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Title: Jack Winters' Campmates

Author: Mark Overton

Release Date: January 13, 2010 [EBook #30958]

Language: English

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JACK WINTERS' CAMPMATES

BY
MARK OVERTON



MADE IN U. S. A.

M·A·DONOHUE·&·COMPANY
CHICAGO NEW YORK

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Here they knelt and waited and waited.

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JACK WINTERS' CAMPMATES

CHAPTER I

A GREAT STREAK OF LUCK

"Anybody home?"

"Sure, walk right in, Toby. My latch-string is always out to my chums. I see you managed to pick up Steve on the way across; but I wager you had really to pry him loose from that dandy new volume on travel he was telling me about, because he's such a bookworm."

The two boys who hastened to accept this warm invitation, and enter Jack Winters' snug "den" were his most particular chums. Those who have been lucky enough to read the preceding volume of this series^[1] will of course require no introduction to Steve Mullane and Toby Hopkins. However, as many newcomers may for the first time be making the acquaintance of the trio in these pages, it might be just as well to enumerate a few of their leading characteristics, and then we can get along with our story.

Steve was a pretty husky fellow, a bit slow about making up his mind, but firm as adamant, once he had convictions. He had proved himself a wonder as a backstop in the thrilling baseball contests so lately played with Harmony, the champion team of the county. Indeed, it was due in great part to his terrific batting, and general field work that the Chester nine came out of those contests, under Jack Winters' leadership, with such high honors.

Toby Hopkins was something of a genius in many ways, a nervous sort of a boy, and really deserving of his familiar nickname of "Hoppy" for short. All the same, he was game to the core, and would never acknowledge himself whipped as long as he could draw a decent breath. Toby ardently admired Jack, and believed there never was another such born leader as the fellow who had "placed Chester on the map" of outdoor sports.

Jack Winters had not always lived in this same town of Chester. When his folks came there from an enterprising place, he had been shocked to discover how little genuine interest the boys seemed to take in football, baseball, and all such healthy recreations.

Jack had been accustomed to enjoying everything that had a tendency to arouse a lad's ambition to excel in all healthy exercises calculated to be of benefit to both mind and body. He soon proved to be the much-needed "cake of yeast in a pan of dough," as Toby always declared, for he succeeded in arousing the dormant spirit of sport in the Chester boys, until finally the mill town discovered that it did not pay any community to indulge in a Rip Van Winkle sleep.

And now that the seed had taken root, and Chester was fully awake, some of her most enterprising citizens were promising to take up the subject of a gymnasium and boys' clubhouse, where the young lads of the town could, under the management of a physical director, have a proper place to spend their spare hours with profit to themselves.

Vacation had not as yet made any serious inroads on their summer season, and for some little time now Jack and his two best chums had been trying to figure out some scheme that would occupy a couple of weeks, and give them the outing they were hungering for.

All sorts of ideas had cropped up, but thus far nothing seemed to have caught their fancy to such an extent that their enthusiasm ran wild. It was just at this interesting stage of the game that Jack had called to the others over the 'phone, to ask them to drop in at his place that evening after supper, and hinting after a boyish fashion that he might have something "real interesting" to discuss with them.

Familiarity with Jack's den caused both the visitors to lose no time in seating themselves in favorite seats. Steve threw himself haphazard upon an old but comfortable lounge, tossing his cap at the same time toward a rack on the wall, and chuckling triumphantly when by sheer luck it stuck on a peg.

Toby curled up in the depths of a huge Morris chair that had been discarded as unworthy of a place in the living-room downstairs, and to which in due season Jack had naturally fallen heir.

"Now, we've strolled over this evening in response to your call, Jack," observed Steve, with one of his wide grins, "and full to the brim with expectancy, as well as supper. Suppose you unload and tell us what you've struck this time?"

"Yes, spin the yarn, please, Jack, because I'm fairly quivering with suspense, you must know," urged Toby, with a vein of entreaty in his voice.

Jack laughed. He knew that while the others were trying to appear cool, inwardly both of them were boiling with curiosity and eagerness.

"Well, the conundrum is solved, I reckon," he went on to say; "that is, if both of you agree with me that this chance is something like a gift dropped from the blue sky. We made up our minds a long time ago that it must be some sort of outing for us this summer, and the only thing that looked dubious was the state of our funds, and they have been drained pretty low, what with buying so many things needed for our sports. Well, that part of it has been settled. A magician bobbed up just when we needed one the worst kind."

Steve no longer reclined at full length on the lounge; he sat up straight and turned a pair of dancing eyes on the speaker. As for Toby, he actually leaped out of the depths of his chair, and threatened to execute a Fiji Island war-dance on the spot.

"Go on, tell us some more, please," urged Steve. "Who is this kind gentleman who has taken such an interest in our crowd that he'd actually offer to stand for the expense of our outing?"

"Well, in the first place," Jack explained, "strange as you may think it, it happens that it

isn't a gentleman at all, but a lady who offers to pay for everything we'll need, to have the greatest camping trip of our lives."

"Re-markable!" gurgled Toby Hopkins. "Well, all I can say is that I'm more than surprised. But it's mighty evident to me that she does this because of the admiration she feels for our chum, Jack Winters; and I guess, Steve, once more we're lucky to have such a general favorite for a comrade."

"Listen, fellows," remonstrated Jack, hastily, "there are several reasons why the lady is doing this for us. One of them is admiration for the way we acquitted ourselves in the baseball games lately played. She has a healthy regard for the proper bringing up of boys, though she has never been married herself, and therefore knows them only from hearsay. She is interested in the projected gymnasium, and means to invest some of her means in the enterprise, believing that it will pay enormous dividends to the young people of this community. But you mustn't ask me for her name, because I am not at liberty to mention it even to you fellows just yet. Later on the promise of secrecy may be withdrawn, after we've come back from our trip."

"Then there is another reason for her generosity besides the desire to reward a select few of the Chester nine on account of their good work on the diamond, eh, Jack?" asked Steve, persistently.

"Yes, I own up to that," he was told, "but that's also a secret for the present. She has made one provision which is that we are to take a quantity of pictures of the region while there, and that will certainly be an easy way of returning her kindness, especially since she stands sponsor for everything, and we are not limited to the amount of our expenses."

"Whew! that sounds like a fairy story, Jack," breathed Toby, entranced.

"I take it," continued the wise Steve, "that if she wants certain pictures of the region for some reason or other, the camping country has already been settled on?"

"Yes, it has, and I hope you'll both be pleased when I tell you we are going up into the Pontico Hills region, with a horse and covered wagon, hired from Tim Butler's livery stable, to carry all our stuff along."

"The very place I've always wanted to spend a spell in!" ejaculated Steve, exultantly. "It's surely a wild region, and a better camping place couldn't be picked out, no matter how long you tried."

Toby, too, seemed delighted.

"I suppose now, Jack," he presently remarked, shrewdly, "this unknown lady friend of yours doesn't want it known that any one is backing us in our trip?"

"That is understood," he was informed speedily enough. "Of course our folks must know where the money comes from, but the story ends there. It is a dead secret, though later on when I'm at liberty to open my heart and tell you just what it all means, you'll both agree with me that if the kind lady is to get what she is aiming for, no one outside ought to know a thing about her being interested in our trip."

Of course this sort of talk aroused the curiosity of the two boys to fever pitch, but they did not attempt to "pump" Jack, knowing how useless it would be; and at the same time realizing how unfair such a proceeding would be toward their benefactress.

So they spent an hour and more in discussing the various means for making their vacation in the woods a memorable one, long to be talked of as the greatest event of the year. Long lists of needed supplies were made up, and corrected, so that by the time Steve and Toby thought it time to start homeward, they had managed to fairly map out their programme.

"Fortunately we can hire that splendid big khaki-colored waterproof tent belonging to Whitlatch the photographer," Jack said as the others were leaving, "and all other necessities we'll pick up at our various homes. Goodnight, fellows, and mum is the word, remember."

[1] "Jack Winters' Baseball Team."

CHAPTER II

JACK AND HIS MATES IN CAMP

It was rather late in the afternoon, some days later, when a light covered wagon drawn by a stout though rather lazy horse, could have been seen moving along the valley road among the famous Pontico Hills. Three boys dressed for rough service in the woods sat upon the seat, with Jack doing the driving just then, though both Toby and Steve had taken turns at this work during the long day they had been on the road.

They were many miles away from Chester now, and pretty close to the end of the journey, as Jack informed them.

"We'll strike the old logging road just above here, you see," he explained, "and by following it a mile or so we are due to come on the place where I've been told we'll find a dandy camp-site, with running water near by."

"Lucky for us you managed to get hold of that old map, and copy it, I tell you, Jack," ventured Steve. "This is certainly a pretty wild country up here, and with mighty few settlers around. I doubt if you could run across a single farm in four square miles of territory."

"It's really worse than that, Steve," admitted the other. "I think you'd have to go three or four miles in any direction before you struck a living soul; and then the chances are it'd only be some wandering timber-cruiser, taking a look at the fine lumber prospects, with a hazy idea that he might be able to strike a bargain with the party who owns all this land up here."

"If they at one time started in to cut this timber," said Toby, glancing around at the myriad of lofty trees that stretched their tops toward the sky, "they didn't get very far before being called off, did they, Jack?"

"I believe the land fell into other hands, and the new owner had no desire to clean it of the timber. So operations stopped. But many an envious eye has been turned in the direction of the Pontico Hills of recent years. They say it carries the finest batch of uncleared land left in the county, if not the whole State."

"How about that grown-up road ahead of us, Jack," called out Toby, who had very keen eyesight; "do you reckon now that might be the logging trail we're looking for?"

"Just what it is, my friend," chuckled Jack; and upon reaching the spot he forced the horse to make a turn to the right, though the animal seemed a bit loath to obey the pull at the lines, apparently anticipating harder work ahead.

They found it no easy task to push along the road over which the logging teams had once made their way, so overgrown with vines and small saplings had it become. Steadily they advanced, all of them eagerly observing the many interesting things that caught their attention.

"There's something moving back of that hanging vine, fellows," suddenly whispered Toby, hoarsely; "and I can't tell whether it's a man or a sheep!"

"Why, it's a doe and a spotted fawn, as sure as you live!" ejaculated Steve just then, as two objects flashed off with graceful bounds that carried them lightly over fallen trees and all other obstacles. "First time I ever saw wild deer in their native haunts. We've got a gun along, but of course nobody'd think of shooting deer out of season; and the law especially protects those with young."

"We've fetched that gun with us only as a sort of protection," said Jack, positively. "None of us would dream of hunting in July. Fact is, I didn't mean to carry it at all, but the lady suggested that it might be just as well, since you never can tell what might happen."

Toby and Steve exchanged quick and suggestive glances at hearing Jack say this. Somehow it struck them as meaning there might be a trace of danger in the secret mission which Jack had undertaken for their mysterious benefactress. And doubtless from time to time they would have further reasons for believing that there was something deeper in their errand than merely taking photographs of the wild country for the edification of the lady, who, for all they knew, might be the owner of these miles and miles of wooded land.

"The sun is getting pretty low down in the western sky, fellows," observed Toby, after a while.

"And I should say we'd come all of a mile since leaving that valley road," Steve added.

"I'm expecting to strike the place any old time now," Jack went on to tell them in a soothing tone. "Here and there you can see where trees have been cut, though they grow so dense around here the slashes hardly show. Keep a bright lookout for the bunch of oaks that makes a triangle, because that's where we pull up and make our camp."

Two minutes afterwards and Toby gave an exultant cry.

"I see them, Jack, sure I do, and I tell you they're beauties in the bargain. A better landmark it'd be hard to find. Well, for one I'm right glad our journey is done."

"Tell that to Moses the nag, here," laughed Jack, "because he'd be mighty happy to know his work is through for a long spell. We've fetched plenty of oats along, and mean to rope him out days, so he can eat his fill of grass. Yes, that answers the description given on my map, and we've finally arrived."

"Yes, and if you listen," went on Steve, eagerly, "you can hear a soft musical sound like water gurgling over a mossy bed. That must be the little stream you told us was close by, and which would supply all our wants. Why, I'm as thirsty as a fish out of water right now, boys; me for a drink!"

With that he hurled himself over the side of the wagon and went on a run in the direction

of the soft sweet murmur which he had rightly guessed could only proceed from running water.

When a little later Steve, his raging thirst satisfied, joined his chums again, he found Toby unharnessing Moses, while Jack was investigating the immediate vicinity with an eye to locating the camp-site.

The wearied horse was led to water and then staked out with the long and stout rope fetched along for this especial purpose. They anticipated having little trouble with Moses while in camp, since all the beast would have to do lay in the way of feeding, and being led to water twice a day.

Next the wagon was unloaded, and from the pile of stuff that soon littered the ground, it was evident that the three lads had taken a fair advantage of their expenses being guaranteed, for they certainly had not stinted themselves along the "grub" line at least.

"We've just got to rush things, and do our talking afterwards," suggested Jack.

"That's right," agreed Toby, "because already the sun is setting, and before long it'll be getting plumb dark. Luckily enough we thought to fetch that lantern along with us, though, and a supply of oil in the bargain."

"I wonder," said Jack, with an amused chuckle, "if there was a single thing we did forget to pack in the wagon. Talk about going into the woods light, when you've got a convenient wagon to carry things along, you're apt to fetch three times as much as you really need."

"I'm one of those fellows who like comfort every time," admitted Steve; "and I suppose I'm responsible for a heap of these things right now; but never mind, Jack, some of them may yet come in handy; you never know."

They seemed to be fairly well versed in the art of raising a tent; at least Jack knew how to go about it.

"Time presses too much to be overly particular how we get it up tonight," he told the others when they suggested that it did not seem to be quite as firmly staked as seemed proper. "Tomorrow we'll rectify all errors. Now, if Toby will begin to get the bedding inside, and sort over the cooking things, I'll make a fireplace. Steve, would you mind taking the ax and cutting some wood?"

"Happy to do so," chirped the big fellow, who had always boasted of being handy with an ax, as his muscular condition gave him an advantage over both the others. "The only trouble is I'm as hungry as a wolf right now, and so much extra exercise will make me wild for my supper."

The sound of the ax soon announced that Steve was doing his duty, and that a supply of wood for the cooking fire was certain to be forthcoming.

Meanwhile, Jack had started to build a fireplace with a number of stones which lay conveniently near by. From the blackened state of some of these the boy suspected they had served for just such a purpose on some former occasion.

When he had fixed this to suit his ideas of the proper thing he had arranged the stones so that one end of the fireplace was a little broader than the other.

Across this space he now laid a metal framework that looked like a grill, and which was two feet square. This was bound to prove a most valuable camping asset, since coffee pot and frying pan could be placed on it without much danger of those accidents that occur so often when they are balanced upon the rough edges of the stones themselves.

All was now ready for the fire itself, which Jack quickly started. Toby gave an exclamation of satisfaction the instant he saw the flames leap up.

"Too bad we were in such a hurry," he went on to say, regretfully. "Some sort of ceremony ought to attend the starting of the first fire in camp. It's going to be our best friend you know, when even we get ravenously hungry; and seems to me we might at least have joined hands, and danced around the blaze while we crooned some sort of song dedicated to the god of fire."

"None of those silly frills go in this camp, Toby, you want to know," said Steve, sternly, coming in just then with an armful of firewood. "This is a business camp, and not a make-believe one. We're up here to enjoy ourselves, and take pictures, but no barbaric rites can be allowed. Leave all that for the savages of the South Sea Islands, or those fire worshippers we read about. I love a fire as well as the next fellow, but you don't catch me capering around a blaze, and singing to it like a foolish goose."

Toby was too busily engaged then to attempt to argue the matter. He had arranged most of the provisions so that a choice could be made, and now he ran off a long string of edibles, most of which, however, would require too much time in the cooking to be chosen.

As is usually the case under similar conditions, they finally decided to cut off a couple of slices from the big ham, and with some of the already boiled potatoes fried crisp and brown, make that the main dish for their first supper.

Soon delicious odors began to arise and be wafted away on the evening air. If any of those curious little woods rodents that might be peeping from their covert at the invaders of their solitude had a nose capable of appreciating such perfumes, they must have been greatly edified by these queer goings-on.

But hungry boys have no thought save to satisfy their clamorous appetites, and so little unnecessary talking was done up to the time when the trio curled themselves up with their feet under them, tailor fashion, and proceeded to clean off their heaping pie pans of the savory mess that had been prepared.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST NIGHT UNDER CANVAS

"This is something that just can't be beat!" Toby remarked, after he had made serious inroads upon his first helping, and taken off the keen edge of his clamorous appetite. "I enjoy my food at home all right, but let me tell you nothing can ever quite come up to a supper cooked under the trees, and far removed from all the things you're accustomed to meeting every day."

"And this coffee is sure nectar for the gods," said Steve, helping himself to a second cup as he spoke. "Now, at home I never can bear this tinned cream, yet, strange to say, up here in the woods it seems to go first rate. Pass me the sugar, please, Jack. And Toby, after I've slacked my hunger a bit so I can act half way decent I'm meaning to toast some of the slices of bread at that splendid red-ash fire."

So they continued to sit there and fairly gorge themselves until Steve could hardly sigh, he was so full; but then all boys are built pretty much alike in that respect, so we can easily forgive Steve in particular. Cutting wood does put an edge on a naturally keen appetite that knows no limit save capacity; and Steve had many good qualities to more than balance his greediness.

Later on when they lay around enjoying the sight of the crackling fire, and casting pleased glances toward the capacious khaki-colored waterproof tent that stood close by, they talked of many things that had some connection with their intended stay in the Pontico Hills country.

"This sweet little stream with the ice-cold water is the Spruce Creek you've got marked on your map, of course, Jack?" suggested Toby. "Now how far away would you say Paradise River lies from our camp?"

"Oh! not more than ten minutes' walk from here, I imagine, and in that direction," and Jack pointed as he spoke, showing that he already had his bearings pretty well fixed in his mind.

"Why do you suppose those loggers ever made camp here when they expected to get their timber out through the river, and the lake below, perhaps shipping by way of Chester?"

Toby asked this question as though he sought information, and if so, he appealed to the right person, for Jack was quick to reply.

"Why, I understand that the ground lies pretty low down by the river, Toby; and a camp there might be in danger of being flooded out with the spring rise. You know Paradise River does get on a tear some years, and pours into our lake like mad. These lumbermen had long heads, and didn't mean to take chances of being drowned out of their camp. This higher ground served them better, just as it will us now. That's the only answer I can think of."

"And it comes mighty near being the true one, I'm telling you, Toby," affirmed Steve, positively. "I'm right glad we've been wise enough to look out for that sort of thing. Huh! had one nasty experience of being flooded in a camp, where we had to wade up to our necks in the stream that grew in a night, for the little island was all under water. No more of that sort of thing for this chicken, thank you."

They talked until all of them began to grow sleepy. Then the horse was looked after for the last time, and found to be lying down, well satisfied with the feed of oats and sweet grass that had made up his supper.

Inside the tent there was plenty of room, for the three intending sleepers. Apparently Mr. Whitlatch, the photographer, carried quite a lot of paraphernalia with him when going off on his periodical excursions, taking pictures of Nature as found in the vicinity of Chester; and meant to have an abundance of room in which to keep his camera and other traps safe from the heavy rainfalls that frequently deluged that section of country.

Making themselves comfortable, the three boys tried to compose themselves for the sleep they needed so much, for very likely none of them had rested soundly on the last night under the family roof-tree, on account of nervous anticipations of the fun in store for them.

It turned out a difficult thing to do. Going to sleep away from the surroundings with which they were familiar excited them so much that even though they closed their eyes to shut out the fitful flashes of the fire burning just outside they could not control their thoughts.

Then again at times sounds that were not at all familiar came to their ears. As a rule they understood that these were made by the small fur-bearing animals inhabiting the wooded region, and which must have been thrown into an unusual state of excitement by their arrival on the scene.

The hours passed.

In due time all of the campers managed to get asleep, though, if they awakened during the night, it must have given them a queer feeling to realize that they were no longer surrounded by the familiar walls of their rooms at home, but had only a thin canvas covering between themselves and the star-studded heavens above.

Morning came.

The whinny of old Moses acted as reveille to arouse the trio inside the tent; possibly the animal was accustomed to having his breakfast at peep of day, and wanted to know why it was not forthcoming now.

First Toby, then Jack, and finally Steve came crawling forth, clad in their warm pajamas. They stretched, and went through certain gymnastic feats calculated to limber up their cramped muscles. Then, as the fresh morning air began to make Toby in particular shiver, he

plunged inside again to commence dressing.

"It really isn't because I'm so ferocious for my breakfast, boys," he hastened to explain, when the others followed him under the shelter; "but that air is pretty nippy, seems to me, and I don't like too much of it when minus my clothes. Steve, how about you trying your hand at those bully flapjacks you've been boasting of being able to make ever since this camping trip was first planned?"

"Oh! I'm game, if you both say the word," affirmed the other. "That's why I just insisted on fetching that self-raising pancake flour along. What would a camp be like without an occasional mess of flapjacks?"

Later on, while Steve was making ready to carry out his job, Toby sought Jack, who was doing something inside the tent.

"Say, do you know, Jack," he went on to remark, "I woke up some time in the night and couldn't just make up my mind what it was roused me. Seemed like a clap of distant thunder; but when I peeped out under the canvas the stars were shining to beat the band. Did you happen to hear it too, Jack?"

"Just what I did, Toby," returned the other, with a smile, "and as you say, it did sound like far-away thunder. I saw you peeking out, but didn't say anything, for old Steve was sleeping fine, and I didn't want to wake him up. After you went off again I crept outside for an observation. It was around midnight then."

