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Title: The Camp in the Snow; Or, Besieged by Danger

Author: William Murray Graydon

Release date: January 15, 2008 [eBook #24301]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Georges T. Dodds and Roger Frank.

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THE CAMP IN THE SNOW

By
WILLIAM MURRAY GRAYDON

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The Camp in the Snow

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THE CAMP IN THE SNOW

CHAPTER I.

A MERCILESS ENEMY.

"All tickets, please!"

The blue-uniformed conductor, with a lantern under his arm, and his punch in hand, entered the smoking-car of the Boston express.

It was between seven and eight o'clock on the night of the tenth of December. The train was speeding eastward through the wintry landscape of the State of Maine.

Among the passengers in the smoking-car was a well-dressed lad of eighteen, with a ruddy face, and gray eyes in which was a lurking gleam of humor.

Just across the aisle sat a middle-aged man with a clean-shaven, cadaverous face and rusty black clothes. He was reading a small book, and seemed to be absorbed in its pages.

As the conductor drew near, the lad fumbled hurriedly in his pockets. He turned them inside out, one after another. He looked on the floor, on the seat, in the folds of his clothing.

"Your ticket, sir."

The conductor had been standing by the seat for a full minute.

"I—I must have lost it," replied the lad. "Just my beastly luck! You know that I had one, for you clipped it twice."

The conductor stared coldly.

"Find it, or pay your fare," he answered.

The lad put his hand into the breast pocket of his cape coat. He whipped out a handkerchief, and a bulky pocketbook. The latter flew across the aisle and under the next seat, where it burst open.

The clerical-looking man stooped and picked it up.

"Permit me," he said, handing it back with a low bow.

"Much obliged," answered the owner. "Hello! there's a wad of bills missing. It must have fallen out."

The clerical-looking man pretended not to hear. He turned toward the window and went on reading. The conductor and the lad peered under the neighboring seats. They saw no trace of the money. The other passengers looked on with interest.

"Lift your feet, sir," said the conductor, sharply, as he tapped the clerical passenger's arm.

The man obeyed with an air of injured innocence, and the roll of bank notes was instantly seen.

"Quite an accident," he protested. "I was not aware that my foot was on the money."

"Of course not," sneered the conductor.

"No insults, sir," replied the other, in a dignified tone. "Here is my card. I am a missionary from the South Seas. My name is Pendergast."

The conductor waved aside the proffered card.

"I see you are reading Hoyle's Games," he remarked, sarcastically. "Is that the text-book you use among your heathen?"

The missionary looked discomfited for an instant.

"I have been perusing this evil work with horror," he replied. "Some worldly sinner left it on the seat. Perhaps it is yours, sir?"

The conductor reddened with anger, and some of the passengers laughed aloud. The missionary folded his hands with a smile of triumph, and looked out of the window.

Meanwhile the lad had restored the roll of bills to his pocketbook, and in one of the compartments of the latter he found the missing ticket. As the conductor took it he leaned over and said:

"Keep an eye on that rascal yonder. He's no more a missionary than you or I."

Then he hurried on to the next car.

A few moments later scattered lights appeared through the frosty windows, and finally the vague outlines of houses and streets.

"Bangor!" shrieked the brakeman.

The announcement created a stir and bustle among the passengers. The train soon rolled into a lofty station. The lad gathered up his traps, hurriedly left the car, pressed through the crowd, and gained the lighted street.

Here he paused for a moment, remembering the conductor's warning. But he could see nothing of the clerical-looking individual, though he carefully scanned the passers.

"I've seen the last of that chap," he muttered. "Perhaps he was a missionary, after all. Well, I can't lose any more time here. Thanks to Tom Fordham, I've got my bearings pretty straight. I'll bet Tom wishes he was with me now. I fancy I can see him grinding away at old Herodotus by lamplight."

With a smile that showed his white teeth, he strode down the street of Maine's most thriving port and lumber town. He entered the Penobscot House, a block and a half from the depot.

He gave his luggage to a bellboy, and wrote his name on the register:

"Brick Larkins, New York City."

The clerk looked at the inscription and smiled.

"Done it again, have I?" exclaimed the lad. "Brick is only a nickname. Shall I write it James?"

"Let it stand," replied the amused clerk. "Will you have supper, Mr. Larkins?"

"Thanks, but I have dined on the train. Send the traps up to my room, please."

Brick fastened a button or two of his cape-coat, and strolled out of the hotel.

He did not see the missionary standing across the street. If he had he would probably have failed to recognize him, for Mr. Pendergast now wore a tweed steamer-cap, gold glasses, and a short gray overcoat with the collar turned up.

Brick little dreamed that he was being followed as he pushed steadily across town to the banks of the Penobscot River.

Turning parallel with the river, Brick went on until the lights of the town were some distance behind. By the dim glow of the starlit sky he could see that the beach sloped upward to a pretty steep bluff, and that tall stacks of lumber lay in all directions. The sullen slapping of the waves drowned his crunching footsteps.

"It's all as Tom described it," he said, half-aloud, as he paused to look about him. "The dug-out ought to be near by, but I can't see a glimmer of light. Hullo! what's that?"

A sharp sound had fallen on his ear, and he wheeled around in time to see a dusky figure within ten feet of him.

"Hold on there," cried a stern voice. "Stop!"

Brick, having started forward, only ran the faster, and in the darkness he collided with a tall stack of lumber. He grabbed the projecting slabs and climbed to the top.

He was now eight or ten feet from the ground, and looking down he saw his pursuer standing directly beneath.

"No use, my lad," whispered the man. "I've got you safe. Pass down that pocketbook."

With a thrill of surprise, Brick recognized the voice.

"This is nice missionary work, Mr. Pendergast," he replied. "I'm willing to donate five dollars to the heathen if you'll be satisfied with that."

"No chaffing, young feller," growled the ruffian. "I'm not in the missionary line now. If I don't get your pocketbook and watch and chain in about ten seconds, I'll fix you."

Brick hesitated, and glanced toward the distant lights of the town. There seemed no chance of saving his money. An idea struck him, and he said, boldly:

"I've got friends at hand. You're making a big mistake to stay here."

"That bluff won't work," was the cool reply. "There's not a soul within half a mile. Fork it over, quick."

Just then the pile of lumber began to tremble and sway, and down it came with a crash.

Brick escaped injury by an agile leap that landed him on his enemy's back. They went to the ground together, and rolled clear of the avalanche of planks and snow.

The lad was almost a match for his wiry antagonist, and by a desperate effort he tore loose and ran. Pendergast overtook him, and snatched the collar of the cape-coat. Brick twisted out of the heavy garment and sped on. He had the pocketbook buttoned safely under his jacket.

Threats rang behind him. A pistol cracked shrilly, and the ball whistled by his head. He dashed on through the gloom, panting hard for breath, and shouting hoarsely for aid. Nearer and nearer came the crunching footsteps of his enemy.

Unluckily a boat lay right in the path. Brick spied it at such close quarters that he had no time to swerve aside. He pitched roughly over the gunwale and fell inside. The next instant Pendergast was kneeling on him, and shaking him with savage anger.

"I'll fix you," he snarled, as he lifted his shining weapon. "I'll pay you for this."

"Don't!" pleaded Brick.

He threw up his hands, and struggled to ward off the threatened blow.

"Take that," cried the ruffian.

Brick felt a stunning pain, and immediately lost consciousness.

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CHAPTER II.

INTO THE WILDERNESS.

Brick struggled back to his senses amid strange surroundings. He was lying on a soft bearskin in a small, picturesquely-furnished room. A wood fire blazed in one corner, and a lamp swung from the ceiling.

Three of the walls of the apartment were of hard, polished clay, ornamented with groups of guns, fishing rods and paddles. The fourth was of heavy timber, and contained a door and a shuttered window. Deer and bear robes covered the floor. Here rested two canvas canoes, and there lay a light cedar skiff.

Two lads stood by the fire. One, about eighteen, was tall and well knit, with dark hair and a swarthy, honest face. The other was shorter and thicker, and possibly a year younger.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Brick, as he pulled himself to a sitting position.

The strangers hastened to his side.

"How do you feel?" asked the elder lad. "I was just going for a doctor."

"I'll be all right pretty soon," replied Brick. "I've got a thumping headache, though."

"And no wonder, with a bruise like that over your eye. Do you remember what happened?"

"Yes," answered Brick, "up to a certain point. But how did I get here?"

"We heard the racket, and ran out with our guns and a lantern. We saw a man jump from a boat down near the water. We chased him a short distance, and he fired at us twice. We found you lying on the bottom with an ugly bruise on your forehead, and between us we got you up here."

"You certainly saved my life," declared Brick, gratefully, "and you saved something else, too. This is what the ruffian was after. You scared him off before he could find it."

He unbuttoned his jacket, and drew out the pocketbook. Then, in a few words, he related the whole adventure to his new friends.

"I'm lucky to escape with a bruise and the loss of my overcoat," he concluded. "It would have been ten times worse but for you fellows."

"Here is your coat," said the younger lad. "We stumbled over it when we were chasing the rascal. Were there any valuables in it?"

"Only a couple of letters from my father," replied Brick, as he went through the pockets of the garment. "By Jove! they're gone, though. The thief will find he's made a valuable haul."

Brick spoke in jest. He little dreamed what use would be made of the stolen letters, or what a harvest of trouble he was destined to reap from their loss.

"I'm feeling considerably better now," he added. "I'm glad of it, for I'll have to be moving soon. It's getting late, and— Hullo! something just struck me. I believe you're the very chaps I'm looking for. This is a queer go."

The lads exchanged puzzled glances. Possibly they thought that the blow had deranged Brick's mind.

"I'll bet anything your names are Jerry Brenton and Hamp Foster, and this is the dug-out in the bluff," resumed Brick. "Am I right?"

The boys nodded in open-mouthed wonder.

"I'm Jerry Brenton," admitted the elder.

"And Hamp Foster is my name," added his companion, "but I never saw you before."

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"Of course you didn't," declared Brick. "Do you fellows remember Tom Fordham, the chap from New York that spent a vacation here two summers ago, and had such jolly times with both of you?"

A light broke on the boys.

"We remember Tom," they exclaimed, with enthusiasm.

"And did you ever hear him talk of his best chum, Brick Larkins?"

"Often," replied Hamp. "But you ain't—"

"Yes, I am, too. I'm Brick Larkins, and I'm awfully glad to meet you fellows. The way I come to be here is this: Tom and I entered Columbia College last fall, and a couple of weeks ago I got into a scrape and was dropped for a term. I wasn't going to spend the time on a lot of musty books, so I concluded I'd come up to Maine, and go deer hunting. My folks are in Europe, and a lawyer down in New York is my guardian as far as money matters go. I'm my own master in other ways, and I've got cash enough to see me through for a while. I understand from Tom that the father of one of you chaps is a guide. I want him to take me into the woods for a few weeks. I'm willing to pay his price, whatever it is."

"I'm the one," replied Jerry, soberly; "but my father is laid up with rheumatism, and won't be able to make any trips this winter."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Brick. "Perhaps I can get another guide. Look here, are you fellows in any trouble? You both look pretty downhearted, if you'll pardon me for saying so."

The boys were reluctant to speak, but Brick finally compelled them to admit that they were in serious trouble, and that they had come to the dug-out that evening to have a quiet talk over the matter.

Two months before Hamp's father had been drowned by the foundering of his lumber barge in a storm. What little money he left was soon spent, and now Hamp had just been thrown out of employment by the closing of the mills in which he worked. Unless he speedily found a new place, his mother and sister would be in actual want.

Jerry was confronted by an equally dismal prospect. He could get no work to do, and money was sorely needed for his sick father. His mother had formerly earned a little by sewing, but her time was now required for the invalid.

Brick pondered the situation for a little while. He could see that the boys were proud, and that it would never do to offer money. At last he hit upon a bright idea.

"Look here," he said, "I'll bet you fellows know as much about the woods as regular guides. Tom always said so, anyway. How is it?"

"Hamp and I have been out with my father a good deal," replied Jerry, modestly. "We've been to Moosehead Lake and Chesumcook."

"And we're pretty fair shots," added Hamp. "We've been in at the death of more than one bear or deer. If it wasn't for our being so young we might get employment as guides. We were talking about that this evening."

"I wouldn't want better guides," declared Brick. "If you fellows will take me into the woods I'll pay each of you fifteen dollars a week, and stand all expenses. Before we start I'll pay in advance for three weeks."

He opened his pocketbook and showed the contents.

"I can easily afford it," he added. "I have nearly five hundred dollars."

The boys were dazzled by this munificent offer. It brought tears to their eyes to think of the relief that money would bring to the afflicted ones at home.

"You're awfully kind," said Jerry, in a tremulous voice. "I'll gladly go if my father will let me. And I'm sure he will."

"I know my mother won't object," added Hamp.

"Then it's as good as settled," declared Brick. "I can hardly wait till we're off. I've been wanting to see the Maine wilderness for years."

"Know much about guns or hunting?" asked Jerry.

"Mighty little," Brick candidly admitted. "I never shot anything bigger than a blackbird in my life. Game don't run loose in New York."

"We'll show you sport enough," promised Hamp. "Just wait till we strike the deer."

The three lads fell to chatting with the freedom of old friends, and Brick quite forgot his aching head.

During the next few days all arrangements were made, and Brick provided himself and companions with a lavish outfit.

Brick had reported his adventure to the police, but without success. Mr. Pendergast had doubtless left the town.

The ground was covered with snow to the depth of half a foot on the crisp December afternoon when the young hunters landed at Katahdin Iron Works—the terminus of the Bangor and Katahdin Iron Works Railroad.

They were now more than one hundred and fifty miles from the coast, and very nearly in the center of Maine.

On the following morning they hired a sledge and driver, and were transported thirty miles northward—to the end of a rugged lumber trail. The next day they pushed ahead on foot, trailing two hand sleds, to which were strapped their provisions, guns, and various needed supplies.

By sundown they reached one of the eastern arms of Moosehead Lake, and built a temporary lean-to among the rocks and trees. They were now in the actual wilderness, miles and miles from civilization.

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CHAPTER III.

A DOUBLE PERIL.

After supper that evening a light snow began to fall, but it ceased at midnight. The increased cold wakened Brick, and while he was searching for an extra blanket he heard a long, wailing cry outside.

The youth was scared almost stupid for a moment. Then he tremblingly lit a lantern, and roused his companions.

The boys peeped through the crevices of the lean-to, but they could see nothing. Twice they heard the dismal sound. It was certainly coming nearer. They seized their guns, and huddled close together.

"What do you suppose it is?" whispered Brick.

"A catamount," replied Jerry, "or Indian Devil, as some call them."

"That's right," added Hamp. "It's going to attack us, too."

"Then be ready to shoot," warned Jerry. "I'll give the word when the time comes."

The brute now seemed to have stopped, though the blood-curdling wail echoed several times on the frosty air.

"I saw a catamount in Central Park once," whispered Brick. "It was an awful-looking creature."

Just then the unseen prowler wailed again. The boys peered anxiously at the snowy open space before the lean-to.

"No wonder the brute is bold," exclaimed Hamp. "There's nothing left of the fire but a couple of hot embers."

"We must build it up right away," declared Jerry. "Come on, you fellows. We'll stick together."

"But won't the catamount jump at us?" asked Brick.

"Not while we have the lantern," assured Jerry. "All wild animals are afraid of fire."

The boys ventured out of the lean-to. They timidly advanced to the fireplace, which was in the center of the glade.

"Where's the wood you brought at bedtime?" asked Jerry. "I don't see it."

"I—I forgot all about it," admitted Hamp. "I was too sleepy to think. I'm awfully sorry."

"Being sorry won't help us now," said Jerry, grimly. "There's not even a stick."

There was silence for a moment. The boys expected nothing less than to be pounced upon by the hungry beast.

"I believe the catamount has sneaked off," declared Hamp. "Give me the lantern, and I'll get some wood. It's my fault that we have none."

"I'll go with you," replied Jerry. "There's a windfall under the roots of that dead pine tree. It's only half-a-dozen yards from here. Come on."

The two lads started, taking their guns and the lantern. They crossed the glade, and vanished in the timber.

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Brick was left standing by the fireplace. He was afraid to go after his companions, nor did he like to be alone. He rested his gun on a stone, and stooped over the dying embers of the fire, trying vainly to fan them into a blaze. As he rose to his feet he heard a crackling noise, and was horrified to see a great, dusky animal crouching on the edge of the timber, directly opposite the spot where the boys had disappeared.

The beast's arrival was so unexpected that Brick lost his wits. With a yell he turned and dashed across the glade, and rolled into a copse of bushes.

There he lay, shouting for help at the top of his voice, and expecting to be immediately torn to

pieces.

Lusty cries quickly answered him, and trampling footsteps came near. He saw the gleam of the lantern go by, and then a rifle cracked sharply. The next thing he knew Jerry and Hamp were hauling him to his feet.

"Where's the catamount?" he panted. "Did you kill it?"

"Missed," replied Jerry. "I only had a snap shot. The creature bolted into the forest when it saw the lantern. We didn't get here any too soon."

"I thought I was a goner," declared Brick.

His face was pale, and he trembled like a leaf.

Hamp had a great load of wood on his back, and the fire was soon blazing merrily.

The catamount made no sign for ten minutes, and then a wailing cry from far off told that he was retreating.

After waiting a little longer the boys went back to their warm blankets and pine boughs.

They fell asleep very quickly, and it was broad daylight when they got awake. The sun was behind murky gray clouds, and the air was bitterly cold. The snow crunched sharply under foot, and the lake was frozen from shore to shore.

The presence of the catamount in the vicinity decided the boys to hunt a new camping-place.

After breakfasting on bacon and fried potatoes, they packed the sleds and started.

They traveled northward over the ice, following all the bays and indentations of the lake's crooked shore. At noon they stopped for lunch. The cold was something awful.

"It looks as though we were going to have a hard winter," said Jerry when they were on the march again. "It's a good thing that we brought snowshoes, and plenty of extra blankets along."

"I hope we don't see anything more of that catamount," replied Brick. "I suppose there are plenty of them in the woods, though."

"A good many," assented Hamp. "But they don't often trouble hunters. This fellow was extra savage. He must have been hungry."

"They've been known to follow men for days and weeks in bitter weather," said Jerry.

The conversation shifted to another topic, and the boys trudged on for half an hour. Then Brick suddenly gave a sharp cry, and pointed to a spot on the shore, some fifty yards distant.

"I saw the catamount over there," he declared. "It was a big, yellowish-gray animal, and it slipped past that rock into the bushes."

"Sure?" asked Hamp, anxiously.

"Dead sure."

The boys looked and listened. They were about moving on, when a long, thick-set animal stole out of the forest, and crouched by the edge of the ice. It wailed in a mournful tone, and crept a little nearer. It was as large a catamount as the two Maine lads had ever seen.

"There's a chance," exclaimed Jerry. "Come on. We'll try to get within easy shooting distance of the brute. Three of us can't well miss."

The boys abandoned the sled, and advanced toward shore, with loaded rifles. But before they had taken a dozen steps the catamount turned tail, and vanished in the timber.

"No use," muttered Hamp. "That's a crafty fellow, and he's not going to give us any advantage. He'll stick to us like a leech, though, and some time, when we are off our guard——"

A significant pause ended the sentence.

"What are we going to do about it?" asked Brick. "This knocks all the fun in the head. We won't dare go to sleep at nights."

"We've got to get rid of the brute," replied Jerry, "and I think I know how to do it. What do you say to cutting straight across the lake, and making our camp on the other side? I don't believe the catamount will follow us over miles of open snow and ice."

This suggestion was warmly approved. They headed due west toward the faintly visible forest on the further shore of the lake, a distance of ten or twelve miles.

To keep off the intense cold they ran along on a dog trot. The sleds trailed easily behind them over the patches of crisp snow and glassy ice.

Two hours later the western shore of Moosehead Lake loomed clearly before the young voyagers. They were not half a mile away. They could look right into the dense forest that stretched far away to Canada.

"Got the time, Brick?" asked Jerry.

"Yes; it's just half-past three."

"Well, suppose we push up the lake for another hour. By that time we'll likely strike the sort of a camping-place we want."

The others agreed, and Jerry led them to within twenty yards of the shore. Then they turned

northward, and went on at a rapid trot.

About half a mile ahead a spit of rocky and timbered land jutted out from the shore.

"We ought to find a good place behind that," said Hamp.

"No doubt we shall," Jerry added.

"I hope so," declared Brick. "I'm as hungry as a bear. I haven't had such an appetite since the day——"

Brick never finished. He was interrupted by a crashing noise a short distance back in the forest. The sound came rapidly nearer and louder. The boys stopped, and looked at one another in alarm. 25

"It must be a deer," exclaimed Jerry, "and some animal is chasing it. The wind is blowing this way. We may get a shot."

Crash! out from the forest burst a magnificent buck, with widely-branching antlers. He bounded down the sloping bank, and over the ice. He was panting and exhausted.

Close behind leaped a gaunt, ravenous wolf, flecked with foam and perspiration. Both animals swept out on the lake, making straight at the frightened and amazed boys.

Brick had a sudden attack of buckfever. He stood stupidly still. The others hurriedly grabbed their rifles from the sled. Jerry ran a few steps in front of his companions.

Then, for the first time, the buck saw the lads. He snorted with terror, and tried vainly to check himself on the slippery ice.

Jerry knelt and took aim. He was too excited to be cautious. He pulled trigger at a range of fifteen feet.

The ball failed to reach a mortal part. It hit the buck in the left flank, inflicting a painful wound. The huge animal's terror instantly changed to wrath. With lowered antlers, he dashed full tilt at Jerry.

The lad started to run, but his rifle caught between his legs. He sprawled headlong on the ice. He was right in front of the enraged buck. In a few seconds the cruel hoofs and sharp horns would mangle his body. 26

At the same instant the wolf, maddened by hunger and passion, veered with a shrill yelp. He leaped savagely upon Hamp's breast, and bore him to the ice.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST DEER.

Hamp escaped death by a display of nerve and coolness that was remarkable in one so young.

The wolf, happily, missed the lad's throat. Instead, the white teeth snapped shut on the thick, furry collar of his overcoat. For an instant they stuck there, and this gave Hamp his chance.

With one hand he grabbed the wolf's shaggy breast, and pushed against it; with the other he reached for the long hunting-knife that dangled from his belt. He drew it from the sheath, and plunged it fiercely into the wolf's body.

Twice, thrice the keen blade cut its way deeply through flesh and skin. A vital part was reached at last. With a gurgling cry the brute relaxed its hold, and slipped to one side.

Hamp rolled away from the quivering carcass, and sprang to his feet. His clothes were thickly smeared with blood, but a scratch or two was his sole injury.

Meanwhile, Jerry had shown equal coolness in an equally trying ordeal. It will be remembered that he stumbled right in the path of the advancing buck.

Doubling himself like a ball, he rolled several feet over the smooth ice. An instant later the spot that he had just vacated was struck by the vicious hoofs and antlers. He rolled still further, and staggered to his feet. His rifle was out of reach, and the shelter of the shore was equally so. 28

"Help! help!" he shouted. "Somebody shoot."

With the vengeful buck still at his heels, he dashed blindly toward Brick.

Then it was that the raw New York lad showed of what sterling stuff he was made.

He made a plucky dash between the two, and struck the savage animal with the stock of his rifle. The blow landed on the antlers, and its only effect was to check the buck for a few seconds. Then Brick and Jerry fled in opposite directions to get out of reach.

The consequence was that the animal now spied Hamp, and went for him with a savage snort. The lad had just put his knife away, and was still a little dazed. But he realized his peril, and knew that he had not time to pick up his rifle. At his top speed he ran blindly over the ice.

Jerry was now out of danger, and his quick wits told him the best thing to do.

"Run faster, Hamp," he cried. "Circle around, and come back this way."

Then he made for his rifle, which lay within several yards.

Hamp heard, and was cheered. By a sudden spurt he increased his speed. He actually gained several feet on the buck. Then, not being able to see behind him, he made a natural error. Had he veered to the right, he would have circled toward Jerry, and given him a shot. Instead, he turned to the left, and bore rapidly down on Brick, who was hardly prepared for the move.

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"He's gaining on me," Hamp cried. "Help! help!"

The lad's situation was truly critical. Jerry was some yards away. Moreover, there was something wrong with the hammer of his gun. But Brick made himself ready in time. He slipped a few feet to one side, and lifted his rifle. A brief hesitation, then the trigger fell.

Bang! The shrill report echoed across the lake and through the forest. The buck staggered. His forelegs gave way. With a gasping moan he toppled over, and his life-blood stained the ice.

No words can tell the delight of the young hunters. They cheered until they were fairly hoarse. Hamp drew his knife, and sprang astride of the feebly-struggling animal. By a single pass he slit its throat.

Jerry slapped Brick on the back.

"That was a grand shot," he exclaimed. "I couldn't have done it better myself. It was Hamp's only chance. The hammer of my rifle was clogged with snow."

Brick was almost speechless. He looked at the buck, and then at his companions.

"Did—did I really kill him?" he gasped. "Is he dead?"

"Dead as a door nail," assured Hamp. "See, the ball went in between the foreshoulders. It must have pierced the heart. You've shot the first deer, Brick, and it's something to be proud of."

"I know it is," admitted Brick. "I wish Tom Fordham was here now. He said I'd forget how to shoot when I saw a deer."

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"You didn't, though," said Hamp. "You saved my life."

"And mine," added Jerry. "It was a plucky thing to rush in between me and the buck."

"It wasn't much," Brick modestly protested. "You would have done the same for me."

The boys continued the animated discussion, quite heedless of time. The dead wolf was examined with wonder, and they removed the scalp, in order to claim the State bounty. With some difficulty they dragged the buck partly onto one of the hand sleds.

"I want the antlers," said Brick. "I wouldn't go back to New York without them."

"We'll see to that," replied Jerry. "Now, then, if you fellows are ready."

A moment later the march toward the headland was recommenced. The heavily-laden sleds grated over the ice and snow.

Some small animal followed the boys for quite a distance, keeping well out of sight behind the timber. It had a shrill, rasping voice that was very aggravating. Jerry declared it to be a lynx or wolverine, and Hamp agreed with him. A little later something more serious occurred. Three hungry wolves stole out of the forest and down to the ice. They evidently scented the carcass of the deer. They followed the little party persistently, and kept up a mournful howling. Now and then they circled near with swift leaps, only to bound back toward the shore again.

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"We must put a stop to this," said Jerry. "Wait a minute."

He discarded his rifle for a shotgun, and, when the trio of scavengers next approached as close as they dared, he gave them both barrels.

It was long-range shooting, but two of the brutes were slightly crippled. All three fled, yelping, to the forest, and disappeared.

Darkness was now creeping rapidly on. Colder and colder came the bitter evening breeze. At times the great stretch of ice-bound lake cracked like a pistol-shot. The boys were anxious to reach their destination before twilight, and they altered their swinging stride to a jog-trot.

At last they gained the jutting headland, and circled around its point. Here, on the shore of the lake, they found choice camping facilities. They picked on a shallow ravine that was comparatively open and ran back into the forest for thirty or forty yards. On three sides it was sheltered by pine and spruce trees, and had an open frontage on the lake.

"This is just the thing to build our cabin against," said Hamp, indicating a weather-worn block of granite that was almost square in shape. "We're in a great neighborhood for hunting and fishing, too."

"The locality is all right," replied Jerry, "but I don't think it's wise to build right in the trough of this ravine. A heavy storm would snow us up, and a thaw would wash us out into the lake."

"No danger of a thaw," declared Hamp, as he blew on his numbed fingers, "and I don't believe we're going to have any big snowstorms, either. You know your father said there were indications of an open winter. Besides, it will take too long to clear a place for building on higher ground. Look how stout the timber is all around us."

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"I'm not anything of a woodsman," joined in Brick, "but this hollow looks like a mighty snug place to me."

Jerry allowed himself to be persuaded.

"All right," he said. "We'll take the chances. Pitch in, fellows."

The sleds were unpacked, and the space in front of the rock was quickly cleared of snow, undergrowth, and loose stones.

Armed with sharp axes, the boys felled and trimmed a number of young trees, and, under Jerry's supervision, the lean-to rapidly assumed shape. Nails were freely used to strengthen it. Soft pine boughs were laid a foot deep on the floor, and an extra covering of the same material was put on the roof.

It was dark long before the task was finished, but the boys worked on by lantern light. The exercise made them feel quite warm. It was a proud and happy moment when their labor was done.

The cabin proved snug, and comfortable beyond their expectations. It had a small doorway, that could be closed by buttoning a strip of canvas over it, and the roof sloped at just the right angle.

"We couldn't have more solid comfort if we were at home," declared Jerry. "Not a drop of water can get at us."

"And we've got protection from the wind on three sides," added Hamp. "I feel like going to bed right now."

"Not before supper?" exclaimed Brick, in a tone of such earnest alarm that his companions laughed merrily.

But there was much to do before the meal could be prepared, and no time was wasted. First the traps were carried into the cabin, and arranged in place. Then all three of the boys set to work on the deer, and partially skinned it. They cut off a number of tender steaks, and hung the carcass to the lower limbs of a stout pine tree.

Brick and Jerry gathered a big store of fuel, and built a roaring fire, while Hamp chopped a hole through the ice on the margin of the lake, and brought a pail of water. Half an hour later, when the hungry and tired lads sat around the blazing logs appeasing their appetites with crisp venison, and fried potatoes, and crackers, and steaming coffee, they felt that their happiness was complete. It was past ten o'clock when they crawled into the shanty, and buried themselves between soft boughs and warm blankets. Outside, the logs smoldered and crackled, and the far-away beasts of the forest wailed to the rising moon.

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CHAPTER V.

THE FACE IN THE TREES.

The night passed without alarm. In the morning the cold was more intense than ever, and the sky was still overcast with sullen-looking clouds.

During the forenoon the boys put a few extra touches to the cabin, and gathered enough fuel to last for several days. After dinner Brick and Hamp chopped holes through the ice, and caught a number of fat pickerel. Jerry took his gun, and trudged into the woods. He returned with a brace of spruce partridges.

Toward evening the wind shifted to the east, and it grew even colder. The boys put an extra layer of boughs on the cabin floor, and got all their blankets out. The only comfortable part was around the fire.

Just before supper a bird flew out of the forest and over the camp. It alighted in some bushes near the verge of the jutting headland. Jerry snatched his gun, and hurried after it across the ice.

When he reached the spot he saw something that drove the bird entirely from his mind. Nearly a mile down the lake two black specks were visible. They were moving slowly toward the western shore.

Jerry summoned his companions by a cautious shout.

"Bring your field-glasses, Brick," he added.

When the boys arrived, Jerry pointed out the far-away objects. Brick had the glasses—a long-range pair purchased at Bangor. Each took a turn at them.

"Hullo, those things are only men," said Brick, in a tone of relief. "I was afraid they were wild animals."

"They are odd-looking chaps for this neighborhood," replied Jerry. "They ain't dressed like trappers or hunters. They have guns, though, and there's a hand-sled trailing behind them."

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"I wish we could make out their faces," said Hamp. "They've come across the lake, just as we did."

"Perhaps they are following us," suggested Brick, uneasily.

"Hardly," replied Jerry. "Where are they now, Hamp?"

"Just climbing the bank. Now they've disappeared in the woods."

And Hamp lowered the glasses, and restored them to Brick.

After some futile discussion of the mystery, the boys went back to camp. It was natural that they should feel a little curious and alarmed. Ruffianly characters are often encountered in the Maine wilderness.

When supper was over the boys cheered up. They washed the dishes, and then built a roaring fire of great logs directly in front of the cabin. With blankets wrapped about their shoulders they sat beside the flames.

All at once Hamp sprang in excitement to his feet. He pointed toward the lower side of the ravine.

"Look!" he cried. "Oh! it's gone now. I saw a face peeping from behind the trees."

"What did the fellow look like?" demanded Jerry.

"I don't know," was the reply. "He was only there for a couple of seconds. He had savage, black eyes, and no mustache or beard. The fire shone right on him."

"Well, we've got to investigate this thing," declared Jerry. "Come on, fellows."

They delayed enough to get their guns and to light a lantern. Then they boldly climbed the bank of the ravine, and poked about among the trees.

But not a trace of the intruder could be found. There were no footprints on the few bare patches of snow.

"Are you sure you weren't mistaken?" asked Jerry.

