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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOUR BOY HUNTERS; OR, THE OUTING OF THE GUN CLUB ***

E-text prepared by Jim Ludwig

FOUR BOY HUNTERS

or, The Outing of the Gun Club

by

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL

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PREFACE

My Dear Lads:

This tale of "*Four Boy Hunters*" is a complete story in itself, but forms the first volume of a line to be called "*The Boy Hunters Series*," taking the heroes through various adventures while searching for big and little game in the woods and in the mountains.

The boys are bright, lively fellows of to-day, with a natural taste for a life in the open, and a fondness for a gun and a rod. In the present volume they organize their little club, and after a good deal of talk obtain permission to go a number of miles from home and establish a camp on the edge of a lake. From this spot they are driven away by one who is their enemy, and then they go elsewhere. They have fun and adventures in plenty, around the camp and while out after both big and little game, and they help to bring to justice two men who are hiding from the officers of the law. To-day hunting in our country is not what it was some years ago. Many of the best hunting localities have become settled, and it is becoming harder and harder to catch a sight of a deer, or a moose, or a bear, or, in fact, any wild animal of size. In the far West the buffalo has been practically wiped out, and in the East the deer and moose would also be gone were it not for the protection of the law, which makes it illegal to shoot down such game during the closed season.

With best wishes to all who love a gun and love good hunting,
I remain, Your sincere friend, Captain Ralph Bonehill.

CHAPTER I

TARGET SHOOTING AND A PLAN

Cling!

"A bull's-eye!"

Cling!

"Another bull's-eye, I declare!"

Cling!

"Three bull's-eyes, of all things! Snap, you are getting to be a wonder with the rifle. Why, even old Jed Sanborn couldn't do better than that."

Charley Dodge, a bright, manly boy of fifteen, laid down the rifle on the counter in the shooting gallery and smiled quietly. "I guess it was more luck than anything, Shep," he replied. "Perhaps I couldn't do it again."

"Nonsense," came from Sheppard Reed, also a boy of fifteen. "You have got it in you to shoot straight and that is all there is to it. I only wish I could shoot as well."

"How did you fellows make out?" came from a third youth, as he entered the gallery. He was sixteen years old but hardly as large as the average lad of ten.

"Snap just made three bull's-eyes!" cried Shep Red. "Made them as easily as pie, too."

"And what did you make?"

"Made one bull's-eye and two inner rings. Are you going to try your luck, Giant?"

"Humph!—I don't think I can hit the back of the building unless they move it up to me," answered Will Caslette. "But I'll take a chance," he added, turning to the keeper of the gallery and fishing five cents from his pocket. "Got to learn to shoot if I'm going on a hunt, you know," he went on, to his chums.

"Then you can go with us?" questioned Charley Dodge, quickly.

"I think so—mother said she would tell me for certain to-morrow."

The small youth took the rifle handed to him and aiming carefully, pulled the trigger.

"The outer ring," said Shep Reed. "That's not so bad but what it might be worse, Giant."

"Oh, it might be worse!" answered the small youth, coolly. "I might fire out of the window and kill somebody on the back street, or hit a duck in Rackson's pond. Here goes again."

The second shot was a little better, and the third made the bell ring, much to the small youth's delight.

"Hullo, you fellows!" came from the doorway, a lively boy of fourteen came in, curly hair dying and a cap set far back on his head. "Been looking for you all over town for about sixteen hours. Been shooting, eh? I'll bet a can of buttermilk against a shoestring that you all made outer rings."

"Hullo, Whopper!" called the others. "Come in and try your luck."

"Can't—I'm dead broke this morning," answered Frank Dawson. "I've got to wait a year or two till my next allowance comes in."

"Here's the money," answered Charley Dodge, producing five cents. "Now, Whopper, don't make more than three bull's-eyes."

"I'm going to make twenty-'leven," answered the boy called Whopper. "Don't you know that I once went into a gallery in the city and made one hundred bull's-eyes in succession? The proprietor fainted and didn't get over it for two months."

"Phew! That's the biggest whopper yet!" ejaculated Giant. "Nothing like living up to your reputation."

The boy who could tell big stories on all occasions took up the rifle and shot three times with care, and as a result placed three inner rings to his credit.

"That isn't bad," said Shep Reed. "But Snap is the boss rifleman of this crowd."

"Then we must make him the leader of our gun club," put in Giant. "What do you say, fellows?"

"That's it!" cried the others.

"Have you fellows got a gun club?" came from the man who kept the shooting gallery, curiously.

"We've got something of that sort," answered the newly declared leader. "You see, we expect to go

out on a hunting tour this fall and so we got together and called ourselves a gun club."

"The Fairview Gun Club," corrected Whopper. "Nothing like giving a title that looks like something, as the French Count said when he called himself a duke."

"Where is your club going?"

"Oh, just up in the mountains, back of Lake Cameron," answered Snap.

"Is the hunting good there?"

"Pretty fair---so old Jed Sanborn says."

"Well, I wish you luck. You boys are good enough shots to bring down almost anything," said the shooting gallery keeper.

"Come on up to our orchard and talk things over," said Snap, as he led the way from the gallery, and in a moment more the boys were on the Street and making their way to Mr. Dodge's apple orchard, a quarter of a mile from the center of the town. The other boys knew as well as Snap that there were some fine fall pippins in the orchard, and, like all growing lads, each loved a good apple.

The town of Fairview was not a large one. There was one main street and a side street running to the little depot, at which eight trains stopped daily. There were fifteen shops and stores, a hotel and three churches. The houses numbered less than a hundred in the town proper, although many others were located in the rich farming district close by. Fairview was situated on the Rocky River, which, ten miles below, flowed into a beautiful sheet of water called Lake Cameron. The town was noted for its natural beauty, and in the summertime not a few tourists stopped there.

One of the principal men of the community was Mr. Dodge, Charley's father. He was rich, but preferred to live on his farm instead of moving to the town or the city. He was a school trustee and also held an interest in the summer hotel and in one of the big saw mills on the river.

Sheppard Reed was the only son of a local physician, who, during the past twenty years, had built up a substantial practice in and around Fairview. Shep and Snap, as they were always called, were close chums, and once in a while their own folks would refer to them as the Twins.

Frank Dawson had moved to Fairview only two years before, but had become a general favorite among the boys. He had a habit of exaggerating most woefully, and this had gained for him the nickname of Whopper. From this it must not be inferred that Frank could not tell the truth, for, when it came to the pinch the lad was as truthful as anybody. His "whoppers" were always so big that everybody recognized them as such instantly.

Will Caslette, always called Billy or Giant, was the son of a French widow lady who had come to Fairview on the death of her husband, seven years before. The widow had just enough to live on comfortably, and she took a great pride in her offspring, even though he was so small in stature. But though Billy was small he was "all there," as the other boys said, and promised to become a man, every inch of him.

Arriving at the orchard, the four boys walked to one of the best of the apple trees and with a stick brought down a dozen of the finest apples. Then they selected a warm spot in the sunshine, threw themselves on the sward, and began to eat and discuss their plans at the same time.

"It's a regular windfall for us that the old schoolhouse is going to be shut up next Wednesday," said Snap. "Just think of two months of loafing."

"Bless the storm that ripped off part of the roof," came from Shep.

"And bless the fact that they can't get it mended right away," was Will's comment. "I don't believe they'll open again until after the holidays."

"Of course they won't," said Whopper. "They can't do it. They've got to put on a new roof, mend the water pipes, reset the steps, paint the place, and do sixteen hundred and one things."

"The best thing we can do is to make all arrangements for going on our tour bright and early Monday morning," went on Snap. "We will have from now on to get ready in. That will be plenty of time."

"Humph! I could get ready in an hour," murmured Whopper. "What's there to do anyway? Pick up our guns, pack up some grub, take along a tent and some fishing tackle, and there you are. Easy as sliding off a banana peel."

"Is it?" came from Snap. "That's all you know about it. In the first place, you must remember that this is no outing for a day or two, or even a week. We have got to take supplies for at least a month, if not two months. And I don't want to live in a tent when it gets good and cold. We've got to build a shack of some sort. There will be a hundred and one things to do before we are ready to start. And it is going to cost something, too."

"How much?" asked Giant, anxiously. "Please don't make the amount too high, or I won't be able to stand for my share."

"We'll figure it out," said Snap, producing a note-book and a pencil. "I suppose when it comes to such things as flour, sugar, salt, coffee and the like, we can get them from our homes. But there are other things that we will have to buy. For instance, we will need plenty of powder and shot, and we'll want to take medicines and plasters along, in case of accidents——"

"I can get those from my father," interrupted Shep. "He has an emergency case that will be just the thing."

"How about——" began Giant, when he stopped short, to gaze at a man who was running down the road at top speed. "Hullo, Mr. Harrison!" he called. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Goin' to the fire!" was the puffed-out answer.

"Fire?" ejaculated all of the boys, leaping to their feet. "Where?"

"Down the river. Reckon it's the Barnaby mill," and the man went on his way.

The boys gazed down the river and saw a thick volume of smoke rolling skyward. Men and boys were running toward it from every direction.

"It's the mill, as sure as fate!" cried Snap. "Come on, I'm going to the fire, fellows!" And away he started.

"Isn't that the mill in which your father owns an interest?" asked Whopper.

"Yes; he owns a third share," answered Snap.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRE AT THE SAW MILL

It was indeed the Barnaby place that was going up in flames, and already the fire had gained much headway. The place was composed of the saw mill proper and half a dozen sheds used for the storage of cut lumber. The plant was valued at thirty thousand dollars, so if it was swept away the loss would be a heavy one.

The mill was a good half mile from the orchard, but the boys were all good runners and covered the distance in a few minutes, Shep and Snap arriving there first and little Giant bringing up the rear, with a face as red as a beet.

A dozen men and boys were on hand, besides the mill workers, and a bucket brigade had been formed to throw buckets of water taken from the river on the flames. Some men were bringing out a line of hose, which was presently attached to the engine of the mill itself.

"I am going to help here!" cried Snap, throwing off his coat, and he went to work with a will and the other lads did the same. The buckets of water came along swiftly, but for a long time it looked as if the whole plant was doomed to destruction. The fire was in a shed next to the saw mill itself, a place one end of which was used as an office by the mill company. The wind was blowing the sparks directly to the mill proper.

"Phew! but this is hot work!" cried one of the men. "Can't stand this much longer."

"Don't give up!" pleaded the master of the mill. "Perhaps the wind will change."

It certainly was warm work, as all of the boys found out. The sparks and brands were dropping over them, and once Snap's shirt sleeve caught fire, while Shep had a spark blister his neck and cause him to let out a yell like an Indian.

In the midst of the excitement, Mr. Dodge arrived, and a moment later the local fire engine, an old-fashioned affair purchased from a neighboring city. The stream of water, however, did good service, and the fire was kept largely to the shed in which it had started. The mill itself caught a dozen times, but the flames were extinguished before they did material damage. Finally the wind veered around, blowing the sparks toward a cleared spot in the woods, and then all saw that the worst of the affair was over. But men and boys kept at their labors, and did not stop until every spark of the conflagration had been extinguished.

"Now it is over, I am going down to the river and wash up," said Snap to Shep, and they walked to the edge of the stream, followed by Whopper and Giant. "I feel dirty from head to foot."

"Your father can be thankful that the mill didn't go," said Whopper. "Gosh, what a blaze! I thought the whole county was going to burn up. I got burnt in about 'leven hundred spots."

"And I let a bucket of water drop on my foot," put in Giant. "Say, but didn't the edge of the bucket feel nice on my little toe!" and he limped along to the water's edge.

Having washed up, the boys returned to the scene of the fire. They found the mill master, Tom Neefus, in earnest conversation with Mr. Dodge.

"You saw the rascal do it?" asked Snap's father.

"I certainly did," replied Tom Neefus. "I started to catch him, but then I came back to put out the blaze. I made up my mind it would be better to stop the fire than catch the man, even though he was such a villain."

"Who's a villain, father?" asked Shep.

"The man who started this fire."

"Did a man start it?" asked the boy, while several others drew closer to listen.

"So Mr. Neefus says. He caught the fellow at the office desk. In a corner the fellow had thrown a pile of shavings and saturated it with oil. As he ran away he threw a handful of lighted matches into the shavings and they caught instantly."

"I suppose he did that so that he could get away. He knew the men around here would try to save the property instead of going after him."

"Exactly, Charley. He must have been a cold-blooded villain to do such a thing, for it might have been the means of burning down everything," continued Mr. Dodge.

"What was he doing at the desk, Mr. Dodge?" asked Shep.

"He was evidently looking for money or something of value."

"Did he get anything?"

"Nothing, so far as Mr. Neefus knows. The safe was locked up, I believe."

The strong-box mentioned stood in a corner of the office, and the fire had swept all around it. It was quite hot, but after some more water had been poured over it the master of the mill threw it open.

"The books are all right—the fire wasn't hot enough to touch them," said Tom Neefus. "I don't think—Ha!"

He stopped short, gazing into a small compartment of the safe. Then his brow contracted.

"What have you discovered?" questioned Mr. Dodge, quickly.

"The money is gone—and also those papers to that tract of land at Spur Road!"

"The money? How much money?"

"Three hundred and fifty dollars."

"But I thought you said you had the safe locked," went on Mr. Dodge.

"I did have it locked. He must have opened it and then shut it up again before he went at the desk."

The announcement by the master of the mill created something of a sensation, and soon all the men and boys in the vicinity gathered to learn the particulars of the robbery. It was learned that the man who had perpetrated the deed was a tall, slim individual who limped with his left foot when he ran. He had disappeared into the forest bordering the river, and that was the last seen of him. He had red hair and a stubby red moustache.

That very evening a reward of one hundred dollars was offered by the mill company for the capture of the thief, and men and boys for miles around went on the hunt, but without success. Mr. Dodge and the other men of the concern were very much worried, but could do nothing further. The county authorities appeared to be helpless, although the sheriff and two deputies spent two days in trying to get some trace of the criminal. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

The loss of the money was bad enough, but it was learned by Snap that this was not the worst of the affair by any means. For a long time the mill company had had a dispute with another lumber concern over the right to cut timber in a locality known as the Spur Road. The Barnaby Company had certain papers for this right—getting them after much trouble. Now these papers were gone, and the dispute about the Spur Road tract might be again opened.

"I wish I had those papers back," said Mr. Dodge. "If I had them I shouldn't mind the loss of the money so much, although three hundred and fifty dollars is not an amount to be sneezed at."

"Can the thief sell the papers to the Felps Lumber Company, father?" asked Snap.

"He might do that—if they were mean enough to buy them. But I rather think the Felps folks would be above that—although they are very, very bitter against us. They can't get any more timber to cut around here, and they don't want to move their plant. The Spur Road tract will keep our mill busy for at least three years."

The excitement of the mill fire and the search after the thief kept the four boys from speaking of the proposed outing for several days. But as soon as the school closed they met at Snap's house to complete their arrangements.

It had been no easy matter for the four to obtain permission to leave home on such an extended trip. Mr. Dodge and Dr. Reed were willing enough, for they had gone out in a similar fashion when boys, and thought it would do their sons good, but with Frank's folks it was different, and Giant's mother shook her head decidedly, and only gave in after a long consultation with the doctor, who had become her physician.

"They will be safe enough, do not fear," said Dr. Reed. "Boys have to become self-reliant, Mrs. Caslette, and the time to start is when they are young." After that the widow said no more, and so it was settled, so far as Giant was concerned. Then the three boys talked the matter over with Whopper's folks, and at last they gave in also, and then the boys danced a regular war-dance in Whopper's back yard, which made even Mrs. Dawson laugh.

"Well, boys will be boys," she said. "But I do hope they don't run into a bear or shoot themselves."

"They are all good shots and know how to handle their guns," answered Mr. Dawson. "They ought to be able to get along. Mr. Dodge told me privately he was going to have old Jed Sanborn keep an eye on them, and Sanborn is one of the most reliable hunters and guides in this district."

As soon as it was settled, the boys began to get their stores ready. It was decided to go down the river as far as Lake Cameron in a rowboat belonging to the Dodges, and from there "tote" their outfit to wherever they decided to camp. If one spot did not suit after stopping there they would move on to some other point.

The outfit was no light one, when it was all gotten together. For clothing, each youth had an extra set of underwear and some socks. Each carried a pair of shoes and wore boots, and also had a coat that would do for both rain and warmth.

Their stores consisted principally of flour, beans, bacon, coffee, sugar, salt, pepper, condensed milk, and a few vegetables, some fresh and others canned. For cooking purposes they had a "nest" of pots and pans, of the lightest ware obtainable, and for eating carried tin plates and tin cups, and also knives, forks and spoons.

Each boy wanted to take along his shotgun, and in addition they took a rifle belonging to Mr. Dodge and a pistol loaned to them by Dr. Reed. Each youth also carried a serviceable pocket-knife and a waterproof match-safe.

"I think we've got about all we need now," said Snap, after looking at the collection. "Now all we want is those rubber blankets and the flannel ones, and then we shall be about ready to start."

"Will the rowboat hold the load?" questioned Whopper. "It seems to me there is about two thousand times too much stuff."

"The boat has got to hold it," came from Giant. "But what I am thinking of is, what a job we'll have carrying the load after we leave the boat."

"Well, if it's too heavy we can make two trips instead of one," said Shep, and so it was agreed.

CHAPTER III

DOWN THE RIVER

When Snap awoke on Sunday morning, he was very much discouraged, for the sky was overcast, and by church-time it was raining steadily.

"This will make it beastly for a start," he grumbled, while on his way to church in the family carriage.

"Never mind," answered his father. "You can start Tuesday as well as Monday."

"I'd rather start on time," answered the impatient boy. His mind was so taken up by the proposed outing he could scarcely bring himself to listen to the sermon; and what was true of Snap was also largely true of the others.

By nightfall the rain cleared away, and when Snap went to bed the moon was shining brightly. The boy could hardly go to sleep, and when he slumbered, dreamed of being in camp, with wolves and bears and deer on all sides of him. Then he dreamed that it began to hail, louder and louder, and he awoke to hear some pebbles being thrown against the window-pane. He sprang up, rushed to the window and saw Giant standing in the yard, fully ready for a start.

"Hullo, you! How long are you going to snooze?" demanded the small youth. "I've been ready for an hour. Don't you know that this is the all-important day?"

"I do!" cried Snap. "What time is it?"

"Half-past six. I wanted to start by six."

"We're to start at eight o'clock," answered Snap, and hurried into his clothing with all possible speed.

By seven o'clock all of the boys had had a good breakfast and then they bid their folks good-by and hurried down to the river. It was a glorious morning, as clear as crystal after the rain, and with just the faintest breeze blowing.

The stores had been packed away on Saturday in a boathouse nearby, and it was an easy matter to transfer them to the rowboat. The craft was rather crowded with goods and boys, but the lads made the best of it. Only two could use the oars, so they took turns at rowing, Snap and Whopper taking the blades at first, with Giant in the bow and Shep in the stern, steering.

Nearly everybody in the town had heard about the outing, and many came to see them off.

"They'll be back in a week," said one big boy, with a laugh. "Just wait till they catch a rainy spell."

"You're only mad because you can't go along, Ham Spink!" cried Snap.

"Bah! I wouldn't go with you!" retorted Ham Spink. "When I go out I'll do it in first-class style and with an A1 guide. No little two-cent trip for me."

Hamilton Spink was the son of a very aristocratic man who had come to Fairview a year before. Ham, as all the boys called him, was very much of a dude and always thought himself superior to the regular town boys. He smoked cigarettes and played pool and golf and rode horseback, and did as much "showing off" as he possibly could. As a consequence the majority of the boys detested him.

"This isn't a two-cent trip!" cried Shep. "I don't thank you to call it such."

"I'll call it what I please," muttered the dudish youth.

"Oh, dry off and keep cool!" came from Whopper, and he allowed his oar to slip on purpose, sending a shower of water over the youth on the dock.

"Hi! hi! stop!" came angrily, as Ham backed away. "How dare you do such a thing!" and the dudish boy got out a silk handkerchief and began to wipe the water from his face and high collar.

"Excuse me," answered Whopper, drily. "I beg two million pardons, Ham. You see, I was holding the oar this way and I turned it so, and I—well, I declare, there she goes again!" And once more poor Ham received a shower of water over his rather elegant suit.

"I'll—I'll have, the constable lock you up!" spluttered the dudish boy, backing away rapidly. "This is—er—outrageous—I'll—I'll tell your folks!"

"That's right, be a tattle-tale!" came from Giant, and then he began to sing softly.

"Ham in the pan! Ham in the pan!
Ham's the best of meat!"

"Ham in the pan! Ham in the pan!
Ham is good and sweet!"

"You stop that!" roared Ham Spink, and then, as a dozen boys on the dock took up the darky song, he turned and strode away, with his rather short nose tilted high in the air.

"Do you think he'll call on our folks about this?" whispered Whopper, somewhat anxiously. "I shouldn't like to leave under a cloud."

"Oh! he hasn't got backbone enough to make trouble," answered Shep. But Shep was mistaken, as we shall learn later.

The rowboat was now some distance from the dock, and with a final wave of the hand the boys began the journey to Lake Cameron.

In a straight line the lake was about ten miles from the town, but the river was a winding one, so they had a row of over thirteen miles before them.

"I hope we haven't forgotten anything," said Whopper. "It would be a shame to have to go back, eh, fellows?"

"We are not going back," returned Giant. "If anything has been left behind we will have to get along without it."

Having left the town behind, the boys reached a point on the stream where the trees and bushes were thick on either side. They turned in toward the left bank, where the sun was not quite so strong, for in spite of the fact that it was fall it promised to be warm.

"Be careful along here," cautioned Shep. "There are some big rocks just under the surface."

He had scarcely spoken when there came a terrific bump which almost threw him overboard. Whopper was sent sprawling on his side, and his oar sent a shower of water over Giant.

"Wow!" came from Whopper. "Say, did we strike a fortress or what? I thought I was going to the bottom sure!"

"I said to be careful," answered Shep, as the craft sheered off. "Either move out to the middle of the stream or else go slower."

"No use of moving to the middle of the stream now," said Giant. "I want to land a short distance below here."

"What for?" asked the others.

"I'll show you when we get there."

Presently they came to a clearing where there was a cornfield. Beyond this was a fine apple orchard, and looking among the trees they espied some especially fine apples.

"We may as well take a few along," said Giant.

"Who owns the orchard?" questioned Whopper.

"Pop Lundy," answered Snap. "The meanest farmer in this district."

"Then he won't give us any apples," declared Whopper.

"We'll have to make an appropriation," said Giant, coolly. "He owes me some, anyway. I once did an errand for him in town and he hardly gave me a thank you for it."

"If he catches us he will make it warm."

"We'll keep our eyes peeled."

After a few words more the rowboat was run up under some bushes and all leaped ashore. They made their way through the bushes into the orchard proper and then hurried for the tree that seemed to be bearing the best of the fruit.

"These apples are certainly all right," remarked Shep, biting into one which was extra juicy. "We may as well take all we can carry of them."

It was no easy task to get at the apples, which were rather high up, and one after another the boys got up into the lower branches and then mounted higher. Here they stuffed their pockets until it was impossible to carry another one.

"Well, boys, how much longer be you a-goin' to stay up there, hey?"

The question came from the foot of the tree, and, much alarmed, the four gazed below, to see Pop Lundy standing there, with a stout whip in his hand.

"I say, how much longer be you a-goin' to stay there?" went on the mean farmer, with a glare at them.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Lundy?" cried Snap, as cheerfully as he could. "We were just rowing by and we thought we'd sample your apples."

"Really neow, that was kind, wasn't it?" said the farmer, sarcastically.
"Jest come deown and ye can sample this cowhide o' mine."

"Thanks, but I just as soon stay here," came softly from Giant.

"Fine work to be cotched at," went on Pop Lundy. "Stealin' a poor man's fruit. Come deown an' I'll tan yer hide well fer ye!"

He was very angry and now he shook his cowhide whip at them.

At that instant, quite unintentionally, Shep let an apple core drop from his hand. Pop Lundy was looking up when the core hit him plumb in the left eye.

"Yeou villain!" he cried, dancing around. "Want fer to put my eye eout, hey? Oh, wait till I git my hands on ye, I'll show ye a thing or two!"

"Mr. Lundy, supposing we agree to pay you for the apples?" questioned Snap, after an awkward pause.

"How much?" demanded the farmer, cautiously. He was a good deal of a miser and money was very dear to him.

"Oh, a fair price."

"Don't pay him a cent," whispered Giant. "Let us all drop and run for it."

"If we do that he may report the matter at home and make trouble that way," went on Snap. "He can't charge us only a few cents for what we have taken."

"Will ye give me a dollar fer the apples?" asked Pop Lundy.

"A dollar!" ejaculated Whopper. "Humph! I can get a barrel of these apples for a dollar!"

"No, yeou can't! I'm a-goin' to git six dollars fer 'em—they're the best in these air parts. Make it a dollar an' I'll let ye go."

"This is a regular hold-up," muttered Shep. "Offer him twenty-five cents."

At that moment came a loud cry from the direction of the farmhouse, which was located at the upper end of the orchard.

"Help! help! Simon! Simon! Help me!" came in the voice of a woman.

CHAPTER IV

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BOAT

"Something is wrong sure!" exclaimed Snap, as the cry from the farmhouse was repeated.

He looked below and saw that Pop Lundy was running away, in the direction of the cry for assistance.

"Now is our chance to get away!" cried Whopper, and dropped to the ground, while the others did the same.

"Wait!" came from Snap. "That sounds as if somebody was in great trouble. Hadn't we better go and see what it means?"

"And get caught by Pop Lundy?" queried Giant.

"I don't care," put in Shep. "If I can help a lady I am going to do it."

He hurried off in the direction Simon Lundy had taken and one after another his chums followed. To get to the back door of the farmhouse they had to pass around a chicken house and a pig sty, and as they were doing this they saw a burly negro leap a rail fence not far away.

"What is it, Jane?" they heard the farmer cry, as he dashed into the house.

There was no reply, and coming to the door, the four boys saw that the farmer's wife lay back in a kitchen chair in a dead faint.

"Sumbuddy hez killed her, I guess!" moaned Simon Lundy. "Oh, where is the villain?"

"She isn't dead, only fainted," answered Shep, who had assisted his father on more than one occasion. "Got some smelling salts in the house?"

"I dunno. Ye kin look in the closets."

Shep and the others did so, and soon the son of the physician found something that was beneficial. Yet it was several minutes before the lady of the farm came to her senses and opened her eyes.

"Where is he?" she murmured. "Take him away! Take him away!"

"Who are ye a-talkin' about, Jane?" demanded the husband.