"Course you could tell by the stars," suggested Toby, eagerly. "I saw you taking their positions about the time we crept in for a snooze. I must learn how to tell the hour of the night by the heavens before we finish this camping trip. It must be a great stunt, I should think, Jack."

"As easy as falling off a log, once you begin to notice the heavenly bodies, and their relations to each other," Jack told him. "I'll take pleasure in putting you on the right track any time you see fit."

"But about that sound, could it have been a blast of any sort, Jack?"

"That's hard to say," the other replied, looking thoughtful, Toby saw. "It may be they are doing some quarrying miles away from here; or else some railroad is being cut through the hills."

"But even if that's so, Jack, why should any one want to set off a blast in the middle of the night, tell me?"

"I give it up, Toby. Possibly before we leave this region we may have found out an answer to your question. Forget that you heard anything queer, that's all. We expect to scour this whole region up here, and if anything like that is going on, as likely as not we'll learn all about it."

Toby looked strangely at his companion as though a suspicion may have arisen in his mind to the effect that perhaps this queer sound had something to do with the mission that Jack had undertaken in coming to the Pontico Hill country; but Toby had the good sense not to press the matter any further, though his boyish curiosity had undoubtedly been exercised.

When breakfast was ready, they made themselves as comfortable as the conditions allowed. Already there was a vast improvement over the arrangements of the preceding night. Two short logs had been rolled up so as to serve as seats while they discussed their meals. This was much nicer than squatting on the ground in attitudes that severely tried the muscles of their bodies. Toby promised to make a rude but serviceable camp table upon which their meals might be served. And a host of other things were considered by means of which their stay in the woods might be made much more comfortable.

They talked of numerous things besides those that concerned the present outing. Football came in for a fair share of their attention, because the fever to excel in sports had already seized hold of these Chester boys, and in the fall they hoped to put a sturdy eleven in the field that would be a credit to the town.

Besides this other sports were mentioned, especially those having an intimate connection with the season of snow and ice. Lake Constance offered a fruitful field for iceboating; and there could hardly be a finer stream than the crooked Paradise River when it came to skating distances during a Saturday, or in the Christmas holidays.

So the time passed. They had actually cleaned out the coffeepot and both fryingpans of their contents, but at least no one could ever complain of getting up hungry in that camp-not while Steve had anything to do with the cooking. His flapjacks had turned out to be a big success, and Toby in particular was loud in praise of them; though by the way he winked at Jack when declaring them the best he had ever devoured, barring none, it was plainly evident that he was saying this partly in the hopes that the gratified Steve would repeat the dose frequently.

"This will never do," said Jack, finally; "we have too much on hand this morning to be loafing here. First we'll get the dishes out of the way, and then arrange programme for the work. By noon I expect to have things more ship-shape."

The others were eager to assist, and presently every one had his hands full. The big tent was raised in better shape than could be done in their hurry of the preceding evening. Then all their stock was gone over, some of it placed securely away in the covered wagon until needed, and the rest kept handy for immediate use.

A dozen different artifices were carried through, each intended to make things more comfortable and handy. Plainly Jack knew ten times as much about the business of camping-out as either of his chums; and they were only too pleased to take lessons from him, being eager to "learn all the frills," as Toby said.

And just as Jack had predicted when noon came they had most of these innovations carried through, so that the afternoon could be used for other enterprises as the humor suggested.

CHAPTER IV

TAKING A LOOK AROUND

Toby had evidently been making up his mind about something, for they had hardly finished a cold lunch when he turned to Jack and remarked:

"I've got a hunch there ought to be some mighty good fishing over there in the river, do you know, Jack? I fetched my stuff along, and would like ever so much to make a try there this afternoon, if either of you cared to go with me."

"Now, that's too mean for anything," grumbled Steve, looking quite unhappy. "I'm just as fond of fishing as the next fellow, and I'd like to take a whirl with the gamey bass of the upper reaches of Paradise River; but hang the luck, I just oughtn't to try to walk that far."

"What ails you, Steve?" demanded Jack; "I haven't heard you complain any, though come to think of it, you did limp more or less when walking around this morning doing your share of the chores. Got a cramp in your leg?"

"No, but one of these shoes has rubbed my heel till it's sore," fretted Steve, taking off his shoe to sympathetically rub that portion of his pedal extremity. "If I expect to be able to toddle around, and have any sort of fun while we're up here I ought to keep quiet the balance of the day; and also put some sort of lotion on my heel that'll start it to healing."

"I can't go with you, Toby," Jack went on to say, "because I have planned to take advantage of this clear day to snap off a few pictures, just to get my hand in, you see. My old camera wasn't good enough, the lady said, and so she had me step in and buy the finest in Chester. It looks like a dandy box, and I aim to pick up a lot of mighty smart photographs while we're up in this neck of the woods."

"Any objections then to my going off alone, Jack?"

Toby asked this with such an appealing look on his face that Jack could not find it in his heart to put any obstacle in the way.

"I don't see why you shouldn't take a little tramp by yourself if you feel that you just can't wait until tomorrow, Toby," he told the other. "Only be careful not to get lost. I'll loan you my map, which you can study while waiting for a bite; and then again, you must carry the compass along, too. I reckon you know something about telling the points of the compass from the green moss or mould on the northwest side of nearly every tree-trunk. Yes, go if you feel disposed, but start back an hour or so before dark."

"Just when the fishing is bound to be at its best, too," complained Toby; "but then after I know the way, and have broken a regular trail to and from the river, I can stay later. I dug a lot of worms in our garden, and picked up some whopping big night-walkers besides, so I'm all fixed for bait, I reckon."

Eagerly then Toby secured his jointed rod, and the little canvas bag in which he kept all his paraphernalia, such as hooks, sinkers, extra lines and many other things without which a fisherman's outfit would not be complete.

Taking his quota of bait in an empty can that had contained some Boston baked beans which the three lads had eaten cold for lunch, Toby started gaily forth, whistling as he went.

"You said the river must lie directly west of here, Jack," he called back ere plunging into the woods; "so I'm heading that way now. I expect to take notice of everything that looks at all queer, as I go along, and make as broad a trail as I can, so I'll have no trouble about coming back the same way I go. Steve, wish me luck, because I know you just love fried black bass."

Thereupon Steve waved both hands after him as if in blessing.

"Hope you get a fairly good mess, Toby," he shouted, "not more than we can manage at one sitting, because I hate a fish hog who wastes twice as much as he can make use of. But if they do bite like sixty, say, I'll be sorry I didn't make up my mind to limp along with you, no matter how much this heel hurts."

So Toby vanished. They could hear his merry whistle gradually growing more distant as he trudged along, keeping his face set toward the west, and doubtless making sure of this by frequent glances at the friendly compass.

"Let me take a look at that heel of yours, Steve," said Jack, when they were thus left in charge of the camp. "Luckily I thought to fetch some magic healing salve along, and I'm sure it'll help you a lot. We'll fix that shoe, too, so it can't do any more damage. I've had a bruised heel myself, and I know how painful it always is."

Steve was only too willing to have Jack's assistance; and between them the little operation was carried out. The limping camper declared his heel felt ever so much better, and he believed he would have no further trouble from that source, given a rest until the next morning.

Then Jack got out his new camera, and fussed around for half an hour or so, examining its working before loading it with a roll of film. He appeared greatly pleased with its excellent workmanship, and felt that if he only did his part the results must be exceedingly satisfactory.

"I may be gone an hour, Steve," he told the campkeeper, as he prepared to make a start; "or, for that matter, don't be surprised if I'm away double that length of time. A whole lot depends on what I run across interesting enough to make me take considerable pains to get a good picture of it. I mean that our kind benefactress shall at least have the worth of her money, and call it a good investment, if a set of splendid pictures can fill the bill."

"So long, Jack, and I reckon it would be silly for me to tell you not to get lost. You've been too long at the business to need any compass in order to get around in a strange region. But if you should stray away, remember to shout and I'll fire the gun twice in answer."

"It's a bargain, Steve, and I won't forget the signal," chuckled Jack. "If anybody should chance to drop in on you while I'm gone, entertain them as your good sense tells you is the right thing. But remember, we're just up here for a vacation camping trip, and nothing more."

"Oh! I can be as close-mouthed as a clam, Jack, never fear!" sang out Steve, as the other strode away the camera held over his shoulder by its strap.

Jack was gone almost two hours. Then he once more showed up at the camp, and Steve pretended to be greatly overjoyed at seeing him.

"I was just thinking I had better get out the gun, and fire off both barrels so's to let you know where the tent lay," he chuckled, as though such an idea amused him considerably. "But I suppose you've found some things worth snapping off; how about it, Jack?"

"Yes, I used up a six-exposure film, and believe I've picked up some things well worth the trouble. Next time I'll go in another direction, and farther away from camp. This is a wonderful country, Steve. I don't believe you could find grander bits of scenery than right here among the Pontico Hills. Anything unusual happen since I went away?"

"Oh! I've had a lot of visitors," laughed the other boy, "slick little chaps in their fur coats one and all. They are watching us both right now, I reckon, behind the shelter of the leaves on the ground, and up in some of these big trees. There were both red squirrels, and fat gray ones that barked at me, and seemed to ask what business a chap walking on two feet had in their domain. Then chipmunks galore live around here, and the little striped fellows have already begun to get acquainted, for one ran in and picked up a bit of bread I threw, and then whisked out of sight like fun over there where he lives in the holes under the roots of that tree. Why, I've been so employed watching them, and talking to them, that the time has just skipped along. When I looked up at the sun just now and guessed you'd been gone nearly two hours, I had to rub my eyes and figure it all out again. You see I'm so used to telling time by clocks that it seems queer to use the sun for it."

"No signs of Toby so far, I suppose, Steve?" asked Jack a little later, as he emerged from the tent after putting his camera safely away.

"Not a thing," announced the other. "I hope you're not worrying about him, Jack, and sorry already you let him go off alone. Mebbe I ought to have kept him company, sore heel or not."

"Don't fret about it, Steve. Toby has common horse-sense, and could hardly get lost if he tried his hardest. You see, the formation of the valley is calculated to always set a fellow straight, even if he gets a little mixed in his bearings. It runs directly southeast to northwest around here. Besides Toby has the compass, and the sun is shining up there full tilt. He may not be in for another hour or so; but I wouldn't be alarmed even if the sun set with him still away. The light of our campfire would serve as a guide to him, once darkness fell."

"Yes, that's a fact, Jack. We could build a roaring blaze that might be seen a mile and more away. I did hear one thing that surprised me."

"What was that?" demanded the other, looking expectant, as though he could give a pretty good guess himself, which was as much as saying that he had heard the same sound.

"Why, there must be some sort of mining going on not many miles away from here," argued Steve, "because that was surely a blast I heard half an hour ago. First I had an idea it meant a coming storm, but there wasn't a sign of a cloud in sight. It seemed to be a deep, heavy reverberation, just like I've heard dynamite make at the red-sandstone quarry near Chester when the workmen at noon set off their blasts. Of course you noticed it, too, Jack?"

"Well, I should say so," the other admitted, "and during the night both Toby and myself were awakened by just the same sort of far-off dull roaring sound."

"I must have been sound asleep then, because I never caught it," acknowledged the other, frankly; "but if you two boys talked it over, what conclusion did you arrive at, may I ask?"

"We were undecided," said Jack, warily. "We sort of inclined to the opinion that either a railroad was being cut through the hills over to the north, or else there might be some sort of mining or quarrying being carried on there. I told Toby that while it was an unknown quantity to us now, the chances were in our scouting around while camping here for two weeks or more, we stood to learn just what caused that queer booming sound."

"There's Toby whistling, as sure as anything," announced Steve. "I figure from his merry tone that he's met with a decent bunch of luck. Yes, there he comes, swinging through the woods, and actually following the trail he made in going out. Good boy, Toby, he's all right."

"And it's fish for supper in the bargain," asserted Jack, "for you can see he's carrying quite a neat string of the finny beauties. There, he holds it up so you can get your mouth ready for a feast."

As the fisherman came closer, Jack saw that he was looking a bit serious for a fellow who had been so successful in his first fishing trip to the river.

"Something happened, I calculate, eh, Toby?" demanded Steve, also reading the signs.

"Well, yes, I've got a story to tell that *may* interest you both," admitted Toby with an important air.

CHAPTER V

TOBY'S ADVENTURE

"Now that's what I get for staying home when I had a chance to go along with you, Toby, old scout," grumbled Steve. "Just my luck to be left out of the running. Hang the sore heel, I say!"

"Come over to the log and sit down, Toby," tempted Jack; "you must be a little tired after your long walk, and all the work of catching such a bunch of fighters. It seems after all that the gamiest bass frequent the upper reaches of Paradise River. And none of the fellows in Chester cared to go that far when the fishing near home was always pretty good."

So Toby was escorted to the sitting log with one chum on either side. He would not have been a natural boy if he did not feel his importance just then, with two fellows eager to hear his story.

"Now pitch in and tell us what really did happen," begged Steve; "for of course by now you've got us all excited, and guessing a dozen things in the bargain."

"Well, I didn't have a bit of trouble finding the river," began Toby, just as though he felt he should conduct them gradually along until the climax came, as good story-tellers do, he understood. "All I had to do was to follow my nose, and keep going ahead into the west."

"I reckon the Paradise River must lie about a mile and a half over yonder; but in places the going isn't as easy as you'd like. Finally, I glimpsed running water, though to tell the truth I'd heard it some time before; because in places there are quite some rapids, and they make music right along, as the water gurgles down the incline, and swishes around rocks that stick out above the surface."

"Let me tell you, boys, the old river may look pretty fine in spots down our way, but shucks! it can't hold a candle to what you'll see up here. Soon's I got my eyes fastened on that picture I thought of you, Jack, and how you'd just love to knock off such a handsome view for keeps."

"But fishing was what I'd come after, and so I put all other notions out of my head. It didn't take such an old fisherman as Toby Hopkins long to settle on what looked like the most promising site for throwing out in an eddy just below some frowning big rocks, and where the shadows looked mighty inviting for a deep hole."

"Say, the fun began right away. Hardly had my baited hook disappeared in the dark water when I had a savage strike, and away my reel buzzed like fury. He was a game fighter, let me tell you, and I had all I could do to land him, what with his acrobatic jumps out of the water, and his boring deep down between times. But everything held, and he chanced to be well hooked, so at last in he came."

"That sure looked like business, and I lost no time in baiting up again, for I knew how finicky bass are about biting, and that you have to make hay while the sun shines, because they quit work just as suddenly as they start in, without you understanding the cause either."

"Right away I had another, and then a third big chap followed which I lost. But what did one fish matter when there seemed to be no end of them just hanging around waiting a chance for grub—because that was just what I was feeding 'em, having fetched along two dozen big white and brown fat fellows I got out of rotten stumps around home."

"Before there was a lull, I had landed five of the string. Then they quit biting, and I had a chance to rest up a bit, and do some thinking. So mebbe half an hour passed, when suddenly something happened. I heard a cough, and looked around right away, thinking that either Steve here, or you, Jack, had taken a notion to follow my trail across to the river just to see what was going on."

"Say, I had a little shock just about that time. A man was standing there not a great ways off, and watching me for keeps. He seemed to be scowling like a black pirate, and something told me right away he didn't much fancy seeing me there, taking fish out of the river."

"I guess I must have thought of half a dozen things all in a minute. He was one of those slick wardens prowling around to see that the game laws were enforced; or it might be he owned the land up here, and took me for a poacher who hadn't any right to be fishing on his preserves; then again, he looked so ugly and black that I even figured whether he could be a desperate fugitive from justice who'd been hiding in the Pontico Hills country, and hated to see anybody coming in to bother him."

"When the tall man with the black mustache and goatee started to move toward me I collected my wits and decided I'd have to seem cordial to him. Then, Jack, I also remembered your warning not to peep a single word about our having come up here for any other purpose besides having a jolly summer outing during our vacation."

"So I nodded my head and said good morning to him just as cheerful and unconcerned as I could. He grunted something, and kept coming along, watching me like a hawk all the while, I could see. Why, I had a cold shiver chase up and down my spine just like somebody had thrown a bucket of ice-water over me; because all sorts of horrible things began to flash through my mind."

"If he chose to tumble me into the river and drown me, who'd ever be the wiser for it, I thought; and perhaps I unconsciously moved back a bit from the edge, as if I wanted to put on a fresh bait."

"Who may you be, boy, and how does it happen that you're fishing up here where not a single soul have I seen in the weeks I've spent here?" was what he said to me.

"Course I up and told him my name, and that I lived in Chester; also how with two chums I was camping about a mile or more to the east.

"All the while I was speaking he kept those hawk-like black eyes of his glued on my face. I felt my skin fairly burn, and wondered whether he could read a fellow's thoughts, which would surely give me away. But I told him the truth, because we have come up here for our vacation camping, and mean to have a bully good time of it fishing, walking, and eating until our grub runs low, and we'll have to head back to civilization.

"I guess I must have put up a pretty fair article of a yarn; leastways he seemed just a mite more cordial when I'd got through; though I could feel that his suspicions hadn't all been set at rest, for he seemed mighty uneasy.

"He told me he was a surveyor employed by the owner of the property all around there; but that owing to an accident to a companion, he had to temporarily stop work, and was waiting for another assistant to arrive. But he never once hinted at such a thing as our visiting him in his camp; or suggesting that he'd like to drop in on us here during our stay.

"He asked a whole lot of questions about Chester folks and what was going on down there; so thinking to interest him I told him about the new spirit that had been aroused in Chester boys, and how we were going to have a new gymnasium erected this coming fall; also how we licked Harmony at baseball, and hoped to wipe their big eleven up on the gridiron when the football season opened.

"Would you believe it, that solemn-looking man never cracked a single smile all the time I was giving him such a glowing description of sport events down Chester way. And I want to go on record as saying that the man who has no love for baseball or football in his system is fit for treason, stratagems and spoils.

"Then finally he said goodbye, just as short as if he was biting it off from a plug of tobacco, turned on his heel, and walked away as cool as you please. Anyhow, I did make a face after him when I could see that his back was turned. And, believe me, fellows, that man isn't all right; he's got something crooked about his make-up as sure as two and two make four."

Steve heaved a great sigh.

"I want to say again I'm sorry I wasn't along when you met him, Toby," he observed, disconsolately. "Not that I don't give you credit for being as smart as they make 'em, but two heads are better than one, even if one of them is a cabbage head."

"Which one?" demanded Toby, suspiciously.

"I'm not committing myself," grinned Steve. "But all the same I agree with you in saying that man must be crooked, though just what his game could be up here I'm not able to even guess."

He gave Jack a quick, almost imploring look as he said this, as though begging him to lift the veil and let them see a little light; but Jack only turned to Toby and commenced to quiz him, asking numerous pointed questions, all concerning the appearance of the dark-visaged stranger who had bobbed up so unexpectedly to interrupt his sport with rod and reel.

It could be seen that Jack took especial pains to inquire into the personal looks of the man. He even startled Toby once by asking suddenly:

"If you scrutinized his face as closely as you say you did, Toby, perhaps you can tell me if he had a scar under his left eye, a sort of mark like a small crescent moon, and which like most scars turns furiously red when any excitement comes along?"

"Why, Jack, I clean forgot to mention that!" Toby instantly exclaimed. "He certainly did have just such a disfigurement, though I took it for a birth-mark and not a scar or healed wound. So then you've already got a good suspicion about his identity, have you? Well, this keeps on growing more and more interesting. Steve and myself will be glad when the time comes for you to open up and tell us the whole story."

"You must hold your horses yet a while, fellows," said Jack, gravely. "The lady made me promise to keep the secret until I had gained the information that was so important, and then I could tell you everything. Toby, I want to congratulate you on playing your part well. That man had reason to suspect you might be up in the Pontico Hills for something a heap more important than just camping out. Perhaps he's satisfied now you spoke the truth; and then again he may still suspect something wrong, and want to keep an eye on us; so we must never speak of these things except when our heads are close together. At all other times we've got to act just like care-free lads off on a camping trip would appear. There are other days to come, and bit by bit I reckon the thing will grow, until in the end I've found out all I want to know."

"One thing sure, Jack," ventured Steve, meditatively, "it's no ordinary game this man with the black mustache and goatee is playing up here in these hills."

"Well, I can stretch a point," Jack told him, with a twinkle in his eye, "and agree with you there, Steve. It's a *big* game, with a fortune at stake; and so you can both understand how desperate that man might become if he really began to believe that our being here threatened his castles in the air with a tumble. So be on your guard all the time, boys, and play your part. Suspense will make the wind-up all the more enjoyable; just as in baseball when the score is tied in the ninth and Steve here has swatted the ball for a three-bagger, with two men on bases, the pent-up enthusiasm breaks loose in a regular hurricane of shouts and cheers, and we're all feeling as happy as clams at high tide. Now, let's get busy on these fish, and have a regular fry for dinner tonight!"

CHAPTER VI

SIGNS OF MORE TROUBLE

They had a most bountiful spread that evening. Steve and Toby insisted on taking charge, and getting up the meal. Besides the fish, which by the way were most delightfully browned in the pan, and proved a great hit with the three boys, there was boiled rice, baked potatoes, warmed-up corned beef (from the tin), and finally as dessert sliced peaches, the California variety; besides the customary coffee, without which a meal in camp would seem decidedly poor.

All of them fairly "stuffed" after the manner of vigorous boys with not a care in the wide world, and plenty more food where that came from. After supper was over they had to lie around and take things easy for a while, inventing all manner of excuses for so doing, when in reality not one of them felt capable of moving.

"I must say the bass up the river seem to taste a whole lot better than down our way," remarked Toby, reflectively. "Sometimes when I've fetched a string home with me, and the cook prepared them for the table they had what seemed like a muddy flavor. It may have been because the river ran high just then, and this affected the fish more or less."