"Not a bit of it," replied Hamp, indignantly. "I saw the face as plainly as I see yours now."

The boys listened in silence for a moment, and then they made another short search. In all directions were dense thickets of undergrowth. Through this a man on snowshoes might easily have fled without leaving a trail.

"We may as well go back," said Jerry. "We can't find the spy, whoever he was."

For the next half-hour nothing else was talked about. Hamp was positive that he had seen the face, and his companions believed him. All were uneasy and scared. They knew that had the stranger been an honest man he would have shown himself. His spying actions and hasty flight seemed to indicate some evil design.

"We'll have to be on the watch, that's all," said Hamp. "The fellow was probably looking for a chance to steal something."

"I don't believe he'll come back," replied Brick. "He knows by this time that we're not to be trifled with."

About nine o'clock Jerry slipped away on the pretext of getting a drink. He took an ax with him, but instead of pausing to chop the ice he went on to the headland.

Here he quickly climbed a tall pine tree. From its top he could look down the lake and over the surrounding forest. But all was dark and silent. Nowhere was the gleam of a campfire visible.

He concluded that the strangers had pushed on into the wilderness, and were no longer in the vicinity. With a relieved mind he descended from the tree and started back. He was now really thirsty, so he stopped to get a drink.

There were pretty deep shadows around him, for the timbered sides of the ravine kept the glow of the campfire shut in from the ice. He found a spot that had been chopped open at supper time, and was since frozen over to the thickness of several inches. He stooped down, ax in hand.

Just as he dealt the first stroke a low, mewling cry caused him to look up. Out on the lake, and less than twenty feet distant, crouched a long, grayish beast. With stealthy steps it came nearer and nearer, whipping its thin tail over the snow.

Jerry uttered one terrific screech that echoed far and wide through the forest. He flung the ax madly toward the creature, and, without pausing to look behind, dashed for camp at his top speed. The beast was actually in pursuit, but it stopped at a distance of thirty feet, and uttered a wowl of disappointment.

Brick and Hamp had armed themselves, having heard Jerry's first yell of terror. Hamp lifted his rifle, and fired at random. He missed, of course, but the flash and the report scared the savage creature away.

It was a full minute before Jerry could talk intelligibly.

"It would have scared the bravest man alive to be jumped on so suddenly," he declared. "I was kneeling on the ice, and the brute nearly had me. Cracky! I thought I was a goner."

"What was it?" asked Hamp. "A catamount?"

"Yes; the biggest one I ever saw. You can bet he's hungry, and savage, too."

"Do you think it's the same animal that was after us night before last?" asked Brick.

"I reckon so," Jerry admitted, reluctantly. "It must have come across the ice. There's just one thing about it, fellows. If we expect to have any peace we've got to kill the creature."

"That's easier said than done," replied Hamp. "I wish I had taken careful aim when I had the chance. Now the measly varmint will lurk around here all night, and keep us from sleeping."

"We'll do our best to put him to sleep with a bullet," declared Jerry. "Keep a stiff upper lip, Brick. We've got long odds on our side."

"I'm not afraid," Brick protested, stoutly. "I can kill a catamount as easy as a deer if I get the chance."

It was the chance that was wanting, however. Evidently, the beast had no intention of being killed. He was hungry enough to hang onto the forlorn chance of a I meal, but not once did he show himself, though the boys I lay behind the fire for an hour, watching with cocked and I loaded rifles.

"The cunning fellow is lurking close by, you may be sure," said Jerry. "If we watch long enough we'll catch him in the act of snatching the deer."

"It's no fun to sit here in the cold," replied Hamp, as he tossed a log on the fire. "How snug it looks inside the cabin. Confound that catamount!"

"You fellows turn in if you want to," suggested Jerry. "I'll keep guard for a couple of hours."

"No; I'll stick it out with you," replied Hamp.

"And so will I," added Brick.

Half an hour slipped away in silence. The drowsiness of the boys increased. They felt strongly tempted to go to bed, and leave the catamount in possession of the camp.

Suddenly they were startled to hear the dull report of a gun far back in the woods. Another shot followed, and then another.

"Something wrong," exclaimed Hamp. "Those men must be camping within a mile or two of us."

"That's where the racket comes from," admitted Jerry. "I can't account for it, though."

His lips framed the word murder, but he did not utter it.

"I hear something else," declared Brick; "a sort of a roaring noise. It sounds like the wind among the trees."

All listened intently.

"There's no wind," said Jerry, in a puzzled tone, "unless there's a hurricane coming from the west. I know now what it means. It's the howling of wolves, fellows."

No one spoke. The assertion was too plain for denial. Nearer and louder rose the weird, moaning sounds. Howl answered howl. The ravenous scavengers of the forest were out on a night hunt for food.

"Yes, it is wolves," muttered Hamp. "We ought never to have crossed the lake. The bitter weather has driven the pack down from Canada. Those brutes we saw yesterday were part of it."

"Now they're headed this way," declared Jerry. "They must have attacked the camp of those two men, and been driven off. That's what the shooting meant."

"Can't we climb trees?" Brick asked.

"If we do the catamount will likely climb after us," replied Jerry. "Keep cool, fellows. A wolf is a born coward, and hates powder. We'll give the pack a good dose of lead if they molest us. Have your rifles ready."

The boys hurriedly built up the fire with great logs. Then, after a short discussion, they retreated to the cabin.

"This is the safest place," said Hamp, as he barricaded the entrance with one of the sleds. "Tear a hole in that lower wall, Jerry. About as big as your head."

As soon as the opening was made the boys crowded before it. It faced the direction from which the wolves seemed to be approaching, and commanded a view of the buck's dangling carcass.

Closer on the frosty air rang the dismal howling of the wolves. They could be heard scurrying through the undergrowth. The boys waited, nervously fingering their rifles.

Suddenly a great, tawny beast sprang into full view from behind a rock. It was the hungry catamount. With a bound it fastened teeth and claws in the haunch of venison. It pulled it to the ground, and then dragged it lightly to the top of the bluff.

BESIEGED BY WOLVES.

This daring theft was so quickly done and over that the boys had no chance to shoot. The venison could be plainly seen, but only the catamount's ears and tail were visible as he crouched behind it.

"The impudent brute," cried Brick. "That beats everything. We don't want to lose the meat. Shall I try a shot?"

"Better let me," replied Jerry. "I think I see a chance. Keep back a little."

The boys moved aside, and Jerry poked his rifle through the hole. The hammer clicked. Then there was an anxious pause of half a minute.

"What's wrong?" whispered Hamp.

"Can't get a shot," was the reply. "The brute has dropped lower, and won't stir. Wait a bit," Jerry added, as he withdrew the weapon. "You fellows are going to see the liveliest sight of your lives. Here come the wolves, and the catamount is growling like fury. He doesn't intend to let himself be robbed of that venison."

The boys all gathered before the hole, eager to witness the coming struggle. They were too excited to bother much about their own peril.

Now the hungry pack scented the savory meat. The long howls changed to quick, shrill yelps. They were very close.

All at once the flames danced up around the logs. The red glare flashed to the top of the bluff. The catamount had shifted his position, and the boys saw him plainly. His great jaws were open, and his tail lashed the brush angrily.

"What a chance!" whispered Jerry. "I could put a ball right through him."

"Don't spoil the fun," pleaded Brick. "The wolves will make an end of the brute."

"Don't be too sure of that," muttered Hamp.

However, Jerry had no intention of interfering. The opportunity of ridding the boys of a relentless enemy was imprudently allowed to slip by.

An instant later the scene changed. Out from the—forest broke two shadowy gray forms, gaunt and ravenous with hunger. They darted at the venison, snarling defiance. There was a lightning-like bound, and a screech of fury.

For a few seconds the three animals were a shapeless, whirling tangle. Then the catamount tumbled out of the heap, and sprang back to the carcass. One wolf lay dead and mangled on the snow. The other limped into the forest with dismal wails.

But the balance of the pack were close by. Out they leaped in twos and threes, reckless of the firelight. White teeth gleamed and snapped in every crevice of the timber.

The catamount screeched, and quivered for a second attack. Then it altered its purpose. It seized the haunch of venison, and attempted to make off with it.

The wolves took this move for cowardice, and were emboldened. With a chorus of howls they closed in. The struggle that ensued was simply terrific. The catamount seemed to be everywhere at once. Its long, lithe body performed countless revolutions.

"Hurrah!" cried Brick, in great excitement. "This beats the old Roman shows. Do you think the catamount will be killed?"

"Not likely," replied Jerry, "but he'll lose the meat. There are too many against him."

"That's so," exclaimed Hamp. "Look, fellows, look!"

Just then the catamount leaped clear over his circle of tormentors. With a screech of baffled fury he bounded into the bushy limbs of a tall pine tree. He made his way into an adjoining tree, and then vanished.

Three wolves lay struggling in their death agonies on the snow. Here and there limped crippled ones. The rest of the pack sprang at the venison with teeth and claws.

They muttered and yowled as they bit off great mouthfuls. New arrivals came swarming from the forest. Soon more than a score of the gaunt brutes were assembled around the carcass.

The bones of the deer were soon polished cleanly. Then the famished creatures attacked the bodies of their comrades. Tiring of this cannibalistic meal, they swerved to the edge of the glade, sniffed the air for a moment, and came leaping down the bank of the ravine. The patter of their feet was instantly all around the cabin. They brushed against the sides, and scratched at the interstices of the beams, howling and yelping like a troop of demons.

So sudden was the attack that the besieged lads were taken by complete surprise.

"We'll be torn to pieces," cried Brick. "They'll be through the door in a minute."

"No they won't," yelled Jerry.

He hurled himself against the sled, which had actually begun to move.

"Keep cool, boys," he added. "It's our only chance. Fire away, and make every shot tell."

Then he poked his rifle under the doorway, and pulled the trigger. The report was followed by a yelp of agony. The wolves fell back a little. They had a wholesome fear of firearms.

Jerry reloaded his rifle, and jammed shells into his double-barreled shotgun.

"I'll guard this end," he yelled, hoarsely. "You fellows must take care of that."

"It's an ugly outlook," replied Hamp. "Here are your two guns, Brick. Keep them loaded. We've got four between us—six with Jerry's. But where's the ammunition?"

"Here," and Brick tapped the cartridge belt that was strapped about his waist. "Help yourself, Hamp. Do you think we can pull through?"

There was no chance for reply. Jerry sounded a note of warning as the wolves came leaping at the cabin again.

A gaunt head suddenly shot through the aperture, and a pair of frothy jaws closed with a snap on the sleeve of Hamp's jacket. Brick instantly reversed his rifle, and hit the brute a stunning blow. The head vanished, and Hamp nervously examined his arm.

"Not a scratch," he muttered. "You hit him just in time, Brick. Now I'll pay the brute for his daring."

He poked his shotgun out, and fired both barrels. Jerry joined in with a rattling fusillade.

"That hit something," he shouted. "Half a dozen of the varmints were scratching at the sled. I thought it would give way."

"We'll beat them off yet," gasped Brick. "Aren't they savage, though? They don't mind the fire a bit. Hullo! there's a paw sticking through. Take that."

"That" was a well-delivered charge of buckshot between the timbers of the cabin. A yelp of agony followed the report.

"Good!" applauded Jerry. "You'll do."

"Keep it up, fellows," yelled Hamp. "Plenty of powder and shot will tell. There, the brutes are falling back a little."

Hamp was right. The scratching at the cabin now ceased. But the hungry pack were loth to abandon their prey. Still they scurried here and there. From the opening the boys could see the sinewy bodies and the gleaming eyes. Above the din of yelps and howls a shriller sound occasionally rose.

It was probably the screech of the worsted catamount.

"Keep all the guns loaded," cautioned Jerry. "I don't believe we'll have to do much more shooting, though. We've taught the wolves a bitter lesson. They know they can't make a meal of us."

But he had barely spoken when a scratching noise was heard overhead. The entire cabin seemed to totter and sway.

"The pack are on the roof," cried Brick. "They must have climbed over the rocks. Everything will be down on us in a minute."

"At least three or four of the brutes are there," declared Hamp. "Just hear them digging. Let's all fire together."

But before a single weapon could be raised the flimsy roof parted in the center with a dull, ripping noise. Through the gap tumbled a heap of snow from the trees above, and then followed a snapping, snarling wolf, landing squarely upon the terrified boys.

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CHAPTER VII.

THROUGH THE ICE.

Happily, the wolf was not the least frightened member of the party. His plunge through space had been unintentional, and when he rolled off into one corner of the cabin he gave a howl of terror.

Brick and Hamp gathered themselves up from the pine boughs, where the blow had tumbled them. They felt sure that they were lost; they expected to be instantly torn limb from limb.

"Stand aside!" yelled Jerry, as he stepped in front of his companions.

There was no time to shoot, for the wolf had turned in desperation, and was in the act of rushing at his enemies.

Jerry clubbed his rifle and let drive. Thud! the heavy stock landed on the brute's head, and tumbled him over in a heap.

"Hurrah!" shouted Hamp and Brick, in one breath, as they rushed to the attack.

The wolf was a tenacious fellow, and he struggled desperately to rise. Sorely wounded though he was, he actually managed to get upon his feet. Then a charge of buckshot from Jerry's gun, settled him for good and all, and he rolled over lifeless.

The whole affair transpired in about a minute, and the plucky lads next turned their attention to the peril that threatened them from overhead.

Two howling brutes were digging and tearing at the hole in the roof. Their lolling red tongues and white teeth glistened in the firelight. The rest of the pack yelped and scurried around the cabin, as though they knew that the feast would soon be ready.

"We'll fix those fellows, never fear," panted Jerry.

He and Hamp lifted their shotguns, and fired together, straight at the glaring eyes and hungry jaws.

With a yelp of agony one of the brutes rolled from the roof, and crashed heavily to the ground. The other was invisible when the smoke cleared; he must have leaped back upon the rock.

The boys were cheered by their victory. They reloaded their weapons and waited, keeping an eye on all vulnerable spots.

"This will be something worth remembering, if we come through it all right," said Brick.

"Morning can't be many hours off," added Hamp. "The pack will be sure to go then."

But the brave lads were spared the horrors of a further siege. All at once the wolves became strangely silent, and the boys heard a rushing noise far back in the forest, mingled with a chorus of faint howls. The sound came closer, and then veered off in another direction, growing more and more indistinct.

"Listen!" whispered Jerry, holding up a warning finger. "There goes another pack of wolves—after a deer or something. Hear them tear through the forest. I'm glad they're not headed this way."

"So am I," assented Brick. "Hullo! what's up now?"

"The siege," shouted Jerry, and the witticism proved indeed true.

The pack around the cabin gave voice to the fading howls of their kindred, and then scurried off into the forest at full tear.

For a time the lads could scarcely realize their good fortune. Then, with thankful hearts, they pulled the sled away from the door, and crept out.

The fire had burnt low, and they hurriedly stacked it with fresh fuel. Two dead wolves lay in the ravine, and the one inside the cabin made three. The bodies were dragged down the hollow, and pitched into a gully between two rocks.

"Let them lay there for the present," said Jerry. "In the morning I'll take the scalps off. We'll get bounty for them."

Encouraged by the brightness of the fire, the boys crept up the slope, and looked at the picked bones of the deer, and at the wolves that the catamount had killed.

"Pretty clean work," observed Hamp. "I don't care to stay here long, though. The catamount may pounce on us at any minute. There's the tree he jumped into."

"But he's not there now," replied Jerry. "I think he's had enough of this locality, and won't trouble us any more. No danger of the wolves coming back, either."

"There is, if the severe weather keeps up," said Hamp, as they returned to the fire. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to cross the lake again, and do our hunting between Moosehead and Chesuscook. This neighborhood is too near Canada and the home of the wolves for me."

"For me, too," added Brick, uneasily.

"Well, I don't suppose you fellows want to move to-night," declared Jerry. "We can talk about it in the morning. I think I could sleep for twenty-four hours straight ahead now."

"But how about the hole in the roof?" questioned Brick. "It won't do to go to bed and leave that open. The catamount might jump down on us."

"Or it might rain or snow," added Hamp.

"It won't do either," asserted Jerry, "but I'm not so positive about the catamount. It will be only prudent to repair the roof to-night. Come, fellows; it won't take long."

Jerry mounted the rock, and then climbed partly out on the roof. The others procured hatchets and started toward a copse of young timber that lay behind the cabin.

"You'll need another prop or two, won't you?" asked Hamp.

"Yes, one of these is broken," Jerry replied. "Cut it thick."

Hamp chose a likely sapling and began to hack at it. Brick struck in now and then. Upon the roof Jerry rearranged the disordered layers of pine and spruce boughs. The boys anticipated a quick completion of the work and then a much-needed sleep.

"Help! Help!"

The cry came from a pair of lusty and vigorous lungs. Their owner was evidently some distance out on the lake and directly opposite the camp.

Jerry sprang back to the rock, and thence to the ground, landing directly between his companions.

Again the appeal for help rang out, mingled with a blood-curdling screech. Then followed a hoarse, quavering noise that sounded only half human.

"Some one is in peril out there," exclaimed Jerry. "It must be one of those strange men. The catamount has attacked him. We have got to rescue him, fellows."

"And mighty quick, at that," added Hamp. "Come on."

The boys ran back to the cabin, where each grabbed a rifle. Then they sped down the ravine and out on the slippery ice. The strange, unearthly noise was twice repeated before they were twenty feet from land.

"It sounds like a college yell, only a good deal worse," declared Brick.

"I'll bet I know what it is," replied Hamp. "The man has no rifle, and he's trying to scare the catamount off by screeching at it. I've heard of old trappers doing that."

"And it often succeeds, too," said Jerry. "There, the fellow is calling for help again."

"Hold on, we're coming!" shouted Hamp, at the top of his voice.

An answering hail floated back on the wind, and was speedily drowned by an ear-splitting yowl from the catamount.

The boys ran on and on. As yet nothing was visible in the deep gloom ahead.

"I wish we had brought a lantern," panted Hamp.

"Too late to think of that now," replied Jerry. "We've got to face the music in the dark. If it comes to close quarters, I'll shoot at the catamount first. You fellows be ready in case I miss."

A moment later the figure of a man loomed out of the misty gray atmosphere thirty yards in advance of the boys. He was running toward them at full speed, and brandishing a gun.

When the man came a little closer, the pursuing catamount could be seen bounding along behind. Suddenly the man stopped. He turned around and yelled savagely. The beast also stopped, and squatted on the ice.

The boys now came up with the stranger, who welcomed them gladly.

"You are just in time," he panted. "I couldn't have held out much longer. My rifle dropped in the snow, and is good for nothing. Shoot the creature, if you can."

At sight of the rescuers, the catamount had swerved to one side, and was now creeping along in a half circle, evidently afraid to venture nearer.

Jerry took aim—unerringly, as he thought—and pulled the trigger. He missed, however, and when Brick and Hamp fired, with no better success, the beast retreated with great leaps.

"Don't let him get away," yelled Jerry, excitedly. "As long as he's alive, he'll give us trouble. We've got to finish him up now. Come on, fellows."

Off dashed the lad on a run, and Brick and Hamp followed. They skimmed over a dozen yards of ice and then slackened speed. Just ahead was a small, bluish spot, but none noticed it.

"Confound the beast!" exclaimed Jerry. "I never saw anything slide out of sight so quickly."

He ran on for several yards, heedless of his peril. Then he struck the thin shell of ice on an air-hole, and like a flash he vanished from the eyes of his horrified companions.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. RAIKES OF PORTLAND.

The catastrophe was one of appalling swiftness. Brick and Hamp could scarcely realize what had happened. The hole that had swallowed Jerry up yawned at their very feet.

It was less than two feet in diameter, and its edges were jagged. The surface of the deep, blue water went swirling around and around, as though an under-current existed. Doubtless there was one, and it had sucked Jerry far down. He did not reappear, though the boys strained their eyes on the fatal spot. The seconds went by—twenty—half a minute.

Hamp uttered a groan of agony.

"Jerry, Jerry!" he cried aloud.

"Look out!" exclaimed Brick, as he dragged him back. "You'll go in, too. It's all up with poor Jerry. There's no hope—not an atom."

His voice quavered and broke; he dashed a tear from his eye. Hamp was crying, too. Loud sobs

burst from his bosom. Just then the stranger reached the spot. He had seen the accident from a distance.

"Which one was it?" he demanded. "Which one? Tell me his name, quick."

It was a strange request, and he spoke in eager, excited tones. But the boys were too much concerned to notice such a trifle.

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"It—it was Jerry," sobbed Hamp.

"Jerry who?"

"Jerry—Jerry Brenton."

"Brenton? Ah!"

The man's voice and manner showed intense relief.

"Poor fellow," he added. "Nothing can be done to help him. The water is deep, and he must have been carried far under the ice. Where is the catamount—the author of all the mischief?"

This was a heartless question, and the boys were too indignant to reply. At such a moment they would have cared little for a dozen catamounts.

"Oh! oh!" moaned Hamp. "Poor Jerry! What shall we do? What shall we do?"

So complete and hopeless was their despair that what followed seemed at first like a dream. They heard a crackling sound, and then a plaintive cry. It was really Jerry's voice, calling faintly for help from a distance.

Brick was the first to notice a dark blot some twenty feet out on the ice. He rushed toward it with a yell of delight, followed by Hamp and the stranger.

The dark blot was Jerry's head and shoulders. The rim of broken ice fitted close to his armpits, and his outstretched hands were clutching at the glossy surface.

"Help! help!" he cried, in a weak and quavering voice. "I'm going under again, fellows."

"No, you ain't," shouted Hamp. "We'll save you. Hold on a minute."

"Don't go too near by yourself," warned Jerry. "The ice will break."

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"That's so," cried Brick, giving one hand to Hamp. The stranger, in turn, took hold of Brick, and thus a triply-strong line was formed. Hamp went forward on his knees until he was able to grasp one of Jerry's hands.

All pulled together. It was a time of terrible suspense. Twice Jerry was almost out of water, and twice the edge of the ice crumbled, letting him slip back.

Fortunately Hamp did not break through. He bravely withstood the strain, and, at last, a mighty effort pulled Jerry out beside him, and he was dragged to a place of safety.

Hamp rubbed his arm.

"I thought the muscles were going to crack," he said. "It was an awful strain. But I would have lost both arms sooner than see you drown, Jerry."

"Better get the lad back to the campfire at once," suggested the stranger.

This was good advice, for Jerry was simply speechless with cold. His face and hands were blue, and he shivered like a leaf as he stood with dripping clothes.

Hamp and Brick took Jerry between them, and away they sped for camp. The stranger followed, and he was close behind the others when they reached the fire. The boys now saw him clearly, for the first time, as he stood in the light of the flames.

The man was about thirty years old, with brown hair and a slight, yellowish mustache. His face was good-humored and rather prepossessing. He wore gray trousers, and a short, but heavy, overcoat was buttoned up to his throat.

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"You've got dry clothes for the lad?" he asked.

"Yes; each of us has an extra suit," replied Hamp.

He and Brick bustled in and out of the cabin, and in a brief time they had Jerry attired in dry garments. His lips were still blue, and he shivered as though he had a chill. The boys wrapped him in blankets, and made him sit close up to the fire. Then they heaped on quantities of wood, until the roaring flames were leaping high.

The stranger took a small flask from his pocket and wrenched a metal cup from the end. Into the latter he poured a few drops of a reddish liquor.

"Drink this, lad," he said, handing the cup to Jerry, who drained it hastily and made a wry face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Brandy, and prime stuff, at that. It's thirty years old."

Jerry shivered to think what the stuff would have tasted like had it been twice as old.

It was just what he needed, however, and in a short time the shivering ceased, and the color came back to his cheeks.

"How do you feel now?" asked Hamp.

"Splendid. It's awfully snug and warm under these blankets. I'll bet you fellows were scared when I went through the ice."

"Well, I should say so," replied Brick. "We never expected to see you again. How did you get to that hole, anyhow?"

"It was presence of mind did that," declared Jerry. "You see, as soon as I broke through, a sort of an under-current sucked me deep down and to one side. I opened my eyes and began to swim. I came up with a bump, and then I knew I was clear under the ice. I saw a gray streak away off in front of me. I knew it must be the light shining through an air-hole, and swam for it. Then I went up head first, and you fellows know the rest. My rifle is at the bottom of the lake, though."

"We've got guns enough without it," replied Hamp. "Don't worry about that. You can be mighty glad that you're not beside the rifle, Jerry."

"It was, indeed, a most marvelous escape," said the stranger. "Had this brave lad been drowned, I should have put the blame upon myself. It was to save me from the catamount that you lads ventured out on the lake."

"I only wish we had killed the brute," grumbled Jerry.

"Yes, it is unfortunate that he got away," admitted the stranger. "But I forget that I have not yet introduced myself. I hope you will overlook my carelessness. My name is Silas Raikes, and I hail from Portland, Maine. I am camping a mile or two from here with a friend. His name is Joe Bogle, and he belongs in Augusta. We are out on a little prospecting expedition."

The boys nodded.

"Some hours ago we were attacked by wolves, but managed to drive them off. When we heard shots a little later, we knew that there must be other campers near by, and that they were in peril. So I left Joe to guard camp, and came to your assistance. But, as it so happened, the tables were turned, and I was the one to need help. My rifle was useless from a fall in the snow, and the catamount very nearly captured me."

"Then we are square all round," said Brick, laughingly. "We're much obliged to you for your good intentions, all the same. If you had come a little sooner, you would have seen some lively times."

He went on to describe in a graphic manner the thrilling events of the night. Mr. Raikes took a keen interest in the tale, and overwhelmed the boys with praise.

"I should be glad to know such brave lads more intimately," he said. "Let me see. Have I forgotten your names already?"

"I guess you never knew them," replied Hamp, with outspoken candor. "My name is Foster, and over there is Jerry Brenton. We are both from Bangor. This fellow is Brick Larkins, and he lives in New York."

"Jim Larkins," corrected Brick, with a roguish look at Hamp.

"Larkins, Larkins," repeated Mr. Raikes, as he thoughtfully rubbed his forehead. "Where have I heard that name? Ah, yes. Surely you are no relative of John Larkins, the wealthy contractor of Lexington avenue, New York?"

"His son, that's all," replied Brick. "Do you know him?"

"I have met him in a business way. And so you are his son? Well, I am glad to make your acquaintance. Your object is hunting, I presume?"

"We started out with that intention," replied Brick, "but so far the wolves and the catamounts and the deer have been hunting us."

The boys laughed, and Mr. Raikes joined in heartily. He took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it with a glowing ember.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GREAT STORM.

Mr. Raikes proved to be a very affable and genial sort of a man. He chatted with the boys for some time, and asked them a great deal about their plans.

Not once, however, did he refer to the business that had brought himself and Mr. Bogle into the wilderness.

"Isn't this a queer time of the year to go prospecting?" inquired Jerry, during a lapse in the conversation. "I thought summer was the right season."

Mr. Raikes' blue eyes expressed mild surprise, as he turned to the speaker.

"This is just the time for our line of business," he replied; and if he ever spoke the truth in his life, he spoke it then.

"We'll make out all right if the weather holds good," he added, hastily. "I'm a little afraid there's a snow squall coming, though. The air just feels like it. It's not nearly so cold as when I started."

"That's so," exclaimed Hamp. "I can feel it getting warmer."

"You'd think it was downright hot if you were in my place," declared Jerry. "I'm actually sweating."

"That's the best thing for you," said Mr. Raikes, "only don't take cold after it. Well, I must be off. You boys want to sleep, and I suppose Joe is getting anxious about me. Of course, we will see each other again, since we are such near neighbors?"

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Without waiting for a reply, Mr. Raikes shouldered his gun and strode down the ravine. The boys shouted good-by after him, and watched until he disappeared in the gloom.

"Not a bad sort of a fellow," commented Brick.

"He has mighty restless eyes," said Hamp. "When they weren't looking at you, they were searching around the camp."

"I noticed that he watched Brick pretty sharply," put in Jerry. "He was a mighty talkative fellow. Come to think of it, he found out everything about us, and didn't tell us a scrap about himself."

Here the discussion of the departed Mr. Raikes ended, for the boys were too sleepy to think of anything else. Brick looked at his watch, and uttered a gasp of surprise.

"Half-past three o'clock. It will soon be morning."

"The roof of the cabin must be fixed before we go to bed," cried Jerry. "It may snow at any time. You fellows will have to manage it, for I won't dare stir about till I get over this sweat."

Brick and Hamp undertook the contract, and, by following Jerry's instructions, they completed the work in a very few minutes. Then they dragged a big log down the ravine and put it on the fire.

The light faded, and dawn came. It was a dreary sort of a dawn, at best, for the weather had changed in a truly terrific manner. At midday the tired boys were still slumbering, blissfully ignorant of the warring elements outside. The afternoon advanced, and it was well toward evening when Brick yawned, stretched himself, and sat up. He looked at his watch.

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"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "After four o'clock! What a sleep we've had!"

Then he noticed a sprinkling of snow on the pine boughs, and saw quite a layer of it in the front corners of the cabin. A loud humming noise was ringing in his ears, and mingled with it was a deep, sonorous roar. Brick threw off the blanket and crawled to the door. He pulled the sled away and partly lifted the flap of canvas. When he saw a solid wall of snow staring him in the face, he uttered a shout that instantly woke his companions.

"Look out, or we'll have a cave-in!" cried Jerry, as he pushed the sled back in place. "Whew! what a storm this is! Just hear the wind roaring!"

"How are we going to see out?" asked Hamp.

For answer, Jerry took an ax and chopped a small, oblong hole in the front wall of the cabin, at the height of five feet from the ground. The boys crowded in front of it and looked out.

To say that they were astonished and alarmed, would but feebly express their feelings. The snow was level with the hole, and lay to the depth of five feet all through the ravine. The air was white with swirling flakes, and the lofty trees to right and left were creaking and groaning in the teeth of a tremendous gale.

Fortunately the storm was blowing from the northeast, and thus the cabin was effectively screened by the upper bank of the ravine. Had it been exposed, even partially, to the gale, it would have been demolished long ago.

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Jerry stuffed an old coat into the hole to shut out the bitterly cold air that filtered through.

"This is a pretty ugly fix," he said, gravely. "I hope the storm won't keep up."

"We're snug enough in here, at any rate," replied Hamp.

"And we can stand a long siege," added Brick, who was disposed to be cheerful. To him, a snowstorm suggested only the pleasing excitement of winter sports.

"We are all right as long as the wind don't change," responded Jerry, "but if it does—then good-by to the cabin. The snow itself is not as deep as it looks. The wind blowing over the bank makes a sort of an eddy behind it, and all this snow in the ravine has drifted. It will keep on drifting, too—higher and higher."

"We'll find a way to pull through," said Hamp, confidently. "I don't believe the wind is going to change."

"It may sheer to the east," suggested Brick.

"That is just what I am afraid of," replied Jerry. "But we won't borrow trouble before it comes. We have enough on our hands now."

He pointed to the roof, which was sagging down considerably in the middle. There was evidently

a heavy weight of snow on top.

"No way to remedy that," he added. "We can't get up there in such a deep snow. Let's make the best of it, fellows. I'm thankful that I feel well after my cold bath last night."

"If anything happens, those men may help us," suggested Hamp.

"Not likely," replied Jerry. "I'll bet anything they're worse off than we are. Probably they've got nothing to shelter them but a couple of rocks or a flimsy lean-to."

"Then I pity them," declared Brick. "But let's have something to eat, fellows. I'm ravenous."

His companions were equally hungry. All sat down on the straw, and for half a minute no one spoke or moved. An expression that was half serious, half comical, stole over each face.

Then Hamp opened a tin box and took out several dozen biscuit. He unrolled a napkin and disclosed about half a pound of chipped beef. He spread these things significantly in front of his companions. The act was enough to tell the tale.

"I thought so," exclaimed Brick, dismally. "We'll starve, sure. What fools we were to leave everything in the storehouse."

"What confounded fools," echoed Hamp. "But we couldn't have known what was going to happen."

The storehouse, it must be explained, was a triangular hollow between two rocks that stood in the center of the ravine, half-a-dozen yards below the cabin.

Here, snugly covered with one of the sleds, rested most of the provisions—tinned biscuit and meats, potatoes, flour, lard, coffee, pork, and various other articles.

This place had been selected because there was not sufficient room in the cabin.

"We can't keep alive long on this handful of crackers and beef," declared Jerry. "We've got to get at the supplies somehow or other. Light the lantern till we look about us. Where are the matches?"