"Thet—he—oh, Simon, is it you? Why didn't you come before?"

"Couldn't—cos I had these young whelps up an apple tree. But wot is it all about anyhow?"

"The big negro—he wanted something to eat, and then he got saucy and he picked up your watch from the mantelpiece——"

"My watch!" The miserly farmer sprang to the mantelpiece. "It's gone, sure enough!" he groaned.

"I saw the negro!" cried Snap. "He jumped that fence out there as we came up."

"That's right," put in Whopper. "He was running like a house afire, too."

"Where did he go?"

Nobody knew, but some thought he might have taken to the road. Finding his wife had not been harmed, only badly scared, Simon Lundy ran out to the road and gazed up and down, and the boys did the same.

"I don't see nuthin'," said Pop Lundy.

"Let us run down the road a bit, fellows," suggested Shep.

"Will ye come back?" asked the farmer, anxiously. "I—er—I won't say nuthin' about them apples."

"Yes, we'll be back," answered Snap.

The boys spent the best part of an hour on the road, hunting up and down for some trace of the negro, but without success. They knew he was short and stocky and wore a light, checked suit, but that was all.

When they returned to the farmhouse they heard Mrs. Lundy's story in detail. She had been on the point of sweeping the sitting-room when the negro had appeared and asked for Mr. Lundy. She had told him her husband was out, and then the colored man had wanted something to eat. She had refused to give him anything, and then, seeing the watch on the mantelpiece, he had snatched the timepiece and run. She had screamed for assistance and then fainted from excitement.

"Was the watch a valuable one?" asked Snap.

"Yes, it was," answered Simon Lundy. "It was gold and given to me by my father years ago. I wouldn't take a hundred dollars fer it nohow. I was mighty careless to leave it on the mantelpiece, but I didn't want to carry it around in the orchard when I picked apples."

"What will you do about it?" asked Shep.

"I dunno. Go tew teown an' tell the constable, I guess. Be yeou goin' to town?"

"No; we are off on a hunting trip," answered Giant. "And, by the way, we had better be getting back to the boat," he added to his chums.

"Mr. Lundy, we'll give you a quarter for those apples," said Shep.

"All right, as ye please," said the old farmer. He was so upset over the loss of his watch he could think of nothing else.

The boys passed over the money—that is, Shep did, for he had been appointed treasurer of the expedition. Then, after a few words more, the young hunters hurried back through the orchard to where they had left their rowboat among the bushes.

"Gosh! what a mean man!" was Whopper's comment. "To take that money after what we did to catch that negro."

"It isn't likely that he'll get his gold watch back," said Giant. "That nigger will shake the dust of this locality from his feet as fast as he can."

"More than likely he belongs in some big city," was Whopper's comment. "That is the way those chaps do—go to a lonely farmhouse and make sure the men are away and then take what they can lay hands on. If he hadn't heard Pop Lundy and us coming he would most likely have ransacked the house from end to end."

They were soon at the river bank and forcing their way through the bushes. Then Snap looked around in perplexity.

"Isn't this the spot where we left the boat?" he questioned, gravely.

"I think so," answered Shep.

"Well, I don't see it."

"Don't see it!" exclaimed Whopper, who was in the rear. "Why, it must be here."

All came out on the edge of the river and gazed up and down the shore in alarm. Not a sight of the boat was to be seen anywhere.

"Wonder if she floated off?" suggested Giant.

"She couldn't," answered Shep. "I tied her up, and did it good, too. There is the exact spot," and he pointed out a stout bush. In the dirt of the bank was the mark of the rowboat's sharp bow.

"Look there!" ejaculated Whopper. "See the size of those footprints—as big as canal-boats. Do you know what I think?" he almost shouted.

"That nigger ran off with our boat!" came in a chorus from the others.

"That's it. See, there is where he came along the shore. He meant to hide here, when he came across the boat. He saw it was well filled with things and jumped in, and I suppose he rowed off as fast as he could," added Whopper, bitterly. "Oh, wouldn't I like to catch him! I'd make mince-meat of him, I would!"

Whopper stopped short, and all of the boys looked at each other blankly. For some seconds nobody spoke, but each was busy with his thoughts.

"If we can't find the boat——" began Snap.

"We'll have to return home and give up the trip," finished Giant. "Oh, I don't want to do that!"

"Nor I!" came from the others.

"We must find our boat, that is all there is to it," said Snap. "I don't believe he went up the river, consequently he must have gone down."

"Then let us get another boat and follow him."

"That's the talk!"

But where to get another boat was a question.

Snap ran back to the farmhouse and met Pop Lundy at the door.

"Thought you boys was a-goin' down the river," said the farmer, suspiciously.

"We have learned what became of that nigger."

"What?"

"He took our boat and ran off with it."

"Well, I vow! Ain't he the pesky rascal, though! Wot be yeou boys a-goin' tew do neow?"

"We want to get another boat, if possible, and follow him. Do you know where a boat can be had?"

"Yes; Ike Welby has a boat. His farm is the next one down from mine. I'll go along. I want to catch him ez much as yeou do."

In a few minutes they were off in a body, all of the boys accompanying the farmer to the next farm. Ike Welby was not at home, but his wife said they could have the boat and welcome, and procured for them two pairs of oars from the barn.

"I am glad that negro didn't come here," she declared. "I should have fainted dead away, too, and he would have gotten everything in the house. I trust you catch the rascal."

"We be a-goin' to try mighty hard," answered Simon Lundy.

There was a small boathouse at the end of the grounds and here was a good round-bottomed boat built for speed as well as pleasure, for in his younger days Ike Welby had been quite an oarsman and had won more than one race. They ran the rowboat into the river, and all jumped in. Then Snap shoved off, and all of the boys got at the oars.

"Now, then, to make things hum!" said Shep. "We must try to spot that nigger before he thinks of going ashore."

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER START

The four young hunters were used to rowing together, so they made rapid progress when once they had caught the stroke. Simon Lundy sat in the stern of the craft, gazing anxiously ahead.

"The wuss o' it is he's got sech a tarnal good start of us," remarked the farmer. "He must be a mile away by this time."

"Never mind, we'll catch him before long, if he sticks to the river," said Snap, confidently.

"Wisht I had brung a gun along."

"Yes, that would have been a good thing," was Shep's comment. "And that reminds me," he added to his chums, "all of our weapons were left in the rowboat."

"Yes; and the nigger is well supplied with guns and pistols," came from Whopper. "Maybe he will try to shoot us full of a million holes when he spots us."

"Oh, deary me! Don't say thet!" groaned Simon Lundy. "I—I don't want to be shot at, not me!"

"He won't dare to shoot!" said Giant. "We can pretend that we are all armed, you know."

On and on sped the rowboat, making excellent progress on the smooth-flowing river. About a mile was covered, and they swept around first one bend and then another.

"I see a boat ahead!" roared the farmer. "She's gone now," he added, as the craft shot behind some bushes, at a point along the river.

The four young oarsmen increased their stroke, and soon gained the point. Then the boat again came into full view and they could see that it was their own craft and that the colored man was rowing along at a good rate of speed.

"There he is!" was the cry.

"Pull, boys, pull!" called out Snap.

They did pull, and soon came closer to the craft ahead. Then the negro chanced to look back and saw them. He was evidently chagrined, and with out delay turned in toward shore, close to where the trees grew thick.

"Stop!" cried Shep. "Stop, you rascal!"

But the negro paid no attention, excepting to renew his efforts to reach the river bank. He sent the rowboat in among the bushes with a loud swish, and hopped ashore. Then the other boat came up.

"Stop!" roared Simon Lundy. "Give me back my watch!"

"Don't yo' dar to follow me!" yelled the negro, and showed a big horse-pistol. "If yo' do, somebody is dun gwine to git shot."

"Don't!" yelled the farmer, and fell flat in the rowboat.

The boys were also alarmed, and for the moment knew not what to do. In that space of time the negro darted back of some trees and was lost to view.

"Look out, boys, he'll shoot ye sure!" said Simon Lundy, in a voice full of fear.

"He has gone," announced Snap.

"Are all of our things safe?" asked Shep, anxiously.

"We'll soon find out," put in Whopper, and leaped from one boat into the other. All made a hasty examination and found everything intact. Even their weapons had not been touched, for which they were exceedingly thankful.

"He wasn't expecting us," explained Giant. "He thought he'd get time later to go through our belongings." And the others concluded that Giant had spoken the truth.

What to do next was a question. Simon Lundy said he did not want to follow the negro, since the rascal was armed and evidently full of fight.

"I'll go after him if the others will," said Shep, and the upshot of the matter was that the four boys went on a hunt, leaving the cowardly farmer to watch the two boats. The boys went deep into the woods and even to the road beyond, but saw nothing of the rascal that had disappeared.

"He will be on his guard now and keep out of sight," said Whopper.
"I'll bet he don't show himself again in two years."

"Make it ten years while you are at it, Whopper," said Snap, drily.

"Well, do you think he will show up?"

"No. But we may see him some day."

When the four young hunters returned to the boats they found Simon Lundy had hidden himself behind some bushes. He came out rather shamefacedly and asked if they had met the negro.

"Yes; and he said he was coming to chew you up," answered Whopper, with a wink at his chums.

"H-he did!" quaked Simon Lundy. "Sa-say, hadn't we better be a-goin'?"

"We are not going to bother to look for him any more," said Snap, who was disgusted with the cowardly and miserly farmer. "We are going on our way."

"An' what be I a-goin' tew do?"

"Take Mr. Welby's boat back," answered Snap, shortly. "You can row, can't you?"

"A leetle, yes."

"Then, good-by to you," said Shep, and leaped into the rowboat containing the camp outfit.

"Hi! Don't leave me here alone!" ejaculated Pop Lundy, in fresh alarm. "Shove the boat out into the stream."

This they did for him, and soon he was rowing away from the spot as best he could, fearful, evidently, that the negro would come, as Whopper had said, to "chew him up."

"He's about the limit!" was Snap's comment, when Simon Lundy was out of hearing. "How I would love to play ghost on him!"

"He'd have a fit and die," added Shep.

The negro had not disarranged the boat in the least, so they were soon on their way, Shep and Giant taking the oars. Snap leaned back in the stern and stretched himself.

"Tell you what, fellows, our outing is starting with lots of excitement. Wonder how it is going to end?"

"Perhaps it will end very tamely," said Whopper, who was in the bow, munching an apple. "We'll strike several weeks of rain, and not get a shot at anything larger than a rabbit. Then we'll all take cold, and have to send for a doctor, and——"

"Say, please heave him overboard, somebody!" burst out Giant. "He's just as cheerful as a funeral. We are going to have nothing but sunshine, and I am going to shoot two bears, four deer, seventeen wildcats, eighteen——"

"Hold on!" shouted Snap. "You have gotten into Whopper's story-bag, Giant, and it won't do."

"Oh, I was fooling!" said Whopper. "We are going to have a peach of a time. We are going to strike an old lodge in the wood—some an old hermit once lived in—and find a big pot of gold under the——"

"Bay window, near the well, just across the corner from the barber shop, next to the school," broke in Shep. "Say, cut out the fairy tales and get to business. Does anybody know that it is exactly ten minutes to twelve?"

"Codfish and crullers! You don't say so!" came from Whopper. "I knew I was getting hollow somewhere. What shall we do—go ashore and cook dinner?"

"Might as well," came from Snap. "Our time's our own, remember. We haven't got to hurry."

"I know just the spot, about quarter of a mile from here," said Shep. "Our family once went there for a picnic. There's a good spring of water there and a hollow for a fire, and everything."

"Pantry full of dishes and a tablecloth, I suppose," broke in the irrepressible Whopper. "I do love a picnic ground where you can pick napkins off the bushes and toothpicks, too."

The boys pushed the rowboat on its way and soon reached the spot that Shep had mentioned, and there they tied up at a tree-root sticking out of the river bank. Beyond was a cleared space and a semi-circle of stones with a pole in two notched posts for a fire and kettle. They soon had a blaze started and Whopper filled the kettle at the spring and hung it to boil.

"This is just a taste of what is to come," said Snap. "At this meal we'll have our sandwiches, cake and some hot coffee. It will be different when we broil our deer meat, or something like that, and make hot biscuits."

"And roast our bear steaks," put in Whopper. "Just wait till you see the bear I shoot!"

"He means the bear he runs away from," said Shep, and this caused a laugh.

As soon as the water was boiling they made coffee, and then all sat around to enjoy their first meal in the open. The adventures of the morning had given them all good appetites, and they did not stop until the entire allowance had disappeared.

"No more just now," said Snap. "We must keep something for supper and for breakfast, you know. After that we have got to live on regular camp fare."

They lolled around for the best part of an hour, then arose, cleaned up the camp, and started on their journey.

"And now for Lake Cameron!" cried Shep. "May we reach there without further mishaps."

CHAPTER VI

A FIRST NIGHT IN CAMP

Lake Cameron was a beautiful sheet of water, connected with the river by a narrow but deep creek lined on either side with thick blackberry and elderberry bushes. Around the lake the scenery was rather wild, and had it been closer to the railroad would have been a great spot for sportsmen. Even as it was, many came up there to hunt and to fish, and the boys were by no means certain that they would have even a small portion of the locality to themselves.

"I am going to see if I can't get a shot at something on the way," said Snap, as they turned into the creek. "There used to be wild turkeys up here, so Jed Sanborn told me."

"Is Sanborn out hunting?" asked the small youth of the crowd.

"Not just now, Giant. But he said he was coming to see us some time," answered Snap.

Snap had his shotgun ready for use, and so had one of the other young hunters. The rowboat glided along silently. The sun was just preparing to go down beyond the hills to the westward.

"Wait!" called Snap, in a low tone, and stood up. Those at the oars ceased rowing. The leader of the club took careful aim. Crack! went the piece.

"Touch anything?" asked Whopper.

"I did. Go ahead, and I'll pick it up." They rowed on, and a minute later Snap reached out of the boat and hauled in a fine wild turkey that was still fluttering faintly. A twist of the neck put it out of its misery, and the young hunter surveyed his game with satisfaction.

"First prize goes to Snap!" cried Shep. "Boys, we are sure of a turkey dinner to-morrow, anyway."

They continued on their journey, and at length came in sight of Lake Cameron, surrounded by hills and the forest. A moment later Whopper reached for his gun, took careful aim and fired.

"Only a rabbit," he announced. "But that is better than nothing."

"I should say it was," answered Giant, readily. "I'd like to bring down a game-bag full of them. Think of the rabbit pot-pie we could make!"

"Here goes for something," whispered Shep, and fired at a squirrel running around on a fallen tree. But the little creature was too nimble for him and got away unharmed.

"There is no use of my trying to get a shot at anything," announced Giant. "The noise has scared away the rest of the game. As soon as we land I am going to try my hand at fishing."

"You can do that now," replied Snap. "I'll take your oar. There are some flies in yonder little red box, and the white box had a few worms in it."

"I'll try a worm and look for a perch or two," answered the small lad.

He soon had his line out and baited up and began to troll at the end of the boat. In a few minutes he got a bite and pulled up a fair-sized perch. A sunfish followed, then a sucker, and then two more perch.

"What's the matter with that?" he asked, rather proudly.

"Nothing at all, Giant," answered Shep. "Shall I help?"

Giant agreed, and soon Shep had brought in another perch. By this time they had come to a suitable landing, and the rowboat was turned in and hauled well up on the shelving shore.

"I fancy this will make a good camping spot for to-night," said Snap. "In the morning we can decide upon what we want to do next."

"All right," said Shep. "Let us start up a camp-fire and make ourselves 'to hum,' as the old folks used to say."

Any quantity of dry sticks were to be had, and they had brought with them both an ax and a hatchet, so they soon had the sticks reduced to a proper size for burning. Near the shore were a number of bushes, and they cut out a spot in the center of these and over the top spread the canvas they had brought with them. For a flooring, they gathered some leaves, and over this spread a rubber blanket when it came time to go to bed.

It was very homelike and cheerful, gathering around the campfire, and all of the boys took a hand at preparing the supper which consisted of fried fish, baked potatoes, sandwiches, cake and coffee. They took their time over the meal, and did not finish until after eight o'clock. Then they sat around for an hour discussing their plans and telling stories.

"Now, the question comes up, do we stand guard at night?" asked Snap.

"Oh, let us all go to bed," answered Whopper. "I don't believe any cannibals are coming to carry us off—or an elephant, either."

"What about a wildcat or a bear?" asked Shep.

"Well, if you are afraid you can stay awake," answered Whopper.

There was a moment of silence and then, close at hand, a hoot-owl let out an unexpected and exceedingly weird call. Whopper gave a jump and so did Shep, and then all of the young hunters laughed.

"I am willing to let the guard slide if the others are willing, too," said Snap; and so it was decided.

They fixed the fire so that it would not go out, and then one after another retired to the shelter among the bushes. The moon was shining far above the trees and the center of the lake glistened like a mass of silver. Occasionally they heard the hoot of the owl, and the far-off bark of a fox, but otherwise all was silent.

When the boys awoke, the sun was shining brightly. Shep was the first to rouse up and he slipped outside and looked around the clearing and on to the lake. Not a person or a creature was in sight. He stirred up the fire and piled on some wood and then began to wash up.

"Hullo! you up already?" The call came from Snap, and soon all of the others sprang up and came from the bush shelter.

"This is fine!" exclaimed Whopper. "My! but the lake looks grand enough to take a bath in."

"Better try it," returned Shep, drily. "But first I'd advise you to wash your face only."

Whopper ran to the shore and took a dip.

"Phew! Cold as Greenland's icy mountain!" he ejaculated. "Say, if a fellow took a bath in that he'd stiffen into a mummy. No swim for me this morning!" And after a good wash he fixed up, and the others followed his example.

All wanted some more perch, and they went fishing for their breakfast in true camping-out style. A mess was procured in less than half an hour, and then they got one of the pans hot, while Snap made coffee and brought out the last of the bread they had brought along.

"Our next bread or biscuits we'll have to make ourselves," observed the youth.

It was so nice to take it easy that the young hunters did not finish their breakfast and clean up again until the middle of the forenoon. During that time they talked matters over once more and decided to row around Lake Cameron and then make up their minds at what point to locate.

Once more the outfit was packed on board of the rowboat and they moved along the lake shore, slowly, taking in the advantages and disadvantages of every spot as they went along. Some places seemed too high and rocky and some too low and marshy, some too barren and others too overgrown with trees and brushwood.

At last the circuit of the lake was finished and then by mutual consent they turned back to a point where there was a sloping, sandy shore. The trees grew close to the water's edge north and south of this point, but there was a cleared spot, and back of this a series of rocks, where they discovered a spring of clear, cold water.

"I think this is the best camping spot of the lot," said Snap.

"Anyway, it suits me."

"Couldn't be better, and I am perfectly satisfied," returned Shep.

"Count me in on stopping here," came from Giant.

"Why, this is a perfect paradise," remarked Whopper. "A fairyland of beauty and natural resources. I could live here a million years and never weary of gazing at the lake and——"

"Looking for something to eat," finished Shep. "No, I don't want a million years of this. But I think a few weeks will do very nicely."

"Well, if we are going to stay here, the question is, what sort of a shelter are we going to put up?"

"Oh, let us build a regular log cabin!" cried Giant. "It will be such fun."

"A log cabin isn't built in a day," answered Snap. "To build a good cabin will take quite some time. But we might build some kind of a shack," he added, as he saw the small lad's face fall. "There are four small trees almost in a square. We can cut them off and they will do for the corner-posts, and another tree in line with two in front will do for a door-post."

"Hurrah! Snap has solved the problem of a cabin!" shouted Whopper. "I declare, Snap, you want to take out a license as an architect and builder. We'll go to work to-morrow—as soon as we've gotten together something to eat." And in his joy, Whopper turned a handspring on some dead leaves, coming down on his back with a thump. "Wow! I'll not try that again in a hurry!" he grunted.

"We can take turns at building," said Shep. "Each day two can work on the cabin and two can go hunting or fishing. At the start we needn't go after anything but small game."

"That's it," said Snap. "But if any big game comes our way we can bring it down."

"Or make a try at it," corrected Giant.

CHAPTER VII

SOMETHING ABOUT A STRANGE ANIMAL

They brought the boat up on the sand and placed their things in the shelter of some bushes and rocks, covering everything with the canvas. It was growing late again and there was nothing to do but to try fishing once more and cook the wild turkey. Snap used a fly this time, and brought up a fine lake trout, of which he was justly proud. Up the shore Shep saw some rabbits, and went after them with his shotgun, bringing down a pair that promised good eating.

"How fast the time goes up here!" exclaimed Giant. "Why, it doesn't seem two hours since we got up!"

"That proves that we are enjoying ourselves," answered Snap. "The time won't go quite so fast after we get used to it."

"Well, if we get tired of one spot we can move to another," said Whopper.

It promised to be warm and clear that night, so they slept out under the trees, not far from their camp-fire. All was very quiet, not even a hoot-owl coming to disturb them.

But about four o'clock Snap awoke with a start and sat bolt upright. Something had awakened him, but he could not tell what. He aroused Shep.

"What is it, Snap?"

"That is what I want to know, Shep."

"What do you mean?"

"Something just woke me up. Did you notice anything?"

"I did not."

The talking aroused the other boys and all stared around them. Nothing unusual was to be seen anywhere.

"Snap must have been dreaming," grunted Whopper. "I guess he ate too much supper last night."

After a look around, the boys went to sleep again, and nobody got up until after seven o'clock. Then Giant began to stir around among the stores.

"Well, I declare!" he shouted. "Come here, fellows!"

"What is it?" asked Snap, running forward, followed by the others.

"Struck a gold mine?" queried Whopper.

"We had a visitor last night."

"A visitor?" cried the others, in a chorus.

"Yes. That must have been the noise Snap heard."

"I knew I heard something," murmured Snap. "But what kind of a visitor did we have?"

"A four-legged one," answered Giant. "He rooted among our stores for something to eat."

"Some animal!" ejaculated Whopper. "It's a wonder he didn't try to chew us all up. Is anything gone?"

"Is anything gone? Well, I rather guess?"

"All the fish for one thing!"

"And the rabbits and turkey!"

"And that crust of bread!"

"And about half of the sugar!"

The young hunters gazed about in consternation. Evidently the visitor had rooted around their stores to his heart's content.

"Do you know what I think it was?" came from Shep.

"A fox?"

"Worse than that."

"You don't mean a bear, do you?" queried Whopper, with a shiver, and a hasty glance over his shoulder.

"Yes; and there he is!" shouted Snap, and ran for the trees. Helter-skelter the others came after him, Whopper pitching headlong in his flight.

"Hi! hi! Save me!" roared the fallen one. "Don't—don't let the bear chew me up!"

"Where is the bear?" demanded little Giant, catching up his gun. Then he looked at Snap, who was grinning broadly. "You're fooling! Boys, it was only a joke!"

"A joke?" spluttered Whopper. "Do—do you mean to say there is no bear?"

"Not here. But there may have been one last night."

"Snap Dodge, you ought to be—be hung, drawn and quartered, and tarred and feathered in the bargain," said Whopper, severely. "it's an outrage to—to——"

"Let it drop, Whopper. Seriously, though, some wild animal has been here and eaten up part of our stores. The question is, could it have been a bear?"

"Let us look around for tracks," put in Giant, and got down on his hands and knees. The others began the hunt also, and soon they came upon some large tracks, leading deep into the woods and up the rocks beyond.

"It was certainly a bear," said Snap, and now his voice had something of seriousness in it. "Boys, I must say I don't like this."

"No more do I," answered Shep. "Why, that bear might have killed us all while we slept!"

"It's queer he didn't visit us," put in Giant.

"I don't know but what he did," said Snap. "Perhaps he woke me up and then ran away. I certainly heard something or felt something."

"This is enough to give one the creeps," was Whopper's comment. "I don't want to sleep where there are bears to crawl over one."

"Somebody will have to remain on guard after this until we get some sort of a shelter built," said Shep, and so it was agreed.

"I am going to build a bear trap, too," said Giant. "An old hunter from the West was telling me of the kind some Indians make. You take some logs and build a sort of raft of them and place it on the ground where the bear is likely to come. You raise one corner of the raft up and fix a couple of sticks under it, each fastened to another stick with a strong cord. On the cord you fasten the bait, and then on the top of the raft you pile some heavy stones. When the bear comes he tries to get at the bait, but the only way he can get under the logs and stones is by dropping down on his side. He works his way in, pulls on the bait, and down come the logs and stones on top of him holding him fast and most likely killing him."

"That's an idea! We'll make such a trap sure!" cried Whopper.

That day was a busy one for all hands. To do as much work as possible on the shelter, only a few hours were spent in hunting and fishing. But their luck was good and long before noon they had a dozen fish to their credit and also half a dozen rabbits, a wild turkey, three squirrels and some small birds.

"There, that will keep us going for a while," declared Snap. "Now let us turn all our attention to the cabin, so we can get away from Mr. Bear, if necessary."

It was no easy matter to chop down the five trees to a height of about eight feet, but once this was done cabin building began in earnest, and by nightfall they had a rude roof over the posts and had the

back logged up to a height of four feet. The next day they went at the task at sunrise, finishing the back and putting in the two sides, one with a slit of a window, over which they nailed some slats, so that nothing of size might get through.

"Now this begins to look like something," declared Shep. "I am afraid the front with a door, though, is going to bother us."

"We'll work it somehow," answered Snap, confidently.

In a few days the cabin was complete and it must be confessed that the young hunters were quite proud of their work. They made a sort of mud plaster and with this filled up the chinks between the logs, and the roof they thatched with bark, so as to keep out the rain. The floor they covered with pine boughs, piling the boughs high up at the back for a big couch upon which all might rest at night. They also made a split-log bench and a rude table, from which they might eat when the weather drove them indoors. But they were not equal to building a chimney, and so continued to do their cooking outdoors.

It was well that they hurried their cabin, for the day after it was completed a heavy and cold rain set in, lasting forty-eight hours. Fortunately they had a fair supply of fish and game on hand, so nobody had to go forth while the elements raged. They built a camp-fire close to the doorway of the cabin—under a sort of piazza top, and there took turns at cooking, and made themselves as comfortable as possible.

"This isn't so pleasant," said Whopper, as he gazed out at the rain. "I hope it doesn't last long."

"Well, we have got to take the weather as it comes," said Shep, philosophically. "We can't expect the sun to shine every day."

"I'd like it to rain during the night and be clear in the daytime."

"Want your weather made to order," laughed Giant.

