, as if he had plenty to eat, and a good place to sleep!"

"I have been eating regularly," grinned Thede, "but there's no knowing whether I'll ever connect with another bear steak."

"He came up here with Pierre," Sandy explained. "Perhaps he can tell you what the half-breed is up to."

"I don't know any more about it than you do!" replied Thede. "He didn't seem to like the idea of my associating with George," the boy added with a wink at Will, "and so he bunched us together and locked us up."

While Pierre gave vent to hoarse shouts of rage, and many entirely unnecessary and insulting taunts, the boys explained the events of the past night. The thing which startled Will most was the story Thede told about having caught sight of the Little Brass God.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Certain sure!"

"It wasn't the firelight or anything like that?"

"No, it was the Little Brass God!"

"Was it Pierre who sat before the fire?"

Thede shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't think so," he replied.

"Did you see the man's face?"

"Only in the shadows. His chin was on his breast at first, and then, when he looked up, he turned his head the other way."

"Well," Will said, "we have at least located the ugly little beast."

"Did it look complete and whole?" asked Tommy. "That's one question you didn't answer when you told me about having seen it."

"Just as good as new," replied Thede. "If it had been opened at all, the trick was turned by a man who understood the combination."

"And now about George?" Will asked.

"Some one carried him away," Thede declared.

"That's the way I figure it out," Tommy cut in.

"He didn't walk away," Tommy added, "because there were no tracks his size. There were plenty of other tracks, but none which could have been made by George's shoes."

"Aw, how do you know anything about that?" demanded Sandy. "We saw a large moccasin track there, and how do we know that some man didn't walk behind George and step on all his tracks?"

"Or how do we know that some big chump didn't carry him away in his arms?" Tommy admitted. "I never thought about the means that might have been used to conceal the kid's exit. You're the only real live Sherlock Holmes in this crowd," the boy added with a laugh.

"Then it's a cinch that some one carried him away," Will decided.

"Of course it is!" Sandy answered.

"Look here!" Tommy said after a moment's reflection. "Don't you boys remember how mussy that cavern looked. We were all so anxious to chase out and find George that we didn't pay much attention to the room, but I begin to remember now that it looked as if some one had shot wild game there and cooked meat over the fire."

"I remember something about that now!" Thede said.

"And there was more blood on the floor than ever came from the little wound George received, according to the way you describe it," Tommy went on.

"And I'll bet if we'd hunted around the cavern, we'd have found bear steak and refuse hidden in some of those odd little nooks."

"I guess that's right," Thede declared.

"Now, about those moccasin tracks?" asked Will.

"Let's go out and follow 'em up!" grinned Sandy.

"Sure!" replied Tommy. "Just bite your way through these rocks and go out and follow 'em up."

"It's only a question of time when we'll get out," Will insisted.

"That crazy half-breed can't keep us in here forever!"

"If he keeps us in much longer," Tommy declared, rubbing the waistband of his trousers affectionately, "he'll have me starved plumb to death!"

"Me, too!" Sandy cut in. "I'm shy a breakfast myself!"

"And I'm so hungry that I could eat snowballs!" Thede said, with a grin. "I don't think I ever was so hungry!"

"Why don't you go outside and take a shot at that half-breed?" Tommy asked, looking reproachfully at Will.

"Did he get your guns away from you?" asked the boy.

"You bet he did!" replied Tommy.

"How did he do it?"

"He asked us to lay them aside while we crawled through a crack in the rock, and then grabbed them. Oh, he's a foxy old fellow, that!"

"Well, we can't get out if we stand here talking all day," Sandy ventured. "The longer we stay, the hungrier we'll get!"

"What I'd like to know," Will suggested, "is this: Why did he do it? What spite has he against us?"

"If you leave it to me," Thede replied, "the Little Brass God has something to do with it! I don't know whether Pierre has possession of the ugly little beast, or whether he is trying to get possession of it, but I believe he has a notion that we're trying to get bold of it."

"Well, that's a good guess," grinned Tommy.

During all this conversation the voice of the half-breed had been frequently heard, alternately cursing and coaxing the lads to enter the outer chamber where he could talk with them.

"What do you want?" Will asked finally.

"Come here!" was the answer.

Tommy stepped half-way through the opening and flashed his searchlight into the apartment beyond.

"That is better!" shouted Pierre,

"So that's what you want?" demanded Tommy. "You want light to shoot us by!"

"Send the other boy out!" demanded the half-breed. "Send out the one I brought here!"

"He wants you, Will," Tommy said.

As the boy was about to step into the opening, Thede caught him by the arm and drew him back.

"Just you wait a minute," he said.

The lad placed a sliver of rock in Will's hat and held it beyond the opening, at the same time letting the rays of the searchlight fall full upon it.

"I know that half-breed better than you do," Thede said, as he pushed the hat out further and further.

When the hat was about as far out as the boy could send it without risking his own hands, a rifle shot rang through the cavern and the bullet cut its way through the exposed hat.

"Don't you see?" Thede asked. "He knows you have a gun, and he figured that you'd fall into this chamber, and that we wouldn't dare reach over for it. He's a foxy old reprobate!"

"What next?" demanded Will.

"You just wait a minute!" Thede advised. "I think I know a way out! If we just could get in behind that half-breed and chuck him into the prison he prepared for us, it would be a mighty fine joke on him!"

CHAPTER XI

THE HALF-BREED

But the way out was not to lie through undiscovered passages! It was set by fate that it was to be over the dead body of the half-breed!

While the boys discussed the possibility of finding an unguarded exit from the series of caverns, another shot sounded, and then they heard the rattle and crash of rocks falling upon an equally hard surface.

"There's something doing, now, sure!" Tommy exclaimed.

"Do you know of any other trappers in this section?" asked Will, turning to Thede. "It seems to me that that shot came from outside, and I don't believe Pierre would be throwing down his own barricade."

"I haven't seen anyone else here," replied the boy, "except the one we saw in front of the fire last night."

"And that might have been Pierre, for all we know!" Tommy declared.

"You don't know whether it was Pierre or some one else," Sandy observed, "so we don't know whether there's another hunter roaming around here or not! I hope there is, so far as I'm concerned!"

The question was settled in a moment. Rocks continued to fall from the barrier, and in a moment a voice called out:

"Who's there?"

"Four of us!" was the reply.

"Why don't you come out?"

The boys detected a faint chuckle in the voice.

"We're willing!" Sandy answered.

"Well, come on, then!"

Sandy stuck his head out of the entrance and turned his searchlight on the new-comer. After a moment's inspection of the fellow, he stepped into the outer cavern.

"You look pretty good to me," he said.

Ho was about to say more when he caught sight of the body of the half-breed lying just inside the cave.

He turned white and for a moment felt dizzy and faint.

He was unfamiliar with death in any form, and this snuffing out of a life seemed to him particularly horrible.

In a moment the other boys came out and stood looking down upon the body. They were all deeply affected by what had taken place, particularly Thede, who had never received anything but the kindest treatment from the half-breed until the arrival of the Boy Scouts.

"It was my life or his," Antoine explained.

"Did he shoot at you?" asked Will, "we heard only one shot, save the one fired by Pierre at my hat."

"He didn't get an opportunity to fire!" Antoine answered. "He had his gun leveled at my head when my bullet ended his life!"

"Now I wonder," thought Will, "whether it was Pierre who sat by the fire last night, and whether the secret of the Little Brass God dies with him! I wish there were some way of knowing."

While these thoughts were passing through the brain of the boy, Thede stood regarding the new-comer in a puzzled way. Slowly the impression was forming in his mind that it was not Pierre who had sat before the fire in the chamber where the Little Brass God had been displayed.

"I suppose the next thing on the program," Antoine observed, with a smile, "will be breakfast."

"That suits me!" shouted Tommy and Sandy in a breath.

"Well," Antoine answered, "I have plenty of bear meat, and a few canned provisions, and plenty of good, strong tea, so we'll adjourn to the dining room and partake."

"Have you seen anything of our chum?" asked Will.

Antoine smiled, but made no reply.

"Look here," Sandy said, pointing down to the moccasin tracks, as they emerged from the cavern and found themselves on the snowy slope, "this man has passed along here before this morning."

"That's a fact!" Will exclaimed. "So he must be the man who carried off George. If he is, why doesn't he say so?"

"Perhaps he wants to give us a surprise," observed Tommy.

It was only a short distance from the system of caverns where the boys had been imprisoned to the home of Antoine, which has previously been described.

When the boys entered, they looked eagerly around in the hope of finding George, but the boy was nowhere to be seen.

"I thought sure you had found our chum in the cavern," Thede suggested.

"Why, I thought you boys were all here!" replied Antoine, still with that odd smile on his face.

"But there is a boy who was wounded in the bear cavern last night," Thede explained, "and I left him there while I went after his friends, and when I came back, he was gone. We thought sure you took him away."

Antoine made no reply. Instead, he busied himself with breakfast.

In his efforts in this direction Tommy and Sandy were not slow in joining, and in a short time beautifully broiled bear steaks were smoking on tin plates which Antoine had taken from a cupboard fastened to the wall. A pot of tea was steeping over a fire built at one end of the cavern. The boys eyed this with interest.

"We really ought to be going out in search of George," Will finally said. "He may be suffering in the cold."

"That's right!" declared Tommy. "I'm going out just as soon as I finish eating! The lad was carried off by some one, all right, and he can't be far away!"

"I wonder why we didn't get our revolvers away from that dead man?" asked Sandy. "We surely ought to have them!"

"I looked for them," Will said quietly, "but they were not there!"

"Then he must have hidden them away somewhere," Tommy declared. "We laid them down just before crawling through that hole."

"You will doubtless find them in time," Antoine suggested.

"I should think the half-breed would have kept them pretty close," Sandy observed. "You don't find automatics like those every day!"

"It strikes me," Antoine said, directly, "that you boys would better settle down for a little rest previous to going out after your chum."

"Aw, we don't need any rest!" declared Tommy.

"Not while George is out in the cold!" Sandy cut in.

"Just as you please," smiled Antoine. "And now," he went on, "if you've all had plenty to eat, I'll bring on the tea. Tea always tastes better to me when there is no food in my mouth to interfere with the flavor of it. I have a very fine brand here."

"We've been waiting for that tea!" laughed Tommy.

"You can't lose Tommy when it comes to anything good to eat or drink!" laughed Sandy. "He's always on watch."

Antoine seemed a long time pouring the tea into the tin cups, which he had placed on the rough board which served as a table. As he bent over the teapot, a familiar sound caught Will's ears and he turned his head aside to listen.

"Slap, slap, slap!"

The boy nudged Tommy who sat next to him with his elbow and called his attention to the sound. Tommy almost sprang to his feet as he listened, but Will forced him back with his hand.

"Slap, slap, slap!" came the signal again.

Sandy and Thede were now sitting with knives and forks suspended in the air, listening wide-eyed to the sound.

"That's the Beaver call!" declared Will in a whisper.

"That means George!" Tommy whispered back.

"Sure!" was the reply. "There's no one else to give the Beaver call here. I wonder why the boy doesn't show up."

In the meantime, Antoine had been busy over the teapot and had not noticed what was going on at the table.

"I'm fixing this tea up particularly strong," he said, facing the boys with a smile on his lips, "so you mustn't wonder if it tastes just a little bit bitter. There's nothing on earth will do a man who's been exposed to the weather more good than a strong cup of tea!"

The man poured the decoction into the tin cups and brought out a couple of cans of condensed milk and plenty of sugar.

"You see," he laughed, "that I have all the luxuries of an effete civilization! Put in all the sugar you like, if you find the tea too strong. I have plenty of it!"

The boys used the sugar and milk liberally, and Will was about to lift his cup to his lips when the Beaver call came again:

"Slap, slap, slap!"

Although the sounds were faint ones, they caught the attention of Antoine, who, scowling, turned his face in the direction from which they had proceeded. In a minute, he arose.

"What was that noise?" he asked.

"Did you hear a noise?" questioned Will.

"I thought I did!" replied the man. "Perhaps I'd better take a look about the place. There may be intruders here!"

As Antoine moved about, his footsteps in a measure muffling the sounds which followed, the boys heard a low whisper.

"Don't drink! It's drugged!"

Wondering why the boy did not show himself, and able to understand his strange conduct only on the theory that he had been gagged and bound, Will overturned his cup of tea by an awkward movement and sprang to his feet as the burning fluid came in contact with his clothing.