"In the storehouse," muttered Brick. "The sealed bottle, I mean. But we had a box here last night. I saw it lying in that corner."

Alas! the corner was heaped up with snow, and when Brick dug out the box, it was a sight to be seen. It had been left partly open, and the heads of the matches were one sticky mass.

"Look in your pockets," Jerry fairly shrieked.

Every pocket was quickly searched, but to no purpose. Not a match could be found.

"No light, and hardly any food," muttered Jerry, glaring at the two useless lanterns. "Now we must get to the storehouse. There are no two ways about it. I suppose the snowshoes are with the other traps."

"Yes," said Hamp, dismally.

"If we had them here, we would be all right."

"Can't we dig a tunnel?" suggested Brick.

"That's just what I'm thinking about," replied Jerry. "It might be done, though it will take a long time. The snow is so light that I am afraid a tunnel will cave in."

"Let me try it, anyhow," said Brick. "You'll catch cold if you get into the snow, Jerry."

"I'll attend to the tunneling," asserted Hamp. "I'm used to that sort of thing. Do you remember our snow forts, Jerry?"

Jerry nodded.

"Do your best, old fellow. Everything depends on it. Let's all have a bite to eat first."

As he spoke, a sharp, snapping noise was heard above the roar of the storm. A terrific crash followed. The cabin quivered and reeled, and black darkness shut out the pale gray twilight.

CHAPTER X.

A GREAT DISASTER.

The stunning crash and the succeeding darkness suggested an earthquake to the frightened boys. They dropped down on the boughs and lay there without moving for nearly a minute.

"Any one hurt?" asked Jerry, in a husky tone.

"I'm not," whispered Brick.

"Neither am I," added Hamp. "But we may be killed any minute. I wonder what that was."

"I'll bet I know," exclaimed Jerry. "One of those big pine trees has fallen right across the ravine. Luckily it hit the rock instead of the cabin, and the thick branches are what makes it dark in here."

To prove his assertion, Jerry removed the plug from the hole over the door. Sure enough, a couple of bushy, green limbs were seen protruding from the cabin roof down into the snow.

"It's only the limbs that do that," declared Jerry. "The trunk of the tree is on the rock. If it had fallen a little to this side we would have been crushed like eggshells."

"The cabin is just as firm as ever," said Hamp, as he pressed his weight against one side.

"It's firmer," asserted Brick. "It don't wobble one bit now, and it did before."

"That's because the outspreading branches of the tree are holding it like a vise," said Jerry. "I'll tell you what, fellows, this accident is the best thing that could have happened to us. The cabin is as solid as though it was built on stone, and the roof can't break down now, no matter how deep the snow becomes."

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This was undoubtedly true, and the boys were vastly relieved to hear it.

"If we only had the matches and provisions here," said Brick. "Then we would be fixed."

"Yes, we could stand a long siege," assented Jerry. "But we've got to be up and doing. First, we'll have a bite to eat, and then Hamp can tackle the tunnel."

The storm still raged with unabated fury, and the stinging cold air penetrated to the cabin. The boys plugged up the hole, and then sat down to the scanty repast, which was soon over.

"Now for the tunnel," said Hamp.

He removed the sled and gingerly unbuttoned the flap of canvas from the doorway.

The others helped him, and as fast as they removed the snow, they poked it out through the hole above. Finally the excavation was three feet deep, and high enough to admit Hamp on his hands and knees.

"You'll have to stop removing the snow now," said Jerry. "I can't poke any more out, for the drift is up over the hole in the wall."

"All right," replied Hamp, cheerfully, as he crawled into the tunnel. "The snow is so light that I can pack it under me and against the sides. It's nice and warm in here, fellows, but it's dark as pitch. I wish there was a little light."

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"You'll have to wish," replied Jerry. "You can strike matches on the way back from the storehouse."

Hamp laughed, and his voice had a hollow, muffled ring.

"Better let me come in and help you," cried Brick.

"No; stay there," responded Hamp. "If two fellows were working, we would surely have a cave-in. I'm getting along all right."

By this time he was five feet from the cabin. On hands and knees he went slowly ahead through the intense darkness. He wore stout buckskin gloves, and carried a slab of bark, with which he patted down the snow in front of him and slapped it against the sides of the tunnel. He could hear, as though from a great distance, the ceaseless roar of the tempest. All was quiet in the cabin, and he dared not call out to his companions, for fear his voice would bring an avalanche of snow into the tunnel.

Yet the lad was in a hazardous situation, and to himself he did not disguise the fact. At any moment might come disaster in the shape of a cave-in or a falling tree. Then, in the darkness, he would have little chance of escape.

He worked forward slowly and bravely. He had a definite plan in mind. Directly out from the cabin door was the fireplace, and two or three feet to the right of this lay a flat stone, on which the boys had frequently sat while cooking the meals. Straight down the ravine from the stone was the storehouse. To reach the latter seemed simple enough, but it was not so easy after all.

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Now and then he would throw himself flat, and stretch out his arms and legs to their fullest extent to make sure that the tunnel had no crooks.

At last something occurred that made his heart leap for joy. The slab of bark struck a hard obstacle. Hamp tore eagerly at the snow with both hands. Yes, he had found the fireplace. One by one he lifted the charred embers of wood. Here was the half-consumed log that had ceased to burn when the storm opened. So far the tunnel was just what he had aimed to make it.

In a short time Hamp cleared the space round about him, and flattened the snow down solidly. He was tempted to push straight ahead for the storehouse, but a prudent second thought caused him to abandon the rash design. He turned to the right, and went on with the excavation. Hope made the time pass quickly, and he was surprised when he struck the flat stone. He tunneled clear over it with extreme caution. Then he veered sharply to the left and followed the triangular point of the stone, which he knew pointed straight for the storehouse.

Deeper and deeper grew the tunnel, and soon his feet were quite beyond the stone. He could barely kick it with his heels when he threw himself flat. The goal was now within six or eight feet.

Then came a sudden rumble and whirr, and Hamp felt a weight drop upon the rear part of his

body. He knew what had happened, and threw himself convulsively forward. He cleared the fallen snow and then wheeled quickly around. The tunnel had disappeared. The roof had fallen in.

Hamp had no way of telling how far back the blockade extended.

"I'll have to turn back and clear the path," he reflected. "The cave-in surely can't reach farther than the stone. This time I'll make the roof stronger. I can be thankful it didn't drop all over me."

The cleared space around him permitted him to turn slowly on his hands and knees. He described a complete revolution, gently patting the roof overhead to make sure that it was solid.

It was a most stupid thing to do, and when the realization of his folly flashed upon his mind, Hamp felt that he would give much to be able to kick himself. In truth, he had blundered into a most perplexing situation. He had utterly lost his bearings.

For a moment the lad was simply stupid with horror. He had not the least idea in which direction lay the cabin or the storehouse, the upper or the lower side of the ravine.

He was buried under a mighty snowdrift, that might collapse and stifle him at any instant.

CHAPTER XI.

UNDER THE SNOWDRIFT.

Hamp knew that his only hope lay in a clear head and a courageous heart. Already the air seemed to be more dense, and he felt a difficulty in breathing.

"One thing certain," he reflected, "I've got about a ghost of a chance of striking either the cabin or the storehouse. If I try to tunnel away from here, there's no telling where I may land. I've got two chances—either to stay here until Brick and Jerry come to rescue me, or to get my bearings by hearing them shout."

The latter commended itself most favorably to Hamp. In spite of the risk of an avalanche, he put his hands to his lips and uttered a piercing yell.

No reply.

He waited, and tried again.

Now, to his delight, he heard a faint cry. He was not quick enough to locate it, so he shouted once more.

A moment later the answering hail came, but, alas! he could not make sure in what direction.

An agony of despair seized him, and he uttered cry after cry.

Fatal mistake! The loud noise loosened the quivering masses of snow. Hamp felt the walls shake and heard the rustling glide. Throwing out his arms, he fought his way upward through the descending avalanche. Though twice beaten back, he gained an upright position. Had the snow been less light and powdery, he must have been crushed to the ground.

He was now firmly on his feet, but in danger of suffocation. His head was covered. The snow pressed against his mouth and nose. He gasped for breath. He clutched and tore at the weight above him, swinging his arms from side to side. Then the powdery masses slipped to right and left, disclosing a funnel-shaped aperture, through which filtered a current of cold air. Hamp uttered a cry of relief and made the opening larger. The top of the drift was about two feet above his head. He saw the circular patch of murky gray sky through the driving storm. He felt the icy flakes dropping upon his cheeks, and heard the hoarse, deafening hum of the wind. The youth was in no present danger, but otherwise his position was not improved. He could not force a way onward through the drift, nor could he get his head high enough to see where he was.

"It's no go," he muttered. "I'm stuck here like a pig in a poke. Unless I keep mighty still, I'll have another avalanche from the surface."

Just then he heard two lusty shouts, and the voices seemed to come from straight in front of him.

"Hurrah!" he yelled. "Brick! Jerry!"

The response quickly floated back, and at the same instant the wind drove a stinging shower of fine snow into his face.

Hamp wiped the snow off, and was about to utter another shout when he heard a shrill crackling above the din of the storm. As he stared upward he saw the disk of open air suddenly eclipsed by a sheet of blackness. More from instinct than logic, Hamp divined what this meant. Quick as a flash he dived downward with arms and head, and sought to burrow under the drift.

He was none too quick. He heard a dull crash, and felt himself seized by some mighty force and driven roughly against the very ground. There was a considerable weight of loose snow upon him, and when he had beaten it away from his face, his outstretched hands caught hold of something that was solid, but prickly and yielding.

He recognized it as the branch of a pine tree. Then he twisted about and thrust his hands down toward his middle. Here he found the trunk of the tree, resting with no little weight upon his thighs.

No bones were broken, nor was he even badly bruised. But, nevertheless, he was pinned fast. He lay partly on one side, with his head turned in the direction whence the voices of his friends had come.

The canopy of branches above admitted plenty of fresh air, and there was quite an open gap in front of his face. He made a strong effort to drag himself free, but stopped as soon as he found masses of snow dropping down upon him. Then he shouted several times, and heard a faint response. The cries continued at intervals, and now they actually seemed to be coming closer.

"Brick and Jerry are tunneling this way," said Hamp, to himself. "I wonder if they will succeed in reaching me. I didn't tell them how I was going to dig. I only hope they won't get in the same fix that I was in a few minutes ago."

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The chance of rescue—slim though it was—cheered him considerably, and gave him patience. He lay quite still, shouting from time to time. There were no longer any responses, but he concluded that the boys were afraid to shout for fear of a cave-in.

Twenty minutes of thrilling suspense slipped away. Then he heard a dull, muffled sound, and a moment later a mass of snow dropped upon his face. He threw out his hands and caught hold of a human arm.

"Brick! Jerry!" he shouted, with delight.

"We're here, old boy," replied Jerry's familiar voice. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit. I'm pinned fast, though."

"Well, we'll soon have you out. Brick and I thought you were a goner for sure when that tree fell. The crash sounded just where your voice was."

"It was a close call," replied Hamp. "But how did you get here so soon?"

"Why, by your tunnel," said Jerry. "It was open a foot beyond that stone. We dug mighty carefully the rest of the way. That's what kept us so long."

"And now how are we going to get you free?" added Brick.

"I'll tell you," replied Hamp. "In the first place, make the passage wide enough for both of you to kneel side by side."

"It's wide enough now," declared Jerry. "We came through in double file."

"Then take hold of my hands and pull."

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The boys followed instructions, and by a long, steady haul they drew Hamp from under the trunk of the tree.

"There, that will do," he cried, as he sat up. "Thank goodness, I can kick as spry as ever. My trousers are torn, but I don't believe I have a scratch. I wouldn't go through this over again for a fortune."

He briefly told the boys his thrilling story, and it made them feel rather shivery.

"We had better go back while the way is open," said Brick. "It will be good-by if we are caught by a cave-in."

"I hate to give up," muttered Hamp, doggedly. "I Started for the storehouse, and I want to reach it."

"But that tree is right in the road now," declared Jerry. "The storehouse is on the other side of it. We can't get through, and it will be a risky thing to try to tunnel around it."

Hamp was not satisfied until he had crawled forward several feet. Then a perfect network of interlacing branches drove him reluctantly back.

"I thought so," said Jerry. "There is only one thing to do, fellows. We must return to the cabin and wait until morning. By then the storm may be over. At any rate, the snow will be more solid and compact, and won't cave in so easily. We will be able to make a tunnel clear around the tree, and get at the storehouse from the lower side."

This was sound logic, and as no one could suggest a better plan, the boys started despondently back through the tunnel, crawling in single file.

They reached the end without mishap, and were heartily glad to find themselves in the snug shelter of the cabin once more.

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Brick looked at his watch and wound it up. It was just half-past eight o'clock in the evening. Of course, the boys were not sleepy, and it looked as though they would have to turn night into day. They were savagely hungry, and longingly eyed the cartridge box that held the scanty remnants of their supper. But they put the temptation aside with stern fortitude, knowing that greater need would come with the morning.

All hands prudently exchanged their damp clothes for dry ones, and then huddled together under blankets in a corner of the cabin.

It was four o'clock when the boys finally dropped off to sleep, overcome more by mental than physical exhaustion. They rested soundly, and awoke to find that another day had dawned—dawned hours before, for Brick's watch indicated eleven o'clock. The hands could be barely seen by the meager gray light that filtered through a crevice in the roof.

The storm was over—the wind, part of it, at least. The silence was oppressive. Evidently the drifted snow was piled many feet above the cabin. What scanty light penetrated to the boys filtered through the outspreading branches of the fallen pine.

CHAPTER XII.

DECOYED TO DANGER.

The first thing was breakfast. Prudence was no match for ravenous hunger, and the boys greedily devoured the last scrap of food. They even searched the pine boughs for fallen crumbs.

"It don't seem as though I had eaten anything at all," said Brick, mournfully.

"Well, it won't be long till we get a good, square meal," said Jerry. "The snow must be packed pretty hard by this time, so the tunnel won't take so long to dig."

"And there won't be much danger of caving in," added Hamp.

The boys sat talking for a while before they began the great undertaking. Their very lives depended on reaching the storehouse.

"I hope we can get out of this," replied Brick. "I'm sick of this part of the country. I've been wondering what became of those two men."

"They're either dead, or snowed up so badly that they can't help themselves," declared Hamp. "It's our duty to go to their assistance as soon as we get a chance. That fellow, Raikes, put himself in danger to help us, you know."

It was shortly after midday when the three entered the tunnel in single file. Jerry took the lead, and the others followed close at his heels.

The snow was rather sticky and compact, and they, took advantage of this to enlarge the top and sides of the passage as they went along. Not a single cave-in was found. They easily made the two turns, and reached the scene of Hamp's disaster on the previous day.

Here the actual work began, for, though the storehouse was close ahead, the fallen tree effectually barred the way. The boys turned sharply to the left, and tunneled cautiously along for ten or twelve feet through the pitch blackness.

Then they struck the bank of the ravine, and followed it down for two yards.

"We must have passed under the trunk of the tree by this time," said Jerry. "Now comes a straight course for the storehouse. And it's got to be straight, for if we dig only a foot or two to right or left, we'll strike either the tree or the other side of the ravine."

"Go ahead," replied Hamp. "We'll make it, old fellow."

Already more than an hour had passed since they left the cabin. They advanced with redoubled caution, working two abreast, and patting the roof and sides of the tunnel to make them secure.

The long and trying ordeal came to an end at last, and glorious was the reward. The slab of bark, with which Jerry was digging, suddenly struck something hard. It proved to be a rock, and the boys cleared the space around it with frantic haste.

A moment later they fairly tumbled into the triangular cavity between the two great boulders. It was indeed the storehouse.

With greedy hands they tore away the sled and clutched at the precious supplies lying underneath. The fear of bringing an avalanche down on their heads was all that kept them from bursting into hearty cheers.

"We are saved," cried Hamp, as he got hold of the tin box of matches and struck a light.

"Stay right here," said Jerry. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

He snatched a handful of matches, and crawled into the tunnel, striking light after light as he went along. He was quickly out of sight, but in less than five minutes he returned with a flaming lantern.

The next step was to enlarge the space in front of the rocks, and when this was accomplished, the sled was dragged out of the cavity, and the supplies—snowshoes and all—were securely strapped upon it.

Then the return trip was begun. Jerry crawled ahead with the lantern, and Hamp and Brick came after him with the sled. Each angle was safely rounded, and it was a happy moment when the boys entered the cabin.

The first thing they did was to eat a hearty meal, and no banquet could have tasted better than the dry, uncooked food.

"What time is it?" asked Jerry.

"Just four o'clock," replied Brick, looking-at his watch.

"Then I'll tell you what we had better do," resumed Jerry. "If a thaw and rain should come—and it feels pretty close now—the cabin would almost certainly be flooded. Suppose we go back to the storehouse and dig another tunnel clear out to the lake. I'll bet anything the wind blew the ice clear of snow. Then, if we reach the open air, we can start away from here to-morrow morning and hunt another camp. First, we'll look up those prospectors."

This proposition suited Hamp and Brick. They were just as eager for a change as Jerry.

Without delay, the boys started back to the storehouse. They took with them a lighted lantern, and each was provided with a snowshoe for digging purposes.

The task proved a long and weary one, but they pluckily persevered. They chiseled a passage straight down the trough of the ravine, guided along the way by well-remembered landmarks.

Shortly after seven o'clock in the evening Jerry's snowshoe broke through the thin wall of snow, and the delighted boys tumbled out into the dusky night air. They found themselves several yards beyond the mouth of the ravine.

Far in front stretched the lake, its icy surface almost free of snow. Behind was the great drift, mounting higher and higher as it receded, until it rose many feet above the banks of the ravine. The tree that had fallen across the storehouse was utterly invisible, while of the upper tree only a few protruding limbs could be seen.

Having accomplished their purpose, and thus opened a way of retreat from the buried cabin, the boys entered the tunnel once more and crawled back. They were hungry after their toil, and immediately sat down to another hearty meal. The lamp shed a cheerful glow throughout the snug little inclosure, and the contented faces of the lads reflected its beams.

"This is what I call comfort," declared Jerry, as he put away the provisions.

"It's not bad," assented Brick. "I only wish— Hullo! what's that? I heard a cry from, outside, fellows."

"So did I," exclaimed Hamp. "Listen!"

All were silent, and now the faint, far-away sound came again to their ears.

It seemed to be the voice of some one in distress.

Again it rang faintly on the night air.

"Those men!" exclaimed Jerry.

"I'll bet anything they are out on the lake looking for us. They can't see the tunnel in the dark."

"Mebbe they are half-starved and need help more than we do," suggested Hamp. "We've got to go out and see, fellows."

"That's right," cried Jerry. "Come on."

He snatched the lantern and dived into the tunnel, followed by his companions. They had not the slightest doubt that Raikes and Bogle were outside.

In their confidence and hurry, they committed the grave error of leaving their rifles behind. It never occurred to them that the strange cries might have another and totally different origin.

So, with empty hands, the lads crawled hastily forward on hands and knees down the long, straight passage that led to the open lake.

Suddenly a sharp, blood-curdling cry vibrated on the pent-in air, and that instant a long, tawny beast, with glaring eyeballs, took shape in the gloom, just beyond the lantern's flashing rays.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST OF THE CATAMOUNT.

Before the boys, at a distance of barely twelve feet, crouched the huge catamount, screeching with fury and hunger.

Bitterly, in that awful moment, did they repent the folly of venturing forth unarmed.

Brick and Hamp grabbed each other, and stared wildly about as though they expected a way of

escape to open before their eyes.

Jerry was two feet in front of his companions, and when he saw that the hungry beast was about to spring, he uttered a terrific yell, and nearly let the lantern drop from his nerveless fingers.

The cry was wrung from his lips by sheer fright, but it served a good and unexpected purpose. The catamount was disturbed by the shrill echoes of a human voice. He turned tail instantly, and bolted several yards down the tunnel. Then he wheeled around again, and squatted low. His fiery eyes glared at his intended victims, and his long tail smacked the snow. He wailed several times in a whining key.

The boys were too badly scared to realize or to follow up their advantage. For the moment they were without wits or presence of mind.

"Run!" yelled Jerry; "run for the cabin!"

Running was out of the question, but the boys did the next best thing.

Turning around, they fled up the passage on all fours, momentarily expecting to feel the claws of their enemy. Six arms and six legs revolved wildly. Jerry held grimly to the lantern, and its friendly light showed the way.

But ere the lads were half the distance to the storehouse, the hungry beast was bounding after them, screeching hideously at every jump.

In sheer desperation Jerry wheeled around, and saw the ugly head almost within reach of his arms. Terror prompted him to try a last device. He lifted the lantern and let it drive with all his might.

It struck the catamount on the foreshoulders, bounced off and rolled in the snow. There was a sudden puff, an explosion and a dash of burning oil in all directions. Then a series of hisses, and utter darkness.

On went the boys, groping blindly from side to side. The angle at the storehouse bothered them, and they fell together in a confused heap. Somehow or other they got disentangled, and by pure luck Hamp and Jerry hit the tunnel and made good time toward the next curve.

Brick was not so fortunate. He went head first into the storehouse, and only discovered the mistake when his arms struck the rocky sides of the cavity.

There was no time to retreat, for he heard, close by, an angry snarl from the catamount. With almost the swiftness of a lightning-flash he remembered that there was a smaller cavity beyond the storehouse proper. Could he squeeze into it?

He did not stop to consider, but plunged forward at once. He found the hole, and in a trice his arms and head were through. The rest was a tight fit, but he kicked and scrambled, paying no heed to bruises or lacerations. At last his legs were free, and he dropped down between the rocks.

There was barely room enough for him to squat in an upright position, and even then his head scraped a sharp point of rock. But surely the catamount could squeeze after him.

He shouted hoarsely as he heard a sniffing, whining noise close by, followed by a blood-curdling screech. He believed that his companions had fled and left him to his fate. He had matches in his pocket, and almost unconsciously he drew one out and struck it.

It was well that he did so. The catamount had already gained the larger cavity beyond. His wicked head, with its flattened ears, was just gliding into the crevice that led to Brick's retreat. The lad uttered yell after yell, and the brute paused. A moment later he retreated to the outer mouth of the storehouse, for Brick had ignited his handkerchief, and tossed the flaming mass forward.

The blaze showed Brick a slab of loose rock lying at his feet. He snatched it up, and wedged it into the crevice with all his might. He tore off his coat, and jammed that in beside the rock.

The handkerchief was now nearly consumed, and when the last spark faded away, the catamount came on more determinedly than ever. His yowls of fury floated through the tunnel with dismal reverberations. He sniffed and snorted, and began to tear at the obstacles that blocked the crevice.

Brick shouted for help as he pulled the two remaining matches out of his pocket. His nerveless fingers let them drop, and a hasty search of the hard, stony ground proved futile.

Suddenly Brick felt a stinging sensation, and half of his shirt-sleeve was ripped off his left arm. The catamount had thrust a paw through the crevice.

Brick retreated as far as possible, wedging himself so tightly between the rocks that he could scarcely move a limb. Here he crouched and trembled. He knew that drops of warm blood were trickling down his arm, but he felt no pain. He wondered why the boys did not come to his rescue. Scarcely a foot away the catamount tore and scratched at the barricade, pausing every now and then to utter a fearful screech. The brute had doubtless been prowling about on the lake since the beginning of the storm, and was ravenous with the pangs of hunger.

Suddenly a rattling noise told Brick that the slab of rock was loose, and a moment later he heard it tumble in with a dull crash.

He gave himself up for lost.

Let us return, for a short time, to Hamp and Jerry.

Spurred on by mortal fear, they turned all the curves of the tunnel with a speed and accuracy that they could scarcely have excelled by the light of a lantern. Not until they tumbled breathlessly into the cabin, and scraped a match, did they discover Brick's absence. Then the tumult of sounds that rang out behind them told a plain tale.

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"He's taken refuge in the storehouse," cried Jerry, "and the catamount is trying to get at him."

"That's just it," echoed Hamp. "Come on, quick, or we'll be too late."

In three minutes—an eternity to poor Brick—they were crawling rapidly back through the tunnel. Jerry had a rifle, and Hamp a double-barreled shotgun loaded with big shot. From one side of Jerry's belt swung the lantern, and in the other was thrust a bunch of pine boughs soaked in oil. As the boys advanced, they heard Brick's cries for help, mingled with the screeching of the catamount.

"So far he's safe," whispered Jerry. "I'll shoot first, and you be ready to follow."

"I'll give the brute both barrels, if they're needed," muttered Hamp.

They were now at the wall of the ravine, and a moment later they turned into the passage that led to the storehouse. The rocks were in sight, but no catamount. Evidently the creature was inside. A loud scratching and whining mingled with Brick's hoarse cries.

The boys crept nearer and nearer. They were trembling a little now, but they went pluckily on.

Suddenly a dull crash was heard, and Brick's voice rose instantly to a shrill pitch. The boys shouted in return, and Jerry quickly lighted his torch.

The racket brought the catamount out from the storehouse like a streak. The ugly beast glared at the boys and the torch. He was hungry for the former, but afraid of the latter. He realized that he was outmatched, and, turning his tail, he bounced into the passage that led to the lake, wailing like a spoiled child.

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It all happened so quickly that Jerry lost the opportunity he wanted. He dashed to the angle, and pitched the torch far ahead. It flared up brightly, showing the beast in a crouching attitude on the edge of the gloom. Jerry took a quick aim, and fired.

The report rang out with stunning violence. Its echoes were followed by a dismal wail and a shower of snow clods from the roof of the tunnel, some of which extinguished the torch. When the smoke lifted, the catamount had disappeared, though it was doubtless not far away.

With a glad cry of welcome, Brick crawled out from the storehouse, coat in hand. His sleeveless arm was stained with blood, and the wound proved to consist of several severe scratches.

"You just came in time, fellows," he said. "The beast had knocked my barricade down, and in a few seconds more he would have had me. Do you think you hit him?"

"I don't believe it," growled Jerry. "Seems to me I can't shoot worth a cent any more. Still, I didn't have a fair shot. But we had better be getting back to the cabin instead of fooling away time here."

"You bet we had," assented Hamp. "It's the only safe place. That catamount will be after us again, or he ain't the kind of an Indian devil I take him for."

Brick was nervously anxious to start, and at once took the lead of his companions. They hurried around angle after angle, and when they were half-way through the final passage, they heard the creature's pattering strides behind them.

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Brick and Hamp bolted into the cabin. Jerry paused on the threshold, and wheeled around. He was frightened to see the catamount within six feet of him. But he kept a cool head, and lifted his rifle, which he had meanwhile reloaded. There was no time to hesitate. He aimed, and pulled the trigger.

With the stunning report that followed, he rolled backward into the cabin and sprang to his feet. A frightful scream of blended rage and agony echoed through the tunnel, and the startled boys hastily pushed the sled against the door. Then they backed off, and waited. Jerry disengaged the still burning lantern from his belt, and placed it on the floor.

Another horrid scream, pitched in a strain of mortal agony. Then a bang and a crash. Away went the sled, and plump into the cabin tumbled the wounded and infuriated catamount.

It was well for the lads that Hamp retained his presence of mind. Like a flash the double barreled shotgun went to his shoulder. Twice he pulled the trigger.

Bang, bang! a rasping screech mingled with the stunning reports. Then all was still. When the curtain of powder smoke slowly lifted, the quaking boys saw their ferocious enemy quivering in his death throes on the blood-stained pine boughs.

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CHAPTER XIV.

A HERD OF DEER.

Such a cheering arose as might have been heard far off in the forest. The praises and congratulations of his companions brought a ruddy flush to Hamp's cheeks.

"It wasn't anything to do," he protested, modestly. "When the creature bounced in, I just up and fired. Jerry gets the most credit."

"No, I don't, either," declared Jerry. "My rifleball took him in the shoulder, and your charges of buckshot went through the head. You saved our lives, Hamp, for the brute was crazy with pain, and would have torn us to pieces."

"That's so," assented Brick. "I thought it was all up with us when Hamp fired. Well, we're rid of a mighty ugly enemy. You fellows may be glad you weren't in my shoes when the beast had me penned up in the crevice back of the storehouse."

When the excitement of their recent adventures had passed off, the boys discovered that they were very sleepy. The night was well advanced, so they turned in without delay, permitting the lantern to burn dimly. They were not inclined to lie down in darkness with the dead catamount.

Morning seemed to come quickly. The boys were astir early, and had breakfast over by eight o'clock. Then they crept out to the mouth of the tunnel, and were disappointed to find that the weather was unfavorable for departure. A fine rain was falling from a sodden, gray sky, and the air was quite warm and moist.

"It feels as though a change was coming," said Jerry. "I believe it will clear off by evening and get cold. Then a crust will form on the snow over night, and we can start early to-morrow morning."

"I hate to spend another day in this cooped-up place," replied Brick, mournfully.

"It can't be helped," declared Hamp. "We don't want to travel in the rain. Keep your spirits up, old fellow. The time won't seem long."

"You're right it won't," assented Jerry. "We've got a lot to do. First of all, the catamount must be taken away from the cabin and skinned. Then we ought to make a search back in the woods for those men. I'm worried about them."

The others shared Jerry's anxiety, but it was agreed to postpone the expedition until afternoon.

The boys went back to the cabin, and tied a rope about the catamount's neck. After a great deal of trouble, they succeeded in dragging the body to the mouth of the tunnel.

Then they set to work with sharp knives and removed the skin in good condition. The carcass was hauled out on the ice, where it would ultimately be devoured by wolves.

After a cold dinner, the boys donned snowshoes and oilskin coats and sallied forth again. They traveled down the lake as far as the point where they had seen the men make a crossing. Then they entered the forest, and tramped backward and forward for several hours.

But not a trace could be found of the two prospectors, Raikes and Bogle, or their camp. The boys searched long and carefully, and varied their shouts by firing guns at frequent intervals. No reply came back. The stillness of death reigned in the forest.

"It's no use," declared Jerry. "We may as well give up and return. I don't suppose the men had more than a campfire, and the traces of that are buried under the snow."

"But what became of them?" asked Hamp.

"I don't know," replied Jerry. "I'm sure they're not dead, anyhow."

"I'll bet they packed up and left for a safer neighborhood as soon as they knew the storm was coming," said Brick. "They didn't leave since, for we would see their tracks on the snow."

"That's about it," assented Jerry. "No doubt they struck back toward the mountains. They didn't worry about us, for Raikes knew how snugly we were fixed."

This solution to the mystery was accepted, and the boys returned to their camp.

On the way back Jerry shot a brace of spruce partridges, and these made a savory supper, varied with two fresh pickerel which Hamp snared through a hole in the ice.

A blazing fire was made at the mouth of the tunnel, and here the meal was cooked and eaten.

Jerry's prediction as to the weather had come true. No rain was falling, and the air was much crisper and colder. By nine o'clock the stars were shining from a steel-blue sky.

The boys went to bed early, so as to be fresh for the morrow's journey. They rose at daybreak, hurried down a cold breakfast, and packed the sleds. This was a task that required some skill, for the ordinary luggage was augmented by the catamount's skin and the antlers of the buck.

Then, with feelings of mingled regret and pleasure, the boys looked their last on the snug little cabin where they had witnessed such stirring scenes, and crawled through the tortuous passages of the tunnel, dragging the sleds behind them. They strapped on their snowshoes, and started directly across the lake.

The walking was mostly over smooth ice, though here and there was a formidable snowdrift piled up by an eddying wind.

The distant line of forest gradually became more distinct, and an hour before noon the young travelers reached the eastern shore of Moosehead Lake. They were not more than two miles from the upper end, and after a brief consultation, they decided to push straight on for Chesumcook Lake, which was about twenty miles away.

"You will like the neighborhood," Jerry assured Brick. "Game is plenty, and there are lots of good camping-places. Chesumcook is an awful long lake, only it's narrow. The Penobscot River flows out of it."

Brick was willing to do anything that his companions proposed, so they plunged into the fragrant spruce woods, and pushed rapidly over the crusted snow. 97

At the end of two or three miles a range of pretty steep hills were encountered, and after dragging the sleds over one of the ridges, the boys were badly winded. They trudged on at a slower rate of speed, making wide detours to reach a gap whenever such a plan was feasible.