Fortunately the boys had brought along several books and games. They had agreed that the books should be read only in bad weather, and the games played only when they could not go out, and now these pastimes came in very handy. They had checkers and dominos, and a new card game that was just then "all the rage." When night came they turned in early and slept soundly, the fear of the bear no longer troubling them.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL

The second week passed and they spent a quiet Sunday in camp. They were fortunate in their hunting and brought in large quantities of small game. Shep brought down a silver-tailed fox, of which he was very proud, and Whopper laid low the biggest rabbit they had yet seen. One day Giant and Snap went out for partridge and brought in three, all of fair size. They had also come across the track of some deer, and hoped to get on the trail of big game in the near future.

But Tuesday morning brought a disagreeable surprise. They were just getting ready for dinner, and Giant was out in the boat, fishing, when they heard a noise that was new to them.

"What do you suppose that is?" asked Whopper. "Sounds like an automobile approaching," answered Shep. "But of course it can't be that."

"It's a gasolene launch," declared Snap. "There she is now!" and he pointed to an outlying spur of land, around which the craft was puffing.

The launch was a craft fully forty feet long and correspondingly broad of beam. She was piled high with an outfit for camping, and in the boat were six men, two of whom were evidently camp helpers and guides.

"I believe those men are coming here!" declared Shep, as the launch turned in toward them.

The boys watched the approach of the gasolene launch with interest. It did not take long for the craft to reach a position directly in front of the camp, and there the power was turned off and one of the men

prepared to leap ashore.

"Hullo!" ejaculated a man in the stern of the launch, gazing ashore at the cabin. "What in thunder does this mean?"

No one answered him, and a moment later the bow of the launch scraped the sand and one after another the men leaped out. The boat was tied up and the men approached the young hunters.

"I say, what does this mean?" demanded the man who had spoken before. He was a burly individual, with a heavy black moustache and closecut beard. The look out of his eye was far from a pleasant one.

"What does what mean?" returned Snap, as coolly as he could, yet he felt that something "was in the wind."

"This!" cried the man, pointing to the cabin. "Who built that?"

"We did," put in Shep.

"Did you?" sneered the man. "And who gave you permission to do it?"

"Nobody," said Whopper. "We took permission. What have you got to say about it?" he added, not liking the man's tone.

"What have I got to say about it?" ejaculated the bearded man. "I've got a good deal to say about it, seems to me. Don't you know this is my private property?"

"No; we didn't know that," put in Snap, quickly. "Are you Mr. Chester?"

"No; I am Mr. Andrew Felps."

"Oh!" exclaimed Snap, but the word meant a good deal. He remembered that the man named was the head of the lumber company with which the Barnaby Lumber Company had had its dispute over the Spur Road tract. Snap's father had had several interviews with Mr. Andrew Felps, and the feeling engendered was decidedly bitter.

"You boys have no right on this property," went on Andrew Felps.

"I thought Mr. Chester owned this tract of land."

"He did, but he has sold out to the Felps Lumber Company, of which I am the head. Who ar you?"

"My name is Charley Dodge."

"Humph!! Come from Fairview?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it your father who has the interest in the lumber company there?"

"Yes, sir."

At this discovery Andrew Felps' face grew positively resentful.

"I suppose he sent you up here, eh?" he snarled.

"No. We got permission to go camping out and picked this place as suiting us."

"Well, you knew what was good," put in another of the men.

"Did you see us looking around here a couple of weeks ago?" went on Andrew Felps.

"We did not."

"Who are these—other kids with you?"

"Thank you, but I am not a kid," put in Shep. "My name is Sheppard Reed, and I am the son of Dr. Reed of Fairview. This is Frank Dawson, and the boy out in the boat is Will Caslette. We all belong at Fairview. As Snap—I mean Charley—says, we came to camp out. We have always understood that this was a free camping-out place. Folks have come to this lake for years."

"Well, they are not coming here any more!" cried Andrew Felps.

"After this those who come will pay for the privilege."

"The place isn't fenced in," said Whopper.

"No; but it will be, shortly. I am going to have a wire fence put up."

Seeing there was a dispute going on, Giant came ashore.

"What's the trouble?" he sang out. "Bad news from home?"

"No—bad news right here," murmured Shep, coming towards him.

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see."

"I came down here to camp out myself," went on Andrew Felps. "I and my friends picked this very spot over two weeks ago. I am going to have a first-class cabin built here shortly. You boys had no right to cut down the trees."

"Can't we stay here?" blurted out Giant.

"Stay here? Not much! You'll get out just as fast as you can pack up!"

At this announcement the hearts of the boys fell instantly. All thought of the labor they had put on the cabin and the surroundings.

"This is too bad!" cried Whopper. "See here, Mr. Felps, can't we stay if we pay you?"

"No, sir!" was the first answer. Andrew Felps looked at Snap, coldly. "You can go home and tell your father I sent you."

The remark made Snap exceedingly angry and for the moment he lost his temper.

"You are more than mean!" he cried. "We have worked hard to fit up this spot, as you can see. But your meanness is nothing but what I should expect from one who would act as you did about that Spur Road tract of lumber."

"Shut up, you imp!" snarled Andrew Felps, growing red in the face. "I have my rights, as you'll soon learn. Pack up your duds and get out at once!"

"Well, you are a gentleman!" cried Shep, also growing angry. "But I've heard about you before—down to Fairview. Well, we'll go."

"Yes, and mighty quick, too!" roared Andrew Felps, and rushing forward he kicked at the campfire with his foot and sent one of the frying-pans whirling into the bushes.

"I wouldn't be so hard on the youngsters, Andy," said one of the men, in a low tone.

"Oh, I know them, Sam," was Andrew Felps's answer. "That Dodge's father has been trying to get the best of me for years. Do you suppose I am going to give his cub any leeway? Not much!"

Some bitter words followed between the boys and the unreasonable timber dealer, and then the young hunters began to pack up and put their belongings in the rowboat.

"Oh, but wouldn't I like to get square with him!" muttered Whopper, as the work went on.

"Maybe we'll get a chance to square up some day," answered Shep. "I think he is more than mean."

"Here, leave that cabin alone!" came from Andrew Felps, as Snap began to knock down the front end with the ax.

"I may as well take it down, as you don't want it," said the boy.

"You leave it alone, I say."

"Maybe you want to use it?" sneered the youth.

"If so, who is going to stop me? It was built out of my timber, don't forget that, smarty."

"Perhaps you want to steal our outfit," cried Giant, who was boiling with suppressed rage.

"Say another word, kid, and I'll throw you into the lake!" roared Andrew Felps.

He came at Giant so threateningly that the small boy had to retreat. At last the things were stowed on the rowboat and the four young hunters boarded the craft.

"Don't you dare to come back here!" cried Andrew Felps.

"Thank you, I like to pick my company!" returned Whopper.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I like to associate with a gentleman."

"Say that again and I'll make it warm for you!" roared the timber dealer, and would have grabbed up a gun from his launch had not one of his companions prevented the move.

"Here, you might as well keep this while you are at it!" cried Shep, and hurled a dead rabbit ashore. The game was unusually "ripe" and caught Andrew Felps directly across the face. The man staggered back, stumbled over a log and sat down directly in the midst of the scattered campfire!

CHAPTER IX

A NIGHT OF DISCOMFORT

"Hi! Help! I am burning up!"

"Gracious, boys, look at that!" burst from Snap's lips. "He got more than he expected."

"Well, I didn't intend to upset him into the fire," burst out Shep. "I hope he doesn't get burnt."

By this time Andrew Felps had rolled out of the blaze. His coat was on fire and so was one leg of his trousers.

"Dive into the lake, Andy!" called out one of the men, and hurried the unfortunate individual toward the water. There seemed no help for it, and the timber dealer rushed into the icy water, giving a shiver as he did so; and then the danger was over.

"Come, we had better get out of here!" cried Whopper, in a low voice. "He'll be as mad as a thousand hornets now, and ready to chew us up into mincemeat!"

All of the boys were at the oars and without delay, they began to pull a strong stroke.

"Come back here, you young rascals!" cried one of the men of the party. "Come back, I say!"

"We are not going back," declared Snap.

"Not much," put in Shep. "I'd rather jump overboard."

"It served Felps right for being so mean," said Giant. "Just look at all our work gone to waste. It's enough to make one cry."

"And such a fine spot as it was, too," said Shep. "I doubt if we find another to equal it."

"It won't do any good if we do—on this lake," said Snap. "Andrew Felps will not let us stay here if he has purchased the property—as he says he has. I am afraid it is all due to me that we have got to move on," he added. "That man hates my father worse than poison."

"It is his natural meanness, that's what it is," said Whopper. "He is mean enough to get drowned, so as to save the expense of a cemetery lot."

While talking, the boys continued to row steadily, and soon a point of land took them out of sight of

Andrew Felps and his party. Then they rested on their oars and held a consultation.

"This is certainly something we didn't bargain for," was Snap's comment. "It knocks all of our plans endways, as the saying goes."

"I hope you're not thinking of going home?" said Giant, quickly.

"Home!" cried Shep. "Don't you dare to mention such a thing. No, I am not going home, boys. But one thing is certain, we can't stay at Lake Cameron."

"Let us try our luck at Firefly Lake," suggested Whopper. "That isn't as large as this lake, but it is certainly a nice sheet of water. And the hunting around there ought to be just as good as around here."

The others said they were willing, and a little later they made their way out of Lake Cameron and sent the rowboat along the rocky watercourse in the direction of Firefly Lake. It was now past noon, yet nobody was in the humor for eating.

"The more I think of Andrew Felps the madder I get," said Shep. "I don't see how a man can be so mean. It wouldn't have hurt him a bit to have let us stay there."

"I hope he has no luck at hunting," grumbled Giant. "He deserves to go home skunked."

"He will get some game—or his guides will get it for him," said Snap. "I wonder if it is possible that he has bought up Firefly Lake, too."

"My gracious, that's so!" ejaculated Whopper. "No use of going there if he has. He'll root us out sooner or later."

"Firefly Lake belongs to half a dozen people," said Giant. "Why, come to think of it, one of my uncles had an interest up there."

"Then I reckon we'll be safe."

It was no easy matter to guide the rowboat through the narrow and swiftly flowing river they were now on, and the young hunters had to give all their attention to the task. Once or twice they struck the rocks rather sharp blows, but no damage was done, for which they were thankful.

"One thing is certain," said Snap, when a wider part of the watercourse was gained. "That gasoline launch can never follow us to this lake. It's too large."

"Yes, and the tramp from one lake to the other is not easy," added Shep. "Old Jed Sanborn told me that."

"Won't Jed be angry when he learns that Felps has bought up Lake Cameron," put in Giant. "That was one of his favorite hunting and fishing places."

They had to go so slow through some portions of the stream that it was nightfall by the time Firefly Lake was reached. It was clouding up, and when the sun went down not a star showed itself.

"This looks as if we were going to have rain before morning," was Shep's comment. "Just our luck—to be caught in the open."

"Don't croak," said Snap. "No matter what comes, let us make the best of it."

It was almost impossible in the fast gathering darkness to distinguish one part of the shore from another, and they did not know where to land. Seeing a small cove, they made for it, and pulled the rowboat up among some bushes. Then they gathered some firewood, started a blaze, and set about getting a meal which should be a dinner and supper combined.

"Well, I am hungry now and no mistake," said Whopper. "I think I could eat snakes' eggs on toast or pickled eels' feet."

The camp-fire made things look more cheerful, and a hearty meal did much toward restoring good humor. Yet the boys felt sore over the way Andrew Felps had treated them, and for this they could not be blamed.

"To-morrow we'll have to locate all over again," said Snap. "And if we want to be comfortable, we'll have to put up another cabin. But we needn't to make it quite so complete as that other one was."

"Let us look around and see if we can't find some sort of a natural shelter," suggested Shep—"some

cave, or overhanging rocks, or something like that."

"Where the rocks can come down and bury us alive," said Whopper.
"Wouldn't that be charming!"

"Whopper, you're as soothing as a funeral!" cried Giant. "We ought to make you build the next cabin all alone."

"Well, I could do that if I had time enough," was the dry reply.

Among the trees the boys found a pretty fair shelter, and here made themselves as comfortable as possible. They covered the stores in the boat with the canvas, piled the wood on the camp-fire, and then lay down to rest, leaving Giant to stand guard for the first two hours of the night.

When Giant called Snap to relieve him it was already raining and the wind was rising. The fire had died down and they did not dare to stir it up for fear the wind would carry the sparks into the forest and cause a general conflagration.

"I guess we are in for it," declared Snap, as he peered around in the darkness. "Just listen to the wind rising!"

Giant retired, leaving the leader of the tour on guard. Snap walked around for a bit, but then had to seek the shelter of the trees as the rain came down heavily.

"Hullo! what's this?" came from Whopper, as he sprang up. "Say, I thought somebody was throwing a pail of water over me!" The rain had come through the tree branches directly down upon his upturned face.

In a few minutes more all of the boys arose, as the wind was now sending the rain in all directions. The tree limbs bent low and threatened to break at every instant.

"Phew!" cried Whopper. "There goes my cap!" And he made a dash after the whirling headgear, catching it just as it was sailing for the lake.

A moment later came a gust of wind that almost lifted them from their feet. The trees of the forest were bent lower than ever, and amid the whistling of the tornado came a crack like that of a big pistol.

"Look out for the tree-top!" yelled Shep, and pulled Snap to one side. All jumped into the open and were just in time to escape about ten feet of the top of the tree, which sailed through the air and bit the lake surface with a loud splash. Then down came half a dozen small branches, several with birds' nests on them.

"This is positively the worst storm yet," was Snap's comment, after a perilous half hour had passed. "I am wet to the skin."

"Don't say a word," groaned Whopper. "I've got about a barrel of water in my shoes and another barrel down my neck!"

"I am going to see if the stores are safe," came from Shep, and he hurried for the boat, followed by Snap. They found that the canvas had torn from its fastenings and was flapping wildly in the wind. The rain had soaked almost everything.

"This is certainly serious," said Snap, as he did his best, assisted by the others, to pull the canvas into place once more and fasten it tight. "We don't want our stores ruined."

"We can thank Mr. Andrew Felps for this experience," grumbled Shep. "I suppose he is snug in our cabin and laughing at us."

"He must certainly be in the cabin," said Giant, who had followed the others to the boat.

They could do nothing to make themselves comfortable, and so had to simply grin and bear it, which they did with the best grace possible. They were afraid to remain under the trees for fear of getting struck by some falling branch.

"Wonder how long this is going to last?" came from Whopper, an hour later. "Looks to me as if it was going to keep up a long time."

"There is no telling," answered Snap. "I think--hark!"

All listened and heard a strange humming. Then the wind began to tear through the forest with

fearful violence.

"It is surely a tornado!" yelled Shep. "Get down, all of you, or you'll be blown to nowhere!"

CHAPTER X

GIANT AND THE MASKALONGE

The wind was making such a noise that little more could be said, and as the tornado increased all of the boys threw themselves on the ground, between a number of low bushes close to the lake shore. The rain was coming down in veritable sheets and the water was running into the lake in hundreds of rivulets.

"There goes something!" screamed Giant, as he caught sight of an object whirling over their heads. "Looked like a sail."

"It was the boat canvas," answered Whopper. "Maybe the boat will go next. Say, I'd just as lief be at home in my own little bed, eh?"

"Don't mention it," replied Giant, with a sigh.

For fully an hour the wind tore around them in a manner that alarmed the young hunters in the extreme. They could do nothing to save either themselves or their stores, and wondered what the morning would bring forth. More than one imagined that that was the last of the outing and they would have to return home.

But by daybreak the storm let up and the wind gradually died down to nothing but a gentle breeze. At eight o'clock the sun broke from under the scattering clouds and then all heaved a long sigh of relief.

"I never want to put in such a night again," said Shep. "I was afraid every minute was going to be my last."

"This storm undoubtedly did a great deal of damage," said Snap. "I shouldn't wonder if—oh, look at the top of yonder tree. What is that?"

"It's the patch of canvas we had over the stores!" cried Giant. "The wind took it to the top of the tree. Somebody will have a climb to get it again!"

"I'll go after it later on," said Snap. "The first thing to do is to build a big fire and get dry, otherwise we'll all catch our deaths of cold."

It was no easy matter to find wood dry enough to burn, but once a blaze was started they found branches enough to pile on. They shed the majority of their garments, and soon the warmth dried each piece, much to their satisfaction and comfort.

Whopper had not been idle, and he soon had a pot of hot coffee, to which they added some condensed milk and water-soaked sugar. They also got some fish from the lake, and the entire morning was devoted to "drying out" and getting a substantial meal.

"One comfort," remarked Shep, "we'll not want for firewood while we are here."

"I shouldn't be surprised if we can pick up quite some dead birds and small animals," said Snap. "You generally can after such a storm as this."

After a good meal they felt somewhat better and took a survey of the situation. Then they brought out their stores and set them to dry on some stones in front of the camp-fire. A few articles had been rendered valueless and these they threw away. Late in the afternoon Shep and Giant went fishing, while Snap and Whopper walked for a short distance into the woods.

"We can't go very far," said Snap. "It is too wet in the shade."

"I see one bird already," said his companion, and picked up a fine woodpecker. A thrush and two other birds they could not place followed, and then they ran across a fallen tree under which lay two

squirrels.

"This is hunting of a new kind," said Whopper. "Poor chaps!" he went on, looking at the squirrels. "I suppose that storm ripped your home completely to pieces!"

"Wait! I see a good shot!" cried Snap, a few minutes later, and raising his gun took careful aim. The report of the fowling-piece was followed by a wild fluttering and then two partridges dropped down, each seriously wounded. The boys dashed forward, caught the game and quickly put them out of their misery.

"There, we have done enough for to-day," said Snap, but Whopper blazed away, nevertheless, and brought down a rabbit that chanced to be limping across a clearing, having had a paw broken by the storm.

With their game in their bags, the boys started back for the lake front. They were almost to the camping spot when a wild cry of alarm rent the air.

"Help!" came in Giant's voice.

"Let go! Let go!" came from Shep, an instant later.

"I can't! I can't!" answered the smallest of the young hunters.

"Something is wrong!" cried Snap, and dashed for the shore, followed by his companion. When they came to the clearing they found Shep standing up in the rowboat, gesticulating wildly. Giant was in the water and moving at a fairly rapid pace toward the centre of Firefly Lake!

"What does this mean?" questioned Snap.

"He got some kind of a bite and the fish hauled him overboard," answered Shep.

"Why don't you let the fish go?" screamed Whopper.

"I—I can't," gasped Giant. "The line is twisted around my wrist!"

"Row for him, Shep!" called Snap.

He had scarcely spoken when the fish took another tack, dragging poor Giant toward the shore, some distance above the camp. Snap and Whopper hurried in the direction, and as the little youth managed to get a footing near the beach they ran in up to their ankles and dragged him to safety. Then all three began to haul in on the fishing line.

"I see what it is!" cried Snap. "A maskalonge—and a whopper, too!"

Snap was right, and it was no mean task to bring the fish to the shore, and even then it flopped around in a manner that scared them a little. The maskalonge was dark gray in color with small black spots, and measured all of four feet and a half from head to tail.

"My, but he is a whopper!" cried Shep, as he ran the boat ashore and surveyed the haul. "No wonder he yanked Giant overboard."

"Giant, you can be proud of such a haul," said Snap. "I guess he's the king-pin of all the pike in this lake."

"Well, I am proud," answered Giant, with a grin. "Just the same, I don't relish being pulled overboard for any fish in the lake. He must weigh something, eh?"

"Fifteen to twenty pounds, I guess," said Snap. "It's too bad we haven't a scales along."

"Weigh him in his own scales," said Whopper, by way of some fun.

"I wish I could send this fish home to my mother," said the small youth. "Wouldn't it make her eyes stick out, though!"

"It certainly would, and some other folks would wonder, too," answered Shep. "But I don't see how you can do it."

Besides the maskalonge, the boys had caught several pike of fair size, so they were assured of enough to eat for several days.

"The best thing we can do to-morrow is to find a suitable camping spot and build a shelter," said Snap. "We don't want to be caught out in the open again."

The canvas at the tree-top was secured, and that night they slept between some bushes with this over them to keep off the night air. Each of the young hunters took his turn at watching, but nothing came to disturb them, although Whopper declared that he heard several foxes not far off.

"I thought they were going to pay us a visit, but when they were about two hundred feet away they took a turn and that was the last I heard of them."

On the following morning the young hunters were in the act of embarking in their rowboat, for a tour around the shore of Firefly Lake, when Shep pointed out a small canoe coming swiftly toward them. In the craft sat a man of middle age, with thick hair and a heavy beard.

"Who can it be?" questioned Whopper.

"Perhaps it is one of the Felps crowd—to warn us away," spoke up Giant. "If it is, I'm rather for giving him a piece of our mind."

"It is Jed Sanborn!" cried Shep. "He must be out to do a little hunting or fishing on his own account."

Jed Sanborn was a character well known to the people of the district surrounding the lakes. He was a hunter and trapper and had been all his life. He was a bachelor, with no known relatives, and lived in a little cabin on the mountainside, two miles from Lake Cameron. The boys had met him a number of times and knew him to be a good shot and a good-humored individual.

"Hullo, Jed, where are you bound?" sang out Snap, as the hunter drew closer in his canoe.

"Thought I'd find you up here, boys," was the answer. "Have a good time last night?"

"No; we had a beastly time," answered Shep.

"Rained hard, didn't it? Where are you bound now?"

"We were going to look around the lake, that's all. We want to find a good camping-out spot."

"Folks down at Fairview said you were going to Lake Cameron."

"So we were, but Mr. Andrew Felps came along and drove us away."

"And after we had built a cabin, too," put in Giant.

"Huh! that's just like him," responded Jed Sanborn, as he bumped alongside of the rowboat with his canoe "He told me I couldn't hunt or fish around that lake either."

CHAPTER XI

IN A NEW CAMP

"When did you come from Lake Cameron?" asked Snap, after a pause.

"Came from there right now."

"Then you saw the Felps crowd at the cabin we built?" queried Whopper.

"So you built that shelter?"

"We did."

"And he drove you off? It was dog mean, that's all I've got to say."

"Did he tell you he had bought that land?" went on Snap.

"Yes. Oh, he's as mean as they make 'em, that feller," added Jed Sanborn. "Hullo! Where under the canopy did you git that big maskalonge?" he cried, catching sight of the fish.

"Giant caught it," answered Whopper. "But he was pulled overboard doing it."

"And they had to help me land him," added the small youth, but rather proudly.

"Well, well! this beats the Dutch! Why, I never caught such a fish but once in my whole life in these parts although I've hooked 'em on the St. Lawrence. It's something to be proud of, lad. You're as good a fisherman as is to be found anywhere."

"When did you leave Fairview?" asked Shep.

"The day after you did. I expected to meet you before, but I had to go over to Sand Rock on business and I was delayed. I went up to Lake Cameron, and I almost had a fight with Andrew Felps. He wanted to take away a mink I had caught in a trap. But I wouldn't give it up." And Jed Sanborn pointed to where the mink lay, in the bottom of his canoe.

"Do you know much about this lake, jed?" asked Snap.

"I think I do—I've spent plenty of time up here, one year an' another."

"Where can we find the best camping place?"

The hunter scratched his head in thought.

"Well. I know of two pretty good spots. Maybe you had better see 'em both an' then take your pick."

"All right, we'll do that," came from Shep. "Will you show us the spots now?"

"Certainly. I haven't got much else to do," answered Jed Sanborn.

He did not tell the lads that he had been asked to keep an eye on them, fearing the information would not be to their liking. He was not to interfere with any of their movements unless he that they were running into positive danger.

In a few minutes more the rowboat and the canoe were on the way up the western shore of Firefly Lake. It promised to be a perfect day, with just sufficient coolness to make it exhilarating. In the trees that lined the lake shore the birds warbled merrily, evidently glad that winter was not yet upon them.

"I reckon it's going to be a good sporting season," said Jed Sanborn, as they pulled along the lake shore. "If so, you boys will be right in it, as the saying goes."

"Well, we are out for all we can get," answered Snap.

It was not long before they came to a spot that looked rather inviting, but there was one drawback—they would have to go quite a distance for spring water.

"Now I'll show you another spot which may prove better," said the hunter.

They turned one end of Firefly Lake and came up on the other shore. Suddenly Whopper gave a cry:

"That looks good!"

"So it does," answered Shep. "Jed, is that the spot you had in mind?"

"It is, my lad."

"Is there a spring handy?"

"Yes; right behind the big rock to the left—the purest water in these parts, so I always thought."

They lost no time in going ashore, running the rowboat up into a tiny cove, where an overhanging rock acted as a dock. There was a small, cleared space between the tall trees, and to one side grew a clump of trees in something of a semi-circle. Snap ran forward to investigate.

"Why, Jed, what does this mean!"

"Here is a shack already!"

"Some other hunters must have been here!"

"I was here last season, with two gentlemen from New York," explained the hunter. "I built that shack fer 'em. You can use it until you put up something better—that is, if you decide to stay here."

"Let us stay by all means!" cried Shep, gazing around. "It's a beautiful spot."

"Better than the one we had to give up at Lake Cameron," came from Giant. "How about hunting, Jed?"

"Jest as good around here as t'udder lake, my boy."

A vote was taken, and all of the boys decided that they would remain at the spot. This being settled upon, they brought their stores ashore and placed them in the shack, so that no further rain could get at them.

"We have lost enough through the rain and that bear," said Snap, and then had to tell Jed Sanborn all about the mysterious midnight visitor.

"Oh, but I wish I had been on hand—to git a crack at that bear!" cried the hunter. "I ain't had a crack at a bear fer some time. They are gittin' scarce around here."

It was time to eat again, and they made a splendid dinner of some baked maskalonge, Jed Sanborn showing them how to turn out the fish in a manner that was appetizing to the last degree. Shep also made some biscuits, which, if they were not first-class, were far from what boys usually call "sinkers."

"I hope nobody comes to disturb us here," said Snap. "I think if we are left alone we'll have the time of our lives."

While they ate they discussed the question of putting up another cabin. Giant was very eager to go ahead and so was Whopper—both loving the work fully as much as they loved hunting and fishing.

"All right, we'll build a cabin," said Snap. "But first we must get together something to eat, as we did before."

That afternoon all went out hunting with Jed Sanborn and he showed them where to find a good supply of rabbits, and took them to a hollow among the hills where the partridges were thick. All fired at once, and as a consequence they got eight of the game. Their rabbits numbered sixteen, and they also brought down three squirrels. Coming back to the camp, Jed Sanborn took a long shot at some wild ducks that were flying overhead and brought down two, which he added to their stock.

"Now, do a little fishing, and you'll have enough to eat fer a week," he said.