"Don't you believe it," snapped Steve, philosophically. "The difference was in the surroundings, and the kind of *appetite* you had. No matter if a fellow does think he's hungry at home, when he sits down to a white tablecloth, and silver, and cut-glass, and all that sort of stuff it sort of dulls the edge of his appetite. Then again he has to just wait his turn to be served, and mustn't forget his table manners if he knows what's good for him. But say, up in the woods he can just revert back to the habits of primeval man from whose loins he sprang, and his appetite compares to that of the wolf. Oh! things do taste altogether different, somehow or other; and meals seem an *awful* long time apart."

"What's on your mind, Toby?" asked Jack, a short time afterwards, when he noticed the other looking pensive, as though his thoughts might be busy.

"Oh! I was only wondering whether we'd hear that queer old booming sound again tonight, that's all, Jack; and mebbe, too, I was trying to figure out just how *he* manages to make it."

Jack smiled.

"Everything comes to him who waits, Toby," he said, simply; "and so don't worry yourself about things yet awhile. Let me shoulder the burden; if it gets too heavy a load for one fellow to carry be sure I'll call on you two for help."

Then he deftly guided the conversation into other channels. There was plenty to talk about, for these were observing lads, who kept their eyes open no matter where they might be; and every little while Toby would remember something he had noticed as he made his way to or from the river, that he must describe in order to arouse Jack's interest, and cause him to decide on a trip across country soon.

They sat up fairly late, for there was a peculiar fascination about the crackling campfire that held them spellbound. They clasped their hands about their knees, and stared into the glowing heart of the fire, as though capable of seeing all manner of fantastic figures dancing there like madcap sprites. It was the old, old story that never dies out, the spirit of devotion that mankind pays to the element which he had compelled to serve him so well in a thousand different ways, but principally to cook his food, and warm his chilled body.

Finally Toby admitted that his eyes were closing in spite of himself, and Steve on hearing that frank confession commenced to yawn at a terrific rate; so Jack said for one he meant to creep between his blankets and get some sleep.

All seemed well as they retired within the tent where, by the light of the lantern, they could finish their disrobing, and don their warm flannel winter pajamas, which, at Jack's suggestion, they had fetched along with them, because he knew how chilly the nights become in camp even during the "good old summer-time."

After all Toby had his fears for nothing, because he was not aroused by any mysterious explosion. If anything of the sort happened he certainly failed to hear it, and slept through the night.

When morning arrived they were on the job again, as Steve termed it; that is, taking their waking-up exercises in front of the tent by doing a number of gymnastic feats, and then after dressing proceeding with breakfast.

"So far we've been favored with good weather," remarked Steve, as they sat on the logs, and enjoyed the meal thus prepared. "Not a drop of rain, and while fairly hot nothing unseasonable, to make us sizzle along toward three in the afternoon. But seems to me there's a change due before long. I don't quite like the looks of the sun this morning; and it came up glowing red in the bargain."

"So it did, Steve," assented Toby, "and they say that's a good sign of stormy weather. Well, all we can do is take things as they come, the bad with the good. When fellows camp out for two weeks they ought to go prepared for wet as well as dry weather. I've fetched along my rain-coat, and the rubber cap that keeps your neck dry in the toughest of a downpour; and rubber boots, so why should I worry?"

"Since you're prepared to be a regular waterdog, Toby," said Steve, "we'll look to you to do all the stray jobs when it rains. Jack and myself not being so well prepared can stick to the tent and keep dry."

"Perhaps you're counting your chickens before they're hatched," chuckled Jack, apparently

much amused by this conversation on the part of his chums; "for there's no certainty that it means to rain today. That sign business used to make a great hit with people before they began to reason things out; but it as often misses making connections as it does strike the truth."

"Guess it must be a whole lot like the almanac people," laughed Toby. "You know they just guess at probabilities when setting down what the weather is going to be six months ahead. I remember reading a story about one of the most famous of almanac makers, I forget what his name was, but let it go as Spilkins. He was walking out in the country one fine morning when there wasn't a sign of a cloud in the sky. A farmer working in a field called out to him that he'd better keep an eye above, for like as not there'd be rain before the day was done. Spilkins only laughed at him, and went on; but sure enough, an hour later it clouded over like fun, and down came the rain, so that he had to seek shelter in a friendly barn.

"Now, as an almanac man, he thought it worth while to go back and interview that hayseed, and find out just how he could tell there was rain coming when not a sign was visible. I guess Spilkins thought he might pick up a valuable pointer that he could make use of in prognosticating the weather ahead.

"The man was working again in his field, where the shower had made things look fresh and green. So Mr. Spilkins called him over to the fence, and after passing a few pleasant remarks, bluntly asked him how he could scent rain when not a small cloud was in the sky. The farmer grinned, and this is what he told him:

"Why, you see, Mister, we all of us take Spilkins' Reliable Family Almanac around this region, and we goes by it regular like. When he sez it's going to rain we calculate we'll have a fine day for haying; and when he speaks of fair weather, why we just naturally git out our rain-coats, and lay for having a spell in the woodshed. And I happened to notice this same mornin' that he predicted a fine day, so I jest knowed it'd sartin sure rain; and, sir, *it did!*"

Both the others laughed at the story, which neither of them had heard before, old though it was.

"That's just about the haphazard way almanacs are built up," observed Jack. "Of course in a few instances they do hit the truth; so could any of us if we laid out a programme for a year ahead. It's natural to expect hot weather along about this time of the summer; and such a spell is always followed by a cooler period. So we'll take our ducking when it comes, and not bother our heads too much ahead of that time."

While sitting there they mapped out their intended plans for the day. Jack figured on starting out a little later, and securing some more photographs. Steve, not wanting to spend another day in camp, asked permission to accompany him.

"Certainly you can come along, Steve," he was told; "if you think your heel is equal to the long jaunt, because I may cover quite a good many miles before coming back to camp again. How about that? I wouldn't like you to start limping, and be in misery for hours."

"Oh! the old thing seems to be all right this morning, Jack," Steve assured him. "That salve was sure a magic one, let me tell you, and took all the pain out of the rubbed place. I've found a way to prevent it ever hurting again; and right now I'd be equal to a twenty-mile tramp if necessary."

"How about you, Toby, will you mind acting as camp guardian for today? Tomorrow one of us might want to go over to the river with you, and have a try at the bass; but on the whole, I think it would be wise to keep watch over our things."

Jack said this seriously, so they knew he was not joking.

"Why, do you really think that man, or any one else, for that matter, would actually *steal* things from us?" demanded Steve, frowning as he spoke, and perhaps unconsciously clenching his fists pugnaciously.

"I'm only guessing, remember," Jack informed him. "It might be a raid on our camp would be made during our absence. Don't you see, if our being up here annoyed certain people, the quickest way they could get rid of us would be to steal all our eatables while we were away from camp. We couldn't stick it out and go hungry, could we? Well, on that account then we'd better keep a watch."

"Jack, you're right!" snapped Toby, while Steve looked even more aroused than ever at the bare possibility of such a calamity overtaking them; for Steve, as we happen to know, was a good eater, and nothing could appall him more than the prospect of all those splendid things they had brought along with them being mysteriously carried off by unknown vandals.

"Toby, just you keep that shotgun handy, and defend our grub with the last drop of blood in your veins," he went on to say. "Now, I'll step out and see if Moses has finished the oats I gave him before we had our breakfast. While about it I'll lead him over for a drink at Turtle Creek below the spot where we get our supply of clear water."

"Thanks for your trouble, Steve; you'll save me doing it later," spoke up Toby, graciously. "When you fellows are off I'll wrestle with the dishes and cooking outfit. After that I've got several things I want to fix about my fishing tackle—some snells to tie fresh after heating them in boiling water; and hooks that need filing about the points, as they seem a bit dull. Then there's a guide on my pole—I mean my rod, that needs winding with red silk thread. Oh! I'll find plenty to keep me busy I reckon."

Ten minutes afterward Steve came hurrying back with a look of concern on his face that caused both Jack and Toby to jump to the conclusion that he had made some sort of important discovery.

"It isn't Moses that's broken away and given us the slip, I hope?" gasped Toby, and then adding: "no, because I see him over there where we tied him out so he could eat his fill of green grass. What's happened, Steve; you look like you've met up with a ghost?"

"We had a visitor last night, just as sure as anything, boys," said Steve, solemnly; "and we

can thank our lucky stars he didn't run off with our stuff in the bargain!"

CHAPTER VII

PROSPECTING FOR PICTURES

"How do you know that, Steve?" asked the startled Toby.

"Guess I can read tracks when I see them!" snapped the other.

"Then you've come across some sort of trail, I reckon?" ventured Jack.

"Just what I have," came the quick reply, "and here's the way I happened to hit on it. Tell me, do either of you chance to own this pocket handkerchief?" and as he spoke Steve flipped the article in question from its hiding place, and held it up before his comrades.

Both gave a hasty look, and shook their heads in the negative.

"Never saw it before," Toby went on record as saying; "and it's an unusually fine piece of material, I should say, just such as a gentleman who cared a heap for his personal appearance and clothes would be likely to carry."

"Well, you picked that up first of all, and it excited your suspicions; is that it, Steve?" queried Jack.

"It started me to looking around the spot," explained the other, "and right away I saw the tracks of shoes—long shoes in the bargain, making prints entirely different from anything we'd be likely to do. So says I to myself, 'hello, Mister Man! I see you've been snooping around here while we slept like the babes in the woods!' And so I came in to let you fellows know about it. Want to see for yourselves, don't you? Then just follow me."

They were soon examining the imprints. Just as Steve had said, there could be no question as to the tracks having been made by some one other than themselves. More than this, Jack could easily tell that they were comparatively fresh.

"Let's follow them a little bit, and see what he was up to," he suggested, which they accordingly set out to do, and found that while the stranger did not actually enter the camp he did scout around it as though desirous of seeing all he could.

"Wanted to know if Toby here spoke the truth when he said we were only a bunch of fun-loving boys off on a vacation camping trip, didn't he, Jack?" Steve asked, as if to confirm his own suspicions.

"Yes, he actually went completely around our camp, and in several places seems to have approached pretty close," Jack went on to say, after they had given up following the trail of the unknown man. "I think he must have even heard some of us breathing inside the tent, and perhaps he could count our number that way. But after all no great harm has been done; only it goes to show we must keep our eyes open all the time we're up here."

Toby heaved a great sigh.

"Whew! but it's getting some exciting, let me tell you, fellows. All the while you're gone today I'll be nervous and think I heard footsteps every time a gray squirrel whisks around a tree, or barks at me so sassy like."

"Do you think this could be the same man who talked with Toby yesterday, Jack?" Steve inquired.

"We can guess that it must have been," came the answer. "He wasn't wholly satisfied with things, and dropped over in the night to learn if this camp was actually run by boys. You see how wise the lady was, after all, for if this party had run upon three *men* in camp up here, the chances are he'd be more apt to suspect their motives."

Steve shook his head as though ready to give it up. He never in all his life had been so thoroughly mystified as just then. Toby, too, had an anxious expression on his face, as though he would give considerable if only Jack felt disposed to explain the whole matter. But Jack held his peace; apparently nothing could induce him to betray the confidence of the lady who had trusted him. When the right time arrived, he would divulge the secret; but until then both his chums must content themselves with taking it out in speculations.

Finally, Jack began to collect his photographic paraphernalia as though about to get ready to start forth on his tramp. Steve had meanwhile looked after a "light lunch," which he facetiously called a "snack"; though it filled two of his coat pockets, and Jack had some difficulty in stowing away his portion.

Toby eyed these amazing preparations with something akin to awe.

"Say, do you really expect to come back tonight, or are you figuring on staying out a whole week?" he asked plaintively; at which Jack, taking compassion on him, hastened to assure Toby there was no cause for worry.

"You know Steve's weakness," he went on to say aside, "and of course he is always in deadly fear of starving to death. That's why he loads himself down so with grub on the least provocation. But never expect to see a crumb come back, for that would be against Steve's principles, you know. He thinks it a shame to waste food; and so he'd stuff himself until he could hardly breathe rather than throw anything away. We may be a little late in the afternoon, but we'll bob up serenely long before dark comes."

So they set out, Toby waving them goodbye with his dish towel, for he had started in to do the breakfast things.

For a whole they walked along, observing everything that seemed worth their attention. Then Steve took note of a certain fact which he deemed significant. This was that Jack was heading in an almost straight line, as though he had arranged a plan of campaign for that day; and also that if they kept along that course, sooner or later they were bound to fetch up in the neighborhood of the place where that strange booming sound had originated.

This fact agitated Steve, and made him think many things. He even found himself speculating upon the chances of their running across the stranger who was taking such a deep interest in their presence in the Pontico Hills country.

Jack did not make any pretense at hurrying. He was taking his time, it seemed, and enjoying the scenery around him. A thousand things called for exclamation of delight, for the woods looked especially grand with the sun glinting on the green foliage of the various trees, some of which were veritable forest monarchs.

Once before noon arrived, Jack stopped short. The largest tree thus far encountered confronted them. Just what size butt it had I should be afraid to say, for fear I might not be believed, but it was perfectly enormous.

"I must try to get a shot at that dandy oak," said Jack, with bubbling enthusiasm, such as becomes an amateur photographer who loves his calling. "Never have I set eyes on such a majestic king of the woods. I'm sure it will make a splendid picture with you standing alongside, Steve, just to show its enormous girth. The pity of it is that I can't dream of trying to get the whole tree in the picture, for no camera could do that in these dense woods, where you can't get far away from the object you're photographing."

He found that the side toward the sun was after all the best for his purpose, and accordingly, after a little maneuvering, Jack secured a picture of the tremendous monarch of the woods.

"I guess now he was a pretty hefty old tree when Columbus discovered America," said Steve, afterwards, as he tried to measure the butt by passing around it many times with his arms fully extended. "Just think of all the stirring events in history that this giant has outlived. It makes a fellow look up with respect, and feel as if he wanted to take off his cap to the patriarch, doesn't it, Jack?"

"You give him the right name when you say that, for a fact, Steve; because there's no way of our telling just how many hundred years he has stood right in this same spot."

"Well, I'm glad I'm not a tree," grinned Steve, "because it must be terribly monotonous staying all your life rooted to the ground, and never seeing anything of this beautiful world. As for me, I want to travel when I grow up, and look on every foreign land. Going on now, Jack, are you? Soon be time to take a little noon rest, and lighten the loads we're carrying in our pockets."

"Given half an hour more and it'll be noon," Jack informed him, after taking a look aloft to where the beaming sun was high in the heavens. "I never like to eat lunch until then, so let's wait a bit. Besides, I'm not quite as hungry as I ought to be to do justice to all that stuff you put in my pockets."

After that Jack did not seem anxious to snap off further pictures, though they came across a number that would have made excellent ones. Steve wondered whether he might not be saving his film for something more important. Even the thought gave a delicious little thrill, his imagination was so highly excited by now.

Then came the time when Jack, taking another look aloft, announced that the sun had reached his zenith, or nearest point overhead. That was good news for Steve, although truth to tell he had for some time been slyly nibbling at the contents of one of the packages he carried in his pockets, unable to resist the temptation while the opportunity was within his grasp.

Fortune favored them again; but then possibly the presence of that sweet singing little rivulet that meandered through the forest may have had something to do with Jack's decision to stop for lunch; he was always seeing these small but very important things, as Steve very well knew.

They found a mossy bank and sat down, Steve with a great sigh of contentment; but whether this was caused by the fact that his lame foot was hurting him a bit again, or just from plain delight over the arrival of "feeding time," it would be hard to say; nor, indeed, fair to big Steve, who might have his weaknesses, but on the whole was a real good fellow.

Here the pair sat and ate and drank of the cold water until they had fully satisfied the inner man. After all, Steve was compelled to wrap up part of his lunch again, being utterly unable to devour it.

"Huh! guess that time my eyes were bigger 'n my stomach," he grunted, being too full for much speaking; "but, then, never mind, we are quite a ways from camp, and I often take a little bite around three in the afternoon, even when I'm home. So it isn't going to be wasted, believe me."

"Only waisted," laughingly said Jack, and then apologized for getting off such an atrocious pun.

They decided to lie around for an hour, and then push on a little farther before turning back. That Jack figured would bring them to the camp by the triangle oaks an hour or so before darkness came on, which was time enough.

It was very pleasant for Steve, lying there on his back, and feeling the gentle breeze fan his heated face; for around about noon the sun's rays began to grow pretty fervid, and Steve often mopped his perspiring and beaming face, though taking it good naturedly.

Both of them shut their eyes and rested, though not meaning to even take what Steve was pleased to call a "cat nap." It was peculiarly still just at that hour after the middle of the day. The little woods animals must all be sleeping in their burrows, or the hollow trees where they had their nests. Even the inquisitive squirrels were only noticeable by their absence. A scolding bevy of crows alighted in a tree some distance off, and kept up what Steve called facetiously a "crow caucus."

The time Jack meant to remain there resting, had almost expired when both of the boys suddenly sat up, and held their heads in a listening attitude.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN THE CAT RULED THE ROOST

"I've heard foxes bark before, Jack," said Steve, with a trace of excitement in his manner, "but never like that. I reckon now those bowwows were plain dog!"

"Sure thing," remarked his companion, nodding his head at the same time, while a pleased look flashed athwart his face.

"It wasn't so far away, either, was it?" continued Steve, meditatively. "We have the air in our favor, that's true, but the sound was pretty strong. Huh! seems as if we may not be the only campers in this stretch of the Pontico Hills. Other folks have taken a notion to come up here. I wonder if they can be Chester fellows, or from some other place."

"It doesn't matter much to us who they are, since we don't intend to mix with them," said Jack, drily.

"That was a pretty husky bark, Jack, and I should say on a venture the beast might be a fair-sized dog. I think I'll look around for a nice club as we saunter along. Never did fancy being jumped on by a mastiff, or a vicious collie. Been bitten twice already, and the third time might be fatal to poor little Stephen."

"That isn't a bad idea," his mate told him; "and I'll copy your example. Then if we are unlucky enough to run smack into the beast, we can keep him at bay anyhow until his owners come up and rescue us. But I'd a heap rather not have it happen. As you say, the air is coming toward us, which is a good thing; for in that case even a dog with a good nose wouldn't be apt to get our scent in a hurry."

Jack now evinced a disposition to move on. It was as if that series of gruff barks from the unseen dog had acted as a sort of challenge; and having a duty to perform he meant to carry it out grimly.

They accordingly walked on, not making any kind of haste. Indeed, Jack showed a disposition to act cautiously. He was continually keeping a careful vigil, and, as a rule, his eyes were directed ahead. There seemed to be no longer a disposition to look for beautiful vistas that might draw forth exclamations of delight; and as for snapping off a picture, why, Jack had slung his camera back of his shoulder with a final air that told he had put such an idea completely out of his head.

As the minutes passed and they heard no further indications of the dog's presence near by, they concluded that he must have gone back to his day dreams. Steve found himself more than ever puzzled by the actions of his companion. He wished harder than before that Jack would lift the veil a little, and tell him what it all meant, who that man might be, and what he was doing up there among the hills that would bear watching.

It began to get real exciting once, when Jack suddenly ducked and pulled Steve down with him, as though he had glimpsed something suspicious. Valiant Steve gripped his club with a firmer clutch, took a big breath, and awaited the coming of the savage dog; for he believed nothing less than this was about to confront them.

Jack raised his head so that he might see above the bushes behind which they chanced to be crouching. Then he gave a low chuckle as of amusement.

"False alarm after all, Steve!" he whispered. "See, it was only a red fox scuttling away, with his big brush dangling behind him. He was just waking up after his afternoon nap, and wondering where he could get a fat partridge for his supper when our coming disturbed him. I just caught a glimpse of something moving, and on the spur of the moment of course could think only of the dog."

Steve breathed freely again. He also knocked on the ground a bit savagely with that elegant club of his.

"Well, I'm just as well pleased, Jack," he remarked, "though I had it made up to give the brute all that was coming to him. Once let me get a fair crack at him with this stick, and he'll go daffy, I warrant you. I'll put all the vim into the blow that stands for a home-run hit on the diamond. But remember, I don't like dog, and I'm not aching for a chance to make the try."

So again they started along, still heading straight toward the region out of which had come that tell-tale barking. They had come to a still wilder section of country by now. The land was cut up by little ridges and gullies and walking proved more tiresome. Jack appeared to notice this fact, as though it might have a certain significance in his eyes. To Steve, however, it only meant that there must be more chances of game holding forth amidst these dark and gloomy depressions, where trees and heavy undergrowth combined to make an almost impassable stretch.

While there was really no trail for them to follow, it happened that the easiest way to make progress took them along a direct line. On either hand the impediments seemed to be such as to discourage any variation from their course. Only with considerable effort could they have pushed through the tangled vegetation, and for one, Jack did not seem disposed to try it.

Then something happened.

"Oh! did you hear that, Jack?" gasped Steve.

Both of them had come to an abrupt halt, and were standing there, straining their eyes to see what lay ahead of them.

"The first time it was a dog," muttered Jack, as if communing with himself; "and now, unless I'm might mistaken, that meant cat!"

"Cat!" echoed Steve, incredulously. "Why, it was a whole lot louder noise than any cat I ever ran across could make! a snarl that sent a cold chill racing up and down my backbone. Cat? What sort of a cat would you call it, Jack?"

"A wild cat, if anything," replied the other, neither of them stirring as yet. "Look around you and tell me if anybody could imagine a better place for such a beast to live in. And I think I've located it. We can find out quickly enough by making a move as if to go on."