About midafternoon they found themselves traversing a narrow and heavily-timbered valley. Through the center brawled a noisy torrent that was too swift to freeze. On either side rose steep, pine-clad hills.

"There ought to be some small game hereabouts," said Jerry. "It's soon time to look up a camping-place for the night, and I'm hungry for a supper of fresh meat."

"So am I," muttered Brick. "I hate the smell of salt pork and bacon."

The boys pushed warily ahead through the dense bushes, looking to right and left. They kept their weapons ready for instant use.

Hamp was several yards in advance. Suddenly he stopped, and held up a warning hand. His face was ablaze with excitement as he turned to his companions.

"Look there!" he gasped. "How's that for luck? Don't make a sound."

The boys crept excitedly forward, and looked through the bushes which Hamp was holding apart with one hand. Then their eyes opened wide, and they shook with feverish ardor.

Over the top of the scrub, and less than sixty yards distant, rose the branching antlers of a huge buck. Close by was a second buck, and the reddish-gray flanks of several other deer were visible. As they moved about on the snow, the rasping crunch of their hoofs could be plainly heard. 98

"What a glorious sight," whispered Hamp. "It's a whole herd of deer, as sure as anything. They're not looking this way, but it's funny they haven't scented us. The wind is from the west, and blows straight down the ravine."

"Let me try a shot at that big fellow?" pleaded Brick, in a tremulous voice.

"Not for the world," whispered Jerry. "The range is too long, and we can't crawl any closer without being discovered. There must be a salt lick down there, and the deer are feeding. I've got a great scheme, fellows, and if we work it properly, we're sure to make a big haul of venison. You two go back a short distance, and climb the hill on the left, without making a bit of noise. Follow the ridge for more than a quarter of a mile, and then climb down to the valley again. I'll take Brick's watch, and wait right here with the sleds. I'll give you thirty-five minutes, and when time is up, I'll try to get a shot at one of the deer. The minute I fire, the whole herd will dash down the valley, and if you fellows are well posted on opposite sides, you ought to get one a piece without any trouble."

The boys heard the plan with enthusiasm, and at once prepared to start. Brick took out his watch, and gave it to Jerry.

"What gun do you want?" asked Hamp.

"I'll keep the shotgun," replied Jerry. "You fellows had better take both along. You understand the plan, do you? Well, don't make any mistake, and avoid noise. Keep up the center of the valley for a hundred feet before you start to climb the hill. Go ahead now. I'm beginning to count time." 99

CHAPTER XV.

A SUCCESSFUL BATTLE.

Hamp and Brick obeyed orders to the letter. Each carried a rifle, a shotgun and a hunting knife, and each had a pocketful of shells.

The thought of what lay before them lent feverish speed to the boys' weary feet. Ten minutes of stiff climbing brought them to the top of the hill. They had taken their snowshoes off, and at present they had no need of them. Owing to the high wind that prevailed during the storm, there was not even a sprinkling of snow on the ridge. 100

They hurried along the rocky pathway, taking good care, however, to tread on no dry twigs or branches. They could see nothing below them, owing to the dense foliage. To right and left lay an equally deep and gloomy ravine.

When the young hunters were a quarter of a mile beyond the spot where Jerry was waiting, as nearly as they could judge, the top of the hill suddenly began to drop downward in steep jumps. Then it sloped more easily, and finally terminated on the brink of a flat, egg-shaped basin, surrounded by hills.

It was a weird and dreary place, and the boys surveyed it for a moment with vague feeling of abhorrence. Then they hastily strapped on their snowshoes, and turned to the mouth of the valley, which was a few yards to their left. They posted themselves behind rocks, on opposite sides of the narrow pass. In between lay scrub bushes and the now frozen bed of the stream.

"Got both your guns loaded?" Hamp called across, in a loud whisper.

"Yes; I'm ready," Brick replied.

His rifle was in his arms, and the shotgun stood beside him.

"How long do you think we'll have to wait?" he added.

"Not long," answered Hamp. "The thirty-five minutes are surely up by this time. I'll bet Jerry is stalking the herd."

An interval of waiting dragged slowly by. The boys became fidgety and restless. They imagined that something had happened to their companion.

Bang! the thunderous roar of a shotgun suddenly reverberated down the ravine. The boys jumped with surprise, and nervously clutched their weapons. They gazed eagerly up the valley.

"Now look out," cried Hamp. "They'll be here in a minute. Keep cool, old fellow, and aim straight."

"I'll do my best," replied Brick. "You take the first one, and I'll pick out one of the rest."

"All right," Hamp whispered.

Just then a loud halloo was heard up the valley, and an instant later the crunching of hoofs and the threshing of bushes rose near by. Now the herd burst into sight, and it was an unexpected surprise to the boys to see eight fat deer leaping onward through the narrow pass.

Bang! went Hamp's rifle, and the leader of the herd, a huge buck, dropped dead in his tracks.

Brick also singled out a buck, but excitement unsteadied his hand, and he merely wounded the animal in the hind flank. As the rest of the herd scurried by, the lads fired several shots apiece, but without visible effect.

Then they sprang out from cover, well content with what they had accomplished.

The wounded buck had toppled over, but at sight of his enemies he staggered to his feet, and made a rush on three legs for Hamp, snorting savagely. The lad had just time to dodge behind the rock. Indeed, his escape from the antlers was very close.

The buck then turned and went for Brick, who skillfully and coolly ended its career with a charge of heavy shot.

"Hurrah! two dead," cried Hamp, as he left his place of shelter. "What a streak of luck!"

"Isn't it glorious?" answered Brick. "Jerry will hardly believe his eyes when he gets here. Say, look there," he added, in a loud and excited voice.

Hamp looked and uttered a yell of delight. Then both lads rushed toward the mouth of the valley, taking great strides over the snow.

What they saw was a fat doe struggling across the center of the swamp. At every step her hoofs broke through the crust, and she was making but feeble progress. The rest of the herd had wisely swung aside into the forest, and were long since out of sight.

Their snowshoes carried the lads swiftly forward, and they were quickly within close range of the animal. Two shots were fired, and the deer rolled over lifeless.

"We've bagged three!" exclaimed Hamp. "Just think of it!"

"It's a great haul," replied Brick; "but we're in pretty much the same fix as the man who had an elephant on his hands. How are we going to carry all this game?"

"Yes—how?" echoed Hamp.

The problem was left unsolved, for just then a hearty cheer rang on the air. The boys hurried back to the mouth of the valley, reaching there just as Jerry emerged from the bushes. His eyes opened wide with amazement when he saw the dead bucks. Then he spied the body of the doe, and simply gasped with open mouth.

"You—you fellows," he stammered. "Why, I can hardly believe it. I thought you might knock over one between you—but three! Great Jehosaphat!"

"Oh! we've got it down fine," laughed Brick. "But how did you make out?"

"I killed a good-sized doe," replied Jerry. "It was a long-range shot, and I'm rather proud of it. I couldn't get very close to the herd on account of the wind."

As he spoke a rasping cry floated toward the mouth of the valley. The startled boys looked out

on the swamp, but could see nothing.

"Some animal is lurking in the scrub," exclaimed Hamp. "Attend to your guns, fellows."

"I hope it's not a catamount," said Brick.

"As likely as not it is," replied Jerry.

The question was not long in doubt. With a whining cry, a good-sized wildcat sprang from a clump of alder bushes just beyond the dead deer. It pounced upon the body, and began to rend it with teeth and claws.

"Did you ever see such impudence?" exclaimed Jerry, half angrily. "Come on; we'll give the little brute a settler."

The boys moved forward, and not until they reached the edge of the swamp did the wildcat become aware of their presence in the neighborhood. The creature was evidently half famished, and, having found a meal to its liking, it was determined to hold on to it. It stopped eating, and glared at the intruders with a ferocious snarl.

"Watch sharp, now," cautioned Jerry. "We'll go pretty close, so as not to run the chance of missing. I'll kill him with a rifle. If we all fire, the skin will be ruined, and it's well worth saving."

This was agreed to. The wildcat remained on the body of the deer until the boys were within four yards. Then it bounded forward six feet, and crouched for another spring.

Jerry took hasty aim, and pulled trigger. The creature was already in air when the shot rang out, and, more by luck than skill, the ball passed through its head. It landed on the snow with a convulsive gasp, and rolled over lifeless at Brick's feet.

"Pretty close quarters," remarked Jerry. "A miss is as good as a mile, though. Now we've got a skin that is worth keeping."

"This is the sort of hunting I used to read about in books," exclaimed Brick. "Four deer and a catamount. Just think of it. I'm afraid I'll wake up and find I've been dreaming."

The others laughed, and Hamp playfully pinched Brick's arm.

"We've got to stir ourselves now," said Jerry. "In about an hour and a half it will be dark. The mouth of the valley will make a good camping-place, and after we've brought down the sleds and my deer, we'll build a blazing fire. Then we'll skin the wildcat, and get the deer swung up to the branches of some of these trees. We won't do anything more to them until morning."

"Except cut some steaks off for supper," added Brick, in a hungry tone.

"Don't be worried," Jerry replied. "I'll give you a supper fit for a king to-night."

"But what in the world will we ever do with all this venison?" asked Hamp. "It will make an awful pile, even when it is cut up."

"It certainly will," admitted Jerry. "There's only one thing to do that I can see. We'll take what we can to Chesumcook to-morrow, and when we get a camp picked out, we'll come back for the rest with two empty sleds."

This sounded practical, and the matter was dropped. The boys hurried up the valley, and presently came to the deer which Jerry had shot. It was a fine, plump animal, and lay in the very center of the salt lick. Two minutes later they reached the spot where the successful hunt had been planned.

As they emerged from the bushes they made a startling and mysterious discovery. The sleds were gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE TRAIL.

The boys were dumfounded by their loss. The theft was a most daring one, and must have been committed within the past few minutes.

"Somebody will wish he had stayed honest," muttered Hamp, vengefully. "I'm glad we all have our guns."

"There was only one thief," declared Jerry. "Look! you can see the dim marks of his snowshoes. Here's where he turned the sleds around."

"And he's taking them back the way they came," added Brick. "In the same ruts, too. He must have hitched them together."

"We'll catch him," said Hamp. "He can't have much of a start. Come on, before it gets dark."

The boys started eagerly along the trail, unmindful of the wealth of venison they were leaving behind.

At the end of half a mile they were not in sight of the thief. Jerry bent down and scanned the sled marks.

"Something wrong here," he said. "The trail is no longer double."

The boys tramped up and down the valley, poking behind every rock and into every clump of bushes and trees. Gradually they became widely separated.

Suddenly a loud shout from Hamp drew his companions to him. His search had proved successful.

Behind a fringe of bushes, at the very base of the left-hand mountain, the faint ruts again appeared on the snow-crust.

"Now for a stern chase," said Jerry. "Have your guns ready, and don't make any noise. This way."

The boys started briskly up the mountain side. Before they had taken many steps they were agreeably surprised to find a broad and easy path that followed a zig-zag course toward the summit.

The boys traveled faster. They were almost at the top of the mountain now. Straight ahead the trail wound narrowly between two steep walls of rock and timber.

Crack! the angry spit of a rifle echoed among the rocks. The ball whistled close over the heads of the lads. They instantly dropped down among the bushes, fearing another shot.

"Let's all fire at once," whispered Hamp.

"No, hold on," cautioned Jerry. "The rascal is safe behind the rocks."

The next instant a deep, growling voice floated down the ravine.

"Keep back, you chaps. The first one as comes a step nearer will get a bullet through him."

The boys wisely made no reply. Under cover of the rocks and trees, they crawled a few yards down the path.

"We're in a hole," said Jerry. "The thief is up there with the sleds."

"What are we going to do about it?" asked Brick.

"Well, we've got to have our traps back," said Jerry, "that's certain. And there's only one way to do it. We must cut down the path as though we were retreating. Then we'll make a detour and lie in wait for the rascal and try to take him by surprise."

This plan offered much risk in spite of Jerry's confident words. But a better course was out of the question.

So the boys rose, and tramped down the winding path, purposely making as much noise as possible, to show that they were retreating. Half-way from the bottom of the valley the boys turned to the left. They followed the rugged mountain side for several hundred yards. Then they mounted straight to the summit and crossed in safety.

Suddenly Jerry uttered a low cry. He sprang forward and snatched a small, dark object that was lying in the snow.

"What is it?" exclaimed his companions.

"A tin dipper," was the reply. "It must have fallen off one of the sleds."

Hamp instantly struck a match, and the flame revealed plain sled-marks leading across the valley.

"We're outwitted again," groaned Brick. "This is awful luck."

"Yes; the rascal must have pulled out the minute he heard us go down the ravine," said Jerry. "By this time he has a big start."

The situation of the lads was now truly deplorable. Yet their very helplessness made it necessary for them to push on.

The trail of the sleds led to an easy pass in the opposite range of mountains. The boys trudged rapidly through this, and emerged in what seemed to be a broad, deep valley.

They pushed on for a quarter of a mile. Then they were stopped by a deep and rapid stream, which was frozen along the edge.

But one match was now left. Hamp cautiously lit it, and it was instantly seen that the thief had turned down the valley.

"We're still on the right track, anyhow," said Jerry. "We can't well miss the rascal, either. He'll stick to the stream until he finds a place to cross."

"He won't find one very soon," declared Hamp. "This is the Mallowgash Creek, if I'm not mistaken. It flows into Chesumcook, and it's broad and deep all the way. It's too swift to freeze."

"I don't see a speck of light ahead," said Brick, as he glanced down the valley. "The thief must be still traveling."

"And that's what we've got to do," replied Jerry. "Come on."

An hour slipped by, and then another. The boys could hardly drag their aching feet along. They yearned to drop down and sleep. But they knew that if they succumbed to the temptation, they

would never wake again.

Now the strip of open suddenly faded into a gloomy pine forest that grew to the water's edge. The boys stumbled from side to side among the trees, and presently came out of the forest into open ground. Some distance ahead a ray of yellow light was visible.

"At last!" muttered Hamp. "We have run the rascal down."

"Yes; there's his campfire," said Brick. "I hope he's sound asleep."

"Not too fast, you fellows," whispered Jerry. "That light is too steady for a fire. But we'll investigate and make sure."

He led the boys softly forward. They were moving off from the stream at an angle now. The roar of the water grew fainter with every step. A few yards ahead was a copse of tall bushes, which concealed the yellow gleam.

The boys made a detour around them, and the next instant they were fairly blinded by a dazzling glare of light.

Their eyes quickly became accustomed to it, and then they made an unexpected and joyful discovery.

The light shone from a single window in the end of a long, low house that stood some fifty feet away. The intervening space contained several small sheds, and was strewn with felled trees, many of which had been denuded of bark and branches. From the house came gruff voices and an occasional peal of boisterous laughter.

"We've stumbled on a logging camp," exclaimed Jerry. "That thieving rascal must be inside."

"He may be one of them," suggested Hamp. "What are we going to do about it?"

"First of all, we'll take a peep," replied Jerry. "I don't believe the thief belongs here. If he does, we'll get square treatment, though. Loggers are mostly honest fellows, if they are a bit rough. Come on."

CHAPTER XVII.

FOUND AND LOST.

The boys went cautiously forward among the obstructing trees, and soon reached the end of the loggers' house. There was probably a hot fire inside, for the window was raised several inches to admit fresh air. The sill was not high from the ground, and the boys ventured to peep in.

They saw banks on two sides of the room. At the far end was a red-hot stove. At the end nearest the window was a long table. Around this sat half a score of burly, rough-looking men. All were smoking pipes but one.

The exception was a tall, muscular fellow of about forty. His face was covered with a stubbly red beard, and its expression was crafty and brutal. Before him were a plate of food and a mug of coffee. He was eating and drinking in the greedy fashion of a hungry pig.

The boys looked on for several minutes. They were too deeply interested to be prudent. But, fortunately, none of the loggers glanced toward the window.

All at once Hamp clutched Jerry's arm in a strong, excited grip.

"Look!" he whispered. "Over there are our sleds, against the wall."

"I see them," replied Jerry. "Hush! don't make any noise. I want to hear what they are talking about."

The boys put their heads closer together. They looked and listened. The conversation had been low and unintelligible. Now it suddenly rose to a higher pitch.

"Whar've you been all this time, Sparwick?" demanded a red-shirted logger at the head of the table, who seemed to be a leader among his companions. "I reckoned you wasn't in this part of the country."

"I reckoned he was in jail," cried the man next him, with a loud guffaw, and general laughter followed.

The red-bearded man, who was eating, lifted his face from the plate, and scowled angrily.

"I didn't come here ter be insulted, Thomson," he replied, addressing the first speaker. "I've been workin' with Bill Jordan's loggin' gang up at the head of Chesumcook. I'm goin' down ter Bangor now fur a spell."

"Yer seem ter hev kinder struck it rich," pursued Thomson. "Two sleds an' a lot of truck!"

"I borrowed 'em up at the camp," said Sparwick, carelessly. "I've got spruce gum packed under the blankets. I oughter realize on it purty handsome."

He glanced at the sleds; then tilted his chair back.

"Much obliged fur the grub," he added. "I reckon I'll take a sleep now, so's ter pull out at daybreak."

"Look here, Kyle Sparwick," said Thomson. "We happen ter need an extry hand badly. Can't you stay a day or two?"

Sparwick pulled at his short beard.

"I'm afeard not," he replied, slowly. "I've got pressin' business down at—"

Bang! the window came down with a crash as Jerry's fingers knocked the plug of wood from under it. The frightened boys jumped back. They heard excited shouts and cries inside.

"Come on," exclaimed Hamp. "We must face the music. I think we're sure of square treatment."

He led his companions around the angle of the house. Just as they reached the door it was flung open by a noisy crowd of loggers.

The boys were dragged inside, and clamored at by a dozen indignant voices. They tried vainly to explain. Finally Thomson restored a semblance of order, and quieted the mob.

"Now, what does this here mean?" he demanded. "You chaps were sneakin' an' spyin' outside that winder. Don't deny it."

"We didn't mean any harm," stoutly protested Jerry. "We can explain our actions. We came here after our sleds. There they are in the corner, and that's the man who stole them from us three hours ago."

He singled out Sparwick from the crowd, and pointed at him.

The detected thief was in a tight place, but he was not prepared to give up. He made a bold attempt at bluffing.

"Them sleds are mine," he cried. "I'll wring yer neck, you young liar."

He sprang forward, and seized Jerry by the collar. He lifted him clear off his feet, and swung him in air.

A chorus of indignant cries rang out. There was a rush from all sides.

"Drop the youngster," yelled Thomson; and when Sparwick refused to obey, he struck him forcibly on the arm.

Jerry dropped to the floor, and quickly regained his feet.

"I'm telling the truth," he cried, huskily. "Those are our sleds. I can describe every article on them."

The ruffian made another rush at the lad, but was jerked back. The loggers seemed to be against Sparwick to a man. Evidently they knew his reputation.

"Sit down thar," commanded Thomson, pointing to a chair. "An' don't yer make no sneak fur the door. We'll get to the bottom of this affair. Now, youngsters, spin your yarn."

The boys needed no second bidding. They spoke by turns, and gave a clear and convincing account of their unpleasant adventure. They did not forget to describe the thrilling slaughter of the deer. This part of the narrative caused the loggers to open their eyes and stare incredulously. They slapped their horny hands against their knees.

"That chap tells a heap what ain't true," said Sparwick, when Jerry had finished the concluding part of the tale. "I found the sleds, an' reckoned their owners had lost 'em. As fur me shootin' at the lads—why, that's the biggest lie of all. I never laid eyes on 'em until now."

But no one seemed to believe the rascal. Indeed, they heaped him with ugly names, and made not a few unpleasant threats. Thomson interfered in behalf of peace.

"Everybody knows that Kyle Sparwick can't keep his hands off other people's property," he said. "He's seen the inside of more'n one jail. Thar's where he oughter go this time, only I reckon no one's goin' ter take him down ter Bangor. Now, I've got a propersition ter make -pervised it suits these youngsters. If Kyle Sparwick will agree ter do a week's work here we won't prosecute him."

This suggestion was approved.

"What's yer answer, prisoner?" demanded Thomson.

"I reckon it's yes," muttered Sparwick.

He added something in an undertone as his evil eyes glanced at the boys.

"Then the thing's settled," said Thomson. "You can tuck yerself into that bunk yonder just as soon as you please. And now about that kill of deer. We ain't had any fresh meat fur quiet a spell, an' I reckon it'll taste good. Here's a propersition for you, youngsters. We'll bring the venison to camp, an' give you all you kin carry. The rest we'll keep fur our trouble. How's that?"

The boys gladly assented, and ten minutes later half-a-dozen of the loggers started for the distant spot. They took with them lanterns, and a long hand-sled. There was no time to lose, for wolves were likely to scent the meat.

Thomson stayed behind and made himself agreeable to the young visitors. He soon knew all about them, and when he heard they were going to Chesumcook Lake, he gave them some

valuable information about the locality.

Then he instructed the cook to prepare a warm supper, of which the boys ate greedily.

It was now close to midnight, and they eagerly took possession of the cozy bunks that were assigned to them. The last thing they remembered, before losing consciousness, was Kyle Sparwick's sleeping figure in another bunk across the room.

Banging and rattling of dishes; clattering footsteps; angry voices and shouts—this was what roused the boys after what seemed to them but a few minutes' sleep.

They tumbled out of bed, and rubbed their eyes. At first they did not know what to make of the confusion. The misty light of dawn was struggling with the red glow from the cook's stove. The loggers were up, and clustered together at one side of the room. They were clamoring, and gesticulating, and uttering tremendous threats and oaths.

"Hello, youngsters!" cried Thomson. "Hev you heard the news? That consarned slippery cuss is gone. We might a-knowed better than to put any trust in Kyle Sparwick."

"How did he get away?" asked Jerry.

"Dunno. He must a-skipped off as soon as we wus all asleep—long about two o'clock. He made a dummy outen a blanket, and an old hat, an' stuck it in his bunk. There was a lamp burnin' dim on the table, too."

"I mind hearin' a noise," said a logger named Tommy Bobb; "but I was too sleepy to do more'n sing out, 'Who's thar.'"

"You must a-skeered him," declared Thomson, "an' that's why he didn't take nothing with him—not even his own gun. Thar it rests on the hook."

"He took something better than a gun," exclaimed Brick, who had meanwhile been examining his pocket. "He took my gold watch, and a purse with thirty dollars in it. I had some more money in a belt, but that's all right."

This declaration caused a renewal of the excitement. The loggers sympathized with Brick, and offered him rude consolation.

"How about you fellers?" asked Tommy Bobb of Hamp and Jerry.

They shook their heads and smiled. The contents of their pockets would have offered no temptation to the meanest sort of a thief.

"I don't mind the money," said Brick; "but I hate to lose the watch. I'm going after that sneaking rascal."

"No use, youngster," assured Thomson. "Sparwick has a big start. He took an old boat what we had here, an' went down the Mallowgash. He'd have clear water fur four miles. Then I reckon he'd strike deep inter the woods. If thar was a chance of gettin' him we'd make up a party. How's that, boys?"

"Dead right," exclaimed the loggers, in chorus.

Brick accepted this as final. He was anxious to start for the lake, however, and so were Hamp and Jerry.

But just when breakfast was over the party returned with the dead deer and the wildcat. This caused a delay. As soon as possible the deer were skinned and cut up, and the meat divided. The boys were given all they could carry.

Between eight and nine o'clock they were ready to start. They parted with the friendly loggers, and tramped briskly across the clearing.

"I say, youngsters," Thomson yelled after them, "if you should run acrost that sneakin' Sparwick, jest show a bold front, an' you'll have him. He's a coward at heart, an' hates a gun barrel worse than pisen."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAMP'S PERIL.

Neither Brick nor his companions expected to overtake Kyle Sgarwick. They knew that what Thomson said was true. The thief was many hours ahead, and possessed an intricate knowledge of the wilderness.

"I'll have to let the watch go," said Brick, in a resigned tone. "I hated to lose it, because it was a present from my father."

"We may recover it at some pawnshop in Bangor, when we go back," replied Jerry.

This cheered Brick up a little, and the conversation turned on brighter topics. For mile after

mile the boys tramped steadily down the Mallowgash. The air was bitterly cold, but not sufficient to freeze the dashing current and tumbling waves.

"We ought to be near Chesumcook," said Hamp, at length.

"We are," replied Jerry. "The logging camp is a good four miles behind us. Pretty soon we'll get a view of the lake."

"And what then?" asked Brick.

"Well, I guess the best plan will be to get across the Mallowgash, and push up this side of Chesumcook until we strike a good camping-place."

"That's just the thing," assented Hamp. "Come on. Let's walk faster."

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Accordingly the boys quickened their pace. The roaring of the near-by stream drowned the slight crunching of the snowshoes and sleds.

At length they reached a bit of a clearing that faced the Mallowgash. Here they paused, startled and pleased by the strange sight that met their gaze.

In the center of the stream was a submerged tree, drifted there by some powerful flood. Only its upper limbs projected from the water. Caught in these was a partly sunken boat. Its bottom had evidently been impaled on one of the sharp, spiky branches. In the precarious and slanting front-end of the craft stood Kyle Sparwick.

The rascal was naked, and in one hand he held his clothes, rolled tightly into a pack. His back was toward the boys, and for half a minute they watched him in silence.

"Serves the rascal right," muttered Hamp. "He must have struck there hours ago. He couldn't get the boat loose, and now he's going to wade."

"I don't envy him," whispered Jerry. "He'll nearly freeze to death."

"I wish I had my watch and money," replied Brick; "but I don't see any way to get them."

Just then Sparwick stepped from the boat onto the submerged trunk of the tree. He shivered like a leaf, but without hesitation he lowered himself into the icy water. It came almost to his neck. Holding his clothes high overhead, he waded slowly toward the opposite shore.

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"Stop, you thief!" shouted Brick, with all his might.

Sparwick nearly lost his balance. He recovered himself, and turned his head. His eyes snapped with fear and danger when he saw the boys. Jerry lifted his rifle, and leveled it across the stream.

"We want that stolen property," he yelled. "I've got the drop on you. Wade over to this shore as quick as you can."

Sparwick stood still. He tried to speak, but his teeth chattered too much. Then he did a bold and venturesome thing. He flung his clothes safely beyond the heavy fringe of bushes that skirted the opposite bank of the stream. The next instant he vanished before the eyes of the amazed boys. He had dived clear under water.

"Watch for him!" yelled Jerry.

"Pepper him when he comes up," cried Brick, excitedly.

For half a minute there was silence. The boys eagerly scanned the opposite shore. Then, thirty feet diagonally down stream, something white slipped out of the water, and dodged like a flash into the bushes.

"What beastly luck!" cried Jerry. "I never dreamed of his coming up away down there. He's out of reach now."

"And we can't get across," moaned Brick. "Good-bye to the watch. I wish I had fired when I had the chance."

"Hold on!" suddenly cried Hamp. "We've got a show yet."

He ran swiftly down stream to a point some twenty feet below, and opposite to the place where Sparwick had left the water.

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Jerry and Brick followed at a slower pace, wondering what was in the wind. They understood as soon as they caught up with Hamp. Here the Mallowgash abruptly widened. It was frozen hard from shore to shore with the exception of a six-foot channel in midstream. Through this the water poured with a swift, steady rush.

"Don't be a fool," expostulated Jerry. "You'll throw your life away."

"The watch ain't worth the risk," added Brick. "Let it go."

"Don't worry about me," cried Hamp. "That's an easy jump. Don't you fellows try to follow me, though."

Before his companions could prevent him, he dashed forward, rifle in hand. He sped swiftly over the first stretch of ice. With an agile leap, he cleared the gap of rushing water, and landed on firm ice beyond.

Suddenly Sparwick crashed through the fringe of bushes. He was attired only in a red flannel shirt. His face was blue with cold, and his beard was a frozen mass of icicles. He glared at the daring lad, and uttered a hoarse cry. In one hand he held a great clod of frozen snow. He drew it

back and let fly.

The whole thing was so sudden that Hamp did not have time to lift or use his rifle. The heavy missile struck him forcibly on the breast. He reeled to one side and slipped on the smooth ice. With a piercing cry, he plunged into the swift water.

Sparwick instantly vanished behind the bushes. Well for him that he did so. Had he lingered but a moment Brick or Jerry would have shot him in their wrath.

Finding the ruffian out of reach, the two boys turned their eyes anxiously on the open channel.

Hamp's head and shoulders bobbed to the surface half-a-dozen feet below where he had fallen in. He still retained his hold on the rifle. He made a gallant struggle for life, and succeeded in reaching the rim of ice nearest his companions. He threw the rifle forward, and clung tight.

"Help! help!" he cried. "I'm nearly played out, boys. I'll have to let go."

But Brick and Jerry were prompt to the rescue. With great strides they crossed the ice, and soon had Hamp safely beside them. They dragged him over to the bank, and dropped him in a clump of bushes. He was blue and speechless with cold.

"Bring the sleds here, Brick," cried Jerry. "Quick, while I make a fire. Hamp must have dry clothes and blankets right away."

Brick dashed off at full speed. When he returned, a moment later, Jerry had heaped up a pile of brush and twigs. Hamp was taking off his dripping clothes as fast as his numbed fingers would allow.

Just as Jerry scraped a match, a crunching noise was heard back from the stream. It grew nearer and louder. The boys stopped their occupations, and glanced in the direction of the sound. A moment later the bushes parted and two men emerged.

The foremost was an old acquaintance, Mr. Silas Raikes. His companion was a sinister-looking fellow, with a heavy black beard and mustache. Both were armed with rifles, and a well-packed hand-sled trailed behind them.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Raikes, in a tone of the utmost surprise. "We meet again, my young friends. This is an unexpected pleasure. Not taking a bath on such a morning as this, I hope."

"Hamp was compelled to take one," replied Jerry.

He briefly related the stirring events of the past twenty-four hours, beginning with the start from the far side of Moosehead Lake. Meanwhile the fire blazed up merrily, and Hamp got himself into dry clothes and blankets.

"You've had a tough time of it, boys!" commented Silas Raikes. "I'm glad to find that you weathered the storm all right. And so you're bound in our direction? I had no idea you intended traveling to Chesumcook."

"That's what we told you the night you were at our camp," replied Jerry.

"Then I forgot all about it," admitted Raikes. "You see, I've got a bad memory."

"Are you still prospecting?" asked Brick.

"Not in this weather," was the reply. "We're taking a sort of a roundabout way home."

"We feared you were lost in the storm," said Jerry. "After it was over we hunted the neighborhood for your camp."

"And didn't find it, eh?" laughed Raikes. "No wonder, lads. We had a snug nest among the rocks, two miles or more from the lake. But pardon me. I quite forgot to introduce my friend, of whom I spoke to you before. This is Joe Bogle, from Augusta, Maine. We've been partners for many a year."

The black-bearded man had been scrutinizing the lads—and Brick in particular—with keen attention. Now he stepped forward, and nodded in response to the introduction.

"I'm glad to meet any friends of my partner," he said, in a low, oily voice.

A surprised and puzzled look appeared on Brick's face. He stared intently at Mr. Joe Bogle.

"Haven't I met you before?" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIX.

BOGLE SHOWS HIS HAND.

A brief pause followed Brick's impulsive question. The boys looked on with interest. Raikes gave an almost imperceptible start. Then he drew a pipe from his pocket, and began to clean the bowl industriously with a twig of wood.

Mr. Joe Bogle was the most unconcerned one of the party. A smile lightened his sinister

features, and he came quite close to Brick.

"We may have met before, youngster," he drawled, in a tone that was the exact opposite of the one he had used before. "It's quite likely, though I can't say that I remember your face."

"I guess I'm mistaken," admitted Brick. "It was your voice that seemed familiar when you first spoke. I don't notice it now."

"I've often been tricked that way," said Raikes, laughing. "Lots of people have voices alike. Still, you may have run across Bogle some time or another. How long have you been in Maine?"

"I never was inside the State in my life, until two or three weeks ago," replied Brick.

"Then I reckon you must be mistaken," emphatically declared Raikes. "Bogle and I have been in the woods since November."

"And I haven't been outside of Maine for nearly fifteen years," added Bogle. "It ain't very likely we met before that."

He laughed in a rasping way. Brick laughed, too. Now that the stranger's voice had lost its familiar chord, he was satisfied of his mistake, and ceased to think about the matter.

Raikes quickly turned the conversation into a different channel.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we ought to overhaul that rascally thief, and restore the stolen property to these lads. How does it strike you, Bogle?"