"Before you go away I want you to show us how to set some traps, Jed," said Snap.

"I'll do that," was the answer, and the very next day the old hunter made for them a trap to catch birds, another for mink and also a beaver trap.

"When I come ag'in I'll bring you something to put in the beaver trap," said the hunter. "It's a stuff we call barkstone. The beavers can't resist it nohow. As soon as they smell it they have to walk right into the trap after it." He referred to castoreum, a liquid obtained from the beaver, or castor, itself and having a powerful odor which acts on the animal just as catnip acts on a cat.

The weather had now turned off colder and they were glad to huddle close to the camp-fire at night. Before going to bed the hunter told the boys a bear story that all pronounced a "rattler."

The building of the new cabin began in earnest the next day, and Jed Sanborn told them how it might be put together to the best advantage, and even aided in cutting down some of the necessary logs.

"I've got to go back to town to-morrow," he said. "But I'll come back here before very long. I'll bring you anything you want."

"In that case I'll make out a list," answered Snap, and did so, with the aid of the others. Jed Sanborn left the next day at noon; and it was some time before they saw him again.

"And now to get at this cabin in earnest," said Shep, after the departure of the hunter.

Jed Sanborn had shown them how they might pile up some rocks for a rude chimney, banking up the lower part outside with dirt, and this they finished first. Then the top was put on the new structure and the sides, one end having a small door and the other an even smaller window. The flooring was of hard dirt, with cedar boughs in two corners for couches. In the shack they found a rude bench and a table, and these they transferred to the cabin. When they tried their new fireplace they found it worked well, the smoke going up the rude chimney without difficulty.

"Now, this is something like!" declared Giant, as he surveyed the work. "Even in a storm we can be quite comfortable here."

"Providing the roof doesn't leak," declared Shep. "When it rains we must watch for leaks and try to stop them up—with bark or with the canvas."

CHAPTER XII

SHEP AND THE HOLLOW TREE

For several days after the cabin was finished, the boys rested from their labors and took it easy. An unusually warm spell followed the short cold snap and one day, at noon, all took a dip in the lake. But the water was so cold they remained in only a few minutes and all were glad enough to hurry back into their clothing.

"A cold bath like that goes a good ways," declared Shep. "If a fellow stayed in too long he'd freeze to death."

"Why, my back is full of icicles now!" declared Whopper. "Feels as if I had gotten locked in a refrigerator by mistake."

"Like the tramp they caught at Westport last summer," came from Giant, with a laugh. "He stole a ride on the cars and got into a refrigerator car by mistake. The car was packed with ice and wasn't opened for forty-eight hours after it started. The poor tramp was about half dead when they got him out."

Early on the following Friday morning, Shep and Snap went out on a hunt, leaving Whopper and Giant to look after the camp and fish, if they felt like putting out any lines. It was a bright, breezy day and all of the boys were in the best of humor.

"We may not be back until late," said Snap, as he and Shep moved away. "So don't worry if you don't see us."

"All right—we'll save you some supper," answered Whopper.

Snap and Shep had decided to try their luck in the woods to the north of Firefly Lake, taking to an old deer trail that Jed Sanborn had pointed out to them. They were after any game that might appear, but did not look for anything big, for the older hunter had informed them that it would be next to impossible to spot any deer until the snow was on the ground.

Each youth carried his shotgun and his gamebag, containing his dinner, and also a good supply of ammunition.

The boys walked a good half mile before they saw any indications of game. Then Snap called a halt and pointed to a little clearing. Looking through some brushwood, Shep made out half a dozen wild turkeys, feeding peacefully.

"We ought to get at least two of them," whispered Snap. "All ready?"

"Yes."

"Then fire when I tell you."

They came a little closer, and both boys took careful aim. At the word the two shotguns rang out, and to the delight of the two young hunters down came three of the wild turkeys. The rest flew away among the trees and were lost to sight immediately.

"That's a haul!" cried Shep, and ran forward.

"Look out!" screamed Snap, an instant later. "One of 'em is coming for you!"

His warning proved true, and before Snap could retreat the wounded wild turkey had flown directly into his face and was cracking the boy with its strong wings.

"Get away! Oh, dear!" sang out poor Shep, and tried to beat the wounded creature off, but the wild turkey was full of fight and renewed the attack with vigor.

"I'll fix him! Down with your hands!" ejaculated Snap, and, rushing in, he hit the turkey with the stock of his gun. The creature fell to the ground and before it could arise Snap had his foot on it; and then the little battle came to an end, and soon all three of the wild turkeys were dead.

"Well, that's the first I knew a wild turkey would attack a fellow," declared Snap, as he nursed a scratch on his left cheek. "Phew, but he gave me some regular prize-fighter blows!"

"Wild creatures of all kinds will fight if cornered," answered his chum. "Be thankful that he didn't try to pick out your eyes."

"Yes, that is what I was looking out for," answered Shep.

Having secured the game, they moved onward once more, up a small hill and then through the hollow beyond. But though they kept on until noon nothing further worth shooting at presented itself.

Sitting down in the sun, the boys ate their lunch and took a drink from a tiny brook flowing into the lake. Then they tramped onward once more for another mile.

"Humph! This sort of hunting doesn't amount to anything," grumbled Snap. "If we hadn't run across those turkeys we should have been skunked."

"Let us go a little further," answered Shep. "Here are two trails. Supposing I take the one over the hill and you the one nearest to the lake. If we don't see anything we can come back here."

So it was agreed, and a minute later they separated. Shep took to rather a rough path and more than once felt that he would have to turn back and give up.

"But I am not going back till I hit something," he told himself, and just then a distant shot reached his ears. "Snap must have spotted something. I must do as well."

A hundred feet further on he came to an old and wide-spreading tree. On the branches he discovered two squirrels of good size. Without delay he blazed away, and when the smoke drifted away saw that both of the creatures were stone dead. They had not dropped to the ground, but were caught in two crotches of the tree, at a spot well over his head.

"I'll have to climb up to get them," he murmured, and threw down his gun and his game bag. A limb was handy and he swung himself up into the tree and worked his way toward the trunk, where the squirrels lay.

The tree was old and partly split in half and the center of the trunk was hollow. Just as he reached out to take hold of one of the squirrels, his foot slipped and he began to slide down into the hollow. He clutched at the smooth wood, but could not stay his progress, and like a flash he disappeared from the sunlight into almost utter darkness!

Unfortunately for the young hunter, the tree was hollow to its very roots, and he went to the bottom, reaching it with a jolt that made his teeth crack together. His hands were above him and he was wedged in so tightly that he could not bring them down.

"Well, of all things!" he murmured, when he could catch his breath. "I am a prisoner now and no mistake!"

He looked up, but a slight twist of the tree cut off the sunlight from overhead, although he could see dimly after his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the semi-gloom.

Shep waited to get back his breath, and then started to feel around for something by which he might raise himself. Not a projection of any sort was at hand.

"How in the world am I to get out of this?" was the question which he asked himself.

He could not answer the riddle, and the cold perspiration stood out on his forehead. Was it possible that he must remain a prisoner in the tree forever?

"I've got to get out somehow!" he told himself, desperately. "I must get out!"

Again he felt around, and tried to raise himself by means of his feet. He went up several inches, but that was all, and a moment later slipped down again.

It must be confessed that Shep was now thoroughly alarmed, and he trembled a little as he thought of the possible outcome of this unlooked-for adventure. Perhaps he would have to remain there until he died of hunger and thirst. Long afterwards his friends might find his bones.

Then he thought of crying for help and gave half a dozen shouts. But no answer came back, for nobody was in that vicinity.

Again he tried to raise himself, and by a mighty effort got up a distance of a foot and a half. But that seemed to be the limit and, utterly exhausted, he dropped back, gasping for breath.

"It's no use," he mused, dismally. "I'm caught in a regular vise."

Then he thought of cutting his way out of the tree and after a long struggle managed to get at his jack-knife. But cutting in the position he occupied was a slow process, and made his hand ache long before he had even a hole through which he might peer.

At last he gave up the attempt and stood still, not knowing what to do next. He felt that he was as good as buried alive. What was to be the outcome of this perilous adventure?

CHAPTER XIII

LOST IN THE WOODS

Snap had fairly good luck while on the hunt. He shot half a dozen rabbits and one of the plumpest partridges he had yet seen.

As he moved along, he listened for some shots from Shep, but, hearing none, concluded that his chum was having no success.

"It's too bad," thought Snap, at length. "Perhaps I had better go back and get him to come this way."

With his game in his bag and over his shoulder, he retraced his steps to where he had separated from Shep and began to call his chum. Not getting any answer, he started after the other young hunter.

"He must have gone back," he mused, coming to a halt when he was within a hundred feet of the tree in which poor Shep was a prisoner. "And if that is so I may as well go, too. He might at least have waited for me."

Whistling carelessly to himself, Snap made his way back to the camp. He found nobody at hand, but presently Whopper hove into sight with some fish, followed by Giant.

"Hullo! That's a nice haul!" cried Whopper. "How did Shep make out?"

"I don't know. Isn't he here?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Neither have I," put in the smallest of the young hunters. "I thought he went out with you."

"So he did; but we separated, and I thought he came home, as I couldn't find any trace of him."

"Oh, I guess he'll come along after awhile," observed Whopper. "Maybe he is trying to bring in an extra lot of game."

"I didn't hear him doing any shooting," answered Snap.

However, he was not much disturbed, and the boys sat around the camp for an hour, waiting for Shep to return. Then they prepared dinner, and while eating talked about the sports still to come.

"I tell you, I don't much like this," said Snap, at last. "I wish Shep was back in camp."

"Do you think anything has really happened to him?" questioned Giant, quickly.

"I don't know what to think."

"Let us fire a signal."

This suggestion from Whopper met with approval, and they fired a signal long before agreed upon—two shots in rapid succession. They waited impatiently, but no answering shots came back.

"Let us go out and look for him," said Giant. "Perhaps he has fallen into a hole and broken a leg, or something like that."

"Oh, there are lots of things could happen to a fellow out here," answered Whopper. "But I thought we could trust Shep to take care of himself."

They waited a while longer, and then, putting the camp in order, set out on the hunt for the missing member of the gun club.

It was an easy matter to reach the spot where Snap and Shep had separated. Then they took to the trail Shep had followed, until they came to a bit of a clearing.

"Oh my! look there!" ejaculated Giant, suddenly. "Come back of the bushes, quick, before they see you!"

Having hauled his companions behind the bushes, he pointed to a spot beyond one end of the lake.

"I don't see anything," said Snap.

"I do!" cried Whopper. "Some deer!"

"Yes, three or four of 'em!" cried the little hunter. "Oh, if we could only get at 'em!"

"I think I understand now," came from Snap. "Shep must have gone after those deer."

"Like as not—and he didn't answer our signal for fear of scaring them," answered Giant.

The sight of deer filled the three young hunters with enthusiasm, and for the moment they gave up the idea of finding Shep. Snap thought he saw a path leading around the lake end, and proposed they go after the game without delay.

"It's our first chance at deer, and it may be our last," he said. "Even if Shep did go after them we may as well do our share toward bringing some of 'em down."

The others were willing enough to go after the deer, and away they went, pushing through the brushwood and over the rocks, in an endeavor to get around the end of the lake which, at this locality, formed a long V-shape, each side overhung with trees and bushes.

They were making good progress, and Whopper was in advance, when the young hunter let out a cry of alarm:

"A snake! A rattlesnake!"

He was right, the rattlesnake was there, and in order to get out of the way of the reptile they rushed pell-mell into the woods until they suddenly found themselves in a swamp over their ankles. They kept on until they reached higher ground and then paused in the midst of some tall brushwood.

"That was certainly a scare!" gasped Giant. "I don't want any rattlesnakes in mine!"

"Nor I," put in Whopper. "Gosh! He was about a hundred feet long! And did you see the eyes? Regular electric eyes!"

"Phew! It takes Whopper to tell the plain truth," said Snap, with a grin. "But he was bad enough, I admit," he continued. "If he hadn't been I shouldn't have legged it as I did."

"Don't forget that we are out after the deer," said Giant, after the excitement had somewhat died away. "What direction is the game, anyway?"

They looked around them and then for the first time noticed that they were surrounded by tall trees, which all but shut out the sunlight. Then the sun went under a cloud, making it quite dark.

"Come on, this is the way," said Whopper, and the others followed him without question, but they seemed to get deeper and deeper into the forest, and at last came to a halt close to the base of a series of big rocks.

"I think we have missed it," said Snap, gazing around sharply.

"Missed it?" queried Giant. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we are not getting around the end of the lake at all."

"Do you think we are lost?"

At this the leader of the gun club shrugged his shoulders.

"You can put it that way if you wish, Giant."

"Oh, dear! I don't want to be lost!"

"Oh, we are not lost!" put in Whopper, briskly. "Come on."

"Do you want to climb over the rocks, Whopper?" asked Snap.

"No; let us go around them."

They attempted to do this, only to find themselves caught in a tangle of undergrowth from which it was almost impossible to extricate themselves. Then they came out at a point that was all but surrounded by big rocks. It was now so dark they could scarcely see in any direction.

"We may as well face the truth, fellows," said Snap. "We are lost."

"Lost!" came from both of the others.

"Yes, lost. And how we are to get out of the mess I don't know."

"Well, this is the worst yet!" came with a groan from Whopper. "We start out to find Shep and end up by getting lost. If he is back in camp he will have the laugh on us."

"This means good-bye to the deer," said Giant. "But I don't care—if only we get back to camp in safety."

"Let us climb a tree and look around," suggested Snap.

This advice was followed, but try their best they could not locate their camp, although they saw Firefly Lake at a distance to the south of them. The sun was setting behind a bank of clouds and soon it grew positively black beneath the trees.

It must be admitted that the young hunters felt in anything but a cheerful frame of mind. Giant suggested that there might be more rattlesnakes at hand, and this made all nervous and on constant guard against reptiles.

"Are we going to stay here all night?" demanded Whopper, after a spell of silence.

"I don't see what else we can do," answered Snap.

"If we do have to stay, I am going to have a fire," put in Giant. "And somebody ought to remain on guard."

"To be sure, Giant. All of us can take turns at watching and at keeping the fire going."

Wood was handy, and finding something of a cleared space, they built a fire and over this cooked the single squirrel Giant had brought down shortly after leaving the regular camp. It was not much of a meal, but it was all they had, and with it they had to be content.

Even with one on guard, it was rather hard for the other two to go to sleep, though they were worn out by their long tramping around. They slept only by fits and starts, and they were glad enough when morning came and they saw the sunlight stealing over the tree-tops.

"And now for the camp!" cried Snap. "I hope nothing has happened there during our absence."

CHAPTER XIV

"Oh, what a night! What a night!"

It was Shep who uttered the words. The long spell of darkness had at last gone, and looking up overhead he could see a bit of sunshine striking the edge of the hollow.

In vain he had tried to get out of the tree. Every plan had proved unsuccessful, and he had been held a prisoner through the long hours which seemed to have no end.

He was both hungry and thirsty and had slept only by winks, as the saying goes.

He no longer dared to think of the future, fearing he would go mad. Was he really to remain there to die of thirst and hunger? Was the hollow tree to prove his coffin?

A bird fluttered down into the hollow and startled him. He raised his hand softly and tried to catch it, but like a flash the bird was gone, and he was left as lonely as before.

Another hour passed and his thirst seemed to grow upon him every minute. Then he grew desperate, and bracing himself, tried with all of his strength to burst the hollow tree asunder. But the effort availed nothing.

Presently he heard something that caused him to rouse up. It was the sound of a shotgun, discharged at a distance.

"They must be out—perhaps they are looking for me!" he murmured. "I hope they come here!" And he breathed a silent prayer that they might not pass him by in his sore distress.

A little later he heard a curious scratching at the top of the hollow. He strained his eyes and saw a bushy tail swishing around.

"A wild animal!" he thought. "Will it come down on top of me?"

He gave a low call and the animal disappeared. But then, after a period of several minutes, it came back again and this time looked down into the hollow tree, longingly.

"A wildcat!"

Shep was right; it was indeed wildcat that had come to pay him a visit, and the beast seemed to be in anything but a good humor as it glared down upon the imprisoned young hunter.

Would the beast spring down upon him? That was the question Shep asked himself. As quickly as he could he raised his hand which contained his jack-knife.

"Scat!" he hissed, and, alarmed once more, the wildcat backed away from the hollow and sat down on a limb of the tree to think matters over. As a matter of fact, the hollow tree was one of the wildcat's favorite haunts and it did not know what to make of it to find it thus strangely inhabited.

In the meantime the three young hunters who had lost themselves in the woods were doing their best to find their way back to camp. They had reached a small opening and Whopper raised an unexpected cry:

"Boys, look!"

"Shep's gun, as sure as fate!" ejaculated Snap.

"And his game-bag," added Giant. "What can this mean?"

"I think" began Snap, and then chanced to glance up into the tree. He caught a full view of the wildcat, and stopping his talk, took quick aim and fired. The wildcat turned over in the air, gave a second whirl, and then disappeared from view.

"Where did he go to?" asked Giant, recovering from his astonishment.

"Fell into the tree," answered Whopper. "Hark!"

They listened and heard a faint cry for help.

"Where is that from?"

"The tree! Shep must be in the tree!"

"And the wildcat's on top of him!"

"I'm going to his help!" exclaimed Snap, and began to climb up the hollow tree without delay.

When he gained the opening he peered down into it.

"Shep! Are you there?" he called out, anxiously.

"Yes," was the faint answer. "Is that you, Snap?"

"Yes. Is that wildcat alive?"

"I guess not. But he has almost smothered me."

"How did you get down there?"

"Slipped down. Get something and help me to get out."

"I will."

"Poor Shep! What a place to be in all night!" was Whopper's comment.

"I wouldn't go through that for two billion dollars!"

"I'm going to cut a pole with a notch on the end," said Snap. "We can pull him up with that."

A number of saplings were handy and Snap soon had the pole he desired. Then all three of the boys climbed into the tree and lowered the pole.

"All ready?" cried Snap.

"Yes," was the muffled answer from the bottom of the hollow.

"Take care, or somebody will slip out of the tree," cautioned Giant.

"Our footing isn't of the best."

All three of the young hunters strained on the pole with all their might. At first they could not budge the doctor's son, but at last they gained a few inches, and then the rest was easy.

"I'm glad I am out of that," gasped Shep, when he could step on one of the tree's branches. "I don't know what I should have done had you not happened along."

"We started to look for you and got lost," answered Whopper, and then told the story.

Shep was so weak he could scarcely use his feet and they had to help him to get to the ground. He told of his night of horror and of the experience with the wildcat. He was exceedingly thankful that they had shot the animal.

"We may as well take our time getting back to camp," said Snap. "I shan't feel like doing anything else to-day."

"I am going to do nothing but rest," answered Shep.

Arriving at the camp they were thankful to find everything just as they had left it. A fire was started up and preparations made for a substantial meal. Then all took a good wash and ate their fill, after which they declared they felt much better.

"I have learned one lesson," said Shep. "I am going to give hollow trees a wide berth after this."

"And when I go out after deer I am going to make sure of where I am traveling," said Whopper. "Don't catch me getting lost fifteen miles from nowhere again!"

The wildcat had been brought along, and during the afternoon Snap skinned the carcass and hung the pelt up to cure. The carcass was thrown away, as they did not know what else to do with it.

After that several days passed quietly and then came another rain lasting the best part of a night. To their satisfaction the new cabin did not leak at all, everything remaining as dry inside as before the downpour.

"Now we have a cabin worth having," was Snap's comment. "I hope that rain just leaked in all over Mr. Andrew Felps and his crowd."

"Oh, don't mention him!" cried Shep. "I hate to even hear the name!"

After the rain it was considerably colder and they were not slow in putting on some of the heavier

underwear they had brought along. By the suggestion of Snap they also spent one whole day in cutting firewood and piling it up beside the cabin door.

"There is no telling what we may strike soon," said Snap. "If a heavy fall of snow should arrive it wouldn't be very nice to be caught without a good supply of wood."

"Oh, we could go out in the snow and cut some," said Giant.

"Not if it was real deep," put in Whopper. "I'd rather have the wood on hand, as Snap says."

The boys had not forgotten about the deer they had seen, and one somewhat cloudy morning they started across the lake in the rowboat, taking their guns and some provisions along. They headed directly for the spot where the game had been seen and then hunted for the trail.

"Here it is!" cried Shep, presently. "And it looks to be fresh."

"You are right," answered Snap. "And that proves that the deer have been here since that heavy rain. Now, boys, if we follow this trail with care we may be able to bring down something worth while."

And then they set off to follow the trail, little dreaming of the strange adventure in store for them.

CHAPTER XV

THE CAVE IN THE MOUNTAIN

The opposite shore of the lake was rocky and full of brushwood, and it was rather difficult to follow the deer tracks, which occasionally led directly across the rocks. Once in a while they would miss the trail and then a grand hunt for prints would be instituted, until the trail was recovered. They passed over one small hill and then came to a broad hollow, fronting something of a mountain.

"I see some deer!" cried Whopper, pointing with his hand. "Five or six of 'em."

The young hunter was right, and all gazed at the game with longing eyes. The deer were more than a third of a mile away, on the mountainside.

"Let me see," said Snap, "the wind is blowing from the west. So we had better make a semicircle and come up on the other side of the game. If we don't, the wind will carry our scent to them and they'll be off like a shot."

Silently the others followed the directions of their leader, and once again they plunged into the brushwood. The way was harder than before and more than once they had to halt, not knowing exactly how to proceed.

"This is dead loads of fun," grunted Whopper. "Never had such fun since I was born. It's almost as good as chopping wood when the other fellows are playing ball!"

"Do you want to go back?" questioned Snap, quickly. "For you can if you wish, you know."

"Humph! not much. I'm going to see the end of it."

"Then, don't grumble," put in Giant. "It's harder work for me to climb the rocks than you."

On they went until they came to another opening. They gazed forward eagerly, but to their chagrin the deer had disappeared.

"Now what do you make of that?" came quickly from Shep.

"They can't be far off," said Snap, cheerfully. "Perhaps they are just beyond the bushes yonder."

Up the mountainside they went, sometimes abreast and then in Indian file. Soon they came to a mass of heavy undergrowth.

"Gracious, what a tangle this is!" cried Giant. "I don't seem to be able to get through, no matter how hard I try."

"I'll help you," answered Snap, and worked his way to the small youth's side.

"Say, fellows, the bottom isn't very safe here!" exclaimed Whopper, a second later. "It's all spongy!"

"Let us get out!" put in Shep, thinking of his experience in the hollow tree.

They tried to turn, but before they could make any progress felt the brushwood sinking rapidly. Then came a crashing of branches and vines, and down slipped all four of the young hunters, from the bright light of day into utter darkness!

All gave yells, for they were thoroughly frightened. They were pitched together in a heap, and held tight to one another as they went down, first a distance of fifteen or twenty feet and then twice further.

"We are in water!" gasped Shep, when he could speak. The water was up to their ankles, but speedily it reached their knees.

At last, when the downward movement had come to an end, the boys drew long breaths and tried to gaze around them. They were in a mass of brushwood, and this brushwood seemed to be floating on the water. All was pitch dark around them, for they had not come down straight, but in something of a zig-zag fashion.

"Well, of all things!" came from Whopper. "Are we going down to the center of the earth?"

"It looks like it." answered Giant, with a groan.

"One thing seems to be certain, fellows—we are not meant to get those deer."

"That looks to be true," answered Snap.

"This is about as bad as being down that hollow tree," said Shep. He was more than glad that he was not alone.

Having recovered their breath a little, the young hunters tried to decide upon what would be the best thing to attempt next.

"We have got to get out, that is all there is to it," said Snap.

"Well, I am willing," said Whopper, gravely.

"See any stairs around?" asked Giant.

"Maybe Snap has spotted an elevator," said Whopper, with a grin. "If so, Snap, press the button by all means."

"I don't think this is any laughing matter," said the leader of the gun club.

"No more do I," answered Shep, quickly. "The sooner we get out of this hole the better."

"We are moving again!" ejaculated Giant, and all felt that he was right. The whole mass of brushwood floated off on something of an underground stream, carrying the boys with it. The movement continued for a distance of at least two hundred feet and then the bushes became stationary.

As it was still pitch dark around them, Snap lit a match and set fire to a dry bush. By the light, they saw they were in a hollow that was not unlike a cave in the mountain. At their feet ran the stream that had carried them forward, disappearing under some overhanging rocks. On all sides were rocks and dirt, with here and there a decayed tree root, showing that they were not very far under the earth's surface.

"Here's an adventure," was Shep's comment. "We must be careful, or we'll bring down that dirt above us and be buried alive."

"We are about buried alive now," said Giant. "I'd give a good bit to be out of this hole."

Stepping from the brushwood, the boys made their way to the dirt and rocks beyond. By this time each had a kind of a torch, so the place was fairly well lighted.

Walking back a distance, they saw where the smoke curled to—through the shaft down which they had fallen so unceremoniously. But the top of the shaft was hidden from their view.

"I don't know how we are going to get up that," was Shep's comment, after looking the ground over. "If we try it we may bring all the dirt and rocks down on our heads."

"Just my idea of it," answered Snap. "Let us try to find some other way out."

They walked back and forth in the cave and then, by common consent, sat down on some flat rocks to consider the situation.

Nobody felt like joking, for all felt the seriousness of the situation.

"That water must come to the surface somewhere," said Snap. "But it may be a good distance from here."

As they were wet to the knees, one after another got down in the stream and examined the rocks. Some thought they saw daylight under the water beyond the rocks, but nobody was sure.

"If it wasn't so cold a fellow could take a dive and find out," said Shep. "But I don't want a dive in such water as that," and the others agreed with him.

It was noontime and Whopper suggested that they have something to eat.

"I am willing," said Snap. "But don't eat too much. There is no telling how long we'll have to remain down here."

So they ate sparingly, and washed the meal down with water from the underground stream, which was as pure as it was cold.

The afternoon was passed in looking around the cave. All they found of interest were the bones of several wild animals.

"Perhaps they fell into this place and couldn't get out again," suggested Shep, gloomily.

Snap had obtained a long stick and with this he was poking at the ceiling in various spots. He worked with care, and the others watched him with interest.

"There, look at that!" he cried, presently. "The stick has gone through into something!"

He withdrew the stick as he concluded, and the boys saw a single ray of light shoot down upon them. All sprang to the opening quickly.

"There is daylight there, that is sure!" cried Whopper, and his voice had a ring of hope in it. "Let us dig away a little dirt and see what comes of it."

All were willing, and they poked at the dirt with care, using such sticks as they could find for the purpose. At first the ground came away slowly, but soon Snap noticed several cracks.