He suited the action to the words. Instantly there came the repetition of that vicious snarl. It seemed to contain all the concentrated essence of savage hatred, and sent another shiver over Steve.

"Now I can see the critter, Jack!" snapped Steve, extending his club to point toward a certain tree standing directly in their path. "Crouching right on that lower limb. Oh! how his yellow eyes glare at us! Excuse me from wanting to come to close quarters with such a demon."

"For one thing, you've settled on the wrong gender, Steve," remarked Jack in a fairly cool tone; "because if you look sharper you'll see two other puffy balls close by the first one. Those are half-grown whelps, and the mother stands ready to defend them to the last ounce of her strength, and drop of blood. We've surprised Mrs. Cat at home."

"Yes, you're right there, Jack, those must be cubs, for I saw one move just then. But with such a combination against us what are we going to do? Surely you won't think of trying to scare the old cat away?"

"Twenty armed men couldn't do that, so long as her kits were in danger," Jack told him. "If we still mean to advance there's only one way to do it. We can't fly over, and consequently it's up to us to go around, or else turn back and acknowledge ourselves baffled."

"I hate to do that last the worst thing," grumbled Steve, giving another whack at the ground with his long club, shaped somewhat like a baseball bat; "but whatever you say goes, Jack."

"It looks a trifle easier traveling over on the left," observed Jack, "so let's make our try there."

When they started, there was another volley of snarls from the beast in the tree, evidently laboring under the impression that this flank movement had some bearing on the safety of her precious offspring.

Steve kept his eyes turned in that quarter about as much as he used them to take notice of the way he was going. Every unusually loud snarl made him think the cat was about to launch herself toward them in an attack; so that the boy was kept worked up to fever heat all the time.

"She's on the move, Jack!" he now hissed. "I saw her leap down to the ground and run along. Say, she's keeping on a line with us, would you believe it?"

Jack took a look himself in order to be convinced.

"You're right there, Steve," he said, with a short laugh. "After all our trying this little dodge may not be worth the candle."

"She's bent on keeping us from advancing, seems like," complained Steve. "Why, the pesky thing acts like she had a mortgage on all that stretch of woods beyond here, and didn't mean to let us foreclose on her either."

"One thing sure, she isn't afraid of two fellows like us," chuckled Jack. "Even our clubs have no terror for the mother of the kitties. Why, if we dared push on ahead she'd jump at us like a flash."

"I certainly feel cheap, being held up like this by an ordinary cat," gritted the burly Steve between his teeth.

"When you're up against an enraged wildcat mother," Jack told him, "and without a sign of a gun to back you, that's the time to spell prudence in big capital letters. They've got terrible claws, and can use them to tear a fellow's clothes to ribbons, not to mention what they'll do to your hide. No use talking, Steve, if the miserable beast is dead set on keeping us from going on we'll have to own up beaten, and retire with our skins whole."

"I've lost track of her for a minute, Jack. Wonder now if she's gone back to her family, thinking we've been scared off."

"You can test that easy enough," he was informed; "just take a step or two forward, and see what happens; but don't be too rash, Steve. You'll need all your good looks when you get back to Chester again. I'd hate to see the map of Ireland across your face in red scratches. Besides, there's always danger of blood poisoning setting in when a wild animal has scratched you, especially one that is carnivorous by nature. Go slow now."

The experiment met with an immediate success, for there broke forth a fresh series of explosive snarls even more ferocious than any that had gone before. Steve drew up in a hurry, evidently under the impression that he was in danger of being made the object of an attack.

"Yes, she's there still, Jack!" he exclaimed, just as though there could be any doubt of such a thing.

"I saw her move, in the bargain," his companion went on to say. "She has kept on a line with us all the while, and still bars the way."

"This is simply disgusting," fretted Steve.

"It's something that can't very well be helped," Jack told him: "and so what's the use of feeling bad about it. There are other days coming, when we may be able to pass along here without being balked by a mother cat with kittens. You know the old saying, 'what can't be cured must be endured,' so we'll have to make the best of it."

"Does that mean we're at the end of our rope for today, Jack?"

"Seems that way, Steve; the cat rules the roost this time, apparently."

CHAPTER IX

BACK TO THE WOODS CAMP

Steve had a fairly well developed stubborn streak in his nature, and he certainly did hate to give a thing up, once he had got started. Worst of all was the fact of their being compelled to acknowledge defeat through a miserable wildcat; had it been a panther now, a tiger, or a lion, he might bow to the inevitable with a good grace; but cats, in his mind, were always to be associated with the night-singing Tommies at home, for which species he felt a contempt that could best be displayed by a rock thrown from a bedroom window.

"Shucks! I hate to do it, but just as you say, Jack, the beast is set on drawing a regular dead line ahead of us, which we can't pass without a fight. So when you're ready give the word and we'll quit cold. I'll never feel like telling any of the fellows at home, though, how two of us were forced to turn tail by just one measly cat."

"We might sit down here for a spell, and see if the brute will slink away," suggested Jack, evidently also averse to giving up so easily.

"Good idea," agreed Steve; and accordingly they found a convenient log upon which they could rest while waiting to see how the plan worked.

Time passed, and Steve kept his face turned toward the spot where the last savage snarl had been heard. He had a vague suspicion that perhaps the beast might try to stalk them, just as he had seen a domestic tabby do a sparrow at home.

When fully ten minutes had crept by Jack made a slight move.

"Well, we can't hang out here much longer," he was saying; "already the afternoon is so far along that I'm afraid we'll never be able to get back to camp before dark sets in. Let's make a move, and test things."

Hardly had they done so than once again they heard a repetition of those warning growls. Jack shrugged his shoulders and laughed drily.

"We hear you, old lady with the claws!" he called out, "and we understand that you are still on the job. It looks like she didn't mean to lose sight of two such suspicious appearing chaps as we seem to be. Well, our cake is dough, and we might as well acknowledge ourselves beaten."

"Oh! why didn't we fetch our gun along, Jack?" sighed Steve, looking angrily toward the spot from whence the warning snarls had volleyed at them. "I'd give every cent in my savings bank for the chance to knock that critter over. What use are pesky wildcats anyway? They live on game birds and rabbits most always. If I had my way I'd clean out the whole bunch of them, kits as well as mother cats."

"Well, we can't do anything along that line this trip," Jack told him. "So say what you've got on your mind to the lady, and let's clear out. These woods belong to her this afternoon, and we've got no business here."

"I don't mean to waste any more of my precious breath on the silly beast," grumbled Steve, as he turned his back toward the spot where the unseen enemy lay concealed in the scrub.

Jack headed toward the open space along which they had formerly been walking. He had been wise enough to keep this in mind when trying to circumvent the obstinate feline enemy that refused to let them pass. Once they found their trail, and it would be an easy matter to follow it toward camp.

They had lingered longer than either of them seemed aware. This fact was presently brought to their attention by the growing gloom of the woods around them.

"Why, Jack, the sun has gone down, I do believe!" exclaimed Steve, suddenly.

"No, it isn't time for it to set yet," his chum advised him. "We can't make sure of it, but I wouldn't be surprised if a bank of heavy clouds has risen in the west, and hidden the sun behind it. One thing certain, we're going to have the fun of tramping several miles through a dark woods."

"Well, so long as there are no rattlesnakes around this section of country, that won't make much difference with me," Steve assured him. "Yes, and I might add I hope that mother cat is the only specimen of her race up here, too. It would be tough on us to run across another holdup, so we'd be between two fires."

It grew constantly darker. Undoubtedly Jack must be right about the heavens having clouded over in the west. Steve found another source for worry. This time it did not partake of the nature of animal foes.

"Say, wouldn't it be a joke on us now, Jack, if a regular old drencher came on, and soaked us to the skin? I'm listening in expectation of hearing the mutter of thunder in the distance. After all, this wonderful day seems bent on bringing us face to face with a number of queer happenings. There, was that a growl of thunder then, or could it be another of those queer blasts we heard before?"

"Neither, I reckon, Steve. I think it was only the wind rising, and making a moaning sound among some treetops. I've heard it call out in a way to make you think some poor fellow had been caught under a falling tree, and was being slowly crushed to death. Yes, there it goes again, you notice."

"But doesn't it sound spooky, though?" ventured Steve, looking hastily over his right shoulder for luck. "Does that spell rain to you, Jack?"

"I hardly like to say, but it wouldn't surprise me if we did have a spell of it before morning," the other went on.

"I only hope then it'll have the decency to hold off till we're safe back in camp again," Steve ventured. "That tent is guaranteed to shed water in the hardest downpour. Mr. Whitlatch, the town photographer, has tested it many times and promised that it would not leak a drop; only you've got to keep from touching it when wet with your fingers, because that's a bad thing to do, and may start a drip."

Both boys found themselves bending over more than at any previous time during the return journey. This was all on account of the gathering darkness, for with the passage of every minute the task of seeing their tracks was becoming more difficult.

"This thing is getting pretty tough," wheezed Steve, finally. "I've got fairly decent eyes, but I own up they're going back on me pretty fast trying to pick up our trail of the morning. How far away are we from camp, do you reckon, Jack?"

"An hour's tramp yet," he was told with an assurance that surprised Steve. "If you're wondering how I can tell, I'll show you. Don't you remember our stopping to take a good look at this queer twisted tree that seems to be trying to make its straight neighbors support it? Well, I remember that we were just about one full hour out when we got here."

"It takes you to notice everything, Jack. I never once thought to pay any attention to our time when we were going, except to count the hours until it would be near noon, and feeding time."

"What about that snack you saved over?" chuckled Jack, who knew what the answer was bound to be, because he had often seen Steve nibbling on the sly.

"Gone long ago, every crumb of it," came the frank admission, "and right now there's beginning to crop up a strong desire for more grub. I hope Toby thinks to have supper all ready for us when we do get in."

Steve was limping more or less now as he trailed along behind the leader. He felt tired, and that heel bothered him again; besides, sheltered by the friendly darkness he thought he was at liberty to shuffle along in any old fashion that offered him the most comfort.

"We'll ease up on the eye strain a bit for one thing," Jack was saying as he fumbled at one of his pockets.

Suddenly a brilliant shaft of white light shot out ahead of them. Steve gave utterance to a startled cry, in which delight was mingled with surprise.

"So you fetched along one of those hand-electric torches, did you, Jack?" he exclaimed. "Well, a flashlight never had a better chance to make itself useful than right now. It's going to be a picnic from here on. I can see every little twig and blade of grass; and as for our trail, a fellow could follow it with one eye shut. Thank goodness! our troubles for the day are ended; unless it comes on to rain cats and dogs before we get under shelter."

He cast frequent anxious glances aloft whenever the trees were open enough to allow of a view of the sky. There were no stars visible, as must have been the case had it not clouded over; because the hour had grown late enough for an exhibition of the usual heavenly display.

"I hate to say it, Jack, but I really thought I felt a drop right then," Steve remarked.

"We can stand it all right, if we have to," commented the other, as though determined not to be cast down by such a trifling happening. "I have a hunch that it won't amount to much, if it rains at all. What's a little wetting between friends, tell me? And neither of us happens to be made of sugar or salt. This sort of thing lends variety and spice to an outing in the woods. It would be too monotonous if every single thing just happened as we planned it. Besides, we have gone half an hour since leaving that twisted tree."

"Jack, just then it seemed to me I could glimpse some sort of a light ahead of us. Toby might have built a roaring fire, to cheer us up as we came along the back trail. Yes, there I could see it flame up again, over the trees and against the background of the clouded sky. We're getting close to home, thank goodness!"

"I agree with you, Steve, for I saw it just as you said. Toby, like a good fellow, has started up a big fire. He must be getting a bit anxious about us by this time, and you can't blame him much. No one likes to be left alone in camp all day, and then have a dark night come along, with prospects of a storm, too."

"Shall I give him a shout, Jack? It'll ease the poor fellow's mind some."

"Just one whoop, then, Steve. He'll understand, and can be finishing supper while he waits. How about that rain now; have you felt any more drops?"

"No, I own up I haven't," confessed Steve, "and mebbe I was mistaken about thinking as I did. Queer how things somehow do manage to clear up. Often what we dread never happens at all. That old cat didn't tackle us, though I felt sure she would; the storm hasn't caught us yet, if I did count on getting soaked through; and there lies the camp before us," as a sudden turn in the trail allowed them to catch a glimpse of a still distant fire that seemed to leap upward wildly.

The thought of soon arriving at the end of their long tramp gave both lads additional vigor, so that they actually increased their pace, and made better time in the last half mile of the journey.

Toby could be seen bustling about as though he had heard Steve's whoop, now and again he would stand and shade his eyes with his hand as he stared into the darkness over the fire. Thinking to add to his peace of mind Jack flashed his light several times as a signal, which he knew the other would understand, for Toby had been with him when the hand-torch was purchased, and knew all about it.

Finally they reached the camp. How welcome did the sight of the big khaki-colored tent, that cheery campfire, and the friendly wagon standing close by seem to the eyes of the tired stragglers as they stalked in and threw themselves down on the ground to rest.

"Supper all ready, fellows, just when you say the word," cheerily chirped Toby Hopkins;

“but if you’re overly tired you’d better take things easy a bit before eating.”

CHAPTER X

THE NIGHT ALARM

Steve was so ravenously hungry after his long tramp that he could not be held back long. Doctors might say it was very bad to eat when exhausted, but what boy was ever known to restrain himself on that account?

So they settled down on the logs, and had a surprise in store for them, because Toby had actually fashioned a rude sort of table from several boards fetched along in the wagon for that very purpose.

"This is something like," burst out Steve, when he found the dishes being spread before him, and caught a scent of a savory stew the cook had prepared in vast quantities, knowing Steve as he did.

"Sorry I haven't any tablecloth and napkins to do the thing up brown," ventured Toby, whereat a shout went up from the others, who violently declared that such things were taboo in the woods, and never see unless there were ladies in camp.

Of course it was only natural that Toby should be eager to learn of their adventures during the long day; but he knew nothing could induce them to talk until at least the raw edge of their clamorous appetites had been taken off; so he continued to ply them with more food.

Jack, seeing the mute look of entreaty in Toby's face finally took pity on him.

"Now, you'll want to hear what sort of time we've met with, Toby," he said; "and how we had to hand over the laurel wreath of victory to one old mother cat that somehow seemed averse to letting us go ahead."

"A cat!" ejaculated Toby, and then he looked wise; "Guess you must mean a lynx, don't you, Jack, and with whelps in the bargain. Whee!"

"No, this was a wildcat of the ordinary variety," Jack told him. "A Canada lynx is an altogether different object, and has tasseled ears that make it look mighty queer. But Steve here will tell you why we didn't dare tackle the old lady when she threw down the gauntlet."

"I want to know!" cried Toby. "Tell me how it came about, Steve. I noticed that both of you seemed to be carrying pretty hefty clubs when you came in. So there *are* ferocious wild beasts at large up here in the Pontico Hills country?"

"Ferocious is hardly the word to describe that wildcat, I tell you, Toby," said Steve. "Wow! how she did spit and snarl until a fellow's blood ran cold. And when we glimpsed her yellow eyes they seemed to glow like phosphorous."

So the story was told by degrees, Steve liking to linger when he reached the point where their progress was barred the second time by the audacious and persevering feline foe.

"Wasn't it too bad you didn't have the shotgun along just then," observed Toby, "because you'd have easily knocked that beast over, and ended its ugly career."

"Just what I said several times," Steve asserted, "and I'd have been tickled half to death at the chance; but then I don't believe Jack would have fired, even if we had the gun along. You see, it would have told anybody within a mile of the spot how we were poking around, and that's something against his plans."

They both looked yearningly toward Jack, but he only smiled, and made no remark, upon which Steve sighed, and shook his head as if to confess that it was no use trying to tempt their leader to anticipate his promised disclosure by even an hour.

By degrees everything was told, even to some of the remarkable sights that they had run across during their tramp. Steve spoke of the enormous tree alongside of which he had stood while Jack snapped off a picture, so as to show by comparison just what a magnificent old forest monarch the mighty oak was.

An hour passed, and they were enjoying every minute of the time. It felt so good to be back in camp again. Those among my boy readers who have ever been through a similar experience can easily understand the sensation of solid comfort that took possession of Steve as he lolled there, filled to the limit with supper, and enjoying the crackling fire in a way words could never describe.

Jack seemed to have recovered from his fatigue, for he was busying himself in some sort of way. Steve, too well satisfied with his position even to move, watched him for some time, while Toby, like the good fellow he was, wrestled with the pots and pans and pannikins that had been soiled with getting supper.

"Would you mind telling me, Jack, what in the wide world you're doing with all that dark-colored cord, and those tin pans in the bargain?" Steve finally burst out with, unable to restrain his bubbling curiosity longer.

"I'm trying to save our bacon, that's all," replied the other calmly; but this explanation only increased the mystery; so far as Steve was concerned.

"I reckon I'm particularly stupid tonight, because I'm tired, Jack," he went on to say, desperately; "but, honest now, I don't get the hang of it at all. What do you mean by saving our bacon? Does that apply to our fine pork products in the wagon yonder; or are you hinting that perhaps our lives are in danger, and you're fixing up a game to keep us from going under?"

Jack chuckled as he explained further.

"I've got our provisions in mind when I designate them all under the general name of bacon, you understand, Steve."

"But how are they in danger of being carried off, Jack? I wonder now if you suspect that

hungry old mother cat would follow us all the way here, with the idea of making a night raid on our well stocked larder. Could she know we must have plenty of grub along in camp? Please explain a little further, won't you, Jack?"

"It's a two-legged thief I've got in mind, you see," he was told. "Have you forgotten what we said that perhaps the easiest way to make us clear out of the Pontico Hills country would be by stripping us of all our grub? Well, it's to prevent the possibility of such a calamity overtaking us that I'm working this game right now."

Steve evinced new interest on hearing this. He even bestirred himself, and limped over to see what Jack was doing at closer range. After watching for a short time, he gave a laugh as though he had solved the puzzling mystery.

"Oh! I'm on to your fine game now, all right, Jack, old scout!" he exclaimed, as he saw the other fasten one end of the cord to a collection of tins which he had assembled in a heap. "It's going to be a sort of home-made alarm clock, I reckon. You've fixed that cord low down near the ground, so a man can't get near the wagon without brushing up against it. When he does he's apt to break the cord and that'll let the bunch of tins drop down from where they're dangling. Whoop! what a glorious jangle there'll be about that time. I warrant you the intended thief will get the scare of his sweet life, and how he will run like mad!"

"You've guessed it finally, Steve, though it did take you a long while," Jack assured him. "And we'll have the gun handy, so as to send a shot up in the air, and add to his terror. Of course I may be off in my guess, and no one may visit us tonight, or any other night during our stay. But then lots of business men insure their houses and their goods when they never dream that they will have a fire. This cord is our insurance policy."

"Yes," sang out Toby, who had been eagerly listening to all this talk, although up to that point taking no part in the same, "an ounce of prevention is always better than a whole pound of cure. They say, too, that a stitch in time saves nine, though I've had many a one in my side, and it didn't save me at all. But Jack, it's a bully good scheme all right, and ought to work first rate."

"I can just imagine three fellows about our size piling out in the wee small hours of the night, clad in their striped pajamas, and hearing a scared individual go whooping through the woods, banging up against every other tree as he runs. It will be a great picnic, for us I mean, boys; and I'm half hoping he does come along this very night."

"How about that rain, Steve?" asked Jack, quietly.

"Why, would you believe me, it has actually cleared up again, with all the stars shining up there like fun? Which goes to show the folly of borrowing trouble, eh, Jack? There I was, figuring out just how it'd feel to be wet to the bone, and all that stuff, when never a drop came down. I had my worry for nothing."

"It happens lots of times with most people," chuckled Jack. "There, I think that ought to fill the bill. The string isn't very strong, and even a slight knock will serve to break it, because you see it's being held pretty taut by the weight of all those tin pans. Once that happens and you'll hear Rome howl."

"I think I'll sleep easier, because of your precaution, Jack," asserted Toby.

"Huh! I just *know* I shall," added Steve. "I've worried a lot about our supply of eats, and it gave me a pain even to think of them being stolen. But if the trap only works like it promises to do, we'll be safeguarded all right. If the marauder means to come over the same distance we covered, Jack, he'll be doing great stunts. And then there's that cat to consider in the bargain. Oh! I hardly think we'll be bothered tonight, anyhow."

Later on they retired to their blankets. Steve declared that he would not need to be rocked to sleep that night, and that there was nothing like exhaustion to induce good sound slumber. Toby had kept himself busy much of the day, finding many things to do about the camp, following out various suggestions which Jack had mentioned in talking matters over, and which of course he had meant himself to undertake when the right time came along. So Toby was tired also and ready to welcome the "call of the blankets," as Steve humorously designated the proposition to go to bed.

Jack took a last look around. He wished to be sure everything was secure in case a rain storm did drop in upon them during the remainder of the night; or some light-fingered gentleman invaded the camp, on looting bent.

Finally he too crept inside the canvas. They were eventually tucked away snugly in their warm blankets, and had said the last goodnights as the lantern was extinguished, and darkness reigned within the tent.

Outside, the fire burned low, since Jack did not see any necessity for leaving much of a blaze when it was a summer night. Besides, there must always be more or less danger of embers being blown about by an increasing night breeze, possibly to start an incipient conflagration amidst dead leaves gathered behind some log, and thus cause trouble, for it is often much easier to start a fire than to put one out.

It must have been midnight or some time past when the trio of campers were suddenly aroused by a most terrific clamor. It sounded as though all the small boys in Chester had secured dishpans and such instruments of ear torture, and assembled with the idea of giving a village serenade to some newly wedded folks who would be expected to treat the bunch to cakes and fresh cider.