He exchanged a lightning-like glance with his companion. The latter nodded assent.

"That's right," he replied. "I'm with you. It won't take us much out of our way."

"No," Raikes continued, "we'll catch him in a jiffy. He can't be far off."

"It would have taken him almost this long to put on his clothes," said Jerry. "He has snowshoes, though."

"So have we," replied Raikes. "If you lads will come along with us, we'll try to recover the money and watch."

"Hamp ain't fit to travel," answered Jerry. "He's got to sit over this fire for a couple of hours. And Brick and I can't leave him alone. Besides, how are you going to cross the Mallowgash? That leap is too dangerous."

"Just below the bend, yonder, is a clean freeze-over," replied Raikes. "We were in the act of crossing when we heard you fellows sing out. But one of you ought to go with us to identify the property and bring it back. You see, the rascal may head just in the direction we want to go, and; under them circumstances, we wouldn't care about tramping all the way back."

"I'll go with you," eagerly exclaimed Brick. "I'd like to be on hand when you corner Sparwick, and make him fork over."

A sudden gleam passed over Bogle's face. Raikes twisted his mustache and looked across the stream.

"It don't matter which one of you goes," he replied, carelessly. "Come on, youngster, if the rest are willing."

Jerry and Hamp had no objections to offer. They knew that Brick was eager for the chase, and they saw no reason why he should not accept the friendly offer of the two genial strangers. It was his money and his watch that were at stake.

Brick filled his belt with fresh cartridges, and shouldered his rifle. Then he started briskly down stream with Raikes and Bogle.

As soon as they rounded the bend, the party found the channel frozen tightly from shore to shore. They crossed over and went up the other side. They soon found Sparwick's trail, leading off from the Mallowgash at a right angle. After apprising Jerry and Hamp of this fact by a shrill whistle—the signal agreed upon—they took up the chase.

For a mile they pushed on through heavy forest and rocks. The men went at a rapid pace, and Brick easily kept up with them.

"We'll overhaul the rascal before long," assured Raikes. "You'll get back to your companions in time for dinner."

But at the end of another mile Sparwick was still invisible; nor did the scant-marks of his snowshoes appear to be particularly fresh. He evidently suspected pursuit, and was moving at his top speed.

Presently the trail turned due north. During the next half hour the pursuers caught an occasional glimpse of Chesumcook Lake from high ground. They pushed steadily on, until Brick began to feel a little weary. He admitted as much to his companions.

"Don't give up yet, my lad," said Raikes. "Now that you've come this far, you may as well finish. The rascal can't keep ahead of us long."

"And when we get your watch and money, we'll take you part of the way back," added Bogle.

"If you'll do that, it's all right," replied Brick. "It's a long distance to where we left the boys, and I might get lost by myself. It must be dinner time now."

"I reckon it is," admitted Raikes.

He looked up at the sun, which was dimly visible through a bank of fleecy clouds.

"Shall we have a bite to eat?" asked Bogle, glancing at the sled.

Raikes shook his head.

"Better not stop now," he replied. "Every minute is precious."

They pushed on rapidly, spurring Brick to greater efforts by repeated words of cheer. Now and then they bent over to examine Sparwick's trail, or whispered together in low tones.

An hour after midday, a strip of open ground was reached. It had probably been devastated at one time by a forest fire.

Sparwick's trail led across the clearing to within a dozen feet of a brook. Then it turned abruptly and entered the thick forest, in the direction of the lake.

Raikes stooped down, and intently examined the imprint of the snowshoes.

"What do you think of it?" he asked of Bogle.

"Not very fresh, eh?" replied Raikes.

"Exactly. The scamp is traveling at a two-forty gait. It will be wasting time to keep this up any longer."

"And the game's not worth the candle, anyhow," added Raikes.

He looked meaningfully at his companion. They moved away from Brick to a ledge of rocks that extended clear to the brook. For several minutes they conversed in low tones. They pointed first to the stream, and then to the rocks on which they stood. The latter, owing to their exposed position, had been blown full of snow. Finally the men returned to Brick.

"We've decided to give up the pursuit," said Raikes. "Instead of gaining, we've been falling behind."

"Sorry we brought you on such a wild-goose chase," added Bogle, "but it can't be helped."

"I don't care much," replied Brick. "Only it's a long ways back. Are you going with me?"

"I reckon not," said Bogle. "In fact, you had better go along with us. You're pretty tired, lad, so I'll carry your rifle for you."

By a quick movement, he snatched the weapon.

The act and the words startled Brick. He suddenly realized that his companion had some evil design against him.

"Give me my rifle," he said. "I can find the way back alone. The boys are likely to meet me."

Bogle scowled savagely.

"Don't get obstinate, youngster," he said, in a sharp tone. "I told you before that you were going with us. Now march! we have no time to lose."

Again Brick recognized the familiar chord in the man's voice. Like a flash, he remembered where he had heard it. The discovery so angered him that he forgot every instinct of prudence.

"I know you now," he cried. "You can't fool me with your beard and mustache. You are the missionary who was on the train that night. You followed me and tried to steal my pocketbook."

The ferocious expression that instantly appeared on Bogle's face told Brick he had done a foolish thing. His dread of consequences led him to commit another blunder. He turned and dashed at full speed across the clearing.

A hoarse command to stop fell on his ears. He disregarded it and ran faster. He heard crunching footsteps behind him. Then one of his snowshoes caught in a tuft of bushes, and he sprawled headlong. As he rose to his feet, a muscular hand clutched his collar. He wheeled around to meet Bogle's grim and angry face.

"I've got you," growled the ruffian. "Don't try another trick of this sort, youngster, or you'll be sorry."

"Let me go!" cried Brick. "Let me go, I say. It's you that will be sorry!"

Fear and terror lent him strength. He struggled desperately to break loose. In the short scuffle that followed he was roughly handled. A blow on the nose from Bogle's fist partially stunned him and drew blood. He realized the folly of further efforts, and meekly submitted to be dragged back.

"I told you not to be rough," remonstrated Raikes. "The lad's nose is bleeding, and there's blood on the snow. How are you going to hide it?"

"It won't matter," replied Bogle. "It's his own fault. He had no business to struggle. I hit him accidentally. Use your handkerchief, youngster."

Brick did so, and in a short time the bleeding stopped. He quietly let Bogle search him, and the belt of money that he wore under his clothes, was soon brought to light. The men opened it greedily, and counted over the gold coins and banknotes.

"You're welcome to that, since I can't help myself," said Brick, in a sullen tone. "And now I suppose you'll let me go."

Raikes looked at his companion, and shrugged his shoulders.

"No; we won't let you go," replied Bogle, savagely. "The cash will do very nicely, but just at present we want you more than anything else. And here's a word of advice, youngster. You'll do well to heed it, for I'm not given to idle speech. Keep your mouth shut, and ask no questions. Obey orders, and you shan't be harmed. If you try to escape, I'll put a bullet through you. How's that, Silas?"

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"Couldn't be any plainer," assented Raikes. "I hope you understand, lad."

Brick did not reply. He was pretty badly scared by Bogle's threats, and had no intention of disobeying. The whole affair was a profound mystery. He could not imagine what his captors wanted with him, now that they had all his money.

"I guess they intend to keep me prisoner for a while," he reflected, "so they will have a better chance to escape."

Then a darker thought entered his mind, and brought a gleam of terrible anxiety to his face. Supposing they should make an attempt upon his life?

CHAPTER XX.

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BRICK'S DEFENCE.

First of all, Raikes followed Sparwick's trail to where it entered the woods. He plunged a few yards into the heavy undergrowth and timber. Then he retraced the entire distance backward, leaving a plain imprint with every step. Brick's heart sank. He thought he knew what this proceeding meant.

The two men next removed their snowshoes, and made Brick do likewise. They put the three pairs under the luggage on the sled, and drew the straps as tight as possible. Raikes hoisted the heavy sled to his right shoulder. Then the start was made, in the following order: Raikes first, Brick in the middle, and Bogle bringing up the rear, whence he could watch every movement of the prisoner. The three followed the ledge of rocks to its very end, and stepped off into the swift, open channel of the brook. The water was shallow, but fearfully cold. It quickly penetrated Brick's boots and made him shiver. Raikes and Bogle did not seem to mind it. The latter turned and looked back.

"Well done," he muttered. "That would almost throw a bloodhound off the trail."

"There's better luck in store for us," replied Raikes. "We'll have snow before morning."

"I believe it," assented Bogle, glancing up at the murky sky. "Go ahead. Don't you plant your feet anywhere but in the water, youngster."

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Raikes led the way down the center of the brook, between deep and gloomy woods. The chilling journey lasted for more than a mile. The water sometimes took the waders almost to their knees. Brick was heartily glad when the open lake came in sight. It was frozen hard against the shore.

The party pushed rapidly up the lake, evidently with a fixed destination in view. Here and there were great drifts of snow, but, for the most part, the ice was bare. The travelers left no trace behind them. Raikes bore the heavy sled as though it was a trifling burden.

About midafternoon, when the head of the lake was several miles distant, a lively snowgust came on. Raikes and Bogle held a short conversation.

Then they headed due east, across the lake. Before they tramped a mile the snow had turned to a steady fall of fine flakes. It quickly covered the ice to the depth of an inch. Raikes lowered the sled and trailed it behind him.

It was quite dark when the eastern shore of Chesumcook was reached—so dark that the forest was only a blurred blot against the night.

The snow was several inches deep, and still falling in a white, stealthy cloud. There was scarcely enough wind to stir the tops of the pine trees.

Brick had hoped that his captors would pitch camp here. He was hungry and tired, and his frosted feet ached with every step.

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However, he was destined to disappointment. No doubt Raikes and Bogle were equally disposed to rest, but, nevertheless, they lit a lantern and plunged into the forest.

As before, Raikes took the lead, while Bogle followed on Brick's heels. All wore their snowshoes again, and they traveled at a fair rate of speed.

Brick speedily lost all track of his bearings. For nearly two hours he followed the misty gleam of Raikes' lantern—over hills, across open meadows, and through narrow ravines. The snow grew deeper and deeper, and at times it fairly blinded him. Then, without knowing how or when it began, he found himself threading the mazy windings of a vast, frozen marsh.

The path was a tortuous one. It led over rocks, and fallen trees, and patches of tangled grass. At times it slipped under canopies of interlaced bushes. Here it was necessary to stoop very low.

A whole hour was spent in traversing this gloomy and boundless place. Brick began to believe that it had no end.

"A little faster, youngster," urged Bogle, in a gruff voice. "We don't want to spend the night out of doors. A lovely hiding-place, this, ain't it? An army could never find us here. If we should turn you loose now, you would wander about till you died of starvation. You could never get out."

Brick shuddered. He tried hard to quicken his pace. Raikes was moving rapidly, and in a manner that betokened familiarity with the ground.

"It's not far now," he called back to Brick. "You'll soon have supper and sleep."

Five minutes later the tangle of the undergrowth and young timber ended abruptly on the edge of a small clearing. Here, faintly outlined against the driving snow, stood a low, flat-roofed log cabin.

Raikes grunted with satisfaction as he opened the door. Bogle pushed Brick inside, where the scene was in strong contrast to the outer storm.

The floor was planked. A pile of wood was stacked by the open fireplace. The furniture consisted of two benches and a table. One end of the room was spread with pine boughs, on top of which were blankets.

A blazing fire was quickly built. The sled yielded provisions in plenty, and from a small cupboard Raikes took dishes and cooking utensils.

A little later the three sat down to a tempting supper. The fact that he was a prisoner did not interfere with Brick's appetite, and he ate heartily.

When the meal was over, the men prepared for bed. They made Brick lie down between them, and his left wrist was fastened to Bogle's right by a pair of slender, steel bracelets.

Brick was too sleepy to mind this indignity. From the moment his head touched the pine boughs, he knew nothing until he woke, to find the light of day shining through the cabin's one window.

The fire was roaring, and the table was set. Raikes was frying bacon and potatoes, and Bogle sat near by, smoking a pipe.

"Get up, youngster," he called out, when he saw that Brick was awake. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Pretty good," answered Brick.

He was puzzled to account for the ruffian's affable manner.

Raikes now announced that breakfast was ready. He pulled a bench to the table, and the three sat down. Bogle was the last to finish. He rose and opened the door.

"Come here, youngster," he said.

Brick obeyed. From the threshold the prospect was dreary and dismal. No snow was falling, but it lay deep on the bit of clearing. Overhead was the murky, gray sky; in front the tangled thickets of the marsh.

"I want to tell you where you are," resumed Bogle. "This cabin is in the biggest and loneliest swamp in the State of Maine. Raikes and I built it two years ago. No one ever comes near the locality. The swamp is regarded as inaccessible. Your friends would not find you, if they searched for ten years. Even if you escaped, you could never get put of the swamp. You would lose yourself, and travel around in a circle."

Brick did not doubt the truth of this. A lump rose in his throat as he turned away from the door. He could scarcely repress the tears. Raikes was just putting away the last of the dishes. He glanced meaningly at Bogle. The latter opened the cupboard, and brought out a bottle of ink, a pen, some sheets of paper, a pack of envelopes, and arranged these things on the table.

Brick wondered what was coming next. He felt more curiosity than fear. He did not have long to wait.

Bogle drew a packet of letters from his pocket and held them up. They bore foreign stamps and postmarks.

"Do you recognize these?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Brick, in an aggressive tone. "You stole them out of my coat on the night of the tenth of December."

His face flushed with anger as he remembered all that happened on that occasion.

"No impudence," growled Bogle. "I won't have it. I'm showing you these letters in order that you may see the uselessness of telling us any lies. We know who you are and all about you. You are the son of John Larkins, the wealthy contractor of New York."

"Well, I don't deny it," replied Brick. "What's that to you?"

"You will find out presently," said Bogle, with a mocking smile. "I want a little information first. These letters were written to you by your father. The last one is dated at Mentone on the twenty-fourth of November. Is he still there?"

"Yes."

"And how long will he remain?"

Brick hesitated an instant.

"My parents intend to stay in the south of France until spring," he replied. "My mother's health is poor. My father took her abroad to avoid cold weather."

"And you were left at college in New York," added Bogle, "in care of a lawyer, who acts as a sort of guardian. What brought you to Maine at this time of year?"

"I won't answer that," replied Brick, sullenly.

Bogle's eyes flashed. He made a threatening move forward. But a glance from Raikes checked him.

"If the answer was of any importance, I'd soon find a way to open your lips," he said, coolly. "Now sit down at that table and take the pen. You must write two letters—one to your father, the other to this lawyer, Frederick Glendale, whose address you know. I will dictate them. Do you understand?"

A light broke suddenly on Brick's bewildered mind. He saw now why he had been brought to this lonely place. His blood fairly boiled with indignation. He faced Bogle with flashing eyes.

"You may keep me here for a lifetime," he cried, angrily, "but I won't write a line."

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CHAPTER XXI.

PLUNGED UNDER GROUND.

For two reasons Jerry and Hamp stayed but a short time at their temporary camp by the Mallowgash.

In the first place, Hamp quickly recovered from the chilling effects of his bath, and refused to be considered an invalid any longer. In the second place, both lads felt a growing uneasiness concerning Brick. They had no tangible suspicions or fears. They were merely anxious to overtake him, since they were, in a measure, responsible for his safety.

Accordingly, in a little more than an hour after the parting, they were ready to start. They crossed the Mallowgash at the frozen spot, and easily picked up the trail. The two heavy sleds delayed them somewhat. On the whole, they did not travel quite so rapidly as the other party. As time slipped by, their uneasiness grew upon them. They had expected, ere this, to meet Brick coming back. They were alarmed, too, by the threatening aspect of the weather.

Finally they reached the clearing by the stream. Here the short trail of blood gave them a terrible fright. Their looks meant what their lips were afraid to utter—the dread word "murder."

Then Jerry laughed.

"This is nonsense," he said. "It's nothing to be scared about, Hamp. One of the party fell on the snow and scraped his nose. Look! here's where the crust is dented in."

"That's so," replied Hamp, in a relieved tone. "Cracky! I was scared for a minute."

"So was I," admitted Jerry. "They must be having a long, hard chase. Still, they can't be much farther ahead."

"Let's walk faster," urged Hamp. "It's going to snow soon."

They turned to the right, barely glancing at the ledge of rocks and the brawling stream. They left the clearing and plunged into the scrub and timber in the direction of the lake.

They were moving too rapidly to notice that the imprint of but one pair of snowshoes was ahead of them. As they neared the lake, they struck a pitch of rising ground.

The boys dropped into single file. Hamp preceded, and Jerry followed with both sleds.

"I can see a bit of the lake through the trees," said Hamp. "It's not more than half a mile away. We ought to overtake the party between here and the shore."

Just then he struck a slippery pitch of rock and snow, and began to feel his way very cautiously. Six feet below was a fringe of bushes that shut off further view.

Meanwhile Jerry had fallen a little behind. He suddenly observed how slim and indistinct was the trail. He paused at once, and the sleds backed up against his ankles.

He bent over and keenly scrutinized the impressions on the snow.

"Hold on, Hamp," he cried. "Something wrong here. I see the marks of your snowshoes and of another pair. By cracky! we've blundered. There's been only one man ahead of us."

"How can that be?" exclaimed Hamp. "We didn't see any marks branching off."

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He was startled by his companion's assertion. He tried to stop, but, unluckily, one foot slipped. He came forcibly down on the snow-crust in a sitting posture.

With a yell of dismay he shot down the slope and plunged through the fringe of bushes. A brief glimpse showed what was below—a circular depression of glistening snow screwing downward like a funnel, until it ended in a jagged black hole of extreme narrowness. The same glimpse made clear to Hamp that some one had created the depression by breaking through the crust of snow and gliding into an underlying cavity of unknown depth. For a fraction of a second Hamp stuck on the brink. He clutched vainly at air and snow. Then he shot down the abyss, feet first, and vanished through the black fissure at the bottom!

Jerry heard his companion's horrified cries. He knew that some catastrophe must have happened. He forgot all about his recent discovery, and plunged recklessly forward. The natural result was that the sleds banged him violently from the rear. Then came a dizzy drop through space, and a collision with something soft, that yelled lustily in Hamp's familiar tones.

"I—I couldn't help it," gasped Jerry, as he rolled to one side.

A second later it was his turn to sing out. A rifle, a haunch of venison, and half-a-dozen tin dishes pelted him in quick succession on the head and shoulders. He looked up with blinking eyes. Then he understood what the avalanche meant.

Ten feet overhead was the gap through which he had fallen. Both sleds had stuck there, and blocked it so completely that only a slim crevice of light was visible. The straps on one of the sleds had broken, allowing part of the contents to fall through.

Jerry held his breath for an instant, expecting another avalanche. When nothing more fell, he recovered his presence of mind.

"That you, Hamp?" he whispered. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so. I fell on a pile of snow."

"Neither am I," declared Jerry. "It was a lucky escape for both of us. I haven't got a bruise."

"No wonder," replied Hamp, in an injured tone. "You landed right on top of me. I'm just getting my wind back."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Jerry, "but I couldn't help it."

"Oh, that's all right. Only if I had known you were coming, I would have crawled out of the way. Where are we, anyhow?"

"That's what I want to know," Jerry replied. "It must be a cavern, Hamp. The entrance was on top, and it got snowed over in the big storm."

"Some one broke through the crust before us," said Hamp, "for I saw the marks as I was falling."

"Then he's in here now, whoever he is," whispered Jerry, in a startled voice. "He couldn't have reached the hole to get out."

There was a moment of terrible silence. The boys huddled close together and shivered with fear. Their hearts beat loudly and rapidly.

"I don't hear anything," whispered Hamp. "Do you?"

"Not a sound," replied Jerry. "Wait a second. I'll settle the matter."

He pulled out his metal box of matches and scraped one. As the light flared up, the lads glanced anxiously around them.

They saw at once that they were in an underground cavern. To right and left stretched a gloomy passage, ten feet wide. The sides and roof were of jagged, slimy rock, dripping with moisture.

Deep footsteps crossed the snow and led into the yawning blackness to the right. They were of recent origin, for the white imprint was visible in half-a-dozen places on the smooth, rocky floor.

"Do you see that?" Jerry whispered, hoarsely. "There is some person here, sure enough."

"Who can it be?" said Hamp. "Perhaps it's Brick."

In a clear, distinct voice he called the missing lad's name several times. But there was no reply. Jerry shook his head.

"It's not Brick," he muttered. "How would he get separated from his companions? We were following only one trail toward the last, so this may be Sparwick."

"Then why did Brick and those men give up the chase and branch off?" asked Hamp. "It's too deep a mystery for me."

"It is sort of puzzling," admitted Jerry, "but we won't bother about that now. Whoever it was that fell into the cavern, I believe he has found a way out by this time, and that's the first thing we want to do."

"I hate the idea of crawling through the dark," muttered Hamp.

"The matches will last if we use them sparingly," Jerry replied. "We've got to take this stuff with us, though. No; we'll leave the venison behind. Here's the rifle. Be careful, for it's loaded."

He gave Hamp the weapon and some of the dishes. The rest he took himself. When he picked up the tin coffeepot, it rattled. He lifted the lid, and found two sperm candles.

"Here's luck," he exclaimed. "How did they get here? We're sure of light now."

"Brick put them in the coffeepot this morning," said Hamp. "He had them in his pocket, and didn't want to carry them."

"Brick ought to have a medal for that," declared Jerry, as he lighted one of the candles. "Have we got everything? Yes; come on."

They trampled over the snow and went cautiously and slowly along the gloomy passage. The yellow gleam of the candle danced ahead of them and threw grotesque shadows on the slimy walls and roof. They advanced ten feet. The distance increased to twenty. As yet, not a speck of daylight could be seen.

Suddenly a rustling noise was heard. A low, angry growl followed instantly. Beyond the radius of candlelight the terrified boys saw a pair of fiery, snapping eyes. They stopped and turned half around.

"The rifle, quick!" cried Jerry.

He snatched it out of his companion's hands and gave him the candle instead. But before Jerry could lift the hammer of the weapon a startling interruption came from an unexpected quarter.

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CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY.

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A little in front of the lads, and to their left, a slab of rock jutted out from the side of the passage.

From behind this suddenly emerged a tall, gaunt figure. It was no less a personage than Kyle Sparwick.

No doubt Sparwick had also seen the snapping eyes, and it was this which had scared him from his hiding-place.

A low, savage growl rang through the cavern. Sparwick uttered a yell, and dashed forward. In his terror, he probably thought only of flight.

But the glare of the candle led him astray, and he collided blindly with Jerry. Both came to the rocky floor with a crash, and each imagined that the other had attacked him.

The two rolled over and over, locked in a tight embrace, and uttering hoarse cries. Jerry had dropped the rifle; nor could he reach for it, since his hands were needed for other purposes.

With one fist Sparwick pounded his antagonist on the face and breast. Jerry warded off the blows as well as he could, and tried to return them.

"Let me go!" he cried. "Help! help!"

"Let me go," yelled Sparwick, in shrill tones. "There's some sort of wild critter in this here place."

Jerry did not understand what he said. There was a comical side to the struggle, for each was trying to break away, and each imagined that the other was striving to hold him.

Meanwhile, Hamp held the candle and looked on like a piece of statuary. In fact, he did not know what else to do.

"Put the candle down," yelled Jerry. "Get the rifle and hit this fellow on the head."

But before Hamp could make a single move toward the execution of this order, he saw something that made his eyes fairly bulge out of their sockets. Where the fiery eyes had been seen a moment before, now appeared a monstrous bear.

The creature was fat, and his short, black fur bristled with rage. He was evidently ravenously hungry, and came swinging down the passage, uttering growl after growl.

Just when bruin was within six feet of them, Jerry and Sparwick caught sight of him. Their yells of fright blended into one. Who broke loose first, it is impossible to say. They tumbled apart, and scrambled in hot haste to their feet. Sparwick slipped back against the wall, and the delay proved fatal.

The bear was right upon him, having risen to his hind legs. A single blow from one of the great paws toppled the unfortunate man over on hands and knees.

Jerry saw the disaster, made a frantic dash, and ran into Hamp's arms. The latter dropped the candle, and it was extinguished as soon as it struck the floor, plunging the scene in utter darkness.

The first impulse of the terror-stricken lads was to get as far away as possible. But Sparwick's shrill cries for help checked them. The panicky feeling fled, and they regained their courage and

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self-possession.

"Hold on!" cried Jerry. "We can't leave the fellow to such a fate, even if he is a rascal."

"That's so," replied Hamp. "Strike a match, quick!"

Jerry already had the metal box out of his pocket, and the words were barely spoken when the tiny flame of a match pierced the darkness.

Jerry spied the candle as quickly. He grabbed it, and lit the wick. Then the brighter light showed the boys a startling picture.

Ten feet distant stood the bear, still erect on his hind legs. He had his forepaws about Sparwick, and was straining him to his breast. The angry growls of the animal mingled with the shrill, pitiful cries of the man.

"Look, there's the rifle!" exclaimed Hamp.

It lay two or three feet this side of the bear.

"I see it," cried Jerry. "Here, take the candle."

Then, by a swift and clever dash, he captured the weapon and retreated a few paces. He hesitated only long enough to pull back the hammer. Springing forward again, he fearlessly pressed the muzzle of the rifle against the bear's head, and pulled the trigger.

A frightful report followed. The whole cavern seemed to shake. Flakes of stone and dirt fell from the roof and walls. The boys were dazed and deafened by the sound. The candle was extinguished, and by the time Jerry struck a match and relit it, the powder smoke had lifted.

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The bear lay motionless on his back. Sparwick was crawling toward the lads on hands and knees. He stopped, and sat up against the wall of the cavern. His face was deathly pale, and a wheezy, gasping sound came from his lips.

Jerry first satisfied himself that the bear was dead. Then he turned to his former enemy.

"Are you hurt badly?" he asked.

"I reckon not," replied Sparwick, with a painful effort. "I was purty well squeezed, but I'm gettin' my breath back now. The critter hit me a lick here, but it ain't no account."

He pointed to his left shoulder, from which the coat and shirt had been partially torn away.

"I gave you up for dead," said Jerry. "It was a close shave."

"Close ain't no word for it," declared Sparwick. "You saved my life, young feller, an' I ain't the man to fureget it. Words ain't much in my line, or I might say I was sorry for certain things. Howsomever, here's what I took from that pardner of your'n."

He produced the watch and pocketbook, and handed them to the boys.

"Yes; they're Brick's," said Jerry. "But didn't you see anything of him yourself? He started after you this morning with two men. Hamp and I followed a couple of hours later. Somehow or other we lost their tracks, and got onto yours."

"Yes; I seen them all," replied Sparwick, in a peculiar tone. "Your pardner is in a bad way."

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"What do you mean?" cried Hamp and Jerry, in one breath.

Sparwick hesitated an instant to get his wind. Then he related, just as the reader already knows it, the assault on Brick, and the lad's subsequent abduction.

"How I come ter see it was this way," he explained, in conclusion. "I traveled purty fast arter leavin' the Mallowgash, and when I reached that clearing back yonder, I was nearly done out. So I dropped down in the timber an' bushes for a rest. I hadn't been there more'n half an hour when the two men an' the lad come along. Then happened what I just finished tellin' you. The affair was none of my business, and I couldn't a-helped the young fellow any if I'd wanted to. I struck back in this direction, an' first thing I knowed, I broke through the crust, an' found myself under ground. I was huntin' the way out when you fellers tumbled in."

The effect of Sparwick's story upon Jerry and Hamp may be better imagined than described.

"I thought there was something wrong with those men," exclaimed Hamp, wrathfully. "They've been dogging us ever since we came into the woods."

"But why did they carry Brick off with them after they had all his money?" asked Jerry. "That's the strange part of the affair."

"It beats me, too," admitted Sparwick. "They had his money, sure enough, fur I seen them countin' it over. Mebbe they took him along for their own safety, an' mebbe there's a worse reason——"

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"You don't think they would kill him?" interrupted Jerry, quickly.

Sparwick looked grave.

"No; I wouldn't like to say that," he replied. "But them fellers are bad men, an' there's no tellin' what they might do."

"You know them?" asked Hamp, in surprise.

"Yes; this many a year. But I wanter hear this whole yarn afore I kin give any opinion."

Accordingly, Jerry and Hamp related what little there was to tell. Brick's abduction threw light

on some things that had been mysteries before. It was Jerry's keen wit that identified Joe Bogle with the missionary on the train. Sparwick took the same view of the matter.

"Yes," he admitted, "I reckon Bogle is the party that tried to rob your friend at Bangor that night. Knowin' the lad had money, he an' Raikes planned to follow you chaps into the woods. As I said before, I know the men well. Bogle and Raikes ain't their right names, for they have a heap of others. But we'll call 'em that for the present."

Brick's abduction was discussed for half an hour longer, but neither Sparwick nor the boys could hit upon a plausible solution.

"Can't we get out of this place and follow the rascals?" suggested Jerry. "There are three of us, and we have plenty of arms and ammunition."

"If we do, we've got to hurry," declared Hamp. "They've got a big start on us."

"Look here," exclaimed Sparwick. "You say this lad has a rich father in New York?"

"Yes," replied Jerry.

"And the old man would likely fork over handsome if I was to get his son out of a tight place?"

"I suppose he would," Jerry answered. "If we get all that money back, I'm sure Brick will give you a big reward himself."

"Well, I'll do my best," declared Sparwick, with sudden energy. "I ain't much on the fight, but I'm purty good on strategy. And that's how we'll tackle these fellows. I have an idea where they'll strike for. If you lads say the word, I'll lead you right to the spot."

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CHAPTER XXIII.

BACK TO FREEDOM.

It is needless to say that Hamp and Jerry accepted Kyle Sparwick's offer with ill-concealed eagerness. That it was prompted solely by greed made no difference to them under the circumstances.

They felt that Brick must be rescued at any cost.

Sparwick bound the boys by a solemn agreement to do all in their power to procure for him a reward of five hundred dollars. They were staggered by the munificence of the sum, but they did not dispute it. Sparwick claimed the contents of the pocketbook as part payment in advance. He allowed Jerry to take possession of the watch.

The affair was settled without delay, and then they turned their attention to getting out of the cavern.

They regarded this as an easy matter, but a few minutes sufficed to show them that they were in a very ugly fix.

They first explored the passage beyond the dead bear. It terminated thirty feet distant in a hard wall of rock. Then they investigated the other end of the cavern with much the same results. It dwindled to a tiny crevice, through which a weasel could hardly have squirmed.

"It looks ugly," muttered Sparwick, scratching his head. "The bear must a-had some way to get in. He never dropped ten feet through that hole."

This was sound logic, as the boys well knew. Hamp suggested another search. Accordingly the cavern was gone over with extra care and patience.

The result was the same. No visible outlet existed, save the tiny hole overhead. Here the prisoners stopped and looked up. They quickly made a disheartening discovery. It was snowing fast outside. The white flakes were dropping through the dingy and trampled mass of crust.

"The trail of those rascals will all be covered up," exclaimed Jerry, dolefully.

"It is out of sight by this time," replied Sparwick. "But that won't matter much. I can guess purty well where them fellars are going. I ain't denyin' that time is vallyble, though. There ought to be a way to climb out of here."

"One of us might get on your shoulders," suggested Hamp.

"No use," Sparwick replied. "There ain't nothin' to ketch hold of but a rim of snow. It's purty hard, but it wouldn't bear the weight of one of you chaps."

This was manifestly true. Various other plans were discussed, and abandoned as impossible.

Soon night came on, and the pale gray light faded away from the crevice. The boys and their companion were now face to face with a dreadful and terrifying fact. They were hopelessly entombed underground. Unless some rescuer should chance that way—and there was slight hope of this—they were doomed to certain death.

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The disaster affected them differently. Sparwick fell into a dull, apathetic mood, from which he would rouse at times to wring his hands and groan. The man was plainly a coward at heart.

Outwardly, Jerry and Hamp made a braver show of courage. Perhaps they didn't realize how black was the prospect. That they still clung to a ray of hope was shown by their actions. Again and again they traversed the entire length of the cavern, vainly searching for an outlet that had no existence.

As the night advanced, they suffered from hunger and cold. Only ten feet above them were the two sheds, laden with everything needful. The possession of these would mean, at the least, the power to endure a long siege of imprisonment.