"Look out there!" he cried. "Something is coming down! Get back!"

All leaped out of danger and the next moment down came a mass of dirt, rocks and brushwood, scattering in all directions. The downfall left a hole all of two yards in diameter, and they could easily look out on the sky.

"Hurrah!" cried Whopper. "This is how the young hunters escape from their underground dungeon cell!"

The fall of the dirt and rocks had left a mound on the center of the cave floor, and by mounting this they were enabled to pull themselves to the earth's surface. It is safe to say that never were boys more delighted to get out of a hole.

"After this I am going to be careful where I step," said Shep.

"First it was a hollow tree and then this cave. Maybe the next time I won't get out at all," and he gave a little shiver.

CHAPTER XVI

A SUCCESSFUL DEER HUNT

While they were in the cave all thought concerning the deer had been vanished, but now they were at

liberty once more the four young hunters were just as eager as ever to get a shot at the game.

"We must hurry if we want to do anything," said Snap. "It is such a gloomy day that it will be dark soon and then the deer will surely give us the slip."

On they went, up the mountainside, but now taking care that they should go into no more caves. Thus several hundred feet were covered. Then of a sudden, Snap held up his hand.

"Hark!"

All listened and heard a crashing in the brushwood. Like a flash, five deer leaped into view, rushing across a small opening. They saw the boys and were out of sight again in a twinkling, before a gun could be raised at them.

"Why didn't you shoot?" cried Shep to Snap.

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't have my gun ready," came from Whopper.

"Neither did I," added Giant.

The four young hunters gazed at each other sheepishly enough. Their long tramp had been all in vain.

"We're a lot of doughheads," grumbled Shep. "Come all the way for those deer and then—Oh, say, let's go back home!"

"I wasn't thinking the deer would come this way," said Snap. "But this proves the truth of Jed Sanborn's words. He told me when I went hunting I must be ready for a shot all the time."

There was an awkward silence. The boys were bitterly chagrined.

"Can't we follow them up again?" asked Giant.

"Not to-night," answered Whopper. "They may go several miles before they stop. They got so close to us that they were thoroughly scared. My, what an opportunity we lost for bagging at least four of them!"

"We better not tell anybody of this experience," said Whopper. "If we do, everybody will have the laugh on us."

It was growing dark already and they thought the best they could do would be to go down to the lake and row back to camp. During the day they had allowed some small game to pass unmolested, and this now added to their discomfiture.

"I am going to stir up something before I go back," declared Whopper.

"So am I," added Snap.

It took the best part of an hour to get back to the lake shore, and on the way they discovered several rabbits, some squirrels, and over a dozen birds of good size. The bringing down of this game served to raise their spirits a bit, but they still felt decidedly sore whenever they thought of the deer.

It was nightfall when they rowed across the lake and struck the shore in front of their camp. While Giant tied up the boat the others hurried to the cabin.

"Hullo! somebody has been here!" exclaimed Snap, glancing around hastily.

His words were true, as the others could readily see. All of their stores had been overhauled and some few of them taken away. On the floor lay the broken bowl of a clay pipe and near it some half-burnt tobacco.

"Hullo! Anybody around here?" called out Shep, and ran outside to gaze around. No answer came back, nor did anybody show himself.

"It was evidently a man, and he smoked a clay pipe," said Snap.

"Couldn't have been Jed Sanborn?" asked Whopper. "He smokes, sometimes."

"No; Jed wouldn't tumble the stores around in this fashion," answered Snap. "And, besides, if he came here he would most likely be back now to see us. No; this is the work of some stranger."

"Maybe somebody from the Felps camp," put in Giant, who had come up.

"That is possible," said Snap.

"Let us see just what is missing," said Shep.

They made a careful examination of all the things in the camp. One lad had lost some underwear, another a pair of socks and a handkerchief and another a blanket. Some provisions were gone, also a knife and fork, a cup, a frying-pan and half a dozen other things.

"Whoever was here evidently fitted himself to camp out," observed Shep. "I wish we could catch him! I'd give him a piece of my mind."

"So would I," added Whopper.

All were too tired, however, to hunt for the interloper and all they did that evening was to get supper and take it easy. When they turned in it was raining, but by midnight the stars came out one by one.

"After this I shall hate to leave the camp all alone for fear somebody will run off with our things," remarked Snap, while at breakfast.

"Just the way I feel about it," answered Shep. "Yet we can't watch the things all the time."

For several days they remained close to the camp and then received a second visit from Jed Sanborn.

He reported that everything was going on well at Fairview, and listened to what they had to tell with much interest.

"Yes, you must get those deer by all means," he said. "But about the feller that come here and took your things. He must have been a mean critter an' no mistake!"

Jed Sanborn was quite willing to go out with them after the deer, and the start was made on the following morning. They were soon across Firefly Lake, and then the old hunter showed the boys an easy trail over the hill and up the distant mountain.

"Gracious! This beats going through the bushes!" cried Giant.

"It's a pity we didn't know of this trail before," said Whopper. "It might have saved us from going about 'steen miles out of our way."

"Well, you'll know it after this," said Jed Sanborn, with a quiet smile. "Can't learn everything in a day, ye know. The woods is like book larnin'—ye have got to learn a page at a time."

They walked along until nearly noon and then came to something of a clearing. Here all took a sharp gaze around and at last saw two deer far over to the eastward.

"We can walk straight for 'em," said the old hunter. "The wind is blowing our way."

Once more they hurried on, this time with hopes beating high. Half the distance was covered when Jed Sanborn halted the boys.

"Look to your guns, lads. Is every gun ready for use?"

"Mine is!" came from one after another, as the examination was made.

"Good! Now remember, if we come up to the deer and you shoot, aim for the one that's in line with you—that is, the boy on the left takes the left deer, the boy on the right takes the deer on the right, a boy in the middle takes one in the middle, and so on. Do you understand that?"

They all said that they did.

"Very good. Now, one thing more. Don't get scared. Shoot quickly, but take as good an aim as you possibly can. If the deer is coming toward you, let him git putty close before you let drive."

Having issued these instructions, the old hunter moved on once more, and the boys followed. Each had his weapon ready for use, and each advanced with as little noise as possible.

The deer were in a little glade, cropping the tender grass around a small spring. They were six in number, including a fair-sized buck, who occasionally raised his head, as if on guard. But the wind, as Jed Sanborn had said, was blowing directly from the deer to the hunters, so nothing in the air gave the game the alarm until it was too late.

When the old hunter raised his hand, the boys knew it was a signal to halt. Jed Sanborn crouched low and wormed his way to some bushes fringing the glade, and the young hunters did the same.

It was a thrilling sight and it made the boys tremble in eager anticipation. Not a word was spoken, for they scarcely dared to breathe.

In a minute each hunter had his gun into position, Giant resting on a rock and Whopper in the crotch of a low tree.

"I'll take the buck," whispered Jed Sanborn. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"Then fire!"

Crack! went the several firearms, in a scattering volley, and the buck and one of the others pitched headlong, not to rise. Another deer was hit in the side, but leaped into the bushes and was soon lost to sight. Still another went limping off on three legs.

"After 'em! Finish 'em up!" yelled Jed Sanborn, and led in the chase, across the glade and into the brushwood beyond. Here they caught sight of the limping deer, and all of the boys gave it a shot, which finished it in short order.

"Three, anyway," was the old hunter's comment. "Not so bad."

"You brought down the buck and Snap brought down the deer near him," said Whopper.

"And all of you brought down the third one," said Snap. "I think as Jed says, it is not such a bad haul."

"Can we get the others?" asked Giant, anxiously. "I want to do better than I have."

"No use of going after 'em now," said the old hunter. "They will run too far. Some day—listen!"

They listened, and from a distance heard two gun shots, followed by several more.

"Somebody else is out," said Shep. "Wonder who it can be?"

He was destined to find out before he was many hours older.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RIVAL CAMPERS

It was no light matter to get the three deer down to the lake shore. The old hunter showed the boys how to lash the game to long poles, resting the poles on their shoulders as they walked along.

"I believe I'll take the buck to town," said Jed Sanborn. "I can get a good price for him there."

"Will you take one of the deer home for us?" asked Snap, after consulting with his fellow-members of the gun club.

"Sure I will, lad."

"We want the meat divided," came from Shep. "Give each family its fair share." And so it was arranged, and the boys told Jed Sanborn to tell their folks that all was going well and they were "having the time of their lives."

After Jed Sanborn had departed the four boys set to work to cut up the deer they had kept. They nailed the hide up so that it might be preserved, and then cut a fine venison steak for supper.

"Now we've got a real camp!" cried Snap, enthusiastically. "Just think of it! Deer meat!" And he fairly danced a jig for joy.

It was certainly a happy gathering, and the young hunters voted the venison steak the best meat they

had ever eaten.

"Well, I declare!" cried Whopper, presently, as he gazed across the lake. "Am I mistaken, or is that a camp-fire I see."

"It certainly is a fire," answered Snap, leaping to his feet.

"Maybe it belongs to those persons we heard shooting, after we shot the deer," suggested Shep.

The boys were curious to know what sort of folks could be in that vicinity, and after it was talked over, Snap and Whopper entered the rowboat and moved over the lake in the direction of the strange light.

"I see three persons moving around," announced Snap, as they drew closer. "Let us remain on the lake until we make sure what sort of people they are."

They drew closer with caution and at last made out five young men, among them Ham Spink, the Fairview dude, who was, as usual, smoking a cigarette.

"It's the whole Ham Spink crowd," muttered Snap—"Ham and Dick Bush, Carl Dudder, Sid Foley and Sam Anderson. I didn't know they were coming up here."

"Ham said something about going hunting," answered Whopper. "Don't you know how he stuck up his nose at our way of going out?"

"Yes, I remember. But I don't see that their camp looks any better than ours does," went on Snap. "See, they have a fancy striped tent. That looks well, but it can't be very warm."

"They have one of those patent cook stoves, Snap. They don't use the camp-fire to cook by."

"Well, I'd just as soon use the regular fire."

"See, they have a wash-stand and a regular looking-glass," went on Whopper. "Nothing like being in style, is there?"

During their conversation the two boys had allowed their craft to float close to shore. Now one of the lads in the camp saw the boat and leaped up in alarm.

"Somebody is coming, fellows!" he called out.

"Oh, it's only Snap Dodge and Whopper Dawson," drawled Ham Spink, lighting a fresh cigarette. "What do you want?" he asked, abruptly.

"Nothing," answered Snap, coldly.

"Then why did you come over?"

"We wanted to find out who was camping here, that's all."

"Humph! You are over there, ain't you?" went on Spink.

"Yes."

"Had any luck hunting?"

"A little."

"Just wait till we get down to business. We are going to bring down everything in sight," went on Ham Spink. He could hardly talk without "blowing his own horn," as some of the boys put it.

"Were you out for something this afternoon?" asked Whopper, curiously.

"What business is that of yours?" asked one of the other boys.

"None at all."

"Yes, we were out. We got two fine wild turkeys," answered Ham Spink. "To-morrow we are going after some deer we saw early this morning."

"Maybe you won't get them, Ham," said Snap.

"Why not, I'd like to know?"

"We got three of them this afternoon."

"Three deer!" came from nearly all of the rival hunters.

"Yes."

"Oh, that's a fairy-tale," came from Ham Spink. "You can't make me believe it."

"It is true," said Whopper. "Jed Sanborn was along. He took two of the deer to town, and we have the other at our camp."

"Humph! Think you are some pumpkins, I suppose," sneered Ham Spink. "Well, let me tell you one thing: Don't you dare to interfere with our hunting after this."

"We have as much right to hunt here as you have."

"We saw those deer first and it was our right to shoot them."

"Then why didn't you shoot?"

"Next time we will," said one of the other boys.

"How long are you going to stay here?"

"As long as we please."

A few more words passed, and then Snap and Whopper turned their boat around and started back for their own camp.

Hardly had they done this when something whizzed through the air and landed in the bottom of the boat with a squashing sound. It was a tomato that was overripe, and the center splashed over both boys.

"Who threw that?" cried Snap, in anger.

There was no answer.

"Whoever threw that is too cowardly to own to it!" went on the leader of the Fairview Gun Club.

"Do you mean to say we are a set of cowards?" blustered Ham Spink.

"Yes, you are, to do such a mean thing as that in the dark."

Just then another overripe tomato came whizzing over the rowboat. Had not Whopper ducked his head he must have been struck.

"Wait, I'll give them a dose of shot!" cried Whopper, reaching down into the boat as if to take a gun. As a matter of fact, the boys had brought no weapons with them.

"Hi! hi! Don't you dare to shoot!" roared Ham Spink, in terror.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" came from some of the dude's friends.

"Are you going to throw any more things at us?" demanded Whopper.

"No, no!"

Some of the boys on shore were so scared that they ran for the nearest trees and got out of sight.

"We ought to give them a shot or two," said Snap, seeing the joke of the situation. "Maybe it will put some common sense into them."

"Don't!" came once more from three of the boys on shore, and they drew further out of sight than ever.

"You are a set of cowards," said Snap. "Now, don't you dare to make any more trouble for us. If you do, you'll surely get into hot water."

"We'll—er—let you alone if you'll let us alone," answered Ham Spink, in a voice that trembled.

"Very well, then, see that you remember that," said Snap.

A moment later he and Whopper rowed away and soon the darkness hid them from the view of the Spink party. Then the boys on shore drew a sigh of relief.

"What rowdies!" declared one boy, who was as dudish as Spink. "I really believe they would have shot us, don't you know!"

"Very, very rude," said the youth who had thrown one of the tomatoes.

"They ought to be locked up for threatening us," declared Ham Spink. "It is an outrage that we cannot come here for an outing without being bothered by such low creatures."

"I tell you what we can do," piped in one of the crowd. "Let us go over to their camp some day when they are away and hide all their things on them."

"Yes, that's an idea!" cried several. "It will be lots of fun, and they won't know who did it."

"Well, we want to be certain that nobody is around," said Ham Spink. "For if they caught us at it they would surely kill us."

"Oh, we'll be careful!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A MIX-UP IN CAMP

After the deer hunt the young hunters were content to take it easy for several days, lolling around the camp, or going out fishing on the lake or up the river beyond.

While fishing one day, Giant and Shep ran into several of the Spink crowd and some unpleasant words passed. When the rival campers separated, the feeling upon both sides was very bitter.

"I don't like those chaps at all," was Shep's comment. "I am sorry they came to Firefly Lake."

"They make me sick," was the way Giant expressed himself. "And they are such dudes, too, with their fancy hunting outfits and patent fishing gear."

"And not one of them can shoot worth a cent," said Snap.

"How do you know that?"

"I saw them at the shooting-gallery one day. They couldn't make a single bull's-eye, try their best, and lots of times they didn't even hit the target."

On Friday, Shep came into camp from a walk up the lake and his face showed his excitement.

"I saw some more deer!" he cried. "Come on, all of you! It's the chance of our lives!"

This announcement filled the crowd with excitement, and soon they were asking all sorts of questions of the doctor's son. He had looked across the upper end of the lake and had seen seven or eight deer making their way along one of the mountain trails.

"We'll take to the boat and go over," said Snap. "Hurry up and get some provisions together. This may keep us out all day."

The boys set to work with a will, and in twenty minutes were ready for the trip. They kicked out the camp-fire, shut up the cabin and then leaped into the rowboat and took up the oars.

"I suppose the cabin is safe," said Snap, a little anxiously.

"Safe enough," answered Shep, whose mind was on the deer.

The young hunters rowed up the lake with all speed, and, landing, tied their craft fast among the bushes.

"This will be an all-day chase, I guess," said Giant.

"Well, what of it?" returned Whopper. "Our time is our own. I hope we get at least one deer."

The young hunters soon passed out of sight of the shore, and a moment later another rowboat appeared, containing Ham Spink and his particular crony, Dick Bush.

"Say, Ham, did you hear what they said?" asked Dick Bush, eagerly.

"I certainly did, Dick," drawled Spink.

"They expect to be gone all day."

"Exactly."

"This will give us the chance we have been looking for."

"By jove! that's so!"

"We can go over to their camp and do just as we please, and they will never know who did it."

"Not unless they come back sooner than we expect."

"We can stop them from coming back in a hurry."

"I don't see how."

"Over yonder is their boat. We can tow that along. When they find the boat gone they'll have to walk around the end of the lake, and that will take a long time."

"So it will. Do you think it is safe to take the boat now?"

"We can wait a little while."

They waited, and at last, thinking the coast clear, pulled the other craft from the bushes and tied it to the stern of their own boat. Then they wound up their lines, for they had been fishing, and lost no time in rowing to their camp, where they had left their cronies lolling in the sun, smoking cigarettes and playing cards.

"Hullo! where did you pick up the boat?" asked one of the other boys.

"It belongs to the Snap Dodge crowd," answered Ham Spink. "Boys, we have got the chance of our lives to get square with that crowd now," he added.

Matters were speedily explained, and all of the dudish boys present voted it would be just the thing to go over to the other camp and "make a mix of it," as they expressed it.

No time was lost in getting away from their own camp, and it did not take them long to get to the opposite shore of the lake. Here they took the second rowboat and hid it under some overhanging bushes.

"We'll make it look as if it drifted here," said Ham Spink, and this was done, a broken line dragging in the water over the bow.

Arriving at the other camp, the dudish boys proceeded to make themselves at home. Feeling certain Snap's crowd would not return for some time, they rekindled the fire and cut themselves some meat and took whatever of the stores they wanted. Inside of an hour a good dinner was ready and they sat down to this with gusto.

"Nothing like living on the fat of the land," observed Ham Spink.
"Must say, their coffee is all right."

"That's because you made it good and strong," said another of the boys.

"Here's a fine can of condensed milk," said another, helping himself liberally.

"I found some fine sardines," put in still another. "And here is a tin of fancy crackers."

"And some good cheese. Say, boys, they must be living pretty well, eh?"

So the talk ran on, while the Ham Spink crowd ate whatever they desired. As the meal progressed, they grew reckless and began to throw things around, so that more than a quarter of the stores were literally wasted.

After the meal was over the boys set to work to hide what remained of the stores, in the brushwood back of the camp. They carried everything out of the cabin, even to the blankets and extra clothing. Some clothing was thrown high into a tree and some shoes were placed under a flat rock.

It was not until four in the afternoon that Ham Spink and his cronies began to think of getting back to their own camp. They were all in rare good humor, thinking they had accomplished something wonderfully smart.

"We must watch for the return of Snap Dodge and his chums," said Ham.

"To be sure," put in Dick Bush. "Won't their eyes open when they see this! I just guess!"

"Finest trick I ever played in my life, don't you know," drawled one of the dudish boys.

The fire was kicked out and they took themselves to their boat. A strong wind was coming up, ruffling the surface of Firefly Lake.

"Wish we didn't have to row in the wind," said Ham Spink.

"We can take our time," said another.

They were a lazy, idle set, and wrangled over the question of who should row the boat. At last it was decided that all should take a turn, and they started.

The wind was increasing every minute, and no sooner were they out on the lake than the full blast caused the waves to dash over the side.

"Hi! I don't like this!" cried one of the boys, in alarm. "The boat may go over——"

"Well, we have got to get back to our camp," said Ham, in dismay. He did not like the roughness himself.

To keep the water from coming into the boat they had to row into the wind, and this took them some distance away from their camp. Even as it was, every boy got more or less wet, which put them in an ill humor.

"I didn't calculate on this when I started out," grumbled one, as he surveyed his fancy outing costume. "I'll have to have these pressed again before long," and he sighed.

There was a point of land around which the wind was sweeping at a furious pace, and to avoid this spot, they decided to tie up their boat in a safe cove and walk to their camp through the woods.

"It's blowing up another storm," said one of the boys. "I think it will rain to-night, and rain hard."

"Won't those other fellows enjoy it—if they can't find their things!"

"The things will get wet."

"Humph! what do we care?" grumbled Ham Spink.

"Maybe they'll make us pay for anything that is spoiled."

"I shan't pay a cent!"

"Nor I!" came from several.

The walk through the brushwood and over the rocks was not so pleasant, and all of the dudish boys were glad when they at last came in sight of the spot where their own camp was located.

"It's growing awfully dark," said one. "And just listen to that wind! It's a regular gale!"

The wind was indeed blowing a gale and all of the boys hurried forward faster than ever, until they stood in the midst of their camp. Then, with startled eyes, they gazed around quickly, and a howl of dismay went up.

"What does this mean?"

"All of our best things are gone!"

"Yes, and the best of the eating, too!"

"Somebody has been here while we were away!"

"I see what it means !" cried Ham Spink, in a great rage. "While we were at the other camp those fellows came here and fixed things up as you see!"

CHAPTER XIX

ANOTHER HUNT AFTER DEER

All unconscious of what was taking place during their absence, Snap and his chums went on their way, in the direction in which Shep had spotted the deer.

Having learned a few points from Jed Sanborn, they kept to the trail and made sure that the wind was not blowing from them to the game they hoped to lay low.

It was a rough and laborious climb up the mountainside, and once they missed the trail and got into a pocket so that they could go no further. Then, on turning back, Shep saw two magnificent wild turkeys and was strongly tempted to bring one of them down.

"If you do, you'll scare the deer sure," said Whopper.

"I know it but if we miss the deer I'll be sorry I didn't take this shot."

"Well, that's the gamble in hunting," put in Giant. "I saw a rabbit awhile ago I could have had for the asking."

Having gotten out of the pocket, they went on once more, and shortly before noon reached a knob of the mountain. From that point they made out nine or ten deer a distance to the north of them.

"This is certainly a great chance," said Snap, enthusiastically. "We don't want to miss it by carelessness. Remember what Jed Sanborn told us."

All looked to their firearms, and then went forward with scarcely a word. Coming to the last fringe of brushwood, they got down on their hands and knees and moved on until the game was brought once more into view.

The shot offered was certainly a good one, and in a few whispered words the young hunters decided what they would do. Each was to aim at his own deer and fire as many shots as he pleased. They took their positions, and Snap asked if they were ready. A dead silence followed.

"Fire!"

All of the shotguns went off in a volley, and then the shots came scatteringly. Three of the deer went down, dead, and one was mortally wounded. A big buck got a glancing shot in the flank, and, mad with pain and terror, turned and leaped in the direction of the young hunters.

"Look out!" ejaculated Shep. "He is coming for us!"

"Give him another shot!" yelled Giant. "My gun is empty."

Snap took hasty aim, but the shot only struck the buck in the side. Then the beast came on, with lowered antlers, as if to pin Snap against a tree.

At that moment Whopper fired, hitting the buck in the right foreleg. Down went the animal, but struggled up a moment later and tried to leap into the brushwood where Shep was concealed.

As he came down over the doctor's son, the boy was badly frightened and gave the buck a shove with his hand. Weak from loss of blood the beast fell over. Then Shep struck him a blow over the head with the gun stock and Giant finished him with a shot at close range. In the meantime the other deer that had been mortally wounded was put out of its misery; and then the short but sharp contest came to an end.

"What a haul!" ejaculated Snap, as he reloaded his weapon. "This is something to make town folks stare!"

"We must send some of the deer home," put in Whopper.

"Yes, yes!" cried the others.

It was with tremendous pride that the four young hunters looked the game over. The deer were young and tender, and the buck had a fine head, fit for mounting.

"This haul will open the eyes of the Spink crowd," remarked Whopper.

"If they weren't so mean we might send them some venison," said Shep.

"They wouldn't thank you for it," broke in Giant. "They are too high-toned for that sort of thing."

With so much game the boys hardly knew what to do. The deer were heavy and it was all two of them cared to do carrying one between them, hung from a pole.

"Well, we have got to get them to the lake somehow," said Snap.
"So the sooner we get at the job the better. Don't grumble."

"Grumble?" shouted Shep. "Why, I feel like singing." And he broke into a merry whistle.

They took the deer down to the lake in three trips. It made them pant to climb over some of the rocks, and when the job was done they were all out of breath.

"Have you fellows noticed how the wind is rising?" remarked Giant, as he paused to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

"Yes," answered Shep. "We are surely fixing for a storm."

"By the way, Shep," came from Snap, "don't you wish you had shot a turkey instead of the deer?"

"Don't say turkeys," replied the doctor's son, reproachfully. They had brought the deer close to the spot where the rowboat had been tied up, and now Whopper went to get the craft. Soon he returned in anxiety.

"Didn't we tie up here?" he questioned.

"Certainly," answered Giant.

"The boat is gone."

"Gone!" came from all of the others.

"Yes."

A rush was made for the lake front, and they gazed in blank amazement at the spot where the craft had been left.

"We haven't made any mistake, have we?" asked Snap, slowly.

"No; this is the very spot," said Whopper. "I know it by that tree yonder."

"Whopper is right," put in Giant.

"Then one of two things has happened. Either the boat drifted away——"

"It couldn't drift away—it was too well tied."

"Then somebody took it."

"Perhaps the fellow who visited our camp!" cried Whopper.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Each youth was wondering what was best to do next.

"Hi, you fellows!" came from nearby. "Stop!"

They turned, to find themselves confronted by Dick Bush, the dude, and another of the rival campers, named Carl Dudder.

"What do you want?" asked Snap, shortly.

"You've been over to our camp, haven't you?" blustered Dick Bush.

"What makes you think that?" asked Whopper.

"Because you turned everything upside down and ran off with some of our things."

"We haven't been near your camp," put in Giant. "We have been out after these," and he pointed to the game.

When the dudish youths saw the deer they were astonished.

"Did you kill all those?" cried Carl Dudder.

"We did."

"To-day?"

"Yes."

"Then you weren't near our camp?" questioned Dick Bush, uneasily.

"We haven't been within a mile of your camp," answered Snap. "We left our boat here this morning and went directly into the mountains. We just got back—to find our boat gone."

"Well, I'll be blessed!" gasped Carl Dudder, and then he gave his companion a peculiar look.

"Do you know anything about our boat, Bush?" demanded Snap, sharply.

"Why—I—er—that is——"

"Don't say anything!" whispered his companion, quickly.

"What's that?" asked Shep. "So you do know, eh? What have you done with the boat?"

"I—er—I didn't say I knew."

"But you do know—your actions show it!" shouted Whopper. "Boys, don't let them get away until they tell us where our boat is!"

Snap and the others were quick to act, and Dick Bush and Carl Dudder were at once surrounded.

"Look here—you—you let us go!" said Dick Bush. His face showed how uncomfortable he felt.

"Tell us where the boat is."

"I—er—I don't know."

"That isn't true," said Whopper. "Tell the truth, Bush, unless you want us to duck you in the lake!"

At the mention of a ducking the dudish boy lost the most of his courage.