Simultaneously the boys all sprang from the table, taking care to upset the board upon which they had been eating. An angry exclamation came from Antoine's lips as the carefully prepared tea was spilled to the floor. In a moment, however, his face broke into a smile.

"Too bad!" he said, "but accidents will happen. I'll make you some more! I'll have it ready in a moment."

"We really would like some tea, notwithstanding our awkwardness," laughed Will, listening as he spoke for some further sound from his chum.

"Drugged, drugged, drugged."

The boys heard the whisper floating through the room. Then they heard a gasp as of some one coming out of a sound sleep, and saw Antoine springing toward a weapon lying on the floor.

CHAPTER XII

A SURPRISE AT THE CABIN

Will got to the weapon first.

With an exclamation of rage and anger, Antoine drew his hunting knife from its sheath and lifted it threateningly.

"Keep back!" he said. "Keep back, every one of you!"

"Throw down the knife, then!" Tommy demanded.

Instead of throwing down the knife, Antoine seemed preparing for a spring. It was evident that he had not yet abandoned the hope of gaining his revolver. The weapon which Will had seized left his hand with a swift whirl, and the next moment the knife crashed from Antoine's hand to the floor. The fellow's wrist had been broken.

He fell back with a groan, but remained inactive only a second.

"I'll come back!" he shouted, and disappeared through the entrance.

Tommy followed him out after having secured Will's automatic, but he was nowhere in sight on the slope. The tracks in the deep snow showed that he had turned in the direction of the cavern which the boys had known to their cost that morning.

"He's gone after our revolvers!" shouted Tommy.

"I'm afraid that's right," Sandy answered, sticking his head cautiously out of the opening. "He's the man who hid them, probably!"

"He'll be back directly," Will prophesied, "so one of you would better remain on guard at the door. If he catches us all inside, we'll be in the same fix we were when he found us!"

"I'd rather fight bears than a snake like that!" declared Sandy.

A faint voice was now heard calling from some unseen recess.

"Tommy, Sandy, Will!" George's voice called.

Leaving Tommy at the door, the three boys passed around the chamber pounding on the walls with little rocks and listening eagerly for further words. At last they came to where a bear skin hung against a crevice. They drew it aside and saw George looking up at them.

"Vot iss?" asked Sandy with a grin.

"So you heard me in time!"

The boy's speech was low and indistinct.

"If we hadn't, we wouldn't be here," answered Sandy.

"That Beaver call sounded good to us, too!" Will observed.

"What about the tea being drugged?" asked Sandy.

"It put me to sleep in a minute!" declared George. "My head whirled for a second, and then I was out for the count."

"I guess he thought he had you laid away for a good long time," suggested Sandy.

"I reckon I woke up too soon for him," George answered with a faint smile. "I heard you boys talking, though you seemed a long way off, and at first I thought it was all a dream."

"We got a feed in that dream, anyway!" laughed Sandy.

"I tried to cry out but couldn't," George continued. "My lips seemed frozen into numbness. I couldn't move hand or foot for a time, but finally I managed to clap the palms of my hands together in the Beaver call, and that seemed to set the blood circulating through my veins."

"What do you make of it?" asked Sandy.

"If you leave it to me," whispered George, still faint from loss of blood and the effects of the drug, "I dope it out that this man who calls himself Antoine is in possession of the Little Brass God, and he has in some way discovered that we are here after it."

"That's a fact!" exclaimed Will, "you saw the Little Brass God, too, didn't you?"

"I certainly did!" was the reply.

"Well, was the man who sat before the fire, the same man who gave you the drug?" Will went on. "Did you see him plainly?"

"I've been wondering about that," George replied. "Sometimes I think Antoine is the man who sat before the fire with the ugly Little Brass God leering down at him. Sometimes, I think it was Pierre who sat there. I can't quite make up my mind."

"If it was Pierre," Will said gravely, "the Little Brass God will probably never be found! The man who gave you the drugged drink shot the half-breed to death this morning."

"Then I hope it wasn't Pierre who sat by the fire," Sandy declared. "We've come a long way after that Little Brass God, and got into many a mix-up over it, so we've just got to take it back to Chicago with us!"

"Now look here," Will reasoned, "this Antoine had some motive in putting us boys to sleep! We don't know what that motive was, but I think I'm giving a pretty good guess when I say that he wanted to prevent our interfering with the Little Brass God until he had arranged to make anything we might do in that line absolutely worthless."

"That listens good to me, too," declared Sandy. "The man wouldn't try to drug us unless he had some strong motive for doing so!"

"We're all together once more, anyhow!" Will observed, "and I think we'd better stay together. I never did like this idea of one boy sneaking away in the night and leaving the others to guess where he went to. It isn't safe to go wandering off alone in that way!"

"Yes, I'd talk about that if I were you!" laughed Sandy. "You go wandering off by yourself more than any of the bunch!"

"I think it's a good thing for you boys that I went wandering off alone this morning," Will argued.

"You didn't go wandering off alone!" Thede cut in. "You had Pierre with you? Poor Pierre!" he continued. "I'm sorry for him! I suppose we'll have to make some kind of a grave and give him decent burial!"

"Sure, we'll do that!" agreed Will. "But what is puzzling me just now is this," the boy went on, "how are we going to get out of this hole with that Antoine watching our every move? He'll shoot us down just as quick as he shot Pierre if he gets a chance."

The boys took short trips out of the cavern in quest of their enemy, but were unable to discover any traces of him other than the tracks in the snow. These led toward the chain of caverns which the boys had such good reason to remember.

"I think we'd better make for the camp," Will suggested in a moment.

"Why not move over to the cabin?" asked Thede. "It will be much more comfortable there."

"That's a good idea, too," Will agreed, "except that we'd have to move all our camp equipage and provisions."

"Well, why not?" asked the boy. "We can rig up a drag and draw the stuff over in two or three loads."

"We can if Antoine isn't shooting at us every minute!" Sandy cut in.

"I don't believe Antoine will trouble us," Thede answered. "If he has the Little Brass God, he'll probably make off with it. He's got to go somewhere to get his injured wrist tended to, and my opinion is that he'll simply disappear from this neck of the woods until he makes up his mind that we have gone back to Chicago."

"I hope he won't go very far," Will mused.

"If he does, we'll lose the Little Brass God!" Sandy argued.

"I don't agree with Thede," Will said directly. "If the man has a secure hiding place in the hills, he'll manage to treat the injured wrist himself and remain hidden until he thinks we have left the country."

"It's all a guess, anyway," Sandy exclaimed, "and, whatever takes place, I vote for moving our truck over to the cabin and settling down there! We don't want to go back to Chicago as soon as we find the Little Brass God, do we?"

"We certainly do not!" shouted Tommy, sticking his head into the narrow doorway. "I haven't had a chance to catch all the fish I want yet!"

"Well, we may as well move over to the cabin if that's the general opinion," agreed Will. "I must admit that those tents look pretty thin to me. I didn't expect snow to fall so early."

"Besides," Sandy urged, "if we live in the cabin, we'll be perfectly safe from attack. It would take dynamite to make a hole through those great logs, and the door itself is about a foot thick!"

"All right," Will replied. "If we find anything left when we get back to our camping place, we'll move it over to the cabin!"

"The first thing to move will be George," laughed Sandy.

"Oh, I can walk all right!" the invalid declared.

"Through this thick snow? I should say not! We've got to make up some kind of a sled and give you the first sleigh-ride of the season!"

"And while we're about it, we can make a sled that we can move the tents and provisions on," suggested Will.

The boys had little to make a sled with, but they finally managed to bind saplings together with such cord as they had in their possession, and so manufacture a "drag" upon which the wounded boy could be carried back to camp. The lads were strongly tempted to help themselves to Antoine's provisions before they left, but they finally decided not to do so, especially as they believed that they had plenty of their own.

"He'll need them all before he gets rid of that sore wrist," Sandy laughed. "He won't be in shape to do much hunting!"

"Now," Thede observed, after wrapping George up in one of the bear robes taken from the wall of the cavern, "I've been thinking that the cabin is a great deal nearer the camp. Of course I haven't been to the camp, but I've heard the location described and I'm positive that it is four or five miles further away from us than the cabin."

"So you want to take George directly to the cabin, do you?" asked Tommy, who still considered himself on guard and kept a constant lookout for Antoine. "I don't see why we shouldn't do so," he added.

"It isn't far out of the way," urged Thede.

"Then here we go to it!" laughed Tommy. "I'll chase on ahead and have a roaring fire built there before you get half way to it!"

"Oh, you will?" grinned Thede. "I'd like to know how you're going to find it! George and I are the only ones in this party who can find the mysterious cabin in the bog!"

"Well, then," Tommy admitted, "perhaps you'd better run on ahead and find it, while we come along with the kid!"

It was a long and painful journey to the cabin, but it was finished at last. When the boys came to the edge of the swamp, however, they saw a great column of smoke rising from the chimney on the roof.

"Now do you suppose Antoine beat us to it?" asked Thede.

CHAPTER XIII

A FACE AT THE WINDOW

When the boys came nearer to the cabin, they saw many footprints dotting the level surface of the snow. They peered through the window which gave on the side of their approach, but could see no one moving about on the inside. Save for the great fire blazing in the rudely-constructed fire-place, the cabin seemed to be absolutely deserted.

"Suppose you give me a boost through this window," Thede suggested, as the boys at last stood close against the rear wall.

"Why not go around to the door?" George asked.

"I might get a bullet in my coco when I turned the angle of the house!" replied Thede. "There's no knowing who's around there."

"That's a fact!" Will agreed. "We've got one wounded boy on our hands now, and we don't care about having another."

"Look here," George cut in crossly, "if you think I'm too much trouble, you can just drop me down in the snow anywhere and I'll take care of myself!"

"Aw, cut it out!" roared Tommy.

The boys laughed so heartily at the idea of leaving their chum in the snow to care for himself that his mood instantly changed to one of apology. In a moment, he was all smiles again.

"Now, if you've got that little scrap settled, you can give me a boost through this window!" suggested Thede.

"Sure the door's closed?" asked Tommy.

"Closed and latched!" was the answer.

The boys had some difficulty in removing the single sash which protected the opening, but the task was finally accomplished, and then Thede crawled through into the cottage.

The boys heard him drop lightly to the floor and then followed a long silence. Presently Sandy clambered up the log wall and peered inside.

He saw Thede standing close against the wall, gazing down at a great haunch of venison which lay on the floor.

"If you want to keep that in good condition for eating, hang it out in the frost," laughed Sandy. "We can't afford to lose that!"

Thede beckoned to him to enter, and the boy dropped down on the floor.

"Who brought it here?" he asked.

"Search me!" Thede answered.

"It might have been Antoine."

"Aw, he couldn't kill a deer and bring in that big haunch with that lame wrist of his!" Thede exclaimed.

Sandy looked out of the window and beckoned to his chums to enter.

They gathered around the haunch of venison with amazement depicted on their faces. The fire still burned brightly, and it was evident that it had not been long since new fuel had been laid.

"Some one made us a present, I take it!" Tommy grinned.

"But who?" demanded Will.

"It's one of the mysteries of the British Northwest Territories!" replied Sandy. "Suppose," the boy continued, "we open the door and bring George in. He must be getting cold by this time!"

"Be careful when you open the door, then," Thede warned.

But there was no one at the door or, at first, within view of it. There were plenty of tracks, however, which appeared to have been recently made. George was carried into the cabin, and then Sandy and Tommy set out to trace some of the foot-prints to their destination.

"I'm going to know where that fellow went," the former declared.

"I have an idea he'll come back before long," Sandy suggested. "He's built a nice fire and brought in plenty of venison, and won't go away and leave the cosy corner just yet."

When the boys came to the edge of the morass, they saw a figure flitting into the underbrush on the other side.

"I guess we've frightened him away!" Tommy declared.

"Shall we follow him?" asked Sandy.

"Aw, what's the use?" Tommy questioned. "You said yourself, a little while ago, that he'd come back to get a bite of that haunch of venison."

"And I believe he will!" answered the boy.

George was made comfortable in one of the bunks, additional fuel brought in for the night, and then Will, Tommy and Sandy set out to bring the supplies and tents from the camp.

"Suppose Antoine, or some one else, should bring the Little Brass God to this cabin," George began.