An idea flashed into Jerry's mind. He brought the rifle, and reached up with it, standing on tiptoe. He was not tall enough, so he gave the weapon to Sparwick. The latter was barely able to poke the sleds, but he could not budge them an inch. They were evidently wedged tightly across the hole. Their great weight held them there as though in a vise.

Sparwick dashed the weapon from him.

"It's no use," he cried. "I might as well try to move a mountain. A year's poking won't bring them sleds down."

This ended the hopes of warmth and food. Death by starvation now stared the captives in the face. A little later, the candle burned to the very bottom and went out. The remaining one was too precious to light. Sparwick crawled over against the wall. Jerry and Hamp followed him. There they spent the night, huddled close to one another for warmth.

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The hours of darkness seemed like so many weeks. At last the pallid light of dawn appeared overhead. Another day had begun its course.

The day wore on with protracted suffering and monotony. Long after it seemed that night was surely due, the gray streak of light continued to quiver in the crevice.

At length Jerry sprang fiercely up and lit the precious candle. Lured on by a hope that was born of despair, he staggered up and down the cavern. He stared at the slimy walls and roof. From very weakness he reeled against them time and again. Perhaps his wits were hunger-sharpened, as he was more alert than usual. At all events, he discovered something that had previously eluded him.

On the right-hand wall of the cave, close to the dead bear, was a sort of rude path. It sloped up the rock by crevices and little ledges and projecting knobs.

Jerry held the candle as far overhead as possible. The light shone into a narrow, black recess under the roof. He shouted with all his might, again and again, till the cavern rang with the echoes.

Hamp came in haste to the spot, and close behind staggered Sparwick. They wonderingly demanded of Jerry what he meant. Possibly they believed, at first, that suffering had turned his brain.

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Jerry pointed out the path and the crevice above it. Then they understood.

"It is where the bear entered," exclaimed Sparwick. "Look, here's proof enough."

He gathered from one of the crevices several stiff, black hairs.

Jerry had already commenced the ascent. He held the candle tightly in one hand as he scaled the rugged face of the rock. Hope mastered weakness. He did not slip or fall.

His companions were close behind him when he gained the top. Here was a tortuous passage, three or four feet broad, leading off at right angles from the main cavern. The little party followed it eagerly.

For half-a-dozen yards it remained level. Then it dropped at a steep angle for almost an equal distance, meanwhile growing more and more narrow. Ah! here was the termination at last—not a hopeless wall of rock, but a mass of soft, powdery snow. This was a sure promise of deliverance. What could snow mean but that the outer world was close at hand?

"We are saved!" cried Jerry, as he placed the candle firmly on the floor of the passage.

"Yes, saved!" echoed Hamp, in a broken, husky voice.

"Derned if we ain't," declared Sparwick. "Dig, youngsters; dig."

He dropped on his hands and knees, and started in.

The boys helped him from each side. They tore furiously at the soft snow, crushing it down as they advanced.

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The tunnel grew deeper and deeper.

Suddenly, the light crust overhead broke of its own weight. All sprang erect, threshing out with their arms. They found themselves in the open air, and facing a level stretch of pine forest.

Behind them was the rugged hillside, under which lay the cavern. They were simply speechless with the joy of that first moment of freedom. They inhaled long, deep breaths of the frosty air. Twilight was just falling. It was not yet so dark but that a glimpse could be had through the trees of the misty, distant surface of Chesumcook Lake.

But hunger and cold were quick to assert their sway.

"We must get the sleds!" exclaimed Hamp. "That's the first thing."

"An' we'll have ter spend another night in the cavern," added Sparwick. "We sart'nly ain't fit to travel, even if we wanted to push on through the darkness."

This was too self-evident for denial. The boys regretted the fact, since every hour of delay seemed to lessen the chances of saving Brick from the unknown fate that threatened him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

It is time to take the reader back to the lonely cabin in the swamp.

Brick's daring defiance of his captors fairly petrified them with astonishment and consternation. There was an ill-concealed twinkle of admiration in Raikes' eyes. Bogle's expression indicated only savage anger.

"You won't write a line, eh?" snarled Bogle, with suppressed fury.

"No, I won't," repeated Brick. His voice was a trifle hoarse, but resolute. "I know what you're after, but you shan't succeed. You've robbed me of enough money as it is. I won't help you to get any more out of my father——"

The words were cut suddenly short, for Bogle had fastened on the lad's throat with the ferocity of a bloodhound. He shook him to and fro, dragged him half across the room, and then pitched him roughly on the bed.

Brick staggered to his feet. His face was purple, and he gasped painfully for breath. He glanced around him, but every avenue of escape was barred.

"Have you had enough?" demanded Bogle. "Are you ready to write now?"

"No," came hoarsely from Brick's lips.

The brutal treatment had only made him more dogged and determined.

With a savage exclamation, Bogle sprang forward. But before he could reach the lad, Raikes slipped between the two.

"Hold on, Joe," he pleaded. "You're going about it the wrong way. Violence won't do any good. Try persuasion."

"Persuasion be hanged," growled Bogle. "I'll bring the obstinate young fool to terms mighty quick. Stand aside, Silas."

But Raikes did not move. He held his ground, and kept his angry companion at arm's length.

"Better take my advice, lad," he said, turning to Brick. "I'm peaceably inclined, and I don't want to see you hurt. You've got to come to terms some time, and why not now? It's not likely that we would let you slip through our fingers after going to all this trouble. We're playing for high stakes, and we intend to win. It's not much we ask of you. And as for your father—why, ten thousand dollars is only a drop in the bucket to him. He will gladly pay double that amount to save your life."

"To save my life?" questioned Brick; and the pallor on his face deepened a little.

"That's just it," resumed Raikes in a coldly stern voice. "If you refuse to write the letters, you will never leave this cabin alive."

"A bullet through your head, and a grave in the swamp," added Bogle. "That's what you may expect."

"You would murder me?" cried Brick.

"Yes; if our plans failed," was Raikes' calm reply. "It would be necessary for our own safety. But you don't intend to drive us to that, I know. Come; be sensible. There are the writing materials on the table. Put the matter through without delay, and you will get your freedom in two or three weeks."

Brick's face was deathly pale, but there was a resolute gleam in his eyes.

"You won't dare to kill me," he replied. "You would surely hang for it. My friends will hunt every place for me, and they will get the loggers to help them. If you let me go, I'll promise not to say anything about the affair. And you may keep all that money."

Raikes laughed contemptuously.

"You are a bigger fool than I took you for," he said. "This cabin is as safe from detection as though it was in the center of Africa. We're not worried about your friends. Once more, are you going to write those letters?"

Brick was deceived by the pacific tone and words. He concluded that his threat had made a

wholesome impression.

"No, I'm not," he replied, with an obstinate shake of the head.

"But you will," thundered Bogle. "I'll show you who is master."

He pushed Raikes aside and knocked Brick to the floor by a heavy blow. Swearing violently, he lifted him by the hair, and dragged him over to the table. He forced him down on the bench, and pointed to the pen and ink.

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"Now will you write?" he cried. "I'll give you one minute to obey."

Brick yelled loudly for help. He kicked and fought with all his might. In the scuffle the bench was overturned, and both landed on the floor. Brick jerked loose from his enemy, and rolled a few feet to one side. He sprang up, enraged and desperate. Bogle, too, was on his feet. Murder flashed from his eyes as he rushed at the lad.

Brick met the attack by a heavy blow of his fist. The ruffian staggered. He uttered a snarling cry. He lifted one hand to stanch the blood that flowed from his nose. Brick took advantage of this brief respite. He dodged cleverly by Raikes, who tried to stop him, and gained the farthest corner of the room. A rifle rested on two hooks above his head.

Just as he got possession of the weapon, Bogle dashed at him with a cry of fury. The ruffian was half insane. He snatched the weapon, and lifted it with both hands for a blow that would surely have split Brick's skull open.

But just in the nick of time Raikes gained the spot and seized his comrade by the collar. He jerked him back so forcibly and quickly that the heavy stock of the rifle missed the lad by a hair's breadth, and crashed to the floor.

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"Do you want to ruin everything?" he demanded, hotly. "I saved you from murder."

"You won't prevent it this time," cried Bogle.

He tore loose from Raikes, and pulled the hammer of the rifle back. He took hasty aim at Brick, who gave himself up for dead. Then Raikes snatched the barrel of the weapon, and knocked it upward. The two men struggled for its possession, swaying backward and forward. Raikes was comparatively cool. Bogle was insane with passion. The latter slipped and came to his knees, dragging Raikes after him.

"Let go!" he cried, with a violent oath.

"No," refused Raikes. "You shan't murder the lad. You don't know what you are doing, Joe."

Snap! Bang! The weapon had gone off. Raikes' nerveless fingers let go of the barrel. Without a cry, he toppled over on his side. When the smoke cleared, a few seconds later, his white face stared up at the roof, and from his forehead trickled a little stream of blood.

Brick looked on, mute with horror. The sad disaster instantly sobered Bogle. He dropped the rifle, and staggered to his feet. Then he bent over his companion, and rubbed the white, still face.

"Silas! Silas!" he called, hoarsely.

There was no movement or reply. Bogle groaned aloud, and covered his face with his hands.

It was then that the thought of escape flashed into Brick's mind. The odds were against him, but anything was preferable to staying here at the ruffian's mercy.

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Snatching up the rifle, he sped across the floor. He reached the door, and flung it open. A hoarse cry rang in his ears as he leaped across the threshold. He ran on without even a backward glance.

"Stop! Stop, or I'll kill you!"

Bogle's voice was husky with anger. His heavy steps came clattering in pursuit.

Brick was now across the clearing. He plunged into the tangled thickets of the swamp. He strained every muscle to escape. His heart beat high with hope.

For five minutes he twisted and dodged in every direction, planning thus to throw his enemy off the track. The fresh snow offered little resistance, and the older crust underneath easily bore his weight. Finally he stopped to listen. To his dismay, he heard a snapping and threshing of dry bushes not far behind him.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered. "I forget that every step I take can be traced. It's a question of speed now—nothing else will save me."

So he dashed on at a striding gait, paying scant heed to brambles or thickets or obstructing rocks. The rifle swung lightly in one hand. He almost forgot that he had it.

Nearer and nearer came Bogle, noisily threshing the undergrowth. In vain Brick made desperate spurts. In vain he twisted to right and left. He knew that he must soon be overtaken. He shuddered to think of what would happen then. He need hope for no mercy. Strength began to fail him. There was a throbbing pain between his eyes.

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Suddenly he came to a fallen tree, with a thick copse of bushes behind it. He tried to mount the obstacle, but slipped back. Before he could make a second attempt, Bogle was at his heels.

"I've got you!" he cried. "Your time has come."

Brick wheeled around like a panther at bay. He cocked the rifle, and pointed it at the ruffian.

"Stop!" he shouted. "I'll shoot you if you come closer."

"The gun's empty, you fool!" exclaimed Bogle, with a mocking laugh.

He came on, fearlessly.

Brick thought the scoundrel was lying. In desperation he pulled the trigger. The hammer fell with a dull snap.

But Brick was determined to make the most of his freedom. He eluded Bogle's grasp and sprang over the tree, still holding the useless rifle. He plunged through the copse of bushes, and saw before him a strip of level, open ground, on which rested a thin covering of slushy snow. He went across in a dozen leaps, though more than once he sank above his ankles in what felt like soft mud. As he reached the bushes on the other side, he heard a shrill yell of terror behind him.

CHAPTER XXV.

TORTURED INTO SUBMISSION.

Brick was tempted to push on without looking back. But when a pleading appeal for help rang in his ears he hesitated and stopped.

Bogle had sunk above his waist in the middle of the slushy spot, which was nothing less than a treacherous bog. He was struggling desperately to free himself, and his face was ashen-gray with terror.

"Don't leave me here, youngster," he pleaded. "It's a regular death-trap. I'll never get out alone. Help me, quick."

"I can't do it," replied Brick. "I'll only get in myself. Anyway, I would be a fool to put myself in your power. You've murdered the man that tried to help me, and you ought to hang for it."

Bogle swore a terrible oath, and his eyes flashed a bitter hatred at the lad. Again and again he struggled furiously to escape from the oozy quagmire. His body sank lower and lower, until the surface of the bog was almost level with his armpits. Then his rage changed to abject despair.

"For the love of Heaven, save me," he begged. "Don't you see that I am being sucked down? I will be dead in five minutes. There lies a log at your feet. Roll it out here. The bog will easily bear your weight."

Brick looked on with horrified eyes. He could not make up his mind what to do. It was hard to risk the freedom which he had gained at such cost.

Bogle noted the lad's hesitation.

"Don't be afraid," he cried. "I swear to do you no harm. If you get me out of this place, I will set you free. I will give you all the money back, and will guide you to the edge of the swamp. Do you think a dying man would deceive you?"

His voice rose to a shrill pitch, and he extended his arms appealingly.

Brick concluded to trust the ruffian. He could not bear to go away and leave him to such a terrible fate.

"I'll save you, if I can," he said, "and I shall expect you to keep your promises."

"I will, lad," declared Bogle. "I swear it. Quick, or you will be too late. I'm sinking deeper all the time."

Brick took hold of the log, and rolled it slowly across the quagmire. Several times he sank to the knees. Finally he twisted the log around so that the farther end came in reach of Bogle's hands.

The man grasped the log with a glad cry. He pulled and tugged for nearly five minutes, and gradually worked his body loose.

"Give me a lift, youngster," he said, "and I will be all right."

Brick walked half-way across the log, and extended the rifle.

Bogle grasped the weapon by the barrel. He came slowly up until his knees rested on the log. He was covered with filthy black mud from head to foot. With an effort he rose to his feet.

A strange gleam of triumph flashed across his crafty face. With one hand he snatched the rifle from Brick, and with the other he seized the lad by the collar.

"I've got you again," he exclaimed. "That was cleverly done."

Brick was at first too dazed by this unexpected treachery to offer any resistance. He permitted his captor to lead him across the log to firm ground.

Then he struggled to break loose.

"You promised to let me go," he cried, indignantly.

"Is this the way you reward me for saving your life?"

Bogle laughed harshly.

"Keep quiet," he said, "or I'll have to tap you on the head with this rifle stock. What sort of a greenhorn do you take me for? I would have promised anything to get out of that place."

Brick ceased to struggle. He knew it was useless. With a sinking heart he marched back through the swamp, held tightly by his ruffianly captor.

They soon came in sight of the cabin. When they crossed the threshold they met with a surprise. Raikes was sitting on the bed with a clean white bandage wrapped around his forehead.

"That you, Joe?" he said, feebly. "Where have you been? Did the lad escape?"

Bogle hastily explained.

"I'm sorry for what happened, old man," he added. "It was an accident, and I was to blame. I thought you were dead when I dashed out of the cabin after this young scamp here."

"It was a close call," replied Raikes. "The ball plowed a furrow right across my forehead."

"You need rest," said Bogle. "Sleep will fix you up better than medicine."

"Yes; I reckon so," admitted Raikes. "But what are you going to do with the lad? No more violence, Joe—for my sake. There are other ways to break him in."

"It shall be as you say," replied Bogle, "though I hate most infernally to lose the time. Still, you may not be able to travel for a day or two."

He hesitated a moment, and thoughtfully knitted his brows. Then he took a piece of rope from his pocket, and cut it in two.

Dexterously tripping Brick to the floor, he bound his ankles and wrists. Then he dragged him across the room, and threw open the door of a small, low closet that was level with the floor.

"Do you see that?" he exclaimed. "It's not a very snug place, but it's where you'll stay until you consent to write those letters. And nothing to eat or drink, remember. If you choose to starve to death, it's your own lookout."

A moment later Brick was in the closet, and the door was jammed tightly shut.

The closet was of such small dimensions that Brick could not stretch his body out full length, nor could he sit upright. The floor was hard, and through the log-wall next to the open air came a cold and cutting wind.

His limbs were bound very tightly, and soon he suffered from cramp and shooting pains. But Brick had an obstinate nature, and the thought of yielding was extremely bitter.

Incredible as it may seem, he actually held out all that day, and all of the night that followed. He suffered untold pain, and the torments of hunger, thirst and cold. Morning dawned, and breakfast preparations echoed through the cabin. The closet door was opened a slight crack, and Bogle's voice asked.

"Have you had enough, youngster?"

"Yes," muttered Brick, sullenly.

"Will you write those letters?"

"Yes," in a reluctant tone.

The door opened wide, and Brick was pulled out into the warmth and comfort of the room.

The youth's bonds were cut, and his stiffened limbs were rubbed with brandy. Then he was seated at the table, and given a hot breakfast. Raikes saw that he wanted for nothing, and even Bogle appeared to be in a rare good humor.

By the time the dishes were cleared away, Brick felt in good shape physically. But his sober and downcast face showed the keen humiliation of his defeat. When writing materials were brought out, he took pen and paper, and wrote at Bogle's dictation. Occasionally his eyes flashed, or his nostrils quivered. But not a word passed his lips. Bogle read the two letters in approving silence. Then he handed them to Raikes, who put them in his breast pocket.

The matter was not again referred to. The day wore monotonously on. Brick sat in a corner most of the time, looking miserable and unhappy. His companions paid no attention to him, but whispered a good deal among themselves.

The weather had moderated, and rain had fallen during the night. About midday the sky cleared, and a strong wind sprang up. It grew bitterly cold out of doors, and a blazing fire was scarcely sufficient to keep the cabin comfortable. This seemed to give great satisfaction to Raikes and Bogle. Brick overheard a few low remarks, such as "start at daybreak," "hard crust on the snow," "no danger of discovery."

When night came, Brick went to sleep between his captors. The broad light of day awakened him. He was alone on the bed, and his wrists were manacled. Bogle was the only other occupant of the cabin. He stood before the stove, stirring the contents of a frying-pan.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AVAILABLE PRISONER.

We left Kyle Sparwick and his young companions eating supper in the mouth of the cavern. Blankets and a fire enabled them to spend the night there very comfortably. Certainly they were much better off than Brick in his cold and narrow closet.

The little party rose at the first streak of dawn. While Jerry prepared breakfast, Hamp and Sparwick took a lantern and went deep into the cavern. With a sharp hunting knife they carved off as much bear's meat as they thought they could carry. Several of the steaks were fried for breakfast, and the rest were packed on the sleds.

In little more than an hour after daybreak the party were on the march. Through slushy snow and a drizzle of raw, misty rain, they tramped back to the clearing.

Two days had elapsed since Brick's abduction, and, of course, no traces were visible. Nor had Sparwick expected to find any. He merely used the spot as a starting point. Thence he led his companions northward, and during the morning they explored all sorts of secluded nooks in the vicinity of the lake shore.

At noonday, when the sky cleared and the bitter cold came on, they crossed Chesumcook, and conducted a rigorous search on the farther side. Here they met with no better success. About three o'clock Sparwick declared that most of the likely hiding-places had been looked into.

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"It's queer what has become of the rascals," he said. "I'm inclined ter think they've struck south, so we'll try that tack next. No use in tryin' that direction," and he pointed his long arm eastward. "Over thar stretches a swamp fur miles an' miles. It's full of wild beasts, an' it ain't possible fur a man to go through it. I never heard of a hunter or trapper what was in the place. They're all afraid of it."

Jerry and Hamp did not dispute this, for they were familiar with the swamp's evil reputation.

The anxious searchers pushed on through a wild and rugged country until sundown. They were then, as nearly as they could judge, several miles southeast from the lower end of Chesumcook Lake.

They camped in a spruce thicket on the edge of a meadow. By means of a fire and a lean-to they defied the cold, and spent a fairly comfortable night.

Breakfast was prepared, and eaten amid a gloomy constraint. When the luggage was packed, Sparwick lit his pipe, and sat down on a log facing his companions.

"This is a queer business," he said. "I ain't denyin' that I've kinder lost my bearin's. We've sarched purty near every place whar them fellers would likely hev gone with the lad. It looks now as though they had struck out of the woods. There's a railroad settlement about twenty-five miles from here—a bit of a place called Kingman."

"But would they take Brick there with them?" asked Hamp.

Sparwick shook his head.

"It ain't likely they'd run such a risk."

"Then they must have murdered Brick," cried Jerry.

He rose to his feet in great excitement.

Sparwick neither denied nor affirmed the assertion. He drew hard at his pipe, and looked contemplatively across the meadow for nearly a minute of silence. Then an eager look flashed suddenly upon his face, and he held up one hand.

"Listen!" he whispered, hoarsely. "Thar's someone comin' through the woods."

The boys pricked up their ears and looked anxiously around. Yes, Sparwick was right. Behind the camp, and to the north of the spruce thicket, two sounds rose clearly on the crisp air, the slight patter of snowshoes and the rustling and snapping of bushes. The unknown traveler seemed to be heading directly toward the camp.

"It ain't a crowd of three," whispered Sparwick. "There's only one, from the sound. He don't know we're here, I reckon."

"Mebbe it's Brick," replied Jerry. "He might have escaped."

"Mebbe it ain't," observed Sparwick. "Nothin' like bein' on the safe side. Drop behind that log, you fellers, an' have your weapons ready."

The boys quickly obeyed. Sparwick threw a handful of snow on the dying embers of the fire. Then he snatched a rifle, and threw himself down beside his companions.

From this safe cover they commanded a view of the edge of the spruce thicket in both directions. The brisk tread of snowshoes and the threshing of bushes came nearer and nearer. Now the thicket was seen to quiver a few feet to the left of the camp. An instant later, to the amazement of the hidden watchers, Silas Raikes stepped into view.

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The man carried a rifle in one of his mittened hands. He paused on the edge of the meadow, and looked around. A gleam of surprise and fear flashed into his eyes as he noted the sleds, the lean-to, the charred embers of the fire. But it was too late to retreat. Sparwick's tall figure rose before him, and a rifle-barrel sloped into his face.

"Drop that weapon, Raikes. Drop it, or I'll put daylight through you."

The command rang sharp and clear.

Raikes made a step forward, still retaining his rifle.

"That you, Kyle Sparwick?" he exclaimed, in a tone of genuine surprise. "This is a nice way to greet an old friend. What's got over you? Don't you know me any more?"

"Yes, I know you, Raikes, Bostick, Madden, Gerber, and whatever other names you have," growled Sparwick. "Sorry I can't be more polite, but this here is a business matter. Drop that weapon, I say. You ain't travlin' any farther jest now."

At that instant Jerry and Hamp rose up from behind the log, concluding that their services might be needed. Raikes saw them, and his mind grasped the situation.

A brief look of rage and disappointment distorted his features. Then, like a flash, he lifted his rifle, and tried to shoot Sparwick.

But the latter was too quick. With his own rifle, he knocked the other's weapon upward, and it was discharged harmlessly in the air.

With a savage oath, Raikes sprang at his antagonist. They exchanged a round of heavy blows. Sparwick's weapon was dashed from his hand. Raikes had nothing left but the shattered stock. Both grappled, and rolled over in the snow.

Jerry and Hamp looked on with suppressed excitement and anxiety. They saw no opportunity of interfering; nor was their aid needed. Sparwick was far more powerful than his opponent. Raikes made a desperate fight, and quickly exhausted his wind and strength. Sparwick tumbled him over on his back, and sat upon him.

"Lie still, or I'll smash you," he cried.

Raikes glared sullenly up at his enemy, panting for breath. He had no intention of renewing the contest. He was played out.

"Well, I reckon you know what we want with you," resumed Sparwick. "Where's the lad you and Joe Bogle carried off?"

"Don't ask me," muttered Raikes. "You're the one to answer that question. You robbed the lad, and we tried to overhaul you. When you gave us the slip the youngster started back to join his friends. If he never reached them you likely know something about it."

"That's a lie," exclaimed Sparwick. "You're too dumb to live. Listen here. I was hidin' in the bushes when you attacked the lad. I seen the whole thing. What did you do with him? Better own up to it."

"If you've murdered Brick you'll hang," cried Jerry, wrathfully.

Raikes looked crestfallen for an instant. Then a last expedient suggested itself to his fertile mind. He glanced at Jerry.

"Don't you boys be deceived by this ruffian. He is telling a clever lie. If your friend has disappeared, he is to blame. I don't doubt that he robbed and murdered that lad, and concealed the——"

"It's false!" interrupted Sparwick. "I've a mind to break your neck!"

He seized his prisoner by the throat, and shook him savagely. Raikes fought for breath, and in the struggle his coat was torn open, and thrown back from his breast. Something white peeped from the inner pocket. Sparwick made a grab, and hauled out two envelopes.

"Letters!" he exclaimed. "One to John Larkins, an' the other to Frederick Glendale. What's up now?"

Raikes uttered a hoarse cry, and snatched vainly at the letters. Then his head fell back, and a hopeless expression came over his face. He mumbled something inaudible. Meanwhile Sparwick had passed both envelopes to Jerry.

"See what's inside, lad," he said. "I kin make out to read writin', but no doubt you're better. Anyway, this scamp would snatch 'em out of my hand."

Hamp looked eagerly over Jerry's shoulder. The first envelope bore the following address:

MR. FREDERICK GLENDALE, *Attorney at Law*,
Lears Building, Broadway, New York.

Jerry opened it, and took out a sheet of paper covered with neat and legible writing. He glanced briefly at it, and his eyes opened wide.

"Listen to this," he cried, excitedly. Then he read aloud:

DEAR MR. GLENDALE:—I am a prisoner in a lonely and inaccessible part of the Maine woods. My captors know who I am, and unless you pay them ten thousand dollars I will be murdered. The man who gives you this letter will tell you when and where the

sum necessary for my release must be paid over. I send a letter for my father. Cable it to him at once if you need his authority to pay the money. There is no other way to get me out of the fix, so don't be so foolish as to appeal to the police. If the messenger is harmed, or fails to return here in ten days. I will be murdered. Don't delay, for my life is at stake. Only ten thousand dollars will save me. I am writing of my own free will.

Yours sincerely, JIM LARKINS.

Jerry opened the other letter, and glanced through it.

"This is pretty much the same thing," he said. "Brick begs his father to cable to Mr. Glendale to pay the money at once, and without dispute. Did you ever hear of such an outrageous scheme of robbery? The whole affair is as plain as daylight now. Brick is a prisoner some place in the woods, and Bogle is watching him."

"That's just it," cried Hamp. "The thing was planned weeks ago. It sounds like a story out of a book. The idea of bandits carrying off a person for ransom money in the State of Maine."

"Gimme the letters," exclaimed Sparwick. He took them from Jerry, and held them up high in both hands. Slowly and monotonously he spelled out their contents.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" he ejaculated. "Ten thousand dollars! Think of it. Yes, it's plain now. What a streak of luck to nab this fellow. We'll find the missing lad before long. An' if I pull him through all right, don't you boys forget your part of the bargain."

"We won't," assured Jerry.

"We'll stick to the compact," added Hamp.

Sparwick looked relieved.

Then he seized his prisoner, and lifted him rather roughly.

"Stand up, Raikes," he said. "An' no foolin', remember. We've got you in a tight place, an' we're goin' ter keep you there. I reckon you'll hev to postpone that little trip to New York."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THROUGH THE WOODS.

Raikes fixed his disheveled clothes, and pulled his cap down over his forehead. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets, and stared meaningly at Sparwick.

"What are you lookin' at me fur?" demanded Sparwick.

"I was just thinking what a big, lubberly fool you are," replied Raikes, boldly. "Hold on—don't get riled. I want to talk to you for a minute or two."

"Fire away," said Sparwick.

Raikes shook his head.

"No, not here. It must be a private conversation."

Sparwick hesitated, and a greedy look came into his eyes.

"No tricks," he replied, warningly, "or I'll smash your head."

He led his prisoner to a clump of bushes a dozen feet distant. Here they conversed in low, eager tones for nearly a quarter of an hour.

Jerry and Hamp looked on with some curiosity and suspicion. They were afraid that Raikes was coaxing Sparwick to turn traitor.

But the end of the palaver did not confirm this supposition. When the men returned, their relations were evidently the same as before. Raikes looked moody and downcast. Sparwick's impassive face told nothing. The latter handed the two letters to Jerry.

"Put 'em in your pocket," he said, "an' take good care of them. We're going to start right away."

"Where for?" Jerry asked.

"To rescue your pardner," was the reply. "I've got everything in shape. This rascal here hes concluded ter help us out, an' I've promised he shan't be prosecuted. He'll take us straight to Bogle an' the lad. We're goin' to save Mr. Larkins a cool ten thousand dollars."

This glib speech quite banished any lingering suspicion that Jerry or Hamp may have felt. They were highly elated by the news, and they helped to pack up with alacrity. In a short time the little party was on the march.

They headed straight back through the spruce woods. Raikes sullenly led the way, and Sparwick followed at his heels with a loaded rifle. The boys brought up the rear, dragging the sleds.

At the end of an hour they entered a low and tangled swamp. They went on through a maze of gloomy, intersecting paths. The boys were surprised to recognize the place.

"I thought this swamp was inaccessible," said Hamp.

"It were always reckoned so," replied Sparwick; "but it seems kind o' different now."

"Do you mean to say that this is where Brick is confined?" asked Jerry.

"Accordin' to the prisoner's statement that's the case," said Sparwick, "an' I don't reckon he'd lie about it. I've got a bullet ready fur the first sign of deceivin'. Do you hear that, old man?"

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This last was addressed to Raikes. He neither replied nor turned around. He went steadily on, twisting to right and left through the tortuous windings of the swamp.

It was more than an hour later when the party came in sight of the clearing and the cabin. From the top of the roof a pillar of blue smoke curled slowly upward. The boys were startled and amazed. They eagerly examined their weapons.

"Will we likely have much of a fight?" asked Jerry.

"Not a bit," exclaimed Sparwick, scornfully. "Put up them weapons. We're four ag'in one. Do you think Joe Bogle's fool enough to resist. It'll all go our own way, lads."

Raikes was now half-way across the clearing. The others followed closely in his footsteps. Jerry and Hamp saw the cabin door thrown open. They heard a hoarse shout from within.

"It's all right, Joe," Raikes answered. "No shootin'."

Sparwick paused, and drove the boys into the cabin ahead of him. He followed with the sleds.

Jerry and Hamp stared eagerly at their surroundings. They saw Bogle leaning against the table with a savage and wondering expression on his face. Then they spied some one else, and heard a familiar voice call them by name. The next instant they were kneeling on the bed beside Brick, trying to clasp his fettered hands.

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"We've come to save you," declared Jerry. "Your troubles are over now. Your father won't have to pay that money, either. Sparwick is helping us, you know. We told him that you would give him five hundred dollars if he saved you. That's why——"

The sentence was broken off short, for just then Bogle strode forward. His face blazed with anger. He clapped one hand on Raikes' shoulder.

"What the deuce does this mean, Silas?" he demanded, hotly. "Have you lost your senses? Why did you turn back, and bring this rabble here? Do you want to ruin everything?"

There was a brief pause. The boys looked on with thrilling and anxious interest. They expected to see Raikes seize and overpower his comrade.

Imagine their surprise, then, when Raikes leaned over, and whispered a few words into Bogle's ear. The two strolled amicably to the farthest end of the cabin, where they sat down on a bench, and began to talk in low tones.

Sparwick propped himself carelessly against the door, with his hands in his pockets. He studiously kept his eyes averted from the bed. As for the three lads—well, they were not a little puzzled by such strange proceedings. They were at a loss to account for them.

"I hope what you told me is true," whispered Brick. "It don't look much as if Bogle was a prisoner, though."

"No; it don't," admitted Jerry. "I'm afraid there's a hitch somewhere."

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"Perhaps Raikes hasn't turned traitor, after all," suggested Hamp. "I mean that he may have fooled Sparwick."

"I'm afraid you two fellows are the ones that were fooled," said Brick. "It looks very much as though Sparwick had gone over to Raikes and Bogle. Perhaps they promised him more money."

Jerry and Hamp exchanged quick, meaning glances. It suddenly flashed upon them that Brick's suspicion was absolutely true.

Just then Jerry caught Sparwick's eye. He beckoned him to approach. But Sparwick pretended not to see. He looked the other way.

Before the boys could utter another word, Raikes and Bogle rose from the bench, and came across the room. Raikes paused in front of Sparwick, and said something to him. Bogle came on to the bed. His face wore a sneering smile of satisfaction.

"Give me those letters," he demanded of Jerry.

The lad hesitated. With a savage oath Bogle clinched his fist.

"The letters?" he repeated, "quick!"

Jerry realized his helplessness. He took the letters from his pocket, and handed them to the ruffian.