"Don't do that!" he whined. "I—that is, it was only a joke. We—er—we took the boat to the other side of the lake."

"So that we could walk around to our camp, eh?" said Snap, his eyes showing his anger.

"It was, as Dick says, only a joke—and we got paid back for it," put in Carl Dudder.

"How?"

"Somebody came to our camp and robbed us. We thought it was your crowd."

"Were you really robbed?" asked Shep.

"Yes; some of our best clothing is gone and also some of our stores."

"Well, we were not near your camp, I can give you my word of honor on that," said Snap.

"Then some common thief must have come along and done it."

CHAPTER XX

IN A STORM ON THE LAKE

Snap and his chums were much interested in what the rival campers had to relate, and questioned the two dudes closely. They could see that both Bush and Dudder were unusually ill at ease.

"Well, all this doesn't help us any," said Shep. "It is going to storm and I want to get back to camp. Trot around that boat, or else lend us yours."

"We'll have to lend you ours," said Dick Bush. "But—but——"

"But what?"

"I—er—I can't tell you," answered Bush, and turned away.

"Is there anything else wrong?" asked Giant. "Maybe you were over to our camp."

"Were you?" asked Snap, catching Carl Dudder by the arm.

"Let go!"

"I want you to answer me, Dudder."

"I wont answer!"

"Then it is true."

"What did you do at our camp?" asked Shep.

"Go and find out!"

Carl Dudder had scarcely spoken when he found himself flat on his back, with Snap on top of him. In the meantime the other boys caught hold of Dick Bush.

"We must get at the bottom of this," said Snap. "Something is wrong here, that is certain."

"It wasn't my plan," whined Dick Bush, who seemed to be more cowardly than his companion. "I—I didn't do hardly anything."

"Well, you can't blame it on me," retorted Carl Dudder.

"Maybe it was Ham Spink's plan," suggested Whopper.

"It was."

"And what did you do?"

"Hid your stuff on you," said Dick Bush, in a low tone.

"Anything else?"

"Well, we—er—we took a little meat and had some dinner while we were over there."

After that the two dudish boys confessed what had been done, laying the greater part of the blame on the others of their party. Snap and his chums were rightly indignant.

"We ought to duck you in the lake and then have you locked up," said Snap. "It is what you deserve."

"No, no!" came with a shiver from Dick Bush. "Let us off, and I'll pay my share of the damage done."

"It isn't a question of money," said Shep. "It's your utter meanness."

The wind was now blowing so violently that the boys began to grow alarmed, and after a brief talk, Snap and his chums decided to follow Bush and Dodder to their camp, taking their guns with them. The deer were hung up in some trees, out of the reach of other animals.

The coming of Snap and his friends to the rival camp produced another stormy scene, and for awhile it looked as if there would be an open fight. The young hunters "laid down the law" good and hard, and Ham Spink and his crowd were much alarmed in consequence.

"You had no right to touch our things, and I could have you arrested for it," said Snap. "Now our boat is gone, I am going to claim yours until we get ours back."

"That ain't fair!" cried Ham Spink.

"It has got to be fair," answered Snap, stubbornly.

"Most of our stores are gone, too," growled the dudish youth.

"That isn't our fault."

"Will you—er—will you sell us one of your deer?" faltered another of the crowd.

"If you absolutely need it, yes; otherwise, no," said Shep.

"Yes, we need it. We are almost cleaned out of everything."

"One of you has got to go with us," said Snap, a moment later.

"What for?"

"To show us where our things are."

"We'll tell you where they are," said several. They were afraid to cross the lake in such a wind.

The secret was revealed, and a few minutes later Snap and his chums started for the boat, which was close at hand.

"You can have this boat as soon as the wind lets up," said Giant.

"And what of the deer?"

"You can take the smallest," said Snap. "But mind, don't touch the others, or it will be the worse for you!" he added, sternly.

It was dark and blowing a full gale when the four young hunters embarked. They realized that the journey to their camp would be a perilous one, and wished that the other crowd was more friendly, so that they could remain with them all night. But they had not been asked to stay and were too proud to mention it.

"Phew! but this is a sockdollager!" was Whopper's comment. "Blowing about two thousand miles an hour, I guess. I hope it doesn't send us to the bottom."

"Don't be so cheerful," said Shep. "Boys, we have got to do some nice work with the oars, or else ship a lot of water," he added, gazing out on the black and angry lake.

"Well, come on," said Giant. "The sooner we get at it the sooner we'll be on the other side."

All took their places at the oars, and a few strokes sufficed to send them well out into Firefly Lake. Here they felt the full force of the breeze, and in a twinkling Shep's cap was blown from his head.

"My cap!"

"Here it is," answered Snap, passing it over. "Say, boys, this is a corker sure! Can anybody see ahead?"

"I can see a little," said Whopper. "But not a great deal."

They rowed on, bending low to escape the fury of the wind. The rowboat rocked violently, and every time she went down some water came in over the gunwale.

"Let us move down the lake," suggested Shep. "We can't go straight across. We can come up again on the other shore—if the wind will let us."

Presently they reckoned that they had reached the middle of the lake and here all was very dark. They ceased rowing in order to get their bearings.

"I am a little twisted," said Snap. "Can we be in the vicinity of Humpback Rock?"

"Perhaps we are," answered one of the others.

Again they took up the oars. The wind tore along at a frightful rate of speed and the water was a mass of whitecaps.

"I think——" began Giant, when there came a sudden thump. The rowboat had struck the mass of rocks just mentioned, lying near the center of the lake. The craft tipped over and into the lake went the four young hunters, with a loud splash.

As Snap went down he felt Shep on top of him. Then they clasped hands and came to the surface. Not far away was the upturned rowboat.

"Shep, are you all right?"

"I—I guess so," was the chattering reply. "Oh, but it's cold!"

A moment later Giant loomed up in the darkness, and all three of the boys took hold of the overturned boat.

"Where is Whopper?" asked Shep.

"I don't know," answered the smallest of the young hunters. "What a happening!"

"We must find Whopper!" cried Snap. "Hello, Whopper!" he called, as loudly as he could.

A distant cry came back. Then those on the boat continued to call and soon they made out their chum, swimming desperately some yards away.

"Come this way," said Shep.

"I—I——can't swim! I've got—a—a chill!" was the despairing answer.

Hearing this, both Snap and Shep lost not a moment in going to Whopper's assistance. He was on the point of going down when they caught hold of him and brought him over to the rowboat.

As best they could all four of the young hunters climbed up on the keel of the boat, placing Whopper between them.

"It's as cold as Greenland," said Whopper. "What are we to do?"

"I don't know—drift, I reckon," answered Snap.

"The wind will carry us down the lake," said Giant, who appeared to suffer the least of all. "But I say, boys, all of our guns are gone, and other things, too!"

"Well, never mind that just now," said Snap. "Let us be thankful if we save our lives."

"What, you don't think there is serious danger?" asked the small youth.

"Doesn't it look like it, Giant?"

"The wind is coming up again!" cried Shep, and just then they felt its full force. With the wind came a dash of rain, pelting them mercilessly. Truly, they were in a position as uncomfortable as it was dangerous.

CHAPTER XXI

A CAMP AND A PRISONER

Slowly the minutes went by. The wind continued to blow strongly and the rain came down as hard as ever. All of the boys were capless, and the cold chilled them to the very marrow of their bones.

"I'd give all I am worth to be in camp near a big fire," came from Giant, presently.

"I can't sit up mu-much lon-longer," put in Whopper, weakly. "I am like a—a lump of ice already!"

"I think we must be getting close to shore," said Snap, as bravely as he could. "Keep up your courage."

He was at the end of the boat and allowed himself to slip down into the lake.

"Hi! Come back!" called Shep, in fresh alarm.

"I am only going to see how deep it is," was the reply.

A few minutes later Snap announced that he could touch bottom. All strained their eyes and thought they could see the shore at a short distance.

Snap forced the craft in that direction and soon found himself in water but three feet deep.

"We are all right now, boys!" he called out. "Come, let us pull the boat in."

They did so, and soon the four young hunters were standing in the sopping wet brushwood on the edge of the lake. They had no idea where they had landed and only a dim notion regarding the location of their camp.

"I think the best thing we can do," said Snap, "is to stay around here somewhere and start a good big camp-fire. If we try to get back to our camp we may get lost and also take our death of cold. The quicker we start a fire the better it will be for us."

"All right, start a fire," said Whopper. "But it is going to be no easy matter—with all the wood so wet."

"Look yonder, boys!" cried Giant. "Am I mistaken, or do I see a light?"

"It certainly is a light," said Shep, looking in the direction pointed out—a place quite a distance from the lake. "Maybe some other campers are around."

"I hope so," said Snap. "Perhaps we can get something to eat."

All were hungry as well as cold, and the idea of a meal appealed to them strongly. Snap led the way through the low brushwood in the direction of the camp-fire, which was burning under a series of overhanging rocks.

"Let me see what sort of a place it is first," warned Snap, as they drew closer. "We don't want to run into any tramps or worse."

Nobody appeared to be around the camp-fire, which was burning brightly in spite of the rain and wind. It was a well-sheltered spot, and in the rocks was a hollowed-out place, against which leaned some split logs, forming a rude shack.

Catching up a firebrand, Snap gazed into the shack. He gave a good look and then came outside and held up his hand for silence.

"I've made a discovery," he whispered, excitedly.

"What?" asked the others.

"Do you remember that negro who stole Pop Lundy's watch?"

"Yes."

"Well, he is in there, fast asleep!"

"That rascal!" cried Shep. "Are you sure?"

"Look for yourselves."

They did so and saw that it was the same colored man beyond the shadow of a doubt. He rested on a couch of pine boughs, flat on his back and snoring lustily. He was evidently the only occupant of the camp.

"Look there!" whispered Giant, pointing to a tin can that had had some condensed milk in it. "That looks like our stuff!"

"Look at the clay pipe," put in Whopper. "Do you know what I think?"

"He is the rascal who looted our camp?"

"Yes; and maybe he is the fellow who looted the Spink camp, too."

"Let us make him a prisoner!"

All were willing, and they looked around for a rope.

"Here is his horse-pistol," said Snap, picking it up. "I think I'll keep it for the present."

A rope happened to be handy, and with great care they fastened one end around the negro's right wrist. Then they brought that hand over to the other and tied the two together. With another piece of the, rope they tied one ankle fast to the other.

The job was just finished when the negro awoke in a lazy sort of way. He stared stupidly at the young hunters and then his eyes opened widely and he sat bolt upright.

"Wha-what's dis?" he stammered. "Whar did yo' cum from?"

"Stay where you are," ordered Snap, sternly, and flourished the horse-pistol.

"Do-doan yo' shoot me!" cried the negro.

"Then stay right where you are. If you try to get up this pistol may go off."

"Has yo' been a-follerin' me?"

"Never mind. We have found you and you are our prisoner," put in Shep.

"Huh! Does yo' t'ink I'se afraid ob foah boys!"

"Well, do you want to be shot?" asked Snap, holding the pistol on a level with the colored man's head.

"Stop!" screamed the rascal. "Don't do dat! It might go off!"

"Then you keep quiet."

"What have you done with Simon Lundy's gold watch?" asked Giant.

"Don't know nuffin' about any gold watch."

"Yes, you do. You took it—there is no use of your denying it," came from Shep.

"Is dat man around?" asked the colored rascal, suspiciously.

"Are you alone here?" asked Snap, ignoring the question.

"Suah I is. Say, boys, yo' let me go an' I'll make it all right wid yo'," went on the evildoer, struck by a sudden idea.

"What is your name?" asked Whopper.

"Jeff Thompson."

"Where do you belong?"

"Over to Hamilton."

"What did you do with that gold watch?"

"I ain't said dat I had de watch."

"But we are positive you took it," said Snap "Come, tell us where it is."

"I dun hocked it," was the low answer.

"Hocked it?" queried Giant.

"Yes, pawned it fo' six dollahs."

"Where?"

"At Levy's store in Williamsport."

"Where is the ticket?" asked Shep.

"Heah in my pocket. I'se a poah man, dat's wot I am," went on Jeff Thompson. "I didn't hab no wuk an' I was des'prit. So I tuk dat watch. I meant to git it back some day."

"No doubt," said Snap, sarcastically. "Give me the ticket," he added, and stowed the pawnbroker's receipt carefully away in his own clothes.

After that Jeff Thompson confessed that he had visited both the camp of the young hunters and that of Ham Spink's crowd and taken such things as struck his fancy. He was a shiftless mortal and half intoxicated and did not care much what became of himself.

The boys were too cold and hungry to listen, just then, to his story in detail, and threatening to shoot him if he dared to move, they piled some more wood on the fire, rummaged around through the stores Thompson had collected and prepared themselves a hot and welcome meal. The negro watched them for awhile and then turned over and pretended to go to sleep again.

"Maybe he is playing 'possum," whispered Shep.

"We'll keep our eyes on him," answered Snap. The boys were glad enough to crouch close to the fire and get dry and warm. They piled on as much wood as possible, and drank a large quantity of hot coffee, to keep from taking cold. And thus the night wore slowly away. Each got a few "cat naps," but that was all.

About three o'clock the storm went down and by sunrise the rain and the wind were a thing of the past. The boys were around early, and they gave Jeff Thompson such a breakfast as they thought he needed. The negro begged for his liberty, and when he could not get it began to grow abusive.

"Here, none of that!" said Snap, decidedly. "You keep quiet, or I'll place a gag in your mouth."

"I ain't gwine ter let no foah boys do me up!" cried the negro.

"Let us gag him!" cried Whopper, and began to make a gag of a tree root. But then Jeff Thompson cooled down and said no more.

The young hunters hardly knew what to do, and after a consultation it was decided to look for their own rowboat and then take a message to Ham Spink's crowd. The boat was easily located in the daylight, and Whopper rowed across the lake and told his story to the rival campers.

"Humph! that negro ought to be locked up!" said Ham Spink. "He took the very best of our stores!"

"Well, you will have to help take him to town," said Whopper.

"We'll do that, too," was the answer.

CHAPTER XXII

RABBITS, NUTS AND A SNAKE

It was arranged that Snap and Whopper, with two of the Spink crowd, should take Jeff Thompson and turn him over to the authorities, at the same time notifying Simon Lundy of what they were doing and giving him the pawn-ticket for the watch.

The boat belonging to the Spink crowd was righted and the oars were located, and this craft was used for the trip. The negro was tightly bound, so that it was impossible for him to make any trouble.

"We are going to do what we can to put the camp in order," said Shep, when the others were ready to leave. "And we are going to hunt for our guns, too."

The trip from Firefly Lake to Lake Cameron did not take long, and then began the journey to Simon Lundy's farm. They landed at the foot of the orchard. Leaving the negro in charge of Whopper, Ham Spink and Carl Dudder, Snap ran up to the house.

"Is Mr. Lundy in?" he asked of Mrs. Lundy, who answered his summons at the door.

"Simon! Somebody wants to see you!" said the woman.

"What's wanted?" asked the miserly farmer, coming forward.

"We have caught that thief, Mr. Lundy."

"Do tell!" burst out Mrs. Lundy.

"Did you git my watch back?" questioned the farmer, eagerly.

"No; but here is a pawn-ticket for it."

"How much did he pawn it fer?"

"Six dollars."

"I ain't goin' to pay it, not me!" ejaculated Simon Lundy. "The pawnbroker is got to give it up without any pay."

The farmer put on his coat and walked down to the boat with him. Then he got in, and all rowed to Fairview as fast as they could.

Their coming produced something of a sensation, as the boys were not expected. The negro was locked up promptly, and a constable went off with Simon Lundy to recover the watch. Then Snap and Whopper went home, to remain overnight. The boys passed lightly over the trials through which they had passed, fearing that if they told the bare truth they would not be permitted to go away to finish the outing.

Early in the morning, Snap and Whopper had a plain talk with Ham Spink. It scared the dudish and overbearing youth, and as a consequence he obtained for them some additional stores, to take the place of those used or destroyed by the Spink crowd.

"I'll make everything right," said Ham Spink. "Only keep mum." And he was as good as his word.

In the meantime, Shep and Giant worked with a will to put the camp in order once more, and also brought across the lake the deer that had been shot down. It made them exceedingly angry to see how the camp had been treated by Ham Spink and his cronies.

"Those fellows don't know what a joke is," said Shep. "This is past being funny."

"Wait—Snap will make them toe the mark," answered the smaller youth. "He said he would do it before he left."

During the afternoon the two boys took the rowboat and also some lines and a drag-net and rowed over to the vicinity of Humpback Rock, where the tipping over had occurred.

"You can see how shallow the water is here," said Shep. "We ought to find at least some of our things."

"Here is where the boat went over," answered Giant, and gazing down into the water he added:

"And there is one of the guns!"

They hooked the weapon up without a great deal of trouble, and soon located another gun and then a game-bag. This encouraged them, and they kept at the task until sundown, finding all the outfit but one game-bag, which Shep declared of little value, as the strap was broken.

"This is better luck than I anticipated," said Giant. "Now we must clean the guns without delay."

The entire evening was spent in overhauling and oiling the guns, and in drying out the gamebags. They also dressed one of the deer, hanging up the meat as before. The Spink crowd had taken the smallest of the game and for this they were to pay regular market prices.

When Snap and the others got back they brought with them a whole boat-load of provisions and other things, and were followed by Jed Sanborn in his canoe. The hunter had agreed to take the deer to Fairview for them. He was joyful to think they had had such luck.

"Don't need me to show ye how to bring down deer," he observed, with a grin on his homely face. "You have done prime, boys, prime, an' I'm proud of ye!"

A portion of the provisions was left at the camp and then Ham Spink and his crony crossed the lake, while Jed Sanborn remained with Snap and the others.

"Had to buy a deer from ye, did they?" chuckled Jed Sanborn, when Spink and Dudder were out of

hearing. "They won't never make no hunters, not if they try a hundred years. I'd starve to death afore I'd buy meat here, with the woods so full o' things to shoot!"

"I laid down the law good and hard," said Snap. "I don't think they will give us any more trouble."

"I think Dudder is rather ashamed of himself," said Whopper. "But Ham Spink is so thick-skinned it doesn't strike through."

"What did they do to the negro?" asked Giant.

"Locked him up for trial."

"Did Pop Lundy get his watch back?" asked Shep.

"Yes, after a little trouble. The pawnbroker was awfully mad. He wants to send the colored fellow to jail, too."

Snap and Whopper were glad to learn that the outfit had been recovered and they had Jed Sanborn look at the guns to make certain that all were fit to use.

"Didn't hurt 'em a mite," said the old hunter. "But they couldn't have stayed in the water much longer."

"It was lucky the boat went over where the water was shallow," said Giant. "Had the water been deep perhaps we shouldn't have gotten back a thing."

After the old hunter had departed with the deer, the boys set to work in earnest to fix up their camp once more. Some of the things had been spoiled by the heavy storm, but Ham Spink had "made good," as Snap said, so nothing was really lost, so far as the young hunters were concerned.

After several days of rest the boys felt once more in proper trim for sport, and went out after a bunch of rabbits and squirrels. They were fairly lucky, and three o'clock of the afternoon found them on the return to the camp.

"Let us look for some nuts," suggested Whopper.

The others were willing, and made their way to a group of trees growing some distance up the lake shore. Nuts were to be had in plenty, and soon they had their pockets and the corners of their game-bags well filled.

"I see another tree with some extra large nuts!" cried Shep.
"Come on!"

He led the way to the tree in question, which grew on a bit of land projecting far out into the lake. They soon had some of the big nuts and were about to return whence they had come, when Snap uttered a cry:

"A snake!"

"Where?" came from the others.

"There—under the tree roots."

Snap was right; a big snake was close at hand, under some tree roots over which they had just stepped.

"I don't want anything to do with a snake," gasped Giant. "Let us get out of here!"

Then all of the young hunters gazed at each other in dismay. The snake was directly in their path to the shore proper.

It was a water reptile and all of five or six feet long. As they approached, it raised its head and gave a curious hissing sound.

All of the boys crowded back. Only Whopper had his gun, the other weapons having been left at the foot of the other nut trees. The snake certainly looked ugly. Evidently it did not like having its domain invaded.

"I'll give it a shot!" cried Whopper, and raised the shotgun carefully. But just as he was on the point of firing, the reptile disappeared.

"Where is he?"

"He went under the tree roots."

"Maybe he took to the water."

The four young hunters gazed anxiously. Then of a sudden they saw the snake again. It came up through the tree roots almost at their feet, hissing more viciously than ever.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER MOUNTAIN BROOK MINK

"Shoot him, Whopper!"

Such was the exclamation from all of the others, and in haste the lad named took hasty aim and pulled the trigger.

The shot was a poor one, the charge merely tearing across the side of the water snake. With another hiss it whipped around and in a twinkling had itself curled around Whopper's left leg.

"Hi! take him off! Take him off!" screamed the young hunter, in terror. "Don't let him bite me!"

Snap sprang forward. His one idea was to save his chum, and he did not think of his own peril.

"Beware!" cautioned Giant.

Watching his chance, Snap put his foot on the tail of the water snake. The reptile whipped around wildly and wound itself about the lower limbs of both boys.

"I'll get a gun!" yelled Shep, and made a dash for the nearest of the firearms.

"Don't shoot us!" called out Whopper.

Catching up a weapon, Shep came up close and let drive almost in the face of the water snake. It was a telling shot, and the reptile whipped wildly this way and that. Then it fell into the water and was quickly lost to sight.

"Is—is he gone?" gasped Whopper.

"Yes," answered Giant. "Shep finished him."

"That was no joke," said Snap, when he could speak. He was trembling from head to foot.

"A joke? Well, I reckon not!" spluttered Whopper. "Ugh! It makes me shiver to think about it."

"Let us get out of here," came from Snap. "Remember, where there is one snake there may be more."

"Then I am going to quit right now!" cried Shep, and lost no time in leaving the neighborhood, followed by the others.

The boys concluded that they had had adventures enough for one day and went back to camp. Here two of the lads set to work to make a rabbit pot-pie, with dumplings. They had seen such things made at home and went at the task with care. When the pot-pie was served all declared it "the best ever." Perhaps the dumplings were a trifle heavy, but what of that? Living in the open air had sharpened their appetites wonderfully and nobody was disposed to quarrel over the meal.

The next day was rather cold and misty and they kept in or near the cabin. Snap had brought some extra sugar and also some chocolate along, and the morning was devoted to candy-making, some with nuts and some without. The candy was very good, and while they ate a fair share, the rest was put away, to be eaten a little at a time.

So far, since leaving their first camp, they had not seen or heard of Andrew Felps, but that afternoon an old hunter strolled into their locality and asked if they could furnish him with a meal and a shakedown until morning, offering three rabbits in payment.

"I think we can accommodate you," said Snap. "And you can keep your rabbits."

The face of the old hunter looked familiar, and while he was eating, it came out that his name was Jack Dalton and that he had been one of the two guides who had come up to Lake Cameron with the Felps party.

"I got sick of working for that crowd," said Jack Dalton. "They wanted to make a regular nigger of me and I up and told Felps I wouldn't stand for it."

"Is the other guide with them?" asked Shep.

"Humph! Dad Begow ain't no reg'lar guide—he's only a camp follower—dish-washer, an' like that. He pertends to be a guide, but he ain't no good at shootin'. Yes, he's with 'em, but he only stayed because they raised his wages. They wanted to raise mine when they saw I was really goin', but I told 'em money wasn't everything."

"I don't wonder that you got sick of Andrew Felps," put in Giant. "You know how he treated is."

"It was dirt mean, lad, an' I about told him so, too. But the Felps always was a hard crowd to deal with. He thought he was gettin' one in on Mr. Dodge when he fired you out."

"I thought as much," said Snap. "He is very bitter against my father."

"It is because of the lumber business—he wanted the tract of lumber to cut that the Barnaby Company got hold of," went on Jack Dalton. "How are you a-makin' it?"

"Fine!" said Snap, and then he and his chums told of all the game that had been brought down—they having kept a record in a little book the leader of the gun club carried.

"That's first-class, boys," said the guide. "Couldn't be better. Now, all they got were two wild turkeys, some rabbits and one small deer. I led 'em to a fine herd o' deer, but they wanted to do the shootin' all alone. When it came time to let drive, Felps and one o' the other men got buck fever and shot wild, and most of the deer got away. That was one thing made me sick. They can't shoot fer sour apples."

"And they'll blame their ill luck on you, when they get home," said Whopper.

"More'n likely. But I don't care fer thet. Folks in these parts know what Jack Dalton kin do. Jest you ask Jed Sanborn about it."

"Yes, Sanborn has spoken about you," answered Snap. "He said you had brought down some of the biggest deer and bears in these parts."

"Exactly so, boy, although I don't want to blow about it. Tootin' yer own horn ain't perlite. But I ain't afraid o' what sech a feller as Andy Felps says."

That night Jack Dalton told them the story of a bear hunt, which was more than ordinarily interesting. He said that bears were by no means plentiful in the lake region and yet there were a few around, some of pretty fair size.

"You'll run across one when ye least expect it," said the old hunter. "When that happens, take your time an' shoot to kill. If ye don't, Mr. Bear may come up an' hug you to death, jess fer the fun o' it."

"I am going to set a bear trap," said one of the boys, and told of the plan, which was approved by Jack Dalton.

Before leaving the next morning the old hunter told them where he thought they could bring down a mink or two, and after his departure they set off, to see what luck they might have.

The weather was now getting colder and there was a promise of snow in the air. Yet about ten o'clock the sun broke through the clouds and then it grew a bit warmer.

"A little snow will make hunting very fine," declared Snap, as they trudged along. "As it is now, it is next to impossible to track any big game."

The spot Jack Dalton had mentioned was nearly two miles from their camp, along a rocky watercourse flowing into a small lake between Lake Cameron and Firefly Lake. Here, among the rocks, was a favorite haunt of the mountain brook mink, as they are popularly called.

As they neared the locality, the young hunters looked to their weapons and then advanced with

caution. The water, gurgling over the rocks, drowned the sounds of their advance, and so they came upon the mink without being discovered.

Two of the animals were in sight, one on either side of the small stream. As all wanted the honor of bringing down the mink, Shep and Snap fired at one and Whopper and Giant at the other. The aim of the boy hunters was true, and the game dropped down where they stood.

"Fine mink these," declared Snap, after an examination. "Just look at the heavy fur."

"You are right," answered Whopper. "But the fur will be thicker yet later in the season."

With the mink in their game-bags, they pushed on up the tiny watercourse and not long after roused up some partridge, the game going up with a rush that at first scared them. But they shot as quickly as they could, and each had a partridge to his credit.