"I wish we knew whether it was Antoine who sat before the fire last night," Thede puzzled. "If I could just get my hands on that idiotic little plaything, I'd sneak back to old Finklebaum and get his hundred dollars so quick it would make his head swim."

"His hundred dollars!" repeated George. "I thought I heard you saying last night if you got hold of the Little Brass God, you'd make him put up a thousand dollars for it!"

"So I would, too," declared Thede. "And he wouldn't pay the thousand dollars, either, unless he saw a chance to make ten out of it!"

During the entire absence of the boys George and Thede discussed the mystery of the Little Brass God. They wondered how it had made such good time into that country, and puzzled over the strange fact that they had blundered upon it on the very night of their arrival.

But when at last the boys returned with the tents and a part of the provisions, drawn along on the "drag," they had reached no conclusion whatever.

It was all a mystery which time alone could solve!

Although it was now the middle of the afternoon, Will and Sandy insisted on making another trip to the old camp.

"If we're going to stay in the cabin," Will urged, "we've got to do the job some time and we may as well do it now."

"I guess you'll have a good load if you get it all!" Tommy suggested.

The boys insisted that they were able to bring in the remaining stock and set off through the snow. Tommy and Thede continued to drag in wood until there was a great stack of it piled against the cabin. Every time they opened the door, they looked in vain for the appearance of the man they had seen running away through the underbrush on the other side of the swamp, but he was not seen.

"I'd like to know what's the matter with that fellow!" Tommy observed as darkness settled down and the two boys returned to the cabin.

In half an hour Sandy and Will came in with the provisions which they had brought from the camp. They reported that quite a large share of the tinned stuff had been cached in the snow about half way between the cabin and the site of the old camp.

"We couldn't bring it all in," Sandy announced.

"I hope the man we drove out of the cabin will find it if he needs it," Will observed.

After a hearty meal they cleared away the dishes and sat around the fire discussing the situation until ten o'clock. Then they secured the door and windows of the cabin and crawled into their bunks, which were remarkably well supplied with blankets and tanned bear skins.

In the middle of the night the fire died down to embers and Will arose to pile on more wood. He moved softly about in order not to disturb the sleep of his chums, and finally sat down by the blaze to enter anew upon a mental discussion of the mystery which surrounded them.

Will heard the sash rattling, as if in the light wind which was blowing, and glanced toward it.

What he saw was not the velvet darkness of the night laying against the glass. The firelight which shone through the glazed sash revealed the outlines of a human face looking in upon him.

It was an ugly face, with dusky skin, narrow slits of eyes, and straight black hair which seemed to wind and coil about the repulsive countenance as a collection of serpents might have done.

The face disappeared as the boy looked, and Will tiptoed softly to the bunk where Tommy lay and awoke him with a violent shake.

"Get up!" he said.

"Aw, go chase yourself!" answered Tommy not very politely.

"It's worth seeing," Will assured the lad. Tommy seized a shoe from the floor, hurled it at the head of his chum, and then rose to sitting position, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"What have you found now?" he demanded.

"There's a new one on us!" Will declared.

Tommy opened his eyes wide in wonder.

"Not a new Boy Scout?" he asked.

"We seem to pick up plenty of new Boy Scouts," laughed Will, "but this isn't a new Boy Scout. This is the Little Brass God given the power of expression and the use of his legs!"

"So you've gone and got 'em too, have you?" demanded Tommy.

"When I got up to renew the fire," Will answered, "I heard the window sash to the north rattling. Thinking that I ought to go and fix it, I glanced that way and saw the Little Brass God looking down upon me."

"Was he sitting up in the window with his legs crossed, and his arms folded, and his face making you think of the Old Nick?" asked Tommy.

"I could see only the head, but the head looked exactly as I imagine the Little Brass God looks; with the firelight shining on the yellowish hide, the face gave me the impression of being made out of brass!"

"You better read another page out of the dream book and go back to bed!" laughed Tommy. "You've been laboring under strong excitement lately and I think you need a long rest."

CHAPTER XIV

A CALL FROM THE DARKNESS

"Perhaps you don't believe I saw anything at the window," replied Will, somewhat indignantly.

"Oh, I don't doubt that you think you saw something at the window."

Will seized a searchlight, grabbed Tommy by the shoulder, and pulled him out of the door and around to the north side of the cabin.

The boys were not dressed especially for a midnight excursion in the snow, and their teeth chattered

as they made their way against the chilling wind. However, they stuck to their purpose and soon stood under the window which Will had pointed out."

"There!" the boy exclaimed in a triumphant tone. "Now perhaps you'll tell me I didn't see anything through the glass."

A light snow had fallen during the late hours of the night, and there, plainly revealed on the undisturbed surface—undisturbed only for what they saw—were clearly outlined the footprints of two people.

One had worn moccasins, the other such shoes as might have been purchased at any department store in Chicago.

"And the tenant came back!" grinned Tommy.

"Then why didn't he come in?" demanded Will.

"Because he's scared of us!"

The boys followed the tracks toward the morass some distance and then returned to the cabin.

"Whoever the fellow is," Will argued, "he found it necessary to get a half-breed or Indian guide."

"How do you know that?" asked Tommy. "That may have been Antoine in the moccasins."

"I give it up!" replied Will. "I don't know anything about it."

"I shouldn't wonder at all if some faithful Hindu had sailed across the Pacific ocean, and traveled half across the continent, to rescue a faked Brass God from the polluted hands of an Unbeliever."

"You don't really think there's any of this Hindu temple business in this Little Brass God case, do you?" asked Tommy.

"Well, the face I saw at the window looked like that of an East Indian!" declared Will. "His skin was brassy, and his eyes had the devil's leer in them just as the eyes of the Little Brass God are said to have."

"Well," Tommy declared with a yawn, "I'm going back to bed!"

"That's what I'm going to do," Will agreed. "If we sit up here until we solve this new problem, we'll probably never get any more sleep as long as we live."

Seeing that the door and windows were securely fastened, the boys, who had been sleeping together, went back to their bunk, and there was only the crackling of the fire and the roaring of the wind to break the silence.

Tommy was soon sound asleep, but Will lay awake listening. Again he heard the window sash rattle, but this time he did not move.

Then he dozed off into slumberland, dreamed that he was on a tropical island where the perfume of the roses was so heavy on the air that breathing almost became a task. He opened his eyes dreamily, saw the fire blazing cheerily, heard the wind roaring around the corners of the cabin, and closed them to dream the same dream over and over.

At last he awoke with a start and sensed a peculiar odor in the room. He lay perfectly still for a moment wondering what it could all mean, when a voice as smooth and as evil as the hissing of a snake, cut through the air. He listened but did not move.

"You have hidden it!" the voice said.

There was a long pause and then the voice broke the silence again.

"Arise and come to me."

The next moment the boy heard Thede moving in the bunk above. The lad first threw his legs over the rail, and Will heard him drawing away the blankets. Then the boy slipped softly to the floor and moved, as one who walks in his sleep, toward the north window.

"Come to me, come to me, come to me!" the voice repeated insistently.

"I'll come to you, all right, in about a minute," Will mused, "if you try any of that magic business

here."

Thede continued to move toward the window, walking with his hands outstretched, as the somnambulist frequently walks.

When the boy reached the window he staggered back as if from a blow, then moved forward again, as if bent on leaving the cabin by way of the narrow opening.

Will raised himself in the bunk, drew an automatic from under his pillow, and fired point blank at the glass. There was a crash and the cabin grew cloudy with powder smoke.

Thede sat down on the floor abruptly and began rubbing his eyes.

"I guess I walked in my sleep," he said. "I do sometimes."

The shot had awakened Tommy and Sandy, who came bounding to the floor.

"What'd you shoot at?" they asked.

"The Little Brass God!"

"I guess you've got the Little Brass God on the brain!" grinned Sandy.

"Yes," Tommy cut in, "you've gone and busted a perfectly good pane of glass when there isn't another one within a hundred miles."

"Did you hit any one?" George called feebly from the bunk.

"I don't know!" replied Will. "I'm going out to see in a minute."

But Tommy and Sandy were out of the door and chasing around the corner of the house before Will could disentangle himself from the blanket.

Instead of passing outside, then, he stepped over to the window and looked out. The boys were there looking over the freshly fallen snow with an electric searchlight.

"Did I see anything?" asked Will with a note of victory in his voice.

"Somebody saw something!" answered Sandy. "There's blood on the snow! Some one found a bullet!"

"I'm going to dress and find out where these tracks lead to!" Tommy declared. "This is too much mischief for me!"

"Stick your face up in the air," advised Will with a grin.

"Snow!" shouted Tommy with a gesture of disgust. "These tracks'll be full of the beautiful before we could walk forty rods!"

"That's about the size of it!" agreed Will. "So you may as well come back into the house and we'll go back to bed."

When the boys entered and closed the door again, it was four o'clock and they decided not to go back to bed again that night.

"How'd you know there was some one there?" Sandy asked of Will.

"I heard the window sash rattle, then a strong perfume—something like opium or hasheesh—was forced into the room, then the fellow on the outside began to work his hypnotic spell."

"You say it right!" exclaimed Tommy.

"It's just as simple as anything you ever read in a daily newspaper," declared Will. "This Little Brass God we are tracing up belongs either in a Hindu temple in India, or the Hindus think it belongs there. At any rate, some dusky old hypnotizer has been sent after it!"

"You'd better get a new dream book!" Sandy broke in. "Whoever came to the window tonight, came there to find out what we were doing in this cabin! That's all there is to that!"

"Whoever came to the window tonight," Will repeated, "came there for the purpose of hypnotizing one of us boys into telling where the Little Brass God is hidden!"

"Then he must be about fourteen miles off his trolley," laughed Sandy. "We don't know where the Little Brass God is hidden."

"He threw an Oriental perfume or narcotic of some, kind into the room and let out his persuasive language," Will went on. "If you don't believe he hypnotized Thede, just ask him what he heard just before he got out of bed."

"I heard some one calling to me," Thede answered.

"What did he say?"

"He told me to come to him."

"And you was obeying that command when you started toward the window?"

"I guess that's right," answered the boy, "but it's all so hazy that I don't know much about it."

"And then I fired at the window and broke the spell and also the pane of glass!" explained Will. "If he comes back here again, I'll shoot from the outside! We can't be kept awake nights by any East Indian magic."

"East Indian granny!" declared Sandy.

"You read about such occurrences in the newspapers every day!" declared Will. "We see people hypnotized and forced to obey the commands of others, not only in the private parlor but on the open stage. Sometimes, too, the hypnotic influence is assisted by strange Oriental perfume. There's nothing extraordinary about it at all! In fact, there is only one word that describes it, and that is the word uncanny."

"Fix it anyway you want it!" grinned Tommy. "There's a broken window, and there's blood on the snow, and we found Thede lying on the floor when we sprang out of bed. If that doesn't make a good case of circumstantial evidence, I don't know what does!"

"This Little Brass God is getting on my nerves!" declared Sandy after a short pause. "We've been up against smugglers on Lake Superior; up against rattlers and wreckers in the Florida Everglades, and up against train robbers on the Great Divide, but this ghost business gets my goat!"

"Perhaps you'd like to go back to Chicago empty-handed?" asked Tommy.

"Not so you could notice it!" was the reply. "If there's anything I like, it's nice little Boy Scout excursions like this. All we have to do to get busy is to get a camping outfit together and march off into the wilderness. Everything else comes right along as a matter of course. Everything else, from magic haunches of venison, which appear when you wave your hand, to Little Brass Gods, which grin down from the wall one second and vanish in smoke the next!"

"Aw, come on to bed!" cried George.

"I'm going to sit up and get breakfast!" declared Tommy. "Sandy's got a grouch on, and there's nothing on earth so good for a grouch as a slice of broiled venison."

Tommy dressed himself and chased outdoors in order to bring in the meat supply. He returned without it. The venison was gone!

CHAPTER XV

A HUNTING EXPEDITION

The boys remained at the cabin all the next day stirring out only for wood and game. Without going, more than a dozen yards from the habitation, the boys shot three rabbits and half a dozen squirrels.

These were taken about noon, and the boys immediately began the preparation of a stew. There were a few potatoes left, and these they pared and sliced into the savory dish when it was nearing completion.

They expected, every one of them, to receive another visit from the mysterious persons who had appeared at the cabin on the previous night, yet they did not talk of what was in their thoughts. They discussed the sad plight of Antoine, wandering about in the forest with a broken wrist, and wondered if the cached provisions were still intact.