"You're a mean, lying traitor, Kyle Sparwick," he cried, angrily.

"None of that," exclaimed Bogle. "Keep a civil tongue in your head, or you will be sorry." He struck Jerry roughly on the face. Then he took their rifles from the two lads.

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"Stay where you are," he added. "Don't move."

The boys cowered before the ruffian's fierce words and manner.

Bogle crossed the room, and put the weapons on a shelf over the fireplace. He strolled leisurely to the table, and perched himself on the edge. Raikes and Sparwick drew a bench up to the opposite side, and sat down.

"You've come here uninvited, Sparwick," said Bogle. "And I'm not any too glad to see you. You have chosen to meddle with an affair that was none of your business. I don't blame Raikes, for he did the best thing possible under the circumstances. You had the drop on him, and he knew it."

"It's fair enough, as far as I kin see," replied Sparwick, uneasily. "You an' I are old friends, Joe Bogle, an' there's no reason why I shouldn't have a hand at such rich pickin's—especially when I've earned the right."

"Earned it?" sneered Bogle.

"Yes, earned it," replied Sparwick, in a warmer tone. "I don't see how you kin deny the fact. I had a bargain with them two lads yonder to rescue their pardner, an' I was to receive a certain sum of money fur the work. Accidentally Raikes stumbled across us this mornin', an' I nabbed him. He had papers what showed up your little game. I could have blocked it as easy as rollin' off a log. Why didn't I tie Raikes to a tree, an' then push on here, and nab you, an' rescue the lad? You won't deny that I could have done it, an' made a heap of cash by the operation, too. But instead o' that I listens to Raikes. He says he'll take me in with you, an' give me twice the sum I was countin' on. So I agrees to it, an' we fixes the thing up. An' now this is the kind of treatment I get. It ain't fair an' square, Bogle, you know it ain't. An' what's more, I ain't a man ter be sat down upon. This here agreement will be kept, or I'll know the reason why."

Sparwick's face flushed with anger and indignation. He rose to his feet, and pounded the table with his fist.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

SPARWICK LAYS DOWN THE LAW.

Bogle and Raikes exchanged quick glances which Sparwick did not see. The latter was by far the tallest and strongest of the three. Doubtless this fact was taken into consideration by his companions.

"Keep cool," expostulated Bogle. "No need to fly into a temper. We want to discuss this thing peaceably."

"That'll suit me," said Sparwick. "I'm to have square dealing, then, am I?"

"Of course you are," assured Raikes.

"It depends on what you call square," hastily added Bogle. "I hope you'll look at it the same way we do. In the first place, Sparwick, you want to remember that Raikes and I have had all the trouble and expense of working this thing up. It was planned weeks ago; and look what we had to contend with before we got the lad in our hands. Would it be fair for you to chip in and demand a big slice out of our hard-earned reward?"

There was no reply. Sparwick gazed straight at the table. There was an expression on his face which his companions neither noticed nor understood.

"I see you are taking a sensible view of it," resumed Bogle. "To come right to the point, this is what Raikes and I will do: When the matter is settled and we lay our hands on the money, we will give you five hundred dollars—the original sum you had counted on getting. The condition attached to this is that you remain here while Raikes is in New York, and help me to guard these three lads. I'll admit that Raikes promised you a thousand dollars, but he did that before he had a chance to consult me. That's what I call square dealing. How does it strike you?"

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Sparwick had meanwhile seated himself. Now he rose and leaned across the table. He shook his fist in Bogle's face. He glared at him with flashing eyes and quivering nostrils.

"Liar! skunk!" he snarled. "Yes, an' you, too, Raikes. You're a pair of cussed skinflints. You'd sneak out of your bargain, would you? You'd offer me a dirty five hundred dollars to help do your dirty work, while each of you pockets purty near five thousand? If you'd stuck to the thousand you promised, you'd have found me fair an' square. But now——"

Rage got the better of Sparwick. His right arm shot out and took Bogle on the face with such stunning force as to topple him over backward. He was quickly up again, with blood streaming from a badly smashed nose.

"Hit him, Raikes, hit him!" he cried, with an interlarding of trooper-like oaths.

But before Raikes could make up his mind, a backhanded blow caused him to turn a somersault over the bench. He was a plucky fellow, and as quickly as possible he was on his feet.

The boys felt like cheering. They waited in keen suspense for the end of the struggle. Would the result bring them freedom or captivity?

The next move on Sparwick's part was a sudden and unexpected one. He dodged Raikes from the rear and sprang upon the table. He jumped down on the other side and rushed toward the fireplace, his object being to seize the rifles.

His enemies knew this, and they did their best to checkmate him. Bogle thrust out his foot, and when Sparwick tripped heavily to the floor, he threw himself upon his back.

He was instantly reinforced by Raikes, yet the two together were less than a match for the big fellow; at least, when he was in such a desperate mood. Sparwick fought from underneath for a few seconds, dealing and receiving blows. Then he strained every muscle and rose slowly up, with his foes still clinging to him. He shook them off as a panther would scatter a pack of hounds.

Bogle fell in one direction, and Raikes in another. They had no desire to renew the struggle on the same terms. As soon as they could get to their feet, they sped across the room, and snatched two rifles from above the door. These Sparwick had not observed, but meanwhile he had captured a loaded weapon from over the fireplace.

This led, oddly enough, to a drawn game. On the very instant when Sparwick drew a bead on the foremost of his enemies, both Raikes and Bogle leveled their weapons straight at his breast. There was a brief and awful pause. Why neither party opened fire it is impossible to say. Some strange instinct stayed their hands.

"Put them weapons down," said Sparwick, in calm tones.

"Lower yours first," replied Raikes.

"Not likely," muttered Sparwick. "I can't trust two such lyin' skunks an' sneaks."

There was another pause. Then Raikes let the barrel of his weapon fall. Bogle instantly did the same.

"Your turn, Sparwick," he said, suddenly. "I'm a peaceable man, and would go a good deal out of my way any time to avoid bloodshed. So the thousand dollars is yours; I give you my word on it. It's not a square deal, though. You ought to have been satisfied with five hundred."

"That ain't my way of thinkin'," replied Sparwick, as he slightly lowered his rifle; "and as for the offer of a thousand, why, that's come too late. What I want now is five thousand, an' I'm going ter have it or bust this game."

This audacious statement made Raikes and Bogle fairly gasp for breath.

"Five thousand dollars!" screamed Bogle. "What do you take us for? Do you expect us to give you half of the whole sum?"

In his anger, he lifted his rifle again.

"Drop that," cried Sparwick. "If you do it another time, I'll put a bullet through you. I'm one against two, an' if it comes to a shootin' match, possibly I might get wiped out; but I reckon you won't kill me for fear of hangin'. An' I reckon you'll agree ter what I ask, since if you refuse, your game is up. I don't mean that you should give me half of the ten thousand. We'll go shares alike. Make the lad write them letters over ag'in an' change the figger to fifteen thousand. That will give us five thousand apiece. Make up your minds purty quick. I'm in the game fur full shares, an' I intend to stay."

It was evident that Sparwick meant every word, and would submit to no arbitration. He glanced calmly and aggressively at the two baffled rascals, conscious that he had turned the tables upon them.

Bogle glanced at Raikes, and in that glance was a subtle meaning, known only to the two. In a contest of wits and cunning, Sparwick was immeasurably their inferior.

"Your greediness will spoil the whole game," growled Bogle. "It's flying mighty high to ask ten thousand dollars. If we make it fifteen thousand, this lawyer will likely pitch us overboard and appeal to the police."

"The one amount would be paid as quickly as t'other," replied Sparwick. "To a man as well off as John Larkins is reckoned to be, five thousand dollars ain't anything. Is it yes or no?"

"It's yes," muttered Bogle. "It couldn't well be anything else, since you've got the drop on Raikes and me. We'll carry the thing out as you say. Only if they stick at the amount, you'll shoulder the blame."

"If the thing is well done, there won't be any stickin'," said Sparwick.

His aggressive manner disappeared as he stepped forward and laid his rifle on the table.

Raikes and Bogle did the same. Their faces assumed a good humored expression that seemed to say: "We are going to take our defeat gracefully." The next minute the three men were conversing on amiable terms.

It was now past midday. Raikes at once began to prepare dinner. Bogle and Sparwick overhauled the contents of the two sleds and stored the dishes and provisions away in the cupboard.

The meal was a good one, and well cooked. The boys were treated kindly, and given all they

could eat. In spite of their unpleasant situation, they had keen appetites.

After dinner, writing materials were brought out, and Brick was called upon to rewrite the two letters. He demurred at first, but a few unpleasant threats and a glimpse of the narrow closet finally led to his yielding.

The steel bracelets were then locked upon his wrists again. Jerry and Hamp were also placed beyond the possibility of escape by having their arms tightly bound behind their backs with ropes.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MIDNIGHT DISCOVERY.

About sunset something of a startling and unexpected nature occurred. Its effect on the inmates of the cabin was pretty much the same as if a bombshell had suddenly fallen in the midst of them.

Outside were heard crunching footsteps, and the rustle of dry bushes. Then a husky shout rang on the still, evening air.

The three men sprang to their feet. For an instant they were speechless with wonder and alarm. The intrusion had a different effect on the boys. They believed that it meant rescue and freedom.

Bogle snatched his rifle.

"Stay here," he whispered to his companions. "Be ready if I need you."

He went swiftly to the door and opened it. He closed it partly behind him as he stepped outside. Half-a-dozen feet from the cabin stood a vigorous-looking man of sixty, clad in the garb of a typical Maine hunter and trapper. His kindly face was grizzled and bearded. He carried a rifle over his shoulder. Bogle went swiftly up to him and held out his hand.

"I'll swear if it ain't Jack Mowry," he exclaimed.

The stranger glanced keenly into the other's face. Then he uttered a long, hearty laugh that came from deep down in his chest.

"By Jingo, it's Joe Bogle! Wa-al, wa-al, this beats anything ever I heard on. Why, man, I ain't seen you fur near three years—not since that winter on Moosehead."

"Oh! this is a sort of a shooting den that Raikes and I put up," Bogle hastily explained. "Raikes is with me, and we are just ready to start away. Where are you bound, Mowry?"

"That's jest what I'd like ter know," returned the trapper, as he shot a puzzled glance toward the cabin. "I hev a camp 'bout a mile north of the swamp, an' this mornin' I tracked a deer into this dog-goned tangle o' bushes. I lost my bearin's an' hev been wanderin' 'round ever since."

"That's hard luck," replied Bogle. "I'll tell you what I'll do now, Mowry. I can't ask you in to spend the night, because we are just leaving, and our provisions have run out. But I'll get a light and guide you back to your camp. I know every foot of the swamp. By the way, Raikes will be glad to meet you. You remember Silas, don't you? He was with you on Moosehead."

Without waiting for a reply, Bogle called aloud:

"Raikes, Raikes, come here."

As soon as Bogle went to the door, Raikes and Sparwick caught a glimpse of the stranger. Both recognized him at once, for he had long been a familiar figure in the Maine woods.

"I hope Bogle will know how to deal with him," muttered Sparwick.

"Trust Joe for that," replied Raikes. "I reckon I'll be needed in a minute. Suppose you attend to those lads yonder. They might make trouble and upset everything."

Accordingly Sparwick crossed the room and sat down at the foot of the bed.

"The first one of you that utters a sound," he whispered, savagely, "will get his face smashed. Mind that."

Under these circumstances, the boys were helpless. With tantalizing emotions they listened to the audible conversation outside. They heard Raikes summoned, and saw him hurriedly leave the cabin.

The next instant Bogle entered. He snatched up a lantern and a pair of gloves.

"That's right, Sparwick," he whispered. "Don't let those chaps utter a sound. So far we're all right. Raikes will be back in a minute."

Then he left the cabin and closed the door tightly.

It was only a few seconds later when Raikes returned. He called Sparwick over to the fireplace,

and there they conversed in low tones until long after dark. Finally they prepared supper and unbound the boys long enough to allow them to eat.

It was nearly midnight when Bogle returned. His boisterous entry wakened all three of the lads, who had dropped asleep. They lay still, however, and pretended to be still sleeping.

"It took you long enough," grumbled Raikes. "How did you make out?"

"It was a matter of four miles each way," replied Bogle. "I'm lucky to get back so soon. As for making out—well, I'm afraid Mowry has his suspicions. It couldn't be otherwise. We didn't ask him in or offer him a bite to eat. He knew there was something back of it all. I went clear to his camp with him. He was grateful for that, but there was a sort of a chilling coolness about him."

"It's hard luck," muttered Raikes. "He's a nosey old chap, and may come spying around here, now that he's found the way. What had we better do?"

"I'll tell you," whispered Bogle, as he glanced across the cabin. Then he added, in a tone that did not reach half-way to the boys: "At daybreak you will start on your journey, Raikes. After dinner Sparwick and I will move boys, luggage, and all to the Rock House. You will find us there when you return."

"By Jove! that's a clever thought," said Raikes. "Mowry will be neatly tricked."

"Where is the Rock House?" asked Sparwick.

"You'll find out soon enough," replied Bogle. "There are places in these woods that you never dreamed of. And now let's turn in. We've talked enough."

"Yes, and I need sleep for to-morrow's journey," added Raikes.

As has been stated, this last part of the conversation was not overheard by the boys. They knew that it must be about matters of special importance. But they had no chance of talking it over among themselves. Their feigned slumber turned to real shortly after the men came to bed.

Raikes was up before dawn. He cooked himself a breakfast, ate it hastily and departed.

It was after nine o'clock when the boys got awake. They missed Raikes at once. Bogle was setting the table, and Sparwick was frying slices of venison. The boys were kindly treated during the day, but their arms were kept tightly bound, except at meal times.

They were now pretty much resigned to the situation. They knew that it was hopeless to think of escape or of preventing, by any means, the extortion of money from Mr. Larkins.

Brick, who by rights, should have been most concerned, was least so.

"Don't you fellows worry," he said. "My father will pay the money, and I don't suppose he'll mind it much. I'm only sorry that you should get into such a scrape on my account. But just as soon as the money comes we'll all be free."

This was but cold consolation. The day dragged along in so dreary and tedious a manner that the boys regarded a week or ten days of such captivity with the utmost horror.

The weather had moderated during the previous night, and in the middle of the morning a drizzling rain began to fall. So at dinnertime Bogle and Sparwick held a brief and secret conversation. As a result of this, they decided to postpone their removal to the Rock House until the following day.

Late in the afternoon the sky cleared, and the weather blew up cold again. At bedtime a stiff wind was howling around the cabin.

In the middle of the night Jerry got awake with a start. He felt restless and uneasy. The ropes on his arms pained him. He raised himself to a sitting posture and looked around.

Outside the moon was shining, and a few silvery rays crept through the crevices of the door and window-shutters. These, and a faint, rosy glow from the embers of the fire, shed a misty light on the interior of the cabin.

Next to Jerry, on the left, lay Hamp, and beyond him was Sparwick. On the right lay Brick and Bogle. Jerry was sandwiched in between the four. He looked at them intently. Their deep breathing indicated that all were asleep.

Jerry was about to lie down again when he heard strange sounds from outside the cabin. Slow, cautious footsteps crunched over the snow. Now they were on one side, now on the other. Then the door rattled slightly, and finally the shutters creaked.

Jerry's heart beat like a trip-hammer. His breath came short and fast. He was first inclined to waken his companions, but he fought the inclination down. He listened for a long time after the sounds had died away. Then an inspiration flashed suddenly into his mind.

"What a fool I was to be scared," he reflected. "I'll bet anything that old trapper was spying around here, trying to find out what mysteries are going on. I'm sorry now that I didn't shout at him. By this time he must have started back to his camp. If I could only escape! How easy it would be to follow his tracks over the snow! I'm sure he would help me to get Brick free."

As Jerry thus cogitated, he saw some object sparkling in the moonlight on the cabin floor. It was about half-way between him and the table. He looked keenly and now he discovered that the object was a knife.

A daring thought came into Jerry's head. A glance satisfied him that his four bedfellows were still sleeping. With a slow and noiseless motion, he crawled forward on his knees. From time to

time he glanced warily over his shoulder. Finally his perseverance was rewarded.

He reached the knife. He leaned over upon it backward and managed to get the hilt between the partly-cramped fingers of one hand. With a clumsy, sawing movement, he scraped the blade over the rope that held his arms together. He was far from certain of success, but he stuck to the task with grim determination. More than once the blade slipped and cut into his wrists and fingers.

At last, when he was on the verge of despair, a sudden snap told him that the rope was severed. He drew his arms in front of him, and cut loose the separate pieces of rope.

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CHAPTER XXX.

DRIVEN TO DEATH.

The first step to freedom was a success, and consequently Jerry felt greatly elated. He hesitated a moment, slightly bewildered by several expedients that suggested themselves to his mind. Then he picked up the knife and crawled noiselessly back across the floor.

He safely reached his sleeping place, and threw himself down in his former attitude. He lay perfectly still for nearly five minutes. Then he was satisfied that Bogle and Sparwick were buried deep in slumber. He turned around and gave Hamp a gentle shake. The lad stirred and sleepily opened his eyes.

"Hamp, are you awake?" Jerry whispered, softly, in his ear.

"Yes; what's up?" came the drowsy reply.

"Hush! don't talk so loud. I'll do the talking. Are you sure you're wide awake and can understand me?"

"Of course I am," whispered Hamp, a little impatiently.

Then he saw that Jerry's arms were free.

"You are in luck," he added. "Are you going to escape?"

"Yes; and I want you to go with me," Jerry replied, putting his mouth close to Hamp's ear. "I haven't time to explain now, only I found a knife and cut my arms loose. Turn yours this way a little bit." Hamp obeyed, and Jerry deftly severed the ropes.

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"Now lie still until you see me open the door," he resumed. "That will be the signal. Then jump and sneak out after me. I want to get our caps and snowshoes first."

"Are you going to take Brick along?" Hamp asked.

"No; I wish we could. He is chained fast to Bogle. I wouldn't dare to try. But if we get away all right, Brick won't be a prisoner long. That old trapper was prowling around here to-night. We'll strike right for his camp. The tracks will help us to find it. You understand what you are to do now?"

"Yes; I'll be ready."

"Watch for the door to open," Jerry added. "Lie still, and don't make a sound. Better keep your arms under you, in case Sparwick should get awake. If he does, give a little cough."

"All right," whispered Hamp.

Having thus taken all possible precautions against failure, Jerry once more crawled noiselessly away from the bed.

When he was half way across the room, he ventured to rise to his feet. Then, bending low, he moved to and fro in search of what he wanted. He found the snowshoes and the caps without any trouble. He softly opened the cupboard and put some crackers and cold meat in his pocket.

He wanted a rifle badly, but they all rested on one pair of hooks, and he was afraid that he could not get one down without making a racket. So he reluctantly concluded to do without.

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Jerry softly crossed to the door. He undid the fastenings and pulled it half-way open. He stopped on the threshold and looked back into the room. It was a moment of thrilling suspense. He saw Hamp rise slowly to his feet and take a step forward.

Then, like a flash, Sparwick's tall figure towered over the lad. There was a scuffle and a heavy fall. Two hoarse cries blended into one.

Jerry stood as one petrified. He heard Sparwick calling lustily for Bogle. He saw the latter spring to his feet, dragging Brick after him. Then Hamp's voice rang sharp and clear, in tones of entreaty:

"Run, Jerry! run! I'll hold him as long as I can."

This broke the spell. Jerry knew that Hamp was beyond hope of rescue. He dropped the latter's

snowshoes, but held on to his own. He dashed over the threshold and into the moonlit clearing.

There was no time to look for the trapper's tracks. He remembered his saying to Bogle that his camp lay north of the swamp. Luckily Jerry had his bearings, and knew what direction to take.

He sped around the end of the cabin and plunged into the thicket. As he ran on and on, the tumult behind him faded away. The recent cold snap had formed a crust on the snow, and he made pretty good progress. Now and then, however, he struck weak spots and broke through to his knees. At the end of half-an-hour he ventured to stop. He seated himself on a log and strapped his snowshoes on securely. He was conscious of a feeling of elation. Not a sound could be heard but the rustle of the wind.

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"I don't believe they know which direction I took," he reflected. "Anyway, I have a good start, and I mean to keep it. Once I find Mowry's camp, I will be all right. I can't afford to lose any time, so here goes."

He struck off again at a swinging gait. The snowshoes made traveling a delightful task. The moonlight was a great help to him. It shone into the gloomy recesses of the swamp.

At the end of two hours he passed from the confines of the swamp into a fragrant pine forest. There was a steep hill some distance in front of him. He might have gone to right or left, but he was not sure that he had kept unswervingly to the north since he fled from the cabin.

Jerry vaguely feared that he had lost his bearings. It occurred to him that from high ground he might put himself right, or catch a flickering gleam of Mowry's campfire. So he toiled up the hill, never noting that his snowshoes left a plain imprint with every step. He gained a ridge and pushed along it for some distance.

But the undergrowth and timber were heavy, and he could not see far beyond them. He suddenly discovered that he was exhausted and worn out. He thought of climbing a tree to obtain an unobstructed view, but the effort seemed too great. He sat down on a snow-covered boulder to rest. He was in a glow of heat and perspiration, and did not feel the cold. The silvery moonlight streamed upon an open glade in front of him.

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The time sped by more quickly than Jerry knew. The keen, biting air roused him from a train of thought. He concluded to push on. He rose to his feet and stood debating which way to turn.

Before he could decide, a crashing noise in the bushes behind him sent a cold chill through his blood. He ran forward half-a-dozen yards and then turned his head. He was horrified to see Kyle Sparwick emerge from the bushes. The ruffian had a rifle in his hands. He drew it to his shoulder and took aim at Jerry.

"Stop right thar," he cried. "The game is up, lad. I've got you."

But Jerry did not stop. He melted away before Sparwick's indignant eyes. In other words, he dodged behind the trunk of a convenient tree. Thence he gained the cover of thick bushes, and made a spurt over the ridge.

No shot followed him. Indeed, Sparwick had not intended to shoot. His object was to capture the lad. He uttered a yell of anger and started in pursuit. His quick, loping gait soon brought him in sight of Jerry.

Then the chase became doubly exciting. Threats of shooting were freely uttered. But Jerry did not let these distress him. He was satisfied, by this time, that Sparwick had some good reason for not rousing the night echoes with a rifle-shot.

The lad was soon at his wits' end. He was more angry than scared. It was not personal injury that he feared. Recapture meant the destruction of his hopes, and he wanted badly to save Brick's father from paying fifteen thousand dollars to the rascally schemers. But he seemed doomed to failure. His enemy was rapidly and surely overhauling him. In desperation he picked up a short, thick billet of wood. He faced around and threw it.

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The billet struck Sparwick's right arm and knocked his rifle to the ground. With a snarl of rage and pain, he stooped to recover it.

"You'll pay dear fur that when I git hold of you," he shouted.

This ruse allowed Jerry to gain a dozen feet, and gave him fresh hope and courage.

"Mebbe I can outrun him, after all," he thought. "If there was only cover enough to dodge and hide!"

But a moment later the ridge suddenly narrowed, and just ahead lay a huge, towering boulder, crowned with pine trees. It jutted up sheerly, and Jerry knew that he had no time to scale it. He turned and ran to the left side of the ridge. There were tall, tangled bushes in the way, but he forced recklessly through them.

Then came a moment of frightful despair! The treacherous screen ended on the brink of a chasm. To draw back now was impossible.

Jerry's feet slipped over the edge. With a hoarse cry on his lips, he shot down—down into the misty, yawning depths of space.

Several minutes later Sparwick crept tremblingly to the verge of the precipice. With a white, scared face, he peeped over.

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"Poor lad!" he muttered. "It's the end of him—a straight fall of not less than a hundred feet. He must be smashed to a jelly. Well, dead men tell no tales. I reckon the fifteen thousand is safe. I'd

better be makin' tracks for the cabin."

He turned away with a shudder.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

It was an hour after dawn when Sparwick returned to the cabin. Bogle was up preparing breakfast. The boys lay on the bed with wide-open eyes. They were delighted to see that Sparwick had come back alone, but their exultation was quickly changed to deepest sorrow, when the story of Jerry's sad accident was told.

They pleaded with their captors to have Jerry's body recovered—a request that was firmly refused. After breakfast Bogle and Sparwick held a long and earnest discussion. Then, much to the amazement of the boys, they began to prepare for a journey.

"Where are you going?" Brick ventured to ask.

"None of your business," Bogle replied. "You'll know in good time."

"Come on! Lively, now," added Sparwick.

"I guess they're afraid that trapper will find poor Jerry and make trouble," Brick whispered to his companion, as they passed out of the door. "So they are going to hunt a safer hiding-place."

"That's about it," assented Hamp.

There was no chance to say more. A sled was given to each lad, and they dropped into line behind Bogle, who assumed the lead with a rifle over his shoulder.

In the rear came Sparwick, dragging the third sled and keeping a watchful eye on the prisoners.

All morning the little party tramped steadily to the east. At noon they stopped long enough for a lunch. Then they pushed on, through scenery of the most lonely and rugged description, until three o'clock in the afternoon.

A deep valley now lay before them. It was densely covered with trees and undergrowth. After traversing it for half a mile, Bogle turned toward the base of the hill. He pushed through a strip of heavy timber and huge, scattered boulders.

A moment later the weary travelers were at their destination.

The Rock House was aptly named. It was a sunken depression in the base of the mountain—a sort of cave with an open front.

In a short time the place presented a cozy and cheerful appearance. The luggage was unpacked, and the red flames danced in the stone fireplace. Sparwick brought in a dozen loads of pine boughs and made a soft bed.

It was long past dark when supper was ready. In spite of their grief the boys were very hungry. They enjoyed the meal. Then Bogle ordered them to bed.

"You needn't think of escape," he said. "This place is harder to find or get away from than the cabin in the swamp. Make the best of things, and in good time you'll be free."

He strolled back to the fire and, lighting his pipe, sat down beside Sparwick.

The boys felt too wretched and heartbroken to sleep. In tearful whispers they talked about Jerry.

"I can hardly believe that he is dead," said Brick. "He was an awfully good fellow."

"No better ever lived," replied Hamp. "He was murdered, Brick. Sparwick drove him over that cliff. I'll never rest until both these scoundrels are caught and punished."

"Nor I," added Brick. "We'll devote our lives to it. It won't seem long now until we are free."

"But it takes a good while to go to New York and back from here," said Hamp. "Anyhow, will Raikes know where to find us now?"

"They must have left a message for him at the cabin," replied Brick; "or perhaps it was all arranged beforehand."

At this point Bogle and Sparwick came over to bed, and the conversation ended abruptly.

We must now return to the events of the previous night.

After shooting sixty feet downward from the top of the precipice, Jerry plunged into the bushy branches of a pine tree that jutted outward from a crevice in the wall of rock. He stuck for an instant, and then slipped through. He fell a farther distance of thirty feet, and landed in another pine tree.

This time the branches held him tight, and there he remained in a state of unconsciousness until daybreak.

About that time Jack Mowry, the trapper, happened along, in search of a brace of partridges for breakfast. Fortunately he glanced up and saw the lad.

The angle of the cliff was not so sharp at the base. It offered plenty of footholds. The trapper clambered up for ten feet. He reached the tree and succeeded in extricating Jerry, and getting him safely to the ground.

The trapper carried Jerry tenderly to his camp, which was less than half a mile distant—a cozy bark shanty in a wind-sheltered nook of the forest.

Mowry was one of nature's own physicians, and knew just what to do. After satisfying himself that no bones were broken, he rubbed Jerry vigorously from head to foot, and dressed his bruises and scratches. Then he rolled him in blankets and dosed him with hot drinks.

This wise treatment undoubtedly saved the lad's life, but it did not entirely counteract the effects of his fall and exposure to the bitter cold. He struggled out of his stupor to a sort of semi-consciousness. He talked in a rambling and incoherent manner, and tossed restlessly in a fever.

For two days he remained in this condition. Mowry tended him faithfully and constantly, never leaving his side for a moment.

On the third morning Jerry opened his eyes with a clear mind. He was puzzled to find himself in such surroundings. He remembered all that had happened up to the time of his fall. He listened with wonder to Mowry's explanation. He was startled to find out how much time had elapsed. Then, in an eager voice, he told the whole story from beginning to end.

The trapper was vastly indignant to learn of the rascality of his old associates.

"Of course I'll help you, lad," he declared. "I knowed suthin' was wrong when I run across the cabin, an' they didn't even ask me in ter warm my bones. An' that was me you heard outside that night. I was tryin' ter diskiver the mystery. I reckon I didn't git back until arter you fell, else I'd a' heard you screech. You see, I took a roundabout way so as to hide my tracks."

"Then we must act at once," replied Jerry. "If we don't, we won't save the money. Raikes may return from New York any day."

"Time enough, lad," assured Mowry. "The rascals think you're dead, an' they won't dream of leavin' the cabin. If you take keer of yourself ter-day, you'll be able ter tramp down to Kingman an' organize a party."

Jerry insisted that he was as well as ever, and wanted to get up. But an effort satisfied him that this was out of the question. So he submitted to the inevitable as patiently as possible.

Mowry fed him on nourishing meat and broth during the day, and by evening all traces of fever had left him.

A hasty breakfast was eaten in the morning, and the camp was put in order. Then Mowry and Jerry started on their long tramp. The trapper took a hand-sled with him, and whenever the level ground permitted, he gave the lad a lift. Thus the journey was robbed of half its fatigue, and Jerry was comparatively fresh when the settlement was reached late in the afternoon.

Kingman was a straggling bit of a place on the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The inhabitants were bluff, honest folk, and Mowry happily knew most of them. He accepted the proffered hospitality of the station agent for himself and companion.

The news quickly spread through the village, and by the next morning a party of armed men were ready to start for the cabin in the swamp. Jerry reluctantly consented to stay behind. He had to admit that he was not in fit condition to make the long tramp.

"Thar's one thing you'd better do while we're gone," said Mowry. "Telegraph to this here lawyer in New York ter have Silas Raikes arrested. It may save a heap of trouble."

The station agent favored this suggestion. But, unluckily, Jerry had forgotten the name and address. He finally concluded that the former was Glenwood. So, while Mowry and his companions were heading northward through the woods, a message sped southward over the wires, addressed simply, "Mr. Glenwood, New York."

It read as follows:

"Don't make any deal with the man from Maine who demands \$15,000. Have him arrested at once. Particulars later. Answer."

The name of the station agent was attached. But noon brought no answer; nor yet evening. A second message was dispatched, and a third at midnight.

Morning came, and still there was no reply.

Jerry waited impatiently about the telegraph tower at the station. Then he went to dinner. As he and the agent were rising from the table, the operator arrived with a yellow paper. It contained the following reply from New York:

"Can't find the man. Lots of Glenwoods in the city. No lawyers of that name."

CHAPTER XXXII.

JERRY'S JOURNEY.

The agent was satisfied that a mistake had been made in the name, and Jerry was of the same opinion.

While they were discussing what had better be done, Mowry unexpectedly entered the house. He looked thoroughly fatigued and worn out. In a few words he told his story of failure. They had found the cabin deserted. The rest of the party were scouring the neighborhood. Then the trapper had started back at once.

"Somethin' hes scairt the rascals," he declared, "an' so they pulled out fur a safer hidin'-place. But I reckon the men will find 'em sooner or later. I thought I'd slip back with the news. How about the lawyer chap in New York? Did you git an answer?"

The telegram was read to him, and he scratched his head in a puzzled way.

"I don't put no faith in these pesky things," he said. "That there fifteen thousand dollars must be kept out of the hands of these derved rascals. I reckon thar's time enough. It would take about a week fur the lawyer chap to make terms with Raikes, an' get word across the ocean an' back. I'll bet Raikes is down thar in the city waitin'."

"Very likely," assented the agent. "If we had the lawyer's right name we could soon reach him."

"I don't believe it," exclaimed the trapper, in a scornful tone. "Telegraphin' ain't no account. Lad, you must go to New York by the fust train. I'll foot the bills." 217

"Me?" gasped Jerry. He could scarcely believe that he had heard aright.

"Sartin," resumed Mowry. "You're a bright lad, an' I reckon you'll know what to do. Go to this man Larkin's house, or to his place of business. Some one will tell you where to find the lawyer."

"Or you might get a city directory," suggested the agent, who evidently favored the plan, "and look over the names that are like Glenwood."