"This day is opening finely," declared Whopper. "We are bound to get about a hundred birds and animals, I'll wager."

"That's right, pile it on," answered Shep, with a grin. "I thought you had been keeping down lately."

"Oh, a hundred is nothing," said Whopper, airily. "Maybe I'll get that many myself. I once heard of a man who shot two hundred wild turkeys in a day."

"I don't call that sport," put in Giant. "I call that butchery."

"So do I," answered Snap. "Even as it is, I sometimes think we are shooting too much."

"Well, if we don't bring the game down somebody else will," said Whopper.

"Some day they'll have to pass some more laws, protecting game," was Shep's comment. "If they don't, there won't be anything to shoot inside of the next fifteen or twenty years."

"My father said that some folks were advocating a law to stop all deer-shooting for two years or longer," said Shep. "That would give them a chance to multiply."

"Well, I am going to shoot what I can—now I am out here," said Whopper.

CHAPTER XXIV

HAM SPINK AND THE SKUNK

But the boys' streak of luck came to an end as quickly as it began. Try their best, they could locate no more large game, and had to content themselves with a squirrel and a few fair-sized birds.

"I am getting tired of this," remarked Shep, after they had tramped across several hills. "Let us call it off and get back to camp."

The others were willing, and they turned their footsteps in the direction of the cabin. Half of the distance was covered when Snap stopped his companions.

"Look over on yonder hill," he said. "Isn't that Ham Spink's crowd?"

"It is; and there is Ham in advance," answered Whopper.

"Let us go over and see what they have got," put in Giant, curiously.

The curiosity of the others was also excited, and they turned in the direction Snap had pointed out, and soon came up to one of the rival hunters.

"Hullo!" cried Snap, good-naturedly. "How are you getting along?"

The boy addressed was Dick Bush, and he answered with a scowl.

"Shot any deer lately?" asked Whopper.

"No," was the surly response.

"Got anything at all?" asked Giant.

"One rabbit. Have you anything?" went on Dick Bush, also curious.

"Oh, a few things," was Snap's careless answer, and he winked at his chums.

"We have some birds and a squirrel," said Whopper.

"Oh, we didn't shoot any birds," put in Ham Spink, coming up.

"Ain't that fine?" and he held up a medium-sized rabbit.

By this time the whole crowd had surrounded our friends. All the rival campers had were two rabbits and a small woodchuck that was of no account.

"How do you like these?" said Snap, and showed up the mink and the rest of the game.

At the sight of the game, Ham Spink's eyes opened widely, and the others from the rival camp showed their astonishment.

"Where did you get all that game?" asked the leader of the other camp.

"Shot it."

"Not to-day."

"Yes, to-day," answered Giant, proudly.

"Then somebody must have helped you," said Ham Spink, enviously.

"Maybe Jed Sanborn is around."

"No; we brought this game down alone."

"Where did you get the mink?"

"Up that little brook you see yonder."

"I didn't know there was any mink around here," came from Carl Dudder.

"Guess I'll look for some myself."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Snap, pleasantly.

"Yes, you wish us a pile of luck!" burst out Ham Spink. "I rather guess you wish we wouldn't bring down a thing!"

"No; I am not so mean, Ham. There is enough for all in these woods."

"Bah! don't tell me!" snorted the dudish youth, and stalked off, followed by two of his cronies.

Ham Spink was dressed in as fine a hunting outfit as he could procure, and his shotgun was an expensive nickel-plated affair—the kind of a gun some old hunters who know will not have for a gift.

Ham Spink had just caught sight of a small animal, hidden in the long grass of a glade but a short distance away.

"I am going to bring it down, whatever it is!" he cried to Dick Bush. "Keep back!"

"Ham's found something to shoot at!" cried one of the other boys.

They all held back, to give their leader a chance to show his ability. Snap and his chums watched curiously.

"I don't see anything——" began Giant, and then he burst into a laugh. "It's a skunk!"

"A skunk?" repeated Shep. "If that's so, Ham had better give it a wide berth."

It was indeed a skunk, dark in color and with a bushy tail. As it moved along in the grass it looked somewhat like a large black cat. Excited, Ham Spink ran close, took hasty aim and let fire.

The skunk was hit but not badly wounded. It swished around, and an instant later the dudish young hunter received a stream of liquid over his cheek and shoulder that almost paralyzed him.

"Oh! oh! Take it away!" screamed poor Ham. "Oh, dear me!"

"Phw! what a stench!" gasped Dick Bush, falling back a step or two.

"That's a skunk!" yelled Giant. "Get out of the way—unless you want your clothing ruined!"

The offensive odor was now so powerful in that vicinity that nearly all of the young hunters fell hack to another position some distance away. In the meantime the skunk ran for the bushes and disappeared from view.

"Oh, dear! Oh, this is—is fearful!" gasped Ham Spink, putting his thumb and forefinger to his nose. "Wha-what am I to do?"

"Ham has caught it and no mistake!" whispered Snap.

"He'll be as sweet as a bag of bone fertilizer after this," was Shep's comment.

"You'll be able to smell him ten miles off," vouchsafed Whopper. "You'll recognize him in the dark with your eyes closed."

"Hi, you! Don't you make fun of me!" bawled the dudish youth, turning wrathfully on our friends.

"I hope the shooting was good, Ham," said Snap, drily.

"Don't be afraid to bury yourself, Ham, if you feel like it!" added Shep.

"I—I'll bury you!" stormed the unfortunate youth. "Oh, what a mess!" he groaned. "Dick, what shall I do?"

"I don't know," was the answer. "Only please keep away from me. The—er—the odor makes me sick, really it does."

"Huh! I'm sick myself. I didn't know it was a skunk. Why didn't somebody warn me?"

"Take off your clothes and bury them," suggested Giant. "That sometimes takes the smell away."

"Oh, hang the clothes! I'll burn them up!" growled Ham. "What shall I do for myself?"

"Wash yourself with carbolic soap," suggested Shep.

"I haven't any."

"Then take a mud bath," came from Whopper. "After that use common soap, and you'll be rid of the worst of it."

"I suppose you think you've got the laugh on me," grunted Ham Spink. He was about as angry and helpless as he could be.

"Oh, we are weeping for you, Ham!" said Shep. "Come on, fellows!" and he started off and soon his friends followed him.

"Oh, but he does smell prime!" said Whopper, when they were out of bearing. "He'd down a cologne factory in one round!"

"It is certainly awful!" answered Snap. "It was too bad to spoil that nice suit of clothes."

"I am thankful that we didn't meet the skunk," came from Giant.

"I remember meeting a skunk years ago—when I was a little boy," said Shep. "I thought it was a cat and wanted to pick it up. I think the skunk was getting ready for me when our dog came along and scared the thing away."

Ham Spink was indeed in a sorry plight. The smell was so bad that none of his friends wanted to go near him, and they begged him to keep his distance. In anger he stalked back to his camp, and there took off the almost ruined suit and buried it in the ground for forty-eight hours, which removed the worst of the odor. Following the advice given, he washed himself in a mud paste, allowing the mud to dry on him at the heat of the fire. Later he washed the mud off and used some heavily scented toilet

soap, and thus removed the worst of the odor from his person. But it was a good week before he felt as clean as he had previous to the encounter with the obnoxious animal.

CHAPTER XXV

SURROUNDED BY WOLVES

From Jack Dalton the boys had heard of a beautiful silver deer, said to be roaming the woods on the hills back of Firefly Lake, and Whopper and Giant talked a great deal of going after the game and seeing if they could not lay the deer low.

"I know we can do it if only we can spot the animal," said Giant. "And think what a feather it will be in our cap."

"I am going after that deer, even if the others won't go," added Whopper, and so it was finally decided that Whopper and the small youth should go in quest of the silver deer, while Snap and Shep remained at the camp, to try their hands at erecting a trap for beavers and also some traps for birds. It may be added that deep in the woods they had erected a bear-fall and baited the same, but so far no bear had shown himself in that vicinity, although the wolves had stolen the bait on two occasions.

In order to be prepared for big game, Whopper and Giant took along one shotgun and the rifle, and also a hunting-knife. One game-bag was filled with provisions, for they did not know how long the outing would last.

The boys started off in the best of spirits, taking to a trail the old hunter had pointed out to them. There had been a flurry of snow during the night, but this was soon melted by the sun which, at breakfast time, had come out as brightly as ever.

"What a beautiful spot this is!" said Giant, gazing back to the lake before plunging into the woods. "It is strange that so few folks come up here to camp."

"Well, it's lucky for us," answered Whopper. "We shouldn't care for many—especially of the Andrew Felps kind."

"Oh, don't mention him, Whopper. It makes me angry to think of him, and I don't want my day's fun spoiled."

Soon the vicinity of the lake was left behind, and then the boys began to climb the first rise of ground. Fortunately, the trail was good and they made rapid progress. Arriving at the top of the hill, they gazed around eagerly.

"Nothing in sight so far," said Whopper, after a long pause.

"Well, the day is young yet," was the hopeful answer.

Again they went on, and this time scared up several rabbits and also several animals they could not name, so quickly did they disappear again. The boys did not fire, however, being determined to do nothing to scare the deer away, should the game be within hearing.

When, about noon, they came to a clear spring of water, they were glad enough to sit down and rest and partake of their noonday lunch, washing it down with copious draughts of water.

"Folks can say what they please," remarked Whopper, smacking his lips. "When one is good and dry, nothing is so satisfying as a drink of plain, clear water."

"You're right there, Whopper. How some men can prefer liquor is beyond my comprehension."

"They don't know what is good for them, that's why, Giant."

The boys looked around the spring with care and made out several tracks which they thought might belong to a deer. These led along the trail they were following, and once more the boy hunters moved on, refreshed by the rest and the lunch, and cheered by the hope that they might soon get a glimpse of the game they were after.

Less than a quarter of a mile further on they found that the trail came to an abrupt end in something of a glade at the foot of another hill. There had been a landslide during the summer and this had obliterated the path.

"Here's a go!" cried Whopper, gazing around in perplexity. "I suppose old Jack Dalton didn't know about this landslide."

"We must be careful—if we go on, Whopper. That land may give way. We don't want to get underground again."

"Not much! Once was enough."

They walked along the hill, and at last came to something that looked a little like a trail. Then they went forward once more, covering a good mile. The vicinity was full of rocks, and they had to pick their way with care, for fear of tumbling down into a crevice, or twisting an ankle.

"This is growing worse, Whopper," said Giant, coming to a halt for breath. "I had no idea it was so rough, had you?"

"No. One thing is certain—we are not on the trail."

"Just what I was thinking."

"We are getting deeper and deeper into this mess. We'll have to turn back."

"And without that deer! That's too bad!"

"We may see the deer elsewhere."

They walked on a hundred feet further, reaching an opening surrounded by rocks on every side. Here was a tall tree, with branches hanging low to the ground.

"I'm going up into the tree and look around," said Whopper.

He hung his rifle on one of the limbs and began the ascent. Giant did likewise, and soon the pair were close to the top of the tree.

By parting the topmost branches they got a fairly good look of the country for a long distance on every side. They could see the waters of Lake Cameron shimmering in one direction, and the waters of Firefly Lake shimmering in another, and they also caught several glimpses of Rocky River, and some other bodies of water still further away.

"Nothing of the deer," sighed Whopper, after a long look around.

"Let us make sure," came from Giant, and swept every point of the compass with his sharp eyes.

"I see something far to the north of here," he announced. "But what it is I can't make out."

Whopper looked in the direction, but could see nothing clearly.

"Something is moving among the bushes," he said, slowly. "It may possibly be a deer, but I doubt it."

It was rather pleasant in the tree, and they rested near the top for some time. Then, of a sudden, Whopper started up.

"What's that, Giant?"

"What's what?"

"That noise below."

"I don't hear anything."

"I do, and I am going down to see what is doing."

Whopper began to descend and the smaller youth followed him.

"Well, I never!"

"Wolves!"

"Yes, and look at the number!"

The words were true. Under the tree a number of wolves had congregated. There were at least twenty-five or thirty of them, and they were all of good size.

As soon as they saw the boys they retreated a few feet and then began to snarl savagely.

"Say, Whopper, I don't like this," observed Giant, with a grave shake of his head.

"I don't like it myself."

"They don't look extra friendly."

"Friendly? I guess not. They are mighty savage."

"I wonder where they came from?"

"I am sure I don't know. Perhaps from over the mountains. Don't you remember Jed Sanborn telling us of the packs of wolves over near Pine Mountain?"

"Yes."

The two boy hunters had not ventured to the lowest limb of the tree. Now, as Whopper started to step down, one of the wolves, large and savage, leaped up at him with a vicious snarl.

"Not to-day!" cried Whopper, and drew himself up again. "I don't want you to sample my leg!"

"If we only had our guns!" sighed Giant.

"I wanted to get them, Giant. But I don't know if it will do any good—there are so many of them. One or two less won't count."

The wolves now seemed to grow impatient and snapped and snarled loudly as they crowded around the tree and tried to leap up towards the boys. They were evidently a hungry lot.

"I've got an idea!" said Giant, presently. "I am going to cut a notched stick and reach down for the guns with that."

"Just the thing!" answered his chum. The stick was soon cut, and then both boys went "Fishing" with it. Both the gun and the rifle were hanging up by straps, and it was an easy matter to catch the notch under the straps and hoist the weapons up to where the youths stood.

"Hurrah! So far so good!" cried Giant. "Now then, we'll give the wolves something that will surprise them."

"Yes; but don't forget one thing, Giant. The shots will surely scare the game away from around here, and that will mean good-by to the silver deer—at least for the present."

"Well, we have got to do something."

"I agree on that."

"I'll take that savage-looking fellow right below us."

"And I'll fire at the one over yonder. Are you ready?"

There was a pause.

"Yes."

"Then fire!"

And the shotgun and the rifle spoke up almost as one piece.

CHAPTER XXVI

SOMETHING ABOUT TRAPPING

When the smoke cleared away the two boy hunters saw two wolves stretched upon the ground, dead. The rest of the pack had retreated, yelping and snarling more frightfully than ever.

"That's the time we did it!" cried Whopper, reloading the rifle, while Giant attended to his shotgun.

"But it hasn't sent them away," was the answer of the smaller youth.
"Here they come back!"

Giant was right. Sniffing suspiciously, the remaining wolves came as close to the tree as before. Strange to say, they scarcely paid any attention to those that had been killed.

"Let us fire again," said Whopper, and his companion nodded. Once more the weapons rang out and again two of the wolves dropped. This time the remainder of the pack grew scared and vanished into the brushwood as if by magic.

"They have gone!" cried Giant, excitedly. "I thought that would make 'em skip."

"Don't be so sure about that," was Whopper's reply. "They may be watching us from behind the bushes. If they—I see one of them now!"

"Let us give them another shot!"

Again the weapons were discharged, both boys thinking it great sport to lay the wolves low. This time two more were hit, but merely wounded. They ran away yelping with pain, and the balance of the pack went after them. Looking from the tree, the boy hunters saw them cross an open space some distance away and then plunge into the woods of the next hillside.

"That finished them," said Whopper, drawing a sigh of relief. "They are now thoroughly scared and I don't think they'll dare to come back."

Nevertheless, the boys remained in the tree for half an hour longer. But the wolves were really gone, and at last they dropped to the ground.

"This ends hunting for to-day," remarked Giant. "It's too bad!"

"Well, we shot something," answered Whopper, grimly, and pointed to the wolves.

"What shall we do with them?"

"Leave them here. But no, let us take the smallest along. The meat will make good bait for the traps."

After that there was nothing to do but to start back for the camp, and this they did without further delay. It was a hard walk and they often stopped to rest. On the way they were fortunate enough to stir up some partridge and brought down three, and also got two rabbits.

"Well, we'll not go back empty-handed, after all," said Whopper.

It was long past dark when they came in sight of the camp-fire, which Snap and Shep were keeping burning brightly on purpose, so that it might light their way.

"Here they come!" cried Snap, and ran forward to meet them. "What's this? A wolf, I declare! Then you didn't find the silver deer?"

"We didn't get a chance," said Giant, and then he and Whopper told their story.

"You can be thankful that you escaped from those wolves," said Snap.

"I thought wolves didn't attack folks excepting in the dead of winter, when they couldn't get anything to eat," remarked Shep.

"That is usually the case," answered Snap. "But once in a while they do as they did to-day—when there is a large pack of them."

Snap and Shep had made their traps and had some success at fishing, having caught four pike of fair size and also several catfish.

That night came a fall of snow, which covered the ground to the depth of several inches. In the morning it was so cold they were glad enough to hug the fire until nearly noon.

In the afternoon Whopper went out on the lake and soon came back with news.

"What do you think?" he called out. "The Spink crowd is leaving!"

"Breaking up camp?" queried Giant.

"Yes; they are loading everything in their boat."

This announcement produced a mild sensation, and after a consultation, Snap and his chums decided to row across the lake and watch proceedings.

Ham Spink and his cronies were indeed leaving, and in far from a good humor. None of them was a good shot and they did not possess the patience necessary to become good hunters or fishermen. As a consequence they had brought down very little game and caught only a few fish. Their stock of provisions brought from home was running low, and each boy in the camp had voted the outing a failure.

"Going to leave us?" called out Snap, as he and his friends rested on their oars a short distance from the rival camp.

"Yes," was Ham Spink's surly response.

"What's the matter? Don't you like the hunting here?" asked Whopper.

"Oh, don't be so inquisitive!" came from Dick Bush. "I guess you are glad enough to see us go."

"Not at all," said Giant. "You are welcome to stay, so long as you don't interfere with our doings."

"We don't think much of this place," grunted Ham Spink. "It may be good enough in the middle of summer, but not now, when winter is coming on."

"Are you going right home, Ham?" asked Snap.

"What business is that of yours?"

"I thought if you were, you might sell us what stores you have left over."

"We have nothing to sell to you," was the cold reply.

"We might make a trade," put in Shep. "We have got some plump partridge and rabbits to spare."

"Humph! Are you saying that just to tease us?"

"Not at all. Here are the rabbits and the partridge, too," and the doctor's son held them up.

Now, as it happened, Ham Spink and his cronies were very anxious to take some game home, but had nothing but one rabbit and a little squirrel. They gazed longingly at the plump game Shep exhibited.

"Let us take them," whispered Dick Bush. "Nobody will know how we got them."

At this Ham Spink's eyes brightened. He was not above telling an untruth when he felt like it.

"What will you take for what you have?" he called out.

"What have you got?"

The rival campers looked over such provisions as they had left, and enumerated the articles—sugar, cocoa, flour, some canned goods, and some preserves. Snap and his chums went ashore and investigated.

"We'll trade even," said Snap at last, after talking with his chums. "But on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you take some letters home for us and deliver them as soon as you arrive."

"All right, we'll do that," said Carl Dudder.

The trade was made on the spot, and the letters written; and on the following morning Ham Spink and his cronies left the vicinity of Firefly Lake. It was the last our friends saw of the dudish youth and his friends for some time to come.

"I think he feels sick all over," remarked Shep, after the other crowd had departed.

"He certainly isn't in high spirits," commented Snap.

"I'll wager a new cap against a balloon that they tell everybody in town they shot those partridge and the rabbits," came from Giant.

"Sure thing!" exclaimed Whopper. "And they'll say they shot about a thousand other things besides. I know 'em. They can all blow to beat the band when they want to."

On the following Monday it was clear and cool, and the boys set out to look at their beaver traps, of which three had been placed in position. To their delight, two of the traps held beavers; and to their astonishment, the third trap held a muskrat.

"Hullo! here is something I wasn't looking for!" cried Snap.
"He's a fine haul," he added, looking the muskrat over.

"And the beavers are fine, too," added Shep. "Boys, I think we can count ourselves lucky and no mistake."

"Let us set the traps again," said Whopper, who was excited over the haul. This was done, and the boy hunters returned to their camp well pleased at what they had caught.

"I wish we'd get something in the bear trap," said Giant. The small youth had set his heart on getting a bear before it should be time to return home.

On the day following, Shep and Giant went out after nuts and were gone the best part of the day. When they returned to the camp they were both excited and wanted to see Snap without delay.

"What's it all about?" asked the leader of the gun club.

"We may be mistaken," answered Shep, "but we think we have made a discovery of importance."

"What kind of a discovery?"

"We think we have located the man who set fire to the sawmill and ran away with those documents!" answered Giant.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DESERTED COTTAGE

Giant's announcement filled Snap with keen interest, and he wanted to know at once all Shep and the small youth could tell.

"We went directly up the lake," said Giant. "Took the road around the rocks that Jed Sanborn showed us. We found the nut trees, and——"

"Never mind the nut trees," interrupted Snap. "Tell me about that man."

"Well, back of the trees is a cleared spot—maybe it was a farm some years ago, and in the midst of the clearing is an old, half-tumbled-down cottage. We walked over to the cottage and looked in at the window."

"And we saw a man sitting on a box with a barrel before him," put in Shep. "On the barrel he had a board and on the board were spread some papers that the man was looking over. The man was tall and thin, and had red hair and a short, red moustache"

"That tallies with the man who stole the money and the papers!" cried Snap, excitedly. "Did he limp, too?"

"Slightly, with his left foot."

"He must be our man. But what is he doing around here?"

"I don't know," answered Shep. "As soon as he saw us he jumped up and put the papers in his pocket."

"What did you do?" asked Whopper.

"He asked us what we wanted, and Shep told him we were out nutting," said Giant. "Then he asked us who we were."

"Did you tell him?"

"We did," said Shep; "and then we asked him who he was, but he put us off. He said he was out tramping the mountains for his health."

"Did he seem to be staying at the cottage?"

"Yes; at least he had a bag full of provisions with him, and a gun, too."

"Was he alone?"

"He seemed to be."

"Did you see the documents he had, closely?"

"Not very," said Giant. "But we saw something of a map on one of them."

"One of the stolen papers was a map of that lumber tract," said Snap, thoughtfully. "Boys, if that is the rascal who set fire to the sawmill we ought to capture him," he continued.

"That's the talk!" cried Whopper. "But we want to be sure of what we are doing. It won't do to arrest the wrong man."

"If we could only get a look at those papers," said Shep, "they would surely tell the tale."

"Did he look like a guilty man?" went on Snap.

"He acted scared when he saw us, and he got the papers out of sight in a jiffy. And he is certainly tall and thin, and has a red moustache and red hair."

"Well, that fits the rascal who is wanted, pretty closely."

"It's queer that he'd come to a place like this," was Whopper's comment.

"Maybe he thinks it is best to keep in hiding, at least for the present."

"But why doesn't he go elsewhere?"

"He may be afraid to show himself in town, or at a railroad station."

The matter was talked over for an hour, and then it was decided to visit the old cottage as early as possible on the following morning.

"And let us take our guns," declared Snap. "And we'll take a rope, too—in case we have to tie him up."

The boys could scarcely sleep that night, so excited were they over the prospect ahead. All of them were up at dawn and procured breakfast as quickly as they could. Then the game-bags were filled with provisions, the guns were overhauled, and Snap got the rope he had mentioned.

"Now I guess we are ready," said Shep.

"Wait till I kick out the fire," said Whopper. "Don't want the place to burn up while we are away."

The fire extinguished, they set off on their journey and were soon a goodly distance from the lake. The snow had disappeared and the day promised to be an unusually warm one. They did not look for any game, and when a rabbit crossed their path nobody shot at it.

"We are after other game to-day," observed Snap, grimly.

"If only we have the same success as we had when we caught that nigger," came from Whopper. "That was dead easy."

"I don't think we'll catch him asleep," said Shep. "He is a wide-awake fellow, if nothing else."

On and on they went, covering several miles. They passed the trees that were loaded with nuts, but did not stop, and soon came in sight of the clearing.

"Now go slow," cautioned Snap. "If he sees us from a distance he may take it into his head to run away."

"Maybe one or two of us had better go forward and investigate," suggested Giant.

This was thought a good plan, and Snap and Shep went forward, slowly and cautiously, until they gained the very edge of the clearing.

"I see smoke coming out of the chimney," said Snap. "That would seem to show he is still there."

The door to the old cottage was tightly closed, and growing bolder, the two young hunters walked to it and knocked loudly.

"See that he doesn't slip out the other way," whispered Snap to his chum, and Shep at once ran around to the other side of the building.

As there was no answer to the summons, Snap knocked on the door a second time. Still there was no response.

"Guess I'll go in," he murmured, and pushed the door open.

The apartment beyond was the living-room of the old cottage and a glance showed him a smouldering fire in the fireplace. Nobody was visible.

From the kitchen the boy hunter went into the room beyond and then ran upstairs.

"See anybody?" called Shep, as Snap showed himself at a broken-out window.

"No. Call the others."

Shep did as requested, and soon all of the young hunters were making an investigation of the premises.

"He must have gone away this morning," said Giant. "See how the fire is still burning."

"I wish I knew where he had gone to," said Snap, with a long sigh.

"Perhaps we can find out if we search closely."

In the cottage they found the remains of some meals the stranger had had, and also some scraps of paper, including an envelope addressed to Lusher Barrock.

"I wonder if that is his name?" said Snap.

"More than likely," answered Giant. "Did you ever hear of him before?"

"No."

They tried to put the pieces of paper together, but the effort was a failure.

"Here is where he did some figuring," said Whopper, pointing to the board, which contained numerous pencil marks. "Maybe—hullo! look here!"

"What's up now?" asked Snap, running forward.

"Here is the name of Andrew Felps!"

"Felps!" came from all of the others in a chorus.

"Can that man have been here?" asked Giant.

"I must say, I don't understand this," came from Snap. "But I have got an idea."

"What is it, Snap?"

"Of course I may be all wrong, but I'll give it to you for what it is worth. Do you remember what my father said about those papers?"

"That they related to a certain patch of timber land?" said Giant.

"Yes; and that the Felps people wanted to get hold of the patch. Well, this Lusher Barrock may be hanging around here trying to sell the papers."

"To sell them?" said Shep, looking puzzled.

"Exactly. They are of no use to him, but they might be of use to Andrew Felps and his lumber company."

"You mean that by getting the papers Felps might keep your folks from cutting down the lumber on that tract?"

"Yes, and more. Felps may have some way of getting hold of the land himself, if these papers are destroyed. I don't know the whole truth of the case, but I know my father wanted the papers and he didn't want Andrew Felps to learn that they were missing."

"Snap, I think you have struck the truth," ejaculated Shep. "I don't know of anything else that would bring this Barrock—if that's his name—to this locality. He must be watching his chance to meet Andrew Felps."

"Would Felps be mean enough to buy the papers from him?" asked Whopper. "Why, that would be dishonest!"

"I think that man is mean enough for anything!" burst out Giant, who was not inclined to forget how badly he and his chums had been treated by the individual in question.