The following night was a quiet one. Snow fell heavily, and the small streams of that section took on icy blankets.

When they awoke the following morning, the sun was shining brightly, and there were many signs of a pleasant week.

"After breakfast," Tommy declared, as he sent his plate over for the third helping of the rejuvenated stew, "I'm going out and get a specimen of every wild animal in the woods. Then I'm going to put them all into this stew!"

"You might put a wolverine into it!" suggested Thede.

"Are they good to eat?" demanded Tommy.

"They're good to eat game out of the traps, I understand," replied the boy. "Or, just for a change," Thede continued, "how'd you like an owl in your stew? I guess that wouldn't put you wise or anything!"

"You seem to know quite a lot about this country," Will suggested.

"Poor Pierre taught me quite a lot during our rambles," Thede answered sorrowfully.

"Then perhaps you'd better come along with Tommy and me and show us where to get these different kinds of animals the kid wants to put into his stew. That will help some."

After breakfast the three boys started out with their automatics.

They crossed the morass to the higher ground beyond and passed along in the direction of the camp. There might be duck over Moose river, Thede suggested, and Tommy certainly would want a duck for his stew. Also there might be wild geese there.

When they came to the place where the provisions had been cached, they found the surface of the ground broken and the provisions gone. Not a single can remained.

"Now, we'll have to shoot all the more game," declared Tommy. "We haven't got many beans or tomatoes left, so we'll have to forage on the country."

The loss was not considered a serious one, for the boys had plenty of provisions at the cabin and game was very plentiful.

As they passed through the country signs of the wild creatures of the woods were numerous. There were few spaces of a length of twenty-five feet in which the track of some wild beast or bird did not cross their path.

Thede read this writing in the snow so understandingly that the boys actually paid more attention to his explanations than to the discovery of the game he was talking about.

"What crossed there?" Will would ask.

"That must have been a red deer!"

"And this track, here?" asked Tommy.

"Probably a fox."

"Well, what do you make of this?" Will demanded with a wink at Tommy.

"That must have been a moose, but he passed here some time before the last fall of snow!" replied Thede.

"Well, what's this wobbly little mark here?" Tommy asked.

"Partridge!" replied Thede readily.

"Well, here's another odd little mark. Looks like some one had been dragging a rail fence. What's that?"

"You ought to know that!" answered Thede.

"I ought to know lots of things that I don't know!" commented the boy.

"Well," Thede said with a laugh, "the wild animal that passed along there was a Beaver!"

"I wonder if he belongs to our patrol!" chuckled Tommy.

"I should think the little fellow would freeze to death," Will objected.

"Pierre said it was pretty cold for them to be out when he saw tracks two or three days ago!" replied Thede. "They're building a dam over on the river some place, and I suppose they think they've got to finish the job before real winter sets in."

After a long ramble through the forest, the boys came to the site of the old camp. The snow which covered the ground here had been well trodden down, and many tracks led in the direction of Moose river.

"I suppose they've been hunting for deserted provisions," Will suggested. "I'd like to know who it was that made the search!"

"It might have been your Hindu friend," suggested Tommy.

"Look here, kid," Will said in a moment. "Now that this Hindu discussion has broken out again, I'd like to know what you think the chances are for locating that little brown man."

"Well," Tommy answered, "I believe you were right when you said that the Little Brass God meant something more than intrinsic value to at least one of the men who are chasing it up. Now," the boy went on, "if this brass-faced fellow has the sacred idol nut in his head, he won't leave this section of the country until he finds it."

"That's the way I figure it out!" Will answered.

"And this adds another interesting feature to the case," Tommy continued. "When we started out we were alone in pursuit of the Little Brass God. Then we came upon Pierre, and we were just beginning to believe that he also was in search of the merry little jigger when Antoine murdered him. Now, here comes a third interest, and, if you are anywhere near correct in your conclusions, he comes all the way from India."

"You don't know where he comes from!" Will interrupted. "The question we want to ask ourselves now is this:

"Have we any chance of recovering the article we were sent after if we remain in this district? In other words, ought we to settle down here and wait for things to quiet, or ought we to make an effort to discover the whereabouts of the two men who have expressed such decided opinions regarding the value of the Little Brass God?"

"Meaning Antoine and the alleged Hindu?" asked Tommy.

"Exactly," was the reply. "You see," Will went on, "there's no use of our remaining in camp here if the person who has the stolen article in his possession has taken it away."

"I believe Antoine has it!" declared Tommy.

"If Antoine has it, if that was Antoine sitting before the fire that night, why did he take the Little Brass God there instead of concealing it in his own cavern?"

"The more we talk about it, the less we know," grinned Tommy.

"Night before last," Will began, "the Little Brass God was in a cave only a few miles from this spot. I don't believe it has been taken out of the district! If you boys leave it to me, we'll stay in the cabin for a few days, and take quiet trips about the country, particularly the hilly country to the south, in search of Antoine and the Hindu."

"That suits me!" Tommy declared, "and I know it'll suit George and Sandy, too! There'll be a lot of fun in tramping about."

"Then why not make a trip to the range of hills right now?" asked Will. "We can be back long before night."

"I don't know about that," replied Thede who had been listening to the conversation without

speaking. "It's a long way over to the hills and the snow's deep."

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do!" Tommy exclaimed excitedly. "We'll get a lot of game and send you back with it, and you tell the boys that if we don't return tonight, we'll be camping in some of those caverns in the hills."

"I thought you'd be ready for another runaway night excursion!" laughed Will.

"I suppose I don't run away when I'm with you!" commented Tommy.

Will only laughed, and the boys began the collection of rabbits and squirrels and ducks until Thede was pretty well loaded down. They all walked along together until they came to where it would be necessary to part company because of the different directions to be taken.

There Will and Tommy turned toward the south while Thede kept straight on toward the cottage on the island in the swamp.

"There's one thing we forgot," Tommy suggested as the boys tramped laboriously through the snow. "We forgot to bring along anything to eat!"

"Yes, we did!" laughed Will. "Don't you think I'll ever start out on a tramp with you without plenty of provisions."

The boy opened his heavy coat and revealed inside pockets packed with sandwiches made of venison steak and bread, with now and then a sandwich composed of stewed meat and griddle cakes, for variety.

"We won't have to go home tonight, now, will we?" laughed Tommy.

"In Chicago," Will began, "we had a boy in our office we used to call The-Young-Man-Afraid-Of-His-Bed. You must be related to him, for I have never known you to go to bed without objecting, or to get up without thinking how much time you had wasted!"

"Never you mind me!" replied Tommy. "You wait till you get into some of those caverns in the hills and build a roaring fire, and I'll show you that you're not the only boy that can provide provisions."

"You mustn't do any shooting over there!" warned Will. "We might as well go in quest of the Little Brass God with a band!"

"That's a fact!" agreed Tommy in a discouraged tone.

The boys first visited the cave where George had seen the Little Brass God grinning down from the wall. There seemed to be no one within miles of them.

While they talked, however, a shadow fell on the oblong bit of light which marked the entrance, and a tall figure with one bandaged wrist, leaning on the barrel of a rifle, stood gazing down upon them with hatred flashing from his eyes.

"It's Antoine!" whispered Will.

"Yes, and he won't do a thing to us now!" whispered Tommy.

CHAPTER XVI

ANTOINE ON THE RUN

Antoine regarded the boys steadily for a moment without moving a muscle. Will and Tommy believed that the fellow meant mischief, and were wondering if they would be able to get their automatics from their pockets before he could bring his rifle to a shooting level.

One question had at least been answered. The boys had been wondering ever since settling at the cabin whether Antoine had not taken his departure from that country. His presence there at that time answered this question in the most uncomfortable manner. The man was evidently there on a mission not to be interfered with by so simple a thing as a broken wrist.

"Well, boys," Antoine said in a moment, his face relaxing into a smile which was far more terrifying than the previous look of hatred, "it seems that we have come together again!"

"Welcome to our midst!" grinned Tommy.

Antoine eyed the lad keenly for an instant and then turned his eyes toward Will.

"What are you doing in this country?" he asked.

"Fishing and bunting!" was the reply.

"Hunting for what?"

"Do you think we're looking for a forty story skyscraper?" demanded Tommy.

Again Antoine glanced sharply at the boy, but seemed determined not to give the slightest attention to his irrelevant observation.

"Who sent you here?" he asked of Will.

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Tommy angrily. "Is this the third degree?"

"How long are you going to remain here?" asked Antoine, without paying any attention to the boy's question.

"Gee!" exclaimed Tommy. "You make me think of the stories of little Clarence in the newspapers! You're the original little interrogation point."

"You'd better answer my questions!" thundered Antoine, losing his temper at last.

Now this was exactly what Tommy had been hoping for. Antoine angry might prove to be more communicative than Antoine in a pleasant temper.

"Will you answer a few of my questions?" asked Will, wondering if it would be possible for him to spring upon the trapper and bring him down before his rifle could be brought into use.

"If you'll keep that impertinent little gutter-snipe still," Antoine snarled, "I'll answer such questions as seem to me to be worth answering."

"Are you the man who was seen sitting half-asleep before a fire in a cavern three nights ago?" asked the boy.

The man hesitated for a moment, as if in deep thought, and then answered with an exclamation of impatience.

"Were you in the cave that night?"

"No, but my chums were," Will replied.

"What did they see there?"

"A man asleep by the fire!"

"Perhaps the man wasn't asleep at all. What else did they see?"

It was Will's turn to hesitate now. He was wondering if he ought to mention the fact of the presence in that cavern of the Little Brass God.

At first it seemed to him that he ought to do so, that he might be able to secure information as to the exact situation from Antoine by facing him with the fact of the discovery of the ugly little idol.

Then he reasoned that an acknowledgment that they knew anything whatever of the Little Brass God would be likely to get them into deeper trouble, if possible, than that which they now faced.

So the boy decided to say nothing whatever of what George and Thede had seen shining in the light of the fire.

During this brief time of silence Antoine brought his rifle into a more menacing position and began stirring about angrily.

"Are you going to answer my question?" the man finally demanded.

"That's about all so far as I know!" replied the boy.

Of course Will was not telling the exact truth, but he believed that, under the circumstances, he was privileged to shade the exact facts a trifle in the interest of his own safety.

"What was it you put in the tea you gave George?" asked Tommy with a mischievous grin on his freckled face.

"I put nothing whatever in it!" replied Antoine, "that is, I put nothing in it calculated to do the boy any harm."

It seemed to the boys that Antoine's manner was becoming more conciliatory every moment.

"The lad was worn out, weak from loss of blood, and sadly in need of attention," the man went on, "and so, after caring for his wound and giving him a good breakfast, I gave him a mild sleeping potion, which, as you already know, affected him only a short time."

"You say it well!" grinned Tommy.

Antoine threw an angry glance at the provoking youngster, but soon turned to Will once more.

"I didn't quite understand the sudden attack the boys made on me," he said. "I was astonished when I received the blow which broke my wrist."

"Who set your wrist?" asked Will.

"There was only one bone broken, and I set it myself!" was the reply.

"Perhaps we did wrong in taking it for granted that George had been drugged to get him out of the way, and that we would share the same fate," Will admitted after a moment. "But, under the circumstances, I don't see how we could have done any differently."

"I'm sorry you were so precipitous," Antoine said with what was intended for a suave smile. "You boys, I understand," he went on, "are now occupying the cabin on the island in the marsh."

"Who told you that?" asked Will.

"No one!" was the reply. "I have been near the place twice since you took possession."

"Why didn't you call?" demanded Tommy.

Again the boy's question was ignored.

"Did you see any one loitering about the cottage when you were there?" asked Will. "You were there in the daytime, I suppose."

"Why do you ask that question?" demanded Antoine, giving a quick start. "Have you been annoyed by people hanging about the cabin?"

Will didn't know whether to relate the story of the midnight visit or not. He finally decided that the least he said to Antoine the better it would be for him, so he replied that they had passed two very restful nights in the deserted log house on the island.

"Did you find it deserted?" asked Antoine.

"It had the appearance of having been recently occupied," replied Will. "I understand from one of the boys that Pierre formerly lived there."

"So I understand!" Antoine replied grimly. "The point now is, whether it was occupied by any one after Pierre left it."

Not caring to tell the exact facts. Will said nothing whatever, and for a moment there was a rather embarrassed silence.