Although possibly a bit confused on being so abruptly aroused from sound slumber by such an unearthly din, Steve, as well as Jack and Toby, instantly grasped the stunning truth—that was the alarm which had been rigged up to give fair warning that their precious stores were being raided. A thief had invaded the camp and unconsciously disclosed his presence in this loud-tongued brazen fashion.

It was now up to them to appear hastily on the scene and add to his alarm in every way

possible. So acting in concert they all started to crawl out from under the canvas, Jack clutching the double-barrel shotgun in his hand.

CHAPTER XI

THE RASCALLY THIEF

Could any one blame those boys for feeling highly worked up just about that time when they were hustling to get outside the canvas shelter, and see what strange things were taking place? The din created by the sudden fall of the bunch of tin pans was still ringing in their ears. And doubtless all manner of wildly exaggerated ideas must be crowding their brains in that same brief space of time.

Each had something to do in the general line of self-defense as arranged for in case such an event transpired while they slept. There was Jack holding the gun as became the leader of the flock. Behind, and crowding close upon his heels, came Steve, bearing his jolly big club, with which he felt able to flay even a wildcat, and he had quite a notion, too, along that same line. Toby brought up the rear, not because of any undue timidity on his part, but because somebody had to "take the drumstick," as his father was wont to say when they had turkey, and in this case all of them could not be either first or second; so Toby guarded the rear.

He grasped the flashlight in a trembling hand, and his orders were to make use of it just when Jack gave the word.

The night was dark, very dark, in fact. The old moon had not yet put in an appearance in the eastern sky, which went to prove how aged and dilapidated it must indeed be to rise at such a late hour. As for the fire, it was entirely extinct by this time, and not able to render the first aid in time of need.

Every fellow, upon emerging began to look eagerly around him. Just what Steve, for instance, expected to discover would be a difficult question to answer. He may still have had in mind Mrs. Bobcat and her brood of kits, and half anticipated being called on to offer fight in order to defend the camp. Anything seemed possible with that brooding and mysterious darkness hanging over the place. Its sable depths might be peopled with a great variety of goblins, and unnatural wood folks, gathered to expel these rash, invaders of their haunts.

After that one general look around Steve focused his sight upon the particular spot where, as he well knew, the wagon had been standing at the time they sought their blankets.

Well, it was still there, if that fact could afford him any satisfaction. He could just manage to dimly make it out in the darkness, for very little starlight found entrance through an opening aloft in the interlocked treetops and branches.

Even as he looked Steve felt sure he saw some object move as though it were possessed of life. That caused him to have another nice thrill that sent a shiver up and down his spine.

Jack was already starting to creep that way, trailing his gun along, which weapon he held in such a fashion that it could be brought into use without the loss of more than a second.

About this time Toby began to forge alongside Steve. He had remembered that he was the torchbearer of the trio, and on that account had no business to be hanging in the rear, when Jack at any second might call upon him to make use of the flashlight.

Strange noises greeted them, of which they could make nothing. Indeed, Steve was of the opinion that possibly two persons were scuffling over there by the supply wagon; for he likened the queer sounds to half-suppressed breathing, and such struggles as wrestlers might indulge in. He could not make it out at all, nor why two invaders of the camp should pick upon one another in such a ridiculous manner.

There, that sounded like a blow; and it was immediately followed by a plain grunt, as though the recipient of the stroke had had his wind partly knocked out of him.

If only Jack would give the order for Toby to flash his light on the scene, doubtless the mystery might be explained. But so far he had kept silent on this score, although still creeping stealthily forward.

Steve, wondering still, and trembling a whole lot in the bargain, believed he could understand what Jack must have in his mind. He wanted to get close enough up before betraying their presence, so that he could cover the pilferers, and let them see that they were in range of a deadly weapon, so that to run away would very likely get them into a peck of trouble.

The strange sounds kept up, and in an increased ratio, Steve figured. Undoubtedly whoever it was making them must be growing more and more vehement, as though something which was badly wanted managed to evade his clutch. Even the racket produced by those clanging tin pans had not frightened the intruder away, which Steve considered most amazing indeed. He felt sure that had he been invading a camp, and had such a fearful noise suddenly broke out, he must have taken wildly to his heels, and made a record run of it in order to escape the consequences of his folly.

Then Steve caught what was plainly a loud snort, as of triumph. This gave him a new idea, and which was hardly calculated to increase his comfort very much.

Why, that was hardly such a sound as a human being would emit, being much louder, and along harsher lines. Then what else was likely to make it? Jack had said a considerable number of wild game must exist among these same Pontico Hills; indeed, on the way there had they not seen a live doe and fawn; then there was the red fox with the big brush of a tail that had slunk out of their path while they were making their way through the woods; and last, but far from least, Steve remembered the adventure with the wildcat and her kits.

If in the brief space of their stay they had already run across such a variety of game animals would it not be safe to believe there might also be other species roaming the woods,

and seeking to secure their daily meals wherever they could find them?

Now Steve had never seen a bear at large, nor yet a wolf at liberty, but like all other wideawake boys he had fairly doted over these beasts when held in captivity in the circus or menagerie that annually visited Chester.

Would a bear, for instance, be apt to make such snorting sounds when searching the wagon for some prize tidbit that its keen scent told it was to be found there? Steve believed even this might be possible. He gripped his club with a firm conviction that there would soon be a little ruction taking place around that immediate region beside which the famous Donnybrook Fair in Ireland could never hold a candle, "to use the language of his own thoughts."

But then, of course, Jack must shoulder the main brunt of the fight, because he had the gun in his possession. Steve only hoped Jack would be able to send his first charge straight into the heart of Bruin, so as to bring him down immediately. That would save them all from a rough-and-tumble encounter where claws and teeth would be apt to play havoc with their cuticle, and render their faces far less attractive than when they left home.

How about the law? Steve asked himself, for it seemed as though in that minute of time the boy's active brain were capable of grappling with every sort of question, and finding an adequate answer. Of course bears were protected in the summer close season; but when a fellow's life was at stake no game law had a right to force him to lay down and allow a measly bear to walk all over him, as well as steal his precious grub.

So in a flash of time Steve settled that matter in his mind, all right. Jack would be acting well within his privilege as a citizen of the State if he defended his property against robbery. No law could touch him for doing that; and then besides, they could bury Mr. Bruin down deep, so that the game wardens would never find a trace of him there.

Steve really felt better after settling this weighty matter. Of course it still remained for Jack to carry out the provisions of the plan of campaign; but then Jack was a fellow with steady nerves, and might be trusted to do his part without a slip-up. Only Steve did rather envy him the privilege of actually shooting a big, hairy bear; for later on what a great thing it would be to tell to some of the Doubting Thomases of Chester. Yes, before burying the defunct beast they ought to remember to cut off one of his great paws with its ugly claws, so as to have some trophy to show as positive proof of their story.

Well, while Steve's active mind was fixing all these wonderful details with so much accuracy they were all three of them creeping along inch by inch, and drawing nearer and nearer to the scene of activity.

Instead of diminishing the strange sounds actually increased in volume. They were now accompanied by a crunching, of which Steve could make nothing, for he was not sufficiently acquainted with the peculiarities of bears to know how they acted when foraging for food, and climbing into a covered wagon at that in search of the same.

"Jack!"

That was Toby trying to speak in a whisper, but his voice was wofully weak, and moreover had a strange tremor about it that at another time would have made Steve laugh uproariously; but he did nothing of the kind now, partly because he suspected he could not have delivered himself in any stronger tones if he had attempted to speak.

"What is it?" came in a sibilant whisper over Jack's shoulder; for he was only a few feet ahead of the other pair of crawlers.

"Hadn't I better shoot with the flashlight now?" asked Toby eagerly, showing how he had not forgotten what his line of duty was, in spite of all the excitement attending their issuing from the tent.

"I'll give you the word right away, so be ready," Jack told him, cautiously; but the sounds over there at the wagon continued just as vehemently as before, and it was plainly evident that the thief cared little or nothing about their presence near by. "He's around at the back of the wagon, and I'm trying to get so as to cover him properly. Another six feet ought to do the business, so keep steady, Toby."

"Oh! I'm as steady as a rock!" affirmed the one who carried the flashlight; but it must have been a very wobbly rock then, if his bodily condition corresponded with the decided quaver in his shaky voice.

Ten seconds later and Jack suddenly exclaimed:

"Turn the light on the rascal, Toby!"

Toby hastened to comply with the demand. Just as he did so they were thrilled to hear a flickering whinny, a very sociable whinny in fact, coming from the rear of the covered wagon. Then as the strong white glow shot forth they made a wonderful discovery.

The dreadful thief was disclosed in all his grim proportions. He stood there with his stubby tail switching back and forth, and contentedly munching great mouthfuls of oats which he had managed to secure from the gaping sack, opening which had doubtless given him all the trouble and caused those strange grunts.

Yes, they recognized him as soon as the light fell on his sides, and Jack instead of raising the gun to his shoulder instantly let its muzzle drop to earth. For it was only gaunt old Moses, the beast of burden, broken loose, and hunting the fountain head of what he considered his too meagre meals.

CHAPTER XII

FISHERMAN'S LUCK

"Why, it's only our old Moses after all!" cried Steve, as though the astounding truth had burst upon him like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

"And he's trying to founder himself with the whole supply of oats, the rascal!" Toby added, indignantly.

But Moses was not afraid of foundering, apparently. He just gave another contented whinny of delight, whisked that impudent stump of a tail of his, and plunged deeper into the oat sack, which he had succeeded in getting open.

Jack was perhaps the least surprised of the trio, and even he had not more than begun to suspect the true state of affairs when the light was turned on. He doubled up with laughter, for it was really comical to see how eagerly Moses was delving into his oat supply, as though he feared he was now about to be divorced from his feast, and retired in disgrace, wherefore he wished to gobble all he could while the golden opportunity lasted.

After they had all had several convulsions of merriment Steve concluded it was time they took things in hand. Such dreadful liberties could not be allowed, or the offense condoned.

"We've got to make him break away from those oats, that's all there is about it," he went on to say, seriously. "A poor old nag of a horse never knows when he's had enough."

"Horses don't happen to be alone in that class, Steve," chirped Toby.

"Never you mind about that," snorted the other; "and it doesn't become you to give me a dig, Toby, because for a fellow of your size you can go me one better when it comes to eating. But, Jack, we ought to put a stop to this midnight feast, hadn't we? Oats cost money, and even horses have their price in the market."

"Sure thing, Steve," chuckled the one addressed, as stepping forward he endeavored to lead Moses away from the tail end of the wagon.

The old horse strenuously objected, and upon finding Jack determined he took one farewell grab at the fine contents of the sack, so that he could have something to munch on for a while afterwards. He gave repeated backward looks toward the wagon, and seemed very unhappy when all his dreams of a glorious feast had been knocked on the head after this rude fashion.

"Now, you hold him a minute or two, Steve," remarked Jack, "while I go and get into some clothes. This night air is salubrious all right, but apt to set a fellow's teeth to chattering."

"That's right, it is so," Toby acknowledged; but despite his shivering he would not retreat to his warm blanket until the show had ended.

Jack hurried as best he could, having pity on his chums. When he came back partly dressed he sent them to their beds.

"I'll tie up old Moses so he won't be apt to get loose again in a hurry," Jack advised them, and adding a bit reproachfully, "for you must have been in a hurry after watering him in the evening, Steve. After this I'll make it a point to see he's all right before I turn in."

So the horse was led away, and his rope once more fastened, this time in such a secure fashion that there was no possibility of its getting untied. He could move around within a certain radius, and nip the sweet grass, as well as dream of how close he had been to the greatest banquet of his natural life.

Before he went into the tent Jack reset the tin-pan trap. It had already paid for what little trouble it caused him, because only for the alarm having been given none of them might have heard Moses at his surreptitious work; and consequently he would have devoured the entire two weeks' supply of oats, or killed himself in the endeavor to dispose of them, which would have been a calamity in several ways, both for Moses and the camping party.

Again did the little hand-torch come in for a meed of praise on the part of the one who had to carry out all these things in the middle of a dark night. Both the others seemed to be pretty far gone along the road to dreamland when Jack crept under his blankets. Toby did drowsily grunt, and ask if everything was all right, but apparently hardly knew what he was saying; so Jack only answered with a word, and cuddled under his coverings, for he felt a trifle chilled.

There was no further alarm that night. The expected prowler did not show up, much to the satisfaction of all concerned; and morning found them in good shape. Moses was already whinnying as to remind them that horses got hungry. Apparently the old reprobate never knew what a close call he had had; left to his own resources, morning might not have been so calm for him, if he lived to see the sun rise at all. And as Toby wisely said, horse doctors must be as "scarce as hens' teeth" up in the Pontico Hills district.

Somehow the adventure of the night seemed to appear even more comical when viewed in the broad light of day. Toby in particular laughed every time he thought of old Moses standing there, monarch of all he surveyed, and trying to gulp the oats down like mad, as though he feared it was too good a thing to last.

"Do you know," Toby observed, as they sat at breakfast that morning, "Moses actually seemed to have tears in his eyes when Jack here forced him to leave the end of the wagon. Why, that was the one grand opportunity of his life to stuff—a regular Thanksgiving jamboree spread out before him. He kept turning his head and looking back as if he had lost his best friend. If he'd been going to the execution block I don't think he could have shown more regret. Poor old chap, it was almost cruel to cheat him out of his feast."

Then they turned their thoughts to other subjects, because, as Jack wisely said, while this escapade on the part of Moses may have been a great event in his life, it was only an episode with them.

"How shall we spend today?" Jack asked.

"Well, since you want to know my opinion," spoke up Toby, briskly, "I've got my mouth made up for another mess of those fine and frisky Paradise River bass; and I'd like a whole lot to have one of you fellows go over with me."

"How about you, Steve?" queried Jack, turning to the partner of his previous day's long trip.

"Reckon I'd be wise to lay off a spell, because, to tell you the truth that heel did give me a mite of bother, especially on the return trip. You go with Toby, Jack, and take your camera along. He says there are some dandy things you might want to snap off between here and the river. And in case either of you hook a four-pound bass you can get a picture of the fight that will be worth seeing, as well as of the beauty after he's landed. I mean to get over there later and try my luck, don't forget, Toby, so leave a few in the river, please."

So it was settled. Jack somehow did not seem disposed to take that long tramp on two successive days, though doubtless he had certain plans arranged in his mind which could be carried out later on. With nearly two weeks still ahead of them it was needless to hurry matters. "Rome wasn't built in a day," he often told the more impatient Toby, when the other was showing signs of fretting because things failed to move quite as rapidly as he wished.

"Just leave the things for me to look after," said Steve, as they arose after finishing breakfast. "I've thought up a few jobs I'd like to tackle while you're away. And I'll also agree to see that old Moses doesn't cut up any more of his capers. Have a bully good time, boys. When do you expect to get back, Jack?"

"By noon, so far as I know now," he was told. "We ought to have all the fish we can use by then, if they bite at all; and the fishing is never worth much from eleven to three. I'll be able to snatch off any pictures I'd care to take in addition; so look for us by twelve, Steve."

"I'll have lunch ready then, remember that, Toby," called out the campkeeper, as the pair started to the tent to get their fishing outfits and the camera.

Toby having been over the route took it upon himself to act as guide to the expedition. Indeed, a tyro could have found the way, for in going and coming they had left quite a plain trail, easily followed.

Of course Jack was interested in everything he saw. Toby frequently called his attention to certain features of the landscape which apparently had appealed to his love of the beautiful on the former occasion. This showed that Toby kept his eyes about him pretty much all the time; it also proved him to have an appreciation of Nature's handiwork, rather unusual in a boy.

They did not take much more than half an hour to cross over to the bank of the Paradise River. Toby himself remembered skating this far up the stream several winters back, but everything looked so entirely different in the summer-time that he could hardly be positive about this.

It was a pretty scene, and with not a living human being in sight quite appealed to Jack. Birds flitted from tree to tree; small woods animals were to be seen frequently, and Toby even showed Jack where a deer had been down to drink, leaving there a plain series of delicate hoof tracks.

"Now let's try the place that treated me best of all," he went on to say, with all the consequential airs of a first discoverer.

"I want several pictures of this spot," Jack remarked, "but they will do better along about ten o'clock, when the sun gets stronger, and the contrasts are more striking. Besides, the fishing must come first, and its always in its prime early in the morning. So get busy, Toby, and let's see who lands the first bass."

Jack himself was something of a fisherman, as Toby well understood. Indeed, he knew more about the habits of the tricky bass than any of the boys in Chester; for as a rule they had been content simply to angle with a worm, and take "pot-luck," while Jack had read up on the subject, and even done more or less fancy fly fishing amidst other scenes.

Nevertheless Toby got the first fish. Perhaps this was because he knew just how deep the water was, where a favorite swirl had yielded him several finny prizes on the occasion of his former visit; or possibly just through "dumb luck," as he called it. There is no accounting for the freaks of fishing; a greenhorn is just as apt as not to haul in the biggest bass ever taken in a lake, where an accomplished angler has taken a thousand smaller fish from year to year, yet never landed such a prize. "Fisherman's luck" has thus long become a famous saying.

However, Toby was not too exultant over his success. He fancied that before they were done with the morning's sport Jack would be giving him a pretty lively chase for the honors.

They certainly did have plenty of fun, though perhaps the finny inhabitants of Paradise River may not have enjoyed the game quite as well, since it was too one-sided. Inside of an hour they had taken seven very good fish, really as many as they could well use; though Toby kept saying that it was hard to gauge that appetite of Steve's, and one or two more wouldn't come in amiss. It is so easy for even a conscientious fisherman to find excuses for continuing the sport as long as the fish will bite, such is the fascination connected with the game.

Then the expected happened. Jack had a tremendous bite, and was speedily playing a fish that made his fine rod bend like a whip. Toby, forgetting his own line, began dancing up and down on the bank, and urging Jack to play him carefully.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN WITH THE PICKAX

"Oh!" cried Toby excitedly, as the hooked fish leaped wildly from the water, and tried to fall across the taut line, with the idea of breaking loose, though Jack skillfully lowered his tip, and avoided that impending catastrophe. "What a dandy, Jack! Three pounds, and mebbe a lot more. Look at him fight, will you? He's a regular old bronze-back warrior, I tell you. I hope you land that beauty. Play him for all you're worth, Jack; please don't let him get away. And now I hope Steve will say he's got enough."

"We haven't got him yet by a jugful, remember, Toby," remonstrated Jack. "They say you mustn't count your chickens till the eggs are hatched; and I tell you a big bass like that is never caught until he's flopping on the bank. They're up to all kinds of tricks. Now he's boring down, and trying to find a rock to get under, so he can grind the line, until it weakens and gives way."

"Don't let him get to the bottom, Jack!" cried Toby, anxiously. "That rod of yours will stand the strain all right. Give him the butt, Jack; keep him on top of the water! Oh! but isn't he a grand fighter, though."

Toby could hardly have shown more interest had he been holding the rod instead of Jack; for he was not a selfish lad. By slow degrees Jack began to tire the big bass out. His rushes were losing some of their fierceness now, and the boy, shortening his line as he found opportunity, was able to partly drag the fish along to help in exhausting or "drowning" him, since his mouth was gaping open.

They had no landing-net, so Toby hastily stripped off shoes and socks in order to wade knee-deep into the stream, and help get the prize safely ashore. He would have willingly gone in up to his neck if necessary, to make a sure thing of the landing part.

Jack wisely selected a little strip of shallow beach as the best place for carrying out the finishing stroke of his conquest. Here Toby was able to use both of his hands, and actually push the big bass along, until in the end they had him safe on the shore, flapping still, as though his defiant spirit had not yet given in to the adversity that had overtaken him.

Long they gloated over his beauty. Having no scales along they could only guess at the weight of the prize. Jack said a good three pounds, but the more enthusiastic Toby went half a pound higher.

"Why, it wouldn't surprise me much if he even tipped the scales at four," he assured Jack. "See how thick through he is, will you, and a good twenty-two inches long in the bargain. Oh! how he came down with a splash whenever he'd jump two feet out of the water, and turn over! I'll never forget how finely you handled him, either, Jack, old chum! Now, if it had been me I'd like as not have got so excited I'd lost my fish by some fool play. But that ought to be enough for even Steve, and so I reckon we must quit the fun."

He looked dolefully toward the river, as though disliking very much to give up when the acme of the sport had just been reached.

"I hope you'll take his mate another day, Toby," Jack told him, hopefully. "Don't forget the old saying that 'there's just as good fish in the sea as ever were caught,' and it applies to the Paradise River in the bargain. And now I'll wash up, so I can get busy with my photographic work, as it's about ten o'clock, and the sun as strong as I'd want."

He seemed to have made up his mind just what pictures appealed most to him, judging from the business-like way he went about his work. Toby stood by ready to assist in any way possible, though he did not happen to be as greatly interested in photography as his comrade. So after about half an hour Jack had accomplished his task.

"I think they ought to turn out pretty fine," was his finishing comment, as he closed his camera, the present of the lady who had engaged him to combine business with pleasure on this camping trip. "If there's anything wrong the fault will be wholly mine, because the conditions certainly couldn't be improved on."

"I suppose it's home for us now, Jack?" asked Toby.

"We might as well be making a start," he was told. "Perhaps I'll want to snap off another picture on the way, because one or two things struck me as worth while."

Accordingly Toby lifted the string of fish from the water, where they had been keeping cool. He grinned as he pretended to stagger under the load.

"Believe me, they're going to turn out something of a weight, Jack."

"We'll fix that soon enough, and share the burden," the other told him, as he picked up a stout pole, and proceeded to fasten the fish to its centre. "Many hands make light work, they say, and when we carry our prize bag of fish between us the strain will hardly be noticed."