"If this is true, Snap, the best thing we can do is to go over to the Felps camp and watch out for this Lusher Barrock," said Shep.

"And that is what I am going to do," answered Snap.

"When will you go?" questioned Whopper.

"As soon as possible."

"We can't get to the camp very well from here. We'll have to go back to Firefly Lake first."

"Do you suppose this Barrock went that way?"

"Maybe he did, or else he knows of some trail over the mountain."

"Well, we can go back to the lake, and then start for Lake Cameron without delay," said Snap, and so it was settled.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BOY HUNTERS AND A BEAR

The boys stopped to get dinner and then hurried back to the cabin with all possible speed.

"This has been a long tramp for nothing," was Giant's comment, as they trudged along.

"Oh, I don't think so!" answered Whopper. "I think we have learned a good deal."

On the way back they could not resist the temptation to shoot what game came in their way and thus brought down several rabbits, a squirrel, four quail, and two wild ducks that chanced to show themselves near the end of the lake.

As they neared the cabin they had to pass the bear trap that had been set so many days. They heard a peculiar grunting.

"Listen!" cried Snap, coming to a halt. "What is that?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Shep. "Sounds like some beast in pain."

"Maybe it is something in the trap!" cried Giant, and moved forward on a run, before anybody could stop him.

As Giant drew in sight of the trap something caught his eyes that brought him stock still in wonder.

There, fast in the trap, lay a small bear, and close at hand was another bear, evidently trying to get the prisoner free!

"Look out there, Giant!" sang out Snap, as he, too, saw the situation.

"Two bears, by all that is lucky!" ejaculated Whopper.

At the sounds of the boys' voices the free bear turned swiftly. Evidently he was in a rage, and for a good reason, for the bear in the trap was his mate.

"He is coming for you!" cried Shep. What he said was true; the bear was indeed coming for Giant. He stood up on his hind legs and confronted the young hunter. A moment more and his powerful paw must have knocked Giant down and perhaps have killed the lad.

But Snap had somewhat recovered from his astonishment, and raising his shotgun quickly, he pulled the trigger.

The dose of shot took the bear in the side of the face and stung him so bitterly that he fell back a few steps. But this was only for the moment. Soon he gathered himself once more and then turned upon Snap.

"Shoot him!" cried the young leader of the gun club and a second later came the crack of the rifle that Shep carried. The bullet pierced the bear's side and he rolled over and over in pain.

"Good for you, Shep!" sang out Snap. "Shoot him again, somebody!"

For an answer, both Whopper and Giant fired their shotguns and the bear received both charges in his rump. Again he rolled over and over, uttering a roar that could be heard for a long distance. He tried to arise and did so once, dragging himself toward Whopper, who lost no time in retreating.

By this time Snap was ready for another shot, and growing bolder, he watched his chance, ran in and let the bear have the buckshot directly between the eyes. Then Shep took a second shot also, hitting Bruin in the throat. This was too much for the bear, and with a quiver and a gasp he sank in a heap, and a moment later breathed his last.

"Is he—he dead?" gasped Giant, after the bear had been quiet for a full minute.

"I think so," answered Snap. "But don't go near him yet—he may be playing a trick on us."

"I am not going near him."

"The bear in the trap is alive!" called out Whopper, who had just made an examination.

All lost no time in reloading their weapons, and then they peered into the trap. The bear under the logs and stones gave a grunt of pain and rage.

"I'll fix her," said Snap, and, drawing close, let drive at the bear's head. It was a telling shot, and soon the bear stretched out, and then the battle with the two creatures came to an end.

"What a magnificent haul!" cried Giant, after they were certain both bears were dead.

"I wonder what Ham Spink and his crowd would say to this?" came from Snap.

"They wouldn't believe it unless they saw it," returned Whopper. "Boys, do you know what I think? I think we ought to take those bears home."

"Just what I think, too," said Giant. "I want my mother to see them."

"Well, I am willing," answered Snap. "But I think we ought to visit Lake Cameron first and see if we can't find this Lusher Barrock."

"We can stop at Lake Cameron on the way," answered Whopper.

It was late in the day already, and by the time they had dragged the bears to camp it was night. As they sat around the camp-fire they talked matters over and decided to break camp the very next day. They had had about all the hunting they wished for the present, and getting the two bears "topped matters off," as Snap put it.

The bears were loaded into the boat and anchored out in the lake, and then the boys got supper and went to bed. Snap was soon asleep and so were Giant and Shep, and all slept soundly until about midnight, when the leader of the club awoke a start.

"Hullo! what's up now?" he called out, and this cry aroused Shep and Giant.

"What is it, Snap?"

"Where is Whopper?"

"I don't know where he is," answered Snap. "Listen!"

The three did so, and from a distance heard a groan and then a thrashing around in the bushes back of the cabin.

"Something is wrong, that is sure!" gasped Giant. "Whopper must be in trouble!"

"Come on and see," returned Snap, and catching up his gun he ran from the shelter. Shep and Giant were not slow in following.

When they got outside all had become quiet again, and they knew not in what direction to turn. There was no moon, but the stars shone like so many diamonds in the heavens.

"Where is he?" asked Shep, after a breathless pause.

"I don't know," answered Snap. "Hullo, Whopper!" he called out.

There was no reply to his shout and he moved into the bushes cautiously, with the others at his heels. Then, of a sudden, he came upon Whopper, who stood by a bush tugging away manfully.

"Get back!" murmured Whopper. "Get back, you beast! Say, fellows, this is the worst bear of the lot! Down he goes! That makes four bears for yours truly!"

"I know what's the matter!" shouted Snap, lowering his gun. "He has got the nightmare."

"Yes, and got it bad, too," put in Giant. "My! see him hustle with the bush!"

"Shall we wake him up?" asked Shep.

"No—it may not be good for him," answered Snap.

"Oh, I am going to wake him up!" came from Giant, and before the others could stop him he ran forward and caught Whopper by the arm. "Wake up, Whopper!" he called. "Wake up, old man! You've got 'em bad!"

At first Whopper paid no attention. "Then his struggles with the bush ceased and he opened his eyes and stared about him in bewilderment.

"Wh-what is the matter? Wh-where am I?" he stammered, gazing around stupidly.

"You've been asleep and dreaming," explained Snap. "You thought you were after a bear."

"So I was—after a dozen bears. Did I—I kill any?"

"There are no bears here. You were only dreaming."

"Oh!" Whopper rubbed his eyes. "No bears at all?"

"None but what we shot yesterday. You went to sleep and the next thing we knew you were out here, pulling at this bush."

"Where am I?"

"Back of the cabin," put in Shep. "You had better go to bed again."

"And please don't dream of any more bears," added Giant, with a grin.

Whopper scratched his head in perplexity.

"Funny how I got here! I don't understand it at all. Oh, but say, I was having the fight of my life!"

"I should say so," answered Snap, looking around. "You must have pulled up those three bushes yonder. Getting strong in your sleep."

"I am glad he didn't dream I was a bear," remarked Shep. "There wouldn't have been anything left of me by the time he woke up!"

"I know how it was," said Whopper, as the full truth dawned on him. "I ate a very hearty supper last night, and when I went to bed my head was full of those two bears we brought down. That gave me the nightmare."

"Then, after this, we'll have to send you to bed supperless," said Snap.

"Not much!" cried Whopper.

CHAPTER XXIX

A STRANGE MEETING IN THE FOREST

Despite Whopper's nightmare and what had followed, the boy hunters slept soundly for the rest of the night. All arose at daybreak and procured what was destined to be their last meal in the camp for that season.

"I rather hate to leave the spot," said Snap, while packing away the breakfast things. "We have had some good fun here."

"We must come back some time, by all means," declared Shep. "Maybe this winter."

"Yes, some hunting up here in mid-winter wouldn't go bad," came from Giant. "We could bring snowshoes along and have jolly times."

"That's the talk!" ejaculated Whopper. "I have always wanted to go hunting on snowshoes, And we could build a big snowhouse, too."

"Well, that is something to talk over another time," put in Snap. "Remember, just now we want to locate that mill robber if we can, and also get those bears home."

It took quite some time to pack all of the things aboard the rowboat, and the craft was heavily loaded with the outfit and the game.

"Will it carry us, too?" questioned Shep, as he looked at the boat dubiously.

"It has got to carry us," declared Whopper. "But it will be rather hard rowing."

All tried the boat and found it would carry them, although the gunwale sank low into the water. Then they cleaned up the camp, shut up the cabin, and were all ready for the start.

"Good-by to the camp!" cried Giant, lifting his cap.

"And hurrah for the first outing of our gun club!" added Snap. And they gave the cheers with a will.

Snap and Whopper took the oars first, and the course was out of Firefly Lake and through the narrow watercourse running into Lake Cameron. It was a cool, clear day, with a stiff breeze stirring the bushes and trees of the forest.

"I see some turkeys!" cried Shep, while on the way. "I must have a last shot!"

"And so must I!" came from the others.

All caught up their guns, and as the boat drifted closer to the game, each let drive. Two of the turkeys were killed outright, while two more were badly wounded and easily secured.

"One each!" said Giant.

"Exactly," answered Snap. "And now we have got to stop or we'll sink the boat sure."

"Well, enough is enough," said Whopper. "I think, all told, we have had the best luck possible."

"Even if we didn't get a silver deer."

"That's so—I forgot about that deer. Well, he will keep for another time, eh, fellows?"

"That's right."

It was shortly after noon that they turned into Lake Cameron and landed near the mouth of that body of water. All were hungry, and partook readily of the lunch that had been brought along.

"Now, what's the next part of the programme?" asked Giant, looking at Snap.

"I don't think it will be advisable for us to show ourselves to the Felps crowd," answered the leader of the gun club.

"Oh, let us do a little scout work!" said Whopper. "We can easily hide the boat and get around to the camp on foot."

The matter was talked over while they ate their mid-day meal, and at the conclusion of the repast they shoved the rowboat with its load into a cove and under some overhanging brushwood. Then, taking only their guns and game-bags and some provisions, they set off for their first camping spot on foot.

"We must be on our guard," cautioned Snap.

"I do not want any of those men to see us if it can possibly be avoided."

"We'll watch out," answered Shep.

A minute later half a dozen fat rabbits crossed their path directly in front of them. The temptation to bring the game down was strong, but they resisted, not wishing to make any noise. A little later they heard two gunshots at a distance.

"Some of the men must be out hunting," observed Giant.

"Gracious! I hope they don't mistake us for game," cried Whopper.

"Let us walk more in the open," answered Snap. "Then they can't make any mistake."

The way was rocky and uneven, and long before they came in sight of their first camp the boys were somewhat footsore and weary.

"This isn't the nicest kind of tramping in the world, is it?" came from Shep.

"Don't say a word," answered Giant. "I just came within an inch of twisting my left ankle."

They had a small brook to cross and there stopped for a drink of water. They were just going on again when another distant gunshot sounded out.

"They must be doing a lot of hunting to-day," observed Snap. "I'd like to know if they can bring anything down."

"Not if what that old guide said was true," answered Shep.

They advanced a few yards further, when Shep suddenly halted and made his chums do the same.

"What's up now?" whispered Whopper. "See a bear?"

"Whopper has bears on the brain," came from Giant, with a grin.

"I see two men over back of yonder rocks," answered Snap. "They seem to be doing some hard talking."

"Who are they?"

"One of them is Andrew Felps."

"And the other?"

"I don't know who he is."

"He is the man we are after!" cried Whopper "Don't you see his red hair and red moustache?"

"Let us go around the rocks and get closer in that way," said Snap, and his suggestion was followed out promptly.

"Well, what do you want of me, anyway, Barrock?" they heard Andrew Felps say to the man with the red hair.

"I want to talk business," answered Lush Barrock, as he was commonly called.

"Well, get to business, then," went on the lumber merchant. "I am not going to stay here all day. You said you had something to say that would interest me."

"It's true, too, Mr. Felps."

"Well, out with it, then."

Lush Barrock paused and cleared his throat. Evidently he did not know exactly how to go about what he had in mind to do.

"I reckon you know the Barnaby lumber folks," he began.

"Yes," was the short answer.

"They have been trying to get hold of a certain lumber tract up at the Spur Road."

"What of that?"

"I understand your company has been trying to get hold of the same tract of land."

"What business is that of yours?"

"None of my business—in one way—but a good deal of my business in another way."

"I don't understand you, Barrock. Stop talking in riddles and get down to business."

"Can I trust you, Mr. Felps? I mean, will you keep a secret?"

"That depends," answered Andrew Felps, coldly.

"I want to help you so that you can get the best of the Barnaby people."

"How can you help me?"

"I'll tell you if you'll promise to keep the matter a secret."

"Hum!" The lumber merchant paused for a moment. "Well, go on."

"You won't give me away?"

"No."

"Well, when they got their right to that Spur Road tract certain papers had to be signed."

"I know that."

"Then they had a fire at their sawmill."

"I know that, too."

"During that fire those papers disappeared."

"Ha!" cried Andrew Felps, with interest. "You are certain of that?"

"I am."

"And you—you——" The lumber dealer paused.

"In a roundabout way I met the fellow who had the papers. For a consideration he let me have them. If you want them you can have them—provided you will pay the price."

CHAPTER XXX

The boy hunters had listened to the foregoing conversation with intense interest. There could be no doubt but what this Barrock was the man they were after. His tale that he had procured the missing papers from somebody else was pure fiction—gotten up merely to deceive Andrew Felps.

"We ought to make him a prisoner on the spot," whispered Shep.

"Wait—I want to learn what Andrew Felps will do," murmured Snap.

"You want me to buy the papers from you, eh?" said Andrew Felps, after a pause.

"Yes," answered Lush Barrock, boldly.

"Don't you know that you have no right to the documents?"

"Oh, I don't want you to preach to me, Andy Felps. If you want the papers, say so. If not——"

"If not, what?"

"Maybe I'll return them to the Barnaby folks. I understand Mr. Dodge offered a reward for them."

"What do you want for the papers?" asked Andrew Felps, cautiously.

"They ought to be worth several thousand dollars, but you can have them for one thousand dollars."

"Nonsense, Barrock! What would I do with the papers?"

"Destroy them."

"What, after giving you a thousand dollars for them?"

Lush Barrock nodded. "It's this way, Felps," he said. "If you get this contract out of the way I am sure you can make another contract—for your own company. The Spur Road folks feel sore, and I know you can fix matters up with old Haley, who is a miser, and willing to do almost anything for money."

"Have you the papers with you?"

"Do you want to buy them?"

"I want to see what I am getting, first."

Lusher Barrock made a movement as if to take something from his breast-pocket.

Just at that moment heavy footsteps sounded out directly behind the four boy hunters, and two men belonging to the Felps crowd appeared upon the scene.

"Hullo! What are you youngsters doing here?" demanded one of the men.

"We—we came over on business," stammered Snap. He hardly knew what to say, the meeting was such an unexpected one.

"Who is there?" cried out Andrew Felps, and ran around the edge of the rocks. "What, you! Where did you come from?"

Andrew Felps was followed by Lush Barrock. When the fellow who had robbed the sawmill saw Snap and his chums he was almost struck dumb.

"See here," began Andrew Felps, his face growing dark, "what do you——"

"Stop him!" yelled Snap, and pointed to Lush Barrock, who had suddenly taken to his heels. "Stop him, somebody!"

Snap made a dash after the robber, and was followed by his three chums. Barrock was a good runner, and soon disappeared into the bushes.

"We must catch him!" panted Snap. "We must not let him get away!"

He went on after Lush Barrock with all speed. The course was through the bushes and over some rocks. Then, of a sudden, a voice sounded out ahead:

"Stop, all of you! If you don't, I'll fire!"

"Oh, Snap, do you think he will fire at us?" gasped Giant, and came to a halt, followed by the rest.

"If you fire, so will we!" sang out Snap, and brought around his shotgun. But no answer came back, and now Lush Barrock was both out of sight and hearing.

Yet the boy hunters did not give up the chase. They followed the trail as best they could to a brook, but there lost it in the water. Then they hunted around for a good quarter of an hour, but without avail.

"Too bad!" groaned Snap. "Oh, how I wish I had put my hands on that rascal!"

"He is certainly a bad one," was Whopper's comment.

"Yes, and Andrew Felps is almost as bad," said Shep. "He would have bought those papers."

They retraced their steps toward the lake, and soon met Andrew Felps and his companions.

"Did you catch him?" asked the lumber dealer, nervously.

"No," was Snap's short answer.

"Do you know him?" went on Andrew Felps, curiously.

"I know him to be the man who robbed the sawmill and set the place on fire."

"Is that so?"

Andrew Felps put on an appearance of great surprise.

"Don't you know it, too?" said Snap, bluntly.

"Me? Of course not. Why—er—if I knew he was that kind of a man——" Andrew Felps broke off short. "Were you listening to our talk?"

"We were," put in Whopper. "We heard every word, too."

"Ahem! Well, I—er—that is, I was only sounding the fellow," said the lumber dealer, lamely.

To this Snap did not say anything, although Andrew Felps looked at him inquiringly.

"You don't suppose I was going to have anything to do with him?" demanded Andrew Felps, after a pause.

"Yes, I do," said Snap, bluntly.

"Bah! Nonsense! If he had shown those papers I should have taken them away from him."

"To keep?"

"No; to return to their rightful owners."

To this Snap made no reply. Andrew Felps was clearly disconcerted.

"Evidently you don't believe me, boy."

Still Snap was silent.

"See here, do you expect to make trouble for me on this account?" pursued the lumber dealer, growing angry.

"I shall tell the truth, that's all," said Snap.

"I see! You'll try to make it appear that I am in with this—this fellow!" snorted the lumber dealer. "Well, just you take care, or you may get into trouble!"

"If I get into trouble I guess I'll know how to take care of myself," returned Snap, stoutly.

He had scarcely uttered the words when Andrew Felps caught him roughly by the shoulder.

"Boy, take care how you talk to me!"

"Let go of me!" exclaimed Snap, with flashing eyes. "Let go, I say!" And he jerked himself away. "Don't you dare lay your hands upon me again, Andrew Felps!"

"Ha! you imp!" snarled the lumber dealer, and caught hold of Snap once more. This time the boy tried to free himself, but in vain.

"If you don't let go, I'll strike you!" he panted, and the next moment he struck out, landing a hard blow on the lumber dealer's nose. The latter was so amazed he fell back and released his hold.

"Oh, my nose!" groaned the man. "You young scoundrel! I'll——"

At that moment came a cry of alarm from a distance.

"Hullo! hullo! Come this way! The woods are on fire! We'll be burnt out before we know it!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE FOREST FIRE—CONCLUSION

The cry was such an unexpected one that for the moment every one who heard it was dumfounded. The men stared at each other and so did the boys. Then all looked up and saw a thick mass of smoke rolling over the forest. The wind was blowing briskly, and soon the smoke began to envelop the entire crowd.

"Say, fellows, we must get out of here!" exclaimed Shep. "We can't stay, or we'll be burnt up!"

"That's the truth," put in Giant. "Let us get back to our boat."

"To the camp!" came from Andrew Felps, and ran off, followed by the other men.

"Shall we go after them?" asked Snap.

"What good will it do?" said Shep. "They can get out on the lake in their boat—if the fire gets too strong for them."

"The wind is blowing it directly to the lake," said Whopper. "My, but it has gained headway!" he added, looking around.

The smoke was growing thicker, and already they could see the sparks floating overhead. From a distance they heard a wild cry, but could not make out what it was.

Turning around, they started for the spot where they had left their boat.

In their mad rush to gain the craft, they did not notice that they got off the trail until they were halted by a mass of brushwood on all sides of them.

"This can't be right!" panted Giant. "I didn't notice this before."

"We have made some mistake!" ejaculated Shep. "Maybe we are going away from the lake!"

They gazed around. The smoke was growing thicker, and now a few burning brands fell close by.

"One thing is certain, we can't stay here!" came from Snap. "Let us go straight downhill. That will bring us to water sooner or later."

This was considered good advice and all acted on it without delay. The smoke was now so thick they could scarcely see in any direction. The light of the sun was obscure, making it as dark as if it was night.

"Here is a little stream!" called out Giant, presently. "This must run into the lake!"

All stepped into the brook and followed it for several hundred feet. Then Snap called a halt.

"Here is our lost trail!"

"Snap is right," said Shep. "Come on, the boat cannot be far off."

Once more they went on, the smoke growing so thick they had to crouch down to get their breath. The tears were streaming from their eyes, and Whopper let out a yell as a burning brand floated down on his neck, raising a blister.

"Here is the boat, thank fortune!" said Snap, a minute later.

How they tumbled into the craft they scarcely knew. The painter was cut and they shoved off into the lake, just as a fierce gust of wind sent a cloud of smoke and a shower of sparks down upon them.

"Phew! but that was a narrow escape!" muttered Shep, when the shore had been left behind and they could catch their breath.

"We are not out of danger yet!" said Snap. "This fire may be worse than we think. If it takes in the whole lake district, we'll be hemmed in on all sides."

"Look!" exclaimed Giant. "Am I mistaken, or is a storm coming up?" and he pointed to the sky.

"Those are certainly clouds, not smoke," said Whopper. "Oh, I hope it does rain and puts out the fire. I shouldn't like to see this fine forest destroyed."

"Nor I," added Snap.

"If it is burned down it will be Mr. Felps's loss," came from Giant. "He said he had bought the district up, you'll remember."

As they pulled along, well away from the shore, they suddenly heard a mad cry for aid.

"What's that?" asked Snap.

"A man on shore!" ejaculated Whopper. "See him—over on yonder rocks!"

"It is that Barrock!" said Shep.

"Help me!" came from the man, who was waving his arms wildly. "Take me off, or I'll be burnt up!"

"Let us row to him," said Snap.

The rowboat was turned in toward shore without delay. In the meantime, to escape the smoke and burning brands, Lusher Barrock rushed into the lake up to his knees.

"Save me!" he bawled again. "I can't swim!"

"We'll save you!" answered Snap. "But see here, Barrock," he added, suddenly.

"What?"

"You will have to give us those documents you took from the sawmill."

"I—I—ain't got them."

"Well, then, we'll leave you where you are," said Snap, just to test the rascal.

"No! no! I—I'll give you the papers!"

"Very well, then."

The craft came alongside of the robber and he was helped on board. He was badly scared and trembling from head to foot. A burning brand had come down on his left ear, singeing that member and also his fiery red hair.

"Now give me those papers," demanded Snap, and without waiting thrust his hand into the man's pocket and drew them forth. "Have you the money, too?"

"I—I—"

"Hand it over or we'll search you."

"I've got three hundred dollars," said Lush Barrock, lamely. "I spent about fifty dollars."

The money was handed over to Snap, and he placed it and the papers in an inner pocket of his jacket. Then the robber was ordered to sit at the bow of the boat and not move, and a pistol he carried was taken from him.

It was not long after this that it began to rain. At first the downfall was not great, but presently there was a perfect deluge and then the boy hunters knew that the danger from the forest fire was over. Looking up the lake they saw Andrew Felps and his party in their launch, unharmed. The camp of the lumber dealer, however, had been burned out clean and clear, along with all of the provisions.

"That's what he gets for taking our cabin from us," was Giant's comment.

Not wishing to meet the lumber dealer again, now that they had made Lush Barrock a prisoner, Snap directed his chums to row out of the lake and on to the river. The boys pulled a good stroke and, despite the load on board the craft, made fair progress.

"This fire will worry the folks at home," said Shep. "I am glad we made up our minds to break camp."

"Yes," answered Whopper. "Everything happened for the best, after all."

The boat was still some miles from Fairview when they saw another craft approaching. It contained Mr. Dodge and Jed Sanborn.

"Safe, are you?" sang out Mr. Dodge, as he drew near. "We were afraid that forest fire would do you some harm."

"We had a pretty close shave of it, father," answered Snap.

"We've got a prisoner for you, Mr. Dodge," sang out Shep, somewhat proudly. "Here is the rascal who set fire to the sawmill."

"Is it possible!" cried Mr. Dodge.

"That fire was an—an accident," grumbled Lusher Barrock. "All a mistake."

"I've got the documents he took, and three hundred dollars of the money," said Snap.

"Well! well! This is famous, boys!" said Mr. Dodge.

"My sakes alive, look at the bears!" called out Jed Sanborn, as Giant pulled aside the canvas that lay over the game. "Who shot 'em?"

"We shot one and caught the other in the trap," answered Giant. "Don't you think we did pretty well for boys?"

"Well for boys? Why, men couldn't do any better. You're the best boy hunters anywhere!"

The prisoner was transferred to the boat containing Mr. Dodge and Jed Sanborn, and Snap gave to his parent the money and the documents that had been recovered. Then both boats headed for Fairview, which was reached at nightfall.

Great was the surprise of the town folks when it was learned that the man who had set fire to the sawmill had been captured. He was put in jail, and later on tried and sent to prison for a term of years.

There was another surprise when it was noised about that the boy hunters had laid low not only several deer and a good deal of small game, but also two fair-sized bears. The bears were placed on public exhibition at one of the stores and many came to look at them.

Ham Spink and his cronies were intensely jealous, but did not dare to give vent to their feelings. Snap and his chums took no notice of the dudish youth and his followers.

"We have the best of it, and they know it," said Snap.

"Boys, we must go out again, this winter," said Shep. "Come, what do you say?"

All agreed instantly, and how they went out, and what good times they had will be told in another volume of this series, to be called, *"Guns and Snowshoes; or, The Winter Outing of the Boy Hunters."* The best hunting is often to be had when there is snow on the ground, and my readers can rest assured that the four boy hunters made the most of their opportunities.

A while after the boys got home, it was learned that Andrew Felps had escaped with his party, unharmed, but all had lost practically everything they had taken along but the launch. The forest had been much damaged, especially that tract which the Felps Lumber Company had purchased for cutting purposes, so the lumber merchant was out in more ways than one. Nothing was said to him about the talk he had had with Lusher Barrock, and he himself was afraid to open his mouth about it, and soon the incident was practically forgotten. The Barnaby Company went to work at the Spur Road tract and

nobody attempted to stop them.

"Boys, we had a dandy time, didn't we?" said Snap, one evening after he had had his fill of venison steak.

"We had the best time ever!" said Shep. "May we have many more like it!"

"Just wait till this winter!" cried Whopper.

"I am going to kill sixteen deer, twenty bears, two hundred wild turkeys, and about a thousand rabbits."

"Draw it mild, Whopper!" ejaculated Giant. "Wait till the time comes, and then do your best."

And Whopper did wait, and so did the rest, and here let us leave them and say good-by.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOUR BOY HUNTERS; OR, THE OUTING OF THE GUN CLUB ***

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