"What do you say about that?" demanded Antoine.

"Why, I think there was a little fire left when we went into the place," Will replied, "but that might have been a left-over from the day before. Those large fires burn a long time."

"And you say that you have not been disturbed at all during your occupancy of the place?" Antoine continued.

"Now I wonder how much this fellow knows," Will asked himself while Antoine stood gazing curiously down upon him. "I wonder if he knows about the people who came there that night? He seems to have a suspicion that some person is wandering about the country, and keeping pretty well out of sight. I wish I knew how much he knows."

"Oh, we have slept all right," he finally said, in reply to the man's question. "A mess of healthy boys will sleep under the noise of battle!"

"I ask these questions," Antoine said directly, "because I have seen strange foot-prints in the snow at different times, and it seems to me that some person or persons are skulking through the woods and, for some reason known only to themselves, keeping out of sight of honest men."

"He knows all about that affair at the cabin," Will concluded. "Now," he went on, "I wonder why he's so very much interested in these strangers, whoever they are?"

"Oh, come on!" Tommy exclaimed. "Don't stand here all day! We've got to get back to the cabin before it gets too dark to make our way through the woods."

The two boys took a couple of steps forward at a venture, without knowing whether Antoine would oppose their leaving the cavern.

"Well," he said, as he stepped to one side, "if you boys see any strangers loitering about, I wish you'd let me know."

The two lads amazed departed without making any promise, but they did not at once turn in the direction of the cabin. Instead, they plunged through the snow in a southerly direction, after seeing that Antoine had gone the other way.

"Where are you headed for now?" asked Tommy.

"Just wandering about on general principles," replied Will, at the same time turning into one of the eaves belonging to the system of underground passages. "Thought I'd look in here first!"

The lads entered the cavern as noiselessly as possible and looked guardedly about. A great heap of furs lay on the floor, and two figures rested upon them apparently lost in slumber.

Tommy pointed to the modern shoes on the feet of one of the sleepers. Then he silently called attention to the bloody bandage wrapped about the man's head. He looked at Will inquiringly.

"Do you suppose," he whispered, "that these fellows are here after the Little Brass God, too?"

The men seemed willing to answer the question for themselves, for they sprang to their feet and glared at the intruders angrily.

One of the men was dressed as a trapper, although he did not look the part. He was tall and angular, with sharp features and keen black eyes.

His companion was shorter, but equally slender. His eye orbits were small and oval in shape, his face was a dusky brown, and there was, somehow, about the man an atmosphere of the Orient.

While the four people glared at each other a step was heard in the narrow entrance, and in a moment Antoine's face was clearly outlined against the narrow slit of light.

The trapper took in the group at one quick glance, and, turning in his tracks, fled precipitately down the slope. Without speaking a word, the two men who had been found in the cavern, turned and followed him.

"Now what do you think of that?" demanded Tommy.

CHAPTER XVII

"BOYS UP A TREE!"

When Thede returned to the cabin with numerous squirrels, rabbits and ducks, Sandy greeted him with a shout of joy.

"This will seem like living in the north woods!" he cried. "We'll have all kinds of game from this time on!"

"You bet we will!" replied Thede. "I'm some hungry myself, when it comes to that! I guess I can get a few!"

"You never shot all these!" Sandy doubted, poking the squirrels and rabbits about with a finger. "You never got them all by yourself!"

"How do you know I didn't?" asked Thede, with a provoking grin.

"Because you couldn't," Sandy answered.

"All right, then," admitted the boy. "We all had a share in the shooting, and Will and Tommy sent me back with the game."

"Where have they gone?" asked Sandy, a look of indignation over-spreading his face. "They're always running away and leaving me to watch the camp! I wish they'd give me a chance sometime."

Thede sat down in one of the clumsy chairs which the cabin afforded and laughed until his sides shook.

"I don't think any of you boys are famishing for fresh air and adventure," he said in a moment. "You seem to me to be kept pretty busy."

"Well," Sandy exclaimed, "they might let me go with them when they start off on a tour like that. Where have they gone, anyway?"

"They said they were going out in search of the Little Brass God!" laughed Thede.

"Honest?" demanded Sandy.

"That's what they said!"

"I hope they don't find it!" Sandy exclaimed.

The boys cooked a liberal supply of game for dinner and then began restlessly walking to and fro over the cabin floor.

"What's the matter with you fellows?" asked George in a moment, speaking from the bunk.

"Hello, you've woke up, have you?" demanded Sandy. "I thought perhaps you'd sleep all day! How's your head feel?"

"Rotten, thank you!" answered George.

Sandy took a couple more turns about the room and then sat down by the side of the bunk where George lay.

"I know what's the matter with you!" George said, directly.

"What's the answer!" asked Sandy, rather sourly.

"You need exercise!" replied George. "You've been ramming about the cabin all the morning, and I've been wishing for the last three hours that you'd take to the tall timber."

"Is that so?" shouted Sandy springing to his feet.

"Yes, that's so!" answered George. "I wish you and Thede would go out for a ramble. If you don't know what else to do, walk over to the river and catch a fish. That'll go all right for supper."

"You're on!" cried Sandy.

The boys were ready for the trip in a very few moments. It was not necessary now to provide against mosquitoes and "bull-dogs," for the sudden cold spell had effectually silenced them for the winter.

"Now don't you fellows come home unless you bring about twenty pounds of trout," George directed as the two lads opened the door and disappeared from sight.

The boys had proceeded but a short distance when Sandy called his companion's attention to a peculiar foot-print in the snow.

"I guess we must be approaching the corner of State and Madison again!" he laughed. "We come out into the woods to commune with nature, and find some new party butting in every time we turn around."

"That's an Indian's foot-print!" declared Thede.

"How do you know that?" demanded Sandy. "You haven't seen any Indian, have you? How can you tell an Indian's foot-print from any one else's? That may be a white man's step, for all we know!"

"Nay, nay, me son!" laughed Thede. "I know by the shape of the moccasin and by the way the fellow walks."

"You know a whole lot of things!" laughed Sandy. "If you keep on accumulating knowledge, you'll beat Tommy out of his job as the Sherlock Holmes of the party!"

"Well, if you don't believe he's an Indian, you'd better go and ask him!" Thede argued. "He's right over there in the thicket!"

Sandy gave a quick start of alarm and put his hand back to his automatic. Thede motioned him to leave his gun where it was.

"This is a friendly Indian," the boy explained. "I've often heard Pierre refer to him. He's called Oje, but I don't know whether that's his name or not. He's said to be the champion fisherman of this section, and if you really want to get fish for supper, we'd better get him interested."

Oje was not a very romantic looking Indian, his general appearance being that of a bear fitted out with about three hides. The boys noticed, however, that none of the clothing he wore was fastened closely about his waist or throat. In fact, as he joined them with a grunt, they saw that the roughly-made garments were nearly all open.

The Indian knows better than to bring his clothing where it will come in contact with either his breath or with perspiration. Should he do this in very severe weather, he would soon find everything about him frozen stiff. He is sure, however, to carry enough clothing with him to keep him warm in repose and during the long nights.

"How do you know that's Oje?" whispered Sandy, as the Indian stood looking questioningly at the two boys.

"Because he answers to the description."

"Howdy!" the Indian exclaimed in a moment.

The boys returned the greeting, and then followed a conversation which was almost entirely expressed by signs.

Oje was invited to proceed with the boys on a fishing trip, and, later, to accept of their hospitality at the cabin. The Indian gave a grunt of assent, and at once turned toward the river.

As they passed the spot where the cache had been, Sandy glanced curiously toward the Indian, as though wondering whether he had not been the one to dig out the provisions. The Indian, however, walked on without appearing to notice either the rifled cache or the suspicious glances of the boy. Arrived at the river, the Indian, after carefully testing the ice, walked to a small island near the shore.

The boys looked on while he began his preparations for fishing. He went about the work quietly, yet seemed to be remarkably exact in all his motions. First he cut about twenty feet of fish-line in two in the middle of the piece and tied one end of each part to one end of a stick which he cut from the shore.

The knots he made in the fastening seemed primitive, but it was discovered later that they held very firmly. After a time he tied a bass hook to each fish-line, and on each hook he speared a little cube of fat pork which he drew from his pocket, and which had evidently done service through a long series of fishing expeditions.

Next he cut two holes in the ice, which was not very thick at that point, and over these the boys were invited to stand, sticks in hand, lines dangling from the poles.

Hardly had Sandy lowered his line which had a bullet flattened around it for a sinker, when he felt it jerk to one side, and almost immediately drew up a three-pound trout.

"Now, what do you think of that for catching fish?" demanded the boy.

Oje gave a satisfied grunt at this evident appreciation of his services, and motioned the lads to continue their sport.

Next Thede caught a gray trout somewhat smaller than the fish landed by Sandy, and then another three-pound speckled trout was landed.

"I guess if some of these fellows with hundred dollar fishing outfits could see us hauling beauties out of the water like this, they'd begin to understand what real fishing means!" Sandy exclaimed.

It was a glorious day for fishing, although a trifle cold. The sun shone down with a brilliance unequalled in more tropical climates, and there was little wind to send the chill through the clothing. After the boys had caught plenty of fish they started back toward the cabin.

Oje walked through the wilderness with a different manner from that with which he had accompanied the boys in the journey toward the river. He glanced sharply about, and frequently stopped to examine trifling marks in the snow. After a time he pointed to the track of a rabbit which had apparently departed from the faint trail in extreme terror, judging from the speed which had been made.

"Strange man!" he said significantly. "Find track soon!"

"Do you mean," asked Sandy, "that there's some one chasing us up?"

"Find track soon," was all the explanation the Indian would make.

"Of course!" Sandy declared. "We couldn't think of going back to the cabin without butting into some new combination!"

In a short time the Indian discovered the footprints he was looking for, and pointed them out to the boys. Two persons had passed that way not long before. The tracks in the snow showed that one had worn moccasins and the other ordinary shoes.

"I should think that fellow's feet would freeze!" Sandy observed. "He don't seem to have any overshoes on!"

"How do you know?" asked Thede. "He may have a small foot and wear overshoes shaped like a shoe itself."

"I wish we could follow the trail and find out where they're going!" Sandy observed.

"I'm game for it!" declared Thede.

The two boys pointed to the foot-prints and started to follow them.

The Indian seemed pleased at the idea, and soon led the way toward the range of hills whither the foot-prints pointed.

"The first thing we know," Thede suggested, "we'll be running into a nest of black bears. They're thick as bees up in this country, and they'll be hungry, too, with all this snow on the ground."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before a succession of low, angry growls came to the ears of the boys, and the next moment they saw Oje springing into the lower branches of a great fir tree.

"I guess he knows what's good for his health!" shouted Sandy. "Me for a tree, too!"

The boys probably never made quicker motions in their lives.

"Have you got a searchlight with you?" asked Thede.

Sandy shook his head sadly.

"Then we can't see to shoot the beasts," wailed Thede, "and it looks to me like one of those long, cold nights in a tree!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A PILLAR OF FIRE

"Can you build a fire with one match?" asked Thede, after a short silence, during which the boys had been trying in vain to get a shot at the bears.

"Of course I can!" answered Sandy. "What's the good of going through all those Boy Scout examinations, if a fellow can't build a fire with one match? Of course I can build a fire with one match!"

"Can you build a fire with one match up in a tree?" asked Thede, with a suspicion of mirth in his

voice.

"Of course I can!" answered Sandy.

"Up in a tree in the darkness, on a windy night?" asked Thede.

"If this thing is going to your head, you'd better drop down and make a run for the camp!" advised Sandy.

"Honest, now," asked Thede, "can you make a fire with one match in a green tree, in a high wind, on a dark night?"

"Cut it out!" roared Sandy.

"Because if you can," Thede explained, "I think I can show you a way out of this mess!"

"Well, go on and show it, then!"

"All you've got to do," Thede went on, "is to build a fire and drop the burning brands down on top of the bears. That will bring them out into the light for a second or two, and perhaps we can drop them with our automatics."

The boys heard the Indian moving softly about in the branches of the tree he had selected as a refuge, but paid little attention to what he was doing. Afterwards, they discovered that he had dropped his rifle at the foot of the tree, and was trying to secure it.

"Why did you say build a fire with one match?" asked Sandy. "I always carry a lot of matches," the boy added, feeling in his pocket.

"Find any?" asked Thede.

"Not a match!"

"I knew you wouldn't!" Thede said.