It proved just as Jack had said; what would have been a heavy weight for one to carry was a mere bagatelle for both, thanks to that pole, which was some six feet in length.

"First time in all my life I ever had to tote home a string of fish in this way," Toby confessed, though with brimming good humor. "Don't I wish we were going through Chester with the bunch, though; how the fellows' eyes would pop out of their heads to see this whopping big chap you landed. And I just know Steve will immediately press both hands on his stomach, and say: 'That's about my size!'"

"Don't be too hard on Steve, Toby," chided Jack. "All of us have our failings, and for one I've got my appetite along with me pretty much all the time. He happens to be a big fellow, and in fine health, so he feels hungry as many as six times a day, especially when in the

woods, where the air tones up the system."

Leaving the river with some regret they started to head for the camp that lay possibly a mile and a half away "as the crow flies." Sometimes they chatted as they walked along, and then again both of them would fall silent, being taken up it might be with thoughts of those left behind in dear old Chester.

It chanced to be during one of those quiet periods that Toby suddenly shook the pole from which the string of fish dangled, as though endeavoring to attract the attention of his companion without making any noise. Glancing toward the other Jack saw him pointing with outstretched finger; and as he turned his own eyes in the direction indicated he discovered the cause of Toby's singular behavior.

There was a man in sight, though just then, as he was bending over, he had apparently failed to discover their nearby presence. Jack instantly sank down to the ground, and Toby imitated his example; after which they crawled closer together, until they could exchange whispers.

"That's the man!" was the first low exclamation Toby gave utterance to.

"The man who came to the camp, and asked questions, do you mean?" demanded Jack, taking a cautious peep over the tops of the bushes that afforded them an effectual screen.

"Yep, he's the same one," Toby went on to say, decisively. "I recognize his figure, and there, you can glimpse his face right now, which I'd know among a thousand. But whatever can he be doing with that pickax?"

Jack seemed to be taking a deep interest in the actions of the mysterious stranger. He watched him move a little further along, and then start to dig with vigorous blows. They were quite close to him, and his face could be plainly seen. Jack was studying it intently, as though he might be comparing its leading features with a certain description that had been given to him.

When presently Toby saw his chum starting to get his camera in working order he drew a breath of admiration, for he guessed that Jack was intending to try to secure a snapshot of the man working with that pickax, as though desirous of offering it as positive proof that could not be denied.

Creeping behind a neighboring tree the generous trunk of which offered him the necessary asylum, Jack watched his chance. He waited until the man stood up to rest, with the pickax held over his shoulder, and the sun well on his face. Then a tiny click announced to Toby that the thing had been done.

He was keeping his eyes glued on the man; but as several crows were holding a noisy confab not far away, and a squirrel had taken to barking at the intruder with the digging tool, such a slight sound as the clicking of the camera apparently passed unnoticed.

The stranger seemed to be more or less excited. After mopping his perspiring forehead he once more commenced digging here and there in a most tantalizing fashion. Toby could not comprehend what it could mean. Was there gold or some other precious deposit to be found up here among these hills, and might this strange man be an old prospector from the West who had had long experience in searching for mineral lodes? But then such things were seldom discovered so near the top of the ground, Toby recollected. He wished the man would go away so he could speak to Jack, and ask him what he thought; because the more he considered the matter the greater became his conviction that Jack must surely know.

Now the man seemed to have satisfied himself, for he again shouldered the pick, and started to leave the spot. Toby was glad to notice that he had turned aside and consequently there would be no danger of his coming upon them in their hiding-place. He waved a farewell after the other, boylike.

"Goodbye, Mister Man," Jack heard him whisper, exultantly; "come again when you can't stay so long. Your room is better appreciated than your company. Who are you, anyway; and what're you muddling about around here, I'd like to know."

After the man had been swallowed up in the depths of the woods Jack made the other lie quiet for something like five minutes. This was to make doubly sure the stranger did not turn on his tracks, and come back again. It was hard for Jack to hold in, because he was quivering with eagerness to investigate, and see if he could find out what had interested the other so much.

"Guess he's gone for keeps, Jack," suggested the eager Toby, fretting like a hound held in the leash.

"Yes, it looks that way," returned the other, commencing to get upon his feet, "and I suppose we'd be safe in going on our way again."

"But, Jack, don't you mean to take a peep over there where that chap was digging so wildly to learn what he was up to?" demanded Toby.

Jack looked at him as though trying to make up his mind.

"Well, it has to come some time," he remarked, as if to himself, "and I suppose it's hardly right to keep you in the dark much longer, now that you've seen as much as you have. So come along, Toby, and we'll investigate."

They were quickly on the spot. Here and there could be seen evidences of the man's digging, though he had hardly more than turned over the upper crust of earth and rocks. So far as Toby could see there was not the first sign of quartz, or anything else that, as he understood it, had to do with mining. Indeed, just in that particular place the earth looked unusually grimy and moist and oozy, a fact that struck Toby as surprising. Then he commenced sniffing the air more and more vigorously, while over his face crept a smile that kept growing broader and broader, as though the light of a great discovery had burst upon him like a dazzling comet.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN THE SUN STOOD STILL

"I smell oil!" exclaimed Toby, "and that's what's oozing out of the ground right here where the man was grubbing with his tool! Jack, that was what he was looking for, wasn't it? And you must have known something about it right along, now I stop to think of a whole lot of things that have happened."

Jack was busy bending down and examining the oil-soaked earth. He even went to the trouble of taking some of it and wrapping it in a piece of waterproof paper he was carrying in his pocket; just as though he had prepared himself for just such an occasion, the observing Toby thought.

"I know you're burning with curiosity to know what it means, Toby," he went on to say, "and I've finally made up my mind to explain the solution of all this mystery, as well as tell you who and what that man is. But you'll have to content yourself with figuring out as many explanations as you please between now and tonight, for I don't want to say a word until Steve is also present. I take it you've got head enough to reason things out after a fashion, and grasp the answer. So don't ask me any questions, because I won't answer until after supper."

"Then I won't tell Steve a single thing about this affair," Toby went on to say, although he looked a bit disappointed, because with noon still an hour away it would be a terribly long time until they had seen the sun go down, and eaten their evening meal.

"I think it would be best not to get him excited in the bargain," advised Jack. "It's going to be a great surprise to Steve, too, because he hasn't been as keen as you on the scent, and is more in the dark."

"And seeing this monster bass will be all the excitement he can stand at a time," chuckled Toby, beginning to make the best of the situation, for he was usually an easy fellow to get along with, and Jack knew how to handle him splendidly.

They started off again, but not before Jack carefully concealed the tracks they had made. This he did to prevent the man from making a discovery should he again visit the spot, which he was very likely to do, since it would naturally have a species of fascination for him henceforth.

It was difficult for Toby to talk on any other subject while his mind was filled with the strange actions of the man who seemed to resent their presence in the neighborhood. Therefore he had little to say on the balance of the way back to camp, though Jack knew he must be doing considerable thinking, that would cover every angle of the case.

Of course Steve was delighted when he saw the monster bass. He admired it from every angle; though Toby took particular notice that Steve seemed more interested in the glorious dish it would make when cooked than in the great fight it had put up when at the end of Jack's line.

"Do you know I was just hoping you'd fetch such a dandy fish home with you," he went on to say, delightedly; "because I've made all arrangements to bake it in an oven of my own manufacture. I've dug a hole in the hard clay here, and when we've had lunch I mean to heat it furiously with red embers. Then I'll wrap that fish in a wet cloth and lay it inside, after which my oven will be sealed over to keep the heat in for hours. That's the old hunter's oven, and they do say it is the originator of all these new-fangled fireless cookers, as well as the Thermos bottles that keep things hot or cold for a whole day."

"Good boy, Steve!" cried Toby, slapping the big chum on the back affectionately. "You've got a head on you after all, sure you have."

Steve looked as though he considered this a dubious compliment, since it seemed to imply that Toby must have at times doubted the truth of his assertion. But Jack, after examining the earth oven, declared that it was sure to work splendidly.

"And six hours or so ought to be really enough to cook a fish, especially if we get it as hot as we can," he assured the architect.

In due time this was carried out. Plenty of red embers were placed in the hole in the hard clay, and covered over; still more being added until the place was furiously hot. Then the ashes being taken out the cleaned fish was placed carefully within, after which the top was sealed over with wet clay, making the oven a "hermetically sealed one," as Steve proudly proclaimed.

That was the longest afternoon Toby Hopkins ever knew during the entire course of his young life. He seemed to look up at the sun forty times, as though resting under a grave suspicion that some modern Joshua might have commanded it to "stand still." Steve began to notice his actions, and seemed puzzled to account for them, being wholly unsuspecting of the real cause.

He even at one time about the middle of the afternoon sought Jack out, finding him working at his negatives; for he had fetched along a little daylight developing tank, and had already announced himself as well pleased with what the results seemed to promise.

"Jack, see here, there's something wrong with our Toby," Steve said in a cautious voice, although the object of his remark being some distance away there was not the slightest chance of his overhearing anything.

Jack knew what was coming, but he did not even smile.

"Why, what makes you say that, Steve?" he asked, solicitously.

"He's acting so queer that I'm afraid the poor fellow must be going looney," Steve told him, with a ring of sincere regret in his voice.

"Queer in what way?" asked the other, continuing his work.

"Oh! in lots of ways," sighed Steve. "For one thing he can't keep still a minute, but jumps up, and walks around nervously. Then he's always looking up at the sun, and shaking his head as if he couldn't make things out. I've seen him looking at you as if he had a grudge he was nursing. Now *something* has happened to Toby since he left camp this morning, and I'd like to know what it is."

"Why, nothing has happened to him except that he's seen a lot of interesting things, the same as I have. We mean to speak of them after supper, while we lie around taking our ease, you know. Don't worry about Toby; I give you my word the boy is all right. Little danger of him ever losing his head."

"Why, I even asked him point-blank what ailed him, and if he felt any way sick, but do you know, he just smiled at me, and shrugged his shoulders in the silliest way ever. Yes, and would you believe me, Jack, he gave me a queer look and said: 'I'm not a bit sick, I tell you; I'm only tired of waiting,' and Jack, he wouldn't even explain what he meant by that. Even if you don't feel bothered I do, and there's something knocking in Toby's brain right now, I tell you. That boy has got something on his mind."

"Listen, Steve," chuckled the amused Jack. "There may be a method in Toby's seeming madness. Remember the old story of the doctor who, being called in to prescribe for an old gentleman addicted to much dram drinking, put him on a strict allowance of one drink a day, which was to be taken when he sent downstairs for his hot water for shaving. Some days afterwards, chancing to be in the neighborhood again, he stopped at the door to ask how the old party was getting on. To his surprise the butler held up his hands, and looked very solemn as he declared that he very much feared his master was going out of his mind."

"'And why do you fear that, James?' the doctor asked, alarmed."

"'Because, Doctor,' said the butler, 'every hour of the day the master insists on sending down for hot shaving water!' And so you see, Steve, there was a method in his madness, for the doctor knew why he wanted that hot water. You give Toby credit for being a sensible chap. He's only counting the minutes until that fine fish is done to a turn, and you sound the gong for supper."

Steve looked a trifle relieved after that, though he still continued to watch the uneasy Toby from time to time, and could be seen shaking his head as if his doubts had returned in full force.

Slowly but surely the glowing orb dropped closer toward the horizon. A doomed prisoner in his cell might have watched its going with dread, as the setting of the sun would bring the hour of his execution nearer; but with Toby it was just the opposite, and he counted every minute as so much gain.

Steve had evidently gauged the appetites of his chums by his own, and fearing the big fish might not go around for a third helping had prepared a panful of the smaller bass besides.

"You never can tell the first time you try out a new dodge," he offered in explanation of his bountiful provision, "and if after all my oven failed to cook in seven hours why where would we be at for supper tonight, I'd like to know. I'm a great hand for preparedness, you must know, fellows; and here's a fair taste all around, no matter what happens to the roast fish."

"But isn't it time we began to get busy eating," sighed Toby, looking so woe-begone that Steve, under the impression he must be almost starved, thrust a lot of soda crackers and a piece of cheese into his hand, saying sympathetically:

"There, that will take some of the gnawing away, Toby, and keep you up another half hour. I know how you feel, because haven't I been there myself many a time? I mean to take a look-in at my dandy oven soon, and if everything is lovely we can start business at the old stand right away."

Poor anxious Toby, how he did suffer. Evidently he had not been able wholly to clutch the truth, strive as he might; and the solution of the mystery seemed to be dangling there just beyond his reach, as though to tantalize him. Jack himself wished the time would hurry and come so that he might keep his word and "lift the lid," in the way of explanations.

When Steve went to take a look at the oven Toby insisted on accompanying him; and when the *chef* declared that the fish was done to a turn Toby beamed with positive delight, as though the long agonizing period of his waiting was now surely drawing near an end.

The big fish was simply elegant. The boys used up all the available adjectives at their command in order to do the subject ample justice. Never had a fish been better baked. Steve looked as proud as any peacock that strutted along a wall in self-admiration. He even promised to repeat the prize supper, if only Toby could duplicate Jack's catch.

Again and again they all passed in for more until not only the big fish was utterly gone but serious inroads had been made by them in the other mess.

"You see, I gauged our appetites fairly well after all," Steve was saying, as if to clear himself of any reproach along the lines of greediness.

At length they one and all declared they were through, whereupon Toby sat up eagerly, and turned an appealing face toward Jack.

"The time has come for you to keep your promise, Jack," he went on to say, considerably to the amazement of Steve. "So please start in and tell us who that man is we saw digging today; what he's after up here in the Pontico Hills; and just who the rich old lady in Chester may be who put up the cash to finance this expedition. The whole story, mind, and nothing held back."

CHAPTER XV

JACK LIFTS THE LID

If Toby's manner was a trifle dictatorial when he made this demand, perhaps he might be excused for feeling so. At least Jack did not seem to mind in the least, if his smile stood for anything.

Toby had waited long, and suffered horribly. Minutes had dragged out in an almost intolerable fashion as he watched the lagging sun creep down the western heavens. But at last his time of triumph had come, when according to the arrangement made between them he could ask Jack to redeem his promise of a full confession.

As for Steve, he was staring as hard as he could, staring with his mouth partly open after a habit he had when astonished. Of course he soon grasped the idea, and across his face there began to creep a broad smile. He gave Toby a grateful look, as though disposed to crown him with a laurel wreath becoming a victor.

"Just as you say, Toby, the time seems to have arrived when you fellows ought to be told the whole story," began Jack, as he settled back into an easier position. "After what you saw today, and the discovery we both made, it would be silly for me to keep you in the dark any longer. I only bound you not to bother me about it until we'd had our supper, when Steve also might hear, and so save me considerable talking.

"Well, first of all I must tell you who the lady in the case is, and how she came to pick me out as the one she thought could best help her. She is a leader in the Red Cross work, and a woman well liked by nearly everybody in Chester. Her name is Miss Priscilla Haydock!"

"Do you know," burst out Toby, "I've been thinking of her ever since you let slip that our backer wasn't a gentleman at all. Why, they say she's got stacks of money, and uses it freely for every good purpose."

"I'm not so very much surprised myself," Steve told them, composedly; "because I know Miss Haydock right well. She often visits at our house; and my folks think a heap of her. But go on, Jack."

"She sent for me one day, and I called at her house, where she told me that she had a strange job for some one to do, and somehow felt that a wideawake boy might answer a whole lot better than a man. She also said a few nice things about having watched me on the baseball field, and how folks seemed to believe I tried pretty hard to *get* there, whenever I had anything on my hands; but I'll omit the bouquet part of the interview.

"Coming right down to brass tacks now, Miss Haydock informed me that she owned pretty nearly all this Pontico Hills district up here. She had taken it some years back simply as an investment, and was holding it in hopes that some fine day a projected railroad would go through here, when it must become valuable property.

"Latterly she had been bothered by a nephew of hers, a man from New York City by the name of Mr. Maurice Dangerfield, who had been trying to get her to allow him to have an option on the entire strip of land, under the plea that he believed he had a customer who would purchase.

"As the price he offered was considerably more than what she had paid, Miss Haydock was almost tempted to agree. On thinking the matter over, however, she came to the conclusion not to be too hasty about deciding. She happened to know this Dangerfield was a clever individual, who had, as a rule, made his living by being smarter than most people. He told her he was in great need, and that the commission he expected to receive, should the deal go through, would save him possibly from becoming a bankrupt. He was working upon her generous nature, you see, boys; but it happened that she knew a number of things not to his credit, and so concluded to go slow about the matter.

"So she wanted me to get a couple of my chums and spend several weeks up in the Pontico Hills camping, the only provision being that we should take a lot of pictures to show her what the country looked like. And I was to keep a sharp eye out for any sign of Mr. Maurice, as well as learn, if I could, just what he was up to.

"She showed me a picture of her smart nephew, and of course as soon as Toby here described the gentleman who came into camp that day, looking so sour, I just knew it must be he.

"Now, when Toby and myself today discovered a man poking about, and using a pickax now and then, as though searching for minerals, I suspected instantly that we were on the verge of a discovery, and it turned out that way. We hid in the bushes, and I even managed to snap off the party, with his pick over his shoulder.

"When he had gone, Steve, we went over to see why he had been scratching the soil as he did, and showing so many evidences of excitement. Well, tell him what we found, Toby."

"Oil!" ejaculated Toby, theatrically, and Steve almost fell over, such was his astonishment.

"Do you mean petroleum-crude oil?" he gasped.

"Why, in some places the ground was just rank with the black-looking stuff," Toby assured him. "I sniffed it even before we got on the ground; and while I'm not wonderfully bright-witted, I didn't have the least trouble guessing what it was."

"Of course," continued Jack, "we don't know just how this Dangerfield ever got wind of the fact that the big tract of land owned by his aunt showed traces of being an oil district, because there are no such places within fifty miles of here; but he must have scented it out in some way, and then laid all his pipes so as to tie the property up under an option."

"Why, it would be well worth a million, if a cent," said Toby, "in case the wells panned out half-way decent. I've read a heap about this oil business, and how many a poor farmer who had never been able to scratch a decent living from his hundred-acre farm, woke up some fine morning to have speculators pounding on his door, and offering him all kinds of money up to the hundreds of thousands of dollars to sell out to them."

"So that's really all there is to the story," Jack went on to say. "You know as much as I do now. Dangerfield is here on the ground. He's conducting some sort of work over where we heard those explosions, and I think he must be trying to put down an experiment well, so as to convince the men he means to take into the deal with him that it means a fortune for each one of them."

"Yes," Toby went on to say, breathlessly, "and mebbe those dull shocks we heard came from their shooting the well. I understand they have to start things with a blast of dynamite, when the gusher begins to flow."

"That may be the case," Jack admitted, "though I hardly think a shrewd man like Dangerfield would go quite so far until he had actually secured the option from his aunt. It may be he feels certain she will give it to him, and is going ahead on that foundation. No matter, he certainly showed signs of being mighty well pleased at what he saw today, didn't he, Toby?"

"Just what he did, Jack, as happy as a clam at high tide," came the answer. "Why, there was one time I actually thought the gent was getting daffy, for he began to dance about like a darky boy, and slap his thigh again and again. After that he hurried away. I guess if he had any doubts lingering over, what he discovered today did for them."

"As likely as not," mused Jack, "he'll go back to Chester again, and try harder than ever to coax Aunt Priscilla to give him the option, making out that he's doomed to go to prison, and drag the family name in the dust if she refuses. But she told me she was resolved not to take a single step until she had my report."

"Then it's goodbye to all those castles in Spain that Maurice has been building on the strength of deceiving his rich aunt," chuckled Steve, as though highly amused at the way things were turning out, and proud of the part he and his chums had taken in the game.

"Are you satisfied with what you've learned so far, Jack?" Toby wanted to know with an anxious look on his face. "I certainly do hope you won't be wanting to skip out of this the very first thing, and breaking up our vacation camp before we've gotten settled down and hardly more than started enjoying it."

Jack smiled at the earnest manner of the other.

"That would be too cruel, Toby," he assured him. "If I thought it necessary that Miss Haydock should know what we've learned, why, I'd go myself and tell her, leaving you fellows here to keep camp while I was gone."

Thereupon the cloud gathering on Toby's face was suddenly dissipated, and he grinned happily again.

"Oh! I hope you won't even have to think of doing that, Jack," Steve remarked.

"I don't see any necessity just yet," Jack decided, "and unless some new and very important developments come along I think I can hold off until we all go back home. Besides, I hope to do a little more looking around, and perhaps take more pictures while I'm up here."

"I get you, Jack!" cried the alert Toby. "Chances are that you're making up your mind to drop in and see what they're doing over where those blasts came from. How about that for a guess, Jack?"

"You hit the bull's-eye plum centre that time, Steve," laughed Jack; "because while my plans are not exactly complete, I have that in mind. But we'll talk it over again. There's no particular hurry, you see, if we expect to stay here ten or twelve days longer. The more time we take to enjoy ourselves the better it would look, in case a spy was hovering about, trying to learn just what we wanted up here."

"One thing sure, Jack, I hardly think we'll be able to do much tomorrow, because all the signs point to our having wet weather," Steve went on to say, with the air of a prophet who could read the signs about as well as the head of the weather bureau at Washington.

"There is a feeling in the air that way," admitted Jack. "I've noticed it myself even if I didn't say anything about it. So I'm glad, Steve, that you proved a good provider while at home today, laying in a fine stock of firewood that ought to last us through a couple of days. It'll come in handy in case we're shut in by the rain."