"Yes; and one of those is a good plan," replied Jerry. "I'm willing to go, and I think I will succeed."

"Thar ain't no doubt about it," declared the trapper. "You're an extry bright lad, from what I've seed of you. An', bein' brought up in Bangor, I reckon New York won't scare you. It's a leetle bigger town, from what I've heard."

Jerry and the agent smiled at each other.

"You must telegraph back what luck you have," Mowry went on. "An' when you've fixed things an' hed Raikes arrested, you an' the lawyer chap hed better come up here by the first train."

"Unless the boys are rescued in the meantime," added the agent. "We can let you know about that by wire. It's barely possible that Raikes is on his way back, so I will have all the stations in this vicinity watched."

"That's a good idee," approved the trapper. "He'll likely come right to Kingman, since this is the nearest point to the cabin. While the lad's in New York I'll go up country ag'in, an' see how them fellers are makin' out with their hunt." 218

After a further discussion of a few minutes, the matter was definitely settled. The agent brought his knowledge of the different railway lines into practical use, and the trapper produced the sum of fifty dollars from a dirty buckskin belt.

"That oughter last you, lad," he said. "I reckon the lawyer chap will pay me back one o' these days."

There was a train westward at two o'clock that afternoon, and when it steamed away from the Kingman station Jerry was among its passengers. He waved his hand at Mowry and the agent as long as he could see them.

Then the boy settled down in the seat, and tried to realize the wonderful thing that had happened to him. He was actually on the way to New York—the great city that Brick had described in such glowing terms. Already the past seemed but a shadowy dream. Had he actually lived through those stirring adventures in the Maine woods?

By degrees his mind grew more composed, and he settled his thoughts on the object of his journey. He was quickly roused by the arrival of the train at Mattawamkeag. Here he purchased a ticket to Bangor, and made connection with another train on the Maine Central Railway.

Jerry reached Bangor at five o'clock. There was no time to stop and see his parents, for a southward-bound train was ready.

The long journey came to an end at last. It was nearly midday when the train rolled into the Grand Central depot at Forty-second street. Jerry got out and followed the jostling crowd to the street. 219

Jerry stood for five minutes, not knowing which way to turn or of whom to ask information. Passersby jostled him roughly, and a policeman made a warning gesture with his club. This frightened Jerry. He was about to retreat to the shelter of the depot, when a tall, well-dressed

lad, with a handsome, refined face, suddenly caught him by the arm.

"By Jove! is this really you?" he exclaimed, joyfully.

Jerry looked up.

"Tom Fordham!" he gasped.

The other laughed.

"That's who it is. I'm glad you knew me. I recognized you right away. I'm most awfully glad to see you, Jerry. But what under the sun brought you here? Hold on; come into the station. We can talk there."

He led the way to a comparatively quiet spot, and Jerry, nothing loath, poured out the whole story. Never was there a more surprised lad than Tom.

"I can't get over it," he exclaimed. "The idea of Brick getting into such a scrape. But we'll get him out, Jerry. It's awfully lucky that I met you. I was going up to Yonkers to see a fellow, but I'll drop that now. You see, it's holiday time, and college don't keep. I thought Brick would get you fellows to go into the woods with him. He promised to write to me, but he never did it. His running away made a big sensation. At first his guardian was mad about the money, and then he got worried, and——"

"You don't mean to say that Brick ran away?" asked Jerry.

"Oh! didn't you know it?" exclaimed Tom, in surprise. "I don't suppose I ought to have said anything about it, then. But come on. I'll take you downtown. Mr. Glendale is at dinner now. We'll go to his office later on."

So the two lads sallied out from the depot. What followed was like a fleeting panorama to Jerry, but it was a very dazzling and fascinating one.

At length, after a ride on the elevated road, they reached the City Hall. Through narrow Nassau street they walked, and then through to Broadway. Tom led his companion into a great stone building, many stories high.

The rode half-way to the top in an elevator. When it stopped, they got out and traversed a long corridor. At the further end was a glass door, and on this Jerry read:

"FREDERICK GLENDALE,
"LAW OFFICES."

Tom entered boldly, and Jerry followed.

The sole occupant of the front room was a young man who was bending over a typewriter.

"Hullo, Martin," said Tom. "Mr. Glendale here?"

"No; he left town yesterday morning."

"Do you know where he went?"

"Somewhere up north, I think," replied the clerk. "It's private business. That's all he said to me."

"Can you tell me if there has been a fellow named Raikes here to see him this week?" Tom went on, eagerly.

"Yes; pretty nearly every day. His last visit was yesterday morning. I think he has something to do with Mr. Glendale's journey. Can I do anything for you, Mr. Fordham?"

"Nothing," said Tom. "Much obliged, Martin."

He beckoned to Jerry, and they left the room. They did not speak until they were out on Broadway.

"Just a few hours too late," exclaimed Tom. "But we'll save the money yet. Now for the telegraph office. You must send a dispatch to Kingman. Then we'll catch the first express train to Bangor. I'm going up there with you to help get Brick out of the scrape."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TREACHEROUS PLOT.

In the Rock House one day was just like another. The time dragged slowly by. It was a period of indescribable misery and monotony to Brick and Hamp. When they were able to forget Jerry's fate they were tormented by fear for their own.

Nearly a week passed. Then, at sunset on a Wednesday evening, Raikes returned. Bogle, Sparwick, and the boys were squatted on the ground about the fire, eating supper.

Raikes responded to their greeting, and sat down beside them. His face told nothing, but there

was a subdued twinkle of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Fill my plate, Sparwick," he said, "and give me a cup of coffee. I'm hungry as a bear."

"How far have you come?" asked Bogle.

"From Wytopotlock," was the reply. "It's a little station on the Canadian Pacific, a few miles east of Kingman."

Brick was unable to hold in any longer.

"Is it all right?" he exclaimed, eagerly. "Have you got the money? Are you going to let us go now?"

Raikes did not reply. Instead, a bewildered look flashed across his face. He had just discovered Jerry's absence.

"Where is the other lad?" he asked. "I hope you haven't let him get away."

Bogle briefly told the sad story. Raikes was visibly affected.

"I'm sorry it happened," he said. "I didn't want any bloodshed to be mixed up in this affair. Still, it was an accident, and the lad was to blame himself. We'll have to explain to Glendale that he escaped, and could not be found. You see, I told him that we had three prisoners to turn over instead of one."

"Then you have really made a success of your errand, Silas?" asked Bogle.

Raikes smiled as he took a deep draught of coffee, and attacked the food on his plate.

"I couldn't have done better," he replied. "Everything is fixed, and there is no danger of a slip. It took two or three days' work to bring Glendale to terms. He was pugnacious at first, and used some pretty rough language—talked about the police, and all that sort of thing. I told him to go ahead, and he saw that I couldn't be bluffed or scared off. After I convinced him that the lad's life depended on the payment of the money he came down gracefully."

"Did he cable to France?" asked Bogle.

"No; it wasn't necessary. He had money at his disposal, and he didn't want to alarm the lad's parents. The long and short of it is that Mr. Frederick Glendale is now quartered at a tavern in Wytopotlock, and he has with him the sum of fifteen thousand dollars in banknotes."

Sparwick and Bogle fairly gasped for breath. Their eyes and flushed faces showed how excited they were.

"Five thousand apiece!" muttered Sparwick. "It's a fortune."

"What arrangements have you made for the transfer?" asked Bogle.

"We're to meet on Friday evening, three miles this side of Wytopotlock," replied Raikes. "Do you remember that big rock in Path Valley? It stands just where the stream comes tumbling down the mountain side."

"Yes, I know the place."

"Well, that's where we'll pocket the money and turn over the prisoners," said Raikes. "This is Wednesday. I'll spend the night here, and go back in the morning. You needn't start until early on Friday morning. You must be at the rock as near sunset as possible that evening. I'll have Glendale there in plenty of time."

"And Sparwick and I will do the same with the boys," replied Bogle. "The way you put this thing through does you lots of credit, Silas. We'll be well paid for all our trouble."

"It was cleverly managed, if I do say it myself," answered Raikes, as he went on with his supper.

By this time the boys were through. Their arms were tied, and they were ordered over to the bed. They crouched close together on the pine boughs, and discussed, in low tones, what they had just heard.

"It's not the loss of all that money that worries me," said Brick. "I'm thinking about poor Jerry. Don't forget that we swore to have the murderers punished—if it takes a lifetime."

"I won't," replied Hamp, in a husky tone. "We'll begin just as soon as we are free."

Finally the boys fell asleep. The three men sat about the fire, talking and smoking, until nearly midnight. Then they put fresh logs on the blaze, and went to bed. Bogle and Sparwick stretched themselves on one side of the boys, Raikes on the other. In a short time all were apparently sound asleep.

But Raikes was merely feigning slumber. From time to time his eyes opened, and shot a stealthy glance about the cave. At the end of an hour he sat cautiously up. He bent over the boys, and looked into Sparwick's face. The latter was certainly sound asleep. His eyes were closed, and his breath came deep and regular.

Raikes did not relax his scrutiny for nearly five minutes. Then he was satisfied beyond a doubt. He now bent in the other direction, and softly touched Bogle's face.

"Are you awake, Joe?" he whispered.

"Yes," was the reply. "I've been keeping awake on purpose. I thought you had something to tell me."

"Well, I have. I didn't get a chance all evening. I've got to be brief, so pay close attention."

"Hold on," whispered Bogle. "Is Sparwick sound asleep?"

"Sound as a rock," assured Raikes.

"Then, let's creep over to the fireplace, and talk there," added Bogle.

"No; he might get awake, and find us gone. Then he would be sure to suspect something."

"All right," assented Bogle. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Raikes took another look at Sparwick and at the boys. Then he drew a tiny glass vial from his pocket, and slipped it into Bogle's hand.

"Take good care of it," he whispered, "and put it in a safe place."

"What is it?" asked Bogle.

"Chloroform," Raikes whispered. "I'll tell you how to use it. Some time to-morrow night wet a rag, and press it on Sparwick's face while he is sleeping. Then bind him tightly, and put a gag in his mouth. At daybreak start for the meeting place with the boys. You can easily manage them if you keep their arms tied. Glendale and I will be waiting. You and I will share the fifteen thousand dollars, and strike for a safe part of the country."

"Splendid!" whispered Bogle. "You're a born schemer, Silas. I thought you would find some way to outwit this greedy fool. But shall I leave him here to die of starvation?"

"We'll let Glendale or the boys send a party to rescue him," replied Raikes. "And as likely as not he'll spend the next two or three years of his life in jail. That's enough now. It's not safe to talk any longer. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," whispered Bogle. "You may look for me and the lads at sunset."

This ended the conversation. Raikes lay down, and pulled the blankets over him. Not a sound could be heard but the steady breathing of the sleepers.

Had the fire been burning brightly it might have been seen that Sparwick's eyes were open. There was a devilish smile of mingled anger and triumph on his face. Under the blankets he savagely clinched his fists.

"It's a good thing I was listening," he said to himself. "A mighty good thing. I reckon I'll be ready fur these sneakin' liars."

He involuntarily gave a low chuckle as some pleasing thought entered his mind. This scared him. He listened for a moment. Then he closed his eyes, and began to snore.

The three men were up at the first streak of dawn on Thursday morning. After a hastily-prepared breakfast Raikes said good-by to his companions; and started for Wytotpitlock.

An hour later the boys were roused and fed. If the previous days had seemed long, this one was ten times longer. Bogle and Sparwick looked forward to evening just as impatiently as the boys. They passed the time in smoking and talking, and appeared to be on the best of terms. Dinner time came, and the long afternoon dwindled slowly by.

After supper the evening seemed comparatively short. At ten o'clock all were in bed. Bogle did not chain himself to Brick, as he had always done heretofore. He allowed the lad's arms to remain tied behind his back.

"I need a good rest to-night," he explained to Sparwick, "and I won't get it with that confounded bracelet on my wrist."

"I reckon the lad's safe enough," muttered Sparwick, in a drowsy tone. He seemed to be half-asleep already.

Bogle stretched himself on the opposite side of the bed, so that the boys were between the two. He made no effort to keep awake, since he did not intend to carry out his instructions until toward morning. He dropped off to sleep in a very contented frame of mind. He straightway dreamed that the half of fifteen thousand dollars was already in his possession, and that he was enjoying life in a great city.

In the midst of his revels he awoke, and opened his eyes. For a moment he did not remember where he was. The embers of the fire shed a dim light, and showed him a man bending over him. He felt a strange hand groping in his pocket.

Then the situation suddenly flashed upon him. He recognized Kyle Sparwick, and knew intuitively that he must have heard the conversation on the previous night. Now he was seeking the vial of chloroform.

With a husky cry, Bogle pushed his enemy aside, and sprang to his feet.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A VIAL OF CHLOROFORM.

Kyle Sparwick was taken quite by surprise. His back intercepted the light from the fireplace, and consequently he did not notice that Bogle's eyes were open until it was too late.

He rushed blindly at Bogle, and received a stinging blow between the eyes. With an angry yell he rolled over against Hamp.

Both lads were instantly wakened, and, not knowing What was the matter, they cried out with fright.

Meanwhile, Bogle had rushed across the cave in quest of a weapon. The firelight showed him reaching for the bunch of rifles that rested on a stone slab on the opposite wall.

Sparwick arose, and in half-a-dozen leaps crossed the floor. Just in time Bogle got hold of a rifle. He was too excited by the thought of what was at stake to take careful aim. He hastily leveled the weapon, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The ball whizzed by Sparwick's head, and flattened harmlessly on the wall above the boys.

There was no chance for a second shot. With a shrill cry Bogle swung the weapon around in a half-circle. Sparwick instantly broke through the other's guard. Then came a volley of crashing blows.

The cause of the fight was a mystery to the boys. They looked on with a certain show of indifference. The struggle could not well affect them or their fortunes, no matter how it terminated.

"Bogle has no chance at all," whispered Brick. "Sparwick is as strong as a giant."

"He knows how to wrestle, though," replied Hamp. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if— Hullo! there they go."

Yes; the men were down, and Bogle was actually on top. But his triumph was short lived. By a single twist Sparwick jammed his enemy against the floor. Then he pinned him helplessly by the throat with one hand, while with the other he brutally rained blow after blow on his face.

Brick and Hamp felt their blood boil with indignation. Had their arms been free, they would have gone to the unfortunate man's rescue—rascal though he was.

But Sparwick had no intention of doing murder. His spasm of rage spent itself, and he let his right arm drop.

"I won't kill you, you sneakin' cur," he hissed, "though if there was ever a traitor as desarved death it's you, Joe Bogle. I wish I had Raikes here ter give him some o' the same medicine. You didn't count on me bein' awake last night, but all ther same I was. I reckon I'll hev to go shares with Raikes, since he's still got the upper hand, so to speak. But you won't touch a cent of that money—not a red."

Bogle turned his bleeding and battered face upward. "You've done enough, Sparwick," he whined. "Let up on me, and call it square. You needn't be afraid of any more treachery. We'll take the boys down to the meeting-place, and you will get your five thousand dollars."

"Not a bit of it," exclaimed Sparwick, with a harsh laugh. "I reckon I kin take the boys there alone. An' as fur the money—why, I'm goin' ter have a clean half, an' mebbe more. It all depends on what sort of a drop I kin git on Raikes. Lie still, now."

He thrust his hand into Bogle's pockets, one by one. The prostrate villain struggled hard to prevent the search. His vain pleadings changed to bitter curses.

Sparwick was impervious to both. He went calmly on with his task. He uttered a triumphant chuckle as he drew out the longed-for vial. He quickly uncorked it, and poured the contents generously on his bandanna handkerchief.

Bogle struggled and howled, all in vain. As the deadly cloth was pressed over his nose and mouth he became quiet. His limbs relaxed, and his eyes closed. He lay like a corpse.

With a grunt of satisfaction Sparwick rose to his feet and stretched himself. Then he walked over to the sleds, which were piled at one side of the bed.

"I was justified in that thar," he said, turning to the boys. "The mean cur hed it all fixed ter treat me the same way. You needn't be afeared he's dead. It's only chloroform."

Brick and Hamp watched Sparwick place the vial and the saturated handkerchief carefully on the floor at the foot of the bed. Then he took a knife from his pocket, and cut two pieces of rope from one of the sleds. This done, he negligently dropped the knife and returned to his victim.

He tightly bound Bogle's legs together. Then he set to work on his arms. His back was turned toward the boys, who were sitting up watching him.

Suddenly Brick gave a start. He had discovered that the cords on his wrists were coming loose. He fumbled for an instant, and managed to pull one hand through. His arms were now free.

He held them up in front of Hamp, and at the same time made a warning gesture of silence. Then he leaned softly over, and reached the knife.

Two noiseless strokes, and Hamp's arms were free. Sparwick was still absorbed in his task. Brick now removed his shoes, and motioned to Hamp to do the same. He pointed to the handkerchief, and the vial.

"Are you with me?" he whispered in his companion's ear. "It's a great chance. We can sneak up from behind. It will only take a few seconds. We can hold him that long."

Hamp nodded. Just then Sparwick rose to his feet.

"You lads better go to sleep," he growled. "You've got a long tramp ahead of you ter-morrow."

Then he returned to Bogle, and knelt over him in his old position. He had him securely bound, and now he was going to put a gag in his mouth.

Brick instantly leaned over, and captured the vial and the handkerchief. He resaturated the latter with what chloroform was left. Then he and Hamp exchanged meaning glances. They had a splendid chance, for Sparwick's back was turned toward them. 233

Then, in their stocking feet, they went swiftly and silently forward, side by side. Now they were right over their intended victim. Brick encircled Sparwick's head with both hands, and pressed the handkerchief against his nostrils.

Taken forcibly and unawares, Sparwick toppled over on his side. He struggled hard for a few seconds, then the stupefying drug did its work, and he lay still, with quivering limbs.

Brick flung the handkerchief across the cave.

"Will they come to life again?" he asked, huskily.

"Of course," replied Hamp. "Don't worry. Chloroform never kills. But we must pull out of here right away. We'll save that fifteen thousand, Brick, if we can only get back to civilization without being caught."

"We'll do our best," replied Brick. "I can imagine Raikes and my guardian waiting for us tomorrow night."

In great haste the boys put on their shoes, snowshoes and caps. Then they took one of the sleds and loaded it with as many of their traps as they could find. They were in such an excited and nervous frame of mind that they overlooked a most important matter. They failed to bind Sparwick. It never occurred to them that he might recover consciousness in a short time, and pursue them.

With a glance at the two ghastly forms lying in the firelight, the lads turned their backs on the Rock House, and scrambled down the hillside to the trough of the valley. 234

It was now about midnight, and they had not the slightest idea as to the points of the compass. Happily they discovered the faint trace of footprints—evidently made by Raikes. So they followed them in the reasonable belief that they would lead to the settlement of Wytopotlock. But half an hour later the trail seemed to melt away, and after a vain search for it the boys pushed on at random.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A PERILOUS RIDE.

When dawn came, Brick and Hamp were in a miserable plight. They were half frozen, and nearly famished. It was impossible to tell the points of the compass.

"Only so we don't wander back the way we came," said Hamp; "because Sparwick may have recovered his senses by this time."

"I know," replied Brick. "That's why it wouldn't be safe to shoot a bird or something for breakfast. I don't think we're anywhere near the Rock House, though."

"The only thing we can do is to push on," said Hamp. "We may get an outlook from that hill yonder."

The hill was a quarter of a mile distant, but when the boys reached it they found no guiding clew within sight.

"I more than half believe we've been traveling south all the time," said Brick.

"So do I," replied Hamp, "and if that's the case, we're sure to reach civilization sooner or later."

The boys struck through the woods. They were so tired that they stopped frequently to rest during the morning. The sled, too, proved to be a burden; but they held on to it.

Finally they reached a plateau, obstructed with heavy timber, scrub and rocks. Pushing across it, they emerged into a glare of light on the brow of a mountain side. 235

As far as the boys could see, was a rolling, wintry landscape of woods and hills. At a possible distance of eight or ten miles several wreaths of brownish smoke were stamped faintly against the horizon.

"Look," exclaimed Hamp. "That must be Kingman or Wytopotlock. I'm sure of it. We're on the 236

right track, old fellow.”

“With a big tramp ahead of us,” added Brick. “I’m so tired I could drop right down and go to sleep. Say, wouldn’t this slope make an elegant toboggan slide?”

“Well, I should say so,” replied Hamp, in a tone of great enthusiasm.

The boys were right—at least, as far as appearances went. From some natural cause the mountain side was bare of timber and rocks. Its smooth surface of crusted snow fell at a steep but regular angle, and seemed to be unbroken until it was merged with the timber of the bottom of the valley.

As the boys looked, the same idea took root in the mind of each.

“Do you think it would be safe to shoot down on the sled?” asked Brick, doubtfully. “It would save an awfully long walk.”

There was a moment of silence and hesitation. Then all choice was summarily taken out of the lads’ hands. They heard a snapping of twigs behind them, and, when they wheeled around to look, there stood Kyle Sparwick. A rifle was strapped over his shoulder, but he made no attempt to use it.

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“I’ve got you ag’in,” he cried, harshly. “Up with your arms, now. I’m a-goin’ ter tie them, an’ then we’ll start for the meetin’-place. It was purty smart of you lads ter travel in the right direction.”

Sparwick enjoyed the consternation of the lads. He watched them with keen satisfaction. The certain prospect of the ransom money made him more lenient and good-humored than he would have been under other circumstances.

“Well,” he said, finally. “Are you goin’ ter lift your arms?”

It was just then that Hamp remembered the sled, and the long slope of frozen snow. No thought of danger entered into his calculations now. Like a flash, he jerked the sled forward to the verge of the descent.

“Jump on, Brick!” he yelled. “Jump, quick!”

The command was hardly spoken when Brick threw himself flat on the long sled, and clung tightly to the sides. Hamp dropped instantly on top of his companion. There was ample space for them, since the amount of luggage was small.

Just as Sparwick uttered an angry yell, Hamp sent the sled forward by a shove of his foot. The fore end scraped on a hidden chunk of rock that half checked it for an instant. The delay was brief but fatal.

Sparwick dashed forward with a tremendous stride. He grabbed at the sled, but missed it. Then he made a desperate spring, and landed on top of the lads.

The next instant there was a wild, giddy rush—a roaring of wind and a sprinkling of fine snow. The sled, freighted with its living burden, was dashing like a meteor down the mountain side!

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It was almost a miracle that the top-heavy sled did not upset. Had the course been less smooth and even, it must have done so at the start.

“Hold tight, lads,” shouted Sparwick. “If we upset, we’ll be smashed ter pieces.”

The sled plunged on in its mad, careening course. Now it was two-thirds down the mountain.

Suddenly Hamp uttered a startled cry, and Brick chimed in lustily. Through the flying cloud of fine snow tossed up by the runners, both lads had made a frightful discovery. Just ahead was a chasm of unknown depth—a treacherously-projecting knob on the slope of the mountain. The white blanket of snow had kept its existence hid until now.

“Scrape your feet,” yelled Hamp. “Swing the sled to one side. Quick! quick!”

He meant Sparwick, but the latter had no time to carry out the order. The sled whizzed to the verge of the abyss. It shot into the air, turned over, and plunged downward through twenty or more feet of space!

Happily there was a deep drift at the bottom, and the crust on top of it was none too hard. The sled struck on its fore-runners, and went through like a rocket.

Brick landed near by on his side, and Hamp took a header a few feet beyond. Both lads were immersed in powdery snow beneath the surface. Sparwick fared better. He landed squarely on his feet, and the broad surface of his snowshoes saved him from sinking more than a few inches.

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Sparwick dragged the sled out of the snowy depths. Then he rescued the boys, one at a time. They had not sustained even a scratch. They made no resistance, knowing that it would be useless. Sparwick bound their arms behind them, and ordered them to go slowly down the remaining brief stretch of the mountain side. He followed with the sled.

“That there ride saved a heap of time,” he said, mockingly. “It ain’t fur now to the meetin’-place. I reckon we’ll git thar long about sunset.”

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CHAPTER XXXVI.

CONCLUSION.

Tom Fordham proved as good as his word. After apprising the station agent at Kingman of the situation by telegram, he took Jerry uptown to his home.

An early supper was served the boys, and then they hurried off to the Grand Central Depot.

It was nearly noon on Friday when the lads arrived at Kingman. They found a large crowd assembled to meet them, among whom were Jack Mowry and the station agent.

They went at once to the latter's house, and after briefly telling their own story, they were amazed to learn that absolutely no clew of any sort had been discovered.

"Most of the party that was scourin' the woods hev come back," said Mowry. "They was in an' out through every part of the woods, but all ter no purpus. It's mighty queer what them rascals hes done with the lads."

"And how about Raikes and Mr. Glendale?" asked Jerry.

"Not a trace of them has been seen," replied the agent, "though we have kept a careful watch on the trains and made inquiries in various directions. If they left New York at the time your telegram stated, they must have reached this part of the country a good two days ago—even before we were on the watch for them."

"Perhaps they got off at some other station than Kingman," suggested Tom.

"Quite likely," asserted the agent. "In that case, we have missed them. It looks very much as though the rascals were going to collar all that money and get scot-free."

His opinion was reluctantly shared by the others. It was a doleful crowd that sat around the hot stove, vainly pondering what could be done.

But at three o'clock the situation took an unexpected and pleasing turn. A tall, bearded man, clad in a hunter's garb, rushed noisily into the house with two companions.

"Hullo, Ike Carter," exclaimed the agent. "What's up?"

"A good deal, I reckon," replied the other. "I jist heard that you an' Mowry are lookin' fur Silas Raikes. I seen him this mornin' in Hiram Bobb's tavern at Wytopitlock. His mustache was shaved off, but I knowed him all ther same. He was with a swell-lookin' cuss with a beard an' shiny black togs——"

"That was Mr. Glendale," interrupted Tom, rising eagerly to his feet.

At first the news caused great excitement, and it was some time before it could be allayed. Then wise counsels prevailed, and the agent's carefully concocted scheme was adopted.

"There are enough of us here to arrest Raikes without any trouble," he said. "We won't say anything about it outside, but we'll just go quietly to the station, and take the first train to Wytopitlock. It goes in twenty minutes."

This programme was carried out. The party of seven managed to reach the station and board the train without attracting much attention. Wytopitlock was even a less important place than Kingman. It boasted half-a-dozen houses, a store and a tavern. The latter was nearly a quarter of a mile from the station, and stood on the edge of the wilderness. Here bad news awaited the party.

"The men you're inquiren' fur hev been here mor'n two days," said Hiram Bobb, "at least one of them has. Arter dinner they started into the woods. They said they was goin' huntin'. Thar's somethin' queer about it, though. I heard them whisperin' this mornin', an' one, he says to t'other, 'we must git thar by sundown. The place is a big rock about three miles up the valley.'"

Jerry and Tom exchanged meaning glances with the men.

"I know whar that rock is," exclaimed Mowry, "an' I understand the hull thing. Thar's ter be a meetin' at sunset, an' the lad an' the money will change hands."

"And the sun will set in a little less than half an hour," cried the agent. "We've got just about time enough to reach the place."

"What's all this rumpus about, anyway?" gasped Hiram Bobb, with bulging eyes.

The situation was quickly explained to him. He volunteered to accompany the party, and the offer was accepted.

"I hope thar won't be no shootin' needed," said Mowry, "but it's a little unsartin, seein' as thar'll likely be three of the rascals at the meetin'-place instid of one."

A little later the party were advancing softly, and in single file, through the woods. They went swiftly up the trough of the deep and gloomy valley, Mowry leading the way with unerring knowledge.

At last Mowry paused, and waited until his companions had gathered around him. He pointed with one hand to a ledge of rock and bushes that was visible some thirty feet ahead, and stretched two-thirds of the way across the trough of the valley.

"We must git behind that without makin' any noise," he said. "Yonder is the big rock, an' a sort of a clearing roundabout. We'll be able ter see right into it."

Mowry led the party on with extra caution. The increased roar of the torrent drowned their soft tread. Even before they reached the line of rocks they detected voices ahead. Tom and Jerry gained the point of vantage at the same time with Mowry. They cautiously parted the bushes and peered through. The sight that instantly met their eyes well repaid Jerry for all his trouble and suffering in the past.

The fast-fading light showed a group of figures standing at the base of the towering boulder. They were five in number, Mr. Glendale, Raikes, Sparwick, and Brick and Hamp.

The lawyer had just taken a bulky packet from his pocket, and was unrolling the brown paper in which it was wrapped.

"Git ready, men," whispered Mowry. "Here goes."

Then quickly the ambushed party broke from cover. The scene that followed baffles adequate description. With half-a-dozen weapons trained upon them, Raikes and Sparwick had no alternative but to submit to capture. This they did very ungracefully, and with a choice selection of oaths.

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Mr. Glendale dropped the packet of banknotes to the ground—where it was promptly grabbed by Mowry—and shook hands with Tom in a very eager manner. As for Jerry, it may be imagined how his appearance affected Brick and Hamp, who at first thought him a ghost. Then they embraced him, and cried for very joy. In fact, there was vast excitement all around, and everybody was happy but the two baffled villains. Mr. Glendale and the four lads found themselves a little apart from the others. The lawyer took Jerry and Hamp by the hand.

"My brave boys," he said. "I am heartily glad to meet you, and to thank you in the name of his parents for the service you have done Brick. You have saved the money as well, and that, I can assure you, is a great load off my mind. I felt that Brick's life depended on the payment of the ransom.

"Brick," he added, "I hope that this will be a lesson to you. You have seen and experienced the bitter fruits of running away."

"It will, Mr. Glendale," Brick declared, earnestly. "I assure you it will."

Here the discussion ended, for Mowry and his companions were ready to start back. It was a dreary journey for Sparwick and Raikes. When the tavern was reached, they were pinioned, and placed in a room under strong guard.

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Hiram Bobb's resources were taxed to their utmost to provide for all his guests that night. But he managed to acquit himself with credit. The rapid eating of the supper that he provided was ample proof of its goodness.

Then everybody assembled in the big front room, with its sand-papered floor, and tall, old clock in the corner. Mr. Glendale told his story, and Jerry told his, and then came Brick, and Hamp, and Tom, and Mowry—in short, everybody had a say, except the fettered rascals in the room overhead.

And here the story may very fittingly end—that is, after a few words have been said about the principal actors therein.

The first thing Mr. Glendale did the next morning was to hand around banknotes to the men who had aided in the capture of Raikes and Sparwick. He also reimbursed Mowry in full for the money he had advanced to Jerry.

A search party went back to the Rock House that day, but they failed to find any trace of Joe Bogle. He must have come to his senses, and released himself in some way. He has not been heard of since, and is supposed to be in Canada.

Raikes and Sparwick were duly tried, and convicted, and put behind stone walls for a term of years. Of course, the affair gained wide publicity, and when Jerry and Hamp returned to Bangor they were objects of some attention.

Mr. Glendale stopped there for a day or two on his way back to New York, with Tom and Brick. He went to see Jerry's parents and Hamp's mother, and also made inquiries concerning the lads from reliable outside sources. Several weeks later each received a check for one thousand dollars, "as a testimonial of Mr. Larkin's gratitude." This timely gift restored both families from poverty to affluence.

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Jerry and Hamp frequently hear from Tom and Brick, and the latter are talking of coming up to Maine for a summer camping trip. But before that, the Bangor lads expect to pay a visit to New York, of which city Jerry is accustomed to speak in proud and familiar terms.

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1. This text appeared under several titles:
 - as "The Camp in the Snow; or, The Plucky Hunters of the Maine Woods"
 - Good News No. 194-205, 20 Jan-7 Apr., 1894
 - as "The Camp in the Snow; or, Besieged by Danger"
 - New York: Street and Smith (Medal Library No. 182), 1902
 - Philadelphia: David McKay, 1902
 - New York: Street and Smith (Adventure Library No. 96), 1928.
2. Table of Contents was not present in original edition.
3. This text derived from 1902 Street & Smith edition.
4. Corrections to the text:
 - p. 46: stunnning -> stunning (a stunning blow)
 - p. 72: exent -> extent (to their fullest extent)
 - p. 107: zig-zig -> zig-zag (followed a zig-zag course)
 - p. 131: foosteps -> footsteps (heard crunching footsteps)
 - p. 224: thinkinig -> thinking (thinking about poor Jerry)
 - p. 225: Raines -> Raikes (Raikes on the other)

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