"How'd you happen to know so much?" grunted Sandy.

"Because," Thede replied, "I saw you feeling in your pocket for a match and bring your fingers out empty while at the cabin. Then you went to a match box and laid a great heap of 'em on the table. I thought of it while we stood there, but it never occurred to me to tell you to stow them away."

"I remember now!" Sandy said regretfully.

"Well," Thede responded cheerfully, "I've got just one match. I wonder if you can light a fire with that!"

"You just wait a minute and I'll tell you!" replied Sandy.

Thede heard him moving about over the limbs of the tree, his every motion being punctuated by growls from below. Then came an exclamation of satisfaction from the darkness, and Thede heard the boy declaring that it was a dead tree they were in, and that there was plenty of dry wood.

"All right, start your fire, then," suggested Thede, "and we'll see if we can't burn the backs off some of those bears!"

"Perhaps we can break off enough dry limbs to make a rousing old fire that will keep till morning," Sandy said in a moment. "If this old tree is really dead to the heart, it'll make quite a blaze."

Sandy gathered a great handful of twigs not more than a couple of inches in length and placed them in a sheltered position in the lee of the tree. Then he added dry boughs of larger size and made ready to use the precious match.

"Now you know what'll happen if that match goes out!" said Thede.

"This match," said Sandy confidently, "is not the kind of a match that goes out. I'd be a healthy old Boy Scout if I couldn't build a fire in the top of a tree with one match!"

The boy waited until there came a brief lull in the wind, then with the match protected as much as possible by his hat he struck it.

The flame spluttered for an instant, died down, crawled around to the windward side of the stick,

crawled back again, and then flared up gloriously. At first the dry twigs refused to ignite, but presently one caught the blaze, then another, and directly Sandy was obliged to draw his face away from the growing heat.

"There!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Didn't I tell you I could do it?"

"You said you could," answered Thede, "but I didn't believe it!"

"Look here," Tommy said in a minute, sheltering his face from the smoke. "First thing we know, we'll have this whole blooming tree on fire."

"If it gets good and hot, we can fry fish after the bears go away," suggested Thede. "I'm hungry! By the way," he added with a grin, "where are those fish?"

"Do you think I brought 'em up in the tree?" demanded Sandy.

"You never left 'em down there?" asked Thede.

"Didn't I?" exclaimed Sandy. "What did you do with the ones you were carrying?"

"Why," replied Thede, "I guess I left 'em in the thicket where we stood when we made a hop-skip-and-jump for the tree."

"We certainly are a bright mess!" cried Sandy.

"Say," Thede said in a moment, "I'll just bet that's what kept the bears so still while we've been up here building the fire. They've been eating our fish! That's why we couldn't get sight of them!"

"Can you see the bears now?" asked Sandy. "I'm sure I can't!"

"They're still back in there eating our trout!" wailed Thede.

"Unless you want a leg burned off," advised Sandy, "you'd better work around on another limb!"

"Aw, this limb is all right!" argued Thede.

The light from the fire now illuminated quite a little circle around the tree, and the boys saw Oje sliding cautiously down the trunk of the tree where he had taken refuge.

"He's after his gun!" declared Sandy. "Just watch out and you'll see him get one of those bears!"

Oje certainly was after his rifle, for he slid down cautiously, keeping the bole of the tree between himself and the bears.

Much to the surprise of the lads, the Indian did not again climb into the shelter of the branches. Instead, he stood peering around the trunk of the tree as if waiting for the wild animals to make their appearance. The flame blazed higher and higher and the boys began to feel uncomfortable.

"I'll bet there ain't any bears here!" Sandy exclaimed after a moment's silence. "I guess we run away from a rabbit!"

"I guess we didn't!" insisted Thede.

The boy's opinion was verified a moment later by the appearance of three shambling figures in the lighted zone. The bear is noted for his curiosity, and the boys realized, too, that the feast of fish must have been devoured.

"We might have sneaked away while they were eating that fine supper!" Sandy said, in a tone of disgust. "I think we ought to have medals made out of a cow's ear! That would be a good medal, wouldn't it, for boys who showed such courage in the face of the enemy?"

"Never you mind!" Thede answered. "I guess the bears are next to their job. We wouldn't have gone far before they'd been after us."

As the bears appeared in the light of the fire, now blazing fiercely and fast climbing from one dry limb to another, the lads saw the Indian raise his rifle to his shoulder and fire.

Instead of taking to their legs, the bears grouped themselves around their fallen mate and snarled savagely up into the tree.

"Oje will get another one in a minute," Thede ventured, overjoyed at the success of the first shot,

"and then we can open fire with our automatics."

"Holy Moses!" cried Sandy. "Here we've been sitting here watching the panorama with our guns in our pockets! I guess we don't know much about hunting bears, when it comes down to cases."

"Well, it isn't too late to shoot yet," Thede declared.

"It's getting pretty hot here, anyhow," said Sandy, "and we'll have to drop in a minute, whether we shoot or not. This old tree seems to be as dry as tinder!"

"Yes," Thede agreed, "I guess you started something when you made such good use of that one match."

The boys moved about on the limb in order to get at their automatics. They noted then, for the first time, that the perch upon which they rested was burning close to the trunk. They called out to each other, almost simultaneously, to shift to the trunk of the tree.

But it was too late. They felt themselves swinging through, the air, and the next moment there was such a mixture of boy and bear at the bottom of the tree as has rarely been seen in the British Territories.

Both boys landed squarely on the back of one of the animals. Of course, they rolled to the ground instantly and grabbed for their automatics, but their movements were no quicker than those of the astonished bear.

"Woof!" he said. "Woof!"

Translated into boy-talk, this read "Good-night!" and a second later they heard both bears tramping through the forest as if pursued by a pack of hounds.

"What do you know about that?" demanded Tommy.

Without replying, Thede scrambled to his feet and dashed into the thicket where he had left the fish. He returned in a moment with a woeful face which set his chum into roars of laughter.

"They ate our fish!" he said,

"What'd you think they'd do with them?" demanded Sandy. "Did you think they'd put 'em in cold storage and keep 'em for next summer?"

"What I'm sobbing about," Thede went on, "is that the bears certainly made a monkey of me. They weren't after us. They were after the fish!"

"Well, they got the fish, didn't they?" asked Sandy.

"And we might have been on our way while they were devouring them!" wailed Thede.

The tree was now virtually a pillar of fire, and the boys moved out from under it. They found the Indian standing, stolid and indifferent, just out of the circle of light.

"Just think of all that funny thing happening and he never seeing any humor in it!" exclaimed Sandy.

The Indian lifted his hand for silence, and pointed off toward the hills. Then, motioning the boys to follow him, he led the way into a thicket and crouched down.

Directly the panting and puffing of a man exhausted from a long run, was heard, and the familiar figure of Antoine dashed into the circle of light! He glared about for a moment and then dropped down on the snow, evidently completely exhausted.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SIGNAL FROM THE HILLS

"That's a funny proposition, too!" whispered Sandy.

"That's the gink who tried to feed us poisoned tea," Thede whispered back. "I wonder what he's running for."

The Indian drew at the boys' sleeves to enforce silence, and all three sat perfectly still for some moments. Then Antoine lifted himself to his feet and looked cautiously about.

They saw him examine the bear tracks and heard him muttering to himself as he followed with trained eyes the trail leading into the thicket where the boys and the Indian were hiding.

He drew quite close to the bushes where the three lay; so close, indeed, that they could hear him muttering as he lost the trail because of the darkness. Presently, he turned back.

"I think I understand," he said hoarsely. "Two of the boys were treed by bears and Oje rescued them. I presume they are half way to the cabin before this."

He started along the trail by which the boys had reached the tree but presently turned back. He stood in the light of the fire for a moment and then set off in the direction of the hills.

"Safer there than here!" they heard him growl as he passed them by.

Oje waited until the sound of the fellow's footsteps were heard no more, and then arose to his feet, Without speaking a word, he, too, faced toward the hills, passing through the snow at a swinging gait.

"What's he going to do now?" queried Sandy.

"I wish I knew!" replied Thede. "Say, look here!" the boy continued, "hadn't we better make a break for the cabin? I don't see any sustenance in wandering around in the snow all night!"

"Oje has something on his mind!" Sandy declared. "And I think we'd better find out where he's going."

"All right!" answered Thede. "I'm game, only I'm wondering what George is thinking about all this time."

It was cold and dark in the forest, and the snow was deep, but the boys trudged bravely on in the direction of the hills. At least they supposed that they were going in the direction of the hills. They could scarcely see a yard in advance of their noses under the thick foliage and so trusted entirely to the Indian, who led them along at a pace which was exhausting to say the least.

There would be a moon shortly after eight, but soon after that time they hoped to be snugly tucked in their blankets in the cottage. For a time they could see the dry tree which they had fired blazing in the distance, but at length it dropped out of sight.

"How long do you think that blooming savage will keep this up?" asked Sandy of Thede, as the two boys struggled along through snow nearly up to their knees. "I'm about all in!"

"He's capable of keeping it up all night!" Thede answered in a dejected tone, "but I hope he'll stop when we come to the hills."

"He does seem to be heading for the hills," Sandy replied. "If he'll only stop when he gets there, I may be able to catch my breath again!"

"Cheer up!" laughed Thede. "The worst is yet to come!"

"Doesn't that look like the moon coming up?" asked Sandy an hour later as they came to a slope which gradually led up to the hills.

"That's the moon, all right!" replied Thede. "But it won't do much good if we keep on walking under the trees. We ought to be home now."

"Does the moon rise in the south?" asked Sandy,

"There's no knowing what will take place in this part of the country," answered Thede. "Me for little old Chicago right soon!"

"I think it's about time we headed for Chicago," Sandy agreed. "When a couple of Boy Scouts who are supposed to be in their right minds climb a tree to get away from bears who are so busy eating stolen fish that they don't know there is a boy within a hundred miles, I think it is about time they headed for civilization."

"What did you mean about the moon rising in the south?" asked Thede.

"Well," Sandy answered, "it looks to me as if there were two moons rising, one in the east and one in the south!"

There certainly was a light growing far up on the hills. In a moment the Indian came back to the boys and pointed out the strange illumination.

"Fire there!" he said.

"What do you think it means?" asked Thede.

"Heap campfire!" was the reply.

Oje held up three fingers to indicate that he saw three fires. His eyes were sharper than those of the boys, who at first saw only a blur of light. Before long, however, they caught sight of three points of flame lifting above the hills. As the boys looked the blazes seemed to die down, or to be obscured by additional material being thrown upon them. As the moon rose, sending a wintry light over the great slope, three gigantic columns of smoke stood where the flames had shown a minute before.

"What do you make of it?" asked Thede.

"Can you read the signal?" asked Sandy.

"Do you really think it is a signal?"

"Of course it's a signal!" cried Sandy. "That's the Boy Scout signal. Do you know what it says?"

"Three smoke columns mean 'Good News!' answered Thede.

"Do you suppose those crazy boys are still in the hills?" asked Sandy. "If they are, George will think we've all deserted him."

"Of course they're still in the hills!" declared Thede. "No one but Boy Scouts would be sending up those signals!"

"Aw, what good news would they have to communicate?" asked Sandy.

"Perhaps they've found the Little Brass God!" suggested Thede.

"Found your Little Brass Uncle!" cried Sandy.

"Well, it's good news anyhow!" insisted Thede. "If it wasn't the boys wouldn't be taking the pains to build three big fires in order to tell us about it."

The Indian appeared to be suspicious of the campfires ahead until the boys explained to him, with much difficulty, that the fires had undoubtedly been built by their friends, and that they conveyed the information that agreeable developments awaited them.

The slope of the hills was now bathed in moonlight, and the Indian hesitated about advancing over the many clear places from which the timber fell away. Urged on by the boys, however, he finally proceeded cautiously in the direction of the fires, keeping out of the moonlight as far as possible.

"Oje's afraid we'll bunt into something," Thede said, as they clambered up the slope. "I wonder what he'd think if he should be called out of his bed by a blooming magician from the East Indies."

The signal coming from the hills was farther to the east than the boys had ventured before. The fires seemed to have been built high up on a shelf of rock facing the north.

When the boys came closer they saw two figures moving about in front of the flames. Directly they had no difficulty whatever in recognizing Will and Tommy, as they heaped great piles of green boughs on the coals in order to create dense smoke.