"Oh! we're well fixed for anything like that, Jack," chuckled the other. "There's that dandy camp stove we fetched along, and haven't had a chance yet to try out. I made a place in the tent for it, and Mr. Whitlatch has an asbestos collar to use so that the pipe can't set fire to the canvas, no matter how red-hot it gets. Why, it would be well worth enduring a rainy spell just to see how the thing works."

"And I haven't forgotten either, Steve," spoke up Toby, "that you promised to make a fine batch of biscuits in the oven of that same camp stove the first chance you got. I want to open that bottle of honey, and have been keeping it to go on hot biscuits-of course providing they're a success."

"Now don't you worry about that," said Steve, boldly. "I took lessons from our hired girl, and she said my biscuits were mighty near as good as hers. Why, at the table they were sure enough surprised when she told Mom I'd made the bunch."

And so they chatted and laughed until it was time to turn in again.

CHAPTER XVI

STORM-BOUND

Well, it rained, just as the weather sharp had so wisely predicted.

Steve chanced to be the first to hear the drops begin to patter down on the canvas covering that sheltered them from all inclemencies of the weather. He gave a snort as he sat bolt upright and exclaimed:

"There, didn't I tell you so, fellows; listen to her come down, will you?"

"What's all this row about?" grumbled the sleepy Toby, hardly stirring.

"Why, it's raining, don't you hear?" snorted Steve, as though that might be a wonderful fact.

"Let her rain pitchforks for all I care," grunted Toby. "Lie down and go to sleep again, can't you, Steve? What do we care, when this tent is guaranteed waterproof? Besides, haven't we taken all precautions? Only old Moses will get wet, and it isn't going to hurt him any. So please go to sleep again, and leave me alone. I was having the most wonderful dream, and beating the whole crowd at skating for a wonderful prize of a pair of silver-plated skates, when you had to go and spoil the whole show. Now I'll never get those skates, that's sure."

All through the balance of that night the rain continued to come steadily down. At least it was no great storm, with accompanying wind and the crashing of thunder. When morning came it was a dismal outlook that they saw, peeping from the tent. The rain was still falling, and a leaden gray sky overhead gave promise of a hopelessly long and wet day.

Steve had fetched along a rubber coat and boots, so that one of them could go and come on errands, without getting soaked. Moses must be fed, to begin with, and there would be numerous trips to make between tent and supply wagon.

The fire was started in the little camp stove used by the photographer when he took his annual pilgrimage through the country, in search of lovely views to add to a collection he was making that would be an art treasure when he had completed it.

"Say, that works mighty fine, let me tell you!" declared Toby, when the grateful heat from the stove began to render the interior of the big tent very comfortable. "We'll have no trouble keeping as snug as three bugs in a rug, with that sheet-iron contraption to help out."

"And," added Steve, "the oven is getting hot already. I really believe I can do that baking today, boys; so make up your minds to eat some of the jolliest biscuits you ever put between your teeth. I made sure to carry all the ingredients along, barring none."

"I notice that an arrangement comes with the stove so that you can burn kerosene if wood isn't handy," remarked Jack; "which makes it all the more valuable as a camp auxiliary. Lots of times wood is out of the question, but you can get plenty of oil."

At that Steve began to chuckle.

"What strikes you as being so funny, Steve?" demanded Toby, who was amusing himself by starting breakfast on the little stove, as though not meaning to let Steve do *all* the cooking while on their camping trip.

"Oh! I was only thinking of that old saying about carrying coals to Newcastle, you know-which place is the head coal centre over in England. It would seem pretty much that way for fellows to lug a big can of kerosene away up here, when the ground is actually reeking with the stuff in an unrefined state. Perhaps it'd be possible to find a little pond of the same, and dip up all you'd want to use."

"One thing I'm hoping won't happen, at any rate while we're up here," Toby now went on to say, reflectively; "and that is to have the woods get afire. Whee! if that ever did happen, goodbye to Miss Priscilla's gold mine, in the way of an oil gusher bonanza; for the whole country might get ablaze."

"Not much danger of that, I guess," Jack assured him. "The traces of oil we've seen must be only seepage. The main supply is hidden far down in the earth, and until wells are sunk will stay there safe."

After all, it was very cozy there in the tent as long as the stove burned. Fortunately the rain came from another direction, so they could have the flat open, and so get a fair amount of light and air. The table could be dispensed with during the time they were thus imprisoned, for being agile boys they did not consider it much of a hardship to curl their legs under them, tailor fashion, while they discussed their breakfast.

Steve later on got out a book of travel and adventure which he had fetched along for a rainy day, but which, previously, he had not thought to look at. As the morning began to pass he lay there on his blanket and devoured the graphic account of hardships endured by some dauntless party of explorers who had sought the region of the frozen Antarctic, and come very near losing their lives while there. Now and again Steve would shiver and ask Toby if he wouldn't please drop the flap of the tent a little.

"Not much I will," protested that worthy, vigorously. "It's hot enough in here now nearly to cook a fellow, and none too light, either. Suppose you tuck away that book of the ice regions, which is what makes you shake all over when you're reading about the terrible cold they endured. Keep it for a sizzling hot day, Steve, when it'll do you good to shiver a little."

"Huh! guess I might as well," grunted the other, as though convinced. "Besides, it's getting on toward eleven, I reckon, and I really ought to be thinking of starting my baking."

"You're away off this time, Steve," laughed Jack, who had a little nickle watch along with

him, though he seldom carried it on his person, "because right now it is only a quarter to ten."

"Oh! what a long day this promises to be," groaned Steve.

"Can't beat yesterday in my opinion," claimed Toby. "I actually thought the sun was nailed fast up there in the sky, because it didn't seem to move an inch."

"That's because you were on the job every second," Jack told him. "A watched pot never boils, they used to say; but of course it meant that the water seemed to take an unusual time in bubbling."

So Steve yawned, and lolled in his blanket, until finally Jack told him he might as well get busy if they expected to have a feast of camp biscuits for lunch.

It was no easy task which Steve had set himself. First of all he insisted on going out and fetching the rude table inside the tent, even if it did crowd them a trifle.

"However could you expect a *chef* to make biscuits, with never a table to work at?" he threw at Toby when the latter ventured to complain; and of course after that they allowed Steve to have his own way, though Toby hung around to quiz him, until the other ordered him off.

"You'll queer these delicacies if you bother me any more, Toby," he told him severely. "Our cook says you ought almost to hold your breath when making them, because it's always easy for them to drop. Mebbe she was joshing me, but I don't want to be bothered and forget to put the baking powder or the salt in."

Toby kept a roaring fire going, and finally the pan of biscuits was popped into the oven. Steve looked a bit anxious, realizing that his reputation as a cook was now at stake.

"Since we've got this table inside here," spoke up Jack, "we might as well make all the use of it we can, chucking it out again in the rain when supper is over. Here's a box one can sit on, and we'll rig up seats for the others somehow."

"Hurrah!" cried Steve, on hearing this. "That gives my legs a chance to keep out of snarls. I never could curl up like some fellows. But I wonder how they're coming on inside the oven?"

"What, your legs?" exclaimed Toby, jeeringly; "why, I didn't know we were going to be treated to roast *mutton* today, did you, Jack?"

Steve took a peep.

"Believe me, they're beginning to turn a light brown already; and say, they look as light as any Mary Ann ever made at our house," was his joyous announcement.

He seemed to act as though the fate of nations depended on the successful issue of his first camp baking. Indeed, Toby was secretly almost as much concerned as Steve, for he dearly loved hot biscuits, and counted himself a pretty good judge of them.

To dismiss the subject, it may be said that Steve's experiment turned out to be a success. Jack congratulated him on making such dainty biscuits; while Toby declared that the proof of the pudding lay in the eating; and the fact that he was making such desperate inroads on the stack that graced the dish in the center of the table showed his appreciation.

So Steve was made very happy, and readily promised that there would be no lack of fresh bread while the stock of flour held out, and that dandy little stove was in working order.

The afternoon proved terribly long to all of them. Sometimes they would take turns at dozing, for the patter of the rain among the leaves, and on the canvas above their heads, made a sort of lullaby that induced sleep. Several times the rain would die out for a short time, only to make a fresh start again after exciting false hopes.

"Well," observed Jack, as evening drew on apace, "we might have been a whole lot worse off. The tent hasn't leaked a drop, that I've noticed; and thanks to the stove we've been comfortable enough. Let's hope it'll rain itself out during the night, and give us a chance to get moving tomorrow."

This did not prove to be the case, for it turned out to be one of those easterly storms that usually last the better part of three days, with almost a constant downpour, though not very heavy at any time.

When another day came, it was still dark and gloomy, though not raining just then. They managed to get a chance to stretch themselves outside before it set in again. Steve was the one who did most of the complaining, though Toby grumbled quite a bit also.

Along toward noon, it brightened up some. Toby even declared with bated breath that he fancied he glimpsed a tiny patch of blue sky, "large enough to make a pair of trousers."

"But the signs all show that it's clearing off," observed Steve, exultantly, fixing his weather-sharp eye on the aforesaid patch of azure sky. "You know the old saying is, 'Between eleven and two it'll tell you what it's going to do,' so I'm counting on our having a decent afternoon of it."

His prediction proved to be correct. The clouds began to part, and at exactly noon, according to Jack's watch, the sun looked out from behind the dark curtains that had hidden his genial face for so long a spell.

"It'll take the whole afternoon for the woods to get decently dry again," Jack was saying just then; "so we'll have to keep quiet for a little spell. But I've got a scheme on foot that will take two of us away all of tomorrow, and perhaps the day afterwards, leaving one to guard the camp. And you two fellows must toss up to see who goes, and who stays."

CHAPTER XVII

THE PROSPECTORS

"Well, for one, I don't want to be kept in suspense so long," Toby began; "and I move we settle that question right away, Steve, by drawing straws."

"After all, it had better be you who goes with Jack, Toby," the other generously went on to say. "To tell you the truth I'm a little afraid that heel of mine hasn't just given up the fight yet, and a very long tramp just now might make it hurt again like sixty."

"No, that wouldn't be fair," urged Toby, doggedly. "You've got to take your chance at it. If I do go I want to feel that I'm not cheating you out of your opportunity. I like to have a clean conscience. Here, Jack, you hold the straws. The one who gets the shorter stays behind; that's understood. And Steve shall draw first, because I picked the straws."

Evidently, there could hardly be a more conscientious boy than Toby Hopkins, for he was always looking out for the rights of the other fellow. That was the main reason why Jack Winters had chosen him for one of his closest chums. He knew he could depend on Toby to do the right thing every time.

Well, Steve had the nerve deliberately to draw the short straw. He grinned when he discovered what luck he had had, as though not so very much displeased after all.

"That settles it right, Toby," he went on to say, pleasantly. "'Course it'll seem like an everlastingly long time while I'm loafing here, but my heel is going to have a fair chance to get well. Then I've got that bully book, which I can enjoy if the weather gets real warm, so I won't shiver at descriptions of the terrible times they had when nearly freezing to death in the ice packs. Oh! don't look like you pitied me; I'm just as well satisfied it worked out that way."

They did a good many things that afternoon. Jack got his camera in order for further work, because, of course, he meant to carry it along with him.

"Will you want to take the gun, too?" asked Steve, with a touch of solicitude in his manner; for he rather counted on having the firearm with him in camp, as a sort of protection that would serve to ease his mind; because it would be a pretty lonely night of it.

"No, we'll leave that for you, Steve," said Jack, immediately, as though all that had been settled in his mind.

"How about your meals?" Steve now asked. "If you expect to be gone over night, it'll mean that three or four times you'll want to break your fast. What sort of grub do you mean to carry along with you that doesn't need cooking; for I take it you'll hardly expect to make a fire, for fear of being discovered?"

"You're right about the fire part of it, Steve," Jack informed him; "as for our food, I've arranged all that. You see, we fetched along a number of things that will come in handy for such a trip. In the first place, we'll carry a lot of sweet chocolate; that always sustains a fellow when he's weak from hunger. Then there's that big hunk of fine dried beef, which I'm particularly fond of, and can eat just as I cut it from the strip."

"The Indians always used to carry pemmican along with them, to munch on when going into the enemy's country where a fire would endanger their lives," announced Toby. "And this modern dried beef is something like the venison they smoked and cured until it was fairly black. They say a redskin could travel all day on just a handful of maize or corn, and as much pemmican; stopping to quench his thirst at some running stream or spring."

"There are several other things we have with us that we can carry to help out in the food line," Jack continued. "You must know that they have malted milk that only needs water to make a splendid and nourishing drink. Besides, there is desiccated egg in the shape of powder that is the real thing preserved. I have also several tins of soup that I can heat up day or night without a trace of fire."

"That's a queer thing, Jack," spoke up Toby; "tell us how the thing is done, won't you please?"

Jack stepped over to the supply wagon and soon returned bearing one of the tins in question, which Toby noticed now was a trifle more bulky than others that he remembered seeing containing prepared soups.

"This is quite a clever idea," proceeded Jack. "You see, it consists of really two cans, one inside the other. The narrow space between is filled with unslacked lime. When you feel like having a meal, all you have to do is to punch a hole close to the edge on top, and pour in some cold water. This immediately makes the lime furiously hot, and in a short time you can open the main can and your soup is almost scalding. I tried one can at home, and it worked to a charm. My dad was quite tickled with it, and said they never had such splendid things when he was young and used to go off into the woods on camping or surveying trips."

"Oh! I see we're not going to starve yet awhile, even if we can't have a nice pot of coffee while on the job," laughed the pleased Toby, handling the wonderfully self-heating can of vegetable soup almost reverently.

So the afternoon passed.

Jack had everything laid out, for, as he said, it might be well for them to get an early start on the following morning, since they had quite a tramp before them, and would want to take their time during the latter half of the journey, when there might be more or less danger of discovery.

"Of course," Jack assured them, "I don't expect to keep this sort of thing up all the time

we're here in camp. That would be making it too much a matter of business. Once I've settled on what this Mr. Maurice is doing, and managed to gather up all the evidence necessary, I shall put him out of my mind; and after that we'll just enjoy ourselves to the limit, as we deserve."

"Hurrah!" cried Toby; "and if ever any fellows had a better chance to enjoy themselves I'd like to know it; with such a splendid tent for a shelter, a jolly camp stove that keeps you warm in chilly or wet weather; and ten days left that can all be filled with delight."

"Don't forget that we've another cause for rejoicing in the possession of a most delightful stock of things to eat," interrupted Steve, sagely, "as well as a real biscuit and flapjack *chef* who's willing to lay himself out to the limit for the good of his chums."

The rest of the day proved all that could be desired. It warmed up considerably, too, although when the sun had set in a blaze of glory, and evening began to steal softly upon the scene, there was a little tang to the air that made the campfire, built outdoors, feel doubly acceptable to them.

Nor were they disturbed at all during the night that followed. Moses, being well looked after, found no opportunity to slip his tether, and surprise them with a nocturnal visit. Doubtless it was not from lack of trying that he failed to make a second attack upon the oat-sack in the wagon, for fond memories of that other occasion must still linger with him, to judge from the pitiful whinnies he gave vent to from time to time throughout the night.

Once Toby awakened the other two by talking. He fancied he had heard another of those strange booming sounds; but as Jack, who was a light sleeper, declared he had caught no such dull crash, it was determined that Toby must have been dreaming.

So morning found them.

Toby being the first to crawl out immediately announced that the signs were all propitious.

"Going to be a fine day, Jack," he went on to say, "though I reckon it'll warm up more or less along toward noon. But I'm so glad the rain has gone that I'll willingly stand any amount of heat instead. Come, get a move on you, Steve; I'm starting up the cooking fire, and you promised us we would have a batch of flapjacks this morning, remember."

"I believe I did in a rash moment," blustered Steve, making his appearance, clad in his wonderfully striped pajamas; "and as I always try to keep my word I reckon I'm in for it."

"Oh! you'll have it easy enough while we're gone," Toby told him, "with only one to look after. Perhaps now you'll be glad to see us come trailing back home again some time tomorrow afternoon."

"No question about that, Toby," the other told him, as he commenced with his customary early morning exercises, modeled somewhat after the type of those in use in the army, and which were best calculated to take all the stiffness and numbness out of his system, brought about by curling up under his blanket.

There was really little to do save eat breakfast, since Jack had looked after all necessary preparations on the previous afternoon. Steve did not seem quite so hilarious as usual, Jack could not but notice. He understood the reason why, and while he hated to think of leaving the other behind, it was really necessary, since the camp must be guarded during their absence.

Later on the pair prepared to sally forth. Steve allowed the breakfast things to lie around, promising to look after them when he had seen the last of his two departing chums. Toby had filled his pockets with crackers and cheese, in addition to the amount of other things which he was to carry as his share of the burden. It looked as though Toby did not mean to starve to death during his absence from the fountain head of supplies. But then Toby did not differ to any great extent from any other wholesome boy with an appetite that knew no limit. Steve even urged various other edibles upon the adventures until one would think they were planning to be gone a whole week or more, instead of a scant two days.

"I don't believe we've overlooked anything," asserted Toby, as they drew up to make their start.

"Well, if we hang around here much longer we'll be having the entire supply of grub shoved on us," laughed Jack, quite amused by Steve's generosity; "so I guess we'd better say goodbye, and clear out while the going is good. Take care of yourself, Steve, and have as easy a time as you can. You'll get your chance to navigate after we come back again, and must try the fishing with Toby here for a starter."

"So-long, fellows, and the best of luck go with you!" called out Steve, as they launched upon their journey, Toby with a stout staff, and Jack having his camera dangling over his shoulder by the strap.

He stood there watching them plunge into the depths of the woods. Every time one of them glanced back Steve would wave his hat to show that he still watched. There was a trace of regret in his manner, though he had bravely tried to hide it from Jack's observing eye. Of course Steve hated to see them go away to stay so long; it would be mighty lonely in camp all by himself; and the coming of night could not be expected to give him a great amount of cheer.

But then Steve was a sensible chap, capable of making the best of a bad bargain. He would find plenty to do to amuse himself; and as a last resort he had that entertaining volume, only one-quarter read up to now, upon which he could depend to make the time pass. So after they had vanished from his vision Steve turned around and proceeded to clean up the breakfast things for a starter.

CHAPTER XVIII

INSIDE THE ENEMY'S LINES

Jack and Toby pushed on through the woods. Having been over the course much of the way before, going and returning, they would find it much easier than if everything was strange to them.

"No use trying to see our trail, is there, Jack?" the other had remarked after they were fairly started on their way.

"Well, it would have to be a pretty deep lot of tracks that would not be washed out in all that downpour of steady rain," Jack advised him. "But then there are scores of other things by means of which we'll be able to know we are going over about the same route as before. For instance, you remember seeing that stone yonder, that seems to be so neatly balanced on another larger one, just as if human hands had placed it there?"

"Why, of course I do, and we even stopped to look at it closer," replied Toby. "I called it Saddle Rock, because the top does resemble a saddle a whole lot. Yes, and I shall be on the lookout for that remarkable looking tree that made us think of a camel's hump, it was so curved. It wasn't a great way beyond these same rocks, if I'm not off my bearings."

"We'll run across it before ten minutes more," commented Jack; and sure enough that was just what they did.

So, thanks to the habit of observing things all the time, they were enabled to follow their former course just as unerringly as though they had been picking up a well-beaten trail.

Of course they talked of many things as they trudged along, for as yet there was no positive reason which made it necessary for them to keep quiet. That would come later on, when they drew nearer the danger zone.

As often happened Toby's thoughts ran back in a groove and centred about the home country. It was only natural that this should be so; for no sooner are boys off on a vacation trip before home, which may have seemed very monotonous before, with its school duties, and the many restrictions on their liberty, begins to assume a highly magnified place in their concern. As the old saying has it, "you never miss the water till the well runs dry," and boys become so accustomed to accepting the comforts of home that they fail to appreciate them until all of a sudden they find themselves cast upon their own resources, and face to face with responsibilities they may never have dreamed of before.

From time to time the faces of all his Chester comrades had a fashion of rising up before Toby, and he could even imagine himself talking with them, perhaps relating some of the lively happenings of that two weeks in the woods up in the wonderful Pontico Hills country.

"I got to thinking yesterday afternoon, while dozing there in the tent," Toby remarked at one time, "and wondering just what sort of an eleven Chester could put in the field this Fall. Some of us have had a little practice at football work, but other promising players would have to begin right at the start, and learn all there is to the game."

"That can be done easily enough," Jack informed him. "Fact is, it's a more simple thing to start right in the beginning, than to have to undo some false notions, for let a fellow once get into a certain habit, and it's hard to break him of it."

"One thing we can count ourselves lucky over, Jack; that's having such a good coach as old Joe Hooker. He used to be a crackerjack football player in his day; and it was a good deal owing to his work with the nine that Chester won through with Harmony in baseball."

"We all give old Joe most of the credit," Jack told him, bluntly; "and he's promised to whip the eleven into a smoothly running team before the season begins. Inside of two months, or soon after school opens again, there'll be pretty lively doings in Chester, with the squad out for drill nearly every afternoon. All of us have got to get as hard as nails, so we can stand every kind of thumping without weakening."

"Have you made out any sort of list so far, Jack, as to who's going to get a chance for the big eleven?"

"I have a list of all available candidates, if that's what you mean, Toby; but no selection can possibly be made until they've all had a chance to show what's in them. Some who don't seem to promise a great deal in the start will surprise everybody before they've been at work a week. On the other hand there will be bitter disappointments in the bunch, and fellows on whom I've depended may fail to come up to the scratch and qualify."

"Well, I certainly hope I'm not one of that lot," said Toby, between his set teeth, since his heart had long been yearning for a chance to shine on the gridiron as a particular star, to hear the roar of plaudits from the vast crowd assembled, when fortune allowed him to make some sensational play that would advance his side closer to final victory.