"The kids are in the center of the stage all right!" laughed Sandy.

"I don't see how they dare build fires out in that exposed place," Thede suggested. "There's no knowing who may be prowling around."

"Perhaps they know where the few enemies we have found in this section are keeping themselves!"

"Perhaps they've got 'em shut up in some of their own caverns!" Thede suggested. "Anyway," he went on, "there's something doing, or they wouldn't be talking Boy Scout to us at this time of night."

As the boys drew still closer they heard the labored breathing of some one running, apparently only a short distance away.

Oje darted away in the direction of the sounds, but soon returned to where the boys waited and headed once more for the Boy Scout signal.

"What did you see, Oje?" Thede asked.

The Indian turned and pointed back over the snowy trail they had followed from the burning tree.

"Man from there!" he said.

"Antoine?" asked Sandy.

The Indian nodded and continued up the slope as if the matter were unworthy of further attention.

"Now, what do you suppose Antoine came here for?" asked Thede.

"Attracted by the fire, probably,"

"I don't understand what he's roaming about so much for," Thede continued. "What was he doing out at the burning tree?"

"From the appearance of things," Sandy answered, "I should say that he hot-footed it out there in order to get away from some one who was chasing him, though I can't understand why anyone should be chasing him."

"Anyway, he seems to be back here now," Thede said. "It's dollars to buttons, though, that he doesn't go up to the fire where the boys are."

"Look here," Sandy said in a moment, "I just believe that Antoine has the Little Brass God in his possession, and that the two men who came to the cabin that night are after it!"

"I hope they don't get it!"

"Of course they won't get it," Sandy answered. "Didn't we come away up here into this desolate land to get it ourselves?"

When a few yards from the blazing fires, Sandy paused long enough to give the Beaver call and hear the answer given. Then the lads trooped up to the circle of light and warmth.

"What's the idea?" Sandy asked after greetings had been exchanged. "Did you build these fires so we could cook supper?"

"You're not hungry, I hope!" grinned Tommy.

"Starved to death!" answered Sandy. "We've been treed by bears, and dumped down on the back of a great beast about nine feet long, and had our fish devoured, and there's been nothing doing in the eating line since noon!"

"Never you mind the hardships of life!" grinned Will. "We've got great news for you, so get ready to shout!"

"What's the great news?" demanded Sandy.

"We've got the Little Brass God penned up in the cavern just under this rock! We've got a cinch on him this time!"

CHAPTER XX

A SIGHT OF THE GOD

"All quiet at the cabin?" asked Tommy.

"All quiet when we left," Sandy replied.

"What time did you leave?" demanded Tommy, suspiciously.

"Shortly after dinner."

"And you've gone and left George alone all this time!" exclaimed Tommy indignantly. "You're a bright lot!"

"We thought you boys would be back to the cabin long before this!" Sandy declared. "But what is it about this Little Brass God?"

"When we reached the system of caverns which we visited not long ago, and in which we were held prisoners for a short time," Will said, "we found two men, well bundled up in furs, lying asleep, or apparently asleep, in one of the smaller rooms. They sprang up when they saw us and seemed about to engage in conversation with us when Antoine made his appearance. Antoine seemed to want to talk with us, too, but when he saw the two men who had been asleep in the cavern he hot-footed down the slope, with the two fellows after him. I never saw a man run so fast in my life."

"I bet they chased him clear to our tree!" Thede cut in.

"I guess he never stopped running until he got there anyway!" Sandy grinned. "But why should he come right back here after being chased away?"

"I don't think he did!" Will replied.

"Oje saw him out here not long ago!" Sandy insisted.

"What was he doing?"

"I presume he was watching the fire."

"The two men who pursued him are back, too!" Will continued. "Tommy and I found them in a cute little nest in the rocks not more than an hour ago. Just before we built these fires, in fact."

"I suppose you built the fires to lure us from the cabin!" laughed Sandy. "Well, we wasn't at the cabin, but we saw the signals just the same!"

"We wanted you to come and help capture the men who have the Little Brass God," Will answered.

"So you've got the Little Brass God penned up under the hill!" laughed Sandy. "You've got it, and yet you haven't got it!"

"I never said we had it!" Will replied. "I said we had it penned up under the hill. You didn't give me time to explain that there were two men penned up with it."

"All right!" Sandy said. "You've come to the right shop for fighting men. I can see those two fellows fading away at my approach!"

"Then you go in ahead," advised Tommy. "They seem to be well armed and may shoot, if you don't scare them into fits with one of your fierce glances! They're bold, bad men!"

"How do you know they haven't disappeared while you've been making signals?" asked Sandy. "They've had time enough to be five miles away!"

"We nailed 'em in with a couple of boulders!" grinned Tommy.

"You followed Pierre's example, did you?"

"Yes, we just blocked 'em in."

"Well, I think we'd better be getting them out, then!" Sandy urged. "And also be moving toward the cabin. George'll think we've got killed or something."

"Come on, then," Will exclaimed. "I'll show you where they are!"

The boy led the way down the slope for some distance and then paused at a boulder which blocked the entrance to what seemed to be a cavern of good size. They listened for a moment, but could hear no sounds coming from the interior.

"How're you going to get them out?" asked Thede.

"We ain't going to get 'em out!" replied Will. "What do you think we brought you boys here for? We know they can't get out, so we're just going to sit down here and wait for them to get good and hungry."

"All right!" Sandy answered. "Two can watch and two can go back to the cabin! George will be good and anxious by this time."

"I was thinking of asking Oje to watch a short time," Will said. "It's a good thing the Indian came along with you."

Oje was called down to the barricaded entrance and the situation briefly explained to him. The Indian stepped close to the boulder and listened for a long time for sounds from the inside.

Then he turned to the boys and shook his head gravely.

"Don't you ever tell me they've gone and got away!" exclaimed Tommy. "Why, they couldn't get away unless they walked through forty feet of solid rock! And they couldn't do that!"

"I'm going to find out!" declared Will.

The lads pried the boulder away, blocking it so that it could not crash down the slope and so warn the men inside of the approach of the boys. Then Will crept cautiously into the dark passage.

The others were at his heels in a moment. On the previous visit of Will and Tommy, there had been the light of a torch in the cavern, but there was no illumination of any kind now.

"I guess they've gone, all right!" Tommy, whispered.

"Why didn't you get the Little Brass God while the getting was good?" demanded Sandy.

"The guns those fellows carried didn't look good to me!" was the reply.

"It's a mystery to me how they ever got out of this cavern," Will observed.

"Perhaps they are still here, waiting to get a shot at us!" suggested Thede. "This would be a bad place for an attack."

As the boys advanced they heard a whisper of voices farther in, and what seemed to be the rattle of footsteps over the uneven floor.

Then from some, apparently, distant corner of the cavern came a cry in an unknown tongue. The next instant the place was illuminated by two great torches of resinous wood.

They flamed high in the hands of the men who had been discovered in the cavern during the first visit.

"Look!" cried Will, pointing. "Look!"

The eyes of the boys followed the pointing finger dimly outlined in the light of the torches, and saw the Little Brass God swinging to and fro in an uplifted hand!

"There!" exclaimed Tommy. "I told you we'd got the Little Brass God!"

"But you haven't got it yet!" taunted Sandy.

"We'll have it in a minute!" replied the boy confidently.

The ugly little image remained in sight for perhaps half a minute, and then the cavern became dark as pitch again.

The boys heard a quick rush of footsteps, apparently passing further into the cavern, and then all was silent.

"That isn't the man who had the Little Brass God the other time I saw it!" Thede declared. "I guess these fellows must have got it away from Antoine, or whoever it was who had it at that time."

"I wish we had a searchlight," suggested Sandy.

"I've got a little one for a cent," Tommy answered. "I never leave the camp without one. No knowing when one may be needed,"

"Strike a light then!" whispered Sandy.

"That would be a fine way to get a bullet into my coco!" Tommy whispered back. "I'll just wait a while and see what's doing."

There was nothing doing—nothing whatever! The boys, after waiting some ten minutes, advanced into the cavern which was now perfectly still.

Directly Tommy turned on his electric. The little flame revealed no presence there save that of the boys themselves. They searched every nook and corner of the place, believing it impossible that the two men could have escaped. At last, however, they were forced to the conclusion that once more they had lost track of the object of their search.

"But where did they go?" demanded Tommy.

"I guess that's what no fellow can find out," replied Will.

The boys continued their search in the hope of finding the passage by which the two men had escaped. At last they came to a small opening in the floor of the cavern which apparently led to a cavity farther down.

"They didn't wait for the elevator!" laughed Tommy. "Shall we go down after them?" asked Sandy.

"I think we'd better get back to the cabin." Will argued. "It must be after ten o'clock now, and George may be in trouble for all we know."

"Three times and out!" exclaimed Sandy. "The next time we catch sight of the Little Brass God, we'll sure get out fingers on it!"

"I'd be happy just now if I could get my fingers on something to eat!" Thede declared. "I'm about starved!"

"We've got a few sandwiches, if they'll do any good," suggested Will.

"If they'll do any good!" repeated Sandy. "You bring 'em out here and we'll see whether they will or not."

Thede ran to the door of the cavern and looked out, calling softly to the Indian as he did so. Oje was nowhere to be seen!

"I wonder where that Indian went?" the boy asked.

"He probably got busy after some one!" Will replied.

The boys devoured the sandwiches which remained from the supply provided by Will and then started back to the cabin.

The moon was now high up in the heavens, and the boys could trace foot tracks in the snow quite distinctly. For a time they saw the prints of Oje's moccasins. They seemed to be following another track which was obliterated by his passage.

"Perhaps he's chasing the two fellows who had the Little Brass God!" suggested Sandy. "If he is, I hope he gets 'em."

After a time the tracks swung away to the left and the boys saw them no more. When they came in view of the cabin a bright light was reflected through the broken window pane, but there seemed to be no evidences of motion on the inside.

"I presume George has gone to sleep," Will said. "I should think he'd be tired of waiting. It must be somewhere about one o'clock!"

When the boys came up to the cottage they saw a figure detach itself from the shadows which lay against the west wall and dash precipitously into the thicket. Will hastened to throw the door open.

The boy started back in alarm, as he noted the condition of the interior. The bunks lay broken on the floor, and it was plain that the whole apartment had been most thoroughly pillaged.

CHAPTER XXI

TWO RIFLE SHOTS

As the boys stepped into the room George arose from a heap of blankets near a broken bunk and stood regarding them with a quizzical smile on his face. The boys at once clustered around him with dozens of questions on their lips.

"What's been doing here?" demanded Tommy.

"You missed the biggest sensation of the excursion!" exclaimed George.

"Where are the fellows who busted up the furniture?" asked Sandy.

"You ought to know," replied George. "They ran out just before you entered. It's a wonder you didn't meet them."

"Who are they?" asked Will.

"You remember the two men who came to the window that night?" asked George. "Well, these were the two men!"

"Did one of 'em have his head in a sling?" asked Tommy.

"Sure he did!" was the reply.

"Why don't you sit down and tell us all about it?" asked Sandy.

"That won't take long," replied George. "They came in here something like half an hour ago and began mixing up with the furniture. They searched everything in sight and out of sight, and were about to take up the floor, I reckon, when they heard you coming."

"Did they say what they were searching for?" asked Will.

"Not directly," was the reply, "but I know from expressions I heard that they were searching for the Little Brass God."

"The Little Brass God?" repeated Will. "Why, they've got it now!"

"You bet they have!" Tommy joined in.

"How do you know they have?"

"Because we saw them have it in the cavern!" answered Will. "They were in that cavern not more than five minutes before we left the hills. They must have hustled to beat us to the cabin and make a half hour's search before we arrived."

"I think we've all got a lot of guesses coming," Sandy observed.

"Yes, but what I can't get through my head is why those fellows should be searching through the cabin for the Little Brass God when they have it in their possession," Will said.

"You're sure they had it?" asked George.

"I saw them have it in the cavern earlier in the evening," was the reply. "When we went to try to make them give it up, they vanished as if they had gone up in the air!"

The boys began straightening things in the cabin, and Sandy busied himself in the corner where the provisions were stored.

"I'd like to know where that Indian went," Thede said, as he assisted Sandy in preparing some of the game which had been caught early the morning before. "He won't go far away, I'm thinking."

Before the words were off the boy's lips the door was pushed gently open and Oje looked in. He made a gesture asking for silence and went out again, softly closing the door behind him.

"That's a funny proposition!" whispered Tommy. "Why don't he come in and get some of the supper Sandy is getting ready?"

The door opened again, then, and Antoine staggered inside. His face was bloodless and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets. His clothing was slit in places as if he had been attacked with a knife, and he staggered about while searching for a chair.

Will sprang forward to the man's assistance, helped him to a chair, and poured a cup of strong coffee, which the man drank greedily.

The man's eyes roved wildly about the room for a second then he turned anxiously to Will.

"Did they get it?" he asked.

"Did they get what?" asked the boy.

"What they came to search for."

Will turned inquiringly toward George.

"Did they find anything during their search?" he asked.

George shook his head.

"They hadn't concluded their search," he replied. "Then they failed to find the Br——"

There was a movement at the window followed by a rifle shot.

Antoine sitting before the fire by George's side crumpled up and dropped to the floor, a stream of blood oozing from his temple.

Before the lads could quite comprehend what had taken place, a second shot came from outside. Then Oje's face appeared in the doorway again, beckoning to those inside.

Tommy and Sandy stepped into the open air and were directed around to the rear of the house.

There, face up in the moonlight, lay the man whom Will had described as an East Indian. The bandage was still around his head, but a new wound was bleeding now. His eyes were already fixed and glassy. The bullet had entered the center of the forehead.

"He shoot man inside!" the Indian grunted.

"And he killed him, too!" answered Tommy.

Entirely unconcerned, the Indian would have struck off into the forest, but the boys urged upon him the necessity of partaking of food. With a stoical exclamation of indifference, Oje finally followed them into the cabin and seated himself before the open fire.

Antoine was quite dead. The boys straightened his still figure upon the floor and placed by its side the body of the man who had been his murderer.

"We must give them decent burial in the morning," Will decided, "and in order to do so, we must keep them away from the wild animals of the wilderness tonight."

There was a hushed silence for a long time in the room. The boys involuntarily turned their eyes away from the two inanimate objects which had so recently possessed the power of speech and motion.

Presently Sandy saw something glistening at the breast of the dark man. Where his heavy coat of fur dropped back the boy thought he distinguished a gleam of gold. Thinking that it might possibly be some trinket calculated to reveal the identity of the man, Sandy advanced to the body and threw the coat open.

There was the Little Brass God!

"We didn't have to find it," Tommy said slowly after a short pause.
"The fellow brought it to us!"

Will took it into his hand and made a careful examination of it.

"Do you think this is the one we are after?" he asked.

"Holy Moses!" exclaimed Sandy. "You don't think there are two Little Brass Gods, do you? One seems to have kept us pretty busy!"

"I've heard of their traveling in pairs," Theede suggested.

"Is this the man who made the search of the house?" asked Will of George.

"That is one of them!" was the reply. "The other seemed to be a man in the employ of this man. He was dressed like a trapper and acted like one. They quarreled over some suggestion made by this man and the one whom I took to be a guide went away in a rage."

"You are sure he didn't find what he was looking for?"

"Dead sure!"

"Then there are two Little Brass Gods!" insisted Tommy.

"Yes, and I guess the one we want is the one we haven't got!" Will said.

"I don't see how this fellow could have the one containing the last will of Simon Tupper," Tommy argued. "Can you open the tummy of the Little Brass God, Will?" asked Sandy.

"Mr. Frederick Tupper showed me how to do the trick," Will answered.

"Then why don't you see whether this is the right one or not?" asked Sandy. "If you can open it, it's the one; if you can't, it isn't the one!"

"Wise little boy!" exclaimed Will taking the ugly image into his hands again.

He pressed here and there on the surface of the Little Brass God, touching now a shoulder, now a foot, now the top of the head, for all the world like one operating the combination of a safe.

"You see," he said, as he continued his strange employment, "the shell of the image is not very thick and when I press on certain parts, certain things take place on the inside."

He put his ear to the side of the image and listened intently.

"There!" he said. "You can hear a click like the dropping of a tumbler when I press here at the back."

"If the combination works, then," shouted Tommy, "it must be that we have the Little Brass God holding the will."

"It works all right enough," Will replied.

With the final pressure on an elbow Will turned a foot to the right and the Little Brass God opened exactly in the center.

But no will was found in the cavity. Instead a mass of diamonds, emeralds, pearls, rubies, amethysts glittered out upon the floor.

The boys stood looking at the shining mass with wide open eyes.

"There must be a million dollars there!" Tommy said almost in a whisper.

"I wasn't thinking of that!" Will said. "I was thinking that, after all our labor and pains, we have unearthed the wrong Brass God."

"But we've just got to find the right Brass God," Sandy insisted.

"Yes, and we'll have a sweet old time doing it!" exclaimed George. "The poor fellow who lies dead there searched every bit of space inside the cabin, yet he didn't find it!"

"But it may not be anywhere near the cabin!" exclaimed Will.

"If we knew whether Antoine ever had it in his possession," Tommy said, "we'd know better where to look."

"Of course he had it in his possession!" said Sandy. "I'm sure he's the man who took it from the pawnbroker's shop on State street. Now let's see," the boy went on, "what were the last words he spoke?"

"He started in to say Brass!" replied Will.

"Then you see, don't you, that that proves that he knew all about it?"

"Yes, and he asked if they found what they were looking for," Tommy contributed, "and that shows

that the Little Brass God he brought from Chicago is some where about this palatial abode."

CHAPTER XXII

THE TWIN BRASS GODS

Oje, who had been sitting by the fire, waiting for his supper, long delayed by the rush of events, now arose and took the Little Brass God into his dusky hands.

"Have you ever seen one like that before?" asked Will.

The Indian shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the body of Antoine.

"Dead man have one!" he said.

"Like this?" asked Will.

The Indian grunted an assent.

"Then I'll tell you what took place, boys," Will said. "When Antoine shot Pierre, he came here and took possession of the cabin and provisioned it, He had had the Little Brass God in the cavern where George and Thede saw it, and he thought a safer place for it would be the cabin."

"So he moved in here and hid it!" Tommy went on. "And we boys chased along and drove him out into the wide, wide world. Now the question is whether he took the Little Brass God back to the cavern or whether he left it hidden about the cabin."

"It's a hundred to one shot," Sandy observed, "that this dead East Indian knew that the image he sought was in or about this cabin. The first night we came here he prowled about looking for it and tried to get one of us boys into a hypnotic trance. We don't know how many times he has been back here since that night."

"But who sent the fellow up here after the Little Brass God, anyway?" asked George. "How did he come to get on the track of the ugly little devil."

"I guess that's something we'll have to find out in Chicago," replied Will. "All we know is that Antoine was scared to death of him, as shown by his sudden flight from the cavern when he looked in and saw the East Indian and his guide standing looking out at him."

"And they chased him clear up to our burning tree!" Thede cut in.

"That's a fact," Sandy replied. "That dusky faced chap certainly had Antoine buffaloed!"

"Well," Will went on, "the East Indian kept returning to the cabin and Antoine kept returning to the cabin, so it's a pretty safe bet that the Little Brass God we seek is here. Besides, the fact that Antoine asked if the East Indian found anything proves that it is in or about the cabin."

"Well, we're going to find it if we tear the cabin to pieces," Tommy said. "As Will says, it is a sure thing it is not far away."

There was not much sleep in the cabin that night, and it was a dreary supper the boys ate. Before daylight the Indian lay down upon the floor in a blanket, but the other boys remained awake until morning.

Then they began the search for the Little Brass God. They were satisfied now that Pierre had never had possession of it, that he had been despatched as one familiar with the woods and the ways of Antoine, in the Sigsbee interests to secure it from the man who had purchased it at the pawn shop. Everything pointed, as has been stated, to Antoine's being the man who had taken it out of Chicago.

The boys searched the cabin for two days until not a sliver of the inside remained uninvestigated. Then, after putting up their tents, they began taking the structure down, log by log.

On the third day they found what they sought in the heart of a rotten log. Antoine had hidden it in a secure place. Will had no difficulty in opening the belly of the little image, and there he found the last

will of Simon Tupper, bequeathing his entire property to Frederick Tupper.

"That settles the case, boys, so far as we are concerned," Will said, "and I think we'd better be getting back to Chicago in order to straighten things out."

"You talk about getting back to Chicago like we could take the elevated and get there in an hour!" laughed Sandy. "I guess that you forget that we've got three hundred miles of wilderness to travel before we reach the railroad station!"

"Well, we've got our canoes, haven't we?" asked Tommy.

"Yes," Will answered, "and if we want to use the canoes, we'll have to wait until the river opens in the spring. We can get out on the ice all right, I guess."

At the end of two weeks the boys found themselves at a way station on the Canadian Pacific road. After that it did not take them long to reach Chicago. During the trip down they had rather enjoyed the hunting and fishing. Once or twice they had caught sight of a man whom they believed to be the guide the East Indian had secured, but after a time the man disappeared entirely and was seen no more. Oje accompanied them part of the way and then much to their regret, turned back.

The finding of the will, of course, settled the Tupper estate for good and all, and the boys were well rewarded for what they had done.

"There's one thing I'd like to know," Will said, as they sat in Mr. Horton's office after all the adventures of the trip had been related, "and that is where this second Little Brass God came from, and how this East Indian got into the Hudson Bay country in quest of the other Brass God about as quick as we did."

"That has all been explained," the attorney replied. "From your description, Antoine is undoubtedly the man who took the Little Brass God in which we were interested from the pawn shop. The evening papers of that day described the burglary of the Tupper home and referred particularly to the taking of the Little Brass God from the mantle in the library.

"The newspapers said at that time that the taking of the image would doubtless result in the discovery of the burglar. In this, the newspapers were wrong. The burglar has never been brought to punishment.

"On the other hand, however, the taking of the Brass God led to the recovery of two sacred ornaments belonging in a Hindu temple in India. It seems that two prominent Hindus read the article concerning the Little Brass God and made inquiries at police headquarters and at all the pawn shops in the city concerning it. The idols had been stolen years before and these men considered it their duty to restore them to the temple if in their power to do so.

"They found one of the Little Brass Gods without difficulty, it having been purchased a few months ago by a dealer in antiques. They might have known of the wealth contained in the belly of the idol, but it is certain that the dealer in antiques never did. Of course the East Indians learned all that any one knew concerning the destination of the image taken from the pawnshop, and so one of them, the man who was killed, went north in quest of it.

"So far as Pierre is concerned, it is probable that he was picked up here in Chicago and sent north by Sigsbee. Of course we shall never know the truth of that matter, but it is plain that he is not the man who took the idol from the pawnbrokers' shop.

"Well, that ends the case so far as we're concerned," George replied, "and if you've got any more Boy Scout excursions in view, Mr. Horton, I wish you'd suggest a hot climate for the next one. It seems to me like I never would get warm again!"

"What do you think of the people who live up in the Hudson Bay country all the year round?" asked Mr. Horton. "How would you like to wander around there year after year, as Oje does?"

"Say that Oje's a good Indian!" Tommy exclaimed. "I tried to get him to come on down to Chicago with me, but he said he wouldn't live here on a bet."

"What are you going to do with the two Little Brass Gods and all the precious stones?" asked Sandy.

"I would suggest," Mr. Horton replied, "that the two idols be returned to the Hindu still remaining in the city, the companion of the one who was killed, and that the jewels be returned with them."

"That's a lot of money to give away," Sandy suggested.

"There's nothing compulsory about it!" laughed Mr. Horton. "If you boys want to run the risk of being chased up by those Hindus until they finally get their hands on the idols, you may do so."

"Not for mine!" exclaimed Thede. "I don't want any dusky East Indians chasing me up!"

It was finally decided to restore the two little Brass Gods with the jewels to the Hindu. Later the body of the East Indian was taken from its grave near James Bay and transferred to his own country.

"There's one little commission I'd like to have you boys undertake," Mr. Horton said, after all the details of the Tupper case had been settled. "There's quite a bunch of trouble down here in a coal mine that I'd like to have you boys look into."

"Is it good and warm down there?" asked George.

"Suppose you walk down a few thousand feet under ground, some day, and make a note of the temperature!" laughed Tommy.

"Of course we want to go!" replied Will.

After a few days in Chicago, the Boy Scouts were off on their travels again. The story of their adventures will be found in the next volume of this series entitled.

"Boy Scouts in the Coal Caverns; or, The Light in Tunnel Six."

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