"Nobody can tell until the test comes, what they will be able to do, Toby. For my part I shall be bitterly sorry if both you and Steve do not make the team. And then there's Big Bob Jeffries, who ought to be a magnificent full-back; while long-legged Joel Jackman, and Fred Badger should shine as right and left tackle. Besides, I'd surely love to see Phil Parker, Herbert Jones and Hugh McGuffey pull through, because they're all good fellows, and with the right sort of grit to do well in football."

"I know I'm going to be on needles and pins up to the time the final selection is made," affirmed Toby. "And you'd better believe I want to go in, if at all, on my honest individual merits. No favoritism can ever be tolerated in football, where a single weak link in the chain spells ultimate defeat for the team, no matter how strong the other ten men may be. The

opposing players can quickly learn where the soft snap lies, and after that will devote all their efforts to tearing a hole through the ranks just there where the line will give way soonest."

"Game words for you to speak, Toby," commented Jack, full of satisfaction over the thought of having such an honest chum, whose every interest was for the glory of his team, rather than a desire to make an individual reputation, regardless of the general good.

Later on they found themselves at a well-remembered spot. The morning was fairly well advanced by that time. Toby was looking around him eagerly.

"Say, wasn't it right about here we were held up by that onery cat the other afternoon, Jack?" he asked, with a trace of excitement in his voice.

"There's the tree right over in front of us, in which she was located when we first heard her angry snarls and spitting," his companion told him. "But that's no sign at all the beast is anywhere near here now. For all we know she may be ten or a dozen miles away."

"I hope so, anyhow," honest Toby hastily remarked; but he still continued to cast nervous glances to the right and to the left as they pushed slowly forward, keeping to the open line of the little ridge.

Several times something gave him a start. Now it was a rabbit that, without warning, leaped from a clump of grass, and darted away with long bounds. Then a bird flew up from a bush, and the sound of its wings made Toby unconsciously remember the singular spitting noise which the mottled cat with the ears that lay back on her head gave utterance to, as she warned them to advance no further on penalty of being clawed.

But they were not attacked. The neighborhood just then seemed singularly free from malignant four-footed enemies armed with sharp teeth and nails. A dun-colored object just vanishing in a sink some little distance away Toby identified as an extra large fox that had been aroused from his noonday nap by the rustle of footsteps amidst the foliage, or the murmur of their lowered voices. No one made any attempt to interfere with the retreat of Reynard; indeed, they carried no weapon that could have halted his flight, even though inclined that way, which was far from being the case.

Remembering that when stopped on the previous occasion they had had reason to believe they must be within a mile or so of the region from whence those singular blasting noises proceeded, the two scouts from that time on slowed down their pace and maintained a more vigilant watch than ever, particularly keeping an eye ahead for any sign of enemies.

It was Toby, it chanced, who made a discovery.

"Stand still, Jack, and look through this vista ahead of us. Isn't that a man I can see standing there, with a gun in his hand?"

"Just what it is, Toby, and from his actions I'd say he is some sort of sentry or vidette, who is busy watching the open trail we've been following for so long, as it seems to be a sort of woods thoroughfare, possibly running to the bank of the river somewhere."

"That looks suspicious, doesn't it, Jack?"

"It looks as if they're up to some business that they do not want to be discovered at," came the low reply. "I suppose that Mr. Dangerfield, learning of our presence in the woods, and that we're all from Chester, is afraid that we may take a notion to wander over this way; and he has that guard stationed there to warn us back. Perhaps he'd tell some sort of stiff story about Uncle Sam conducting an experimental proving station with aerial torpedoes, or something like that, up here; and that no one is allowed to set a foot on the ground under a severe penalty. But we'll take care to give that guard a wide berth."

"You must mean we'll navigate around him, make a wide circle, so to speak, eh, Jack?" asked Toby, thrilled with the prospect of soon finding himself within the lines of the enemy.

"Yes, and right here is where we must begin the operation," Jack announced. "We can take his bearings, and cut around on the right, where the cover seems to be exceptionally good and heavy. No hurry about it either, remember, Toby. We must make sure of our ground as we go. Given half an hour, and we ought to have left the vidette handsomely in the lurch."

It was very exciting, so Toby thought. Secretly he deplored the fact that their only gun had to be left in camp with Steve. He would have felt better could he but know they had some means of defense with them. However, Jack evidently did not intend allowing anything to arise necessitating such action. He expected to be able to carry out his little spying expedition without betraying the fact of their presence to any of the enemy.

Once they had circled around and come upon the open stretch again they kept stealing forward. When once more they heard the deep-toned bark of that dog, Jack stopped in his tracks.

"We must change our course again, Toby," he announced, briefly; "the wind is striking us on the right cheek, when it should be dead ahead; or that beast will soon be getting our scent. So let's strike off here, and make another half circuit; when we can push ahead, and reach our goal unchallenged."

CHAPTER XIX

THE COMING OF THE CRISIS

It was now after three by the sun, Jack judged, after flinging a look up toward the king of day, shining powerfully half-way down the western sky. There would be plenty of time for them to do what spying they wished, and then, seeking some retired spot, pass the night quietly. When another day came they could lay their plans accordingly.

They found some little difficulty in making the turn, for in places the undergrowth was so dense as to delay their progress considerably. Jack had taken his measures for the flank movement, and knew just when they had gone far enough. The passing air fanning his cheek told him that much. Besides, occasionally they heard some sign from the dog; which Jack judged must be tied up, from the fretful character of his mouthings. There is all the difference in the world between the cheerful bark of a hound free to go and come, and the depressed utterance of one that is fastened to kennel or tree by rope or chain.

Thus another half hour slipped by.

"I hear voices, Jack," whispered the trembling Toby, when they had been creeping forward for some little time after resuming their forward progress.

The other did not reply, only pressed a forefinger upon his lips, and nodded his head in the affirmative. Toby understood from this that communications between them were to be exceedingly limited in scope from that time on; and when necessary, must be made in the most cautious of tones.

Shortly afterwards they had a glimpse of moving objects some little distance beyond. They could easily make them out to be several men, roughly dressed as a rule, and who seemed to be rushing this way and that as though laboring under considerable stress of excitement.

But both boys saw more than that. Reared against the low sky-line was a skeleton framework made of timbers. Jack had never actually seen an oil derrick before in his life, but he knew that this was one. Undoubtedly their guess had been a true one. Maurice Dangerfield, the unscrupulous nephew of Miss Priscilla, was so convinced there was oil to be found on her property that he had entered into an arrangement with some experienced parties accustomed to putting down wells to make an experimental boring, and the skeleton framework had been used in carrying out the said sinking.

"They've gone and done it, as sure as anything, Jack," whispered Toby, feeling that it was still safe to do this, since the men were all at some little distance from them; and moreover seemed completely engrossed with what gripped their attention. "That's an oil derrick and they've sunk a trial well. Isn't it so, Jack?"

"No question about it, Toby. We must move around a dozen feet, so as to find fresh cover; then we'll keep on creeping up. I'd like above everything to get close enough to snap off a picture of that derrick."

"Sure you must, Jack," breathed Toby, instantly falling in with the scheme, as he usually did with anything originating in his companion's fertile brain. "Once they saw that thing, with Mr. Maurice standing near the foot of the same, there'd be no trouble convincing a jury he was guilty."

Jack lost no further time. He appeared quite anxious to close in before the sun got too low in the heavens to allow a good strong picture. The wind continued to favor them as before; and all doubt about the dog being tied up was removed when once they had caught a glimpse of the beast sitting disconsolately on his haunches in front of what appeared to be a rude kennel made from the hollow butt of a big tree.

All the while they were thus creeping up they could hear the men calling out to one another. Jack suspected from the excited tenor of their conversation that some great crisis was drawing near. He watched them working at the foot of the derrick, and soon had convictions concerning the nature of their labor.

Unable to resist the temptation to learn whether his suspicions regarding the presence of oil deep down in the earth were well founded or not, and possibly urged on also by some speculator whom he had taken into the secret, Dangerfield had finally consented to "shoot" the well, and settle the question once for all.

Apparently a kind Fate had led Jack and Toby to the spot just when the crisis was reached. They were likely to witness the operation and learn the result, though uninvited, and unwelcome guests.

By degrees they managed to get close enough up to suit the purposes of the intending photographer. If they ventured any further they ran a great risk of being seen by one of the men, or else scented by the keen nose of the dog. Already Jack could see from the actions of the beast that his suspicions had been aroused. He no longer sat there as before, watching the men, but walked up and down from side to side as far as his tether would allow, sniffing the air in a significant manner, and occasionally giving a doleful howl; at which one of the workers would turn to make a threatening gesture, and call out angrily at him.

Undoubtedly every one of them must be worked up to a state of nervous tension, and the actions of the dog irritated his owner.

From the way in which Jack now commenced to act Toby knew he was getting ready to snap off a picture. He picked away the green leaves in front of him so as to allow of a small round opening. Through this he expected to sight his camera, and get the oil derrick in focus; after which a slight click would announce that his object had been accomplished.

Toby crouched there, fairly holding his breath. He knew that Jack did not wish any further attempt to be made to hold even the briefest of conversations. Toby, bound to witness whatever was going on out there in the open, had copied the example set by his comrade, and picked away the leaves that intervened, allowing himself an admirable peephole.

Here he knelt and watched and waited. Jack evidently was quite particular. He undoubtedly wanted his picture to be an excellent one, and would not risk failure through being in too great a hurry. It seemed to the impatient Toby that an hour must have passed since they ensconced themselves in their present location, when he just faintly caught the anticipated click that announced the accomplishment of Jack's work.

Twisting his head slightly around Toby could see his chum calmly turning the film so as to bring another blank in line for a second shot. Jack believed in making sure of such an important picture. Far better to waste good films than to find that he had failed to get as clear a negative as he wished.

Again he snapped off the scene, doubtless with the idea of catching Dangerfield in full view, with his face exposed toward the camera, so that he might be readily recognized by one who knew him as well as his aunt did.

Nor did Jack stop there, but prepared for a third exposure. When he did not press the bulb, but only held himself in readiness to do at a second's warning, Toby suddenly grasped what must undoubtedly be in the other's mind. Jack meant to try his best to secure a picture of the "shooting" of the oil well, if such a thing lay within the bounds of possibility! It was a splendid idea, and fairly staggered Toby by its immensity; but then Jack always aimed high, and dared attempt things that might seem far beyond attainment when viewed through the eyes of other boys.

Well, whatever was in the wind, Toby thought, it would not be long in developing now, judging from the increased tension out there where men were running back and forth, calling to each other, and some of them removing valuable instruments used in the boring as though to a place of safety.

Yes, it was coming, and hidden there in their leafy retreat he and Jack would be able to witness the great event. Toby was ready to call himself an exceedingly lucky fellow, to be given this wonderful privilege, it must have seemed a momentous thing even had they been present with the knowledge of those oil workers; but the fact of lying concealed and spying upon the group, added immensely to the thrill of the situation, Toby thought.

Now and again he would shoot an apprehensive glance in the direction of the dog. Toby did not exactly like the looks of the beast, nor his actions either. Plainly the animal shared the excitement of the men, or else he suspected the presence of intruders near by, and was becoming wild to break loose and find them.

He jumped from side to side, and strained at his tether violently, while uttering sharp, snappy barks, and low vicious growls. His master, not comprehending what ailed the animal, picked up a stick and advanced toward him threateningly; whereat the beast crept into his stump kennel; only to come out again almost immediately and strain to get loose once more.

Toby was greatly exercised lest that rope give way. If such a thing happened he knew it would be all up with himself and Jack, for they would have to defend themselves against the hound's teeth, and must inevitably be made prisoners by some of the men.

What would happen then was an unpleasant thought for Toby to entertain. Why, it might be they would be kept there until Maurice had been to see Priscilla, and coaxed her to give him an option on the property; which would really be too bad. So Toby hoped, and watched, and waited, to see the climax, his attention divided between the hound dog and the oil derrick, where the cluster of men moved to and fro.

The minutes were "shod with lead," according to Toby's notion, and he ought to know what that meant, after his recent experience along the line of anxiety; if something did not happen pretty soon he feared he would be worked up to such a pitch that he must give a yell, or burst. And then again, unless the great event came about inside of fifteen or twenty minutes surely Jack would be unable to get the kind of picture on which his heart was set.

Then Toby fell rigid, and stared again through his peephole. The men were hurrying away from the vicinity of the derrick now! Plainly the stage was set for the closing scene of the strange little woods drama, and the time had arrived to make use of the electric battery in order to fire the dynamite cartridge lowered into the hole from which the boring tool had been lifted.

Toby held his breath from very awe, and pressed his face still further into the leafy screen. No danger of discovery now, since those men were one and all watching the derrick, as though it were a magnet that held their attention as the North Pole draws the needle of the mariner's compass.

Suddenly there was a quiver to the earth, and a dull deep-seated roar. Then an unseen giant arose in his might, and tossed the derrick upwards as though it were composed of mere straws. With the flying timbers came what seemed to be a stream of dirty water, flying far up in the air, as though a fireman's hose had been turned on! That must be the dark-looking crude oil, mingled with water, Toby conjectured, as he continued to gape and wonder. Then after all the suspicions of Maurice Dangerfield had proven true, and the Pontico Hills region did harbor rich deposits of valuable oil!

He hoped Jack had been equal to the emergency, and pressed the rubber bulb of his camera just at the instant when remnants of the dislocated derrick, and that rush of precious mineral oil stood out against the eastern heavens so wonderfully clear!

CHAPTER XX

OUT OF THE WOODS-CONCLUSION

"Now, let's get away from here while the going is good," said Jack in the ear of his companion, after he had taken yet another view of the scene, with the excited men running forward toward the sprouting oil well, which possibly they might later on seek to plug up, if such a thing were possible.

Toby was nothing loth. He had seen all he wanted, and still feared lest that hound dog might either break loose, or else be given his liberty by his master, either case meaning immediate trouble and exposure for the two lads.

Once they had withdrawn to some little distance and they could increase their pace, Jack seemed to be fairly bubbling over with delight, since all his plans had worked out so admirably. If those pictures only turned out as well as he anticipated he expected to have a pretty spread to show Miss Priscilla Haydock when once more he sought an interview with her. And certainly the clever schemes of the plotting nephew would be nipped in the bud.

"Are we heading for the camp, Jack?" asked Toby, a little nervously, because he knew a long and arduous journey stared them in the face, much of which would have to be undertaken after night had fallen; and the prospect of going through those dark wildcat-infested woods in the gloom, even with a little electric torch to aid them, was far from a pleasing thought.

"No, there's no need of our hurrying like that," the other told him, greatly to Toby's delight. "We'll just go a mile or so further on, and hunt up a retired gully, where we can make a little fire if we want it, and pass the night in true hunters' style."

This they proceeded to do. There was no difficulty about finding just such a gully, because there were dozens from which to make a selection. And the chances of their being discovered seemed negligible, according to Jack. Still, on the way he took some pains to lose the scent by having Toby copy his example, and wading for some little distance along in a brook. Water leaves no trail that a dog can follow, and so Jack felt that he was making things additionally secure by taking this trouble.

They had their fire, and warmed some water in a cup Jack carried; with which they made a mess of malted milk. It was not equal to fragrant coffee, both boys agreed, but better than cold water.

So they sat there munching their supper, and exchanging comments. There was much of interest to talk about, for the wonderful things they had just witnessed would always remain fresh in their memories.

"I'll develop the film as soon as I can," Jack was saying later on, after the shades of night had gathered around them, and they allowed the little fire to go out as an insurance against discovery through its glow, which might be seen some distance away. "Then if things turn out well I might take a run down to town, leaving the camp in charge of you fellows for a day, and hurrying back again."

"Do you mean with old Moses to take you?" asked Toby, incredulously; "you'd have to figure on two days at his rate of travel, Jack."

"Oh! I've got a scheme that can beat that all hollow," laughed the boy who was forever observing things, and turning them to his advantage when the occasion or the necessity arose. "Down the road three miles you remember we saw the last farm, and quite an extensive one at that. I paid particular attention to the fact that the owner had a flivver of a car in his shed, as most farmers do in these enlightened days. I'll pay him well to take me to Chester and back. He can be doing some errand in town while waiting for me. And since we're not limited as to money in a game that might mean hundreds of thousands to Miss Priscilla, I'm sure I can get my ride, if I have to coax the farmer with a promise of twenty dollars."

They had a quiet night, though from time to time when he chanced to be awake Toby listened to the barking of the hound dog with a little trace of his former apprehension. But nothing happened to disturb them, and with the coming of morning they made another small fire, at which they prepared a warm drink from the malted milk; and even after a fashion had a queer tasting omelette, using some of the egg powder with milk added. Toby made a grimace while eating, but nevertheless finished his share of the omelette that had been cooked on a smooth flat stone, placed over the red-hot embers of the fire.

Afterwards they set out for camp. Trudging along steadily, and without any going astray, the pair finally arrived just when Steve was busying himself in getting up a midday meal, and wisely cooking enough for three while about it.

Of course Steve was wild to hear what had happened. And as it would be cruel to keep the poor fellow in suspense, after he had so willingly stayed at home, Jack told him what they had seen and accomplished.

Steve was delighted. He danced a regular sailor's hornpipe upon hearing how the several pictures had been snapped off, while the men remained in utter ignorance of the presence of the two boys near by.

Toby, too, related how nervous the barking dog had made him, and how much he had feared lest the beast break loose, and disclose their presence back of that leafy screen.

Once the midday meal had been disposed of Jack busied himself with his daylight developing tank. Toby hovered near, and seemed just as anxious as could be concerning the

ultimate results. When Jack showed him the negatives, looking particularly clear in blacks and whites, Toby gave a whoop of pleasure.

"They'll make dandy pictures, believe me, Jack!" he cried, after closely examining the roll of film the other was holding up, after fixing the same, and starting to wash the hypo off. "Why, I warrant you, with a magnifying glass there'll be no trouble at all in identifying that Maurice and his crowd one by one, as they were nearly all facing the camera when you shut it off. And say, you've caught the pyramid of timbers and oil and stones just at its height! Shake hands on the strength of your big scoop, Jack!"

The artist himself fairly beamed with joy. He knew that he had met with abounding success in his task, which had been one few professional photographers could have accomplished as well.

He meant to dry the film that afternoon, and if the sun remained strong enough he could make some prints. If not, possibly he might succeed with his little electric hand-torch after darkness had come.

In the end he managed to secure all he required, and just as Toby had said they turned out to be splendid pictures.

When morning came Jack started off along the logging road, bound for the thoroughfare which led to Chester, many miles away. He found the farmer ready to make twenty dollars for a day's run to Chester, and reached town inside of two hours after leaving camp. His chums were pleased to see him show up before four o'clock that afternoon and his radiant face told that everything had gone well with him.

"Miss Priscilla was delighted with my report, and the pictures," he went on to tell the others, as they came crowding around him. "She promised not to do anything until we came back to town, for she didn't want to spoil our vacation outing, she said, and if her vicious nephew once learned that his big scheme for a fortune had fallen through on account of our work up here, he might feel disposed to do us some bodily injury. But she says she'll keep him on the anxious seat yet awhile. She is quite angry at him for this nasty trick of his. If he had come to her honestly and told her of his discovery, she says she would have gladly given him a good interest in the property, and allowed him to have charge of the opening of the new oil district; but since he tried to cheat her out of the whole business she will turn him down flat."

"Just what he deserves, for a fact!" ventured Toby. "He's a bad egg, according to my notion; and I guess his aunt knows it pretty well, too. I warrant you she's had some unpleasant experiences with Mr. Maurice before this. But I'm glad we're all on deck again. Now tomorrow we'll start in to enjoy ourselves after our own fashion. Playing the spy may be very exciting work, but say, it isn't just what appeals to me as the finest thing going. You feel a bit cheap looking in on folks, just as if you were peeping through a keyhole. Steve, are you with me for a turn at the black bass in the morning?"

"I'm feeling fish hungry, if that answers your question, Toby," replied the other: "and I'm laying out to go across country with you tomorrow to see what the Paradise River looks like away up here."

It can be seen from this that the three boys had now cast all anxieties to the wind, and meant to have a jolly time of it during the remainder of their stay up among the Pontico Hills. It was a great relief to do away with suspicion and spying, which really had no part in such a genuine woods outing.

They had plenty of little adventures during the remainder of their camping experience, but nothing of great moment happened; and in due time old Moses drew the party all the way back home again, browned from their days in the sun and air, and with a renewed appetite for the home cooking. Camp fare is all very fine for a spell, but oh! how delightful do those doughnuts, cookies, apple pies and all similar dainties taste to growing, healthy boys, after two weeks spent in the woods!

Maurice Dangerfield found himself balked in his designs, and was glad to accept the really generous amount of money which his aunt offered him, at the same time being told that she never wished to see him again after his duplicity. She did this because she felt under certain obligations to the man for having been the first to discover the presence of oil on her vast holdings of property.

Before many weeks had gone by there were several wells being put down, and the Pontico Hills region began to have a very oily smell, that sometimes could be detected away down in Chester when the breeze was favorable. And Miss Priscilla urged Jack and his chums to accept a generous present from her, with more to follow as time developed the value of the new discovery, which their timely assistance had saved from falling into the hands of the unscrupulous Mr. Maurice.

During the balance of the summer vacation Jack and Toby and Steve enjoyed many little outings that afforded them considerable profit in the way of information, as well as pleasure. Like most of the other boys of Chester, however, they were head and ears interested in the progress of the new building that was being erected, and which when completed would be used as a gymnasium, where they could have the time of their lives amidst such appurtenances as go to make up a first-class physical culture department.

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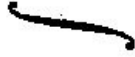
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